



Deafening Silence

Few would deny that 2004 was a year full of engaging and positive stories celebrating the growth of women's basketball. The NCAA tournament drew unprecedented attention from both the media and fans culminating in a dramatic final with record-breaking viewership. The WNBA welcomed an extraordinary group of rookies, successfully negotiated an Olympic break and crowned a new champion in front of a sold out house. On the international front, the United States maintained its dominance in classic style - showcasing the past, present and future with a team that epitomized the very essence of the women's game. Finally, as the new college season began, the buzz was not only about a breathtaking crop of young freshman, but a topsy-turvy season that seemed to suggest that the "holy grail" of parity was close to a reality.

However, since I pride myself in following women's basketball closely, I could not avoid a disturbing number of stories that shared a common theme: the sexual misconduct of coaches with their players. Consider the following brief sample of stories from this past year:

- A 39-year-old former Little League and youth basketball coach in Maine pled guilty to eight felonies and two misdemeanors, admitting he raped three teenage girls in the 1980's and then sexually abused two others in 2002 and 2003.
- In Texas, a 45-year-old coach arrested on charges of criminal sexual penetration. The warrant included threats made towards the girl's college career if she resisted sex with the coach. The alleged abuse took place in 1994 and 1998 and the accuser came forward after she heard stories about other alleged victims coming forward.
- In California, a high school girls' basketball coach surrendered to police after a warrant was issued for his arrest on charges of sexual misconduct with a minor.
- In Oregon, a coach who admitted he had sex with two former pupils, one of whom was under the age of consent, vowed to coach again. "I'm going to continue to teach basketball, because I'm arguably the best at what I do in the country," claimed the coach. "People are going to contract me out to (coach). I'm either going to build a facility where I don't have to worry about when I want to use it, or somebody is going to rent me court space."
- In Wisconsin, a girls' varsity basketball coach and social studies teacher faced charges that he sexually assaulted a 15-year-old player while pursuing her for months for an intimate relationship. He was charged with five counts of sexual assault of a child, three counts of child enticement with sexual conduct, and one count of sexual assault by school staff.
- In Arkansas, a girls basketball coach faced felony sexual assault charges on an allegation he had a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old student.
- In Colorado a girls' basketball coach accused of having sex with three of his underage players was charged with 59 counts of sexual assault and child abuse. The horror was compounded when the coach was found dead of an apparent suicide in his jail cell.

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As a writer, a fan, an educator and a woman these articles set off alarm bells, and I keep waiting for some kind of response from the organizations I consider the leaders in women's basketball: the NCAA, the AAU and the WBCA.

The silence has been deafening.

And incomprehensible.

The NCAA considers one of its core values "**protecting the best interests of student-athletes.**" Its Health and Safety site (http://www1.ncaa.org/membership/ed_outreach/health-safety/index.html) has amongst its headings Sports Medicine, Drug Testing, Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Education Programs (which includes a link to the Minimum Guidelines for such programs). A link to the Nutrition and Performance page reveals a site whose aim is "to promote a healthy and safe environment for student-athletes regarding optimal nutrition, positive body image and peak performance by providing education and awareness."

And yet when I contacted the NCAA, a representative who works with their Health and Safety programs knew of no regulations, guidelines and or position papers on sexual abuse published by the NCAA. "We provide the NCAA membership with resources to address sexual health and relationships issues," wrote the representative, "through our Health and Safety Speakers Grant Program, which provides funding for outside speakers to present on selected wellness issues, and through the APPLE Conferences. (see <http://www.virginia.edu/case/apple.html>).

The Amateur Athletic Union's mission statement is to "offer amateur sports programs through a volunteer base **for all people to have the physical, mental, and moral development of amateur athletes and to promote good sportsmanship and good citizenship.**" When the AAU website announced they had formalized a community partnership with the WNBA, it was because "they share a common goal — **reaching, motivating and inspiring young people through sports.**" With 130,000 girls and 22,000 coaches participating in Amateur Athletic Union girls basketball programs, it is the most popular of all the 34 AAU sports in the organization.

Yet, as laid out in their materials, AAU's current sexual misconduct policies appear to be, as my like-minded friend Ted of the Women's Hoops Blog (<http://www.womenshoops.blogspot.com/>) put it, "hopelessly vague and woefully insufficient."

As for the WBCA, along with their very clear mission statement, their website also states they lead the way in "**protecting the rights of women and girls at all levels.**" (<http://www.wbca.org/Advocacy.asp>)

And yet, while the site's Advocacy page includes headings such as Title IX, Salary Research, Rights Equity and Fairness Program and Monitoring NCAA Legislation at All Divisions, it contains no obvious attempt to address the issue of sexual misconduct or abuse. A series of untitled links are offered, but when you click on one that has "sexoverview" in the address, it leads you to the Department of Education website. I'm guessing this may have been intended to link to Charol Shakeshaft's recent report, "Educator Sexual Misconduct: A Synthesis of Existing Literature," (<http://www.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/misconductreview/index.html>) but with no explanation it's all but useless. Trying to search their "speakers" list sends you into a cybermaze. Either no one has accessed this feature and reported the flaw or, as a cynical friend suggested, it's deliberately designed to foil a search.

By contrast, typing "sexual abuse" in the search engine of the Women's Sports Foundation site pops up eight articles (including an in-depth Position Paper), a press release and a link to Women's Sports International. The Ms Foundation site offers a report called BEYOND SURVIVING: Toward a Movement to Prevent Child Sexual Abuse (<http://www.ms.foundation.org/wmspage.cfm?parm1=56>). The National Council of Youth Sports site reveals their "Child Safety Initiative," a response to what they see as the crisis currently affecting youth-serving organizations: "Known incidents of and potential for abuse and molestation of youth by coaches and mentors." (<http://www.ncys.org/childsafety.html>) The NCYS is providing its membership with information on the magnitude of the problem, what youth organizations are doing to address the problem, and what youth organizations must do to combat the threat.

"So why should I want the NCAA, WBCA or AAU speak up and take a stand make a policy?" you might ask.

- Because they are the three most recognizable organizations directly involved with women's basketball. Women's basketball carries the torch for so many other women's sports, strong and pro-active positions by these organizations would make an invaluable statement.
- Because, if you are a coach, you want your profession and your behavior to be above reproach.
- Because, if you are an administrator, you want your institution to be pro-active and protected.
- Because if you are an educator, you know the trust between a student and teacher is precious and particularly vulnerable. You want to be able to protect yourself and your students.
- Because, if you are a parent you want to keep your children safe, and knowledge is power.
- Because, if you are a woman reading this, it's highly likely that during your childhood you were a victim and it is unacceptable that this should happen to another child.
- Because, if you're a victim and reading this, you shouldn't be made to bear the double burden of speaking up to protect yourself and then being expected to become an advocate for education and change.

I'm not here to write an in depth research article about the issues and facts surrounding sexual misconduct by coaches within and without school systems. The simple fact is they've already been written. It just seems as if no one is paying attention.

I understand there's a delicate dance to be done between codes of conduct, polices and legislated law. The ground between the four major players - parents, athletes, coaches and organizations - is even more fraught with pitfalls. In fact, playing devil's advocate I can come up with all sorts for reasons NOT to take action that will probably sound very familiar:

- It's not our job
- The athletes I work with are over my states legal age of consent

- There already are laws about this stuff; we don't need to do more
- If we admit there's a problem, we'll get sued
- The unions are against it
- It makes me uncomfortable
- Our coaches won't put up with it
- Parents will be upset
- The athletes will be embarrassed
- If you talk about it, you'll encourage it
- If you talk about it, it'll be used to further malign women's sports
- It will cost too much money
- We don't have the time
- A policy is not worth the paper it's written on

To a degree, much of this may be true. But let me offer you this food for thought. After the publication of **Maureen O'Hagan** and Christine Willmsen's four-part series in the Seattle Times, "Coaches Who Prey" (<http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/news/local/coaches/>), O'Hagan wrote a follow up piece for the Education Writers Association: "Exposing Abuse in Washington State Schools: A Case Study in Investigative Journalism." (http://www.ewa.org/desktopdefault.aspx?page_id=120&news_id=1103). The article began:

It started out as a simple crime story: a popular basketball coach was charged with sexually abusing a player. That in itself was no big surprise. Stories about sexual abuse by trusted elders have become so prevalent that they are almost a cliché.

Revisit that last sentence for a moment:

"Stories about sexual abuse by trusted elders have become so prevalent that they are almost a cliché."

I understand a cliché to be an overused expression — an expression that has lost originality and force through overuse. Something deemed completely ordinary and unremarkable. While stories of sexual abuse by coaches may have become more prevalent, there is nothing cliché about the impact of that abuse or the silence that surrounds it.

300,000 children are abused in the United States each year. Keith Lanning, an FBI supervisory agent who has written extensively about child molesters, says that the average "seducer" molester, the kind most common in youth sports, victimizes approximately 120 children before he is caught. Despite today's charged atmosphere, in which it may seem that allegations are easily made, estimates are that for every serious incident reported, 10 go unreported. In the preface to the Ms. Foundation's 2002 report on preventing sexual abuse, Gillian Murphy wrote:

Child sexual abuse is a problem that has remained hidden for too long. Many agree that it is one of, if not the most, taboo problems that we as a society choose to shun. The number of girls and boys who are sexually abused in this country perpetuates patterns of gendered abuse and violence. And when family, teachers, family friends, and religious leaders—the very relationships that should define trust, safety and nurturance—become violators, then safety at its core is removed.

So much good has come out of Title IX legislation. Female high school participation increased from 294,015 in 1971 to 2,472,043 in 1997. College participation has more than tripled, from 31,000 to 128,208. The benefits of participation are well documented. The most recent research presented in "Her Life Depends On It" points to physical activity and sport as "fundamental solutions for many of the serious health and social problems faced by girls. These include obesity, heart disease, substance abuse, teen pregnancy and depression." (womenssportsfoundation.org)

There's a sick irony, then, in that fact that the benefits of participating in athletics can be so profoundly undermined by sexual abuse. "The effects, scientifically documented and anecdotally related, are cyclical, chronic, debilitating, and sometimes fatal," said the Ms. Foundation Report.

Suicide attempts, depression, sexually transmitted diseases, self-mutilation, substance abuse, recurrent victimization, eating disorders, sleep disorders, gastrointestinal illness, abusive sexual and intimate relationships, increased risk of imprisonment, increased likelihood to be involved with sex work: these are some of the outcomes of denied, unaddressed child sexual abuse.

If you've been paying attention you've felt the ripples. Some in the sport believe this is a full-blown crisis, that the stories printed are only the tip of the iceberg. It is very tempting to deny, avoid, retreat, excuse and hide. But are we really willing to wait until the "big blow" before we step up, take responsibility, and take action?

Perpetuating the culture of silence should no longer be an option.

We are, after all, the grown ups.



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The WBCA has scheduled to have an educational platform concerning sexual misconduct at its 2005 National Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana. For more information, please visit www.WBCA.org.

Editors note: Helen Wheelock will appear regularly as a contributing writer to Coaching Women's Basketball Magazine