

Accountable resolution of abuse in sports demands we lose our toxic positivity

BY BRI NEWLAND AND SHANNON KERWIN
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A study reported in Human Kinetics of 370 elite and club level athletes revealed that 31% identifying as women and 21% identifying as men reported being sexually abused. And these data don't include the rate of emotional or physical abuse.

Startling numbers, prompting very little industry discussion. Why the silence? Because people are uncomfortable discussing safety in sports. The push questions: "Can't we focus on winning and excellence?" But that wrongfully implies we can't celebrate athletic excellence and be mindful of well-being.

In this ongoing tension, policymakers and governing bodies are failing athletes -- and tend to be "all bark and no bite" when it comes to protecting victims. The sad reality is that sport organizations would rather circle the wagons and guard their institutions (and their profits) than take the steps necessary to address and eradicate abuse of people in sport.

Across North America, the reports of abuse by athletes have escalated at an alarming rate -- spanning emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual maltreatment and abuse, where the impact of unacceptable acts lasts a lifetime. A complicating factor is how we've fostered a sports culture that allows coach behavior that oversteps boundaries and blurs lines -- where coaches' aggressive behavior is even celebrated. All this in a system where uninformed, outdated practices are accepted standards.

Running counter to progress is an over-emphasis on all the good things sport can be about -- winning, excellence, development -- without a reflection on how these positive aspects are manipulated to be harmful and toxic.

And no sport is exempt from abuse. It's time to acknowledge that toxic positivity -- "the act of avoiding, suppressing, or rejecting negative emotions or experiences" -- stands as our foremost obstacle to this shift.

When we remove toxic positivity from sport, we can get real. Moving past damaging "no pain, no gain" myths that enable abuse will not only make leaders and coaches accountable for athletes' treatment, but the shift will also help reinvent how all abuse is reported and resolved.

Recognize and admit where toxic positivity contributes to the cycle of abuse ...

Direct Reporting of Abuse

Many athletes state that reporting processes are too closely tied to the organizations and people that hold their athletic career in their hands. And the coaches and administrators involved avoid addressing the problems associated with abuse -- in favor of focusing on athletes being "lucky" to have positions on teams.

Therefore, athletes encountering abuse and shaming lack trust in the system. "Why bother reporting it? What good could it do?" Well, it could do obvious good in a changed system, with a safe reporting chain.

We need reporting structures that are created by athletes for athletes -- arms-length from coaches and governing bodies, and founded in a system that gives athletes power. Power here is connected to allowing negative aspects of their experience to be heard and included in the reporting process. Retaliation is too common, and so a process shift toward supporting victims is essential to fairness.

Community Recognition around Abuse

In sport there's a belief that you can't get the most out of an athlete unless you push them to the brink. And "tough love" (abusive behavior by definition) is needed to push the athlete to be their "best." "No pain, no gain" and "mind over matter" perpetuate these issues.

We glorify playing through pain; we made Patrick Mahomes a legend for playing through a high ankle sprain. That's toxic coaching and an unhealthy environment. This mentality perpetuates abuse: abuse of an athlete and/or an athlete abusing themselves, because of fear of losing their spot or failing to achieve decided goals due to pressure.

Stop celebrating pain as an inevitable, positive experience for athletes.

Accountable Action around Abuse

Far too many coaches are still able to coach when an incident of abuse is reported. We ignore the abuse and emphasize how athletes should feel lucky (there's that "luck" again) to be led by someone with a winning record.

Sport organizations, which are responsible for the safety of our athletes, don't get sanctioned when abuse is documented. Further, they don't get penalized when the coach does; basically there's a scapegoat, and everyone else is safe even though they are part of the problem. We celebrate wins on the podium while we demean losses. Yet we fail to celebrate when coaches develop athletes in a holistic way or provide the tools to be long-term participants.

We must adjust the current reporting model, which focuses on protecting reputations. Hold organizations and all parties accountable when abuse is reported. Folks who see abuse happening and neglect to act must be included in this account.

Face the realities underneath the sportswashing and hold leaders accountable for how athletes are treated.

In the "no pain, no gain" tradition, the pain has included abusive coaching. Believe survivors of abuse. Stop blaming victims of abuse and support them when they report wrongdoing. Reinvent systems with collaboration and transparency, and let athletes lead in that process. Reward developmental behaviors toward fairness.

Athletic excellence and personal well-being are essential to the wins and joys we'd all prefer to focus on; it was never an "or." Positivity only means anything in sport when we're all safe enough to play together.

Bri Newland is academic director and clinical associate professor at New York University. Shannon Kerwin is associate professor at Brock University. This piece is crafted in partnership with The Collective Think Tank, a global consortium of academic minds and industry leaders focused on gender parity and improving diversity. The collaboration is led by The Collective, Wasserman's women-focused division.



QUOTE OF THE DAY



We have a great brand, we've had a great business and we want to stay in that business. That said, we're going to be openminded there too, not necessarily about spinning ESPN off but about looking for strategic partners that can either help us with distribution or content.

-- Disney CEO Bob Iger, on the company wanting to remain the sports business. "Squawk Box," CNBC, 7/13.

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