Boundary Trangressions in the Coach-Athlete Relationship


Dr. Jan Toftegaard Støckel, University of Southern Denmark
Dr. Melanie Lang, Edge Hill University
“Monsters don’t get close to children, nice guys do”
(Wyre, 2000, p.53)

Child sex offenders “are sexual predators dressed up as nice men, or wolves in sheep’s clothing”
(Salter, 1995, p.167)
What is Grooming?

- “A course of conduct enacted by a suspected paedophile which would give a reasonable persona cause for concern that any meeting with a child arising from the conduct would be for unlawful purposes” (Home Office, 2010, p.1)

- Deliberate & repeated actions taken with the aim of befriending and establishing an emotional connection with a child & forming a trusting relationship with that child in order to lower that child’s inhibitions & gain the trust of the child in preparation for sexual activity or exploitation

  - Subtle, calculated & frequently carefully thought out and premeditated/ planned behaviour
  - May include activities that are, in and of themselves, legal

- Allows abuse to go undetected
• It’s not just the child who is groomed!

• Grooming also takes place in the social environment around the child:
  
  • Perpetrators often ‘groom’ other adults around the child (parents, coaches etc.), develop trusting relationships – this in turn develops the child’s trust in the perpetrator

  • Perpetrators can ‘groom’ whole communities (Leberg, 1997; Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005) – cultivating an ‘alibi of status’ (Brackenridge, 2001)

  = feel the child is in safe company, even when left alone
  = less likely an allegation will be believed
# The Grooming Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeting a potential victim</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Observing which athlete is vulnerable</td>
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<td>• Checking out child’s credentials as a susceptible person</td>
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<td>• Striking up a friendship</td>
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<tr>
<th>Building trust and friendship</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Making child feel special</td>
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<td>• Giving gifts and rewards</td>
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<td>• Spending time together</td>
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<td>• Beginning to bargain: ‘You have to do this, because I have done that.’</td>
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<th>Developing isolation and control; building loyalty</th>
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<td>• Refusing child access to significant others and/or demeaning any previous sources of friendship and support</td>
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<td>• Restricting access to, or reliance on, parents and carers and non-sport peers</td>
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<td>• Being inconsistent, building up hopes and joy one moment and then punishing the next to increase the child’s desperation for attention</td>
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<td>• Checking the child’s commitment through questioning and setting small tests</td>
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<th>Initiation of sexual abuse and securing secrecy</th>
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<td>• Gradual incursion into ambiguous sexual boundaries</td>
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<td>• If athlete objects saying, ‘You didn’t last time’ to entrap her</td>
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<td>• Invoking co-operation: ‘you owe me/it’s the least you can do’.</td>
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<td>• Invoking guilt: ‘Now look what you’ve done’</td>
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“It was the warm and friendly child or the vulnerable child I was looking for, or someone who had been a victim before, quiet, withdrawn, compliant.”

“Playing, talking, giving special attention, trying to get the child to initiate contact with me…I would initiate different kinds of contact, such as touching the child’s back, head… Testing the child to see how much she would take before she would pull away.”

“Isolate them from other people. Physical isolation, closeness, contact are more important than verbal seduction.”

“Most of the time I would start by giving them a rub down. When I got them aroused, I would take the chance and place my hand on their penis. If they didn’t object, I would take this to mean it was ok.”

(Quotes from Conte et al., 1989)

(Model adapted from Brackenridge, 2001)
What Do We Know About Grooming in Sport?

“The most powerful men at Penn State FAILED to take any steps for 14 YEARS to protect the children who SANDUSKY VICTIMIZED.”

— Louis Freeh

“This is a tragedy. It is one of the great sorrows of my life. With the benefit of hindsight, I wish I had done more.”

— Joe Paterno
Penn State Head Football Coach
How do Coaches See the Coach-Athlete Relationship?

“I don’t really think of myself as having power over my athletes, I look at is as in a partnership … I tell them what we do, so we’re here at six, we finish at seven thirty, this is what we’re going to do … but as far as power, no I don’t look at it that way.”

“I have to put across right from the start that I know what I’m doing at that particular session, erm … that they know what they’re doing, it’s a structured session, a safe environment. … I don’t think of it as having power though. I don’t think you should have power over your athletes, I don’t think there should be power as such.”

(Lang, 2006)
“I wouldn’t know whether a coach is, erm, breaching any kind of policy … I don’t really know what I’m doing … I don’t know enough about what’s appropriate or not to know whether I’m doing it right or wrong, or, you know, what good practice is really.”

“Is it, erm, a bad idea to be, urm, giving a lad a hug, or helping him put a plaster on. I don’t know, I don’t see a problem with it really but I don’t really know.”
“I do know of a couple of coaches who will take the children home and give them a lift in their car … but you keep it to yourself, I think it’s not my place to say … but is it? Maybe I should. It’s not a major issue though really, is it?”

“I’m not, erm… I’m not sure about the whole thing. I mean what’s wrong with driving a kid home, or hanging around with them after the session if their mum hasn’t turned up? … It happens to us all and there’s not much you can do about it. … It’s all got a bit, erm, over, a bit, you know, too much I think.”

“Well I know I shouldn’t really, at least we’re told by the ASA not to, but … well, Johnny is a friend of my Billy and so it makes sense for me to take him training and then [Johnny’s mum or dad] brings them home. I can’t see what’s wrong with that meself.”
“If a child’s poorly they get out and they wrap themselves in the towel, or sometimes a child runs up to you and gives you a hug or if they fall over your instinct is to just go over and pick them up isn’t it, you know, urm, to help them? Well, I ... I don’t have a problem with that. If I want to put them on my knee or give them a hug cos they, erm, they need that at that moment, well hell that’s fine I think.”

“A lot of children if they can’t get something right in their stroke you might, erm, get hold of the child and go [manually] through the stroke and I’ll step in and do that, whereas lots of people won’t – they’ll sort of hold back on doing that, they’ll do everything else they can first before they step in and do that.”
“I don’t suppose you can always prevent yourself from falling in love can you really? … I suppose that [a sexual relationship between a coach and an athlete] has developed over the years … they’re individuals in their own right and can have relationships with whoever they want.”

“People that have got similar interests in common might find themselves attracted to each other and as long as it’s not going to encroach on their coaching then I don’t see there’s a problem with that.”

“I know one of the male coaches that’s on poolside with me and he’s 18 and he’s got swimmers that are probably 16, 17 … I’m thinking if one of his female swimmers, you know, if that … if he were to carry on a relationship with someone and they’re over the age of consent, and agreeing to it and everything’s fine, that’s OK.”

“It depends on the age of the coach. … If they’re [the coach and the athlete] sort of the same age group … if you’re talking 20, 21 and they’re [the coach] in their late 20s it’s only like everyone else.”
Concluding Thoughts

• Grooming is a cumulative process (Brackenridge, 2001; Nielsen, 2001)

• Many behaviours/ actions that form part of the grooming process, particularly early in the process, are not in and of themselves illegal or singularly suggestive of potential abuse

• Any one action may be innocent OR part of the grooming process

• Context is everything!
Content of presentation

1. Athlete rights and quality of life are paramount
2. Prevalence of behavioral stressors in sport
3. Risk factors for sickness/stress/depression in sport
4. Risk factors for sexual abuse
The quality of life puzzle

- Social network
- Social competence
- Recognition
- Selfworth
- Self-accept
- Control
- Challenges
- Mastery
- Autonomy
- Physical health
The sporting process – the black box?

Problems in society

Sport

Social inclusion
Treatment of lifestyle disease
Learning difficulties
Quality of life measures
1,700 Danish athletes

- 95 pct. sport is all in all a positive experience
- 91 pct. increased self-confidence through sport
- 89 pct. got close friends through sport

Current mental health status:
- 71 pct. high
- 21 pct. medium
- 8 pct. poor
coach-athlete interaction

- Directly instruction related
  - Expected
  - Sometimes necessary

- Indirectly instruction related
  - Non-instruction related
  - Power behaviour
  - Verbal/physical advances
  - Often normalized or accepted in sport

The critical threshold
Behavioral stressors in sport

- felt pressured to compete while injured
- felt pressured to lose weight
- premature competition debut (too early too hard)
- discrimination
- sick/stressed/depressed because of sport
Regression analysis for factors associated with stress/depression because of sport experiences

**Experience**

- Premature competition debut
- Lack of peer support during injury recovery
- Coach pressure
- Illness
- Lack of influence on training/competition
- Pressure to loose weight
- Isolated or ignored by coach for lack of discipline or performance
- Discriminated against by coach/sport entourage
- Coach-athlete intimate relationship

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Sub-conclusion

• Relationship dynamics are critical sources of stress

• The coach and/or sport entourage play a key role for administering exposure to stressors
Directly instruction related behaviour
Coach touches hand, arm or shoulder during instruction or conversation
Coach is showing more attention towards some athletes than others
In-directly instruction related behaviour
Coach offers special training session outside normal practice hours
Power behaviour
Use of physical training as punishment for lack of discipline
Coach isolate or ignore athlete during practise or competition due to lack of discipline or performance
Coach tell athlete off during intense competition
Verbal/physical advances
# Intimate coach–athlete relationship

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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>-12 years</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>13-17 years</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>18+</td>
<td>28.9%</td>
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Intimate coach-athlete relationship is strongly associated with coach power behaviour and alcohol consumption

- No or little athlete influence
- Physical punishments through intense training regimes
- Coach pressure
- Isolating/ignoring athlete
Coach out socially drinking with athletes
Other types of non-instruction related coach behaviour

• <5 pct. experience harassment based on:
  – Religion
  – Ethnicity
  – Sexual orientation
Coach openly flirts with an athlete
Coach stares at athletes breasts or buttucks
References