

## **Temporal and developmental risk factors for sexual harassment and abuse in sport**

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## **Abstract**

Recent revelations of sexual misconduct by sports coaches have challenged long-held beliefs in the educational value of sport, yet there is very little knowledge about the dynamics of sexual exploitation in sport upon which to base improvements in the practice of sports coaching or teaching. Earlier inductive research by Brackenridge (1996, 1997a, 1997b) in Britain established a set of hypothesised risk factors for sexual abuse in sport which have subsequently been reinforced by the results of survey research on elite athletes in Canada (Kirby and Greaves 1996). However, risk analysis for sexual abuse in sport has not yet been framed within a temporal or developmental sequence, nor sufficiently differentiated between elite and recreational levels of sport, or between coach-initiated and peer-initiated abuse. This paper reports selected findings from a Dutch qualitative study (Cense 1997) of 14 athletes who have survived sexual abuse in sport. The aim of the study was to identify risk factors that influence sexual abuse and harassment and to analyse which risks might be diminished through a prevention policy implemented by sport organisations. The Dutch study reinforces the earlier risk factor analyses but extends them by putting forward a preliminary temporal model of risk in sport that integrates offender behaviour with athlete and situational factors. On the basis of this model, suggestions are made to assist early diagnosis and prevention of sexual harassment and abuse by authority figures in sport.

**KEY WORDS:** sexual abuse, sexual harassment, risk analysis

## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

Marianne Cense is an independent social researcher working for Transact, a consultancy group specialising in research on gender-based violence based in Utrecht, The Netherlands. She has been part of a national pilot project to research, prevent and monitor sexual harassment and abuse in sport.

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## INTRODUCTION

Recent revelations of sexual misconduct by sports coaches have challenged long-held beliefs in the educational value of sport (Talbot 1976; Sherlock 1979; Shields and Bredemeier 1994; Harrison 1995). There is still very little knowledge about the dynamics of sexual exploitation in sport, however, upon which to base improvements in the practice of sports coaching or teaching. Given that sport education has been justified repeatedly as a medium for the development of desirable personal qualities it seems paradoxical that the institution of sport should be revealed as a site of sexual exploitation (Burton Nelson 1994, 1996; Heywood 1997; Benedict 1997; Robinson 1997). Despite this spate of popular publications on the subject, sexual abuse in sport is still a relatively under-researched topic. Academic work in the area emanated from the feminist movement and from critical sociology in sport, the first articles appearing in the mid- to late 1980s (Crosset 1986; Brackenridge 1987). Policy and prevention work has developed in parallel with academic research (Lenskyj 1992a, 1992b; Brackenridge 1996) but there is, as yet, no effective predictive theory of the risk of sexual abuse in the sport setting. Earlier inductive research by Brackenridge (1996, 1997a, 1997b) established a set of risk factors for sexual abuse in sport presented under three headings - the coach, the athlete and the sport - but these were neither cross-referenced nor linked temporally (see Figure 1).

**[Fig 1. about here]**

Supporting evidence for these risk factors was found in the results of a major, Olympic-level survey (Kirby and Greaves 1996). In the Netherlands the National Olympic Committee and National Sports Federation (NOC\*NSF) commissioned a research project to gather more information on the sequence of risks that pave the way to sexual harassment and sexual abuse in sport and that might be used to identify and prevent such practices. TransAct, a Dutch Non-Government Organisation (NGO) specialising in the prevention of sexual abuse, conducted the research (Cense 1997a & 1997b). Important sources of information were risk factors already identified by Brackenridge and Kirby and non-sport theories on sexual abuse and harassment of Finkelhor (1984), Wolf (1984 cited in Fisher 1994), Eikenaar (1993),

Mastenbroek (1995) and Timmerman (1990). The Dutch research adopted the same definitions of sexual harassment and abuse as those set out by Brackenridge (1997a), in which sexual harassment is unwanted, often repeated, behaviour on the basis of sex, and sexual abuse is groomed<sup>1</sup> or coerced involvement in sexual acts.

## **THEORISING SEXUAL ABUSE IN SPORT**

Finkelhor's (1984) four factor theory of sexual abuse, generated and widely used outside sport, has previously been cited by Brackenridge and others as relevant to the sport context but has not been clearly integrated into the analysis of risk factors. According to this theory, sexual abuse takes place only if four, sequentially linked factors coincide: first, the motivation of the potential abuser to abuse sexually; secondly, the overcoming of the potential abuser's internal inhibitions; thirdly, the overcoming of external inhibitors and finally, the overcoming of the child's resistance. Finkelhor's model has been welcomed in sociology as an antidote to the many, more individual, pathological attempts to explain sexual abuse (for example, see Marshall, Laws and Barbaree 1990). His approach at least includes both personal and social factors. Whilst the logic of Finkelhor's theory is compelling, its validity within the realms of sport has yet to be demonstrated. Brackenridge (1994) has pointed out that there is a need for a contingency theory of sexual abuse in sport that accounts for not just the athlete, the coach and the sport but which also explains personal and situational interaction effects.

The only development-related, theoretical proposal put forward so far in the context of sport has been by Brackenridge and Kirby (1997). They suggest that there is a higher risk of sexual abuse to an athlete at the 'stage of imminent achievement' (SIA), just prior to elite (international) level, especially where this coincides with puberty. Further empirical work is required to test whether this proposition has validity. If it does, then the SIA will be useful for predicting risk and focussing resources for the prevention of abuse. It may also help researchers to understand the ontogeny of sexual abuse experiences in sport.

A number of possible lines of enquiry exist for risk factor analysis in sport. For example, whilst some of the risk factors listed by Brackenridge (1997a) can be identified with risk of sexual abuse more generally (such as victim's age, low self-esteem and vulnerability), others are thought to be specific to the culture of sport. No research has yet addressed whether these, or any other factors, can be differentiated by particular sport. Indeed, unless and until clear evidence is found for risk within named sports, serious scientific and ethical limits to naming sports apply to papers such as this. Those sports *not* named might regard themselves, unjustifiably, to be 'clean': indeed, reports from victims given to the Dutch National Sport Federation (NOC\*NSF) and to other researchers indicate that sexual abuse occurs in a very wide range of sports and activities.

Other possible lines of research include: framing the risk analysis for sexual abuse in sport within a temporal or developmental sequence for victim and perpetrator, differentiating between the risk at elite and recreational levels, and examining differences, if any, between coach-initiated and peer-initiated abuse. The findings reported here address the first of these potential lines of enquiry.

## **THE STUDY**

The qualitative study by Cense (1997) involved interviews with 14 athletes who had survived sexual abuse in sport in the Netherlands. The aim of the study was to identify risk factors for sexual abuse and to map out prevention strategies. The starting point for the research was the set of risk factors found by Brackenridge (1997a, 1997b). The study explored whether there were any differences in the risk factors for different ages of victims (above or below sixteen years of age) and differences in abuser status (athlete-generated or coach-generated abuse).

### **The Sample**

Fourteen athletes were interviewed, all adults at the time of the interview. Eight (six female, two male) had experienced sexual abuse in the sporting context when below the age of sixteen, defined here as children, and six (five female, one male) after the age of sixteen,

defined here as adults<sup>2</sup>. Six of the athletes practised sport at recreational or competitive (sub-elite) levels and eight at elite level, in a wide range of sports. All those interviewed had experienced abuse from males. The sample of athletes was purposive, including those who could be approached relatively easily. Respondents were found through several different channels including sport organisations, the media and health care workers. The athletes were therefore representative neither of sport in general nor of the levels of performance from which they came. Mainstream research on sexual abuse also indicates that socio-demographic variables such as class and ethnicity are not correlated with sexual victimisation (Finkelhor 1986; Morrison *et al.* 1994). The sample in this study was certainly too small for these factors to be investigated and the purpose of the study was to collect qualitative personal accounts of the athletes' experiences. Quantitative research on a larger, stratified samples would be needed in order to achieve representativeness or, indeed, to examine co-relationships between sexual victimisation in sport, structural and personal variables. The perpetrators of sexual abuse against the 14 athletes were not interviewed in this study.

## **Methods**

The study adopted a mix of inductive and deductive approaches. Semi-structured interview schedules were designed from the literature review and with reference to the risk factor analysis of Brackenridge (1997a, 1997b). The interview schedule was used only as a guide: each topic was raised when the female interviewer judged that it suited the respondent. The interview questions were mainly open-ended. Answers to questions about the sport culture were elicited by means of response cards, for example, 'People often make jokes about minorities' or 'At our club women should behave like real women and men like real men'. This method was also used for questions relating to the kind of sexual abuse the respondents had experienced in order to elicit details that might otherwise have been difficult for respondents to reveal orally. All interviews were taped and transcribed. Each fragment of transcript was labelled and coded with key words or themes. Emergent structures were noted, together with different patterns between those respondents abused at an early age and adult age and between the top athletes and recreational level athletes.

**[Fig. 2 about here]**



## **FINDINGS**

Figure 2 is proposed as a temporal model that helps to identify the sequence of stages through which abuse develops, and the components and indicators of each stage in relation to the athlete, the coach and the sport situation. Both Finkelhor's (1984) four factor model of sexual abuse and Brackenridge's (1997a) lists of risk factors for sexual abuse in sport are embedded in the sequence of stages. The central column lists the components that characterise each stage. Indicators of the different components, as they apply in sport, are listed down the right hand side of the model. The model will be now used as a framework for the discussion of findings about the athletes from the younger (under sixteen) age group. The focus of the discussion will be on the development of the coach-perpetrator/athlete relationship. Results from the older (over sixteen) age group, and comparisons between the sexual abuse experiences of elite and recreational level athletes, are not reported in this article.

### **Motivation and opportunity to abuse**

As Finkelhor's (1984) model demonstrates, sexual abuse only takes place if someone is motivated to abuse. This means that the person has to be motivated to set aside his<sup>3</sup> own inner inhibitions. It is easier for him to do this if he holds a position (formal or informal) in which he is not being monitored. Lack of clear sanctions and punitive measure may also influence a person's confidence to transgress or may erode normal interpersonal boundaries. The perpetrator of abuse actively selects suitable victims and creates conditions that are favourable to maintaining secrecy, for example by isolating an athlete socially and physically.

The culture of sport has been blamed by previous authors for its high tolerance of sexual exploitation (Messner 1992: Robinson 1997). There is often no policy in a sports club about sexual harassment and sexual abuse or even any awareness of these issues. Before an athlete files a complaint, he or she must be sure that a club or association will treat it adequately and confidentially. For the aspiring athlete, giving up the sport is not an option. The price for the investments they have made to get so far is very high indeed and, as

Brackenridge and Kirby have suggested (1997), the higher up the sporting ladder the athlete climbs the greater the investment and, therefore, the greater the costs of leaving.

### **Victim selection and grooming**

The early stages of the relationship between the coaches and the athletes in this study already showed indications of the later sexual transgressions that were to occur. Such indicators included, for example, that a coach paid much more time with one particular athlete, adopted a very authoritarian attitude, exercised control over matters irrelevant to sport, was jealous of men the athlete socialised with and used (or threatened to use) physical violence if he was not obeyed. All these behaviours are also symptomatic of sexual harassment by authority figures in the workplace (Stockdale 1996) and violence in personal relationships (Mastenbroek 1995).

Eight athletes, six women and two men, reported their experiences of abuse before the age of sixteen: all were between twelve and sixteen years old when the abuse started. For seven of them the abuse lasted for between two and five years: for one of them it lasted several months. All eight perpetrators of abuse in these cases were male coaches. The abuse started very gradually, with the coach adopting the grooming process that is well recognised in the literature on child molestation (Grubin 1998). The process of grooming followed a similar pattern to that found by Brackenridge (1996, 1997b) in her interviews with sexually abused athletes. Slowly, the coach moved the limits of his interpersonal boundaries. Imperceptibly, his behaviour towards the athlete moved from the innocent, to the ambiguous (Garlick 1989) and into the grey area. This gradual entrapment of the athletes was designed to ensure secrecy, giving security to the perpetrator, and assuring co-operation from the athlete. This pattern of grooming resembles that described by Canter and Hughes (1998) as 'intimate paedophile' behaviour. Despite threats to do so, hardly any of the perpetrators used force, again suggesting that this group resembles the 'intimate paedophile' type rather than 'aggressive paedophile' or 'criminal opportunist paedophile' (Canter and Hughes 1998). *"He didn't force anything, but he always knew how to put it, so that you'd just do it. After all, he was one of the few to pay attention to me."*

In this study, the coach took on the role of a father and encouraged the athlete to consult him both on the technical matters of performance and on matters beyond sport. *"I was drawn more and more towards the coach, as he was the one who was there for me. Of course, it's fantastic to have someone who empathises with you."* Because the sport was so important to the athlete, his or her dependence on the coach was increased. A number of perpetrators threatened to end the sports relationship if the athlete did not co-operate. One athlete said *"I wasn't afraid of violence, but I did fear losing him or my sport"*. Co-operation with the coach's desires was rewarded in different ways, such as giving sports clothing or extra attention: failure to co-operate was punished by humiliating the athlete in front of team mates or by withdrawing attention.

Perpetrators chose their victims well. As found in Brackenridge's previous work (1996, 1997b), the victim athletes were vulnerable for some reason: they had few friends, a poor relationship with their parents and/or an isolated position on the team or squad. The perpetrators strengthened this isolation by setting team members against each other and maligning other coaches. *"It was obvious that if you associated with particular people, you could forget about [sport]. And that was so important that you knew better than to do so."*

All the athletes interviewed indicated that their coach more or less controlled their lives, echoing the findings of previous research (Crosset 1989; Yorganci 1994; Brackenridge, 1996, 1997b; Donnelly 1997). For some athletes, the incursion of the coach stopped at questions about their personal lives: for others, it went much further, as illustrated in this comment; *"He knew everything I did, where I'd been, whom I'd seen. He interfered with my weight, clothing, school, studies, really a lot."* Control over lifestyle is commonly recognised as a feature of the coach-athlete relationship (Donnelly 1997). Such closeness and control can facilitate trust and, indeed, may be viewed as a necessary basis for raising athletic performance (Tomlinson and Fleming 1995). However, if safe interpersonal boundaries are eroded (White 1995) then this control can also disempower an athlete by reducing his or her autonomy.

### **Actual abuse – athlete risk factors**

A number of factors emerged that made athletes additionally vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Most characteristic were differences in age and stage of maturation between the perpetrator and the victim. The social position of children in western society makes it difficult for them to resist adult power (Parton 1985). Their low structural status is reinforced in sport where they have less skill or knowledge than their coaches and instructors. Aspirations to achieve at elite level effectively mask the distress of emotional, physical and sexual abuses and make it even harder for children to challenge or resist the behaviour of their seniors, whether these be peer athletes or coaches, even though coaches have greater structural power. Wherever there is a power imbalance, then there is the potential for abuses to occur. In a sports culture that thrives on authoritarian leadership the climate is ripe for individual exploitation.

For the abused athlete, the bond of trust established between him- or herself and the perpetrator is often a substitute for a weak relationship with a parent or carer. Lack of attention to their sporting endeavours by parents can create social distance or even resentment between them and their offspring (see also Brackenridge 1998). High level athletes are frequently isolated from normal peer group friendships and their only social contacts are those made through sport itself. In sum, where a young person already suffers low self-esteem, then the conditions of social and emotional isolation that may confront them during the preparation for elite sport may facilitate their involvement in the grooming process that precedes actual abuse.

Children's limited knowledge and awareness of sexuality and sexual abuse means that they often fail to recognise what is happening to them, or to have the language and concepts necessary to understand and report their concerns. They may well not recognise grooming and abuse behaviour since it becomes normalised as 'just the way things are'. Where an athlete has family experience of a dominant father, a pattern of harassment and dominance in sport is thus regarded as perfectly normal. In these circumstances the athlete may simply be unaware of what a healthy relationship between a coach and a pupil looks like. Most of the athletes who participated in this research already practised sport at a high level or were

making very good progress towards elite status. This increased their vulnerability because the sport became so important to them. Consequently, the coach was able to take a major grip on their lives, not only with respect to sports performance, but also with regard to their confidence, self-image and relationship to others.

Almost all athletes in the Cense (1997a) study occupied an isolated position in the team or club because they were older than the rest, came from a remote village, performed much better (were the “showpiece”) or received more attention from the coach. This special position meant that they received little support from the other club or squad members and therefore had few social resources or networks to call upon when things went wrong.

The perpetrators took advantage of various occasions for abuse. Four situations emerged from the data as particularly risky: during national and international tournaments, during massage by the coach, at the coach’s home and when the athlete was taken home by the coach in his car. Again, these findings echo previous research (Kirby and Greaves 1996; Brackenridge 1996, 1997b) and policy advice for abuse prevention in sport (WomenSport International 1997; National Coaching Foundation 1996; CAAW+S 1994; Women’s Sports Foundation 1994).

### **Actual abuse – athlete resistance**

The advances by the coach and the period of abuse had a very disturbing affect on the young athletes. They needed the attention of the coach and doubted whether the abuse was normal. *“I didn’t know what was acceptable or not, the only thing I knew was that I didn’t like it.”* Again, this supports previous suggestions that abused athletes often lack the language or conceptual apparatus to recognise or define what is happening to them and may realise only years later that what they experienced constituted abuse. In this study, the athletes all resisted by cutting themselves off, avoiding problematic situations or developing health problems (sometimes rendering the practice of sport impossible). They indicated that boundaries which they tried to establish between the coach and themselves were often not

taken seriously in these situations: one said *“Even if you said no, the nagging just continued. Until you’re fed up and think, just let it go and have it over with.”*

### **Actual abuse - continuation**

For seven of the respondents the abuse lasted a number of years without them talking about it to anyone. They did not recognise it as abuse, felt ashamed, hid the memory of what had happened or felt guilty. They especially feared losing their place in the sport or losing the attention of the coach: they also feared not being believed and this, in turn, contributed to their silence. Positive feelings towards the perpetrator, such as love, thankfulness, admiration or respect, also kept athletes from talking about the abuse. Since the abuse concerned athletes in social isolation, there were few people in whom they could confide enough to talk about it.

### **End of abuse, consequences and victimisation**

For one respondent, the abuse stopped after he had hinted about it to his mother and she subsequently took steps to report it. For others the process was less direct, in that they established a greater distance from the coach, by becoming less keen on the sport, leaving home, getting involved in a different intimate relationship or because they could no longer practise as a result of bulimia <sup>4</sup>.

Age seems to play an important role in this respect; emancipation and independence of the athletes increased with age, suggesting that there is a chronological sequence to sexual abuse in sport. This is also proposed by Brackenridge and Kirby (1997) in their identification of the ‘stage of imminent achievement’ (SIA). The SIA is hypothesised as the couple of years or so just before the athlete reaches his or her peak and is thought to coincide with the peak age for risk of abuse to young athletes. If this period also coincides with or precedes puberty then the risk is thought to be even higher. In this study, sixteen years of age was the first transitional phase.

*I just felt a need for other things. That's how he lost his influence. I was able to break off contact because I had a relationship. If I hadn't had that, I wouldn't have been able to do it. I'd have been too scared that I'd be left with nothing at all.*

Eighteen years of age was the second transitional phase, as athletes developed greater autonomy: this age-related protection was also found by Kirby and Greaves (1996). Support from parents and friends helped the athletes to create distance from the coach, even when these significant others were unaware of the actual abuse. For example, some parents noticed that the coach kept contacting and giving attention to their child but did not fully grasp what was happening. After the abuse had stopped, then harassment by the coach sometimes persisted. Brackenridge (1997b) highlighted victimisation as a feature of sexual abuse in sport and this study also demonstrates that when a sports relationship continues after actual or attempted sexual abuse has stopped, a coach can still wield his power but in a different way; *"He kept claiming me and isolating me from the group. He still wanted to keep a hold on me and he was losing his grip."*

All athletes who were abused before their sixteenth birthday suffered damage as a result. In the case of the respondent for whom the abuse was limited to several months, the consequences were less serious, relatively speaking. Short-term consequences for the other athletes included: no longer practising the sport; repressing memories and emotions; and, distrusting men. In the longer run, however, more serious consequences became evident such as: damage to self confidence; serious disruption of sexual perception; loss of confidence in others; returning anger, fear and sadness; avoidance of situations and people that reminded them of the perpetrator; and a distorted development of adolescence. *"The after-effects influence the rest of your life. It has taken away a part of my youth."* Again, these emotional and psychological consequences match those found in Brackenridge's (1997a) earlier work and listed by Rodgers (in Brackenridge 1997b). All of the eight perpetrators reported by athletes in this study were alleged to have had additional victims. Interviewees indicated that some of these came from the same teams, some from previous periods in time and others from elsewhere. The impact of the damage inflicted on sport more widely is

difficult to assess. The reports from these athletes, and from the athletes in Brackenridge's earlier qualitative study (1997), indicate that the wider impact of sexual abuse in sport is extensive. Not only is the current and prospective involvement of these particular athletes damaged, or even curtailed, but the whole cultural and moral ethos of sport is also undermined by the fears, secrecy and negativity associated with the discourse of sexual abuse.

## **Implications for prevention**

Clearly, the best preventive measure against sexual abuse in sport is to stop potential perpetrators from becoming actual perpetrators. However, this is extremely difficult to achieve. What *can* be done within sport is to deal carefully with coaches and others for whom a previous history of abusive offences is known. Literature on treatment of criminals shows that the chance of recidivism is very high. For example, Gibbens *et al.* (1978, 1981) report reconviction rates of between 10 and 29 percent among extra-familial abusers of girls, and between 13 to 40 per cent among extra-familial abusers of boys. By keeping perpetrators away from situations in which they are given the opportunity to build up an exploitative relationship with children (as a coach or otherwise), recurrence may be avoided. An increase in punitive and disciplinary measures, that constitute part of the 'external inhibitors' (Finkelhor 1984), may also strengthen the barrier to abuse.

Being vigilant with respect to the behaviour of coaches and other staff surrounding children may prevent serious transgressions in the relationships between coaches and young athletes. Clear definition of interpersonal boundaries (White in Gonsiorek 1995) and monitoring of boundary violations will assist in checking the grooming process by which perpetrators secure the co-operation of the young athlete. A clear code of conduct is a prerequisite for this and should include an explicit statement of the interpersonal boundaries upheld for each sport. The code of conduct should specify standards of what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of *both* physical contact with athletes/children *and* issues of dependency and control. By incorporating rules of conduct and limits in the intimacy between



coach and pupil in coach education programmes, these standards will become part of everyday practice. However, this may only have an effect on coaches who do not want to cross barriers. Codes and written standards of practice are unlikely to make much impact on those with malevolent intentions. In order to prevent those who want to abuse children/athletes from doing so, action from outside sport is needed. For example, it is important that the omnipotence of the coaches is reduced, for instance by assigning more than one coach to a team, by involving parents in the coaching of their child, by setting out agreements about supervision or by appointing a coaching co-ordinator and/or welfare officer. In sum, any strategy that democratises sport, by increasing athlete empowerment and reducing the omnipotence of the coach, will have a beneficial effect on protecting athletes from sexual abuse.

From the interviewees' answers to the question of how the perpetrator got them to collaborate, a number of factors emerge that give an insight into the approach used by abusers. These are not risk factors *per se* but signals that may be recognised as indicators of sexual abuse. The social environment of the athletes (including parents, sports staff and other adults) may prevent problems arising if such adults are responsive to these signals. The athletes pointed to the way that the coach gradually shifted limits, building up a strong bond of trust, giving extra attention, nagging, taking advantage of amorous feelings, threatening and intimidating, rewarding and punishing, influencing parents, setting team members against each other and exercising control over them. In terms of protection against abuse, vigilance is also required with respect to the behaviour of *non-coaching* adults who, whilst not directly involved in developing the athlete's performance, might have a legitimate opportunity to get close to them and gain their trust, for example, athletic trainers, managers or bus drivers. Research into abuse in day care also identifies risk amongst these types of ancillary workers (Finkelhor & Williams 1988).

Some signs of abuse may also be picked up from the behaviour of athletes themselves. This applies especially to children who lose enthusiasm for their sport, are reluctant to go to particular practices, start giving worse performances than usual, turn things around or lie

about their whereabouts, become ill or develop an (eating or sport) addiction or whose behaviour changes (becoming very withdrawn or, on the contrary, very noisy, or showing sexual exhibitionism or knowledge beyond their years). By reacting to this and asking them whether unpleasant things are taking place, caring adults can offer children/athletes an opportunity to disclose their experiences.

As Brackenridge (1997b) and others have suggested, an open culture in a club may help athletes to talk about harassment or other transgressions at an early stage and this may prevent the situation from becoming worse. In addition to openness, it is essential that the limits to the behaviour of coaches and athletes are clear to all involved. Good communication about rules of conduct creates safety and makes clear to the athlete that he or she has the right to resist.

Particular athletes may be more vulnerable to abuse, for example, those who bring with them negative experiences from the home, or those who suffer social isolation for reasons of class, race or disability (Creighton 1992). By stimulating the empowerment of all young athletes, these athletes are also likely to develop more confidence and assertiveness or 'fighting spirit' (Cense 1997a). Emancipation may be enhanced by providing well-aimed information, stimulating the involvement of parents through clubs and coaches and by advocating healthy interaction. In addition, the club should offer extra support to athletes who are demonstrably more vulnerable or have an isolated position.

Other preventive measures fit in with the policy of emancipation within sport. A heter-patriarchal culture (Pronger 1990) and an unequal power balance between men and women may be regarded as predisposing risk factors for sexual harassment. An influx of female coaches and an increase in the number of female committee members might have a positive influence on team and club culture and therefore reduce these situational risks. This will only succeed, however, if these women are supported by their male and female peers in challenging exploitative practices. In an atmosphere in which sex discrimination and harassment are challenged, it becomes easier for athletes to resist the boundary erosion that

might lead to abuse. In addition, increased awareness of the issue of sexual harassment allows it more easily to be discussed at an early stage. Clarity about reporting systems is needed so athletes know the procedures if they need help or want to file a complaint. Procedures should guarantee the confidential treatment of complainants but should also allow for referral to the police or social services if the case warrants this. The function of a confidante is, first of all, to enable an athlete to tell his or her story and, secondly, to discuss what steps can be taken. This confidante may also play a role in the procedures that follows (mediation, settlement of a complaint, providing factual evidence to a case conference) and in relieving the pressure on the athlete. Finally, it should be recognised that none of these procedural mechanisms will succeed in ridding sport of sexually exploitative practices unless they are also reinforced by wider structural and political changes to the gender order in sport (Messner and Sabo 1990).

## **Conclusions**

If claims for the educative value of sport are to be validated then the sport experience for young people must be demonstrably positive. This research presents a challenging agenda for sport educators since it reveals how athletes of both sexes can be subjected to sexual exploitation and how their own motivation to succeed can render them more vulnerable to sexual approaches by authority figures such as coaches or sports teachers. The coaches, in turn, express their own need for domination through exploiting those who most readily succumb.

The proposed temporal model in Figure 2 (adapted from Cense's original, 1997a) integrates offender behaviour with athlete and situational factors. It should be possible to use this model for early diagnosis and prevention of sexual abuse by authority figures in sport. The model also shows how, and under what circumstances, sexually abusive relations develop over time.

The results of this study reinforce the earlier risk factor analysis but extend the analysis in several important ways. This research supplies information about risk factors that have an

influence on the prevention of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in recreational and top-class sport. The experiences of athletes clearly show how they can get caught up in a situation of powerlessness and humiliation. However, what still remains vague is the viewpoint of perpetrators. What makes a coach abuse his athlete? Why do fellow athletes maintain a culture of sexism and sexual harassment within the club? What may reduce the perpetrators' motivation and how may inner inhibitions to abuse be strengthened? A study among perpetrators may yield an understanding of this process and provide a basis for dealing with this problem.

This qualitative research provides insight into the mechanisms behind sexual abuse and sexual harassment in sport, their development, the perpetrator's strategy, the effects of an athlete's reaction to the situation and the action undertaken by others. It does not, however, give answers to questions like: How often does sexual abuse occur in sport? Does it happen more in some sports than others? Are women more often victims than men? How far do race, social class and sexuality differences influence the experience? Is sexual abuse a particular issue for very young athletes? What predictive power do the risk factors have? To answer these questions, quantitative research among large groups of athletes is required. Statistics on the scale of the problem are clearly needed to compliment small-scale qualitative work and to create a basis of support for policy development. Most importantly, research on psycho-social processes of sexual exploitation needs to be mapped onto the burgeoning research on the sexual politics of physical education and sport (Griffin 1998; Sykes 1998; Pronger 1998).

### **Notes**

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1. Grooming is the term applied to the gradual preparation of the target victim by the abuser: in the context of sport it may involve the trading of privileges, such as team selection, captaincy, or training roles, for sexual activity. Definitions of sexual abuse and sexual

harassment vary from study to study and culture to culture. For a fuller discussion of these terms in relation to sport see Brackenridge (1997a, 1997b) and Brackenridge and Kirby (1997).

2. Age of consent varies from country to country and even from state to state. 16 is taken here as the dividing line between adult and child even though it is recognised that sports vary widely in their definition of child/junior categories. Kirby's concept of 'sport age' (1986) is useful for avoiding difficulties with chronological age. However, age-based definitions of 'child' are crucial for determining legal culpability in criminal proceedings. Some people argue that sexual abuse *per se* cannot happen to someone above the age of sixteen. We differ from this view, defining sexual abuse as groomed or coerced sexual exploitation based on power: imbalances in social power still exist between athletes over sixteen and their coaches, and between athletes over sixteen of differing social statuses.

3. The vast majority of sports leaders are male, especially at elite level (Acosta & Carpenter 1996; West & Brackenridge 1990; White & Brackenridge 1995). Also, the overwhelming of reported abusers are male (Fisher 1994). Therefore the term 'he' is adopted throughout this paper. However, we acknowledge the growing literature about female abuse and the need for research to be done into both same-sex and cross-sex abuse in sport.

4. Disordered eating is frequently associated with experience of sexual abuse in the general literature but there is no unequivocal evidence yet about a link between abuse in sport and anorexia or bulimia.

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**Figure 1**

**Risk factors for sexual abuse in sport**

[Source: updated from Brackenridge, C. (1997a)]

<b>COACH VARIABLES</b>	<b>ATHLETE VARIABLES</b>	<b>SPORT VARIABLES</b>
sex <b>[male]</b>	sex <b>[female]</b>	amount of physical handling required for coaching <b>[?]</b>
age <b>[older]</b>	age <b>[younger]</b>	individual/team sport <b>[?]</b>
size/physique <b>[larger/stronger]</b>	size/physique <b>[smaller/weaker]</b>	location of training and competitions <b>[?]</b>
accredited qualifications <b>[good]</b>	level of awareness of SH <b>[low]</b>	opportunity for trips away <b>[frequent]</b>
standing in the sport/ club/community <b>[high]</b>	rank/status <b>[potentially high]</b>	dress requirements <b>[?]</b>
rank/reputation <b>[high]</b>	self-esteem <b>[low]</b>	employment/recruitment controls and/or vetting <b>[weak/none]</b>
previous record of sexual crimes <b>[unknown/ignored]</b>	history of sexual abuse in family <b>[unknown/none]</b>	regular evaluation including athlete screening and cross-referencing to medical data <b>[?]</b>
trust of parents <b>[strong]</b>	relationship with parents <b>[weak]</b>	use of national and sport-specific codes of ethics sport-specific codes of ethics and conduct <b>[weak]</b>
chances to be alone with athletes in training, at coach's home, at competitions and away on trips <b>[frequent]</b>	education and training on SH and abuse <b>[none]</b>	existence of athlete and parent contracts <b>[none]</b>
commitment to sport/national coaches association codes of ethics and conduct <b>[weak/none]</b>	medical problems especially disordered eating <b>[medium/high]</b>	climate for debating SH <b>[poor/non-existent]</b>
use of car to transport athletes <b>[frequent]</b>	dependence on coach <b>[total]</b>	
	devotion to coach <b>[complete]</b>	
	'stage of imminent achievement' relative to puberty <b>[at or before]</b>	

**Note:** Comments in **brackets** indicate emerging trends from interview data  
**[?]** indicates further research is needed

**Figure 2 Temporal model of sexual abuse with children and young persons in sport**  
 [Adapted from Cense (1997a)]

