

Bullyology

Bullying in Sport



Jessica Hickman
Bullyologist

Bullying in Sport

“Sports do not build character. They reveal it.”

– John Wooden

Sports participation benefits society in a number of ways. It boosts our health and acts as a kind of social glue that enhances our sense of belonging, increasing social connectedness. There’s also considerable evidence to suggest that sport’s positive outcomes extend to the academic realm and can aid concentration, self-esteem and overall confidence.

Unfortunately, sporting culture can also provide a fertile climate for bullying behaviours. Here, emotions run high and peer pressure is magnified. At its core, sport is a battle for supremacy – a quest to establish hierarchy and gain the upper hand. Intense competition can bring out the brilliant best in some and the ugly worst in others, whether players, coaches, parents, trainers, administrators or spectators.

You don’t have to look too hard to find glaring examples of sports bullying in our society:

- The screaming, red-faced soccer parent who insults and physically threatens the volunteer referee at her 9-year-old’s matches
- The professional cricket player who dismisses repeated taunts about an opposing player’s sexual orientation or ethnicity as ‘harmless sledging’
- The college basketball coach who singles out a player for constant abuse and ‘extra exercise as punishment’ in an effort to make them quit the team
- The stadium full of football fans who join in a ‘gang chorus’ of racial vilification aimed at a specific player
- The hateful harassment of sports managers and team members (and threats to their families) on online fan forums after a poor on-field performance
- The abuse, harassment and humiliation in changing rooms that goes way beyond good-natured banter
- The tennis parent who habitually belittles their child during and after matches, insults umpires and tries to intimidate opposing players
- The professional swim coach who sexually abuses swimmers under his control

Everyone who participates in sport in any capacity - at any age and at any competitive level - has the right to do so in a healthy, fun and safe environment. They deserve to be treated with respect, fairness and dignity. Bullying takes these basic rights away and can have consequences that reach far beyond the school gym, the neighbourhood sports oval or the professional stadium. Bullying in sports can affect work, school and social life, interfere with academic achievement and harm mental and physical health.

I've had schoolkids tell me they often try to find a way to miss school on Sports Day because they believe it exposes them to a greater risk of bullying and humiliation from peers. It's not uncommon for children to feel less safe in sporting environments than in 'more controlled' academic ones.

Children who aren't good at sport and those with a disability can cop extra unwanted attention during sporting events, which can escalate into bullying. Being ridiculed for old, ill-fitting or 'non-trendy' sporting attire can also put a big dent in a student's confidence and may discourage them from wanting to participate in any future sports events.

Sadly, it's negative behaviour by their own parents that can push children away from sport quicker than just about anything. Sport is a great teacher of important life lessons - commitment, reward for effort, compassion, humility and the benefits of collaboration - but only when kids are allowed to experience it without the distraction of parental tantrums and pressure. Kids want support and encouragement from parents, not negativity and unrealistic expectations.

Bullying can actively discourage sporting activity on a large scale. According to Britain's Football Association, 7000 football referees quit every year, mainly as a result of abuse on the field and at the touchlines. In a part of the world where more than 2 million people would like to play more football, this has led to a shortage of referees. Since it's a priority to have qualified referees at every grassroots match, this situation is serious enough to potentially destroy the game in some parts of the country.

Sport and 'being different' share an uneasy alliance. US research shows that more than a quarter of LGBT students have been assaulted or harassed while playing on a school sports team because of their gender expression or sexual orientation, and more than half have been harassed or bullied during physical education classes. Three-quarters said they felt uncomfortable speaking with their coaches or teachers about LGBT matters. About a third said they felt unsafe on school athletic fields, at P.E. classes and in locker rooms and purposely avoided those areas.

These findings highlight the crucial gaps in safety and support within school sporting environments and also help explain why LGBT students are so often underrepresented on athletic teams. Despite the existence of many gifted and high-profile LGBT sports stars, homophobia and intolerance are still well-entrenched in many sporting circles.

Sporting culture - both the good and the bad - is handed down from one generation to the next, to the extent that certain negative behaviours have now become almost

expected: weigh-in scuffles before boxing matches, aggressive niggling of opposing Australian Rules football opponents, personal taunts aimed at international cricket players, baseball pitchers' intimidation to unsettle batters, etc.

In pursuit of a psychological edge, some sporting tactics come perilously close to sanctioned bullying - and all are learned behaviours. However, aggressive stare-downs, pre-game trash talking, occasional conflicts and heat-of-the-moment emotional flare-ups are a fairly normal (and largely benign) part of intense competition that shouldn't be confused with a pattern of bullying.

We still have a long way to go in disassembling old stereotypes about gender norms in sport. A boy who chooses classical ballet over rugby or a girl who would rather box than play netball goes against the grain of purists who insist that 'certain types of people should play certain types of sports'. In many cases, these athletes face an increased risk of bullying because of their outside-the-box choices.

Teenage girls are constantly told 'If you dream it, you can achieve whatever you want in life'. Yet in their own schools and communities, females are stopped before they even begin when it comes to sport - denied access to physical activities that have been deemed inappropriate for them solely because of their gender.

At a time when we're desperately trying to increase healthy participation in physical activity, gender-norm inflexibility holds girls and women back from having a go at whatever sports interest them. Safety considerations are often cited as the main reason for this discrimination but the real cause may have more to do with a stubborn adherence to outdated gender expectations. Unfortunately, those who choose not to conform can find themselves targeted for abuse as a result.

I played touch rugby growing up. We were an enthusiastic rugby family - my Dad was the coach. I rotated my supply of white, black and red rugby shirts to wear each day up until I was around 13, when I started wearing makeup and left the sport, feeling the pressure to conform to society's ideas of 'being girly'. There was peer pressure (from both boys and girls) to not be a tomboy. I also remember enjoying hockey, despite the ignorant school stereotype that 'only lesbians play hockey'.

Even exceptional talent in youth sport can have its drawbacks: a child who is good at a particular sport might often be called upon to play for a team or in a competition made up of players older than them - which then leaves them more susceptible to bullying.

Many would argue that parents, coaches, teachers and civic leaders are more useful role models for youth than high-profile sports stars but like it or not, children will try to emulate the behaviour of their sporting heroes - both the noble and the atrocious. Whether these sporting greats want that responsibility or not isn't terribly relevant - it's there. They're in the public eye and a lot of people look up to them, so they should be striving to set a good example both on and off the field.

For example, look at the horrible sporting example set in the 2018 UFC title fight between Conor McGregor and Khabib Nurmagomedov, when the victor jumped out of the ring to start beating up rivals in the spectator area. Instead of healthy competition and the spectacle of a fair-minded event, all viewers will remember is the atrocious bullying, nasty intimidation, barrage of insults and lack of control from

both camps. In a sport which already has its share of detractors, this type of behaviour simply added to public disgust.

Healthy sports culture starts with leadership

In team sports, the coach has a hugely influential role in players' lives - clarifying expectations, establishing boundaries for acceptable behaviour, providing individual and group support and creating the team culture and ethos. A coach's attitude and processes play a big part in determining whether bullying will manage to get a foothold in a team setting. There are several ways a coach can help deter bullying:

- **Encourage players to freely report bullying**

Openly discuss bullying so players are clear on its definitions, motivations and harmful effects. Ensure there's no stigma attached to 'dobbing someone in' when they're doing the wrong thing.

- **Supervise unstructured time during games and practices**

Bullying occurs most often when players have time on their hands and don't think they're being watched; this is when vigilance is needed most. Close supervision and clear goals help minimise abusive behaviours.

- **Be clear about the punishment for bullying**

Saying 'bullying will not be tolerated' is a warning without a consequence. Clearly state the punishment so potential perpetrators know exactly what to expect.

- **Break up cliques**

Studies have shown that strong cliques within team environments can be harmful, increasing the risk of antisocial behaviour and bullying. Ensure a healthy team dynamic by discouraging the forming of smaller subgroups and encouraging team-wide social inclusion.

- **Stamp out inappropriate aggression**

Properly channelled aggression is a powerful force in sport but players must recognise the line between permissible aggression and unacceptable aggression; remind them that some of the most damaging aggression is psychological.

- **Be a positive anti-bullying role model**

As a coach, your firm personal stance against bullying should be clear from the get-go and be backed up with a team culture that focuses on mutual respect, acceptance and building healthy relationships. Display calmness under pressure and emotional control and your players will follow your lead. Sport is most effective at building good citizens when coaches teach, model and nurture positive behaviour.

The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport supports the idea that positive sports outcomes are driven from a positive sports experience that embraces *True Sport Principles*: Go For It, Keep It Fun, Respect Others, Play Fair, Include Everyone, Give Back and Stay Healthy. In a sporting culture where all these principles are embraced enthusiastically and equally, bullying has no cracks to sneak through.

In sports, bullying is often disguised as something else: a 'tough love' coaching technique, '100% team loyalty' or 'team-building'. Initiation traditions that humiliate new team members might be passed off as 'player bonding' but are nothing more than extreme and often sanctioned abuse and harassment.

The more a sporting culture promotes a 'win at all costs' mentality, the more likely a bullying climate will flourish. One of the best ways to prevent abuse in sport (especially at junior level) is to put more focus on other aspects such as skill development, teamwork, enjoyment and sportsmanship.

Sporting organisations must do more than pay lip service to the anti-bullying movement by developing precise codes of conduct and comprehensive member protection policies. These should address behaviours such as harassment, discrimination and abuse and provide a practical and consistent complaints process to deal with incidents promptly and objectively.

In certain sports such as rugby, gridiron football, mixed martial arts, hockey, boxing and others, aggressive physical contact is expected as part of the competition. Some courts recognise this as 'implied consent' which means participants voluntarily assume certain risks of violence or injury while engaging in that activity. This is far from clear-cut however, since all violent and aggressive acts in sport are different and proving malicious intent can be a tricky business. The line between 'normal sports aggression' and a blatant criminal act is a blurry one and there's no doubt that sports bullies are quite happy to take advantage of that fact to inflict harm on opponents in situations where an equivalent act would be classed as clear assault away from a sporting field.

Bullying in sports is unwanted and intentional behaviour that involves the same three ingredients which define *all* forms of bullying: it's (a) aggressive, (b) repetitive and (c) creates an imbalance of power. What's interesting is that these same three components are regularly instilled in athletes as a recipe for success: a winning coach expects his best players to be aggressive, practice their skills repetitively and try to establish dominance over the opposition.

While these coaching tactics are not a bad thing by themselves, young players may not fully grasp that these same behavioural habits can be incredibly harmful if carried over into interactions with peers in normal social settings.

Anyone involved in sports should understand the difference between banter and bullying. The line is quite clear: banter tends to be good-natured teasing that's part of bonding. It establishes camaraderie and involves no intention to hurt. The line crosses over into bullying when a teammate is persistently and aggressively demeaned for the purpose of making them feel bad – it's sustained victimisation.

On youth athletic teams, coaches should care about bullying because the strongest teams are those in which every member is valued and respected. When a single player is bullied, the whole team becomes weaker. A coach should use positive praise in team settings to single out athletes who have exhibited exceptional sportsmanship or been good off-field role models - and encourage players to do the same. Rewarding positive social behaviour is an effective bullying prevention strategy.

Losing is part of sports. How coaches and other adults handle losing teaches players a lot about self-control, perspective and resilience. Even a bad loss can have positives and coaches shouldn't forget to mention what was done well.

A team pledge signed by all players can spell out expectations and might include a statement like: 'I will not bully others. I will include anyone who is being left out. I'll let the coach know if I see someone being bullied. I'll help any students who are being bullied.' Bullies always need to be held accountable for their actions – even when they're the best player on the team.

Among teens, there's often a strong taboo against reporting bullying abuse. Studies have shown that 5% of those involved in bullying incidents are instigators, 10% are targets and almost 85% are bystanders. It's this larger group that can make a real difference in the prevention of bullying - but many feel helpless to intervene for a variety of reasons.

Upstanders (those who stand up to bullying) are valuable but rare in school sporting environments: research suggests they constitute less than one percent of students. This reluctance may be because they don't want to be seen as a snitch, because they're afraid the bully will turn on them or because they don't believe speaking up will make a difference. But athletes can be trained to become upstanders and this training can easily be incorporated into end-of-practice discussions.

Upstander lessons could go something like this:

- 1.** Teach players to recognise inappropriate situations and behaviours, using Q & A sessions and role-playing to address topics like sexual orientation, weight, homophobic slurs and ethnic differences.

- 2.** Teach the concept of empathy. One way to do this is to have players create two lists; the first list identifies the differences between teammates (age, race, social background, physical characteristics, etc.) and the second summarises the similarities. Many are surprised to learn that they are all much more alike than different; this helps them see each other as a diverse but unified force.

- 3.** Create an environment of trust, where players feel safe in reporting bullying or bringing up other sensitive issues. Do this by expressing gratitude that the athlete came to you for help and validate their thoughts and feelings by truly listening and

letting them 'get it off their chest'. Acknowledge their courage in coming forward and assure them that you'll do your part and take action to address the situation. Be specific about the action you'll take and thank them before they go.

4. Provide guidance about what upstanders should do when confronted with a bullying incident. For example, upstanders should always be confident and use assertive statements. A simple "Hey, someone's coming" is a useful ploy to get bullies to walk away in fear of being caught. Upstanders can recruit a second or third teammate to 'swarm' the bully with numbers, disrupting the balance of power away from the aggressor. The direct approach also works: if just one upstander has the guts to speak the truth about a bully's unacceptable behaviour, others may be more inclined to do the same in future situations. Upstander success is habit-forming.

All it needs is for that less-than-one-percent upstander ratio to be increased just a little for big improvements to start happening in sports bullying prevention. In tackling all forms of bullying, upstander training should be made a priority. It's not easy but it does help – a lot. A calm, confident upstander is one of the best bullying deterrents on earth.

What can you do to promote healthy relationships in sporting environments?

A red-tinted background image showing a person's hands writing in a notebook on a wooden desk. The person is wearing a dark shirt and a watch. The scene is dimly lit, with the red tint dominating the color palette.

Bullyology

For more information, please do not hesitate
to get in touch with Jessica:

T: +61 413 265 991
E: jessica@bullyology.com

www.bullyology.com