

A safe place to be: Relational risk management for male coaches and female athletes

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Abstract 372**

Traditional models of risk management have focused almost exclusively on physical or legal risks. However, an examination of the coach-athlete relationship as it pertains to communication, opportunity, self-image and increasing chances of litigation has been absent from the literature. Relational Risk is an original term that is defined as "a harmful action or destructive form of communication, from a superior to a subordinate, which may adversely affect the subordinate's self-perception and confidence and could negatively influence her/his future accomplishments" (Van Bussel). Examples of relational risk could be aggressive and demeaning verbal and non-verbal communication, threatening physical actions toward athletes, inappropriate sexual references, and/or a lack of appropriate feedback. Several questions will guide this research and subsequent presentation:

1. What relational risks exist for female university team members who have male coaches?
2. What requisites in communication are necessary in the male coach-female athlete relationship to ensure the athlete's safety, enjoyment and ability to maximize her performance?
3. Considering these relational risks and communication requisites, what should be present in a relational risk management plan for male coaches of female athletes?

An assessment of the coach-athlete relationship using an interactionist lens allows for a specific focus on communication between coach and player and considers the impact that a male coach's behaviour may have on female athletes. Furthermore, this framework provides the opportunity to study sport as a vehicle for socialization because, "symbolic interactionism attempts to account for how lives are shaped by social interaction" (Koehler, 1980, p. 2). The research of George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer and their insight into human association, communication, and the nature of human action provide a strong context from which to formulate risk management plans.

The male coach/female athlete relationship could not be thoroughly examined without the aid of feminist theory. Power, athlete self-perception and body image are themes that run through feminist sociology of sport. The perspectives of female participants, regarding their athletic experiences, may be very different from male experiences. MacKinnon (1987) highlights differences in experience: "these include things that men occasionally experience, but that on the whole are not allowed to be the central purpose of male athletics, such as kinesthesia, pleasure in motion, cooperation, physical self respect, self-possession and fun" (p. 121). The inclusion of Kirby, Greaves and Hankivsky (2000) highlights aspects of the misuse of power, sexual harassment and abuse in sport. Finally, aspects of feminist legal theory will round out the legal issues surrounding the male coach/female athlete relationship. Feminist legal theory will facilitate the understanding of legal risk from a female perspective (MacKinnon, 2005).

Ethnographic traditions will drive this analysis. Methods utilized will include the formation of case studies using interviews, narrative analysis, document/policy analysis and non-participant observation of the coach-athlete relationship. The case study method will be used to examine three different Canadian University Athletic Departments, more specifically Female University Soccer Programs. Intended participants in an individual case include administrators (one athletic director), male coaches (one male head coach) and female athletes (four team members). In addition, a sample of female athletes who have left their soccer programs, for reasons other than injury, will supplement this analysis. The use of interviews, document analysis and observations provide an opportunity for the triangulation of data and will further strengthen the analysis of the case studies.

At the heart of the athletic experience is the relationship formed between coaches and participants. Increased scrutiny of this relationship has created a new focus for coaches and administrators, not only to avoid negligence and liability but also to provide a safe and enjoyable environment for student-athletes and coaches alike. The purpose of relational risk management is to minimize inappropriate feedback and communication from individuals in power, such as coaches, and ultimately to eliminate the possible damage that it can cause to athletes. More importantly, the establishment of positive forms of communication through relational risk management plans may foster a more productive environment for coaches and athletes.

Resources:

Kirby, S., Greaves, L., & Hankivsky, O. (2000). *The dome of silence: Sexual harassment and abuse in sport*. London: Zed Books.

Koehler, L. S. (1980b, October). *The interactional experiences of female high school athletes: Implications for socialization through organized competitive sports*. Paper presented at the Conference for the North American Society for the Sociology of

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Sport, Denver, CL.

MacKinnon, C. A. (1987). *Feminism unmodified: Discourse on life and law*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

MacKinnon, C. A. (2005). *Women's lives, men's laws*. London: The Belknap Press.