

Strategies to Prevent Bullying in Female High School Sports

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Abstract

The participation of high school female athletes in sports offers mental and physical benefits, which can enhance self-image, fitness, and overall well-being. However, bullying and hazing in high school female sports is increasing. This paper will go over Milena Clarke's story (a 14 year-old high school freshman basketball player), what female high school sport bullying looks like, what coaches and athletes can do to prevent bullying, and bullying prevention programs. Hazing is a form of bullying that is common and dangerous in high school female sports, and can have detrimental effects on the mental health of athletes. Statistics reveal that over half of female athletes experience hazing, with many reporting emotional and physical consequences. However, bullying can be addressed and prevented, if done correctly. Programs like Ttofi and Farrington emphasize evidence-based strategies that promote a whole-school approach to combat bullying. Unfortunately, more research in high school female sports is needed in order to create bullying prevention programs that specifically address this area. Ultimately, this paper calls for a collective and altruistic effort to mitigate the spread of bullying in female high school sports.

Key Words: bullying, sports, high-school, female

Introduction

With technological advancements, social media, and increasing competition, participation in sports can be particularly stressful for high school female athletes today. However, sports have the potential to benefit women mentally and physically. According to working women, sports participation helps them advance their self-image and gives them confidence in what they do (Women's Sports Foundation 2016). Participating in sports can increase strength and overall fitness in young athletes. Apart from the physical benefits of sports, sports can help boost self-confidence in female high school athletes. It is also a great way to relieve stress. Additionally, another reason sports may relieve stress and anxiety is that sports can provide a sense of identity, belonging, and social connection (Wann et al., 2015). Sports also teach important skills that can help you throughout the rest of your life, such as focusing on your goals, paying attention, teamwork, leadership, and discipline.

Unfortunately, despite the many benefits that come from playing sports, sports can also have a devastating impact. Sports participation among high school female athletes is common; however, many end up dropping out for a variety of reasons. Over the past couple of years, bullying in high school female sports has become a major concern. In general, bullying can dissuade high schoolers from participating in sports, or losing interest in activities (Government of Canada, 2016). Bullying can also impact high schoolers' mental health.

14-year-old high school freshman basketball player Milena Clarke stated that she heard about a bullying situation in Miami, and that it reminded her of a familiar situation. She said that she felt "that familiar sick sensation" and that "it brought back a lot of the pain" (Melissa Isaacson, 2013). This demonstrates that observing bullying in sports or being a victim of bullying in sports can cause trauma. Clarke continued to speak out about the issue and said: "I don't

think people realize how bad it can be. I don't think they know about the things they actually do" (Melissa Isaacson, 2013). On ESPN, she went on to talk about one of her experiences during her high school basketball life. Clarke stated: "I didn't see it coming at all. How it started was during one practice, some girls restrained my arms during a drill, then it started going into verbal [taunts]. I tried to go to the coaches and [in front of the team] they told me to, 'Toughen up, act as a leader'" (Melissa Isaacson, 2013). Her experience highlights the struggle with team dynamics and the challenges high school female athletes face. From physical restraint to verbal taunts, Clarke's experience shows that bullying can be emotionally overwhelming. When she went to the coaches to complain, they simply dismissed her instead of listening to her side of the story, or taking action on the issue. From here, it escalated even more, as her teammates used ethnic slurs towards her, which she looked up because she didn't know what the words meant. Her AAU teammates would call her a "[n-word] lover and continued to be rude. As a result of all of this, she lost weight, had trouble sleeping, and her grades suffered. At this point, she believed that the only way the bullying would come to an end was if she quit. Specifically, Clarke stated: "I was just thinking since I wasn't given any chance and they weren't going to do anything to help me, I'll just quit and it will all be over" (Melissa Isaacson, 2013). In the end, Milena Clarke's life as a high school athlete got better, but in a lot of cases, athletes ended up quitting.

Examples like Clarke's situation display the challenges of interpersonal conflict and bullying amongst teammates within a high-school sports setting. However, this issue is far from isolated. Many female high school athletes experience bullying from their teammates and opponents, negatively impacting their sports experience. This systematic review paper will reference academic research on these topics to explain what bullying in high school female sports looks like, steps to prevent bullying, and bullying prevention programs.

What Does Female High School Sport Bullying Look Like?

Bullying is defined as "unwanted, aggressive behavior among school-aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance" (StopBullying 2019). This can include social bullying, verbal bullying, and physical bullying.

Hazing has become a major issue in female high school sports, and is considered to be a popular form of bullying. Hazing is defined as "the imposition of strenuous, often humiliating, tasks as part of a program of rigorous physical training and initiation:" (Oxford Languages). Humiliation and initiation rituals are considered hazing. For example, girls tend to purposefully exclude people and isolate them from the rest of the team, which is also considered hazing (How to Stop Bullying in Youth Sports, 2024). In a case study by Isaacson (2013) reporting on a female high school basketball player, the story of how an athlete faced discrimination is described through the ethnic slurs she repeatedly heard from her teammates. As mentioned earlier, Clark was a 14-year-old high school freshman basketball player who faced repeated hazing from her teammates. She was considering dropping from varsity to JV in an attempt to avoid her teammates, even though she had the skill to be on varsity. Clarke's situation only got better when her dad intervened and spoke out about what was going on. In summary, hazing has become a major issue in female high school sports and is a form of bullying that can become dangerous if not addressed.

Unfortunately, 52% of female athletes experience hazing from their teammates in different ways, which is over half the population of female athletes, including high schoolers (Gershel et al., 2003). 39% of female athletes have reported being humiliated through hazing in

general, which includes being yelled at or even thrown into a pool (Hoover & Pollard, 2000). 17% of female athletes report being physically abused or beaten, inflicted pain upon, or being tied up (Hoover & Pollard, 2000). This alarming statistic suggests that there is a lot of mistreatment that needs to be addressed in sports. 17.6% of female athletes also report being called names, confined in a locker, or even being abandoned somewhere (Hoover & Pollard, 2000). This highlights that sports can very quickly become a toxic and dangerous environment if rules are not enforced by coaches. This kind of behavior can take away a player's confidence and make them feel inferior to others. As a consequence, the psychological effects can be devastating.

Furthermore, in a European university, a bullying breakdown graph was created that represents the percentage of sports where harassment and bullying are common (Ekowati et al., 2023). For instance, the highest percentage of harassment and bullying has happened in gymnastics (77%), swimming (72%), volleyball (61%), and soccer (44%). These results were based on in-depth interviews with thirty athletes. Most importantly, these alarming statistics represent that these specific sports need more attention when it comes to preventing bullying. The issue of hazing and bullying in female high school sports proves that there is an urgent need for interventions.

On May 4th, 2003, the Powderpuff Football Glenbrook North High Hazing Incident occurred in which a violent physical and verbal fight broke out at a high school Powderpuff football game (Finley, L. L., & Finley, 2007). One victim had a cooler slammed over her head, a few were covered with trash and paint, and one victim had a bacterial infection resulting from the conflict. The entire fight was videotaped and shown around the world. Overall, 31 seniors were expelled, 20 juniors from Glenbrook North High School were disciplined, and six juniors were injured. Although the incident primarily involved girls, few boys were also involved in the fight. Of these students, sixteen were charged with misdemeanor battery. Most of them received community service and/or probation. Adding on, they were required to stay away from the victims. The Powderpuff Football hazing incident at Glenbrook North High School which included slamming a cooler over someone's head, is a reminder that there are severe consequences when bullying is dismissed.

What Coaches and Athletes Can Do to Prevent Bullying

In order to prevent incidents such as the Powderpuff fight from happening again, it is important for both athletes and coaches to step up to their roles. Coaches in particular can help prevent bullying in many ways, including helping athletes set guidelines for themselves. When guidelines are established, athletes will be able to stick to firm rules throughout the season. Critically, athletes should be held accountable by their coaches for any rules they break (U.S. Center for Safe Sport 2024). Coaches should also be on the lookout for athletes skipping practice or avoiding certain teammates, as these are common signs that an athlete is being bullied. If coaches enforce firm rules and expectations early in the season, and hold athletes accountable consistently throughout the entire season, bullying may be prevented.

Another effective method to prevent bullying in high school sports is by developing a code of conduct (Play By The Rules, 2014). The code of conduct may include punishments as well as rules to adhere to. By modeling respectful behavior, athletes will be able to understand what type of behavior is not allowed. Modeling respectful behavior will allow athletes to carry it on both on and off the court. Similarly, coaches should demonstrate how athletes should treat

each other and create a culture of empathy (ASPA, 2021). Allowing athletes to have open discussions with their coaches can create stronger relationships.

Athletes can also work towards preventing bullying in sports. A lot of times, athletes get interrupted and experience attacks and criticism on their performance during games (Vveinhardt et. al., 2017). If teammates show kindness and emphasize that everyone excels at their own pace, this can be prevented. Bullies should also be reminded that if they weren't involved in a conflict initially and they cannot provide helpful feedback, they should not comment. The Bullying vs. Boston program set up a guide on how to prevent bullying. The guide explains what setting boundaries looks like and helps bystanders take a stand. It emphasizes that bullies need to understand the impact of their actions. If all athletes can understand the impact of bullying, it will most likely decrease the chance of them bullying (Greif et al., 2020). The Bullying vs. Boston program states that there are three steps to addressing bullying: the athlete should plan how they are going to act (whether that is when they are being bullied or whether that is when they observe bullying), identify people who can provide support, and make sure that they are in a safe place. Coaches and school officials should support increased assertiveness in responding to bullying as well as support communication between teammates. This way, people can understand both sides of the story and ensure a fair solution.

Bullying prevention programs

It is critical to understand how to establish effective bullying prevention programs to mitigate the impact of bullying across school environments (Green et. al.,). In the past 10 years, researchers have started to pay more attention to what makes anti-bullying programs effective (Salmivalli et. al., 2021). Ttofi and Farrington (2009) “coded the whole-school anti-bullying programs.” Anti-bullying policies and classroom rules were some of the ways in which Ttofi and Farrington (2009) was effective. Their work on bullying prevention emphasized the importance of evidence, parental involvement, and social/emotional skills in students. They also found that providing information for parents was a more efficient approach compared to involving them in discussions and meetings. 18 of 27 (67%) of studies that examined victimization reported that the Ttofi and Farrington (2009) program was indeed helpful, and 11 of 22 (50%) of studies that examined bullying perpetration observed significant effects (Evans et. al., 2014). Ttofi and Farrington (2009) even used methods such as parent and teacher training, strict rules for handling bullying, implementation of a whole-school policy, and instructional videos, in an effort to further prevent bullying, by showing adults what to do. Together, this suggests that bullying prevention programs are not difficult to implement if you know how to.

The first few steps to starting a bullying prevention program are planning assemblies and presentations that are free for all parents and students to watch (Beane). From there, developing a logo, statement, and objectives will allow your program to be recognized. Once the program foundation is established, the next step is to create rules and policies that everyone should abide by. It is also important to recognize locations that have a high-risk of bullying, and to make sure those locations are supervised at all times. Finally, there should be a few assemblies, meetings, and presentations held a couple of times per year to add onto rules or further improve the program.

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