

# A review of the effects of child athlete abuse on the athlete-coach dynamic

St Johnsbury Academy Jeju

Eunju Lee

## Abstract

In sports literature, emotional and physical abuse of athletes by coaches is a co-occurring form of child maltreatment. The purpose of this narrative review is to synthesize research on the emotional and physical abuse of child athletes at the hands of coaches and its consequences. Previous research supports that the relationship between an athlete and their coach lays the foundation for abuse; the relationship is central. The review's findings suggest that the coach's power over the athlete is a cause of the abuse; the abuse may have positive or negative outcomes

## 1. Introduction

In their narrative review, Wilinsky and McCabe (2020) examined the dynamics and results of abuse in the context of elite sports by researching the emotional and sexual abuse of elite child athletes by their coaches. The study explores the characteristics that make athletes susceptible to the aforementioned abuse, as well as the coach-athlete relationship. Similar research was conducted previously by Stirling and Kerr (2009), who probed the perceptions of abused athletes regarding coach-athlete relationships. The focus of their research was on the influence of coaches' power on athletes' experiences of abuse. The study by Bermon et al. (2021) scrutinizes the verbal,

physical, and sexual abuse suffered by young elite athletes. This review examines the positive and negative effects of abuse on elite child athletes by inspecting previous studies and the perception of the athlete-coach relationship and how it serves as the basis for child athlete abuse.

The study by Stafford et al. (2013) examines and contextualizes the emotional harm suffered by children who engage in sports. Through the article, the reader is presented with evidence of a sporting culture in which emotional harm occurs at all levels and affects children of all ages. Kavanagh et al. (2017) contribute to the research on emotional abuse by analyzing the coping strategies of elite athletes in their relationships

with coaches in response to emotional abuse. Gervis and Dunn (2004), in their earlier study, looked into the prevalence of emotional abuse of elite child athletes in the United Kingdom due to their coaches.

### **Antecedents of Abuse for Young Elite Athletes**

The coach's power over the athlete is a recurring theme in the literature on coach abuse involving young elite athletes. Wilinsky and McCabe (2020) claim that a coach's control over an athlete stems from the fact that athletes tend to respect and seek the approval of their coaches. This view is supported by Gervis and Dunn (2004), who imply that athletes view coaches as their means of achieving success in sports. In addition, they conclude that the verbal behavior of coaches has a significant impact on the well-being and self-esteem of athletes. As a result, coaches are in a position of power, which allows them to take advantage of and manipulate their relationships with their athletes; some coaches even go so far as to abuse their athletes. Stirling and Kerr (2009) contribute to this discussion by acknowledging that an athlete's plasticity to abuse is increased by a coach's authority.

There are multiple mechanisms by which a coach can exert influence over an athlete. Stirling and Kerr (2009) prove that a coach may have control over an athlete based on the athlete's age, gender (where female athletes are victims of male coaches), the coach's knowledge and access to resources, the coach's authority to reward or

punish the athlete, and the coach's past successes. Athletes become entirely reliant on their coaches because their success depends on the knowledge and abilities of their coaches. The power of a coach can be nearly equivalent to that of a religious leader; coaches are viewed as individuals with absolute knowledge (Stirling and Kerr, 2009). This influence is retained and fueled because coaches continue to build and sustain the success of their athletes.

### **Types of Abuse**

Wilinsky and McCabe (2020) report that coaches subject athletes to various forms of emotional abuse, including yelling, humiliating, scapegoating, demeaning, rejecting, isolating, threatening, criticizing, using vulgar language, denying them attention, and even throwing objects at them. According to Kavanagh et al. (2017), physical and verbal abuse actions frequently co-occur. There are instances in which coaching practices designed to punish certain athletes, such as benching or sitting them out, overlap with coach abuse. Stafford et al. (2013) had similar findings. Participants in the study confirmed that performance-related criticism was a common way in which coaches emotionally harmed athletes. Participants were emotionally harmed by embarrassment, humiliation, teasing, and bullying, according to different research. Some coaches criticized their athletes for performing poorly, with the level of criticism varying depending on the athlete.

Bermon et al. (2021) published that the prevalence of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse among elite athletes in Australia, Canada, and Sweden is high and consistent. In some geographical regions, the pervasiveness of abuse increased, while in others, the occurrence was low. Notably, the nature of abuse must be precisely defined, and the results must be contextualized in terms of culture and the specific characteristics of the population under study. Sexual abuse frequently co-occurs with emotional abuse, according to Wilinsky and McCabe (2020), and should be examined to identify the overarching findings across the behaviors of athlete child athletes. According to these studies, sexual abuse extends beyond sexual relations with athletes to include a variety of other behaviors. It involves unwanted sexual contact with an athlete, making explicit statements, jokes, gestures, sexual propositions, or displaying pornographic or other material to the athlete.

### **Effects of Athlete Abuse**

As a result of coaches' emotional abuse, athletes undergo many negative consequences. Stirling and Kerr (2013) organized their research findings into three categories of abuse: perceived psychological effects of abuse, perceived training effects, and perceived performance effects of emotional abuse among athletes. Some psychological effects (perceived adverse effects) include depression, low self-esteem, and low self-efficacy; others include anger, anxiety, and poor body image. Athletes are likely to perceive the following negative effects

during training: markedly reduced enjoyment, impaired concentration, difficulty acquiring skills, and undermined motivation. The athlete will experience performance issues, where their performance level declines. According to Stirling and Kerr (2009), the adverse effects of female athlete abuse include depression, unhappiness, disorders, and withdrawals at the peak of the athlete's career. The research conducted by Stafford et al. supports this (2013).

According to research by Stirling and Kerr (2013), athletes consider emotional abuse necessary for a successful performance. The normalization of abuse characterizes a young elite athlete's mid-career. Some of the participants in Stirling and Kerr's (2013) study indicate that emotional abuse was beneficial because it provided the athletes with a sense of accomplishment, an increase in motivation, and, in turn, a higher level of performance. According to Stirling and Kerr (2013), participants indicated that the effects of the abuse were positive in justifying their experiences. This may result from backward reasoning, in which they viewed the coaching process as positive because they were successful in the sport. Wilinsky and McCabe (2020) point out that the retrospective justification of their experiences is problematic. The athletes' justification can be interpreted as an attempt to distance themselves from their emotional experiences and engage in self-objectification, which occurs when one identifies with the aggressor. The implication is that the athletes may

use the same tactics in the future when coaching their teams; as such, athletes are frequently preferred as candidates for coaching positions in sports academies (Wilinsky & McCabe, 2020). The purpose of their role in most academies has been to preserve the academy's culture.

### **Responses to Child Athlete Abuse**

Kavanagh et al. (2020) examine the literature on child sexual abuse, adult sexual assault, and intimate partner violence to suggest coping strategies for individuals dealing with abuse. They indicate that survivors of child sexual abuse employ a variety of defense strategies when confronted with abuse. Some coping mechanisms include escapism, dissociation, cognitive engagement strategies, and support-seeking behaviors. According to Kavanagh et al. (2020), individuals who used approaches to deal with instances of abuse did so in order to prevent themselves from becoming overwhelmed by the situation. Frequently, the victims are overcome by threatening emotions and develop a diminished sense of self-efficacy, perceiving themselves to be powerless and without control. The victim's coping responses can mitigate the stress brought on by instances of abuse.

An earlier study by Kavanagh et al. (2017) revealed that as time passes, athletes gain access to support networks and begin to make sense of and rationalize their abuse experiences. The study investigates the potential for individual-level interventions to help athletes handle the cycle of

abuse by their coaches. Kavanagh et al. (2017) suggest that those primarily responsible for ensuring the safety of athletes, namely sports psychologists, should receive adequate training in safeguarding.

The study published by Kavanagh et al. (2017) illustrates that athletes respond to abuse by relaxing and breathing deeply, which is a technique used by athletes to remain calm and undistracted. An athlete in the study showed that when enduring abuse from the coach, they chose to concentrate on their breathing rather than react. The response assisted the athlete in avoiding an aggressive or confrontational reaction from the coach, who was emotionally and physically abusive to the point of threatening athletes. Some athletes reported that they preferred to be calm while utilizing the progressive muscle relaxation technique to release tension and avert a performance decline.

The paper by Kavanagh et al. (2020) proposes ways to address athlete abuse. Abuse management is a challenging and intricate task, but it is a minimum requirement for the well-being of athletes. Integrity is advocated by Kavanagh et al. (2020) as a principle that would help focus on the management of abuse in sports beyond the "do no harm" ethos to create a safe, fair, inclusive, and enriching welfare environment. They advocate for something other than the absence of elements such as violence, abuse, and poor welfare in sporting environments and experiences.

## Conclusion

Literature review indicates that the coach's power over the athlete is a cause of the abuse; the abuse can have both positive and negative consequences. Athletes are subjected to emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse by coaches. In addition to a depressed mood, low self-esteem, and low self-efficacy, the athletes experience anger, anxiety, and a poor body image. Nonetheless, some athletes view the abuse as essential to their performance success and believe that abuse has a favorable impact.

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