

## A Hard Look at Abusive Coaches : A problem

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It's become crystal clear that coaches who emotionally abuse players will no longer be tolerated. But it's not always obvious if or when a coach has stepped over the line. A panel of veteran administrators provide insight and focus.

By Mary Kate Murphy

*Mary Kate Murphy is an Assistant Editor at Athletic Management. She can be reached at: [mkmurphy@MomentumMedia.com](mailto:mkmurphy@MomentumMedia.com).*

Like many veteran athletic administrators, Sue Willey was previously a successful coach. And like many effective coaches, she used a variety of tactics to motivate her players. She remembers one in particular that, at the time, did not cause her to think twice.

"If I had a volleyball player who kept missing serves in practice, she would be asked to stand on the sidelines while everyone else on the team ran sprints," says Willey, Vice President for Intercollegiate Athletics at the University of Indianapolis, who also teaches courses on sports ethics at the school. "My intent was to show her that her mistakes hurt the whole squad."

Today, however, Willey instructs her staff of coaches to remove drills like this from their repertoire. "I was speaking to Janet Judge [President of Sports Law Associates LLC] about this type of drill, and she said it could be classified as abuse because I was humiliating the student-athlete," Willey says. "What used to be common practice is no longer tolerated, and a lot of college coaches need to rethink some of their motivational strategies."

It's been more than a year since Mike Rice was fired as head men's basketball coach at Rutgers University after video footage of him shoving players, throwing basketballs at them, cursing, and using homophobic language was made public, leading to a national discussion on emotional abuse by coaches. In the time since, athletic directors at every level have been re-evaluating what's acceptable and what's not when it comes to motivating student-athletes.

### **DEFINING THE PROBLEM**

The most difficult aspect of this topic may be pinpointing exactly what constitutes emotional abuse in coaching. Greg Dale, Director of Sport Psychology and Leadership Programs for the Duke University athletic department, says the difference between tough love and abuse largely comes down to the coach's approach.

"Coaches can and should be demanding of their players, but they should never be demeaning," he says. "Emotional abuse occurs when coaches get personal with their criticisms.

\* "They should focus on a player's mistake without zeroing in on him or her as an individual," Dale continues. "It's not about coaches being soft or not having high expectations--it's about correcting athletes without cutting them down in the process. It's an art, but the best coaches figure out how to do it."

Dale, who conducts workshops across the country on this subject, believes that cursing at players falls into the demeaning category. "Swearing at someone belittles and humiliates them," he says. "What would a coach do if their athletic director regularly cursed them out at staff meetings? More likely than not, they wouldn't want to pitch in when the going got tough. The same rationale applies to student-athletes."

How about yelling at practice? In his 30 years in high school sports, Bruce Carver, Executive Director of Athletics at Rio Rancho (N.M.) Public Schools, has dealt with accusations of abuse leveled against coaches who shout, and he has found the message is more important than the volume. "When a coach shouts, 'If you don't do this, I'm going to come over there and slap you in the face,' that's obviously abusive and shouldn't be tolerated," he says. "But if they yell, 'You can do better than that,' or 'You've got to give me more,' I don't think that's abuse--it's coaching."

In Carver's experience, quiet mistreatment can be just as damaging as loud, public outbursts. "Coaches can emotionally abuse players without ever raising their voice," he says. "They might treat everyone on the team fairly except one individual, singling him or her out negatively any chance they get--that certainly is emotional abuse."

Dale challenges coaches to also rethink the concept of motivation through punishment. For example, he believes running should not be used as a disciplinary tool. "Most athletes have to be in great shape to perform well, so making them run following a mistake only causes them to hate something they need to do," he says. "That's like teachers using homework as a form of punishment. Students need homework to help them improve, just like athletes need conditioning."

The Duke field hockey team is proof positive that programs can be successful without this type of discipline, says Dale. "They played in the national championship game last fall," he explains. "The squad has a healthy culture, the kids love playing for the coach, and the athletes are in great shape, all without ever running for punishment."

## PREVENTION

Fostering a culture where no coach on staff ever crosses the line into emotionally abusive territory doesn't happen overnight, however. For Eric Hyman, Athletics Director at Texas A&M University, the process begins with who you hire.

"You don't teach values--you hire values," he says. "Before getting to the interview stage, I do a lot of legwork and research into a coach's background."

Hyman will often track down people he trusts who know a candidate. "I ask them, 'When no one else is watching, what kind of person is the coach? How does he treat his athletes?'" he says. "It helps you get a better sense for them and can eliminate future problems."

Another key is making sure that coaches thoroughly understand the behavioral expectations of the program. "Athletic directors should hold meetings at the beginning of every year to spell out the standards and values the coaches must uphold," says Dale. "It's helpful to use 'standards and values' instead of 'rules and regulations' because the latter is more punitive than positive. When

people hear about rules, they focus in on what they're not supposed to do, but values speak more to how you want coaches to interact with student-athletes.

Wiley tries to paint a picture for her coaches of what is and is not acceptable. "One method that seems to hit home is when I ask coaches, 'Would you say or do that to your own child?'" she says. "For all intents and purposes, the student-athletes are our kids, so it's usually a good way for coaches to self-check their behavior."

"Athletic directors should also stay in touch with their coaches throughout the year," says Dale. "Instilling your standards is an ongoing process. It's not something you can do once in a while."

Staff training sessions can help drive home standards and get coaches thinking about their motivational tactics in a deeper way. "Workshops invite coaches to reflect on whether or not their way of doing things is really the right approach," Dale says. "In the ones I do, we talk about the art of being able to communicate and demand excellence of student-athletes without being abusive. For example, what's a coach's demeanor like on the sidelines when a player makes a mistake? If their response is to yell, throw things, and yank the athlete out of the game, that's going to negatively impact the player."



"Coaches are hungry for these discussions, because they typically don't get a lot of training in the area of emotional abuse," he continues. "I often hear, 'I wish I would have heard this at the beginning of my career,' or 'I hadn't ever really thought about this before.'"

## RED FLAGS

Along with preventative measures, athletic directors need to be on the lookout for coaches who may not be getting the message. Wild outbursts have drawn the most media attention, but coaches can be emotionally abusive in many different ways, and warning signs can be subtle. Some coaches may also act differently behind closed doors.

Mike Ellson, Athletic Director at Christ Presbyterian Academy in Nashville, Tenn., pays close attention to players' demeanor when they interact with their coach during games. "It might be the most important way to find out if a coach is being abusive," he says. "Let's say a coach is talking to a basketball player who just had three turnovers. I watch the athlete's body language. Are they looking the coach in the eye, or is their head down?"

"To me, eye contact means that the player knows the coach is invested in them, and therefore the player is willing to receive constructive criticism," Ellson continues. "That's probably not the case if the athlete is looking at the ground."

Carver catches up with alumni for insight into a coach's behavior. "Former players aren't going to have good things to say about a coach who was emotionally abusive," he says. "Current student-athletes might not say much for fear of retaliation, but as the years go by, athletes can reflect and offer honest insights."

At Duke, exit interviews and evaluations from graduating seniors are used to spot problems. "The student-athlete has nothing to lose and can speak freely about their experience in these

surveys," says Dale. "Getting feedback on the coach can give you a sense of the program's direction and allows you to intervene before the behavior gets any worse."

### **STEPPING IN**

When enough red flags are raised to make athletic directors aware of emotionally abusive behavior, they need to step in. Carver starts by increasing his interactions with the team in question.

"For example, I might sit directly behind the bench at a basketball contest to get a better sense of the coach's in-game behavior or stand outside the gym to listen to what is said during practice," says Carver. "And if I notice they are keeping their players in the locker room after a loss to go over everything they did wrong, I'll walk in, ask what's taking so long, and tell the coach to send the players home."

When complaints of abuse come from a student-athlete or a parent, athletic directors need a careful approach. Jim Murphy, Director of Athletics at Davidson College, encourages the player to discuss his or her concern with the coach first.

"If a student-athlete comes to me, my first question is, 'Have you already had this conversation with your head coach? And if not, why?'" he says. "Unless it is a serious accusation, I think a closed-door session between the player and coach does as much good as anything. Once that line of discussion is opened, coaches may sense that they have taken their behavior too far and should pull back."

When a student-athlete's complaint merits an investigation, Hyman makes sure to gather as much information as possible before taking action. "Coaches and student-athletes are not always going to have good chemistry, and I have had players in the past overreact when a coach yelled at them," he says. "My role as the athletic director is to determine if the athlete's claim has a broader scope than two people who don't get along."

"A lot of people hear a complaint and immediately rush to judgment," Hyman continues. "We gather the facts first and use them to make our decisions. If the athlete is justified in his or her claim, we will deal with it, but if not, the facts will reveal that as well."

Whether they have witnessed the emotional abuse firsthand or find that a student-athlete's complaint is valid, athletic directors have a lot to consider when it comes to taking disciplinary action. "For starters, has the coach been a positive role model in the past?" says Carver. "Have they treated players well? You also have to consider whether the behavior in question was a first-time mistake or part of a pattern."

An initial conversation with the coach should try to uncover if he or she truly understands the standards and values you've already laid out. "It's important that the athletic director and coach are on the same page," Dale says. "That way, if the coach doesn't live up to those expectations, the athletic director can say, 'You said one thing, but I saw another. That's not living our values, and it's not acceptable.'"

Dale suggests having the coach watch their abusive behavior on video. "If coaches really have blind spots and aren't aware that what they are doing is wrong, athletic directors can film them during practices or competitions," he says. "Then, sit down with them and go over the tape, because some coaches don't realize the impact they are having on players until they see and hear it for themselves."

Verbal reprimands, written reprimands, and suspensions are all options that athletic directors can consider, depending on the severity of the abusive behavior. "A write-up or suspension can serve as a wake-up call for the coach," says Carver. "Sometimes coaches will admit they made a mistake and show remorse, and there is a chance they can correct their behavior and move forward in a positive fashion. But they have to show that they learned from it. They need to exhibit behavior that demonstrates a change."

Corrective measures can include specific training to address the problem. "I worked with a coach in the past who made inappropriate comments about his female student-athletes' weight," says Hyman. "After making it clear to him that he had crossed the line, I sent him to mandatory sensitivity training."

Throughout any discussions or disciplinary actions, it's important to get other administrators involved. "Athletic directors have to alert their university president or high school principal of the situation as soon as they realize an initial conversation didn't have the effect they were hoping for," says Murphy.

In instances of severe abuse or after exhausting all other options, athletic directors will need to consider firing the coach. "The ultimate question should be: Do my student-athletes deserve better? If the answer is yes, it's time to make a change," says Willey. "After one incident, it's shame on the coach, but if the abuse continues to happen, it's shame on me for not protecting the student-athletes."

For Ellson, termination is a last resort and leads to self-reflection. "I beat myself up the most when I have to move in another direction with a coach," he says. "As leaders, I think we have to look at ourselves in the mirror and ask the hard questions. Where did I err in leading this coach? Did I do something to suggest it was acceptable for him or her to act that way? What could I have done better?"

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### READY FOR CHANGE

As more and more student-athletes knock on their athletic director's door because they feel their coach is disrespecting them, it can be tempting to ignore the knock. Willey believes administrators should, instead, open their door widely.

"I think we did a disservice to our youth for years, because we always told them to do whatever their coaches asked," she says. "We should have added this caveat: unless your coach says to do something you don't feel right about or treats you in an abusive manner."

Today's social media landscape also means that what were once complaints made in private are now public accusations. "Student-athletes are more likely to go on Twitter and say, 'Coach called this kid a name, swore at this person, or hit this player,' and anyone can see it," Dale says.

While addressing abusive behavior by coaches can be uncomfortable, Willey feels the worst thing athletic directors can do is turn a blind eye. "It frustrates me when coaches are allowed to do whatever they want, because they are successful," says Willey. "I have called other athletic directors when their coaches have behaved inappropriately on my campus. On more than one occasion, the athletic director was afraid to discipline the coach for fear they might leave for another program. To me, that's the tail wagging the dog.

"My belief is, if the coach is going to leave, let them be a problem somewhere else," she continues. "At UIndy, our coaches need to motivate their athletes in only positive ways. I won't tolerate anything else."

#### Sidebar: PLAN OF ACTION

Shortly after becoming Director of Athletics at the University of Indianapolis in 2003, Sue Willey had her first experience dealing with an emotionally abusive coach. "One of our coaches had an arrogant attitude and used vulgar language with the players," says Willey, who is now Vice President for Intercollegiate Athletics.

"I also took issue with the way he would treat his veterans," she continues. "When they were freshmen, he would hype them up, only to seemingly forget about them later in their college careers in favor of incoming players."

She began with a formal meeting. "My first attempt at handling the situation was to tell him, 'You have to drop your attitude and clean up your language, or you won't be here for long,'" Willey says. "We also put a letter in his file saying failure to improve could be grounds for termination."

It was difficult for Willey to monitor the coach's behavior for improvement because she was not at practice every day, so she looked to the team's athletic trainers for periodic updates. "They are my eyes and ears when I'm not around," she says. "I don't ask them to be snitches, but when they told me things weren't changing, I knew the problem hadn't been resolved."

While Willey was considering disciplinary options, a group of team members requested an off-campus meeting with her. "Half the team wanted to talk with me, and they all wanted to transfer," she says. "The players' feedback solidified our beliefs that the coach's actions had reached a breaking point."

*Need Careful Consideration!*

Willey then made the decision to fire the coach. "The meeting with the players showed us that he was still being emotionally abusive, so we called him in," she says. "We told him, 'You haven't made any significant gains in your treatment of the student-athletes, and we believe it is in their best interest to make a change.'"

As a new athletic director at the time, the experience taught Willey a lot about handling emotionally abusive coaches in the future. "I learned that I couldn't tell coaches to be mature and professional without spelling out what I meant," she says. "For example, this coach thought he was using good motivational techniques by calling his athletes every vulgar term in the book. You have to be clear about what you expect. If a coach does something to upset you, it may mean you didn't do your job in the first place."

*Exactly!  
Same  
for  
Athletes!*