

News

AP: Sex Assaults in High School Sports Minimized as 'Hazing'

Reporters examined sexual violence in school sports as part of its larger look at student-on-student sex assaults

By **Reese Dunklin**
Associated Press

The Georgia school district said it was investigating the baseball players for "misbehavior" and "inappropriate physical contact." What it didn't reveal was that a younger teammate had reported being sexually assaulted.

Even after players were later disciplined for sexual battery, the district cited student confidentiality to withhold details from the public and used "hazing" to describe the incident, which it also failed to report to the state as required.

Across the U.S., perhaps nowhere is student-on-student sexual assault as dismissed or as camouflaged as in boys' sports, an Associated Press investigation found. Mischaracterized as hazing and bullying, the violence is so normalized on some teams that it persists for years, as players attacked one season become aggressors the next.

Coaches frequently say they're not aware of what's happening. But AP found multiple cases where coaches knew and failed to intervene

or, worse, tried to cover it up.

The AP examined sexual violence in school sports as part of its larger look at student-on-student sex assaults. Analyzing state education records, supplemented by federal crime data, AP found about 17,000 official reports of sex assaults by students in grades K-12 over a recent four-year period. That figure doesn't capture the extent of problem because attacks are widely under-reported and not all states track them or classify them uniformly.

Nor does the data paint a detailed picture of specific incidents, revealed when the AP reviewed more than 300 cases of student-on-student sexual violence that surfaced through law enforcement records, lawsuits, interviews and news accounts. In those cases, the sports setting emerged as a leading venue for such attacks.

Teammate-on-teammate sexual assaults occurred in all types of sports in public schools, and experts said the more than 70 cases in five years that AP identified were the tip of the iceberg. Though largely

a high school phenomenon, some cases were reported as early as middle school.

Boys made up the majority of aggressors and victims in teammate attacks, records show, and some suffered serious injury and trauma.

An Idaho football player was hospitalized in 2015 with rectal injuries after he was sodomized with a coat hanger. That same year, a North Carolina teen suffered rectal bruising when he was jabbed through his clothes with a broomstick. Parents of a Vermont athlete blamed his 2012 suicide on distress a year after teammates sodomized him with a broom.

"It's basically rape and sexual assault," said Hank Nuwer, a hazing historian at Franklin College in Indiana. "It's amazing to me that there hasn't been a public outcry on this to help stop it."

The acts meet federal law enforcement definitions of rape and sexual assault, but language shrouds the problem and minimizes its severity. It also shapes how coaches and schools respond, and can influence whether



Flags hang over the court at a varsity basketball game at Flower Mound High School in Flower Mound, Texas, on Tuesday, Feb. 7, 2017. In 2011, Charles Freet lost his job as boys basketball coach at the school, and now works at a Dallas-area private school. After a Flower Mound High School teacher reported that players were putting their fingers in teammates' bottoms, he told administrators investigating the allegations that the acts were merely a joke and not hazing.

off-campus authorities hold anyone accountable.

"Language is everything," said B. Elliot Hopkins, a sports safety expert at the National Federation of State High School Associations. "If anyone knew that their kid was going to run the risk of being sexually assaulted to be part of a team, we wouldn't have anyone playing any sports."

Playing With Words

What really happened on the Georgia baseball team — compared to the school district's official statement — is outlined in graphic detail in state education, police and court records AP obtained.

The players from Parkview High School, in the Atlanta suburb of Lilburn, were playing in a tournament in South Carolina in June 2015. That year's squad would be defending the school's third state championship and second Baseball

America High School Team of the Year title since 2011.

Over a pizza dinner, an upperclassman warned several freshmen to "sleep with one eye open tonight" and specifically threatened sexual violence.

At the team hotel later, with coaches nowhere in sight, five to eight upperclassmen barged into a room and ordered three freshmen out of hiding. Over shouts of "get his ass," they pinned down one boy, and through his shorts, he felt fingers shoved into his rectum. They pulled down another boy's shorts. He got them back up, but the attackers grabbed and punched his testicles. The third managed to flee.

To gain entry to a second room, one of the upperclassmen pretended to be a freshman and obtained a key from the front desk. Inside, the aggressors blocked the door and ganged up on

one boy. Only when he broke free and threatened to tell the coach did the assault stop. "We don't want to be raped!" another terrified boy pleaded.

The upperclassmen didn't challenge the evidence in disciplinary proceedings, but described what they did to the freshmen as "wrestling and horse playing."

Targeting rookies for humiliating, and even risky, rituals is not new to sports. However, experts say the last 10 to 15 years have seen an escalation into sexual violence.

The reasons why aren't entirely clear, and research on sports hazing rarely addresses these assaults in depth. But players, perhaps influenced by sexualized pop culture, seem to be trying to one-up what was done to them, experts say.

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