

THE DARK SIDE  
OF SPORTS

# Troubling Trends in Coaching Youth

Abusive methods signal a failure in the preparation of coaches

BY DR. MARC RABINOFF

I started teaching physical education in 1969, at a time when the fields of physical education and coaching had status, value and parental support. But over the past four decades I've seen a decline in popularity and status within these fields, with a steadily increasing number of schools dropping physical education and even many sport programs. These professions have gone from being a major player in the school curriculum to, in many cases, a zero player. Let's look at some numbers.

An organization called The Center for Kids FIRST in Sports recently published a report about coaching young athletes called "Troubling Signals from Youth Sports." Here are some disturbing results from surveys of young athletes that were reported in this paper:

- 45.3 percent said they had been called names, yelled at or insulted by coaches
- 21 percent said they had been pressured to play with an injury
- 17.5 percent said they had been hit, kicked or slapped
- 8 percent said they had been called names with sexual connotations
- 3.4 percent said they had been sexually abused

Consider that we're not talking about professional athletes or hard-core football players here, but about kids in high school, middle school or even grade school. So when I saw the statistics which said that 45.3 percent of kids surveyed had been yelled at, I had to ask myself, "Why would a coach insult a kid?" And the only answer I could come up with is that we are fail-



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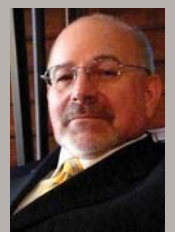
ing miserably in the preparation of our coaches – in fact, the paper also reported that as many as 20 percent of the coaches working with young athletes in the United States have had no training whatsoever in the field!

Because the focus of this issue of *BFS* is on women's sports, let's take a closer look at this area. Since I've been teaching, women's sports have gone through an evolution in which not only do more women want to participate in sports, but more want to train at the highest levels. But the fact is there are differences in the way that young men and women should be coached. Perhaps in the past a coach could get away with using sexually degrading words with young women, but that is certainly not the case now. Every year I find in our local paper reports of at least a half dozen coaches in school districts across the country who are brought up on charges of sexual harassment. Beyond the embarrassment that the actions of these coaches bring to our educational system and the financial costs associated with these lawsuits, there is also lifelong emotional trauma forced upon the young women involved.

From a liability standpoint, male and female coaches alike must be careful about what they say to young women and must be especially careful about touching them. The issue is sensitive enough that performing skin caliber pinch tests to measure bodyfat may be a thing of the past. All that needs to be established is the intent and a coach can get into trouble. And it's not all simply a matter of common sense – coaches need to take special classes in these subjects, whether it is through schools or respected organizations in these fields. You can't just assume, for example, that because a man or a woman is a good parent, they are also a good coach – they are two entirely different sets of skills.

Coaches and physical educators must learn how to treat all athletes with respect, and if they are not willing to do this, then they should not be coaching. When I was in college (1965-1969), we placed second and third in national College Division championships in gymnastics, and I can't remember anyone on our coaching staff ever yelling at us or using bad language. A coach can be hard on his or her athletes, such as by yelling at them to motivate them to do better, but clearly they are not serving the needs of our young people by degrading them with insults and name calling. It's not right, and as many coaches are finding out in the courtroom, in many cases it isn't legal. **BFS**

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