

**Exposing the 'Olympic family': a review of progress towards understanding risk factors for sexual victimisation in sport.**

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## Introduction

Sport organisations, including the Olympic movement, frequently invoke the concept of 'family' to describe their allegedly close and supportive social systems. However, the family metaphor backfires when sexual exploitation in sport is uncovered. Media coverage of high profile cases of sexual abuse against athletes by their coaches has prompted recent policy responses in the United Kingdom, Canada, the Netherlands and Australia but, relative to clinical and therapeutic settings, academic research into sexual exploitation in sport is only in its infancy. This paper reviews the empirical and theoretical advances in sport-based sexual abuse research, contrasting these with 'mainstream' data and theories. It examines whether elite sport, as a surrogate family setting for the talented young athlete, might be a distinctive location for sexual exploitation.

## Recognising sexual victimisation in sport

Sexual abuse was recognised as a social problem some ten years before it came to the attention of researchers in sport. The early studies of Kempe and Kempe on child battering (1961 cited in Lindon 1998; Kempe *et al.* 1962) led researchers to investigate an aspect of domestic violence that had not previously been named. Child abuse was, arguably, part of the complex system of taboo subjects that feminists had begun to raise in the 1970s (Dobash and Dobash 1979). Thompson (1998: 106) notes that, from the mid-1980s onwards, the apparent threat to the traditional family caused by an increase in sexual abuse cases caused a sustained moral panic. The majority of subsequent research has been carried out on *intra-familial* abuse, covering physical, sexual, emotional and neglect issues, since this is the site of highest incidence (Fisher in Morrison *et al.* 1994). Relatively little work has been done on *extra-familial* abuse and even less on sexual and other types of abuse in the voluntary or not-for-profit sector, including amateur sport.

Throughout the 1980s there was increasing public awareness of the problem of child abuse resulting from a number of serious disclosures and legal cases. Press coverage of high profile cases of child abuse in Britain, and especially of several deaths of children previously known to be at risk by social care professionals, led to the emergence of what Lancaster (in Hearn 1996: 132) has termed 'victimology'. What was formerly a private issue then became a public concern: as Elizabeth Wilson says "Sexuality stands at the intersection between public and private" (Wilson 1983: 43). State agencies, especially the police, have always been reluctant to intervene in private (family) spaces (Hanmer *et al.* 1989; Carson 1996) with the result that violence to women has been overlooked but violence to men has attracted attention, intervention and government funds.

**[Figure 1 about here – Responses to public and private violence and sexual exploitation]**

Figure 1 depicts responses to public and private violence and sexual exploitation, both inside and outside sport. Interestingly, sport is both a public *and* a private activity, under the gaze of the spectator during competition but often hidden from view during and outside training (practice). A high tolerance for violence on the field of play is often legitimated through the ideology of 'boys will be boys'. Tolerance for such behaviour has declined in recent years, perhaps as part of the civilising process (Dunning 1999) or because of legal challenges (Young 1992) or because of ideological challenges associated with the deconstruction of sex and sexuality (Butler 1990; Hall 1996). Sexual exploitation in sport takes place within the private domain of the locker room and other spaces away from public gaze (Kirby and Greaves 1996). Just as with marital rape, there has been a traditionally high tolerance of sexually exploitative practices, such as locker room sex talk (Curry 1991), demeaning treatment of women sports journalists (Kane and Disch 1993), or women fans and 'groupies' (Robinson 1998). Only since the start of what is a moral panic over child sexual exploitation in sport (Brackenridge, in press), and with the help of pro-feminist accounts by men in sport, have such practices been exposed and public tolerance decreased.

...in my interviews with the...the executive [officer of women's professional sport] I brought up the fact that there were repeated cases of girls being knocked around usually by their fathers who were also their coaches...his point was that this is a private matter, it's a family matter and we can't intrude into domestic affairs...

(BBC interview with journalist covering women's professional sport, 1993)

It is only in the last couple of years that the traditional collective tolerance for sexual exploitation and violence has started to break down. Where tolerance remains high, whether for violence on the field or for sexual exploitation off it, then there is little reason for sport organisations to change.

### **Sport as family**

It is Olympic year again: athletes from the every corner of the world are in the final stages of their preparation for Sydney. Almost all of them share the Olympic dream of achieving both personal and national glory. The International Olympic Committee has been variously described as 'The Club', 'the movement' or the 'Olympic Family' (Simson and Jennings 1992; Jennings 1996). Its ideals are encapsulated in its many slogans including

'Olympism is essentially an educational movement'; 'sport combined with culture'; 'acting to promote peace'; 'unity is our only strength'; 'bringing people together in peace for the benefit of mankind'

(Simson and Jennings 1992: 234)

Sport teams and clubs are often run as family-like social systems (Kirby and Greaves 1996; Brackenridge 1997b; Messner 1992; Donnelly 1998). Indeed, female victims of sexual abuse in elite sport have reported in interviews that they regard the sport club as a 'surrogate family' with the coach or authority

figure as a substitute parent. For this reason, sexual abuse in elite sport has been described as 'virtual incest' (Brackenridge 1997b: 118).

Time and again, players and coaches refer to the team as "family". Gangs are also viewed as family by their members. Says one victim: "[The athlete gang] becomes sort of a peer family for the young people in a sense of belonging. I think they need that. It's a replacement for a family that they may not be interested in being involved in, which is typical for teenagers".

(Male athlete survivor of sexual abuse described in Robinson 1998: 97)

The ideology of 'family love' is frequently invoked by authority figures in sport as a means of securing complete loyalty and control (Simson and Jennings 1992; Jennings 1996: 317). The concept of 'family' is used to describe the allegedly close and supportive social systems within the organisation, reflecting traditional nuclear and extended family values and ideologies. However, the hypocrisy of the family metaphor is exposed when sexual exploitation in sport is uncovered. It is within the private sphere that abusive 'family' relations can develop, with coaches acting *in loco parentis* and in the surrogate family of the sports club or squad. The frequency with which sexually exploited athletes have called on the family metaphor in interviews (Brackenridge 1997; Donnelly 1998) reflects the strength of the emotional ties with many sport groups.

Sabo and Panepinto (1990: 116) studied American Football players who used family terms to describe the mixed emotions of love and hate that characterised their relationships to their coaches. Messner (1992: 106-7) also noted that sports teams have social hierarchies that closely resemble those of the traditional family. These hierarchies are strongly gendered, with patriarchal authority clearly in evidence as the source of decision-making and sanctions. The hierarchies also harbour and encourage 'sibling' rivalries, resistances to authority and other interpersonal conflicts, just as families do. The family can seal intimate friendships between men but it can also hide exploitative gender relations. A Canadian attorney, dealing with sexual assault charges against ice hockey players, said

It was a 'closed family incest case'. To say [ice] hockey has any real family values is absolutely absurd. I wouldn't let a daughter go out with one of these guys. If they think it's normal to do what they do to each other, what do you think their attitude is towards girls and sexuality? I see a lot of disgusting cases in this job, but this is really sick.

(cited in Robinson 1998: 81)

Sexual abuse, incest and domestic violence are all-too-easily normalised within a patriarchal family system that defers entirely to male authority. In some cases, the structural dependence of the athlete on the coach-parent becomes so strong that they become unable to make even basic decisions for themselves, such as how to manage personal finances, whether or how to choose to engage in non-sport social events, or how to make travel arrangements.

Male athletes' friendships are often constructed through the use of sexist and homophobic behaviour, from mild jokes and locker room talk through to gang rape of female fans (Curry 1991; Robinson 1997). 'Brothers in sport' police their own heterosexual boundaries by ridiculing and repelling all things feminine (whether this be women, gay men, or their own feminine tendencies). At the same time they over-emphasise their sexual aggression towards women as a means of enhancing their own relative standing. Messner (1992: 107) suggests that this impoverishes men's capacities for developing egalitarian relationships with either females *or* males.

... men's violence to known women is in large part a development of dominant-submissive power relations that exist in 'normal' family life.

(Hearn 1998: 31)

'Fathers in sport' assume control of the 'family' in ways that leave little room for manoeuvre by their disempowered subordinates. The close-knit relationships which develop with the coach and other club or squad members resemble those within the family unit. The authority structure of many sports club also parallels that found in traditional patriarchal families in which the father/coach has absolute power over the other family members. The sports club or team becomes the athlete's surrogate family. It is common for high level performers to be geographically isolated from their friends and natural families. In some cases this has led to cult-like milieux whereby the athlete is prohibited from contacting significant others so she gradually shifts her dependency from them to the new, surrogate parent. In such conditions, grooming becomes much easier and secrecy much more readily maintained.

Q: A coach is in quite a position of power really, because of the authority you have ... describe ... the way you were in control of those children you were teaching as a coach.

A: ... well, simply the choosing of teams, is a very powerful method ... you had to as near as possible, select them on ability but it was possible to select them purely because you preferred them over another child ... it would be so subtle that nobody else would realise it.

(BBC interview with coach convicted of sexual abuse in sport, 1993)

Prevalence data on sexual exploitation indicate higher risks to children from step-fathers and from fathers in single-parent families: this is attributed to 'intergenerational loss' (Furniss 1991: 32). In other words, where the mother is absent, the daughter becomes the mother-equivalent, carrying out domestic duties and assuming role of mother substitute, which can extend to sexual 'duties'. These conditions are often replicated in high performance sport, where the female athlete is under the care and control of a surrogate father (her coach) much of the time and takes on the pseudo-partner role, often for more hours in the week than either party spends 'at home'. In these conditions, then, for both the athlete and the coach, the sport becomes family.

Whilst not being actual incest, then, sexual abuse by coaches is virtual incest and is experienced as such by the young athlete. All the trademarks of family-based sexual abuse appear in sport - careful grooming

of the situation, secrecy, and emotional and physical blackmail. In the case of sport, the weapon of de-selection frequently proves the most powerful one available to the abusing coach. The sport family also shares other common family processes such as negotiations over money, housing, shopping, clothing, food, travel, sex, and even reproduction. Coaches frequently share the most intimate knowledge of an athlete's menstrual cycles, mood states, weight, eating, sleeping and contraceptive habits. These incursions into personal life are justified on the grounds of performance enhancement and often lead to the imposition of restrictive regimes and loss of the athlete's personal autonomy.

### **Theorising sexual victimisation in sport - reinventing the wheel?**

A wide range of explanatory perspectives is available with which to try to make sense of sexually exploitative behaviour in sport. This includes: social perspectives that see such behaviour as typical within particular kinds of families and/or sections of society; social learning approaches and reinforcement theory which pay particular attention to failure of early relationships in family life; and cognitive psychology which attributes 'deviant' sexuality to developmental cognitive distortions. The prominence of medical and allied sciences in the current diagnostic literature about severe forms of sexual exploitation, such as rape and child sexual abuse, places undue emphasis on individualised behaviour and treatment, whether for the abuser or the victim (Marshall *et al.* 1990). This pathologises sexual abuse, drawing attention away from important cultural, situational and power dynamics which are the interest of critical, especially feminist, social researchers. All of these detach the perpetrator from responsibility for his actions and overlook how human agency is accounted for.

In considering the social processes by which athletes come to be exploited sexually, and how authority figures like coaches come to assume dominance and control over athletes, it is clear that these expressions of agency arise from long-term, collective, socio-cultural influences. I would not want to absolve those who exploit athletes from their personal responsibilities by suggesting that they are carried along on inescapable tides, either cultural or 'natural'. Sexual exploitation is neither an excusable social abnormality nor an unavoidable genetic urge. It arises from a complex set of individual characteristics *and* constructed social practices. It often takes long and careful preparation and is preceded by the gradual but inexorable development of belief by the perpetrator in his own unassailable superiority. Sexual victimisation in sport demands not just explanation but also responsibility.

The \$64,000 question for sport researchers is to establish whether sexual abuse in sport is in any way distinctive or different from sexual abuse in other settings. As discussed above, sport combines 'private' family-like circumstances that are conducive to incest and intra-familial abuse with 'public' training and competition that may make athletes vulnerable to extra-familial abuses. This is of interest because, at the elite level, young athletes spend more time in the company of their coaches and sports peer group than

they do with their 'natural' families. The surrogate family of sport places coaches in step parent-like relation to their athletes, often in an emotionally charged atmosphere.

As yet, very few empirical studies have been completed on this subject but data from a recent project on the top 600 women in Norwegian sport (Fasting *et al.* 2000) indicate that there are, indeed, distinctive features of sexual harassment and abuse in sport. For example, in comparison with a matched control group, sport appears to offer some protection to female athletes against sexual harassment. Authority figures (such as coaches) in sport, however, are significantly more likely to harass their athletes than bosses are to harass their workers. This confirms the supposition that the culture of sport is conducive to sexual harassment by authority figures. Other findings from the same study show that females playing 'masculine sports' and sports with extensive clothing cover are sexually harassed more than those in traditional 'feminine' sports and sports involving less clothing. This may seem counter-intuitive given that scant clothing is often cited as a provocation for harassment or abuse but the likely explanation may stem from homophobic attitudes in sport. It seems then that women who most threaten the heterosexual masculine imperative are most likely to be vilified.

Some theoretical explanations of sexual abuse are available from the clinical and social science literatures and have been applied to the sport setting. Data from preliminary studies have supplemented generic knowledge about sexual abuse and have begun to inform the development of sport-based propositions and models.

#### **[Figure 2 about here – Risk factors for sexual exploitation in sport]**

**Risk factors:** Three sets of risk factors have been identified for sexual victimisation in sport, for the coach, the athlete and the sport. These have emerged from both qualitative research with sexually victimised athletes in Britain and The Netherlands (Brackenridge 1997a and 1997b; Cense 1997), the majority of whom have been female, and also from quantitative research on elite females in Norway (Fasting *et al.* 2000) and on male and female Canadian Olympians (Kirby and Greaves 1996). Not surprisingly, many of these risk factors are the same as those identified in previous clinical and social work studies, but there are also some sport-specific markers. For example, 70% of the youngest (15-18 years old) athletes in the Norwegian study (Fasting *et al.* 2000) who exhibited disordered eating patterns had also experienced significantly more sexual harassment than their older peers or non-athlete peers.

#### **[Figure 3 about here - Stage of imminent achievement]**

**Risk and peaking in sport:** The stage just *before* an athlete reaches his or her competitive peak has been termed the 'stage of imminent achievement' (SIA) (Brackenridge and Kirby 1997). It has been hypothesised that this is the stage at which athletes may be at greatest risk. The rationale for this proposition is that the athlete has the most to lose from leaving sport at this point, having invested time,

money, resources and emotion in getting so far, but everything to gain from staying in the sport to reach 'the top'. The athlete may therefore be most vulnerable to the grooming process at this time. In those sports where the SIA coincides with puberty, risk is thought to be increased because of the sexual immaturity of the athlete at this time and the transition from childhood to adulthood that the athlete is undergoing.

**[Figure 4 about here – The paedophile and the predator]**

**Abuser profiling:** Notwithstanding the limitations of profiling, we are interested to know how sports coaches construct their notions of acceptable and unacceptable interpersonal boundaries. One study (Bringer in progress) is investigating this through interviews and personal construct analysis with groups of working coaches and those convicted of sexually abusing their athletes. The unassailable power and authoritarian coaching styles of many coaches is also thought to allow coaches to overstep sexual boundaries: this behaviour may be rationalised by a range of denial strategies that are familiar to treatment specialists. The contextual circumstances of some sports, especially at high levels, may allow vulnerable athletes to be isolated and groomed relatively easily, especially when this co-occurs with the SIA. The power-driven abuser cycle, which we have labelled the 'predator', is a mirror image of Wolf's paedophile cycle of offending (Brackenridge 1997a, 1997b).

**[Figure 5 about here – Contingency model of sexual exploitation in sport]**

**Contingency theory:** Whilst recognising limitations in what might be called the 'over-determined', psychological approaches to sexual exploitation in sport, not least their inability to account for moral agency, it is also necessary to point to limitations elsewhere. Socio-cultural analyses of power often lack the specificity of understanding that can come from looking at individual perpetrator and victim experiences of sexual exploitation within specific sporting circumstances. The question, then, is how do we move beyond the cultural critique and *generalised* analysis of sub-cultural norms of dominance and control to a *specific* analysis of the interpersonal power dynamics of exploitation in different sport settings? Moreover, how can this be done in a way that appeals to the practical interests of those charged with developing and implementing safety in sport?

A partial contribution to answering the specificity question may come from developing a contingency theory of sexual exploitation in sport that accounts for the interaction of all three basic components in any exploitative encounter – coach/abuser motivation, sport context and athlete/victim susceptibility. Research interests will be satisfied if the theory can be shown to explain a range of different examples of sexual exploitation in sport and practitioner interests will be served if such a theory provides a clear policy agenda.



Reconciling psychological and feminist sociological approaches to sexual abuse is a challenging task. There is now a sizeable literature on masculinity and sexual violence in sport, which has grown alongside critical and post-modern feminist deconstructions of gender and sexuality, queer theory, and the development of men's studies. Like most sociological theory, the task with sexual abuse is to integrate structure and agency in a comprehensive explanatory account. The success of this theoretical task will depend partly on our ability to think across disciplines and on our ability to ground and test our ideas in the real world. The development of a contingency theory of sexual abuse in sport, which is based on analysis of sociological, psychological and narrative accounts, is a task at an early stage of development (Brackenridge, in press).

If the contingency model of sexual exploitation in sport has any efficacy it should enable us to

- 1 locate any sexual exploitation scenario derived from interviews with coaches or athletes;
- 2 account for the interaction effects of the athlete, the coach and the sport;
- 3 account for the social learning effects (change) in both exploiter and exploited;
- 4 demonstrate the volatility of situational factors;
- 5 define the social processes which characterise different kinds of sexual exploitation;
- 6 account for same- or cross-sex gender relations between athletes and coaches/authority figures;
- 7 account for same- and cross-sex peer athlete interactions/relations;
- 8 avoid the crude categorisation of abusers as 'paedophile' or 'predator';
- 9 assess and locate the intra-cultural/idiocultural risk and safety features of different sports and different clubs and teams; and
- 10 point policy makers to the highest risk priorities for policy development and resource investment.

At best, the contingency model will provide a means of predicting escalations in risk and thus warning of the need for (increased) intervention. At worst, it offers a heuristic device for making us think about the developmental scale of sexually exploitative practices in sport and for targetting policy initiatives and resources. Clearly, a great deal more empirical work is need to test the efficacy of the model.

## **Conclusions**

An athlete's path to sport success is usually littered with disappointments and frustrations, from injury, to loss of form, to competing scholastic and occupational demands, to selection and de-selection traumas. For most athletes, the coach is a powerful influence on their decision to persist in trying to overcome such difficulties. What will go right and wrong for an athlete cannot be predicted when they start down the path to success. Similarly, whilst the general direction of a coach's career path may be known, the challenges and setbacks, highs and lows he will face are rarely predictable. The degree to which either the athlete or the coach can exert agency in their own situation is always to some extent bound by their situational

circumstances and the traditions of their own sport culture. Some sport settings make it very easy for sexual victimisation to go unnoticed. In others the task characteristics, policy infrastructure and operational alertness are such that athletes can be virtually assured of safety from exploitation of any kind.

There are many unanswered questions about exactly how, where and why some athletes are victimised sexually by some coaches and authority figures. For example, we have barely started listening to the voice of the coach himself. We need to gather and interrogate many more narratives about coaching careers, from both everyday, non-victimising coaches and from those already convicted or accused. We know very little about how coaches and others in sport construct their own boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable. Multiple ethnographies of individual sports will also reveal how and why each one has developed its own sexual narratives and how both coaches and athletes negotiate these. Finally, it seems that sport and non-sport researchers have a great deal to share from each others' work.

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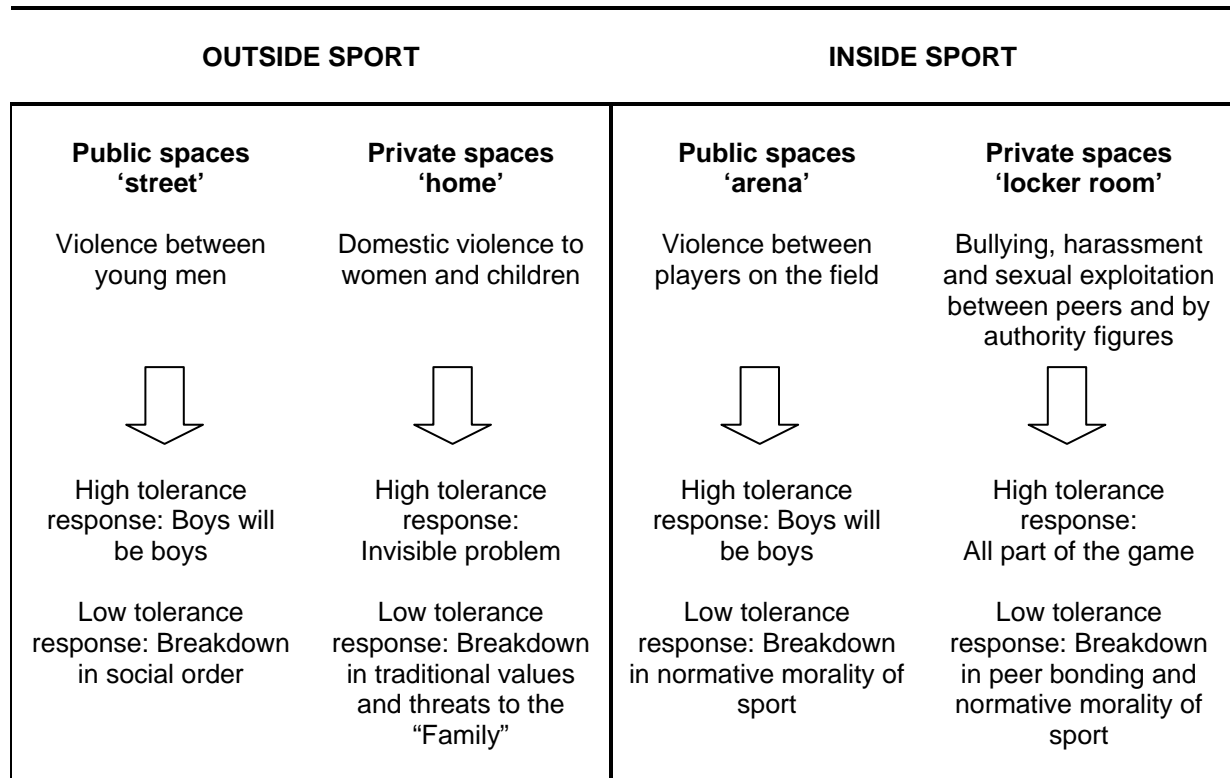
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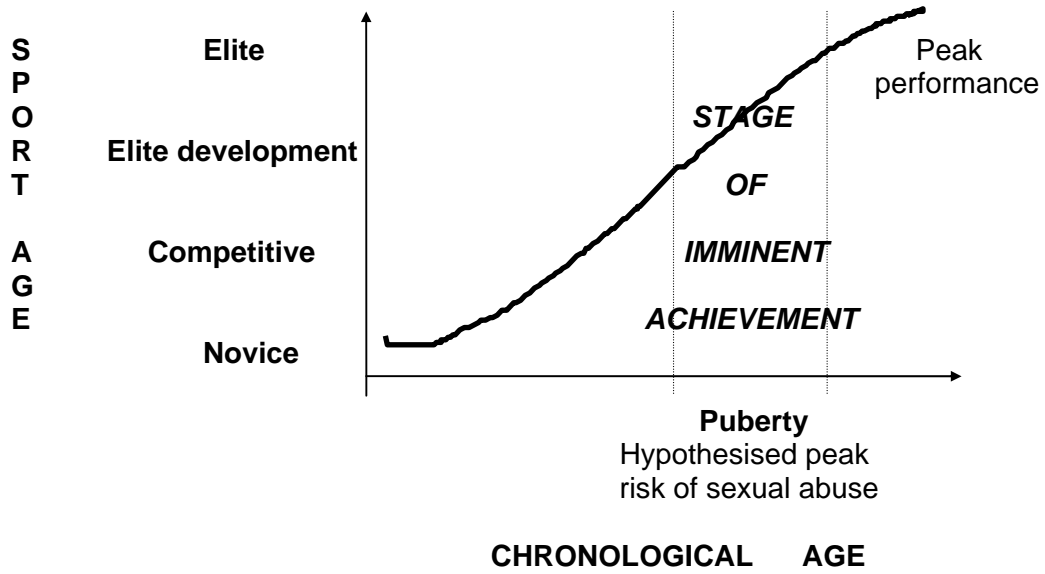
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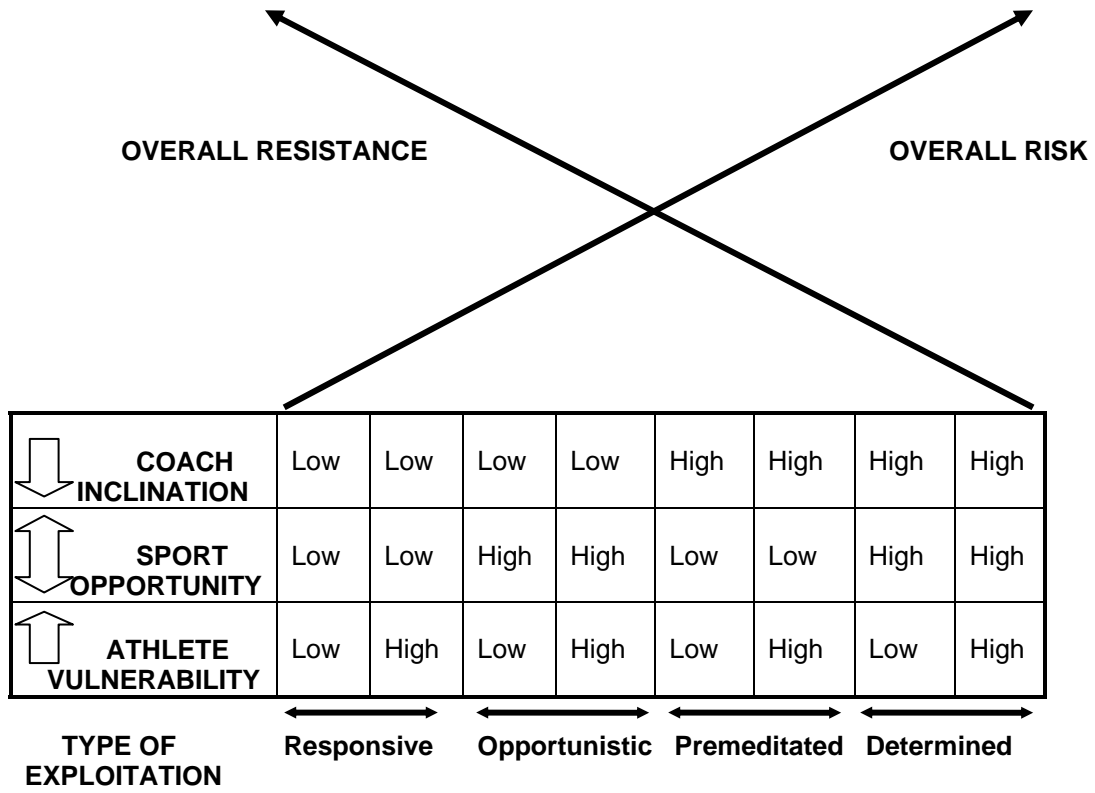
**Figure 1 Responses to public and private sexual exploitation and violence inside and outside sport** (Source: Brackenridge, in press)



**Figure 3** Risk of sexual abuse: chronological age by sport age  
(Source: Brackenridge and Kirby 1997)



**Figure 5** A contingency model of sexual exploitation in sport  
 (Source: Brackenridge, in press)







**Figure 2 Risk factors for sexual abuse in sport** (Source: adapted from Brackenridge 1997a)

<b>COACH VARIABLES</b>	<b>RISK FACTORS*</b>	<b>ATHLETE VARIABLES</b>	<b>RISK FACTORS*</b>	<b>SPORT VARIABLES</b>	<b>RISK FACTORS*</b>
Sex	Male	Sex	Female	Amount of physical handling required for coaching	?
Age	Older	Age	Younger	Individual/team sport	?
Size/physique	Larger/stronger	Size/physique	Smaller/weaker	Location of training and competitions	?
Accredited qualifications	Good	Level of awareness of SH	Low	Opportunity for trips away	Frequent
Standing in the sport/ club/community	High	Rank/status	Potentially high	Dress requirements	?
Rank/reputation	High	Self-esteem	Low	Employment/recruitment controls and/or vetting	Weak/none
Previous record of sexual crimes	Unknown/ ignored	History of sexual abuse in family	Unknown/none	Regular evaluation including athlete screening and cross-referencing to medical data	?
Chances to be alone with athletes in training, at coach's home, at competitions and away on trips	Frequent	Relationship with parents	Weak	Use of national and sport-specific codes of ethics sport-specific codes of ethics and conduct	Weak
Trust of parents	Strong	Education and training on SH and abuse	None	Climate for debating SH	Poor/non-existent
Commitment to sport/national coaches association codes of ethics and conduct	Weak/none	Medical problems especially disordered eating	Medium/high	Existence of athlete and parent contracts	None
Use of car to transport athletes	Frequent	Dependence on coach	Total		
		Devotion to coach	Complete		
		'stage of imminent achievement' relative to puberty	At or before		

Note: \* = Emerging trends from interview data. ? = further research needed

Figure 4 The paedophile and the predator (Source: Brackenridge 1997b)

