SEXUAL ABUSE IN SPORTS: WHY DO YOUNGSTERS GET TRAPPED? (TWO CASES FROM RUSSIA ACROSS 20th AND 21st CENTURIES)

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Abstract

The paper uses field data from the Russian Federation to explore reasons that make minors engage in sexual relations with their coaches. The research started with desk analysis to incorporate publications on abused athletes’ perceptions of the coach-athlete relationship.

The research methodology used case study techniques. The research material included narratives of some sexual abuse victims of sports, the stories were the main source of the present study. Totally 25 stories have become subject of the research analysis. The paper sets forth two stories of Russian female sport persons as an example of those situations that turned out to be typical for the situation in Russian sport.

The cases stand in line with previous research data from international sources and enhance the existing information on the topic, shed new light on the specificity of the phenomenon under study regarding controversial perceptions of both young athletes and their parents, as well.

Keywords: sexual abuse in sports, victims’ perceptions, parents’ behavior.

1 INTRODUCTION

The present stage of human development is characterized by increasing complexity of institutional and organizational forms of society. Modern sports represent one of most crucial phenomena of the societal culture. In recent decades, an understanding has begun to emerge that today we should be talking not so much about the importance of sport in terms of individual physical improvement, but also with regard to its new functions related to the transformation into the industry of entertainment and social interaction.

This state of affairs entails both positive and negative aspects. In particular, the growing concern of the world community about the phenomena of violence in sport and, especially, aggressiveness and deviant behavior of a sports audience is growing (Stoltenborgh, et al 2011).
These phenomena acquire the character of socially destructive factors of public life, especially in cities. In modern Russia, such an understanding is gradually taking shape, as well.

The problem of modern sports as a professional entertainment sphere becomes the subject to research within social sciences, including pedagogy, sociology, psychology, and law.

Among various aspects, practitioners, scholars, journalists investigate issues of sexual violence in sports. The above confirms the current importance of the present study.

The research goal is to analyze reasons that make minors engage in sexual relations with their coaches.

The above goal required the research methodology with the focus on qualitative paradigm, and case study techniques. The research concentrated on a considerable number of cases in Russia regarding the topic under study. The stories of under-aged females from a Russian sport team have been collected from the open access official media sources. This approach was used to identify reasons for youngsters being trapped into pedophilic attempts from their coaches.

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The present paper sets forth two stories of Russian female sport persons as an example of those situations that turned out to be typical for the situation in Russian sport.

The first is former champion of gymnastics (during the Soviet Union period in the 20th century) who has disclosed her tragedy only nowadays. The second is an average teen who attended sport club training on boxing in the second decade of 21st century and further found psychological strength and moral courage to go public about her personal horror.

2 THE RESEARCH THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical framework incorporates publications on various aspects including youngsters’ perceptions in general (Alexander et al. 2011), particular focus on abused athletes’ perceptions of the coach-athlete relationship (Stirling, Kerr 2009), gender analysis (Hartill, 2009), essence of trauma of child sexual abuse (Alaggia, 2005), ways to prevent and protect athletes (Parent, Demers 2011), etc.

Currently, the sexual abuse in sports is under consideration at mega level, within UNO issues (United Nations 2007, UNICEF 2010). Sexual abuse in sport is drawing more attention of the public as new cases come to the spotlight across the world every year (Owton, 2016).

Therefore, it seems timely to mention C. Brackenridge’s statement regarding the “demand for properly qualified sports leaders and coaches to safeguard the wellbeing of the individual athlete midst ever increasing public interest in sport” (Brackenridge, 2017:6).

However, to our mind the challenge under study requires integrated efforts. Youngsters’ safety and wellbeing in sports go beyond the national legal regulations and coaches’ code of conduct.

The issues related to acceptable or non-acceptable, normal or non-normal relations between a young sportsperson and his/her coach are subject to parents and their children’s awareness, to sport club authorities and society in general, such a vision will help to preventive and proactive activities in the field (Fasting, 2014). The above findings of previous research have laid ground to explore the state of affairs within the Russian Federation.

3 CASE STUDIES

Use as many sections and subsections as you need (e.g. Introduction, Methodology, Results, Conclusions, etc.) and end the paper with the list of references.

3.1. Case one: Ronald Knysh and Olga Korbut’s Story

Ronald Knysh, the coach of two Olympic champions, Olga Korbut and Elena Volchetskaya, was first accused of having sex with his minor student in 1981. Then his ward, 17-year-old N., drank 120 nitroglycerin tablets and left a note asking to blame Ronald Knysh for her death. The girl spent two days in coma, but survived. Her parents filed a criminal case for the criminal activities of “bringing to suicide.” During the investigation, N. showed that during the period from 1977 to 1979 she had sex with Knysh. The criminal case was dismissed due to the failure to prove the crime committed by Knish. Nevertheless, the coach quit his job and hastily left the city of Grodno (the Soviet Union Republic of Belarus in the 20th century). The coach was
an Honorary Citizen of this city since 1972. For 10 years he never worked anywhere, lived in different cities of the Soviet Union, and then returned to his homeland and again began to train young gymnasts.

In 1999, Olga Korbut put forward the accusation against her former coach. The four-time Olympic champion, who at the time was living with her family in the United States, said that for two years she had been a sex slave Knish and that he had raped her at the age of 17. Renal Knish denied all accusations and accused Korbut of full ingratitude. The investigation was not conducted due to the absence of an official statement of the victim to the police authorities, the lapse of time and statutes of limitations in criminal law (see Olga Korbut, 2018).

3.2. Case two: Diana's story

On April 2018, Diane's parents came to the Ufa regional newspaper (Siberian region of the Russian Federation). They told their story: they filed a case against their daughter's coach on arts marshal due to sexual abuse of their minor daughter Diane. The criminal case was closed due to the suspect's death.

In 2013, the parents registered their daughter, 13-year-old Diana, to the Thai boxing section. The trainer was a respected man; he worked with colleagues of the girl's father. Diana liked this sport, and she attended training with pleasure and trusted the trainer. At one of the training sessions, the girl fell down and hurt her back. The trainer said that she needed a massage to recover. Diana agreed, and after classes the trainer at first did massage on her back, but over time began to descend lower and lower. Now Diana says that she didn't like it then. But the trainer said that he should know her body, it was necessary to foster trust between the trainer and the trainee. The coach said she should rely on him as he was a friend of the family and a kind of her second father. When the girl began to protest, he said that he didn't need such a stubborn girl and she would no longer attend the sports school. The girl asked her parents if the coach could be trusted. Today, her mother says that at that time she was outraged by her question, because they as parents thought they knew the coach him well. Today, the girl's mother admits her guilt that they didn't specify what her daughter had in mind, did not pay enough attention to her daughter. Partly it happened because of the illness of the girl's father, who had to spend most of his time at hospitals, supported by his wife - the girl's mom. Meanwhile, the coach told a girl that he loved her. Today, she admits that then her hormones began to play due to her puberty age, and she was flattered that such an adult and intelligent man paid attention to her, since she had no sex with anyone. Further the coach gave her an ultimatum: either she stayed with him, or he would not allow her to take part in sports competitions.

The girl was afraid to tell her parents the truth; she began to move away from them. And the coach was very gentle and attentive, asked her to tell him about what was happening in her family, said that her parents did not need her, and he would marry her as soon as she turned 18 years old. Today, the young woman says that at that time this man seemed perfect to her: he did not forbid anything; he did not demand anything, while the "bad" parents constantly intruded in her life with their advice. Then came the stage of intimate relationships with the consent of the girl, the coach introduced her to his mother, who blessed them. Both the coach and Diana's friends supported their relationship.

Among those people, there was only one guy named Russian, who said that it was necessary to go to the prosecutor's office. He told about other cases regarding the massage that the coach offered to young trainees. Respective e-mail messages were found by the girl's mother, she told everything to her husband, they addressed their questions to the coach who began to threaten parents that the girl would commit suicide if they interfered in their relationship.

In the summer of 2016, Diana decided to end this relationship because she had prepared for and sat at final exams at school. However, the coach offered her to live together and register their marriage. The girl's mother found this correspondence. The parents and their daughter had a frank talk and the parents wrote a statement to the prosecutor. the girl said she did not understand that she had relations with a pedophile. However, later the investigation stopped, no witnesses were interviewed, although there was a correspondence between the coach and his friends, whom he told about the relationship with the minor girl. Parents were told that they should have cared about their daughter much better. At the same time, the coach began to accuse the girl of prostitution and said that the girl was "sleeping" with many men. His friends came to the police and confirmed these words. However, a lie detector test refuted these claims.

Later, the investigator found other victims of this trainer - now they are adult girls, many have families. One of them showed photos and videos, in which a naked trainer could be seen with little girls. But they did not want their names to sparkle in a criminal case.

The coach was put under house arrest. Then the coach's lawyer put forward a compensation offer to the girl
and her parents though they specified the amount that the coach could not pay. The day before the criminal case was sent to the court, the coach committed a suicide as was afraid of prison, because such people “do not live there for long”. After the death of coach many people accused Diana of the coach’s death. Even friends turned away from her. Diana is now 18 years old. She says she did not understand that it was not love, that she was simply afraid to leave, believing that her parents would be against her (Fathoullina, 2018).

4 DISCUSSION

The research results showed that reasons for sexual abuse in sports being a reality differ depending on the personality of a victim, on his/her life goals, on those who form the victim’s circle of trust.

The problem of sexual relations between an athlete and a coach, in fact, is as old as the world itself. Marriages between young schoolgirls and their mentors turn out to be a kind of practice across the globe. Such cases have been found in the Russian national teams, as well. It is sure to unfair to judge and even to blame married couples. However, questions might arise about the age when this life together began.

In most sports, the child is almost completely dependent on the coach. The little man spends almost all his/her time in the gym or on the track. And it depends on the coach, whether a minor goes to the competitions or not, will he or she be scolded or praised day, will be declared a genius or a looser.

It is not surprising that the most successful children, especially girls, in the period of transitional age often bear special feelings for their coach. This might be similar to the love or confidence of an adult towards his/her own psychologist. It means that while a coach performs professional duties, minors are likely to see in this coach someone more than (Li, B. et al 2015, Peterson, 2010).

Therefore the question emerges what to do with these impulses of the fragile psyche. This question is left to the coach’s discretion. The law and common sense of a mentor can help the coach to figure it out (Pépin-Gagné, J., & Parent, S. 2016).

But unfortunately, these principles are not always in use. A minor on his/her way to the professional sport faces a lot of risks, including injuries, missed education, doping, etc. Now sexual abuse by coaches or more adult teammates has been added. The solution to this problem can be reached through the comprehensive changes within the modern sport industry (Piper, 2014). The question requires the focus on human rights support in sports (Öhman, & Quennerstedt, 2017).

5 CONCLUSION

The case studies make it possible to draft recommendations for parents and young sports persons, school and sport club authorities.

Minors should be said that if a child has been abused, then in no case should he/she remain silent about it. Parents should be very attentive to their children, should ask about every training session. They should not blame their child for any unusual behavior. They should show a kind of special trust to the child to make him/her feel at ease to talk about things the minor finds unusual/ not comfortable, etc. Therefore, one cannot even hint that the victim him/herself could have caused the violence.

It is necessary to show the child that he/she is under protection, to shift the focus of attention to the fact that this an abuser who should be ashamed, that it is he who is guilty for the situation

But at the same time, parents should not treat the victim as a crystal vase, should not be afraid to talk about violence, to discuss the things with a psychologist or psychotherapist. Naturally, this should not be a school psychologist, because it is a secret that must be handled very carefully. First of all, the child must be prepared for the meeting and given the right to choose. A psychologist will work to eliminate traumatic experiences, remove feelings of guilt and personal inferiority. Child abuse for parents is also a trauma. For many, overcoming it means punishing the abuser. In this case, one needs to rely on the feelings of the child, whether he /she can withstand all legal proceedings.

Parents should consolidate their psychological maturity to address the case to the prosecutor’s office. It is not worth to keep things within the family circle. On the other hand police officers need a kind of specialized training to deal with such cases to know how ensure the best interests of the child in the case which involves a minor victim of sexual abuse in sport, his/her parents, a and psychologist.
REFERENCE LIST


