

Doing Something About Bad Coaches

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For over a decade, part of our business has been helping sport organizations, coaches, and athletes resolve their differences. In an average week, we receive one or two telephone inquiries seeking advice on how to deal with situations of perceived coach misconduct. Some of the problems we hear about are minor, while others are deeply troubling. We appreciate that there are two sides to every story; nonetheless, here are a few examples.

Our most recent query comes from a master course conductor, who, through the process of teaching the ethics component of a 3M NCCP Level 3 course, learned from a student in the course about the “sleazy” activities of another coach. Under the guise of coaching, this man was repeatedly and unnecessarily touching female athletes. The student and the course conductor felt that they needed to do something, but their communications with the sport club’s management appeared to be falling on deaf ears.

Last week, a parent of a Little Leaguer was at her wits’ end because the sport organization refused to register her nine-year-old daughter in spring league. Their stated reason: The year before, the parents had made a complaint about a coach’s treatment of their older daughter. According to this caller, the angered coach “boxed” her daughter’s ears so hard that a tooth cracked. The police were contacted, but felt there was little they could do because there had been no witnesses to the incident. Letters and phone calls to the league were met with silence, and this spring neither child is playing baseball.

A third unsettling incident unfolded over the past year. A successful coach was convicted of a sexual offence after exposing himself in a public place. The court, while aware that this man coached youth, did prohibit him from frequenting the type of public place where he committed his offence, but otherwise placed no restrictions on his coaching activities. This coach is now coaching youth in another jurisdiction.

In the 18th century, Edmund Burke wrote that “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing.” The failure of people in positions of authority to take action causes harm to athletes, their parents, coaches, and the sport organizations themselves. Often people won’t act because it poses too great a personal risk. Most people, by nature, will avoid conflict and confrontation. Sometimes an incident of alleged misconduct pits one person’s word against another’s, and there is a fear that a complaint will result in a charge of defamation. Another frequent response is, if we lose this coach, we won’t be able to find another to do the job. And at times, a person in a responsible position wants to do something, but lacks the requisite knowledge and skills to intervene effectively.

For those situations where people can’t, won’t, or don’t know how to respond, there are alternatives. CPCA has a mechanism to review coach conduct. It encompasses a Coaching Code of Ethics and corresponding discipline procedures. It is modelled after similar schemes in other professions, and it allows members of the public to

lodge complaints and provides for those complaints to be investigated and, if warranted, either moved to a formal hearing or dismissed.

We applaud those sport organizations that embrace the CPCA Coaching Code of Ethics and mandate CPCA membership as a condition of coach employment or appointment. This is a good move on all fronts; it's good for the sport organization, good for the coach, and good for the profession. Most importantly, it's good for athletes.

Encouraging coaches to be professionals subject to the ethical standards of the coaching profession is good for a sport organization because it can relieve the sport organization of the burden of receiving, responding to, investigating, hearing, and deciding disciplinary complaints. In our experience, these matters consume enormous amounts of time and energy and in almost all cases take an exacting personal toll on individuals.

Being a member of CPCA is good for the individual coach because complaints about coaching or coaching ethics will be professionally and properly handled. If a complaint is serious, it will be considered and decided by the coach's peers. It will be done so in an objective, even-handed, and fair fashion. Recourse to this procedure can protect the coach from the whims, personalities, and oddities of disgruntled parents and well-intentioned, but inexperienced, administrators.

Having coaches regulate themselves is good for coaching because who better understands the challenges, stresses, complexities and rewards of coaching than other coaches? A quick perusal of the pages of this magazine shows the breadth and depth of the coaching profession in Canada. A hallmark of a profession is its commitment to protect the public. The coaching profession through CPCA does this by setting standards, promoting competency, and regulating conduct through the Coaching Code of Ethics and its related disciplinary mechanisms.

The sport organization and the coach who support the profession of coaching through CPCA are demonstrating that they place the interests of athletes first. A coach has incredible power. The coach-athlete relationship is both complex and delicate, and the trust inherent in it can be easily abused. Preventing such potential abuse through professional standards and regulation sends a very clear message that the athlete's welfare is paramount.

We have "ranted" once before in this column ["More Coaches Being Sued," *Coaches Report*, Spring 2000]. The source for this particular rant is the continuing realization that people are sometimes not able, or not willing, to do something about bad coaches. It makes only good sense for sport organizations and individual coaches to actively support CPCA's efforts to promote ethical coaching. We challenge all sport employers to make CPCA membership an essential and unquestioned prerequisite of the coaching position.