

The Grooming Process in Sport: Narratives of Sexual Harassment and Abuse

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Drawing on interviews with two elite female athletes from different sports, one from a study in Norway and the other from a study in England, this article explores the process of 'grooming' in the context of sport. Both athletes experienced grooming for sex by their male coaches yet were able to stop the process at a particular point. Grooming has been used to demarcate 'sexual harassment' and 'sexual abuse' as separate points on a continuum of sexually exploitative behaviours. Grooming involves slowly gaining trust before systematically breaking down interpersonal barriers. Elite athletes can become trapped into compliance because they trust and like, or even love, their abusers. The motivation behind sexual harassment and abuse is often power, whereby the harasser seeks to take control over another individual. The abusers use threats (such as being cut from the team) and rewards or privileges to secure co-operation and manipulate the victims to maintain secrecy. Our primary purpose here is to use these adapted realist tales to provide a richer and more personal illustration of these events (within-case) than is presented through extrapolated checklists of 'risk factors' (cross-case). The stories also illustrate vividly elements from the different stages in the grooming process in sport, as described in previous literature. Finally, they reinforce the need to identify protective factors as part of anti-harassment and abuse prevention programmes with both coaches and athletes.

Sexual harassment and abuse have become accepted as problems within sport since the early 1990s (Lensky, 1992; Holman, 1995; Cense, 1997) and, as a result, have also become a focus for research attention (Brackenridge and Fasting, 2002). Much of our knowledge about these issues is derived from previous research on workplace sexual harassment (for example, Hearn *et al.*, 1989; Cockburn, 1991; Stockdale, 1996) and

on intra-familial sexual abuse (such as Finkelhor, 1984; Doyle, 1994; Fergusson and Mullen, 1999). Research within the specific context of sport has extended the knowledge base and has also investigated whether sport might be a distinctive location for sexual harassment and abuse (Brackenridge, 2002). Quantitative studies have been conducted in sport in Canada (Kirby and Greaves, 1996), the USA (Volkwein *et al.*, 1997), Australia (Leahy *et al.*, 2000) and Denmark (Toftegaard Nielson, 2001) and Norway (Sundgot-Borgen *et al.*, 2003); all of these studies included qualitative phases. In addition, interview-based research has been conducted in both England (Brackenridge, 1997a) and the Netherlands (Cense, 1997).

Most of the qualitative studies on this subject thus far have been ‘author-evacuated’ in that they have adopted the passive voice, failing to acknowledge either the social construction of the participants’ narratives or the locus of analytic authority. This article presents narrative segments, in the form of adapted realist tales (Sparkes, 2002), drawn from interviews with two elite female athletes representing two different sports, one from a study in Norway (Fasting *et al.*, 2002) and one from a study in England (Brackenridge, 1997a).¹ Both have experienced grooming for sex by their male coach.² The two narratives, presented here for the first time as individual stories, are discussed in relation to the different stages in the ‘grooming’ process as described by Brackenridge and Kirby (Brackenridge, 2001). The primary purpose of the in-depth examination of these tales, however, is to hear through the athletes’ own voices exactly how the grooming process is experienced and how this might illustrate risk behaviours and protective factors. Our authorial voices intervene in these tales, however, and we are therefore obliged to problematize our roles as ‘interpreters’ and ‘experts’ in reflecting on the need for policy and practice about preventing athlete abuse.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT, SEXUAL ABUSE AND THE GROOMING PROCESS

It is difficult to distinguish between sexual harassment and abuse as there is definitely a grey area between the two. Some authors define them separately while others subsume abuse under the concept of sexual harassment. Earlier work by Kelly (1987) discusses the concept and application of continua in the field of violence to women. She emphasizes that continua draw attention to wider forms of violence and help to show the link between both ‘everyday’ violence and more severe forms, and also between ‘typical’ and ‘aberrant’ forms (1987: 50–51). Kelly’s empirically grounded continuum (Table I) was based on the incidence of different experiences of sexual violence that emerged from interviews with 60 women.

TABLE I Women's experiences of sexual violence – Kelly's continuum of incidence

Form of violence	Number of women	Percentage of sample
Sexual harassment	56	93
Sexual assault	54	90
Pressure to have sex	50	83
Sexual abuse	43	72
Obscene phone call (37 asked)	25	68
Coercive sex	38	63
Domestic violence*	32	53
Flashing	30	50
Rape*	30	50
Incest*	13	22

*These three categories include those women who initially volunteered to take part in the research specifically because of their experiences of these types of violence.

Source: Kelly, L. 1987: The continuum of sexual violence. In Hammer, J. and Maynard, M., editors, *Women, violence and social control*. London: Macmillan Press, 53.

One of us (Brackenridge, 2001: 28) has also attempted to resolve the definitional problem by adopting a conceptual continuum – also associated with interview data – that encompasses sex discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual abuse (Figure 1). We define sexual harassment as *unwanted attention on the basis of sex* (lewd comments, pinching, touching or caressing, sexual jokes, etc.) and sexual abuse as *groomed or coerced collaboration in sexual and/or genital acts where the victim has been entrapped by the perpetrator*. Grooming is central to the abusive relationship and is a term taken from the social work and clinical sex-offending literatures (Doyle, 1994; Morrison *et al.*, 1994). It involves slowly gaining the trust of a potential victim before systematically breaking down interpersonal barriers prior to committing actual sexual abuse. This process may take weeks, months or years with the perpetrator usually moving steadily so that he is able to maintain secrecy and avoid exposure. Grooming is important because it brings about the appearance of co-operation from the athlete, making the act of abuse seem to be consensual. In other words, whereas harassment is *definitely unwanted*, abuse may *appear to be wanted* (or consented to) when the victim has been subjected to grooming.

Leberg (1997: 26) suggests that there are three types of grooming: physically grooming the target victim, for example inappropriate touching that appears to be legitimated by the need for support in a gymnastic event; psychologically grooming both the victim and her family, for example a coach constantly telling an athlete and her parents that she needs to spend more time with him for training; and grooming of the social environment or the community, for example a coach building such a good

SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

SEXUAL HARASSMENT

SEXUAL ABUSE

INSTITUTIONAL PERSONAL

<p><i>'the chilly climate'</i> e.g., worse pay, facilities or coaching for one sex</p>	<p><i>'unwanted attention'</i> e.g., sexual ridicule, jokes, stalking, bullying, homophobic taunts</p>	<p><i>'groomed or coerced'</i> e.g., sexual violence, assault, rape, sexual favours, groping, incest</p>
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FIGURE 1 Brackenridge's sexual exploitation continuum

(Source: Adapted from Brackenridge, C.H. (2001) *Spoilsports: understanding and preventing sexual exploitation in sport*. London: Routledge. Reproduced with permission of Palgrave Macmillan)

reputation for competitive success that nobody dares to challenge what he does, so his reputation acts as an alibi.

In sport, grooming is facilitated by the gradual building of the athlete's trust in her coach (or other authority figure) because he offers her the opportunity of achieving tangible outcomes, such as winning competitions or representative honours and medals. The grooming process also involves intangible rewards such as feelings of being special, high self-esteem, confidence, superiority and security. The coach nurtures and protects the female athlete in a parent-like relationship, providing a mixture of discipline and affection upon which the athlete gradually becomes reliant. The athlete can become totally trapped because compliance is assured by using threats, such as being cut from the team, and the giving or withholding of rewards and privileges.

The gradual development of trust between abuser (coach) and victim (athlete) often leads to strong emotional and affective ties between them and even to the athlete falling in love (or appearing to do so) with her coach, which compounds both the definition of consent and the attribution of responsibility (Brackenridge, 1997a; 2001; Cense, 1997). In both

Norway and England, the legal definition of a child is someone under 18 years old, and the age of consent is 16 years old. In Norway, there is no specific legislation or legal guidance about such relationships of trust (although abuse of someone under 14 is more severely dealt with by the courts). Such is the concern about abuse of trust in England, however, that a law has been passed to *criminalize* sexual relationships between authority figures in particular roles (teachers and residential home staff) and the young people in their care, even after the young person has reached the legal age of consent, that is, 16. Government guidelines have also been issued to deter such relationships between other types of authority figures (such as youth leaders or coaches) and young people of 16 or 17 years old (Home Office, 1999). Age statuses and boundaries are also confused in some sports where, by the very nature of the activity, relatively young athletes perform at elite level (Brackenridge and Kirby, 1997).

Brackenridge (1997a and b) and Kirby (Kirby and Greaves, 1996) used interviews with athletes who had been sexually abused by authority figures in the context of sport to construct a generalized model of the grooming process in sport (Brackenridge, 2001: 35) (see Table II) with the following stages: targeting a potential victim; building trust and friendship; developing isolation and control; building loyalty; and initiation of sexual abuse and securing secrecy. The place of grooming as a 'test stage' within the overall abusive relationship has also been traced by Cense and Brackenridge (2001), using interviews with abused male and female athletes in the Netherlands. The previous studies suggest that, for the abuser, grooming is a conscious strategy. The athlete, on the other hand, is usually an unwitting party to the gradual erosion of the interpersonal boundary between her and the coach. The power afforded to the coach in his position of authority offers an effective alibi or camouflage for grooming and abuse. Incremental shifts in the boundary between coach and athlete go unnoticed, unrecognized or unreported by the athlete until the point where she has become completely entrapped and is unable to resist his advances.

The physicality of sport requires not only close proximity of bodies in states of undress and/or exertion but also intimate actions that might, in non-sport contexts, be regarded as invasive. In this way, sport also fosters a degree of interpersonal closeness between athletes and coaches that might otherwise only be seen within the family or care home settings (Brackenridge, 2000). Many of these apparent invasions of privacy – whether involving touch or other forms of interaction – are thus legitimated in sports coaching, such as technical correction, physical support or the use of terms of endearment.

Severe sexual exploitation is not always the result of a prolonged grooming process. It may also arise from moments of sudden violence and the use of force to coerce a victim into sexual compliance. However, such

TABLE II The grooming process in sport

Targeting a potential victim	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Observing which athlete is vulnerable ● Finding occasions to test her out for secrecy and reliability ● Checking her credentials as a susceptible person ● Striking up a friendship ● Being nice to her
Building trust and friendship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Making her feel special ● Giving gifts and rewards ● Spending time together ● Listening ● Being consistent ● Setting down basic conditions for each meeting ● Beginning to bargain: 'You have to do this because I have done that'
Developing isolation and control; building loyalty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Refusing the child access to significant others and/or demeaning any previous sources of friendship and support ● Restricting access to, or reliance on, parents and carers and non-sport peers ● Being inconsistent, building up hopes and joy one moment and then punishment the next to increase the child's desperation for attention ● Checking out the child's commitment through questioning and small tests
Initiation of sexual abuse and securing secrecy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Gradual incursion into ambiguous sexual boundaries ● If athlete objects, saying 'You didn't mind last time' to entrap her ● Invoking co-operation: 'You owe me/it's the least you can do' ● Invoking guilt: 'Now look what you've done' ● Offering protection: 'I won't tell/it's our little secret' ● Discrediting the victim so she has no choice but to remain: 'Others won't understand' or 'Nobody will believe you' ● Threatening the victim: 'If you tell anyone I'll hurt you/tell others what you've done/hurt someone you care about/drop you from the team'

Source: Brackenridge, C.H. 2001: *Spoilsports: understanding and preventing sexual exploitation in sport*. London: Routledge, 35.

instances are, thankfully, very rare in the sport research literature. Most of the data from studies on sexual harassment and abuse reveal that these experiences follow from violations of the trust relationship between the athlete and the coach.

ATHLETE NARRATIVES

Whilst the power of the coach in sport has long been recognized (Tomlinson and Strachan, 1996), and trust between coach and athlete has been encouraged as a positive ingredient of performance success, *abuse* of trust by authority figures has received far less attention. Although 'baseline' studies of sexual harassment and abuse typically involve questionnaire surveys to establish prevalence (Cawson *et al.*, 2000; Leahy *et al.*, 2001), the long or in-depth interview has been the method of choice for researchers conducting exploratory work on sexual exploitation in sport. One of the authors (Brackenridge, 1997a and b) conducted unstructured interviews, from which risk factors for sexual abuse in sport were extrapolated, and this work provided a framework for the interview schedule used by both Cense (1997) in the Netherlands and another of our projects (Fasting *et al.*, 2002) in Norway. As yet, no researchers are known to have conducted serial interviews or gathered full life histories of either victims or perpetrators of sexual exploitation in sport. However, the clear conclusion from our review of the field (Brackenridge, 2001: 146–47) is that most extant methods fail to engage with the contextual, historical and personal nuances of sexual abuse (for either the victim or the perpetrator) and that narrative analysis is one of the most important methods by which to correct this.

Most of the qualitative studies on this subject thus far have used the passive voice, failing to acknowledge either the social construction of the participants' narratives and/or the locus of analytic authority (Brackenridge, 2001: 148–60). To this extent, then, they have been 'author-evacuated' (Geertz, 1988, cited in Sparkes, 1995: 160). Resultant exhortations for abuse prevention policy and practice in sport have thus been presented unproblematically as 'evidence-based' without consideration of, or concern for, the sources of authority involved. The 'data' from participants' interviews have also been analysed across-case, that is, segmented and compared thematically, reducing them to categories and thus ignoring the athletes' ontological reality or 'biographical time' (Corbin and Strauss, 1987, cited in Sparkes and Smith, 2003: 298).

Two narrative segments are presented here, the first is translated from our joint research into sexual harassment among elite female athletes in Norway (Fasting *et al.*, 2002) and the second is from a project that one of us conducted with abused athletes in England (Brackenridge, 1997a). The English athlete, also a female, was identified through a snowball technique and gave informed consent for an unstructured interview. The Norwegian athlete was selected, also with voluntary informed consent, from a survey sample and interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule based on Brackenridge's original inductive analysis.

The original purpose of the interviews was not cross-cultural comparison since they were collected for separate studies, albeit it the Norwegian study built upon and adopted many of the research design and analytic characteristics of the English one. Although we have worked closely together on the analysis and reporting of the Norwegian study for the past three years, this is the first time we have adopted a biographical approach to the data. Although it might be argued that we are conducting a secondary analysis here, we would not agree since the biographical contours of the data have not been presented before.³ We chose these two transcripts because they include rich descriptions of the athletes' relationships and interactions with their coaches over time and because of the striking parallels between their experiences of grooming and the model of grooming previously outlined by Brackenridge and Kirby (Table II). The primary purpose of the in-depth examination of these narratives is to hear through athletes' own voices exactly how the grooming process is experienced and what this might tell us about risk behaviours and protective factors for athletes.

In both of the original studies, the text was subjected to thematic analysis, using Miles and Huberman's (1994) analytic method. In the English study the analysis was conducted manually using Word and EXCEL (© Microsoft) and in Norway using the WIN.MAX (© Sage) computer package. 'Cross-case' thematic analysis, as advocated by Miles and Huberman, is concerned with 'patterns', 'themes' and 'variables'. Here, using this different, 'within-case' or biographical analysis we thus conceptualize risk as a developing and complex set of social processes rather than as a series of discrete behaviours. Key elements of the narratives that relate to the grooming process in Table II are *italicized*.

It is important to acknowledge that our authorial voices intervene in these tales. We are therefore obliged to problematize our roles as 'interpreters' and 'experts'. Our voices are interspersed with theirs and our interpretations mediate their tales. We have authority not only over the edited and paraphrased text but also, to some extent, over the athletes' replies since we conducted the interviews ourselves and took into these settings our own cultural, epistemological and linguistic preferences and prejudices. To this extent, then, we heed Sparkes' (1999: 20) warning and 'proceed with caution into the domain of narrative analysis'.

NARRATIVE 1 – ANNA

Anna was 16 years old at the time of the grooming. She comes from a village not a large town or city. Her coach is around 55 years old, a little older than her father. He has coached her for 6–7 years but in the last year something happened and her performance deteriorated markedly. Anna

had a very good relationship with her father but one year before the grooming he began to suffer from an industrial illness that changed him a lot, making him depressed and difficult. She withdrew from her relationship with him because he was no longer the father that she remembered. At the same time, Anna was spending more and more time on her sport and became more friendly with her coach than she been before.

I trusted him very much and, in a way, he became ... my father and hugging and cuddling became normal but I had, in a way, a need for it so in the beginning I looked at it as positive. It began at the start of the season. Everything was so nice at the beginning but it began to become more and more that he would demonstrate techniques and stroke my bottom and my breasts ... and if I had done something really good it became customary for him to hold me and kiss me on the mouth and whisper 'You're my girl' in my ear. And then I heard from my sister who had been in a restaurant and she had overheard him talking about me and how clever and nice I was and boasted about it and his wife said that he talked more and more about me than he did about his own children ... but I took it as a compliment in the way that he was fond of me because I substituted him, in a way, for my father. And then it just went further and further and when we were driving to competitions he wanted to sit and hold hands and maybe stroke me on the shoulder and give me a lot of hugs and kisses on the mouth and so on. And then the season was finished and I stopped training and did other things.

In a place where we have weights I was alone and he came. I thought 'That's OK' and he came and gave me a hug and a kiss but then he went further and he wanted to hold me sexually. I really don't remember very much about it but that I turned my back on him and then someone else – one of my younger training partners – came into the room and I am grateful for that because I think it saved me from a very embarrassing situation because I think that he believed that I was really into it and he may have thought this because I had never said no before. I never resisted when he kissed me on the mouth but I understood that something started to go wrong with my coach. You cannot stop being his friend because he is a very powerful man. If you are on the edge with him then you can easily get into trouble with everyone. ... I turned around and I acted as if nothing had happened. I have told this to a girlfriend since then because she also had a similar experience with her coach but not in the same way as me.

This man is still Anna's coach but her performances have declined: she was previously one of the best in her sport in the country.

He [still] tries it on but now I am much more wary and I try to withdraw and avoid any such situations and I am little afraid to practise alone – when you are there alone you really hope you don't hear the sound of his car. Then you become afraid.

The coach is married with two children, both in the same sport at a high level. Anna has never discussed her feelings about the situation with him. Also, although she knew what he did was wrong, Anna also said that she should have stopped him at an earlier stage. She therefore blamed herself for letting things go so far. Anna implied that a man of 50 years of age should know that it was inappropriate to approach a girl of 16 in this way. She gets on reasonably well with her mother but said she could not discuss this with her. Anna talked more with her friend and said, 'Yes, she knows about it and she is on guard in some situations so I don't have to be alone with him.'

At the end of the next season, during which she had tried to avoid being alone with him and had been training as normal but not allowing him to kiss her, they fell out at a major competition. She did not do well and was ill but she felt obliged to compete. Towards the end of the competition she went to him for a pep talk. He was sitting with other adult male coaches around and she told him that she did not want to compete but had to so she needed his help.

He said *'If you don't compete you can take the train home because I will not have you in my car'* and then the other coaches laughed heartily. And then I suddenly had enough and I went. After that I didn't talk to him and I avoided him. I competed but I didn't go to him at the end as normal. *It's OK for him to kiss and cuddle me when he wants to but if I need a pep talk before a competition it's not right if he's sitting around with other coaches drinking coffee.* So after that we haven't talked together for several months. *Now he's gone to my mother and asked why my behaviour is so strange. He put it in a way that made it my fault.* She then became irritated and asked why I have behaved so badly towards him and wanted me to tell her why I did that but *I haven't told her because I think that he's started to get a bit afraid now.*

Anna thinks that he panicked when she did not go to him at the end of the contest – he simply left in his car without her and she had to find her own way home. She then did not talk to him for several months.

I really don't want to [talk to my mother] but will go directly to take it up with him. ... I think that *now I'm strong enough to do this myself because I feel that I have a little power over him because he is a little bit afraid now,* in a sense, so maybe I could talk to him myself now. I don't want my mother brought into this. ... If I'm going to deal with it I want it to be between me and him. *But now I don't want to deal with it because things can be just as they are. It's in my unconscious the whole time.*

She has the chance to move elsewhere but not without telling her mother why. *'I believe that maybe my mother would let me [go away] if*

I had told her the story. A new young coach has joined the club and will take over most of her coaching next year but, as Anna states:

... in many ways it would be very nice to get away because there will always be some times when I have to practise alone. There are three men and three women on the [club] executive board and those women are very positive and try to do a lot but the old men won't let things get through. ... They would never have [sacked] him because he is so powerful and one of them works for him ... he is so powerful and he has always been there and ... has made this place famous [through his coaching successes]. ... I am a very good friend of his children so I would never have dared to say in public what he has done. ... He could hug me when there were other people around – that was quite natural – but he didn't kiss me on the mouth or pet me.

During the interview, Anna kept returning to the same incident:

He did not try to rape me but held me too tight and wanted to touch me sexually – but it wasn't right. ... It has been very hard this season because I have been a substitute but I want to finish my junior years at least. It will always be in my unconsciousness even if I move. He will always be at competitions anyway so, in a way, I can't escape him. ... I want to be here one more year but as soon as I finish high school then I will leave. ... I think I will have less contact with him because of the new coach but I have to be friends with him, or pretend that nothing ever happened, because I have to be on good terms with him – I wouldn't dare not to be because he is so powerful. If he wanted to make real trouble for me then I think he could manage it. It's not that I think that he's evil in any way really but you become insecure towards someone that you have trusted and looked on as your father when he does things like this when you are 16 years old.

There were rumours about this coach's behaviour. He also had a child by someone else outside his own marriage and it was Anna's perception that '*... he can get everything he wants and everyone that walks on two legs and is a woman. ... The most hurtful thing is that he was the one that I trusted and was, in a way, my father*'. When asked what a sport organization could do about such behaviour, she said '*When you are alone with your coach it's for sure that this sort of thing can happen*', but she also thought that '*if there were clear ethical boundaries ... then it would be very easy to know if your coach had gone too far*'.

NARRATIVE 2 – BELINDA

You could smell a man who was coached by him – they all wore the same aftershave ... I was 15 when I started [my sport] through a boyfriend. He was a junior national squad member – love me love my sport! I decided after

six months to get serious about [the sport] so I went to his coach, a former national coach. He [the coach] had set up his own [unregistered] club after having had a row with the governing body. He is now rejoining the fold as a big wig. He now coaches the number one man in Great Britain. *You don't ask him to coach you, he selects you. You are somebody if you are coached by him. I thought 'Wow!' when he said he'd coach me.*

Belinda's relationship with her boyfriend went on for about a year:

... then we split up. I went to see [the coach] to confirm in my own mind that he wanted to coach me not just that I was [my boyfriend's] girlfriend. *We talked for about three hours. He commented on my haircut and suggested clothes.* I thought it was nice because he'd noticed my image change. [She had deliberately changed her image after splitting up with her boyfriend.]

I went away feeling really good. We talked at his home. Whenever I rang him to say anything he already knew! If you knew any rumours you had to tell him, [about] men or women, [competitors] or not. He's married – his wife had bad arthritis – but often when we went there [to his home] it was just me and him and she was still working. [By then] I was 17. During my year with [my boyfriend] there had been nothing untoward. My parents weren't interested in it really, it wasn't a big deal. He [her coach] took the place of [her boyfriend]. I'd been catapulted up to junior squad level in one year. I got a lot of flack – 'She's only doing it because of her boyfriend – blonde bimbo ...' To [my coach] *I was the golden girl for about six months.* I was putting in personal bests. After national squad I felt very close to him. He never went to events. We worked through the winter in X town at the sports ground. Things were going great and then he suggested that I start going out with another of his pupils. He was very keen on matchmaking so I did. I quite liked my new boyfriend – he was a couple of years older. We split up around Christmas.

[The coach] played cupid. *He'd started asking more personal questions – very subtle, he's very clever. [He'd ask] 'What turns you on' etc. He also put on a rude video and watched it with me [while] his wife was at work. He talked about sexual jokes. This happened three or four times in the weeks up to Christmas.* He asked me about the split [with her boyfriend]. He [the boyfriend] had given me a tank top but it was tight. I went up to my coach's to show him – he must have asked to see it. *We did some training in the garden for a bit then, in a break – at his home – he said 'Go and put it on' so I did just to prove it wouldn't fit me.* I was at the top of the stairs and he was at the bottom ... alarm bells began to ring in my head. *He said 'Come a bit closer' I went half way down the stairs. He said 'Take it off' but I said no. He said 'I'm your coach, you can trust me.' I said no again. He said 'If you trusted me as a coach you'd take it off ... I'm not going to tell anybody, just appreciate a thing of beauty'. I was shocked and so aware he wasn't going to let me out. He just stood there waiting.*

Belinda said: *'This has happened before and then I couldn't deal with it.'* She related that she had been unable to resist pressure for intimacy with someone else on a previous occasion.

For some reason I couldn't go back upstairs ... but then I did and changed [her clothes]. He'd gone from the stairs when I came down. We went outside and [trained] again. I was petrified. I had heard a rumour earlier that he was a bit like that but it was from someone I thought was jealous of not being coached by him. We never travelled to [events] together. I [trained] for a while then he said 'If you ever tell anybody what happened I'd deny it and it would be my word against yours and who would they believe?' I felt gutted – this was the bloke I'd trusted ... he knew everything about me – more than my parents. I never went [to the coach's house] alone again. My first boyfriend came with me – I told him in the end because he didn't want to come training at [the coach's house] at first. I went for about another two months ... each time he got more vindictive with sarcastic comments. He said if I ever told anyone he'd bury me. I guess I was trying to get it back to the way it was because I saw him in a position of power over my [performance]. I didn't want to chuck away what I had. Every time I went it was on my mind. His whole coaching approach changed. All of a sudden he didn't like my [technique] and he changed everything about [it]. Without telling me a sort of excommunication from the club [happened] – he let it be known that he wasn't coaching me any more.

I couldn't get him by phone and he wouldn't ring me. At the time my parents didn't know but after he cancelled my coaching session by phoning my mum I broke down and told my mum. *They [her parents] were almost indifferent – they weren't [sports] people. I resented them not caring and almost blamed them* but dad's immediate reaction was 'Where does he live and I'll go and thump him.' I somehow woke up to myself then. I never thought of giving up [the sport]. *The rest of the season I [performed] rubbish.*

When I was asked why I had split up with [the coach] I said we'd had a disagreement. *I felt I couldn't report him ... it would have been suicide bid on my [sports] career.* He used to turn up at [competitions] events that year and he always used to position himself where he could see me and I could see him as I [performed]. It put me off. My [performances] dropped but not only because of that ... also because I didn't have the knowledge why or how to improve. Three national coaches came to offer their services and I said no because they were male.

At the time of the incident, she thought that the sport governing body had no code of ethics, no reporting procedures and no charter of rights for athletes. She did not know about the generic national code of conduct and ethics for coaches. 'I don't know how you do it', that is, open a debate about abuse within sport.

I am now twenty one. It now affects my selection because he's one of the top [national] coaches. *He's a very clever man, likes to play mind games and rub one person against another to get his own way. Because he coaches the best people in the country no-one questions him.* He's got the run of the [sport] field.

... I know I'm not the first. I know of at least three or four women it's happened to ... I've spoken to one – it happened over ten years ago – she doesn't see it as part of what's happening now. As far as I was concerned he was the one with the power. My parents have never seen me [compete]. ... *It makes me feel vulnerable because I was totally alone.* Maybe if [my parents] had been more forceful I would have felt more supported. They weren't in the [sport] scene. I'd lost my first boyfriend and my coach and both of them had done the dirty.

Belinda's first boyfriend had started seeing someone else from the national junior squad after she and he had split up.

He's at least 50–55 now. He coaches a lot of girls from twelve upwards, a lot around sixteen. To this day I still feel guilty that I can't stop him. ... I'm sure he's still doing it. It would still be put down as sour grapes. My parents didn't even know where he lived. I was very independent – I did it off my own bat. *You've got to be close knit and work as a team and trust them 100% ... and then they abuse that trust.* It will be a long time before I trust another man to coach me, a long time. It's a contradiction in terms to say 'He's a brilliant coach.' Look at my brilliant coach – it's taken me three years to get back to where I was!

DISCUSSION

Both stories clearly illustrate elements from the different stages in the grooming process (Table II). Importantly, however, neither of the athletes suffered *actual* sexual assault since the grooming process was terminated – in Anna's case by an interruption and in Belinda's by her own decision to leave. This indicates that Anna's coach took insufficient care in preparing the setting for his intimate approach and that Belinda's coach misjudged the likelihood of her co-operating with his advances. In both cases these were therefore 'failed' attempts at generating intimate sexual contact. 'Successful' abusers ensure that their target victims co-operate fully and use the early stages of grooming process to test out whether or not it is safe for them to take things to a more serious level. Ironically, the most successful abusers are neither rebutted by the athlete nor apprehended since they put in place many social and situational safety mechanisms to ensure compliance and to disguise their assaults. These mechanisms include recruiting the victim's peer athletes and family members into

their support system (which is a form of community grooming as outlined by Leberg, 1997), threatening to shame the athlete publically, terminating their status on the team or, in the most extreme cases, blackmailing or harming the athlete through physical violence (Brackenridge, 2001).

Certain kinds of narrative are associated with the shift from acceptance – ‘*I took it as a compliment in the way that he was fond of me because I substituted him, in a way, for my father*’ (Anna) – to personal resistance to sexual exploitation in sport, whether because the athlete is infatuated with the coach or because she fears the consequences of non-co-operation. Anna, for example, said ‘*I had never said no before. ... You cannot stop being his friend because he is a very powerful man*’ but then indicated how she had taken charge: ‘*I try to avoid any such situations. ... I didn’t talk to him and avoided him.*’ She tells how she increases her control by planning to confront him directly, rather than going through her mother, and inverting the power dynamic by making him fearful that he will be exposed by her. Belinda tells a similar tale of acceptance, at first, of rudimentary intimacies followed by gradual awareness and then resistance. Both tales also exhibit elements of victimization after the failure of the coaches’ advances, something noted by Cense and Brackenridge (2001) in their analysis of temporal patterns in the sexual abuse of athletes. In the case of Anna, she was ridiculed by the coach in front of other coaches and made to find her own way home from a competition. In the case of Belinda, she was plagued repeatedly by the coach writing her disparaging letters and attempting to intimidate her by appearing at her competitions. Both subsequently suffered a decline in their performance standard. To this extent, then, the consequences of both their experiences were severe.

The coherence, certainty and predictability with which elite athletes construct their sporting identities (train hard – try hard – compete successfully) is disrupted by their experiences of sexual grooming, perpetrated by the very person who has the power to confirm this identity, their coach. Their identity suddenly becomes transformed from embodied sports-woman to embodied sex object. Sexual violation, whether actual or symbolic, challenges the athlete’s previous knowledge of her body as systematically trained for high-level competitive performance into one that is caught unawares and ever after watchful of sexual contingencies.⁴

Since these two athletes did not actually experience ‘coerced collaboration in genital acts’ – our original definition of sexual abuse – it could be argued that they had not been abused but merely harassed. However, although both athletes became conscious of their discomfort and then questioned the rightness of what was occurring, their awareness of the experience as ‘unwanted’ came late in the process and only just in time for them to resist abuse. In addition to their performance decrements, the

psychological trauma experienced by both athletes left them unable to regain their high-level sporting status. It can also be argued, therefore, that the grooming process was, in itself, a form of abuse and that these particular narratives therefore confirm our original separation of harassment and abuse via the grooming process.

It is relatively easy to look with hindsight at how a healthy, everyday coaching relationship slides into an abusive one. What is much more difficult to do, however, is to predict whether or how apparently innocuous behaviours can lead to more serious or sinister ones and whether they might be predictors of sexual abuse. In their study of ambiguous behaviours between swimming coaches and their athletes, Bringer *et al.* (2002) describe how the perceived acceptability of certain behaviours (a touch on the arm or a hug, for example) can alter with particular contexts and how such ambiguous behaviours can be, at one and the same time, both innocent and *also* the start of the grooming process. It is precisely because of the equivalence of innocuous behaviours and initial grooming behaviours that perpetrators are able safely to test out the response of their target victim and to retreat or back off without consequences should they meet with resistance or opposition. The manipulation of ambiguity is thus one of the skills in the successful perpetrator's repertoire of grooming behaviours. Toftegaard Nielsen (2001: 170) suggests that the sports perpetrator moves from 'confidence', through 'seduction' to eventual 'abuse'. His work builds on the earlier empirical studies of grooming within sport contexts (Brackenridge, 1997a and b; Cense, 1997) and clearly shows that 'there is a connection between the mild confidence-building activities [by coaches] and the later sexual harassment or abuse' (Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001: 79). Indeed, from their focus groups with elite swimming coaches, Bringer *et al.* (2002: 92) found that "perceptions of appropriateness" often conflict with ... coaches' schemes for "good coaching" and that this constitutes a 'grey area' in coaching practice.

Identifying and clarifying protective factors in the coach-athlete relationship are urgent tasks for those delivering anti-harassment and abuse prevention programmes in sport. This task should be assisted by close analysis of the narratives of both athletes *and* coaches about their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse allegations. Bringer *et al.*'s (2002) work has already helped to illuminate the tensions and ambiguities involved in the coach-athlete relationship. In workshops we have delivered on child protection, coaches from a wide range of sports have repeatedly expressed concerns about being falsely accused of harassment or abuse when *they* construct these situations positively, as expressions of closeness to their athletes through touches, gestures or affectionate comments. Further understanding of the grooming process, and of how

and why it develops in specific sport contexts, should help to allay such fears and also to demarcate protective practices.

CONCLUSION

The athlete narratives presented in this article come from two different countries yet reflect very similar social and interpersonal conditions and processes. The primary purpose of the in-depth examination of these case studies was to explore their experiences of the grooming process in ways that escape attention during cross-case thematic analysis. Close examination of the two narratives shows that, even in the absence of genital sexual contact, grooming may lead to psychological abuse and associated trauma. This suggests that an understanding of grooming may be useful for those seeking to establish guidance on coaching practice and athlete safety and for promoting both prevention and self-protection in sport.

From this brief sortie into telling tales in sport, we conclude that research on this topic would benefit from greater use of narrative and biographical analysis in order to expose the multiple meanings of grooming as part of sexual harassment and abuse in sport. In particular, the protection of athletes from sexual exploitation, and avoidance of allegations or entanglements by coaches, requires us to focus more closely on the gendered relational aspects of coach–athlete interaction. Greater awareness of how certain interactions can be constructed by one party as legitimate and by the other as invasive or illegitimate is required in order to educate both coaches and athletes about these issues and to help them avoid compromising situations.

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NOTES

1 Full details of the methodology of these two studies may be found in Brackenridge (1997a and b) and Fasting *et al.* (2002).

2 We acknowledge that females are sometimes perpetrators of sexual exploitation and that males are sometimes victims. However, the male pronoun is used throughout this article to denote the harasser or abuser since the reported rates of harassment and

abuse by females are statistically very small (Nathan and Ward, 2002). In both of the studies from which our narratives here are drawn all the perpetrators were male.

3 One reason for *not* publishing the interviews in biographical formats previously has been our concern that identities might be revealed. Despite our care in rendering data anonymous by deleting times, places and the names of people and sports from the transcripts, it might still be possible for ‘insiders’ to identify the individuals concerned and we therefore have to accept responsibility for this. It remains one of the hazards of researching sensitive topics (Lee, 1993).

4 Interestingly, *none* of the athletes interviewed in the English study actually realized elite level success after having been groomed or abused, despite their high level of talent (Brackenridge, 1997b).

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