

# Make the Commitment: Stop Abuse in Sports!

By Cecile Reynaud



I coached collegiately for 26 years at a Division I university and tried various coaching styles depending on the age and ability of the team. One particular season, my assistant coach said, “I don’t think the yelling is helping.” I stopped yelling immediately and we won that night against a very good team. I chose to ignore the bad plays, such as a poor pass, a bad dig or an attacking error, and I started celebrating the good plays. It was amazing how much focusing on the positives worked like a charm. Just as the Golden Rule preaches, “we should treat others as we want to be treated ourselves.” In that sense, every one of us would rather hear compliments instead of criticism.

Being a coach is usually a highly respected position at a school, club or university, but the profession is now being portrayed as a type of position which accepts abuse and harassment as ways to achieve success. As responsible coaches, we have the power to make someone’s life incredible or as irresponsible coaches, we can not only ruin someone else’s life, but our own as well.

It is important to realize that sexual abuse isn’t the only form of misconduct in sport. While sexual abuse is very serious and offensive, physical and emotional misconduct can also prove detrimental to athletes, resulting in short- and long-term effects.

In the past few months, these are some of the headlines and stories that have appeared in the media, which pertain to physical and emotional misconduct:

“Volleyball Coaches Suspended for Alcohol Incident During Tournament Trip,” “Lacrosse coach accused of abusive tactics by players, parents,” “The video shows the coach pushing, hitting and kicking players, hurling basketballs at their legs and head, and unleashing a tirade of profanities and homophobic slurs.”

It is up to us, as coaches, to change the perception of the profession and do a better job creating a safe and positive environment for our athletes. Ask your fellow coaches to keep a check on your behavior. Understand that we are all responsible to report

suspected abuse of any kind. Invite administrators and parents to attend practices. Tape yourself coaching and listen to *what* you say and *how* you communicate with your athletes. If what you see scares you, you may need to adjust your coaching style.

I was teaching in a CAP clinic with a fellow clinician who told the coaches, “Sometimes the worst thing a player may hear is his/her own name.” Imagine hearing your boss screaming your name. How much would you hate that? How sad is it that an athlete isn’t excited when a coach says his/her name, but possibly embarrassed or even ashamed?

Mobile and electronic communications have changed in recent years. Think carefully about what you are texting or emailing to an athlete and the time of day you are sending them a message. These types of communications should be written as if the public will be reading them. If you are coaching minors, the parents should be copied on any message you send their child.

*“Sport offers individuals the chance to experience the joys of competition, teamwork and personal development. Every member of our community has a role in creating conditions that protect the physical and emotional well-being of athletes. What makes this challenge so complex is that the human element in sport – the bonds that exist between coaches and athletes and among teammates – can sometimes cause confusion about what actions are acceptable and what cross the line. That’s why recognizing and addressing misconduct in sport requires a team effort. A critical step in addressing misconduct is being able to recognizing the specific actions that are qualified as misconduct.”*

– [www.Safesport.org](http://www.Safesport.org)

As coaches, we should be knowledgeable about the different language that is associated with misconduct in sport. Understanding this language can help us recognize and classify harmful behaviors in our organizations. Here are a few of the terms, which can be also found on the SafeSport website.

## Bullying

Bullying is an intentional, persistent and repeated pattern of committing or willfully tolerating physical and non-physical behavior that is intended, or has the reasonable potential, to cause fear, humiliation or physical harm.

## Emotional Misconduct

Verbal acts:

- Verbally attacking an athlete personally (e.g., calling them worthless, fat or disgusting).
- Repeatedly and excessively yelling at participants in a manner that serves no productive training or motivational purpose

Physical acts:

- Throwing sport equipment, water bottles or chairs at, or in the presence of, participants.
- Punching walls, windows or other objects are examples of physical acts of emotional abuse.
- Acts that deny attention and support. Ignoring an athlete for extended periods of time.
- Routinely or arbitrarily excluding participants from practice

## Harassment

This could include physical offenses, such as throwing a ball at someone, and also non-physical offenses, such as name calling and making negative or disparaging comments about him/her.

I heard the legendary FSU football coach Bobby Bowden speak at a Sport Management Conference in early October. He told a lot of great stories, but his main message for the students was, “Be kind!” We need to do a better job promoting positive behaviors with our athletes. Let’s all make the commitment to stop abuse in sport.

As renowned educator, child psychologist and psychotherapist Haim Ginott said in his book *Teacher and Child*, which was adapted in 1995 by the USOC director of coaching,

“I have come to the frightening conclusion

I am the decisive element on the court

It is my personal approach that creates the climate

It is my daily mood that makes the weather

As a coach, I possess tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous

I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration

I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal.

In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.” ☺

