

## **Bad Acts Special: Child Abuse - The Dark Underbelly Of Our Youth Sports Culture By Don Collins**

Every six months, I cover the worst things to occur in youth sports. The Penn State incident is the worst thing to occur in the second half of 2011. It's all over the news. One couldn't miss it. However, I will recap it for the benefit of future readers who may not be familiar with it.

John Sandusky, a prominent former Penn State assistant football coach who was still affiliated with Penn State and its football program, used his position to allegedly gain access to underage boys and sexually abuse them. Penn State's legendary head football coach, Joe Paterno, received some information about Sandusky's alleged acts, and complied with state law by reporting to his superiors. However, he failed the moral test of notifying the police and taking active steps to ensure that the acts were investigated when it became clear that the University officials he'd reported to had (a) done nothing; and/or (b) had not informed him that they'd taken some action after he reported to them. Simply put, Paterno stuck his head in the sand.

The Penn State scandal didn't occur in youth sports. Yet, it is one of the rare occasions that sex abuse by coaches, which is a major problem in youth sports, got the type of national publicity that makes a problem penetrate the public consciousness.

Sex abuse in coaching tends to generate primarily local and regional publicity. This is mostly because the local youth or high school coach isn't of significant interest to the rest of the country (with some rare exceptions where a local coach accused of abuse has been nationally prominent like Russell Otis at Dominguez High School in Compton). The limited national exposure works against broad, cultural penetration, resulting in people being aware of the problem intellectually, probably underestimating the scope of the problem, and definitely lacking the visceral, emotional connection to the problem that comes from relentless national exposure.

We see a similar problem in youth sports violence. People somehow seem shocked to discover that sports officials are frequently attacked, and that a whole lot of youth athlete and spectators engage in a whole lot of bad acts. Yet, people do have an intellectual awareness that the problem exists; they just don't get the scope and don't get that it really could happen in their child's game.

We've actually done a fine job laying the foundation to combat sex abuse in youth and high school sports. Throughout the country, people at local and regional levels have passed coaching fingerprint laws, and criminal name database check laws. We have also seen numerous other local and regional programs to combat the problem. Some organizations even run quiet, informal searches of on-line lists of child sexual abusers (these have to be quiet as they may not comply with employment law requirements in most states).

We've only just begun combatting this problem, though. The abusers are often one step ahead of us. Often they simply move from town to town, and job to job much like the abusive catholic priests. As they have not been convicted, fingerprint checks don't stop them. If you don't use the FBI database, a criminal name check won't catch them if they committed their crime in states other than yours. If you don't have follow up service, you won't catch post-fingerprint check arrests.

Ultimately, organizations are going to have to expand background checks beyond fingerprinting and checking names against databases. We know that coaches can move from place to place so why not call past employers, and league officials. Many places don't do this. Also, we tend to focus on our own region. This makes it harder to mobilize. There may be three million reports of abuse per year, but it's a big country. Only so many will come from your region, and of those the odds are low that a local coach will be involved right where you are, and right in your working life. Our intense regional and local focus has made it difficult to mobilize resources. Hence, while there are a lot of groups that monitor child abuse, it is fair to say that there is no child abuse equivalent of Mothers Against Drunk Driving. The national cultural penetration is probably still not where it could be.

The Penn State scandal gave us a rare opportunity to shine a national light on what is generally covered regionally. However, the focus on Sandusky and Paterno somewhat obscured the fact that this is a very common problem in youth sports. Indeed, much of the focus on Sandusky and Paterno turned a child abuse focus into a story about a monster in the midst of a noble athletic program (Sandusky), and a heroic man who had the misfortune to confront a demon he wasn't properly prepared to confront (Paterno). We didn't get a national wave of follow up front page stories on local youth coaches who abused athletes or coaches who didn't report child sexual, physical or emotional abuse to their local police or child protective agencies. We didn't even get a wave of victim stories, which is a common tool for Mothers Against Drunk Driving (probably because they are, after all, the parents of the victims). Of course, in all fairness, we did get victim stories in the media reports on Bernie Fine, the basketball equivalent to the Sandusky case. However, those stories often focused on unsavory acts that these once-innocent children either had committed or were committing as adults.

One thing is certain about child abuse in sports: the problem is so pervasive that shining a national light on it is easy. Indeed, it's easy enough that a gentleman named Bob Reno devotes a monthly recap to it on his badjocks.com website. Trust me; Bob is not hurting for content. Coaches, parents, and students engage in a lot of abusive behavior.

In the past few months, Bob has reported on a high school coach who allegedly gave his team the password to a porn site to create team camaraderie; a coach who allegedly pulled a gun on a parent after a game (not child abuse, but still it's pretty unsavory); and a youth cheer coach who stands accused of running a prostitution ring in her spare time.

Badjocks.com reports on people who don't seem to be too swift. One might be inclined to dismiss them as aberrations – however, these aberrations are around our youth. Also, if you view the site, Bob Reno's tone seems a bit self-indulgent; he's a bit too smart, and not quite angry enough in tone. I'd compare him to Chris Hansen on the To Catch A Predator television show. When you read Reno or watch Hansen, you're intellectually aware that the subjects are repulsive. However, the combination of being exposed to so many of the subjects combined with Reno and Hansen's commentary leads to your moral outrage being displaced by bafflement – and even ridicule - at the utter stupidity of the subjects. In short, Hansen and Reno may be, in a strange way, too effective. We can't get worked up in a froth about their subjects the way we can about a serious man who failed to bring the full force of his focus onto an abused child like Paterno or a man who simply fooled everybody like Sandusky.

Unfortunately, the sports world is filled with very serious people who abuse our youth. They're not stupid – although they are repulsive. Sometimes, these serious people hold extremely lofty positions and coach highly prominent youth athletes. They are no more the subject of ridicule than one's own local coach. Yet, they went bad. Prominent or local - an abuser will abuse. Until the Sandusky incident, abusive coaches basically flew under the national radar unless Bob Reno held them up to public scrutiny and contempt.

Here are two examples of serious groups of people who abused our youth. They directly hit youth sports in a big way. They received some media coverage. It's safe to say that people who follow the business and legal side of sports know of them. However, these incidents didn't penetrate the national consciousness.

First, there's Ivan Privilov. Who's he? Well, Ivan is the former head coach of the Ukrainian U18 and U20 hockey national teams. He's an internationally prominent youth coach who has coached several NHL players.

Ivan's players are tough guys, right? Well, maybe so, but Ivan had access to them when they were young boys. They weren't so tough then. Maxim Starchenko is one of Ivan's former players. He played his college hockey in the US, and recently published a book alleging that Privilov sexually abused his players. Well, Maxim didn't make it to the NHL so this could be sour grapes you say. Maybe, but we know that Ivan was arrested in January, 2012 for allegedly fondling a 14 year old hockey player in Philadelphia.

If you think Ivan's case is unique, think again. Prominent Canadian youth coach Graham James was convicted in December, 2011 of abusing youth hockey players. Two of his victims went on to have lengthy NHL careers. One of them, Theo Fleury, was prominent enough to be recognizable to the casual hockey fan.

Second, USA Swimming. There's no single bad guy here. There are, instead, a whole lot of bad guys. So many that one writer compared USA Swimming to the Catholic Church. The USA Swimming scandal broke in 2010. By the time authorities

got to the bottom of it, 36 coaches were banned from USA Swimming. Amongst the bad acts allegedly committed by these youth coaches were filming high school girls as they showered, and sexually molesting young swimmers.

Chuck Wielgus, the head of USA Swimming, was quoted as saying, "It's not nearly as serious in USA Swimming as it might be in the rest of society. I don't want to be the one to sit here and say 36 is not too many, one is too many, but this is not just a problem that's isolated to one sport." Heck, it does sound kind of like the Catholic Church, doesn't it? The scarier part, though, is that just as in the hockey case a bunch of coaches who had regular access to kids, took them on road trips, and spent many hours with them were abusers. Nobody suspected because these were serious coaches who were pillars of the community, highly successful, and highly respected.

Ultimately, the Penn State case has done us the favor of shining light on a problem. To be fair, Bob Reno is part of the media, and the hockey and swimming cases were certainly reported. However, the level of reporting by Reno and the degree of reporting on the swimming and hockey cases as well as the level in other cases does not rise to the level that imprints the problem in the public consciousness. This may be good in that it doesn't make us paranoid about all coaches; on the other hand, it may be bad in that it creates an atmosphere where these acts can occur again more easily. Worse, too many people will be shocked when these things do occur again.

Penn State has given us a chance to take further steps in combating this problem. The big question is whether we as a sports society are up to the task.