

Why Hazing is Never Acceptable – A Position Paper

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Abstract: The purpose of this position paper on hazing is to define what hazing is, to identify characteristics of groups that support its occurrence, and to engage in a discussion about tactics to halt its harmful practices. As human beings, we have a moral obligation to treat our fellow competitors with respect and fairness and to create and participate in a safe environment. It is the contention of the authors that team bonding can, and should, occur in a positive competitive environment. Therefore, the article will conclude with suggestions for accomplishing this goal.

Key Words: hazing; positive team bonding in athletics

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Hazing is described as a rite of passage for a member to become accepted into an organization (Allan, 2005a). Farry (2002a) reports that more and more documented cases of hazing are occurring in athletics for both men and women at the interscholastic, intercollegiate, and professional levels. In Farrey's (2002a) exposè devoted to the issue of hazing in athletics, the following examples were shared: "In Connecticut, a high school wrestler is hog-tied and sodomized with the blunt end of a plastic knife;...In 1998, New Orleans Saints tight end Cam Cleeland and another player were injured in hazing activities in training camp that included running through a gantlet of players who hit the rookies with bags of coins" (Farrey, 2002a). "[A female athlete] and two other freshman [soccer players at the University of Oklahoma] were required to wear an adult diaper and were blindfolded. [The coach then] led an exercise in which a banana was forced into her mouth as a simulated act of oral sex" (Garber, 2002).

Even considering the above, arguments continue to exist between those that support hazing as an encouraged and necessary aspect of preseason team bonding and a method to build trust between teammates (Farrey, 2002b) and those who believe hazing is a deviant act that leaves its victims scared and harmed for years (Hoover, 1999). How can such polar perspectives exist about hazing and team bonding practices? Perhaps the answer to the question lies in misunderstanding the bonding process and even perhaps not understanding how bonding can be affected through positive experiences. Most coaches would argue that team bonding is a necessary component for any team to be successful and coaches work

diligently to create the bonding experience. What then causes bonding to become hazing?

This paper examines the act of hazing and the culture that supports its practice. Because confusion centers on what hazing really is, a definition of hazing will first be provided. Research will then be cited that documents the prevalence and type of hazing practices in athletics. Discussion will follow examining our moral obligation to our fellow competitors to create a safe and competitive participatory environment. Finally, suggestions will be provided to help sporting participants halt the practice of hazing in addition to identifying other healthy team initiation activities that are designed to create team bonding and trust building in a positive manner.

What is Hazing?

The first comprehensive study examining hazing practices in college athletics was conducted by Alfred University in 1999. Researchers identified hazing as:

Any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers, regardless of the person's willingness to participate. This does not include activities such as rookies carrying the balls, team parties with community games, or going out with your teammates, unless an atmosphere of humiliation, degradation, abuse or danger arises (Hoover, 1999, p. 8).

The researchers targeted athletes, coaches, and athletic administrators at 224 NCAA institutions (Division-I, -II, and -III) for their observational study about acceptable and unacceptable hazing experiences. Even though we do not agree with their classifications of hazing behaviors as being acceptable, we do think what their study found is important to understanding the occurrence of hazing and the practices linked to hazing.

Under this definition, [provided above] 45 percent of the respondents reported that they knew of, had heard of, or suspected hazing on their campuses. Only 12 percent reported being hazed for athletics. Eighty percent, however, reported being subjected to one or more typical hazing behaviors as part of their team initiations (Hoover, 1999, p. 8).

Hazing practices were separated into four categories: 1) Acceptable, 2) Questionable, 3) Alcohol-related, and 4) Unacceptable. Acceptable initiation activities include, but are not limited to, “attending a skit night or a team roast,” “keeping a specific grade point average,” and “completing a ropes course or team trip” (p. 9). Questionable initiation activities include, but are not limited to, “being yelled, cursed, or sworn at,” “acting as a personal servant to players off the field, court,” and “being forced to deprive oneself of food, sleep, or hygiene” (p. 9). Unacceptable initiation activities include, but are not limited to, “destroying or stealing property,” “engaging in or simulating sexual acts,” and “being paddled, whipped, beaten, kicked; beating others” (p. 10). Based upon these classifications, responses indicated that “one in five athletes [were] acceptably initiated, one in five

athletes [were] questionably initiated, [and] three in five athletes were unacceptably initiated” (p. 12). Furthermore, between 40-49% of athletes indicated that alcohol use was a part of their initiation experiences both during their recruiting visit and upon enrollment at their respective institution (Hoover, 1999).

The results of this comprehensive study clearly indicate both positive team building activities and hazing activities are occurring. In addition, it is clear that hazing practices are prevalent on college campuses. Interestingly, “many athletes were introduced to questionable initiation rites prior to college. ... Of those athletes who reported they were hazed in college, 42% reported that they had also been hazed in high school and 5% said they were hazed in middle school” (p. 13). Hazing as a negative practice appears to be prevalent throughout multiple competitive levels.

A recent study (Allan & Madden, 2008) that examined exposure to hazing activities among undergraduate students nationwide provided support for Hoover’s (1999) findings. Initial results revealed that “1) more than half of college students involved in clubs, teams, and organizations experience hazing [and that] 2) nearly half (47%) of students have experienced hazing prior to coming to college” (hazingstudy.org). Interestingly, respondents revealed that “...there are a number of public aspects to hazing, including the location of hazing activities, posting photos of these activities on public web spaces, and knowledge of hazing among coaches, advisors, alumni, family, and friends” (Allan & Madden, 2008, p. 24).

Hazing is illegal in all but six states—Alaska, Hawaii, Montana, New Mexico, South Dakota, and Wyoming, which do not have anti-hazing legislature (Nuwer, 2008 as cited in McGlone, 2008). Considering that hazing is illegal, how then does it still occur? Most probably because it is done by individuals who think it is a psychological necessity to develop a team bond and because, "we've always done it." Also because it is illegal, most cases of hazing occur in secrecy and loyalty to the group, which often keeps hazing from being discovered outside the group. How then can we as professionals combat the problem of hazing? Perhaps the first possible answer lies in how team members respect each other.

The Importance of Respect

As contributing members of society, we must examine our respect of and for others. We must be willing to examine who we are as people and how we practice that. "'To do well,' Stephen Covey says, 'you must do good. And to do good, you must first *be good*'" (Lickona, 2004, p. 4). Good in this sense refers to our knowing of what is acceptable and what is not accepted. This quality of knowing is essential for the development of our character. "...we know in our bones that success without *character* – qualities such as honesty, a sense of responsibility, kindness, and determination in the face of difficulty – doesn't count for much" (Lickona, 2004, p. 4). Good character as Lickona (2004) has identified is "the...virtue. Virtues – such as honesty, justice, courage, ...compassion" (p. 7) and respect. We are morally obligated to treat others respectfully and compassionately. "[Virtues] define what it means to be human. We are more fully human when we act virtuously – generously

rather than selfishly, justly rather than unjustly, honestly rather than deceitfully... “

(Lickona, 2004, p. 7). Furthermore,

[w]ithout the virtues that make up good character, no individual can live happily and so society can function effectively. Without good character, the human race does not make progress toward a world that respects the dignity and value of every person (Lickona, 2004, p. 12).

Many believe that engaging in sport teaches and promotes the adoption of social values like hard work, teamwork, and discipline. However, acts of hazing in sport do not respect the dignity or value of any person. In fact, the intent behind hazing is to demean and cause the feeling of being powerless and not valued. While proponents of hazing argue that hazing increases bonding (Farrey, 2002b), the reverse actually occurs. Victims of hazing do not express feelings of increased dignity or perceptions of enhanced value. As a young woman who was hazed as a freshman by her soccer teammates and coaches shared, “...I felt embarrassed, belittled and humiliated” (Garber, 2002).

As identified in the Hoover study (1999), hazing commonly involves alcohol use, physical abuse, psychological manipulation, and/or simulation of sexual acts. The primary question that should continue to be asked is how can such activities relate to an increase in team bonding? The simple answer is that they do not. Hazing is *always* demeaning.

On the contrary, bonding exercises incorporate activities that create a positive and supportive experience for their participants. Examples of such bonding activities could be “attending a skit night or team roast [and/or] completing a ropes course or team trip” (Hoover, 1999, p. 14). Positive team bonding experiences result in the members feeling good about themselves and good about the bonding experience. The members feel valued and important. We must be careful not to categorize these types of bonding activities as acts of hazing. The intent behind hazing and positive bonding experiences and the results gained from them are inherently different. The qualities and practices of hazing are unacceptable in any form. As human beings we have a responsibility to respect the dignity and rights of every other human.

Creating Positive Change

Our humanness demands that we create positive change and formulate a plan to accomplish the task to rid hazing from sport practice. What can we do to make change? The first step[†] is to know what hazing is and to understand the harm that occurs because of hazing. Arguing that hazing is a tradition, or a rite of passage, or necessary to create team bonding is not acceptable. Hazing is NEVER acceptable.

[†] The steps to creating positive change are inspired by Dr. Elizabeth J. Allan who advocates that to create positive change in the hazing culture, five steps should be followed. We need to “help others to: 1) Notice hazing, 2) Interpret hazing as a problem, 3) Recognize a responsibility to change it, 4) Acquire the skills needed to take action, and 5) Take action!” (Allan, 2005b). However, we believe that more needs to be said about how to make change.

Any argument to the contrary reeks of ignorance of bonding practices that can create a positive, supportive team environment. Second, we must all take responsibility to educate about hazing. The fact that hazing still exists tells us much about the lack of quality coaching education in America. Third, we all have a moral duty and obligation to educate ourselves and to become an advocate against harm and abuse in whatever form that it occurs. Fourth, all of us need moral courage to stand against hazing abuse and work within our schools and communities to rid sport of hazing. Fifth, we have a duty and obligation to educate our athletes and our students as to why hazing is unacceptable, while also educating about positive and supportive bonding practices. Sixth, we need to be vocal supporters for the positive experiences in which athletes are blessed to learn about the power of positive bonding.

Athletics is a joy and every girl and woman should be afforded the opportunity to play games. We, who teach and coach athletes, also have the joy of being a part of this experience. Let us make the experience the best that it can be in which girls and women learn the powerful benefits of being on a team and being an athlete—an experience that should be marked by a lifetime of positive role modeling and positive team building experiences.

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