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Coach-Athlete Sexual Relationships: If no means no does yes mean yes?

Susanne Johansson*

The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, Stockholm, Sweden

*The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, Box 5626, SE-114 86 Stockholm, Sweden. Email: susanne.johansson@gih.se. Tel: +46 722391969

Abstract

Coach-athlete romantic relationships and consensual sexual relations are commonly accepted among coaches and athletes, although a growing number of sport organisations discourage or prohibit such relationships. In research, coach-athlete sexual relationships are lumped together with sexual abuse, suggested to harm athletes' wellbeing, performance, athletic career and team dynamics, and to inherently constitute an abuse of power, trust and ethics. Additionally, mistrust of coaches' motives, related to physical touch and fear of sexual misconduct, has resulted in a growing anxiety among coaches. This paper highlights and critically discusses research conceptualisations, contextual understandings and critical issues surrounding coach-athlete sexual relationships, on which there is no comprehensive research outside the sexual abuse context. Studies of authority-subordinate romantic relationships in other social settings have reported that such relationships facilitate both positive and negative characteristics and outcomes. To prevent and reduce harm and to promote wellbeing, functionality and safe practice in coach-athlete sexual and non-sexual relationships, I suggest that comprehensive research outside the sexual abuse context is required. In addition to the previous research focus on harmful and abusive relationships, coach-athlete sexual relationships that are experienced as consenting and mutually fulfilling by the involved parties need further examination.

Keywords: *Sexual relationship; Romantic relationship; Sexual abuse; Coach-athlete relationship*

Introduction

The coach-athlete relationship is at the very heart of sport. Coaches and athletes engage in dating, romance, couple relationships, marriage and various unattached amorous or non-amorous sexual relations.¹ This “everybody knows” phenomenon is ingrained in sport, yet rarely addressed openly. Alternately considered as romantic love stories, personal business, dirty secrets of sport, and abuse of power and trust, coach-athlete sexual relationships constitute an ethical, moral and emotional minefield. Research findings confirm the occurrence of coaches and athletes engaging in various sexual relationships, such as female athletes having intercourse with authority figures in sport (Kirby & Greaves, 1996) and specifically with coaches (Lackey, 1990), intimate, romantic relationships and coach-athlete marriages (Bringer et al., 2006; Jowett & Meek, 2000; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001; Toftegaard Støckel, 2010).

The coach-athlete relationship is profoundly related to trust, dependency, hierarchy, closeness, touching, athlete vulnerability, coaches’ multiple roles, and the requirements and willingness to perform and pursue an athletic career. Thus, defining and establishing relationship boundaries is a highly complex matter, particularly with regard to physical touch and intimate and sexual interactions between coaches and athletes (Bringer et al., 2002; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001). There is an overall consensus that sexual abuse² is a harmful, immoral, unacceptable phenomenon that needs to be prevented in and outside sport. In contrast, there is considerable disagreement about sexual relationships in which one party holds professional authority over the other with regard to consent, appropriateness and ethical conduct (Reaves, 2001; Williams et al., 1999). Diverse and partly conflicting understandings and approaches emerge among and between coaches, athletes, sport authorities and researchers on how to relate to coach-athlete sexual relationships – especially concerning athletes above the age of 18 and considered adults (Bringer et al., 2002).

An increasing amount of literature addresses sexual abuse in the coach-athlete relationship. Sexual abuse research is predominantly driven by a male perpetrator – female victim paradigm (Hartill, 2005). Tentative insights into coach-athlete sexual relationships have been provided by studies attempting to identify and define the appropriateness and boundaries of physical touch, intimacy, sexual interaction and sexual misconduct (Bringer et al., 2002; 2006; Hassall et al., 2002; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001). Based on this research, it has been suggested that coach-athlete sexual relationships can harm athletes’ wellbeing, jeopardise athletic careers and performance ability, disrupt team dynamics, debilitate gender

equality in sport, and also that an acceptance of such sexual relationships increases the risk of sexual exploitation (Brake, 2012; Kirby et al., 2000; Reaves, 2001; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001; Volkwein et al., 1997). Meanwhile, additional literature suggest that mistrust of coaches motives related to fear of sexual abuse and harmful physical touch generate negative outcomes for coach-athlete interaction and more widely for sport policy and practice (Garratt et al., 2012, Lang, 2010; Piper et al., 2012a; 2012b). There is, however, no comprehensive research within the sociology of sport into coach-athlete sexual relationships outside the sexual abuse context.

The intention with this paper is to approach the possibility of expanding knowledge about coach-athlete sexual relationships. More specifically, the purpose is to highlight and critically discuss relevant research conceptualisations, contextual understandings and critical issues. Since children and adolescents below the legal age of consent are regarded as being incapable of objecting to, resisting and giving informed consent, sexual activities with minors are illegal; in most countries this threshold lies between the ages of 13-18. Here, I particularly address coach-athlete sexual relationships which involve parties above the age of consent. Furthermore, the discussion applies to hetero, homo and bisexual relationships, although the literature predominantly focuses on sexual relationships between female athletes and male coaches.

Perspectives on coach-athlete sexual relationships

As will be highlighted throughout this paper, the anticipations, understandings and perspectives adopted in research and sport contexts to approach coach-athlete sexual relationships are not uniform. Categorically, I have identified two perspectives with which to approach such relationships: a deterministic and a dualistic perspective.

A deterministic perspective

The first perspective, employed by some of the most influential researchers into sexual abuse in sport, stipulates that coach-athlete relationships can never be fully equal, and in doing so sidelines (meaningful) consent. This stipulation is based on the fundamental interrelated characteristics conditioning the coach-athlete relationship. The most important of these characteristics are coaches' power and authority over athletes; athletes' dependency and trust in the coach; and ambiguous professional, ethical, and interpersonal boundaries. As a result, sexual relationships between coaches and athletes, irrespective of age, are conceived as

inherently abusive. (e.g., Brake, 2012; Brake & Burton Nelson, 2012; Brackenridge, 2001a; Kirby et al., 2000; Lenskyj, 1992)

As I suggest, this perspective is deterministic in the sense that the conditions and alleged outcomes of a coach-athlete relationship are anticipated to hold without exception. Primarily based on studies of sexual abuse, the consequences of these sexual relationships are regarded as synonymous with the consequences of sexual abuse (cf. Brake & Burton Nelson, 2012; Kirby et al., 2000). However, some coaches and athletes engage in sexual relationships which they define as consenting and mutually desired (Jowett & Meek, 2000; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001; Wahl et al., 2001).

Research into sexual abuse is closely linked with the governing bodies safeguarding sport. Thus, countries that pioneer the research field on sexual abuse in sport, such as Canada, England and the USA, have made more progress on protection and control. For example, Toftegaard Støckel (2010) stresses that: “Coaches should be informed that there is no such thing as a romantic coach-athlete relationship, and that coaches’ physical or emotional advances are always wrong” (p. 98). In similar vein, Brake (2012) states that: “Prohibiting coach-athlete sexual relationships should be the starting point, not the ending point [...]” (p. 424). Consequently, a growing number of sport associations adopt policies, guidelines and codes of conduct which basically advise against or prohibit coaches and athletes from engaging in sexual relationships (e.g., Brake & Burton Nelson, 2012; Sports Coach UK, 2009; Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996). This policy development may be located in a macro risk society context, where danger, mistrust and anxiety together with a growing awareness of sexual abuse and related moral panic necessitate protection (of young athletes) and control (of coaching practice) through extended surveillance, regulation and prohibition. For examples regarding physical touch and sexuality, see Garratt et al. (2012), Lang (2010), Piper et al. (2012a; 2012b); cf. Beck (1992) and Foucault (1977, 1978).

A dualistic perspective

The second perspective acknowledges the possibility of coach-athlete sexual relationships being both consensual and mutually desired. Consensual relationships and sexual abuse are also considered to be essentially distinct phenomena – at least when both parties are roughly the same age. In contrast to the deterministic perspective, such dualistic view appears common among coaches and athletes. A tendency to ignore the regulations governing sexual relationships between coaches and athletes, when the involved parties are perceived as consenting, has been reported by Toftegaard Nielsen (2001). In the same study, the majority

of coaches reported complete acceptance of sexual relationships with athletes aged 18 years or more, but not with athletes below 18, and at the same time condemned blatant sexual harassment and abusive behaviour regardless of age. Preliminary results from a Swedish survey reveal that approximately 50 percent of the coaches saw no hindrance in principle to intimate relations with athletes of a similar age (Johansson, 2012). Other studies show a greater variety of perceptions and attitudes among coaches and athletes regarding intimate and sexual interactions above the age of consent (Bringer et al., 2002; 2006; Hassall et al., 2002). Hence, in the dualistic perspective, legal boundaries and age are key factors that determine the appropriateness of coach-athlete relationships.

National and international policies and guidelines in organised sport in general do not seem to discourage or prohibit coach-athlete sexual relationships. Indeed, legal sexual relationships are not specifically mentioned. In some countries, such as Denmark, England and Canada, the minimum age for legal consent to a sexual act has been increased for adolescents in relationships with teachers, coaches and caretakers, where the position of authority, trust and care can be abused (Bringer et al., 2002; Toftegaard Støckel, 2010). An explicit dualistic distinction is found in the anti-sexual harassment policy of the Swedish Sport Confederation:

Sexual harassment is not about mutual flirtation – which of course is permitted – but about someone being exposed to an unwelcome act related to gender and/or sexual orientation. (2005, p. 4)

As phrased, flirtation, and presumably the possibility of a subsequent sexual relationship, is acceptable, but sexual harassment is not. Emphasising an “obvious difference” between mutual (harmless) and unwelcome (harmful) sexual acts may indicate a positioning against sexual harassment, whereas lumping these phenomena together could be interpreted as extending definitions of harassment and abuse to include misinterpreted, innocent, unanswered acts of attraction and love. Suggesting that any sexual relationship between coach and athlete constitutes abuse, by labelling feelings and experiences of affection, romance and love as sexually abusive, as per the deterministic perspective, could be perceived as offensive and incomprehensible, particularly to those involved.

Consequences of the deterministic and dualistic perspectives

Both the dualistic and deterministic perspectives conceive sexual abuse as harmful and unacceptable; the disagreement concerns the appropriateness of coach-athlete sexual relationships (Reaves, 2001; Wahl et al., 2001). There is no coherent approach to whether these relationships facilitate wellbeing and safe practice, are a rightful choice between consenting adults, or constitute sexual abuse. Accordingly, there is no uniform policy or practice throughout sports governance, prohibiting or approving coach-athlete sexual relationships.

On the one hand, anticipating a dualism between consensual sexual relationships and sexual abuse may partly explain the lack of awareness and attention to coach-athlete sexual relationships. Although it appears to be a phenomenon that “everybody” knows about, few either want to tackle it or believe that it should be tackled, either because it seems uncomplicated or is considered the personal business of consenting adults. On the other hand, if all coach-athlete sexual relationships are regarded as sexual abuse, there is no need – it may even be risky – to handle such relationships outside the sexual abuse context.

Furthermore, there is a gap between athletes’, coaches’ and researchers’ perceptions and definitions of sexual abuse (Brake, 2012; Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). For example, among athletes with experience of coaches initiating non-instructional and potentially intimate relationships, a vast majority perceived such behaviour as positive, whereas the same behaviour was defined as potentially threatening by the researchers (Volkwein et al., 1997). However, as I argue, the deterministic and dualistic perspectives display a larger disconnection between the “experts” (researchers and policy makers) and the “grassroots” (athletes, coaches and other stakeholders at a local level) regarding understanding, knowledge and beliefs about coach-athlete sexual relationships. Viewing these relationships as sexual misconduct and a serious problem in sport is prevalent within sport sociology research, but this does not mirror the common understanding and practice in sport (cf. Bringer et al., 2002; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001). Nonetheless, research has raised awareness about sexual abuse in sport and contributed to developments in this area; regulations and policy can influence ideals and sport culture, and underpin education, dialogue and procedures that safeguard sport. However, disconnection between policy and practice can undermine or contravene informal development, contribute to blurred boundaries, sexual relationships being kept secret and regulations being systematically ignored.

Coach-athlete sexual relationships: critical issues

Related to the deterministic and dualistic perspectives, additional issues that complicate sexual relationships between coaches and athletes are evident in the literature: including definitional and boundary ambiguity; the concept of consent; power structures; attraction, love and sexual agency. Drawing on literature on coach-athlete relationships and from other research fields concerning authority-subordinate relationships, these interrelated issues are now critically discussed.

Definitional and boundary ambiguity

Definitional and boundary ambiguity is inherently related to sexual abuse and coach-athlete sexual relationships (Brackenridge, 2001a). These critical issues are context-dependent and affect and reflect the coach-athlete relationship, sport policy, practice, and research. The scarce prevalence rates for intimate and sexual relationships are either being lumped together with or defined as synonymous with sexual abuse. For instance, Kirby and Greaves (1996) found that 22 percent of female athletes had engaged in sexual intercourse with an authority figure in sport. It is noteworthy, that in later literature the results of this study are referred to as a prevalence rate for sexual abuse (Brackenridge et al., 2008; Brake, 2012). Further, the “grey zone” or “forbidden zone” sometimes referred to is variably defined as the continuum between sexual abuse and sexual harassment (Alexander et al., 2011), the domain between sexual relationships and non-sexual relationships (Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001) and as any sexual contact occurring within professional relationships of trust (Rutter, 1991, referred to by e.g., Brake & Burton Nelson, 2012; Reaves, 2001).

The literature also reveals further insights, including how formal definitions and specific behaviours per se rarely constitute the determinants that separate appropriate from inappropriate coach-athlete relationships. Instead, subjective dimensions in terms of individual and collective perception, context, discourse, and socialisation, are fundamental determinants for defining and dealing with physical touch, intimacy and sexual interaction (Bringer et al., 2002; Garlick, 1994; Piper et al., 2012b). This partly explains the difficulty of identifying and establishing uniform formal boundaries for the conduct of coach-athlete relationships on the basis of specific behaviour (Hassall et al., 2002; Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001). Moreover, sexual harassment is not defined by the sexual element per se; it is rather the characteristics of the person who engage in the behaviour which determines whether it is perceived as welcome or unwelcome (Williams et al., 1999). Here the comment from Hassall et al. is significant:

Thus, it is entirely possible for two different people to interpret the same behaviour as sexual harassment, or for the same person to interpret differently identical behaviours displayed by two others, or the behaviour of one person differently on separate days. (2002, pp. 3-4)

Meanwhile, athletes' feelings of closeness, affection, admiration, and a willingness to please, together with blurred boundaries and sometimes attraction and love, influence how intimate advances and grooming can be perceived (at least initially or alternately) as welcome, flattering affirmation and favour (Brackenridge, 2001a). Hence, the risk of pressure from "quid pro quo" reasoning is imminent (Brake & Burton Nelson, 2012). The literature identifies valid and important reasons as to why intimacy, sexual relationships, grooming and sexual abuse intersect (e.g., Kirby et al., 2000; Toftegaard Støckel, 2010). Accordingly, most research into coach-athlete sexual relationships has been conducted within the context of, or in close connection with ideas around sexual harassment and abuse. However, this framework poses a potential risk of bias, for example by including both ambiguous and blatant sexual and harassing behaviour in the same study (Hassall et al., 2002). As I suggest, research into coach-athlete sexual relationships needs to be deployed without prior negative connotations to avoid guiding participants in a certain direction, especially considering the moral panic surrounding sexual abuse.

Definitional and boundary ambiguities do not just pose risks for athletes, but affect the coach-athlete relationship and contribute to an unhealthy environment as (especially male) coaches' worry about causing athletes discomfort if their behaviour could be misinterpreted as sexually harassing (Bergmann Drewe, 2000; Hassall et al. 2002). Implementation of prohibitive child-protection, "no touch policy" and the fear of false allegations of sexual abuse have resulted in cases where coaches avoid both physical touch and spending time alone with their athletes (Piper et al., 2012a; 2012b). Regarding the environment of mistrust and surveillance a male coach explains: "I get swimmers [who] come to me and hug me, you know, and up to a few year[s] ago I'd hug them back. Now I am aware that I shouldn't because people might see it wrong" (Lang, 2010, p. 30). I suggest these examples reveal outcomes of policy and practice which to some extent are dysfunctional in terms of promoting wellbeing and motivation.

Consent

The meaning of consent is another critical issue when approaching coach-athlete sexual relationships (Bringer et al., 2002; Reaves, 2001). Generally, sexual abuse and sexual violence may occur in both consenting relationships (e.g., marital rape) and non-consenting relationships (Jasinski & Williams, 1998). In the literature considered here, consent has mainly been addressed with regard to adult coach-child athlete relationships, i.e., non-consenting, illegal relationships (e.g., Brackenridge, 2001a; Toftegaard Støckel, 2010). In contrast, I discuss consent in contexts that are legal by law.

Besides age, other circumstances can complicate and negate consent to sexual activities. For example, fear of force or harm to oneself or someone else, being under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or when the sexual nature of an act or the identity of the person behind the act is not comprehended (see Crimes Act 1958, 2012). Also, it is possible that relationships which first appeared as welcome are reevaluated and redefined, either during the relationship or when it has ended (Brackenridge, 2001a; Powell & Foley, 1998). Moreover, adolescent athletes who act in a “sexually provocative” way, perhaps to test their sexuality and attractiveness on an adult male coach, might be misinterpreted as consenting to a sexual relationship (Toftegaard Nielsen, 2001).

As mentioned, the nature of authority-subordinate relationships raise the issue of whether consent is actually possible in such a context, and prompts fundamental questions. Who defines whether a (coach-athlete) sexual relationship is based on consent? In other words, who has right of defining a sexual act as welcome or unwelcome? Despite the absence of a uniform definition of sexual abuse, there is usually one common denominator – whether the recipient of a sexual act defines it as unwelcome. Hence, the question is not ‘does no means no?’ but ‘does yes mean yes?’ in a relationship based on an intrinsic asymmetric foundation of power, trust, and dependency. This leads to the question of what consent means in coach-athlete sexual relationships, in comparison to sexual relationships in other social and relational contexts.

There are no common or consistent answers to these questions. On the contrary, conflicting perspectives emerge in the literature addressing authority-subordinate romantic and sexual relationships. Dank and Fulda (1997) criticise any categorical ban on student-professor romances, arguing that the subjectivity of the subordinate individual (assumed to be female) is what constitutes sexual harassment, but even when a relationship is defined by them as consenting, she is regarded as incapable of making such a distinction and to give full consent. Thus, “the banning movement” categorically portrays consent as a myth regardless

of context, because: “In the objectified world of student-faculty relationships, committed loving relationships simply do not exist” (Dank & Fulda, 1997, p. 112). This objectifies the subordinate individual, and portrays women and female sexuality as passive. In addition, there are studies of authority-subordinate romantic relationships in workplace and educational settings that empirically contradict the abuse of power (male) authority stereotype and the impossibility of consent (e.g., Dillard et al., 1994; Glaser & Thorpe, 1986). Others emphasise the importance of approaching authority-subordinate sexual relationships and sexual misconduct as interrelated phenomena, albeit without sidelining the possibility of consent (Pierce & Aguinis, 2001; Powell, 2001). Williams et al. argue that:

Sexual relationships at work are not always liberating and mutually fulfilling, nor are they always sexually harassing and harmful. Individuals can and do make distinctions between sexual harassment and assault on the one hand, and pleasurable, mutually desired sexual interactions and relationships on the other. (1999, p. 75)

Others argue in conformity with the deterministic perspective that, regardless of social setting, power negates the possibility of (meaningful) consent. For example, Kirby et al. argue: “If one person is in a position of authority over another, the other cannot give consent. Consent is simply not possible in such circumstances” (2000, p. 82). Thus, in order to protect the subordinate individual, authority-subordinate sexual relationships need to be prohibited (e.g., Lane, 2006; Sandler, 1990). It is noteworthy that these stipulations are primarily based on research into unwelcome and coercive sexual relationships (mirroring the nature of research into coach-athlete sexual relationships).

Clearly, the issue of consent is complex, and unamenable to yes or no answers. The questions above, about the meaning of context and the right to define consent, relate to conceptualisations of power and perspectives which alternately emphasise agency and structure. Comprehensive research relating to authority-subordinate romance and sexual relationships in workplace and educational settings offers a broader understanding of how to approach these questions, and more widely including both positive and negative characteristics and outcomes (e.g., Dillard et al. 1994; Powell & Foley, 1998). The possibility that coach-athlete sexual relationships correspondingly might facilitate wellbeing, mutual fulfilment and function (cf. Jowett & Meek, 2000; Kenttä, in press) has either been disregarded or opposed in sexual abuse oriented research.

Researchers have the power to develop definitions and thus categorise experiences of sexual relationships and sexual abuse. Despite their good intentions, there is a danger of invalidating or dismissing the subjective experiences of athletes and coaches if the preferential right of definition is claimed by the researcher, rather than left with the athletes or others involved. Moreover, valuable insights might go unrecognised because certain experiences do not correspond with anticipations, knowledge, values and theory. Dismissing coach-athlete experiences can be perceived as offensive, unethical, and disempowering to the subordinate individual, as well as adopting double standards on the basis of coaches' and athletes' reported experiences.

Power

Sex is not the issue. Sexual prudery is not the issue. Sexual freedom is not the issue. Power is the issue. (Lane, 2006, p. 10)

Power is a loaded term, with multiple meanings and dimensions; hence the immense literature on the topic. Here I will only consider the critical issue of power related to coach-athlete sexual relationships. The above quote refers to the stipulation of power as the most consequential of all social factors conditioning authority-subordinate relationships, the assumption that sexual interaction within these relationships constitutes abuse of power. Also, Lane's assertion can implicitly be related to feminist scholarship, which argues that sexual abuse and sexual violence are not sexual acts due to male urges, but are acts of violence that produce and reproduce power over women (Brownmiller, 1975). Power is probably the most common denominator in the sport sociology literature on coach-athlete sexual relationships and sexual abuse, and the conditions, characteristics and outcomes of power are fundamental to the relationship between social agency and structure in this context.

There is a general tendency to focus on negative rather than positive connotations related to power, such as oppression and abuse of power (Kanter, 1993). The socio-cultural foundation of sport as reinforcing power inequity, social, sexual and gender stratification and stereotyping is prevalent within sport sociology and feminist scholarship (e.g., Flintoff & Scraton, 2002; Griffin, 1998). As long as this socio-cultural foundation remains intact, both inside and outside sport, abuse of power is not challenged but reproduced. Consequentially, sport sociology research emphasises athlete's subordination, dependence and trust as inevitable outcomes of power (Brackenridge, 2001a; Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). Drawing on Foucauldian theory I suggest there is a tendency within this research to view athletes as

passive rather than active agents in relation to power, ethics, subordination and sexuality; for instance in relation to juridical power to assume that (male) coaches possess all the power, and abuse (female) athletes for their sexual desires. Thus, even if a female adult athlete initiates a sexual relationship, this is not recognised as an exercise of her power, sexuality, and desire; she will still be considered a victim of the male coach abusing his power (cf. Foucault, 1978; Kirby et al., 2000). As Denison (2010) points out, Foucault “saw power operating relationally, in a manner that g[ives] every person in every relationship some degree of power” (p. 162).

A different approach to interpersonal coach-athlete relationships is found in the field of sport psychology, for example the work of Sophia Jowett and colleagues. Studies of coach-athlete partnerships or dyads often focus on potentially beneficial characteristics such as interdependence, mutual trust, cooperation and closeness. While the occurrence of sexual abuse and harmful relationships is not ignored, intimate and sexual components are not anticipated to undermine the potential of a coach-athlete relationship to facilitate wellbeing, satisfaction and performance achievement (Jowett & Poczwadowski, 2007; Jowett & Meek, 2000). While micro-level frameworks have been criticised for disregarding the significance of social structure and power (e.g., Brackenridge, 2001b), I suggest, sport sociology research into coach-athlete sexual relationships should not be restricted to an assumed abuse of power and only deployed within a sexual abuse context. Expanded and broader networks of meaning would be beneficial; multidimensional conceptual frameworks are complementary rather than merely conflicting.

An aspect of power that has attracted little attention in the literature is sources of power and social status that correspond with heterosexual partner selection preferences, i.e., why female athletes are attracted to and want to engage in sexual relationships with their male coaches, and why male coaches are similarly drawn to (often younger) female athletes. Reported preferences related to attraction, sexuality and partner selection among heterosexual women include men’s social status and (material and non-material) resources. Heterosexual men place more emphasis on physical attributes and a relatively young(er) partner (Regan et al., 2000; Townsend & Levy, 1990). Furthermore, sexual relations with a person of high social status within a specific context can increase one’s own social status. More so than women, men tend to engage in sexual relations to enhance feelings of personal power and to acquire resources, social and sexual status. Even though women engage in sexual relationships with high-status males in order to obtain social benefits, special favours and treatment, this can also reduce women’s social status. Partly due to sociocultural gender

stereotypes, female sexual agency is expected to be more restrained and is often regarded as an expression of a woman's love, commitment and reproduction. Also, engaging in sexual intimacies with a high-status partner can contribute to feelings of desirableness and self-worth (Buss, 2003; Hill & Preston, 1996; Meston & Buss, 2007).

Given this premise, female athletes who engage in sexual relationships with coaches might enhance social status in the eyes of their peers. It may also make the women involved feel favoured and special. At the same time, these women run the risk of being ostracised from the team or peer group and becoming the target of rumours and speculation. Coaches can be socially stigmatised and mistrusted in selection procedures. Also, relationship breakup and divorce are likely to pose problems for either partner in the coach-athlete relationship, and may jeopardise careers (Wahl et al., 2001; Kenttä, in press).

Attraction, love and sexual agency

Research into sexual abuse in sport has helped to raise awareness about the risks of coach-athlete sexual relationships. However, a critical issue tends to be disregarded in this research context, or is only regarded as part of a grooming process. This is the meaning and impact of affirmation, intimacy, attraction, love and sexual desire for social agency (cf. Brake & Burton Nelson, 2012).

Fictional and anecdotal yet authentic cases and narratives on “the power of love”, where love overrides rules, norms, sanction and rationality, abound. The topics of love, romance and sex are also well represented in the media and attract considerable attention. Gossip has been reported as one of the most prevalent outcomes of authority-subordinate sexual relationships and affects both the relationship and the social surroundings. However, according to Powell and Foley (1998), scholars tend to downplay or ignore issues of love, romance and sex in organisational settings:

They [scholars] certainly shy away from discussions of love. They also shy away from discussions of sex except when considering sexual harassment, or unwelcome expressions of sexuality in the workplace”.[...] Indeed, most scholars' view of the workplace, as conveyed through their choice of topics that they deem most worthy of research, suggests a different question: What's love got to do with it? (p. 422)

The coach-athlete relationship accommodates several characteristics correlating with a high likelihood of attraction, romance and sexual relationships in and outside sport, such as proximity, regular interaction, physical athleticism and shared interests and experiences (Brake & Burton Nelson, 2012; Powell & Foley, 1998; Regan et al., 2000). As several of these characteristics correspond to hypothetical risk factors for sexual abuse (Brackenridge, 2001a), the conclusion is that all sexual relationships between coaches and athletes need to be prohibited in order to reduce the risk of sexual misconduct. However, sexual harassment has been found to be no more prevalent inside sport than outside it (Fasting et al., 2003; Leahy et al., 2002). There is no evidence to suggest that prohibition reduces the number of coach-athlete sexual relationships, or the prevalence of sexual abuse. In contrast, athletes' experiences of intimate relationships with coaches have largely been reported as positive, and the vast majority of such relationships occurred when the athletes were 18 years or older (Toftegaard Støckel, 2010). In addition, sexual relationships that contravene rules, policy and social conventions, involve asymmetric power between the parties, and are expected to generate negative reactions, are more likely to be kept a secret – but this need for secrecy does not prevent these relationships from occurring. Also, as prohibition announces that authority-subordinate sexual relationships are inappropriate and suspect, negative reactions, conflict and disrupted group-dynamics are more prevalent in organisations adopting such a policy (Powell & Foley, 1998).

Tentative insights into the coach-athlete relationship among married couples have been provided by Jowett and Meek (2000). According to their findings, coach-athlete spouses' experienced similar emotions and feelings as those found in non-romantic coach-athlete relationships, such as respect, commitment and belief. Additionally, specific components such as love, caring and genuine concern were reported, which were perceived as positive for wellbeing and athletic performance. An athlete-wife explains: "I would not be able to discuss certain issues that I do discuss with my [husband]. Other coaches can use what you tell them in a way that I know my C will never do" (p. 166), "[...] a close relationship with C affects the achievement of positive results" (p. 171). Two coach-husbands commented: "Although my role as a coach is a bit harder...the fact that my athlete is my wife is an advantage" (p. 171), and "I would think twice for my athlete-wife than for any other athlete" (p.163). The study did not cover the aftermath of marriage breakdown or divorce, or how these marriages affected peer dynamics.

Simply put, coaches and athletes can and want to engage in various sexual relationships because they prioritise love, sexual desire and sometimes marriage and family

rather than possible obstacles. A coach who married his athlete said that: “I know it cost me job opportunities, but when you fall in love, everything else is meaningless. If I’d had to make pizzas forever in my family’s restaurant, I would have done it” (Wahl et al., 2001, p. 64). On the basis of the ideas and material considered in this section, it is clearly arguable that a focus on preventing and reducing harm might be a more viable pursuit than seeking to eliminate legal sexual relationships by overall prohibition (cf. Powell & Foley, 1998). The need to expand knowledge by broadening the research focus on coach-athlete sexual relationships is also indicated.

Conclusions and proposed research

To date research into coach-athlete sexual relationships has mainly been conducted within a sexual abuse context and has focused on the interrelatedness and commonalities of these phenomena. I argue that such inquiry is not comprehensive enough to contribute to (adequate) knowledge concerning the various dimensions of attached and unattached sexual relationships. Further, it does not correspond with coaches’ and athletes’ definitions, perceptions and experiences. While such sexual relationships may involve characteristics and outcomes equivalent to or constituent of sexual abuse, they need not and frequently do not according to testimony from many coaches and athletes. To be in a better position to define, understand and govern sexual abuse, and the characteristics and outcomes of coach-athlete sexual relationships more generally, there is a need to examine sexual relationships that do not constitute sexual abuse according to the involved parties. Thus, comprehensive studies are needed, with the purpose of preventing and reducing harm, definitional and boundary ambiguity, and at the same time promoting wellbeing, functionality and safe practice in all relationships between coaches and athletes.

The characteristics of the coach-athlete relationship do not simply constitute a premise for grooming and sexual abuse, they also facilitate attraction, love and sexual intimacy, and I argue that coach-athlete sexual relationships cannot be legislated away. Preventing and reducing harm is a more viable pursuit. Thus, I suggest an approach that does not assume that all sexual coach-athlete relationships are harmful and abusive, and acceptance that there is no dualistic distinction between consensual sexual relationships and sexual abuse. Although anticipating that consent is possible, it does not guarantee a healthy, advisable, successful or uncomplicated relationship for athletes, coaches or third parties.

The foregoing discussion raises a number of important questions beyond the sexual abuse context. For example: What are the effects of different policies and governing bodies

that prohibit, accept or ignore coach-athlete sexual relationships? What kind of experiences and immediate and long-term consequences and benefits can be found among coaches and athletes who have engaged in any form of sexual relationship? By considering coach-athlete sexual relationships, defined as consenting and mutually fulfilling by the involved parties, new insights can be gained beyond the previous limited focus on harmful and abusive relationships.

While conscious of the complex and critical issues surrounding coach-athlete sexual relationships, I suggest that definitions and conceptions of sexual activity need to be coherent. If no means no, then yes means yes. Athletes' capabilities and entitlements in making such distinctions and setting boundaries need to be recognised and reinforced. Empowering athletes is an important aspect of protection, safeguarding and equality policy and procedure.

¹ In this paper these various relationships are summarised as 'sexual relationships' if no specific sexual relationship is referred to. These sexual relationships share two common denominators: they involve a sexual component and are legal.

² The term 'sexual abuse' has mainly been adopted in this paper. Some prefer the term 'sexual exploitation', while 'sexual harassment' is widely used and, more rarely, 'sexual violence' and 'sexual assault'. The difference between these terms is often understood as a continuum (Brackenridge, 2001a).

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