

THE DARK SIDE OF SPORTS

The Bullying Solution

Why parents and schools must take action now about this serious issue

BY DR. MARC RABINOFF

In the animal kingdom, predators go after the weakest prey. When stalking a band of gorillas, lions don't face off against the alpha male who could put up a good fight; they are more likely to go after the babies. Likewise, bullies in high school will probably stay away from football linemen and members of the wrestling team. They go after kids such as Jamey Rodemeyer.

After being bullied with gay slurs for more than a year, 14-year-old Jamey from Buffalo, New York, took his life on September 18. In an interview about their loss, Jamey's parents said, "To the kids who are bullying they have to realize that words are very powerful and what you think is just fun and games isn't to some people, and you are destroying a lot of lives."

As shocking as that story is, there is even more. At a school dance held shortly after Jamey's suicide, his sister, Alyssa, age 16, had to endure hearing comments about Jamey such as "You're better off dead!" and "We're glad you're dead!" This unconscionable behavior prompts the question "What is a



school's responsibility to deal with the issue of bullying?"

First, let's look at some troubling facts. In their survey of 6,500 students, ages 12 through 18, during the 2008-2009 school year, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported the following results about bullying:

- About 28 percent of students ages 12 through 18 reported they had been bullied at school.
- The percentage of all students who reported that they were bullied

decreased as grade level increased: In grade 6 bullying was 39.4 percent, decreasing to 20.4 percent by grade 12.

- 10.8 percent of students bullied at school feared that someone would attack or harm them at school or on the way to or from school, compared to 1.7 percent of the students who were not bullied.

- 15.6 percent of the students who reported being cyber-bullied reported having been engaged in a physical fight at school, compared to 5.1

percent of the students who were not cyber-bullied.

- 4.0 percent of cyber-bullied students skipped school during the school year compared to 0.4 percent of the students who were not cyber-bullied.

Although some would argue that it's the parents' responsibility to stop their kids from bullying or to help their kids deal with bullying, the fact is that the concept of duty exists between a school and its students. Schools have a duty to provide a safe environment while the students are on school property. This means that if Jamey was bullied on school property, the school had a responsibility to deal with it.

Likewise, when Alyssa was bullied, the school needed to take action to stop the incident while it was happening and to take appropriate action against the bullies after it happened.

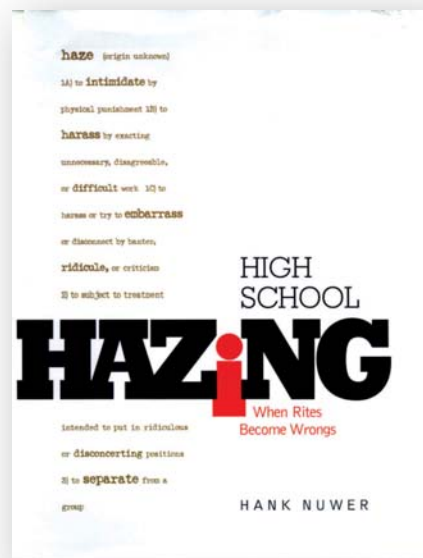
I realize that schools have budget restrictions, but they must not neglect their responsibilities. If a school cannot adequately staff a school dance with enough chaperones to deal with the harassment that Alyssa experienced, then they should not hold school dances – at least, until they can get enough qualified volunteers to help.



Vince Helmuth is the 2006 BFS Male High School Athlete of the Year. A physically strong young man, Helmuth is also strong in character. In high school he devoted much of his spare time working with special needs children.

Further, due to the severity and extent of the bullying problem, schools must examine all the options to prevent bullying from happening in the first place and must have policies in place to deal with any bullying that occurs.

What happened to the Rodemeyers was horrifying. It is a wakeup call for all parents and educators to take a proactive role: Plant your feet and take a stand to stop bullying.



Hank Nuwer's book explores why those who were once victims of such degrading activities convince themselves that hazing others will somehow restore their lost dignity.



BFS clinician John Rowbotham, the son of BFS President Bob Rowbotham, has become a great teacher who inspires young athletes with Be an 11 seminars.

"The Dark Side of Sports" is a regular feature by Dr. Marc Rabinoff that answers questions about safety and liability based upon actual litigations.

The Bullying/ Hazing Connection

BY KIM GOSS, MS

Hazing can be defined as an activity that degrades, humiliates and abuses an individual. Although some individuals willingly engage in hazing rituals to belong to a group, often hazing occurs without an individual's consent. As such, it has many commonalities with bullying.

Hazing has roots that can be traced back to schools in ancient Greece. Even as late as the 1900s, it was a commonly held belief among college presidents that hazing was a way for new students to learn respect for their school and to honor their elders. Today's hazing rituals occur not just in colleges and high schools but also in professional sports, the military and many occupations. It could even be argued that reality television shows such as *Survivor* or even *The Biggest Loser* include hazing activities, as contestants are required to participate in unpleasant activities to continue playing the game and to be eligible to receive cash prizes.

In *High School Hazing: When Rites Become Wrongs*, author Hank Nuwer says one reason hazing continues to survive is that those who were once victims of such degrading activities convince themselves that hazing others will somehow restore their lost dignity. To believe otherwise would result in the sobering realization that what they had themselves suffered as part of their initiation was pointless and wrong.

Nuwer says another reason hazing endures is that hazing crimes are seldom reported, since to do so would further humiliate the victims and prevent them from joining the group. Because hazing can be an embarrassment to any educational institution, school administrators might be reluctant to reveal the details of hazing activities and might report any physical harm that occurs as simply an accident. Further, when hazing is reported, it is common for the accused to shift the blame to the victim by pointing out that the victim was a willing participant. However, because both the degree and the type of hazing are often unpredictable, hazing laws contend that such consent is meaningless.

In the BFS Be an Eleven program, athletes are encouraged and shown how to make the right choices, and not to simply do things because it's what is popular. Hazing, however, may cause a person to make irrational decisions for fear of being seen as abnormal. In effect, says Nuwer, members of these groups "tend to look at themselves through the eyes of peers to judge themselves 'winners' or 'losers.'" Nuwer even speculates that this desire to fit into the group will make members of groups less likely to intervene in a crisis situation, since taking action or simply voicing an objection would be considered counter to the will of the group.

In his book Nuwer offers advice on how to deal with hazing, and now I would like to share with you a real-life example of how a BFS coach tackled the problem.

In an article in the Spring 2002 *BFS* magazine, BFS Founder/CEO Dr. Greg Shepard shared his experience in helping a head football coach stop hazing.

Shepard explained that after some seniors on this coach's football team were caught hazing freshmen, the coach decided to suspend those involved. That didn't go over well, as the parents of the senior football players thought the punishment was too harsh, and the parents of the boys who were hazed thought the punishment was far too lenient. Both groups of parents were threatening lawsuits. As a result, Dr. Shepard flew to the school to meet with the team and the parents. Here is how he explained it:

"It was going to be a Be an Eleven Seminar. I wanted to use that as a tool to deal with the hazing issue and to unite everyone so that the team could move forward before the first game. The coach and I decided it was best if I proceeded without knowing those involved on either side. I also met briefly with the principal, who considered the situation particularly grave.

"I tried to do my best but was not sure if things were going okay. One thing I do in seminars is explain how I handle new employees hired to work for Bigger Faster Stronger. I explained to the participants at the seminar, 'What if I said to a new BFS employee, "Hey, you little wimp. Your first job is to scrub all the toilets"?' How would

that make them feel about BFS and me? How successful do you think BFS would be? What would you think of me as the leader of BFS if I actually did that? Being seniors, captains and leaders of a football team should be no different.'

"What I actually do is bring each new employee in and tell them how glad I am to have them as part of our BFS family. I try to make them feel welcome. I tell them if they ever need anything or have any kind of a problem that we will be in their corner and they will never be alone. I tell them about our bonus program that rewards excellence as greater profits are made. I smile and shake their hand warmly.'

"My next step in the seminar was to practice that approach. I asked a big senior leader and a small ninth grader to come forward. I explained how hard it is for a ninth grader to adjust to a friendly situation, let alone an intimidating one. I asked the senior to look at the ninth grader and say, 'Hey, you little wimp. Go get me a towel!' He did, and everyone kind of laughed, but they knew how bad this really looked. Next, I said, 'Now let's do it the Eleven way. I want you to be like a good big brother. Shake his hand, introduce yourself and say, "Welcome to high school and our football family. We are really glad you have decided to play. It's going to be tough, but I will be here for you to help you through it." Then smile and finish by calling him by name, telling him that he will make it!'

"After this role-playing episode was completed, I asked for a vote. The voting was unanimous. There was no question. The Eleven way was what they felt they should strive to do from that moment forward. Of course, there were some other things we did. In addition, each player and some parents had read all or part of the *Be an Eleven Guidebook*. I left with hope but wasn't sure how it was all going to turn out."

The result? Eleven weeks later Dr. Shepard received a letter from the coach, who wrote, "Having the seminar was a catharsis for everyone. Our senior leadership was the best I have ever had in 14 years of coaching. Consequently this is the most fun I have ever had as a coach. The phrases 'Be an Eleven' and 'Today I Win' are now a regular part of our vocabulary."