

■ **“The Role of Coaches in Rape Prevention Programs for Athletes”**
by Alan Berkowitz, Ph.D.*

Recent empirical research on the effectiveness of rape prevention programs for men have called into question their effectiveness. These studies suggest that men's attitudes may not change as a result of educational interventions and that some program formats may actually reinforce attitudes and beliefs associated with rape proclivity. Athletes and other members of close-knit, cohesive groups of men may be particularly resistant to such interventions because of the strength of group norms, interactions, and emotional bonding.

One variable associated with program effectiveness is the support and advocacy of individuals who are respected and credible to the participants. Among athletes, the role of the coach is crucial. Coaches must ally themselves with the change process initiated by such workshops if the workshops are to be effective. The enormous amount of influence that coaches have on their athletes is well known. Coaches serve as positive role models and often take a personal interest in the lives and well-being of their athletes, providing encouragement and motivation for academic and other extra-curricular activities and often serving as a personal counselor and confidant. Yet male coaches are themselves the product of traditional male socialization processes which inculcate rape supportive attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions, and they can easily undermine rape prevention programs by making derogatory comments, criticizing campus judicial procedures, promoting rape myths, or by making sexist and objectifying remarks about women. In both their actions and speech, coaches serve as powerful agents of socialization into traditional gender roles and attitudes, serving as positive role models in many respects, but often unwittingly reinforcing the beliefs systems which make men more likely to commit rape and sexual assault as well. The role of these socio-cultural factors in producing rape proclivity has been well documented.

My own experiences in this area are the product of over twelve years of work with athletes and other men at Hobart College, where I have

*Dr. Berkowitz is Director, Counseling Center at Hobart and William Smith Colleges.

developed an innovative rape prevention program for men, and of my work as a consultant to athletic programs at numerous Ivy League and small private liberal arts colleges in the Northeast. In my workshops, I ask athletes to share phrases used by their coaches to describe team members who are not performing as expected. Coaches may use language which devalues women in order to motivate athletes to work harder and excel. The intent of such language runs counter to the fundamental assumptions underlying rape prevention education, serving to reinforce negative attitudes towards women that are associated with rape proclivity, and hindering men's ability to be empathic towards others.

Paradoxically, most men are uncomfortable with such language. In surveys I have conducted of men attending Ivy League and private liberal arts colleges in the Northeast, over 75% percent of the 100 respondents (including athletes) reported that they were bothered by the way men speak about women and sexuality when women are absent. Table 2 lists comments made by athletes in response to the question: "Briefly describe something that bothers you which men do when there are no women present." Few men express their discomfort with such behavior because of the widely held belief that most other men agree with and support it. When coaches themselves use language which devalues women and their bodies it becomes even less likely that athletes will express their discomfort. In addition, language which objectifies women's bodies and bragging about sexual exploits further reinforce men's beliefs that other men are much more sexually active than they really are. For example, surveys conducted at Hobart and William Smith Colleges indicate that men underestimate by a factor of ten the number of their peers who have not been sexually active in the last year. In these surveys, respondents were asked to report the amount of times they had intercourse in the last year and then estimate the frequency of intercourse among their peers. Forty-percent of the male students surveyed reported that they had not had intercourse in the last year, but those surveyed guessed that only 4% of their peers were sexually inactive in the past year.

These behaviors and perceptions — sexist and objectifying language used by peers to describe women, exaggerated beliefs regarding the sexual activity of other men, and derogatory references to women by coaches — all serve to reinforce and perpetuate those aspects of male culture which rape prevention programs are designed to weaken. Effective rape prevention programs for men should provide accurate information about men's attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about women, men's sexual activity,

and sexual assault, as well as dispel the myth that all men support and engage in rape supportive attitudes and beliefs. Such programs can empower men who are silent in their discomfort with such behaviors to move out of the role of passive bystander into the role of confronting and reshaping behavior. Yet without the support and advocacy of coaches and athletic directors — often the most important individuals in the athletes life — such goals become unrealistic and unattainable. As one athlete commented: “Sometimes men talk about a girl that I respect and who is a good friend in such a way that degrades her. But this could be solved by just speaking up and telling the guy to shut up, but sometimes doing that can be more difficult than it sounds.”

Effective rape prevention education with athletes thus begins with obtaining the support of athletic directors and coaches. The first step is to have all male coaches attend a rape prevention workshop. The opportunity to discuss openly, criticize, and react to a workshop will help create allies among the coaching staff. In addition, it will give coaches who are already supportive of our efforts the opportunity to speak out on our behalf. I am continually amazed and impressed by the sensitivity and support I have received from coaches who confound my own stereotypes about coaches and whose eyes have been opened by the experiences of significant women in their own lives — including female athletes. After securing the support of the athletic director and providing a demonstration workshop for coaches, the next step is to enlist the support of team captains and leaders by providing an opportunity for them to attend a workshop demonstration as well. Only then will we be in a position to provide programs for athletes with the likelihood that they will not be undermined and devalued by others who are important role models in their lives.

Bibliography

Berkowitz, AD, ed. Men and Rape: Theory, Research and Prevention Programs in Higher Education. Number 65, Spring 1994 in: New Directions for Student Services Monograph Series, Jossey Bass, San Francisco.

Berkowitz, AD. College Men as Perpetrators of Acquaintance Rape and Sexual Assault: A Review of Recent Research. Journal of American College Health. 1992, 40:175-181.

Burt, MR. Rape Myths and Acquaintance Rape. In: Parrot A, Bechhoffer, L. Eds. Acquaintance Rape: The Hidden Crime. New York: Wiley; 1991, p. 26-40.

Earle, JP. Acquaintance Rape Workshops: Their Effectiveness in Changing the Attitudes of First Year College Men. Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Connecticut, 1992.

Lenihan, GO, Rawlins, ME, Eberly, CG, Buckley, B & Masters, B. Gender Differences in Rape Supportive Attitudes Before and After a Date Rape Education Intervention. Journal of College Student Development, 1992, 33:331-338.

Lundberg-Love, P & Geffner, R. Date rape: Prevalence, risk factors and a proposed model. In: Pirog-Good MA, & Stets, JE. Violence in Dating Relationships: Emerging Social Issues. New York: Praeger, 1989, Chapter 9.

Schaeffer, AM, & Nelson, ES. Rape-Supportive Attitudes: Effects of On-Campus Residence and Education. Journal of College Student Development. 1993, 34:175-179.

**Phrases Used by Coaches to Describe Athletes
Who Are Not Performing as Expected
(Selected Responses from Male Athletes)***

- Take your skirt off and get aggressive.
- You're playing like a bunch of sluts.
- You're playing like a bunch of girls.
- What are you, on the rag?
- What's wrong, does your pussy hurt?
- You're acting like a bunch of wimps.
- You don't deserve to be called men.

* Based on anonymous responses provided by athletes during rape prevention workshops.

**Offensive Behaviors of Athletes in All-Male Groups*
(Selected Responses from Male Athletes)**

- Talking about girls that they can't stand, but then acting like they are friends with them.
- When they talk about the sexual habits of girls that they know nothing about.
- Demands by friends to know how far sexually you've gone in a relationship.
- Bragging about sexual acts — giving details including names, positions, in a mocking way.
- Lying or exaggerating greatly the extent of sexual behavior.
- Asking how much play you got from a girl you hook-up with.
- Speaking about women as purely a means of pleasure and that is all.
- Talk about "taking advantage" of women.
- Talk about women in crude sexual terms.
- Talk about female anatomy.
- Guys like to talk about fooling around with girls and often, not always, talk about it with apparently no qualms. I tend to think fooling around is special and feel guilty, as if I had just betrayed that girl, when I reveal intimate moments.

* Subjects were asked to respond anonymously to the following question: "Briefly describe something that bothers you which men do when there are no women present."