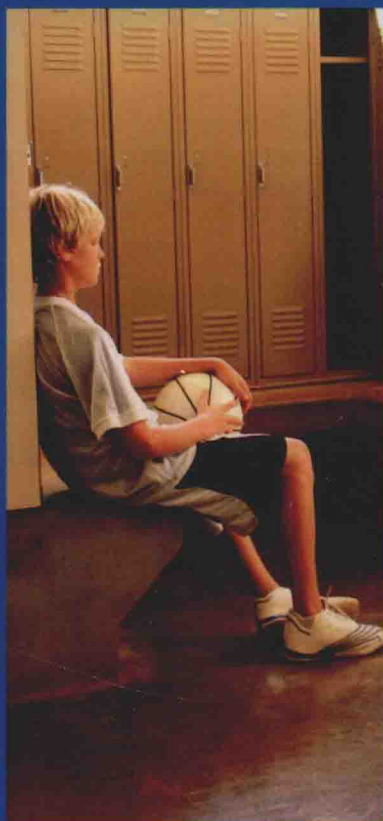


TACKLING BULLYING IN ATHLETICS

BEST PRACTICES FOR MODELING APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR

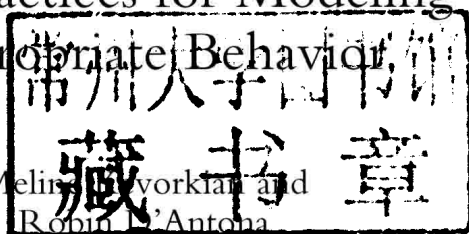
MELINE KEVORKIAN
AND ROBIN D'ANTONA



TACKLING BULLYING IN ATHLETICS

Best Practices for Modeling
Appropriate Behavior

Melina Ivorkian and
Robin L. Antona



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This book is dedicated to
Simon Francis D'Antona
1979–1993

FOREWORD

If you are picking up this book, perhaps you are a coach, the parent of an athlete, a recreation director, a school administrator, or even the athlete about whom the authors are concerned. You may be saying to yourself, “Who needs another book on bullying?”

The authors are, without a doubt, experts in the field of bullying prevention. Yet more than that, they are deeply and personally determined to protect young people harmed, sometimes fatally, by the target-aggressor-bystander bullying dynamic. This book offers concrete information to help you understand how bullying plays out, in its more obvious and most insidious forms. Even more important, it provides concrete, research-based suggestions on how to reduce or even prevent bullying.

The authors have written a straightforward, highly readable book about bullying in athletics. They have purposely chosen not to delve into the annals of athletes and sexual harassment or the details of the law known as Title IX that plays a central role in supporting females in sports and in preventing sexual harassment. But if, after reading this book, you want to learn more, I urge you to dig further.

No book can give the secret ingredient that enables us—whether adults or young athletes—to intervene when bullying occurs and to take steps to prevent it in the first place. That secret ingredient is, quite simply, courage. What is courage? Why is it needed?

While athletics offer great tests of physical courage, stamina, determination, and discipline, there is another very different form of courage. Moral courage is the willingness to do what is right in the face of pressure from peers, parents, community leaders, supervisors, team members, and so on. Bullying and harassment (a form of bias-based bullying

with roots in civil rights laws) thrive when adult authority figures fail to identify and intervene, choosing to ignore or justify such behaviors. Teachers, coaches, administrators, and parents are role models. When young people, athletes or not, see these adult authority figures (and this means you) displaying moral courage, they too learn to follow that path.

Several years ago, a serious bullying incident occurred during a summer training session for a fall high school sport. Out of a large group of bystanders, only one boy backed up the target's story. His father told him he had to do so, because it was the right thing to do. None of the other bystanders spoke up until he did. Their parents had urged them to remain silent. Legal charges were brought and the athletes who had committed the acts were removed from the school. The boy who spoke up was an "upstander," not a bystander.

The path of moral courage is not an easy one for adults or for young people. If it were, there would be far less bullying and probably far less violence. The culture that promotes the ideas "I don't want to get involved" and "I don't want to be a snitch" is not uncommon among young people. But when adults cry out against this culture, we need to look first at ourselves. Are we ignoring or justifying behaviors, such as bullying and harassment, because we lack the moral courage to follow the guidelines in *Tackling Bullying in Athletics*?

Randy Ross, MS, MA
The Education Alliance at Brown University
April 2010

CONTENTS

Foreword	vii
1 Why Care? 10 Win, 1 Loss Season	1
2 Why Bullying Prevention?	9
3 Athletes: The View from the Playing Field	23
4 Coaches: The View from the Locker Room	37
5 Fans: The View from the Grandstands	51
6 The Playbook: Best Practices—Prevention	63
7 The Playbook: Best Practices—Intervention	71
Final Thoughts on Preventing Bullying in Athletics	81
References	85
About the Authors	91

WHY CARE? 10 WIN, 1 LOSS SEASON

HOW EXTENSIVE IS IT? FROM SHAKING IT OFF TO SUICIDE

On Saturday, September 25, 1993, after Simon, a 14-year-old high school freshman, and his three friends attended a home varsity football game, they went to one of the boys' homes. There were many varied reports of what was going on and what they were actually doing that afternoon. They were full of fun and happy to be part of the football team—even if only as members of the freshman squad.

According to one account, they were feeling frisky and they went to the local supermarket, which was located in the center of town. They were parading up and down the supermarket aisle laughing and having fun in a way that adolescent boys think is funny. One of the boys wore a pair of underpants on his head. The boys were playful, acting silly, and laughing at this juvenile stunt. However, when they met a former teacher in the supermarket, they apparently felt embarrassed and claimed they were being hazed. The hazing component may or may not have been true.

Months later, investigations never confirmed nor refuted this statement. Regardless, that claim set up a chain of events that would lead to extreme bullying behavior that would end in tragedy. Once the report of what happened in that supermarket that Saturday afternoon became known to the members of the varsity football team, the boys were subjected to threats, bullying, exclusion, and other cruel behaviors that would become unbearable. Their dreams of participating in football were dashed. It was September of their freshman year and they had become outcasts in a world they had only just entered.

The chain of events began when the teacher reported the incident to the athletic director, who then arbitrarily decided that it was probably a prank the older football players had played on the younger boys. He instructed the head coach to look into the incident but to keep it quiet. The coaches consulted with other coaches, administrators, students, and parents—but not with the parents of the freshman boys involved.

By Tuesday, the football team and everyone connected with the team were buzzing about the alleged incident. The varsity players let Simon and his friends know they would handle the situation in their own way. When these freshman boys went to practice, the others, including upperclassmen and the assistant coaches, constantly yelled at and mistreated them. Even when Simon managed to run the ball through the line for a 10-yard gain, he was berated and made to feel that he could not do anything right.

The varsity football players continued to threaten the boys in the school hallways, the cafeteria, and at practice. In one instance in particular, one of the varsity players looked at Simon, put a hand to his own temple as if it was a gun and pulled the imaginary trigger. Then Simon reportedly told his friend, “They’re going to get us. We’re dead.”

When Simon told his parents, it was already too late. He was frightened and feeling hopeless because he truly believed his high school athletic career was over. When he got home that afternoon, his father, a high school guidance counselor, was already there. After a brief conversation with his dad in which he was unable to convey the urgency and desperateness of his feelings, he went to his room to do his homework. Less than an hour later his father found him hanging in the family room. Simon died six weeks later, never having regained consciousness.

After this incident, the usual assumptions were made. People said that he must have been depressed, distant, troubled, or misunderstood. Was he impulsive, others asked. Because Simon D’Antona was my son, we know for a certainty that these theories were not true. In fact we later learned that this was a case of situational suicide brought on by bullying and harassment Simon received during that week in September of his freshman year in high school. It was clear that a terrible tragedy occurred between him and the boys that bullied him that week. It is so sad that bullying behaviors in the athletic setting are not only tolerated but also accepted.

Simon's death having no other apparent explanation, the culpability for this terrible tragedy was attributed to the victim and his family rather than the bullying. However, six years after Simon's death the infamous mass shooting incident on the campus of Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, started a national discussion about bullying. Today we know that suicide, which is the fourth leading cause of death for 14- to 17-year-olds, can be a direct result of bullying.

In fact, suicide that is a result of bullying now has its own name, *bullycide*. This word was coined by a group of parents who are survivors of suicide. The frequency and commonality of this occurrence brought them together to form a group that has grown into Bully Police, a well-recognized national organization whose mission is to wipe out bullying behavior. While suicide certainly is an extreme outcome of bullying behavior, there is much suffering that happens on a regular basis to the young people and even young athletes of today.

THE PROBLEM OF BULLYING

Research has suggested that many students are and will continue to be bullied in schools around the world (Burns, 2006; Dake, Price, & Telljohann, 2003; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003; GLSEN, 2001; Kuntsche et al., 2006; Lyznicki, McCaffree, & Robinowitz, 2004; Schnohr & Niclasen, 2006). According to Lipson (2001), in a national sample of students ages 8 to 11, 83 percent of girls and 79 percent of boys reported having experienced some sort of harassment in their schools.

Approximately 60 percent reported that both physical and non-physical harassment occurred "under the teacher's nose." In a study conducted by Nickelodeon (2001), 74 percent of 7- to 11-year-olds and 86 percent of 12- to 15-year-olds indicated that children were bullied or teased in their schools. Dake, Price, and Telljohann (2003) found that victimized children tend to become more school avoidant after being bullied. Bullying is a school safety issue. Students who were bullied weekly were 60 percent more likely to carry a weapon to school, 70 percent more likely to be in frequent fights, and 30 percent more likely to be injured than students who were not bullied (Lyznicki et al., 2004).

DEFINITION OF BULLYING

Kevorkian (2006) defined bullying as a set of purposeful physical and emotional actions that have the potential to cause long-term damage, are carried out repeatedly, are intended to injure, and involve an imbalance of power. A general definition of bullying includes repeated exposure to negative actions by one or more students over time (Olweus, 1994). Olweus further defined a negative action as a purposeful attempt to injure or inflict discomfort on another, through either words, physical contact, gestures, or exclusion from a group. Beran and Shapiro (2005) referred to bullying as repetitive aggression directed at a peer who is unable to defend himself or herself.

While there is much discussion about bullying behavior and it has been the center of recent tragedies, there seems to be confusion about exactly what bullying behavior is. The word *bullying* seems to be overused and confused with other types of aggressive, harassing, and assaultive behavior. Three key factors that help separate out bullying from other types of inappropriate behaviors are that it is:

1. Intentional
2. Repeated
3. Power-based

BYSTANDERS

Research supports the concept that we must empower bystanders to assist their peers if we really want to reduce bullying in our schools (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2005). In regard to bystanders, Coloroso (2005) wrote that to break the bullying cycle, we must help change the role of the bystander. Entenman, Murnen, and Hendricks (2005) suggested that “a bystander may be afraid to get involved, not know what to do, or be coerced by the bully not to tell” (p. 355). Lodge and Frydenberg (2005) discussed that bullying behavior that has no consequences for the bully and little to no intervention may cause children to become nervous, fearful, and uncomfortable at school.

All children are exposed to bullying—either as a bully, victim, or bystander—and most of the time this goes unaddressed by adults (Hoard, 2007). Furthermore, we have learned that bystanders suffer when they witness bullying behavior. They feel frightened, guilty, and worried that they may be at risk of being victimized. Research has emphasized that teaching bystanders how to respond to bullying situations can be crucial in reducing bullying.

VICTIMS

Children may be victimized regarding their sexual identity (Williams et al., 2005). This can mean that they are bullied because of their sexual orientation. That bullying can be either real or perceptual. *Fag* and *gay* are common words as early as elementary school and these names and attacks on sexual identity can be very hurtful, particularly for adolescents who are struggling to understand their own emerging sexual identity.

Additionally, children are victimized by their social status, special needs, or being viewed as different (Kevorkian, 2006). Victims tend to be less accepted by peers and to be more insecure and withdrawn (Hodges et al., 1999). Victims of bullying behavior report a myriad of distress symptoms. Children who are bullied are at risk for a variety of mental health problems, the most common being depression (Salmon, James, & Smith, 1998).

Victimized children were more likely to exhibit sleep problems, bed-wetting, headaches, stomachaches, and feeling tense or nervous. Fekkes et al. (2006) indicated that victimization causes an increase in health problems such as headaches, abdominal pain, anxiety, and depression. This supports the hypothesis that the stress of victimization may cause the development of somatic and psychological health problems. “The effects of bullying are rarely obvious, and it is unlikely that a child will complain to the physician of bullying or being bullied” (Lyznicki et al., 2004).

BULLIES

Coloroso (2005) stated, “Bullies come in all shapes and sizes, big, small, bright, and not so bright. Some are popular and some are disliked.”

Brinson (2005) found that girls also bully boys. Frisén, Jonsson, and Persson (2007) found that many perceptions exist for adolescents as to why kids bully, including that kids who bully have low self-esteem. Spade (2007) discussed that bullying tends to occur during unstructured and unsupervised periods of time. Girls who bully “use more verbal and psychological techniques such as verbal harassment, exclusion from activities, name-calling, and initiation of rumors” (Entenman et al., 2005).

SCHOOL CLIMATE AND BULLYING PREVENTION

“School climate can enhance or impair student development and achievement” (Wilson, 2004). Positive school climate (established by interest, concern, and support for all students) is correlated with student achievement (Halawah, 2005). Respect for all members of the school community and a positive relationship between students and teachers are common characteristics in schools where students report a positive school climate (Wilson, 2004). Hickey (2003) discussed participation in sports and other extracurricular activities as an aspect of school connectedness.

Many children do not let an adult know if they have been bullied. This decision to disclose is multidetermined; however, the teacher’s response is likely to be a key factor in choosing to disclose victimization (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007). Students report that teachers do not consistently intervene to stop bullying (Atlas & Pepler, 1998). Research supports that physical abuse is seen as more severe than verbal or emotional abuse and physical conflicts are seen as bullying even when they did not match the definition (Hazler & Miller, 2001). Dake and colleagues (2003) reported a need to increase knowledge and awareness regarding the problem of bullying.

Additionally, a whole-school approach to bullying prevention was indicated as necessary for successful bullying prevention efforts. School-wide interventions are supported to include working with bystanders, who make up the majority of a population, rather than working with bullies or victims only. Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, and Voeten (2005) and Chibbaro (2007) suggested including steps that bystanders can take to report and respond to cyberbullying. Coloroso (2005) stated, “Bullying

is effectively challenged when the majority stands up against cruel acts of the minority. Since much of the bullying occurs 'beneath the radar' of adult supervision, kids can be a potent force against bullies" (p. 51).

ATHLETICS: A WORD ABOUT HAZING

Hazing is behavior linked closely to the definition of bullying, which is repeated, intentional cruel acts between persons of unequal power. Hazing is also tied to a tradition or rituals of initiation that establish a hierarchy or pecking order within a team or other group. High school hazing often begins a week or two into the school year and is related to joining a team, club, or other group within the school.

These actions are often ritualistic in that they have occurred in past years to those who are now in the position of perpetuating the behavior on the new members. Additionally, these actions may require the target to participate in harmful and or humiliating practices. Sometimes these actions escalate over time and become more serious, humiliating, and dangerous. Tragically, some high school students have died from these rituals even when most states have made hazing against the law.

Media reports and research make reference to aggression being taught as acceptable behavior among athletes as a means of addressing conflict (Mintah, Huddleston, & Doody, 1999; Rowe, 1998). Rowe suggested that professional athletes model this aggressive behavior for youth athletes, exaggerating the problem: "Athletic development has proceeded at the expense of emotional development (and social development)." Contrary to the assertion that participation in sports may decrease aggressive behavior by redirecting it onto the playing field, Endresen and Olweus (2005) concluded that there is strong evidence that boys who participate in "power" or physical contact sports tend to be involved in violent and aggressive behavior outside of sports.

Nucci and Young-Shim (2005) discussed that unsportsmanlike behavior in young athletes can be a byproduct of the type of sport and the leadership of coaches within that sport. Athletes are better able to cope with potentially aggressive situations when they experience competition in sports in a healthy environment with quality leadership. Rowe (1998) reported that aggressive behavior in athletics can extend beyond the

sport and into interpersonal relationships. Rhea and Lantz (2004) found that noncontact sport participants exhibited a significantly lower number of problematic behaviors (e.g., getting into trouble at school, assaulting others, and carrying weapons) than contact sport athletes or nonathletes.

Even though most athletes are aware of certain risks involved in athletics, they do not pursue sports involvement with the expectation of humiliation or degradation (Crow, Ammon, & Phillips, 2004). "Creating an environment in which hazing, bullying, and other forms of intimidation cannot thrive is the best way to ensure the safety and welfare of student-athletes" (Crow et al., 2004). Storch, Werner, and Storch (2003) found a correlation of relational aggression to poor peer relations and alcohol use among intercollegiate athletes.

This supports that programs aimed at reducing bullying and relational aggression implemented by coaches and others in leadership positions would serve to promote team cohesion. This book is designed to provide an offensive strategy striking the right balance from the view of the athletes, coaches, and fans to provide a bully-free athletic community and allow everyone to reap the benefits of sports and being part of a team.

WHY BULLYING PREVENTION?

It was easy for Jayden and Alex to call Pete gay. However, they found it was even more fun to get Jorge to do it because he had limited English. Jorge did not always realize when he was being used to make fun of or to humiliate someone else. In fact, he did not even realize he was being bullied when he was asked to stick his butt in someone's face in the locker room. One day when the coach heard about what had happened, Jorge got a strong warning and was told not to let it happen again.

Jorge felt good about having cool friends like Jayden and Alex and liked the attention he got from them for his antics with Pete. They had Jorge convinced that these kind of jokes were what teammates did to one another. A few days later Jayden, Alex, and Jorge found Pete in the locker room alone. Seizing on the opportunity and Jorge's vulnerability, Jayden and Alex told Jorge to stick his butt in Pete's face and call him gay. Jorge, although he didn't really want to, did as he was directed while Jayden and Alex watched, laughing hysterically.

Fortunately, the coach witnessed the entire incident and dealt with it. Jayden and Alex were given consequences according to the school bullying policy. The coach provided Jorge and Pete with guidance and opportunities to connect with other members of the team. The coach monitored them carefully so they would not be victimized again.

A major priority for athletic directors and coaches is the safety and well-being of their athletes. Established guidelines that describe acceptable behavior across all sports are both accepted and practiced by coaches, parents, and volunteers. For example, there are clear rules and guidelines for what to do when a storm comes up and lightning is near. All games and practices are immediately stopped and student athletes are

placed in safe areas. There is even specialized equipment to alert us to the danger of lightning.

The intention of this book is to inspire creation and follow through with established guidelines to protect and assist in the development of the emotional and psychological well-being of our athletes. The hope and goals are that adults involved in youth athletics, regardless of whether they are volunteers or paid employees, will have the awareness and knowledge to recognize, prevent, and then intervene when bullying behavior occurs. Parents as partners in the athletic experience are not only to be aware of the issue of bullying, but need to know what to expect from any athletic program. Beyond that, everyone needs to understand that bullying occurs frequently in athletics with tremendous consequences. Most important, they need to know how to eliminate it.

We can demand excellence and personal best from athletes, but we must dispel the myth that demeaning and humiliating behaviors only strengthen and prepare our young athletes for “real life” by making them tough and strong. Likewise, we must dispel the myth that we can talk to athletes in their “own language” and use common profanity to reach these young people. We must dispel the myth that to be at the top you have to climb over others. Competition is about achievement and winning through personal best without crushing the dreams and hopes of others.

We need to dispel the myth that some athletes are more important than others. We can train and prepare winners on the field who understand and work together as a team. Positive experiences prepare members of a team to become socially responsible leaders with good character and ethics.

We must dispel the myth that fairness depends on the situation. Ethical behavior transcends all situations. There are no instances where it is okay not to be fair. After the whistle is blown, a hit in football or deliberately taking out the player guarding the base is neither fair nor ethical. When these behaviors are allowed or accepted they extend into other aspects of an athlete’s life. There is a connection between these behaviors and bullying.

Young people cannot be expected to turn off their aggressive behavior after the game. Often that aggression comes out with peers, siblings, and toward themselves. Anger is a difficult and complex emotion and it often becomes aggression, which can be destructive and damag-