



Adapted from the Power and Control Wheel developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Programs, Duluth, MN.

Minimizing, Denying, and Blaming

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence* making light of abuse disclosed by athletes or whistleblowers and shifting the blame onto them. For example, gaslighting them into believing it did not happen or that the abuse was really an acceptable act within athletic training.

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence can gaslight the athlete by saying the abuse is a part of appropriate athletic training. Coach, athlete guardians, and enablers may argue that the athlete misinterpreted an acceptable form of training as abuse and try to make the athlete believe the abuse was acceptable.

The coaches, guardians, and people of influence shift the blame onto the athlete for not fighting back, alleging the athlete allowed the abuse, or questioning why the athlete did not report sooner. An athlete's physical strength and athleticism will often be weaponized to cause doubt that the athlete could be a survivor.

Isolation

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence maintain control over interactions and use isolation tactics to make athletes feel alone by restricting access to other athletes, coaches, trainers, facilities, and their family.

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence may distance the athlete from their team, friends and family, or other coaches, trainers, and staff in order to eliminate their contact with the people within their life that could hold the coaches, guardians, and people of influence accountable.

Isolation can be extremely dangerous when the athlete is distanced (especially with travel teams) from their own family and friends. This can happen by the coaches, guardians, and people of influence convincing the athlete that their family does not understand what is best for them, their family does not prioritize their athletic future, or by creating an environment where the athlete has limited time to be with these people.

Coercion

Using pressure or manipulation to force sexual contact. For example, using shame, threats, ultimatums, or withholding access to their sport or playing time as punishment for not engaging in sexual contact.

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence may use manipulative tactics and persistent boundary crossing to initiate abuse and maintain power and control.

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence will weaponize personal information against the athlete to gain access and control the silence of the athlete. For example, coaches and athlete guardians may introduce performance enhancers, use disclosed information, or create sexual abuse material of the athlete in order to have something that could harm the athlete if they reported.

Gaining The Athlete & Caregiver's Trust

Gaining trust is often achieved by "unburdening" or doing "favors" for the parents/guardians such as providing transportation to a family that is struggling with scheduling or providing equipment to a child whose family cannot afford it.

Trust can be gained through different actions that make coaches, guardians, and people of influence seem like a trustworthy person.

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence will often exploit a child and family's vulnerabilities to groom the child such as offering rides to a single parent family, providing a mobile phone to a family with limited financial means, or acting as an affirming person for a queer youth that is not out to their family. These acts provide an additional dynamic of power and control over the athlete.

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence may ask the athlete personal questions, as well as disclose personal information, to groom the athlete and develop a false sense of trust and gauge whether the athlete will immediately disclose boundary crossing behaviors.

The grooming can be furthered by extra physical contact when providing demonstration or fixing the athlete's form. This inappropriate touching can begin by small moments that may initially seem appropriate like congratulating the athlete with a high five, but then escalate to inappropriate physical contact.

*"Coaches, guardians, and people of influence" is being used to represent a coach, trainer, physical therapist, doctor, physician, parent, or other administrative personnel working within a sport that has access and ability to abuse athletes.

Threats & Rewards

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence often instill fear in athletes using threats such as reducing playing time or being removed from the team, to secure compliance and/or silence. Promised rewards may be used to manipulate athletes into compliance and/or silence.

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence may threaten the athlete to have reduced playing time or unnecessarily be placed on the injury list.

Rewarding the athlete with excessive praise, in front of teammates from whom they withhold praise, can further isolate the athlete from teammates.

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence may reward athletes for not disclosing by providing additional resources, one-on-one time, or allowing more playing time

Financial Control

Financial control is the exertion of control over someone's income, savings, assets, and other financial pieces of their life, such as mortgages, rent/lease agreements. In sports, financial control can include access to educational scholarships that are connected with sports performance, deals with sponsors, Name-Image-Likeness (NIL) contracts, professional team contracts, and licensing deals.

Many athletes, including elite athletes at the top of their respective sports, receive no, inconsistent, and often minimal compensation for competing in their sport and rely exclusively or primarily on sponsorships. When not directly compensated for regular performance - such as within a league that competes regularly - athletes rely on money outside of the sport (such as maintaining another job or through sponsorship) and prize money, which is inconsistent, unreliable, and only dependent on their performance in that one competition.

Abuse of finances could include threatening to take away a scholarship or other financial support for the athlete, not renewing their contract, limiting their access to another job outside of the sport that is consistent income, or limit access to sponsorship and other forms of compensation that athletes rely on to be able to maintain their sports participation. Or it could be denying the ability of an athlete to make money within the sport. Especially in sport, these forms of control over money, scholarships, and career can be subtle and implied from the perpetrator's position of power (such as being the gatekeeper for college recruitment or in charge of Olympic or professional athlete opportunities/exposure).

Authority

Coaches, guardians, and people of influence use their position of power over an athlete to threaten and manipulate the athlete not only to assault them, but to also control their reaction after the abuse has occurred and silence them from reporting or disclosing the abuse.

The coach automatically has authority over the athlete as culture teaches children to respect and listen to adults.

Perpetrators will often exploit pre-existing power dynamics in order to maintain power and control of athletes.

Perpetrators regularly reinforce the power dynamic over the athlete through threats of not allowing the athlete's career to move forward or being placed on the injury list, further reinforcing that the perpetrator is the gateway to future successes.

Grooming

Grooming involves slowly gaining trust before systematically breaking down interpersonal barriers** and alienating the athlete from support systems. Grooming often occurs on a continuum beginning with crossing boundaries and then escalating to additional acts of harm, such as sexual abuse.

Grooming often happens over an extended period of time where perpetrators use the previously stated tactics to gain the athlete's trust, reinforce power and control, and make them feel as though they have no exit.

Providing gifts to the athlete to gain trust, friendship, and further enforcing the athlete is indebted to the person causing harm. The gifts might be something special or unique such as new sporting equipment, 1-on-1 training, or sports memorabilia.

Giving the athlete special attention that encourages trust between them and isolates them from their team and support.

Giving excessive encouragement or communicating the athlete's unique abilities can be used as a grooming technique to access one-on-one time with the athlete. Be aware if you notice a person in a position of authority excessively playing into the athlete's dreams of success in the sport.

**The Grooming Process in Sport: Narratives of Sexual Harassment and Abuse by Celia Brakenridge and Kari Fasting