Conceptualizing a Meaningful Definition of Hazing in Sport

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ABSTRACT Administrators, coaches, athletes and parents struggle to understand the definition of hazing. Athletes at all levels of competition continue to subject themselves and their team-mates to harmful behaviors. In particular, college athletes seem willing to do anything that veteran players demand in order to be part of the team’s “inner circle”. The behaviors related to hazing exploit a person’s basic desire to be part of athletic teams, and continue to persist at high rates within various levels of sport. This paper critically examines how sport hazing has been conceptualized by student-athletes, coaches and sport administrators. Through a review of literature and focus group research, multiple issues related to the understanding of hazing and its subsequent definition arose. The confusion surrounding the various acts of hazing and the definition of hazing versus team initiation may be precipitating the problem in collegiate sport. The authors will elaborate on this issue and the paper will culminate in a proposed new definition of sport hazing intended to help develop a better understanding among stakeholders.

Introduction

The issues surrounding the prevalence of hazing in sport continue to be problematic for all stakeholders affected by this phenomenon (Armas, 2007; Crow, 2008; Raevey, 2008). While the literature has been mostly silent on this topic, research activity in this area is beginning to escalate (Young & Bryshun, 1999; Kirby & Wintrup, 2002; McGlone, 2005; Allen & Madden, 2008). Several authors have chronicled the frequent occurrence of hazing in athletic settings and have confirmed that the number of reported hazing incidents on athletic teams at all levels (e.g., high school, university, amateur and professional) has continued to increase (Hoover & Pollard, 1999; Thomas,
Though efforts have been made to advance the prevention of hazing, such as the 2008 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Hazing Prevention Summit, the problem persists in sport at an alarmingly frequent rate (Allen & Madden, 2008).

The sordid details of hazing in sport have been discussed amongst several authors (e.g., Robinson, 2004; Chancellor, 2008; Raevey, 2008). Many psychological and physiological issues and dangers related to victims of hazing are troublesome to say the least. In addition, the subsequent issues related to the financial burden placed on athletic programs, the potential lawsuits which arise, and the loss of employment which hazing incidents can create add to the seriousness of the issue (Rosner & Crow, 2002; Lipkins, 2006b). Researchers have examined the attitudes, behaviors and beliefs of student-athletes to further understand why hazing activities continue on campus (e.g., Campo, Poulos, & Sipple, 2005). Campo et al. (2005) and Robinson (1998) concluded that group cohesion, the desire to belong and wanting to be part of something bigger are important factors contributing to the problem of hazing.

Other researchers (Carron, 1982; Van Raalte, Cornelius, Linder, & Britton, 2007) have explored the relationship between team cohesion and the level of initiation activities that occur. Interestingly, Van Raalte et al. (2007) found that these activities are directly associated with weakened team cohesion, which is the precise opposite of what hazing proponents espouse. Further, research conducted with athletes who admitted to being involved in hazing found the participants downplayed and justified their hazing activities, or were not aware they were actually involved in hazing to begin with (Hinkle, 2005).

Researchers continue to question how to prevent the continued cycle of hazing knowing that the desire to belong to a team has power and influence over student-athletes (Crow, 2008). One issue that may be precipitating the problem in sport appears to be the misunderstanding of what constitutes hazing among student-athletes and, in particular, the confusion surrounding the meaning and appropriateness of activities often described as rituals, initiation and rights of passage (Leemon, 1972; Kirby & Wintrup, 2002; Van Raalte et al., 2007). The definitions of hazing and initiation are linked—initiation is defined by Merriam-Webster “as the rites, ceremonies, ordeals, or instructions with which one is made a member of a sect or society or is invested with a particular function or status” (Initiation, 2008), while hazing is defined as, “the action of hazing; especially: an initiation process involving harassment” (Hazing, 2008). Perhaps this connection provides the basis for confusion among athletic stakeholders.

Scholars agree that hazing has its roots in several European traditions (Nuwer, 1990, 2000; Lipkins, 2006a). Hazing, or fagging as it is known in some European countries, is certainly not isolated to geography. Indeed, it appears as if it is a universal issue. Internationally, researchers have discovered many instances of hazing in Japanese sumo wrestling, where one death occurred in 2007 (Lah, 2008), at colleges and universities in Portugal (Weimer, 2007), in club sports, in the Russian military (Stolyarova,
and within amateur and professional sports as well. Jeong (2003) found that hazing is widespread in South Korean university soccer programs, and that very few laws or hazing policies exist in that country. This is similar to problems in the USA (e.g., football), Canada (e.g., hockey) and Australia (e.g., rugby) whereby athletes emerging into more elite aspects of sport become subject to team initiation rituals that by most accounts are considered to be hazing. Clearly, the topic of hazing in sport is very widespread.

One often overlooked factor that may contribute to hazing in college athletics is the flippant manner in which members of local and national media, often in a humorous or light-hearted way, cover hazing that occurs in professional North American sport (Nuwer, 2008). It is these same media members, who would vilify and castigate student-athletes involved in hazing, but make light of professional athletes acting the same way. Research into media coverage of hazing (Nuwer, 2004; 2008) has shown that young athletes can be impacted by observing the media coverage of ostensibly “harmless” activities, including challenges occurring on television (Reality TV, 2008) and hazing in professional sports (Zeigler, 2006).

In perhaps the most incongruous example of media “approval” of hazing, a writer for Major League Baseball’s official website (www.mlb.com) wrote an article entitled “Rookies face hazy days of spring” (Footer, 2008). Part of the story included guidelines for new professionals:

Most young players know their roles during Spring Training. The rules are simple. Don’t talk too much. Keep your head down. Work hard. And when your veteran teammates pick on you, you must take it. And for good measure, it doesn’t hurt to pretend you’re enjoying it (p. 1).

For good measure (and to most likely protect Major League Baseball), a disclaimer was placed at the bottom of the webpage stating the story was not subject to approval by Major League Baseball or its clubs. This is one simple illustration of a larger and more complex problem in sport that seemingly propagates the notion that hazing is acceptable in some circumstances (Nuwer, 2004).

While the aforementioned literature on hazing is certainly not meant to portray an exhaustive list, the collective body of work they represent is quite vast. Researchers (Nuwer, 2004; Hinkle, 2005; McGlone, 2005) have attempted to institute various prevention strategies within college sport to help educate coaches and administrators. However, there still seems to be confusion among athletes and coaches as to what constitutes and defines hazing (Kirby & Wintrup, 2002; Crow, 2008). This gap in understanding illustrates the need to further clarify and define sport-specific hazing. Consequently, the challenge for researchers is to create a clear, precise definition which all stakeholders of collegiate sport can understand while keeping the meaning sufficiently broad to cover a variety of activities related to athletics.
Thus, the purpose of this research was to critically examine how hazing is currently conceptualized and understood amongst collegiate level athletes, coaches and administrators in sport and to further determine if a more thorough and specific definition and model of sport hazing is needed to hasten the eradication of this “dark side” of sport.

Literature Review

There exists among researchers, legislators, athletic administrators, coaches and student-athletes, an unclear understanding of the definition of hazing. Acceptable terms, such as *initiation*, *tradition*, *rite of passage* and *ritual*, are often used to offset the negative connotation of the word *hazing* (Nuwer, 2000). Scholars and media outlets often use the words interchangeably (Kirby & Wintrup, 2002; Nuwer, 2004), thereby increasing confusion levels among stakeholders. To be clear, these terms are not interchangeable.

Hazing could perhaps be considered by some observers as a rite of passage. Leemon (1972, p. 1) defined rite of passage as “the recurring social mechanisms that a society provides for the orderly transitions in its social relationships that serve as revitalizations, comprise a series of events that include rituals and ceremonies”. In a sport setting, rookies, or rather new members of a team, are often faced with the “transition” of joining the team as a player, as well as being “accepted” on the team as a viable member. Further, Birrell (1981) noted that participation in sport is seen as a special occasion and thus is often accompanied by rituals marking entry into the setting.

Baumeister and Leary (1995) remarked that the individual’s need to belong to a group and maintain positive, lasting and meaningful relationships makes them more susceptible to pressures placed on them by more senior members. Certainly this is true of athletes, particularly in team sports, where involvement is a key motivator for participation (Allen, 2003). Involvement and the need to belong make participation in initiation rites seemingly normal and accepted (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Hoover and Pollard (1999), who conducted a ground-breaking comprehensive study of hazing in college sport in the USA, espoused that initiation rites, when conducted properly, certainly have a place in sport and society. The authors indicated that “initiation rites are comprised of pro-social behaviors that build social relationships, understanding, empathy, civility, altruism, and moral decision-making” (Hoover & Pollard, 1999, p. 3). Failure by rookies to acknowledge veteran team members as the holders of power will threaten acceptance into the group (Holman, 2004).

In order for there to be initiation or hazing, a group (team) must exist. Baron and Greenberg (1990) described four characteristics of a group: (1) common goal achievable only through joint action; (2) interaction between members; (3) a stable structure that survives as members come and go; and (4) group member recognition of the group, other members and their roles. Athletic teams, even those in which members participate as individuals (track and field, golf, tennis, etc.) qualify, by this definition, as a group.
Group or team cohesion has been studied as a possible predictor of hazing activity (Carron, 1982; Weinberg & Gould, 1999), with no consistent findings reported. The question, then, becomes, who is joining these groups (teams)?

DeHass (2006), in a study for the NCAA, found that men were more likely than women to be the victim of hazing in their college sports program and to haze others in the program. Hoover and Pollard (1999) found that women were more than 10% more likely to say that forced consumption of alcohol was involved in rookie hazing on their teams. Further, hazing behavior also seems to build upon past actions, where hazing victims then become perpetrators. According to Edelman (2004), hazing perpetuates through a vicious cycle, which requires new members to behave subserviently. This is required by older members trying to restore their own dignity, which they themselves lost as victims of hazing incidents (Edelman, 2004).

A clear definition of hazing is needed, particularly in athletics, where initiations, traditions and rites of passage are commonplace. Holman (2004, p. 58) asserts that athletic leaders, the majority of whom are male, are reluctant to encourage change because they are “products of a system that subjected them to hazing and had them haze others”. Only when a cogent definition is created will true hazing prevention be possible (Holman, 2004).

**Hazing Definitions**

Though there are many definitions that describe hazing, the following four have been chosen to provide an understanding of the operational and legal definitions of hazing, thus illustrating Kirby and Wintrup’s (2002) assertion that no consistent definition has been created.

According to the website from Mothers Against School Hazing (2008):

Hazing is a broad term encompassing any action or activity which does not contribute to the positive development of a person; which inflicts or intends to cause physical or mental harm or anxieties; which may demean, degrade, or disgrace any person, regardless of location, intent or consent of participants. Hazing can also be defined as any action or situation, which intentionally or unintentionally endangers a student for admission into or affiliation with any student organization. (Hazing is) any action taken or situation created intentionally, whether on or off school premises, to produce mental or physical discomfort, embarrassment, harassment or ridicule (What is hazing, n.d.).

One definition that has been used in other research studies, proposed by Hoover and Pollard (1999, p. 4), follows that hazing is:

Any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers, regardless of the person’s willingness to participate. This does not include activities such as rookies carrying the balls, team parties with community games, or going out with your teammates, unless an atmosphere of humiliation, degradation, abuse or danger arises.
Furthermore, Nuwer (1999, p. xxv) noted that hazing is:

An activity that a high-status member orders other members to engage in or suggests that they engage in that in some way humbles a newcomer who lacks the power to resist, because he or she want to gain admission to a group. Hazing can be noncriminal, but it is nearly always against the rules of an institution, team, or Greek group.

Currently, 44 of the 50 states in the USA have anti-hazing statutes (State anti-hazing laws, 2007). According to North Carolina State Code (2007) it is:

unlawful for any student in attendance at any university, college, or school in this State to engage in hazing, or to aid or abet any other student in the commission of this offense. For the purposes of this section hazing is defined as follows: “to subject another student to physical injury as part of an initiation, or as a prerequisite to membership, into any organized school group, including any society, athletic team, fraternity or sorority, or other similar group.” Any violation of this section shall constitute a Class 2 misdemeanor (North Carolina Hazing Law, 2007).

Some investigators have taken the definition of hazing even further, attempting to classify it by degree or severity. For instance, Nuwer (2004), on the website stophazing.org, described three categories of hazing: (1) subtle, (2) harassment and (3) violent. Hoover and Pollard (1999, p. 8) also described hazing on three levels: (1) questionable initiation rites with no unacceptable activities; (2) alcohol-related initiation; no other unacceptable activities; (3) unacceptable initiation activities, other than alcohol-related.

In the seminal Alfred University study, Hoover and Pollard (1999) found that most student respondents knew of or had participated in activities researchers considered hazing, but that the athletes themselves were reluctant to call hazing, confirming the findings of Robinson (1998) that participants feel these activities are “normal” in a sport setting. Allen and Madden (2008) found 9 of 10 students who experienced hazing behavior in college did not consider themselves to have been hazed. Crow (2008) found further confusion among student-athletes confronted with the Hoover and Pollard (1999) definition, who felt their activities did not meet the definition because they (the athletes) did not determine who made the team—the coach decided. This, in the athlete’s minds, eliminated a significant portion of the definition (Crow, 2008). Until recently, researchers had difficulty trying to determine what created this disconnect between what student-athletes viewed as hazing and what academicians and hazing researchers viewed as hazing.

Studies have shown there is still a strong disconnect between what researchers believe is hazing, and what student-athletes believe is hazing (Robinson, 1998; Hoover & Pollard, 1999; Nuwer, 2000; McGlone, 2005). Indeed, Allen & Madden (2008) have shed some light on the minds of student-athletes in terms of hazing, most notably finding that many student-athletes (1) identify hazing with physical force, (2) believe if a student-athlete consents to participate, it is not hazing, (3) hazing is a gray area, and (4) if
the activity is perceived as productive, it cannot be hazing. These findings lead to a number of important questions when applied to an athletic context. However, the chief question raised is: What exactly do student-athletes think is hazing?

The answer to that question may help us more accurately define hazing in a sport context, which will assist coaches, administrators, parents and student-athlete leaders in developing more effective anti-hazing strategies.

In summary, the findings in the literature review highlight the major problem in defining hazing in an athletic setting; the fact there is a “gray area” between what student-athletes perceive hazing to be (physically harmful and against the will of the participant) and what researchers consider hazing. This disconnect greatly restricts the development of clear and meaningful hazing prevention efforts.

Methodology

The researchers used a qualitative design to examine sport hazing according to college athletes, coaches and administrators. It was believed that an open-ended and more concentrated approach that involved a diverse set of participants directly influenced by the problem of athletic hazing in collegiate sport would help further explain the issue at hand and thus provide additional insight into potential changes in how sport hazing should be defined rather than survey research (Patton, 2002). First, an extensive review of literature was undertaken on the topic of hazing in general, and hazing in sport specifically, to determine the ongoing dialogue regarding the various ways hazing has been defined and to inform the study regarding potential gaps in the literature. The literature review helped to provide a framework for the study and a comparative basis for the results of the second phase of research involving focus groups with stakeholders directly involved in collegiate sport. Focus group research was undertaken to help identify some of the issues involved in defining hazing as well as to explore the contextual factors related to why the problem may precipitate in sport. This type of research assists in providing a richer understanding of the participants’ meanings, experience and perceptions (Creswell, 2009) related to why the problem of hazing is evident in collegiate athletics. Six questions formed the basis of the research and were designed to help concentrate on the problems persistently identified in the literature review—the meanings and perceptions of sport hazing in an athletic context.

Based on areas uncovered in the literature review, the following questions were developed. The first question required the participants to discuss if they felt there was a difference between hazing and team initiation and to describe their answers. The second question required participants to try to define hazing. The third question required participants to address any differences in degrees of hazing. The fourth question required participants to address their knowledge of anti-hazing laws. The fifth question asked participants what should be the penalties for violating any hazing laws and
policies. The final question asked participants their thoughts on how sport hazing could be prevented.

Procedures

The researchers created a list of potential focus group participants within two distinct clusters: (1) student-athletes and (2) coaches/administrators. In order to capture a variety of perspectives from the student-athletes, participants from different university athletic teams at different stages of their athletic careers were asked to voluntarily participate in the research. Student-athlete representatives from each university team were sent a letter via email indicating that they or one other member of their team were invited to participate in the study. The list of student representatives was made available to the researchers through the university Faculty Athletic Representative after the Institutional Review Board approved the research study.

In a similar fashion, coaches/administrators from a variety of different sports were contacted using email and sent a letter of invitation to participate in research related to athletic hazing awareness, legal issues and prevention strategies. The letter of information for both groups included a description of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, a statement of guarantee which indicated no obligation to identify any specific activities related to the individual, his or her team, team-mates or players, and that respondents would not be personally identified as having participated in the research due to the sensitive nature of information to be discussed. Permission to use an audio-recording device was granted from all participants prior to the interview. Focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

The focus group sessions were transcribed in full. The data management system Nvivo was utilized to help organize the transcript data and code the emergent categories. An inductive analysis was used to help identify issues related to the conceptualization and understanding of sport hazing (Creswell, 2009). Hence, the researchers engaged first in a full independent review of the data to provide insight regarding the participants’ understanding of hazing (Creswell, 2009). This enabled the researchers to develop a concept regarding the problem areas with respect to defining sport hazing independently. Next, the researchers compared and discussed their notes on the data until a consensus was reached regarding the problems and concerns participants had with the definition of hazing. After this process was finished, the researchers designed a new definition and proposed a model to help clarify sport hazing, described in more detail below.

Results

Two separate focus groups were conducted in the spring of 2008. The first focus group consisted of university student-athletes. In total, 11 student-athletes (four male and seven female) from a variety of university teams participated in the research. The participants represented all levels of
undergraduate student-athletes (i.e., freshman, sophomore, junior and senior) and competed in both team sport and individual athletic events within a team competition setting (e.g., track and field).

The second focus group consisted of university coaches/administrators. In total (five men and five women) from different sports, including women’s volleyball, rugby, basketball and field hockey, and men’s football, basketball, baseball and soccer. From the group, two participants were involved in the administration of university sport.

The overall analysis of the two focus groups revealed that neither the student-athletes nor the coaches/administrators could agree on a definition of hazing. Subsequently, both groups felt that there was a “gray area” which existed between team initiations and hazing. For instance, certain activities (e.g., public engagements where rookies had to perform embarrassing acts) were perceived by some to be harmless given that they were not physically threatening or degrading, while others felt this same act was emotionally damaging and lasting. This was compelling in that athletes viewed the severity and impact of the same exact activity completely differently. Consequently, this spawned interesting conversation surrounding the role of appropriate conduct regarding whether certain individuals were “cut-out” or “ready” emotionally and mentally to be involved in collegiate sport. The athletes in particular had trouble agreeing on whether scavenger hunts (where rookies are given a list of items to find on campus and in town in a specified period of time) or skit nights and talent shows (where team members, usually rookies, perform songs and act out plays or parodies), although considered traditional, were considered hazing. It was evident that the athlete cohort was split on this subject as about half of the participants felt that these types of activities created unnecessary anxiety, apprehension and a fear of the unknown.

Both groups reported uncertainty regarding what is acceptable team initiation and bonding and what is considered to be hazing by definition. Hoover and Pollard’s (1999, p. 4) definition, that hazing is “any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers, regardless of the person’s willingness to participate” was provided to the participants as the basis for the discussion. During the dialogue, participants in both groups agreed that common sense played a factor in defining and practicing hazing, despite acknowledging they had not exercised such common sense in past behavior. After close examination of the data, it became apparent that individuals in both groups were beginning to formulate their own definition of where to draw the line with respect to team initiation versus hazing. During both focus group sessions, several participants decided to tell stories about how they were involved as “victims of hazing” which were followed up by stories of how they finally had a chance to haze the rookies on their respective teams. The cycle of repeat offensive acts and violation of team rules was apparent.

Both groups recognized that some forms of what was considered traditional “team initiation or bonding” were clearly unacceptable behavior and risked putting the team, player, coach, administrator and the university...
reputation at risk. Though certain behaviors were acknowledged to be inappropriate and potentially harmful, participants admitted to engaging in such team initiation practices off-campus away from supervision (e.g., underage drinking, games that subjected people to forms of humiliation, and other activities that researchers clearly define as hazing).

Participants in both groups also felt that legal repercussions and sanctions needed to be more clearly defined and in place to help avoid hazing in college sport. In addition, respondents felt that the role of athletes (particularly veterans), coaches, administrators and high-level university employees could help prevent future problems by policing current team initiation activities. Ultimately, a number of potential strategies were discussed to help prevent athletic hazing.

The First Question: Is There a Difference between Hazing and Team Initiation?

Student-athletes indicated a number of items they considered to be “hazing”, including the following: wearing random and embarrassing clothing (e.g., cross-dressing or wearing skimpy and revealing clothing), performing skits designed to make people look foolish, having bad hair cuts, face painting, drinking in excess, eating gross foods, performing crude acts sometimes of a sexual nature, and a number of other physical and emotionally damaging behaviors. One of the female athletes commented that; “I think that is where the line gets drawn for hazing, when it becomes embarrassing for the person [when] it becomes public”. However, there were a number of disagreements as to what is considered hazing and what is acceptable in terms of initiation particularly in light of the fact that some people are more easily embarrassed in certain situations while others are not.

Participants indicated a number of items they considered to be a “rite of passage or initiation on to the team” (e.g., carrying bags, cleaning lockers, bring balls out, putting nets and equipment away, telling embarrassing stories or jokes, and conducting scavenger hunts). One male participant noted that hazing occurs “when it crosses that line, but it is such a fine line that determines the difference between initiation and hazing”. This statement is a reflection of just how gray the areas between hazing and initiation were perceived amongst the focus group members. Further, another student-athlete stated that “it depends on the severity of what happens. If you are personally just trying to humiliate someone, then that is where the line is drawn”. A veteran student-athlete noted that when:

The whole team is hanging out and I do not think it is that bad of a thing. But if a freshman is feeling uncomfortable and doesn’t want to do it, they should be able to say it and not have to do it. I definitely think that there is that line that it crosses from team unity and hazing.

With respect to the coaching/administrator group, one coach admitted that he did not know what hazing was, stating that “when I was an
athlete, we did a lot worse things than I hear about today. I try to make sure my players know the rules, but it is hard when I’m not sure myself”. One athletic administrator added, “…we need to ensure that student-athletes and coaches know the difference, or how can we hold them accountable”.

The Second Question: Try to Define Hazing

This particular question proved to be very challenging and drew a fair bit of discussion as both focus groups could not agree on a definition of hazing. The coaches and administrators tried to reach a consensus, initially defining hazing as when someone is “forced to participate in an activity in which they do not want to be involved” and debating that “hazing is when someone is singled out”. One coach noted that she:

Explain(s) very clearly during try outs and at the first team meeting of the year that no activity that will cause any harm to any of the athletes is permissible …[and that] if anyone is caught forcing any hazing rituals onto any athletes they will be removed from the team.

Another female coach remarked that “making rookies carry upper classmen’s bags, or bring the balls out, or put the nets away after practice is not hazing … that stuff is simply tradition and initiation, it is expected that that is what is done”. Though there was no group consensus regarding a definition of hazing, it was agreed that there was a fine line between team initiation and hazing that needed to be further clarified.

Discussion among the student-athlete group focused around the perceived differences between male and female hazing such that one female participant noted that, “sometimes guys go to a further extent than girls do. Like, there is no way a girls’ team would shave someone’s head. They might tape someone up, but shave their head? Yeah … right”.

However, there seemed to be consensus among all participants that male athletes tend to engage in more physically dangerous acts of hazing whereas women tend to engage in more emotional acts. A female participant in the coaches/administrator group suggested that, hazing could be anything “humiliating, painful—anything like that—which is wrong. However, as long as it is not crossing that line, I think hazing is alright”. The problem, of course, with that statement is that each member of a team has a different idea of what is acceptable. Throughout the focus group the participants continually struggled with properly defining hazing.

One of the male athletes perceived a difference between hazing in college and professional sport and elaborated on his point suggesting that:

In professional sport, hazing appears to be fun hazing where no one gets hurt. You don’t hear of anyone dying or drinking too much. I remember watching reports from Ravens camps where a rookie was being interviewed and someone put a pie in his face. I think pro sports are seen differently than college or high school where people can be hurt more.
Overall, it was clearly evident from both discussions that participants perceived there to be an imaginary line between hazing and initiation that needed further clarification. There was concern expressed by both groups as to the ramifications of not fully knowing what constitutes hazing and what is considered to be acceptable initiation rituals.

**The Third Question: Is There any Difference in Degrees of Hazing?**

Participants in both groups were provided Nuwer’s (2004) and Hoover and Pollard’s (1999) descriptions of different levels of hazing, and asked whether they agreed. That student-athletes strongly agreed there were different degrees of hazing was illustrated by one remark from a male student-athlete who noted that:

> Participating in a scavenger hunt is very different than participating in a physical harmful activity. I think there is a line in the definition of what is considered hazing. Like a scavenger hunt, I would not consider that hazing, or telling your most embarrassing story or joke. A joke is a joke, but once it takes it across the line of physical or emotionally harming somebody to the point their self-esteem is hurt or they are physically hurt that is different.

A male coach noted that; “there should be penalties based on the levels of hazing however they are defined”. This sentiment was also echoed by one athletic administrator who commented, “Ideally these things could be policed effectively based on their severity”. One female student-athlete asked if any other institutions or athletic departments defined hazing by levels of severity, because she had never heard it described that way.

**The Fourth Question: Knowledge of Anti-hazing Laws**

In one of the more remarkable segments of the discussion, there was almost no awareness of the state anti-hazing statute from participants in either focus group. Indeed, there was no awareness of any particular campus anti-hazing policy (although one exists). Several student-athletes noted that there might have been some discussion about hazing in an NCAA rules compliance meeting held at the beginning of the school year, but the large majority were unsure whether hazing was brought up and whether the signing of any waiver or contract was expected. The respondents were certainly not aware of any potential penalty or consequences of violating the anti-hazing policies or statutes.

Neither coaches nor student-athletes were sure if any laws are even stated in the athletic handbook provided by the university’s athletic department at the beginning of each season (or semester), including athletic administrators who helped work on the actual handbook. Interestingly, coaches felt it was their responsibility to curtail any illegal and potentially damaging activities that go on with their team. However, they also discussed the impossibility to police their student-athletes 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Additional
information was discussed related to the role of the team captain to act in the absence of the coach in policing the team behavior off campus. A female coach suggested that if any “team policy is violated that it would be dealt with internally and accordingly depending on the violation”. One administrator remarked that:

If it is a criminal act not caught in public, that doesn’t mean it should be handled any differently. It is a criminal act regardless of whether it is within a locker room or someone’s home and should be dealt with appropriately according to the law.

While student-athletes as a group were not aware of university policy regarding hazing or of state anti-hazing laws, they did seem to know that certain activities were illegal. One athlete remarked, “If I force a freshman, who is likely under the legal drinking age, to drink beer or other alcoholic drinks, I know that’s illegal for her and me. I just never considered it to be a part of hazing”.

The Fifth Question: What Should be the Penalties for Violating Laws and Policies?

Both groups agreed that the punishment should fit the crime, and recognized that the leadership of the team (e.g., captains and coaches) and university administration must assume a preventative role in stopping hazing. Despite the general consensus that each hazing offense needed to be looked upon individually depending on the severity, and dealt with accordingly (e.g., internal to the team, internal to the university, civil law suit, federal law suit), the range of penalties varied from less severe to very severe. Some felt that the penalties should be placed only on the offending parties while others felt that the team leadership, the entire team, the athletic program and the university should be held equally accountable since ultimately it is a shared responsibility to prevent hazing. With respect to penalties, a number of potential repercussions were noted and included: suspension from play, fines, removal from the team, removal from university athletics, sanctions placed on team, sanctions placed on university, civil lawsuits and federal lawsuits.

One coach began a spirited debate by asking: “Should my senior players be penalized by having matches suspended for activities they didn’t even know were hazing?” Though the majority of the coaches/administrators group felt that the seniors should have known, they also believed that it was their responsibility as leaders to inform the athletes about proper policy. Student-athletes, predictably, felt the punishments should be less severe, with one participant stating, “If no one gets hurts, and nothing is damaged, there should be no penalty at all. Maybe just give us a warning not to do it again”.

The Final Question: How Can Hazing be Prevented?

Meaningful discussion in both groups centered on whose responsibility it was to take the lead in hazing education and prevention. The role of coaches
and athletic administrators as leaders in the prevention of hazing was critical to the discussion, followed closely by the captains and senior members of the sport teams. Interestingly, one female student-athlete noted “some coaches I am sure know that it happens, and they just look the other way”. A male athlete mentioned that “in high school, you were hazed because it was tradition ... if you are going to prevent hazing, this is the attitude that needs to change early on in someone’s athletic career”. In the coaches/administrators focus group, one of the male coaches stated that “a combination of workshops and guest speakers should be brought into the university athletic department prior to the start of each season to discuss hazing ... and athletes and parents should be present at the meeting as well”. Further, a female coach added that “playing college sport is a privilege and not a right. Athletes need to treat it as such and recognize that they could lose a whole season or career by doing something stupid”. An administrator suggested “the school should be able to fund more programs and support anti-hazing workshops for the athletes, which would go a long way in preventing issues from occurring in all of our sports at school”.

**Summary of Results**

The overriding theme that emerged from both focus groups was that hazing occurs, yet is misunderstood by the majority of stakeholders involved. Student-athletes wanted to be able to continue safe, yet meaningful initiations, but longed for guidance about what was acceptable. Coach and administrator participants were equally unclear about the definition of hazing, and desired a better understanding to protect themselves, the university and their student-athletes.

**Discussion**

The results of the focus group research demonstrated that student-athletes, and coaches and administrators, still do not have a clear understanding of what is acceptable team initiation behavior, and what is considered hazing. The importance of a clearer understanding of hazing cannot be underestimated, as stricter penalties, increased media scrutiny and more legal action have made the landscape increasingly treacherous for those involved in collegiate athletics.

The findings support earlier research that has shown the prevalence of hazing in collegiate athletics (Armas, 2007; Crow, 2008; Raevey, 2008). In this study, several areas were identified as problematic in the pursuit to rid sport of heinous rituals. In particular, knowledge and awareness of hazing, the definition and understanding of hazing, the types of punishments and consequences for hazing, and prevention strategies still need considerable efforts to solve. As was demonstrated in this research, student-athletes—no matter which specific question was posed—returned to the fact that there was a general misunderstanding of hazing. Much of the discussion centered
on the differences between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and, in general, confirmed the results found in other studies.

Many of the results were similar to those uncovered by Hoover and Pollard (1999), where, for example, athletes stated hazing is a “part of team chemistry” or a “tradition”. It was interesting and somewhat troubling to note that very little has changed among student-athlete awareness of hazing in the ten years between studies.

In the current study, participants in both groups attempted to draw a distinction between what they considered benign, harmless tradition and dangerous and harmful hazing. This echoes what Hoover and Pollard (1999) included in their definition and what Allen and Madden (2008) discovered when interviewing athletes. Participants in the current study agreed that while men seemed to be more involved in physical hazing, women student-athletes are not immune from participation in hazing. Research has shown that female athletes are increasingly involved in hazing activities (Hoover & Pollard, 1999; McGlone, 2005; DeHaas, 2006; Allen & Madden, 2008). Part of the focus group discussion focused on hazing that takes place secretly. These behaviors were covert, which supports the findings of previous researchers that a majority of hazing happens behind closed doors (Hoover & Pollard, 1999; Allen & Madden, 2008).

The discussion also focused on a number of incidents in the sport media which discussed permanent physical and emotional damage to amateur and professional athletes who were hazed by team-mates. Participants felt this phenomenon, while impactful, was not as important to them as reaching consensus on what hazing means. Participants in the current study, as members of a society where many traditional values have been compromised, have seemingly been anesthetized to the impact of media coverage of hazing. The student-athlete participants, most between the ages of 18 and 24 years old, have been raised in a culture in which the traditional rules of conformity, while still in existence, require more outlandish and dangerous behaviors.

The final topics of discussion focused on penalties for hazing and prevention of hazing, with the participants engaged in a lively debate over who should be held accountable if hazing occurs. With no consensus reached, the conversation then moved to the topic of prevention. Both groups agreed that workshops and expert speakers might raise awareness, but did not feel strongly that those alone would prevent hazing from occurring. This follows research by Langford (2008), who argues that hazing prevention can only be effective as part a comprehensive strategic plan.

The lack of awareness of hazing policies, statutes and consequences is further evidence that perhaps the current definition of hazing, and its subsequent dissemination to student-athletes, is ineffective. The above statements confirm the findings of previous researchers (Allen & Madden, 2008; Hoover & Pollard, 1999) that most-student-athletes are not aware of anti-hazing policies, the definition of hazing and proper penalties or consequences of hazing. These findings confirm that sport is deeply
entrenched in rituals like hazing and that it will be difficult to extract hazing from the games.

A New Definition

The present state of hazing awareness among student-athletes and some coaches and administrators is dismal and can be attributed, in part, to the vague nature of various hazing definitions, the complexity of state anti-hazing statutes (Rosner & Crow, 2002), and a general dismissal of the seriousness of hazing in sport. Constituents in the sport context, despite years of research, education and attempts at prevention, still seem unclear as to whether something as simple as making rookies carry veteran team-mate’s bags to the team bus is acceptable or unacceptable.

On some levels, this confusion is understandable. Langford (2008) contends that a “one-size-fits-all” approach to defining hazing is ineffective, and that an analysis of local hazing activities and beliefs must be incorporated into a strategic anti-hazing plan. In addition, as Allen and Madden (2008) discovered, many college student-athletes were subjected to hazed behaviors in high school, and may carry specific ideas about acceptable and unacceptable behavior with them as they join a college team. Results of the present study confirm these earlier findings. Finally, the understanding of what constitutes hazing is clouded by mixed messages portrayed in the media, whereby acts of initiation and hazing that would most certainly lead to university student-athletes being suspended or criminally charged are laughed at by television news anchors, newspaper reporters and Internet bloggers (Nuwer, 2008).

As previously noted, the most commonly used definition of hazing is

any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers, regardless of the person’s willingness to participate. This does not include activities such as rookies carrying the balls, team parties with community games, or going out with your team-mates, unless an atmosphere of humiliation, degradation, abuse or danger arises (Hoover & Pollard, 1999, p. 4).

Given the aforementioned misunderstanding, it is time to propagate a new definition and framework for hazing in athletics. As noted above, hazing consists of an activity expected of someone joining a group. In the case of athletics, this component of the definition does not apply, as the coaching staff ultimately decides who joins or is part of the team. Therefore, athletic hazing is most often perpetrated by players who do not have control over which rookies remain as part of the team. In essence, a victim can be hazed and still be cut from the team by the coach, or the team-mate can refuse to be hazed and still be kept on the team by the coach.

But while coaches ultimately decide who joins the team, veteran and upperclassmen often decide who is accepted as part of the team. This was reflected among the conversations in the student-athlete focus group of this study, and echoed the sentiment of Holman (2004, p. 53) who noted that,
for new recruits, who so desperately want to belong to this group and to be accepted by veterans whom they in many cases have grown to admire, the power differential mandates their participation in hazing ritual”. Further, Holman (2004, p. 53) suggested that “experiencing initiation is the only way to be accepted, to be successful on the team”.

These factors, when examined collectively, are impactful enough that a new definition of hazing in a sport context is essential before true understanding of the term can be expected by the various athletic stakeholders. Thus, the authors propose a new definition of athletic hazing as follows:

Any potentially humiliating, degrading, abusive, or dangerous activity expected of a junior-ranking athlete by a more senior team-mate, which does not contribute to either athlete’s positive development, but is required to be accepted as part of a team, regardless of the junior-ranking athlete’s willingness to participate. This includes, but is not limited to, any activity, no matter how traditional or seemingly benign, that sets apart or alienates any team-mate based on class, number of years on the team, or athletic ability.

The authors were careful not to include descriptions of every activity that might be construed as hazing for two very important reasons. One, a list of this magnitude would be nearly impossible to adequately compile and update; and two, a comprehensive listing of hazing activities, when presented to student-athletes, might be viewed as an idea bank for future hazing of new team-mates.

The authors acknowledge that positive team-building initiations and rituals have a place in sport. However, hazing of a dangerous, harmful or humiliating nature has no place in sport, or any part of society. It is our hope that this definition, when used as part of a well-conceived, comprehensive and ongoing hazing education and prevention strategy, may help clarify what constitutes hazing activity, and will further the discourse related to the prevention and subsequent elimination of hazing in sport. Future research regarding sport hazing and the subsequent conceptualization and definition should consider a longitudinal approach, which would perhaps include tracking cohorts (or teams) with respect to their understanding and awareness in sport at the college level.

References


