

It's Not Just a Ride Home

A Roundtable Discussion

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Courage First Athlete Helpline

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About the PSA

It's Not Just a Ride Home illustrates how subtle grooming behaviors can escalate into sexual abuse. From the perspective of an athlete-survivor, we see the psychological aftermath of abuse and the struggle to regain normalcy. At the end, we return to the start of the PSA, and this time a teammate intervenes before the situation escalates, demonstrating how education and awareness can serve as prevention.

In the companion roundtable discussion, three experts explore the unique features of sporting environments that enable grooming and abuse. While this conversation acknowledges that every instance of grooming is unique, raising awareness about signs and patterns can safeguard athletes. To tackle the issue of grooming in youth sports, grooming must first be labeled, defined, and discussed.

Grooming: Grooming is the gradual and often subtle blurring of boundaries by an authority figure. A predator will build a sense of trust, and then will often exploit that trust later on to carry out further abuse. Perpetrators can be charming and unassuming and often groom entire communities to trust them. Perpetrators of grooming often make victims feel special, creating further confusion.

Prevention: Education is one of the best prevention methods. If grooming is understood, it can be recognized, and if it is recognized, there can be intervention. This message comes through in the final scene of the PSA, where a teammate steps in, realizing that their coach is acting inappropriately. Education also gives survivors the language to process their experiences, which can lead to disclosure.

Sports as Healing: Although it is paramount that we discuss the danger of grooming, especially in youth sports, the experts also emphasize the positive role sports can play. Margaret Hoelzer shares how swimming was her outlet, reminding us that sport can be a force of healing.

Before You Go

What is grooming, and why can it be difficult to recognize in sporting environments?

At the very end of the PSA, we see a teammate intervene—what do you hope happened next?

Do you have an outlet that allows you to process difficult experiences, the way swimming did for Margaret?

Lessons From the Roundtable

Risks in Athletics: Athletes are encouraged to obey; their bodies are treated like machines, they are rewarded for toughness, and they are often alone with coaches. These factors, among others, create unique vulnerabilities to grooming and abuse. The tie between athletics and identity, and the focus on winning, can also create barriers to reporting if abuse does occur.

Consent: Consent is often discussed in sexual health classes, but the broad definition of consent is not always given. Athletes have the right to give or withhold consent regarding medical treatment, personal space, and training, but they don't always feel comfortable exercising this right.

In Their Own Words

“A lot of these factors that promote abuse in sport are really normalized” (Kilwein, 17:50)

“The environment of sport is obedience” (Miles, 56:26)

“Those folks who are very well trained in recognizing signs of abuse and grooming are not often the people right on the field” (Kilwein, 1:07:26)

“Can a child be really talented and not be exploited by adults?” (Miles, 40:17)

“Each sport is going to have these things where you're desensitized, because it's normal, it's culturally acceptable” (Hoelzer, 29:08)

“There is no perfect survivor” (Kilwein, 6:52)

“I could cry in my goggles, I could beat up on the water, right? I could just sprint as hard as I wanted, every single day” (Hoelzer, 59:53)

Meet the Experts

Dr. Tess M. Kilwein Clinical & Sports Psychologist

Dr. Tyler Miles Clinical & Sports Psychologist

Margaret Hoelzer Olympic Swimmer
& NCAC Spokesperson