

# Coaches Can Play a Huge Role in Ending Hazing on their Teams

By Kayla Smith



## Introduction

Hazing is an issue that can affect many different clubs and groups. Hazing has been prevalent in athletics since before the first World War. Athletic hazing can be seen at all levels of sports from interscholastic, to club, collegiate and even professional. Hazing also does not discriminate when it comes to race, ethnicity, gender or social economic standing.

## Athletic Hazing

Athletic hazing allows the veterans to show dominance over the rookies. Athletics is special in that the coach chooses the team, so athlete veterans look for other ways to have "traditions" or make new comers "a part of the team." Athletic hazing exists among both male and female athletes, across sports, and has even led to deaths of student-athletes.

## A Coach's Role with Hazing

Coaches are the first defense against player behaviors and activities. Coaches have direct connections to their student-athletes and their experiences on the team. Coaches also have the ability to implement team rules and regulations yet little research has been done on the connections between coach's perceptions of hazing and team hazing activities. Student-athletes cannot be held solely responsible for eradicating hazing; students need guidance from their leadership team (coaches and administrators).

## Attitudes about Hazing

If student athletes suspect that the leadership team is accepting of these "traditions," hazing will continue. The language used makes a huge difference, "I don't want to hear about any hazing" is one way of giving a wink and a nod to practices with the understanding that it's okay as long as coaches don't see it or hear about it. It sends a far different message to players when coaches use stronger language, such as, "Hazing will not be tolerated, and anyone caught abusing or humiliating other team members in any way will be severely punished, including the loss of playing time when appropriate, or possible expulsion from the team."

Some administrators and coaches still see hazing as a "tradition" or "rite of passage" and do not believe it is a problem within their teams. Coaches have been known to take part in hazing activities and/or to tell veterans which new members need to be hazed. Administrators look to the coaches to set the example for student-athletes and that cannot be done if they themselves are participating in or condoning specific practices, or fostering a culture of second-class citizenship or worse.

Beliefs that part of our job as educators is to prepare students for life by creating adversity or instilling mental toughness are misplaced. Some coaches and administrators even believe that training students to be part of a team involves bringing them down a peg

or two if they have too much of a “star” demeanor. The team cohesion argument is sound, but multiple studies have found that hazing weakens rather than strengthens cohesion, so the way to go about that needs to be closely examined, and beliefs need to evolve.

### **Coaches as Leaders to Prevent and Stop Hazing**

Coaches are seen as the leaders of a team and are role models for their athletes. That leadership role allows them to set the standard for behavior towards hazing. Coaches need to take advantage of their leadership to prevent and stop hazing. Those that turn a blind eye to hazing activities are implicitly condoning hazing acts. If student-athletes believe their coaches accept hazing they will continue to haze. Coaches can prevent hazing by addressing the issue before it happens. Coaches need to have the conversation about hazing with their student-athletes at the beginning of each year instead of ignoring the situation. Education on the topic needs to be specific and clear about what is and isn't acceptable, what the policies are, and what the consequences will be, and it must be repeated annually.

They can also set-up appropriate team bonding activities that won't lead to hazing and start positive team traditions. Coaches also need to tackle hazing when it occurs and even when they suspect it is occurring. Coaches set the tone and have the authority to stop hazing in its tracks if they take it on as a priority. If a student-athlete knows the coach does not accept it and there will be repercussions they will be less likely to participate.

### **Conclusion**

The role of the coach as a leader of a team provides a special opportunity, not available in all groups, that allows them to prevent and stop hazing. Coaches need to realize that these actions are happening within their teams and have the discussion about why hazing isn't appropriate and how it can have lasting adverse effects. Luckily there is actually research to back this up. Administrators need to look to their coaches to set the example for the student-

athletes. Student-athletes need guidance to stop these behaviors and coaches can give them that guidance.

**NOTE: HazingPrevention.Org is currently developing a detailed coaches' guide to hazing prevention. It will be released in 2018.**

### **About the Author**

*Kayla Smith is a PhD Candidate at the University of Northern Colorado and the current student board member for HazingPrevention.Org. She has been researching hazing for seven years, with a focus on athletic hazing for most of that time. Kayla also interns with the athletics department at UNC in compliance. She hopes to take her knowledge of hazing and its solutions into the athletic industry after graduation.*