



# Clearing the Haze

By Hank Nuwer



When will they ever learn?

When it comes to the serious hazing incidents in school athletics that result in a nationwide scandal, the big question posed again and again recalls the sad refrain from the old ballad “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” Namely, when will they ever learn?

Those lyrics apply to a breaking news story out of Macomb, Illinois. Five rugby players for the Western Illinois University stand charged with hazing and providing alcohol to minors, and more arrests of veterans are imminent. The WIU rookie was fortunate. He drank enough alcohol to hospitalize him, but medical personnel saved his life. Not so fortunate 24 years ago was WIU lacrosse club rookie Nick Haben. He died after passing out following coerced drinking at many stations with a bottle at each checkpoint. His mother, Alice Haben, fought successfully to get a toughened-up hazing law passed, the same one the WIU rugby players now have been charged with.

Mrs. Haben lobbied against tremendous odds to get a then weak and probably unenforceable Illinois law strengthened. Yet today, most of the 44 states with hazing laws are weak and serve as little deterrent. A recent fraternity hazing death in Virginia

saw the hazers get off with \$1,000 fines and no jail time. Even in Florida with the most jail time for a hazing death allowable by state law, most of the defendants in the beating death of Florida A & M marching band victim Robert Champion have plea-bargained for little or no jail time, causing the parents of Champion to complain loudly in media interviews. To date only one perpetrator received even a one-year sentence (although another violated parole and received a four-year penalty). Five A & M band members stand trial beginning June 24 unless they too accept a plea bargain.

Mrs. Haben’s stated goal for her anti-hazing crusade was that no other mother’s son should be lost due to bizarre but common “wrongs of passage” that harken back to the medieval Dark-Age universities in Europe. Nonetheless, she long has retired as an activist with her dream unrealized. A University of Maine hazing survey conducted by Professor Elizabeth Allan and colleagues found that over half of today’s college athletes and organization members have experienced hazing. Equally disturbing—almost half of all high school students will graduate having experienced at least one hazing incident.

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So the answer to the song's refrain, unfortunately, is that when it comes to hazing in sport and other school organizations, "they" never will learn from the tragedies of the past like the high-profile Haben case, says hazing expert David Westol of Limberlost Consulting, Inc. "No, I don't believe that high profile cases will cause an abatement," concedes Westol, a former assistant Michigan prosecuting attorney and a veteran football referee. "Undergraduates have a historical perspective of about six months. Combine that with the typical 'It won't happen to me/us/our team' mentality, plus other rationalizations, and we've barely moved the needle."

So if undergraduates refuse to heed the dangers of hazing that have claimed at least one life a year on college campuses from 1970 to 2014, what has worked or can work to heighten national awareness? "Change comes with a change in culture--what is acceptable and what is not acceptable--on a team," says Westol. "Those dynamics are set in place by the athletic director, the coaches, and university administrators."

Norm Pollard of Alfred University co-authored the then most comprehensive study on collegiate hazing practices in cooperation with the NCAA. While hazing may give athletes a quick-fix bonding, the drawbacks often outweigh the perks, particularly if one or more participants refuse to go along or report the hazing, as state law in Texas, for example, mandates. Pollard stresses that hazing deprives the hazed and hazers alike of true, valid team-



building under the supervision of coaches and respected alums who were former athletes. "Part of the [preferable] process is connecting with 'elders'—older adults with wisdom that can help teach them effective team building and bonding," says Pollard.

At the forefront taking action against high school hazing involving alleged sexual assaults (most recently in Utah, Illinois and Oklahoma sports teams) is the National Federation of High Schools. In addition to sponsoring many conference events on hazing for coaches and student leaders, the NFHS has directed targeted participant support and resources for those who are affected by hazing by creating awareness on the NFHS website (<http://www.nfhs.org/Activity3.aspx?id=3784&terms=hazing>).

"In addition, we have sexual harassment and hazing prevention information in brochure form in French, Spanish and Portuguese," notes assistant director Elliot Hopkins who has written a master's thesis on hazing. "The NFHS has made national resolutions regarding anti-hazing issues with their high profile Citizenship and Equity Committee, the largest non-sport committee in the federation family. Finally, the NFHS has a staff person dedicated to speak to students, parents, administrators and coaches about hazing prevention

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throughout the United State and Canada. “We are committed to stomping out high school hazing—now,” says Hopkins.

Perhaps the best-known consultancy program approved of by the activist organization HazingPrevention.org is the Novak Institute for HazingPrevention.Org, run by campus safety and risk management specialist, Kim Novak. Offering interactive participant programming, the Institute enrolls a wide range of interested professionals such as athletic directors and coaches. According to Novak, what actually works to curtail hazing is “targeting the culture of athletics and recognizing the role of hazing on a team and then utilizing the strong voices such as coaches, team leaders, and alumni to both send a message that hazing will not be tolerated.”

The Institute teaches attendees to implement workable systems to create or change a hazing culture on campus so that hazing is less likely to occur. What works best is when a campus, such as Cornell University, sends a clear message through a task force and administration crackdowns that hazing will not be tolerated in any organization and suspends even high-status groups such as the Big Red men’s lacrosse team and a number of fraternities.

It is important to note that many of the lacrosse veterans who hazed Nick Haben to death were fraternity members, and that

fatal night conducted a number of hazing activities (such as drinking schnapps laced with disgusting foods) at their respective fraternity houses. On the other hand, the dynamics of hazing in a fraternity often can and do differ from an athletic club or team, making one-stop prevention difficult.

While college fraternities often haze during an entire pledging semester, many sports teams that haze do their worst in a single night of “party” events in which drunken rookies become the night’s entertainment. “Prevention, intervention and response efforts need to match the problem in order to be effective,” stresses Novak. What else seems to work? “I also believe the

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implementation of well-designed bystander education programs for athletes has promise,” says Novak. Bystander education encourages those witnessing a hazing who are against the practice for whatever

reason to band together to curb the more enthusiastic proponents of team hazing.

Novak argues that all forms of hazing need to be weeded out, and that coaches should not wink at so-called benign practices such as dressing rookies in outlandish costumes or mandating scalped haircuts for newcomers. A high school or college sports program can begin to prevent the more egregious and dangerous behaviors if it prevents and stops the less violent behaviors that often proceed them. She stresses that each hazing incident offers administrators the crucial process of

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deducing why something happened, not just what happened to prevent the kind of culture that allows an otherwise respected school such as WIU to experience a sports-club tragedy and near-fatality.

"I believe any incident of hazing merits attention, not just those that end in the tragic loss of life or near death," says Novak. "While the death of a student is newsworthy and merits attention, in order to reinforce that hazing is not acceptable in any form, we must also talk about those behaviors that cause damage to teams and team members in other ways. Students will say to me "no one is going to die from this"... and while that may be true, research shows us that [hidden] harm is still done. Once a culture is set that any hazing is ok, then the power to progress to more violent acts is heightened. The in-for-a-penny in-for-a-pound phenomenon that some researchers have identified when studying hazing is very real."

The author of the book *Preventing Hazing*, psychologist Susan Lipkins, recognizes that hazing from high school athletics on up to pro sports is so common that it will

take the kind of paradigm shifts that saw drunk driving, date rape and homophobia to no longer be tolerated by society. Several attempts to introduce federal legislation against hazing have failed, but activists and experts continue to lobby nonetheless.

"Hazing deaths and injury will abate when the culture changes," says Lipkins, a proponent. "The history of social changes, such as segregation, gay rights, etc. have changed after federal laws were enacted and enforced. I believe that a similar events may be necessary in order to get all institutions and individuals to be responsible about hazing." In agreement with that statement is assistant director of education outreach director Mary Wilfert of the NCAA, instrumental in creating hazing awareness programs since 2004. Of particular repugnance have been allegations of sexual assault and even sodomies occurring among high school and college sports teams, and now the federal government has mandated that such cases be tracked along with all campus sexual assaults. Wilfert is hopeful that what may result in an unintended impact on hazing is the focused attention sexual assault is

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getting through Campus SaVE Act, which will kick in athletics depart compliance to include coaches and student-athletes in awareness education, bystander intervention and response. "I think there will be carryover to other violence issues," says Wilfert. "The NCAA is working on a resource to assist with compliance."

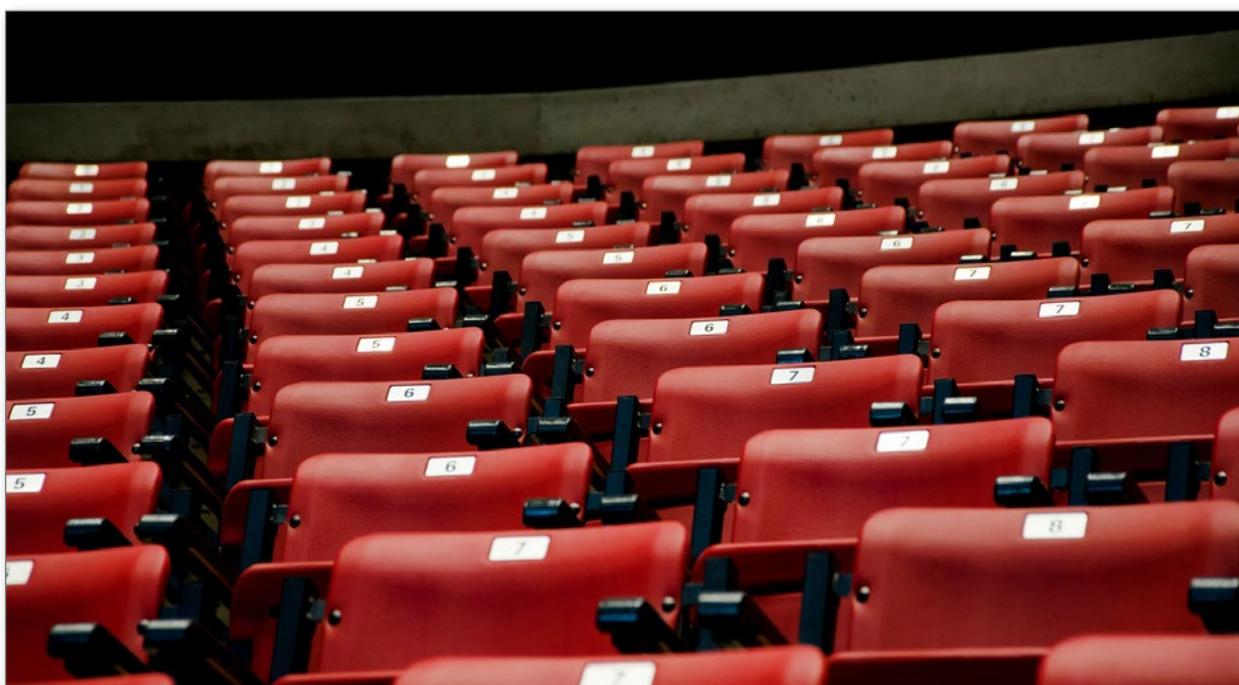
Of course, even after strong federal laws were enacted, they did not necessarily end racial discrimination or anti-gay attitudes, but at least there were places victims could turn to for legal support. One of the more unfortunate outcomes of athletic hazing is that the victim is viewed as a weakling for failing to measure up to the status quo and enduring the hazing that all or most veterans had experienced.

Time and again, the hazing victim quits a team, and in many cases moves to another school to get a fresh start at another school. Case in point occurred in 2012 when a whistle-blowing athlete on

Franklin & Marshall's then-powerhouse women's lacrosse team quit the sport and then transferred schools when a so-called "Freshman Fun Night" resulted in the firing of coaches, punishments for senior players, and ultimate suspension of the season.

The nation saw fallout on an even more dramatic scale in 2013 with the controversial hazing and harassment allegation made by then-Miami second-year player Jonathan Martin against his teammate Richie Incognito. Since an independent NFL inquiry confirmed that the harassment (against Martin and two other veterans) also included charges of racially derogatory speech, Incognito sat out the season and eventually was released by the Dolphins. Martin, however, was signed by San Francisco to play in 2014, reuniting with a former coach at Stanford University, where he played college ball. [With all NFL teams now engaged in OTL and mini-camps, Incognito, 30, remains unsigned for now].

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"I believe the Incognito case is the most important hazing case," says Lipkins. She said she believes that hazing in professional sport sends a highly misguided message to high school and college students that hazing is somehow acceptable as a rite of passage in spite of its often demeaning and dangerous extremes. She hopes the NFL will follow up on the Martin-Incognito affair by pushing teams to set limits for veterans this season. "I say this because if the NFL and its players chose to create a comprehensive hazing prevention program, it is possible that they could change the face of hazing as we know it. The NFL has so much power in terms of the behaviors and emotions of millions of fans that I believe they could use their power in a pro social way with guidance from the appropriate experts!"

In the meantime, at Western Illinois University, campus administrators and rugby adviser Rob Porter now wring their hands in frustration. They stress that all team members signed a pledge never to haze. When will they ever learn?



*Hank Nuwer is the author of four scholarly books on hazing. His 2014 novel, Sons of the Dawn: A Basque Odyssey, concerns itself with harassment and hazing of minorities in the Old West. On a magazine assignment in 1981, he played first base in spring training games for two Montreal Expos minor league teams.*

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