



# FOUL PLAY

Stephanie Pelling explains a recent report on sexual abuse in sport

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) published its report, *'Sexual Abuse in a Sporting Context'*, in June. IICSA, currently chaired by Professor Alexis Jay (OBE), was set up in response to concerns about systemic failings within organisations that led to a proliferation of child sexual abuse. The statutory inquiry launched 15 investigations into a range of organisations which have included County and London Borough Councils, residential schools, religious institutions and custodial settings.

## IICSA focus

We can now add to that list, environments that have resulted in children being subject to sexual abuse in a sporting context. There is no specific institution or sport singled out; the IICSA panel's selection criteria identified 'thematic' situations for investigation (as well as specific identifiable institutions) 'concerning a series of broad areas where multiple institutions may play a role in protecting children from abuse.'

This wide ambit has seen the inquiry explore the stories of victims and survivors within the Truth Project; a

pillar of investigation at the inquiry's disposal, alongside public hearings and research, to hear and learn from the experiences of those who have been subject to child sexual abuse. The powerfully personal testimony of participants has been used to underpin ongoing research and data analysis undertaken by the Inquiry's Research Team.

The 'sports context' IICSA focused on with this particular report covered environments and circumstances where children and young adults participate in organised sport in local clubs, regional institutions, under the auspices of an association, or at a public facility.

Survivors participating in the Truth Project shared their own experiences of sexual abuse from the 1950s to 2010s, and identified a wide variety of sports where abuse had taken place: team sports, individual sports, contact and non-contact sports, those within formally organised clubs, and also where there were private coaching arrangements, as well as abuse which had taken place at public leisure facilities such as sports centres and swimming pools, where abusers would often work or volunteered.

## Abuse in professional football

The report published in June is particularly prescient given that the issue of sexual abuse and the spectre of institutionalised systemic sexual abuse in sport, specifically professional football, has come to the fore in recent years. The Football Association launched its own independent investigation led by Sir Clive Sheldon QC, after multiple former professional players disclosed historic sexual abuse, leading on from the 2016 disclosure of abuse by former Crew, Bury and Sheffield United player, Andy Woodward, who waived his right to anonymity. Other professionals subsequently came forward, including former England and Tottenham midfielder Paul Stewart and ex-Manchester City striker David White.

Since Woodward's disclosure in 2016, over 250 potential suspects were identified, and it has been cited that over 148 clubs were 'affected' by allegations of historic sexual abuse. The Metropolitan Police reportedly received over 100 allegations against 30 clubs, four of which had Premier League status at the time.

The ensuing report, published in 2018, made for uncomfortable reading; revealing not only the extent to which professional football clubs knew about the sexual abuse perpetrated by employees, but also the measures taken to conceal it, often with the imposition of confidentiality clauses surrounding any pay outs made to victims of abuse. Not only did this severely restrict a club's ability to eliminate sexual abuse and ensure that abusers were prosecuted, it also had the exponentially damaging effect of silencing those in need of empathy, support and treatment.

Unsurprisingly, the disclosures and report incited a wider wave of disclosure and introspection in other professional sports.

### Findings of the IICSA report

Sadly, sexual abuse does not pervade only elite athletes; the IICSA report has revealed the extent to which that abuse exists at every level beneath professional sport; including at grass roots level and in the recreational / leisure sphere. Interestingly, the report highlighted the similarities in what are referred to as 'defining factors' in the opportunity, facilitation and concealment of the sexual abuse to other reports which looked at other institutions.

The key findings of report are as follows:

1. Perpetrators actively approached parents outside of the sports context to look after or take children out unsupervised; perpetrators arranged overnight stays with children; a lack of supervision or oversight of adults working in sports; particularly

those operating as leaders or as private coaches or instructors.

2. Physical contact was a more specific enabling factor.
3. The abuse was often perpetrated during overnight stays, trips away and visits to the perpetrator's home, sometimes, but not always, associated with the activities of the sports club or association. Perpetrators also used sports-related rewards, such as allowing the child to play in a more senior team, as a method of grooming or coercion.
4. Some participants experienced psychological and emotional abuse, described physical violence or other forms of abuse by perpetrators in sports contexts.
5. Most participants did not actively or formally disclose their sexual abuse in sports as a child.

To place the IICSA report into context, it is worth looking at the unique circumstances that can present themselves in sport. Close contact between children and adults who are often unfamiliar to them, individual coaching and prolonged time away from parents in an emotional and psychologically stressful environment is taken as the norm, when it would be inconceivable in any other social context.

### Abuse in grass roots sport

Child and adult sexual abuse is a social problem and, like other sectors in the community, sport cannot prevent paedophiles and abusers from gaining entry into the system. While the majority of sports clubs offer excellent opportunities for young people, they can also provide opportunities for adults with an

interest in harmful behaviour to target children and vulnerable adults in their role as coach, volunteer or paid employee. Critically, sports and leisure clubs are often the first places where appropriate, trusting relationships with adults outside of a child's family or school, are first developed.

From a legal perspective, the current framework for the child welfare system in England was established with the Children Act 1989 and its related guidance, including Working Together to Safeguard Children (*Home Office, 1999*). The Act applies to all local authorities and courts, but critically all other organisations, including sporting bodies, are exempt.

Aside from the lack of legal governance, to understand why there is now an apparent proliferation of disclosures regarding abuse in sport, we must look at the specific conditions that can engender the types of practices and exploitation the 1989 Act was seeking to eliminate.

The Sexual Offences Act 2003 was notably amended to introduce the offence of 'abuse of trust', which incriminates an individual over the age of 18 engaging in sexual activity with someone under that age, if they are in a position of trust relative to that person. However, such are the conditions within a physically competitive context that this measure appears to have had limited effect in quelling opportunism for abuse in sport.

Sporting environments routinely revolve around unstable emotional cycles of reward and punishment and in the competitive arena, the cyclical repetition of fear and reprieve and punishment and reward can result in

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an unnatural dependence on a coach which is rarely replicated in any other environment to the same extent. Abusers will usually occupy a position of trust, and coaches can assume an almost omnipotent status in the eye of the athlete, where psychological pressures of succeeding will result in close relationships of extreme power imbalance.

It must also be remembered that abuse in the wider context can take on many forms, including neglect, physical abuse, and emotional abuse, in addition to sexual abuse. The former three can sometimes be hidden among apparently normalised coaching and teaching methods, which would actually constitute psychologically abusive practices in any other context.

With sexual abuse too, sporting environments present an ideal alignment of physical, practical and psychological circumstance to facilitate and conceal sexual abuse. Coaching will often entail physical contact with a child or athlete and situations can be manufactured so that sexual abuse will go unnoticed.

Sexual abuse in its wider parameters is any sexual activity between an adult and a minor, regardless of whether deception was involved, or whether the victim was aware of the abuse or not. Abusers will often engage in a gradual incursion into ambiguous sexual boundaries, and this subtle approach may normalise and hide more obvious forms of abuse as the relationship with the abuser develops.

An experienced paedophile will have developed an ability to groom not just a victim, but also often colleagues, parents, and clubs or

organisations for which they work or volunteer. This creates opportunities to abuse, and also ensure that their practices go undetected, or are overlooked. In circumstances where a victim does make a disclosure, if an abuser has fostered good relations with other adults surrounding that child, then there is every possibility that the disclosure will simply be dismissed.

It is to be expected that some question why, if the extent of abuse in sport, and in particular in professional football, has been so prolific over the last few decades, why so few have come forward with disclosures until recently. The multifactorial reasoning for this is certainly not restricted to professional sport, but is extremely common in all forms of abuse, and was a significant feature in the testimony of survivors participating in the Truth Project.

Abusers will often select a victim via a grooming process in which they identify vulnerable individuals, and may engineer situations to test that person's secrecy and reliability (*Harassment in Sport: www.olympic.org*). The abuser will typically make the victim feel special. In an athletic context, a child or individual may be vulnerable due to their dependence on a coach for career progression, success and a place in a team or squad. In whatever form it takes, the underlying premise of selection and nurturing of the relationship to the advantage of the abuser will be critical in securing compliance and concealment. Restricting access to parents, peers or other potentially protective adults will also ensure that the athlete becomes more isolated and dependent on the abuser. Disclosure in such

circumstances is simply less likely; silencing is part of the abusive process, not separate to it.

Victims of abuse will commonly be concerned that their disclosure will not be believed. It is easily conceivable that some adults will struggle with disclosures, particularly in relation to someone they know, and when they have been groomed by an individual they themselves had trusted, and seemingly held a respected position or position of authority.

In addition to these difficulties, while the effects of abuse are idiosyncratic, victims will often develop psychological problems such as PTSD, avoidance tendencies and dissociation, and these harmful illnesses will further inhibit an individual's capacity to disclose abuse.

**Conclusion**

It is important, in the advent of the IICSA report and indeed the FA report that came before it, that all sports clubs, at grass root level through to national and international professional levels, respond positively at the earliest opportunity to examine their own practices, and learn valuable lessons about the realities of abuse in sport.

Reviews of recruitment and selection, the development and implementation of codes of conduct and ensuring that appropriate procedures are in place for reporting abuse, are important first steps. But it is critical that all institutions continue to raise awareness of this issue through training, and ensure that any disclosures are treated appropriately.

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