HAZING IN SPORT

Throughout history, people have welcomed new members into groups through ceremonies and traditions designed to create a sense of belonging. In sport, initiation rituals are found across many countries and regions worldwide. These practices can play a valuable role in quickly fostering trust and strengthening bonds among participants. While rites of passage are not inherently harmful and can have positive effects on group dynamics, problems arise when these practices cross the line into harmful behaviour. When this happens, the safety and well-being of athletes are at risk, and team unity can be undermined—this is known as hazing.

OVERVIEW

Hazing can be defined as any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or risks emotional or physical harm, regardless of the person's willingness to participate.

Although commonly associated with sports, hazing is a widespread cultural practice found in various institutions, including university fraternities and sororities, police forces, and the military. Hazing typically occurs in group settings and is meant to enforce conformity to group norms and solidify a strict social hierarchy. By intentionally lowering a newcomer's status—and doing so in a public manner—hazing reinforces the power dynamics within a group.

Despite being banned by most sports organizations, hazing remains prevalent at various levels of sport, from amateur to professional. Returning or "veteran" participants often orchestrate hazing practices and promote them as tradition or a rite of passage. New athletes are not fully accepted or recognized as legitimate team members until they have undergone one or more hazing rituals. Regardless of the level, its underlying purpose is to demonstrate a newcomer's willingness to acknowledge and respect the authority of veteran group members.

Hazing vs. Bullying

Though similar in nature, hazing differs from bullying in key ways. Hazing is often linked to initiation rites within school clubs, sports teams, or other organized groups. It is typically presented as a method to foster commitment and is viewed as a necessary step toward inclusion—or the "price" of membership. Bullying, by contrast, aims to exclude an individual from a group and discourage participation. It often begins in early childhood, whereas hazing

usually emerges during adolescence or later, when group identity and social status become more prominent. Despite these differences, both bullying and hazing involve anti-social rather than pro-social behaviour.

PRACTICES

Hazing can incorporate multiple forms of maltreatment and may be either subtle or violent. These practices often occur at team gatherings at the beginning of a sports season and can include:

- Promiscuous or sexually abusive behaviour directed at individuals
- Forced nudity
- Physical assault, such as brandings or beatings
- Theft or involvement in other criminal activity
- Pressure to consume alcohol or drugs
- Eating repulsive or inedible substances
- Having food, liquids, or other forms of waste thrown at individuals
- Body shaving, piercing, or tattooing
- Kidnapping or being abandoned in an unfamiliar location
- Performing humiliating acts in public
- Wearing embarrassing clothing
- Being tied up
- Acting as a personal servant
- Participating in harmful feats of endurance
- Sleep deprivation
- Hygiene restrictions
- Being yelled at, sworn at, or insulted by group members

IMPACTS

Hazing is not harmless fun, a rite of passage, or a tradition or ritual used for team bonding. It can have negative effects on both victims and participants. These effects often lead to feelings of apathy, mistrust, or isolation, rather than bonding and respect. Overall, hazing is prohibited behaviour in sport and can have devastating impacts, including but not limited to:

Psychological Impact - Athletes who experience hazing can develop mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and eating disorders.

Physical Impact - Documented physical effects of hazing range from minor injuries and alcohol poisoning to sexually transmitted infections, concussions, and, in the most severe cases, death or suicide.

Team/Organization Impact - Hazing not only harms the direct victims but can also damage the reputation of teams, organizations, and the broader community.

Given these impacts, it is important for stakeholders to remember that **HAZING IS NOT:**

- ***Fun*** - It is a toxic cycle of harm and humiliation and can be criminal. Referring to hazing as "just fun and games" is unacceptable.
- ***Safe*** - Even when not physically violent, hazing can result in immediate and long-term psychological harm.
- ***Consensual*** - Participation in hazing does not imply true consent. Peer pressure, fear, and coercion are often involved.
- ***Team bonding*** - Harming new athletes undermines team cohesion. Hazing reinforces hierarchical team structures and signals to the person being hazed that they are at the bottom.

WHY HAZING PERSISTS

Despite the negative outcomes associated with hazing practices, there are numerous reasons why they continue to occur in sport. These include:

Normalization
Hazing becomes a normalized tradition, viewed as a necessary rite of passage for joining a team. It can be so ingrained that coaches and administrators may ignore or even participate in these practices. A recent Canadian study indicated that 33% of amateur coaches are aware of hazing rituals occurring in their sport—82% of whom believe that hazing is acceptable. Senior athletes who endure hazing often perpetuate the cycle by hazing newcomers, believing it is part of the team culture and a way to "earn" respect. New athletes may then accept hazing as part of their sport journey, knowing that older teammates endured the same practices.

Acceptance
Hazing is often seen as a necessary step for group acceptance. New athletes endure hazing to prove their dedication and gain approval from veteran players. Non-compliance can lead to social rejection or other harmful repercussions, while participation is viewed as a sign of loyalty and respect, reinforcing conformity and the desire to belong.

Team Bonding
Hazing is sometimes justified as a method of strengthening team unity and ensuring long-term success. Despite its harmful effects, it is often defended as essential for team cohesion. Athletes and coaches may see it as a way to build relationships, strengthen character, and improve performance.

Silence
A code of silence often surrounds hazing, with new athletes fearing retribution if they speak out. Victims remain silent out of fear of harsher treatment or being ostracized by teammates, making it rare for hazing to be reported or challenged.

Career Advancement
The pressure to conform and the desire to advance in sport make newcomers more vulnerable to hazing. Many athletes dedicate their lives to their sport and may be willing to participate in hazing if they believe that refusal could hurt their future opportunities.

Deception
Hazing frequently involves deception. Those who participate may lie to outsiders to protect themselves or others. They may also lie to themselves or teammates by rationalizing the acts as harmless.

PREVENTION

Action is needed to address this deeply ingrained issue that perpetuates harmful behaviour in sport. To shift the culture of hazing and foster positive environments, sport organizations can implement various measures. These include establishing clear policies on acceptable behaviour, offering educational opportunities, creating awareness initiatives, encouraging open and honest dialogue, and ensuring that everyone knows where and how to report hazing incidents. **Particularly important are team-building activities that foster trust and mutual respect.**

Team Building Activities

To promote teamwork, choose group activities that emphasize communication, collaboration, and cohesion. Replace harmful practices that reinforce the veteran/rookie hierarchy with **pro-social, positive alternatives**. The rite of passage and transition onto a team is important—and can be implemented in healthy, inclusive ways. Appropriate activities include:

- ***Sporting Events*** - Attend a local game together—either in your own sport or one your team hasn't seen live before. Consider post-secondary, semi-pro, or other leagues to minimize costs.
- ***Craft Nights*** - Gather to decorate team t-shirts, water bottles, or signs for fans.
- ***Team Retreats*** - Combine goal setting and team-building with activities like hiking, high ropes courses, rock climbing, canoe trips, or non-sport options like laser tag and cooking competitions.
- ***Blindfolded Games*** - Create an obstacle course that one blindfolded teammate must navigate with only verbal guidance. Note: This can also be done with video games for a fun indoor version.
- ***Human Knot*** - Athletes form a tangled circle by crossing arms and holding hands, then work together to untangle without letting go. A simple, cost-effective activity for all ages.
- ***Volunteering*** - Organize group volunteering at a food bank, shoreline clean-up, or meal service. Helping others reinforces teamwork and community values.
- ***Rookie/Veteran Mentorship*** - Pair each new participant with a veteran mentor. This empowers experienced athletes and supports new ones. End-of-season mentorship "handoffs" reinforce leadership.
- ***Other Ideas*** - Movie nights, board games, team dinners, escape rooms, paintball, trivia, karaoke, capture the flag, teammate interviews, or team fundraisers.

Remember - Hazing is never acceptable and must not be condoned by anyone in sport. Sports that haze tolerate exclusion, misconduct, and discrimination, and rely on silence and secrecy. In contrast, sports that reject hazing foster respect, camaraderie, cohesion, communication, and trust.

Break the cycle. Promote positive team-building.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

All sport participants in Manitoba share a responsibility to ensure the safety of all individuals involved by preventing hazing practices. Education is critical to understanding and preventing hazing in sport. We can eliminate hazing and create a safe environment through increased awareness of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Several organizations have developed accessible educational content to guide and support sport stakeholders on this topic. In addition, Sport Manitoba provides actionable advice through our Safe Sport Line for anyone who has experienced or knows someone who may have experienced hazing in sport.

EDUCATION

Various courses, webinars, and workshops are available to help Manitobans understand hazing, prevent it, and create positive environments in sport. These include, but are not limited to:

Respect in Sport for Activity Leaders

Coaches play a critical role in eliminating hazing and bringing young athletes together in ways they will remember for the right reasons. The online *Respect in Sport for Activity Leaders* training, which has been a mandated program for Manitoba coaches since 2007, provides education on how to recognize, understand, and respond to issues of hazing. It also offers team-building strategies to foster positive team culture and enhance sport experiences.

Respect in Sport for Parents

Parents are key stakeholders in the safe sport movement. The online *Respect in Sport for Parents* program outlines best practices for parental behaviour and child safety. The program includes an overview of hazing, examples of hazing practices, and practical tools to help parents prevent and respond to hazing incidents in sport.

Safe Sport Education for Youth

A new initiative from Volleyball, Swimming, and Athletics Canada, the *Safe Sport Education for Youth* program offers age-appropriate, free, and accessible content for youth athletes across Canada. The program includes eight engaging and concise modules on various safe sport topics, including hazing. Youth will learn what hazing is, what it may look like, why it occurs, and how they can help eliminate it.

EndHazing.ca

EndHazing.ca is a privately operated consulting service specializing in hazing prevention and intervention in sport organizations. With decades of experience, EndHazing.ca supports sport bodies in implementing best practices to address and prevent hazing. In addition to working with organizations, they offer tailored in-person education workshops for athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators.

SAFE SPORT LINE

Sport Manitoba was the first provincial sport leader to implement the services of a toll-free support line for abuse, harassment, bullying, and hazing in sport. By offering the Safe Sport Line, we strive to enable everyone, especially children, to be free from harm and create a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment for Manitobans in sport.

If you or someone you know is experiencing hazing in sport, and you need someone to talk to, call the Safe Sport Line at 1-833-656-SAFE (7233) or use the email address help@safesportline.ca. The Safe Sport Line offers additional support or advice on navigating your situation in a transparent, safe, and confidential manner.

When you call or email the Safe Sport Line, a trained staff person with decades of experience in sport-related abuse prevention, risk management, dispute resolution, and hazing intervention will help to answer your questions, address your concerns, and offer resources and guidance for actionable steps that you can take toward a safe sport experience. Call or email the Safe Sport Line anytime. All messages are responded to within 24 hours.

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