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Teams Aim to Tackle Abuse before it Happens

By Frank Fitzpatrick, The Philadelphia Inquirer

When David Greenwald was the Philadelphia Eagles psychologist in the 1990s, it was like being Donovan McNabb's backup: The job's title was more impressive than the job.

Mostly, he was expected to wait for a player to take the step of seeking help, whether he was battering his wife or had some other emotional problem.

"I hung around the locker room one day a week," Greenwald said. Management "wanted me to try to get friendly with the players. The theory was that they'd become familiar with me and then, if they had a problem with domestic abuse . . . they'd come and talk to me."

Although it wasn't a particularly sophisticated technique for curbing what, then and now, has been a significant sports problem, the Eagles weren't alone in employing it.

Domestic-abuse cases involving athletes traditionally were handled as public-relations problems.

Players occasionally were steered toward counseling. Mostly, though, the attitude was more like what former Atlanta Braves pitcher John Rocker said last week to the Chicago Tribune of his sensitivity training in 2000.

"The guy told me when I got there I had to show up to make it look good for people," said Rocker, who was ordered into counseling after making racist, xenophobic comments to Sports Illustrated.

"So after about 15 minutes I left and walked right out of the room and it satisfied the powers that be."

Amid the outcry stirred by the June 23 arrest of pitcher Brett Myers and the Phillies' reaction to it, teams and athletes themselves increasingly seem ready to tackle domestic violence.

College conferences, minor-league baseball teams, and even some professional sports franchises like the Boston Red Sox, New York Jets and Toronto Blue Jays have begun to school their players in techniques to avoid abuse.

New York Yankees manager Joe Torre and Red Sox outfielder Gabe Kapler each have established foundations aimed at “ending the cycle of domestic violence.” Telephone company Verizon and the Cubs have teamed up for a similar effort in Chicago.

While the organization remains mum on the Myers issue, a source with the Phillies indicated that the pitcher and his wife are undergoing counseling through the team’s Employee Assistance Program.

EAPs remain the vehicles through which most teams continue to deal with troubled employees. Federal law requires that details be kept private.

“It’s likely (Myers) will get treated on an outpatient basis,” Greenwald said. “He’d get intensive individual counseling and then they’d both undergo couples’ counseling, all aimed at identifying the underlying causes of the problem.”

Baseball, like the NBA and NHL, does not have specific league-wide punishments or programs to deal with domestic violence. The onus instead falls on individual franchises.

“We don’t have a policy, per se,” said Pat Courtney, a Major League Baseball spokesman.

That soon could change. The NFL already has a domestic violence program, with penalties and treatments much like those it requires for drug offenders. Soon other pro leagues, some of which have drug programs, may also extend those policies to domestic violence.

The NFL adopted its off-the-field violence policy in 1997 and now schools all rookies in it and other personal-behavior issues. It mandates a psychological evaluation along with fines and punishments for those convicted of violent offenses.

Other leagues have begun the process of educating their next generation.

At their most recent gathering, MLB’s farm-system directors inquired about establishing courses for domestic abuse prevention for young baseball players.

In addition to the individual pro teams that now require such sessions for players, hundreds of colleges, including the entire Southeastern Conference, mandate them as well.

“We try to teach our youngsters to cope with athletic issues and to cope with academic issues,” SEC commissioner Mike Slive said. “Now it’s time we taught them to cope with emotional issues.”

The SEC’s training was conducted by MVP, Mentors for Violence Prevention, an organization that is part of Northeastern University’s Center for the Study of Sports in Society.

“It used to be that when we’d walk into a clubhouse for a session, you could see very quickly that these guys weren’t happy to be here. They’d be saying ‘What’s this crap?’” said Jeff O’Brien, who directs the MVP program.

“But once they see that we’re not there to offer them tips, that the process is a dialogue, their attitudes change. I’d say that in 90 percent of the teams we deal with, there are people who now realize this is something important to know.”

The MVP has had success by stressing the “bystander approach” – principles that try to mimic the “got-your-buddy’s-back” code prevalent in the male-dominated worlds of the military and athletics.

“We’re like spokes on a wheel; we all need to work together,” O’Brien said. “If you see a teammate or a buddy is having a problem, step in and take some action to prevent it. Be your brother’s keeper.”

O’Brien suggested the Phillies, who delayed dealing with Myers’ arrest, even allowing him to pitch a day later, didn’t do the player any favors.

“What concerned me was when I saw that the team said it was going to wait until all the facts were in. That doesn’t work,” he said. “If a player really needs help, then get him help now.”

While abuse cases involving athletes like Myers generate the most headlines, no one can say for sure whether the problem is more prevalent in the world of athletes. O’Brien said statistics don’t bear that out.

According to Greenwald, studies on the subject are unclear, but the natural temperament of successful athletes might well make abuse more likely.

“These are extremely competitive people who have been taught to never take no for an answer,” he said, “and to never walk away from a challenge.”

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