

# College athletes with abusive coaches more willing to cheat

July 7 2014

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College athletes who have abusive coaches are more willing to cheat in order to win than players with more ethical coaches, according to new research published by the American Psychological Association and based on surveys from almost 20,000 student athletes at more than 600 colleges across the country.

"Ethical behavior of coaches is always in the spotlight," said lead researcher Mariya Yukhymenko, PhD, a visiting research associate at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Our study found several negative effects related to abusive coaches, including a willingness by [players](#) to cheat to win games."

Men's teams were much more willing to cheat than women's teams, according to the study, and men's football, basketball and baseball teams reported the highest willingness to cheat at large universities in Division I of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, where players are often under intense pressure to win.

"Many student athletes in Division I schools are looking to go into professional sports after graduation," Yukhymenko said. "They are striving to do well so that they will be noticed, and they really want to score more points and bring victories to their teams."

Both men's and women's basketball teams were much more likely to report they had abusive coaches than any other sport, although the reasons weren't clear from the study, said researcher Thomas Paskus,

PhD, a quantitative psychologist and the NCAA's principal research scientist. Almost one-third (31 percent) of male basketball players and one in four female basketball players at Division I schools said their head coaches put them down in front of others, according to the [survey results](#). "I think that raises some questions about the culture in that sport, even though there are a lot of coaches doing it the right way," Paskus said.

Questions about the ethical or abusive behavior of coaches were added to the Growth, Opportunities, Aspirations and Learning of Students (GOALS) survey conducted in 2010 by the NCAA. The quadrennial survey will be conducted again in fall 2014. The survey included 19,920 athletes (40 percent women) from 609 colleges, representing 11 men's and 13 women's sports sanctioned by the NCAA. The research, based on a detailed analysis of the survey results, was published in the APA journal *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*.

Abusive behavior by college coaches has been a growing concern, following several high-profile incidents of coaches being fired or sued by players for alleged abusive behavior, including screaming insults, shoving or kicking athletes. This study looked only at verbal abuse by asking players whether a coach ridiculed or put them down in front of others. The study did not determine whether abusive coaches actively encouraged or permitted cheating by their teams, but there was a correlation between abusive coaches and an increased willingness by players to cheat in order to win.

Players who said they had abusive coaches also were more likely to report that their coaches didn't create an inclusive team environment and that both their coaches and teammates were less respectful of people from other racial or ethnic groups and less accepting of differing viewpoints and cultures, according to the study.

"Coaches are role models for their athletes," Yukhymenko said. "The way they behave is observed by student athletes and is often repeated."

Players with more ethical coaches were more likely to be happy about their college choice and feel more included on their teams. Some players were willing to cheat even if they had an ethical coach, but the likelihood of cheating increased for players with abusive coaches, the study found.

The perceived ethical climate at the colleges had surprisingly strong correlations with whether athletes were willing to cheat, Yukhymenko said. Athletes were less willing to cheat if they reported that their school strongly valued academic honesty and encouraged student athletes to be positive [role models](#) and practice good sportsmanship, the study found.

The researchers recommended that college athletic departments conduct workshops or other programs to improve ethical leadership by coaches. "The impact that athletic coaches have on their athletes potentially affects everything from retention and chances of graduation to how these [student athletes](#) coach future generations of young athletes," the study noted.

**More information:** "The Relationship Between Ethical and Abusive Coaching Behaviors and Student Athlete Well-Being," Mariya A. Yukhymenko, PhD, University of Illinois at Chicago; Thomas S. Paskus, PhD, National Collegiate Athletic Association; and Michael E. Brown, PhD, Pennsylvania State University-Erie; *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology*; online July 7, 2014.

Provided by American Psychological Association

Citation: College athletes with abusive coaches more willing to cheat (2014, July 7) retrieved 20

April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-07-college-athletes-abusive.html>

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