

Research shows youth sports hazing victims often in denial

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The true incidence of hazing in youth sports is unknown because victims don't report the mistreatment or fail to recognize it as hazing, according to a review of scientific literature on the subject by a team of Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) researchers.

One study revealed that of the 47 percent of student athletes who had been hazed, only 8 percent labeled the behavior as hazing. Another study found that college students perceived hazing as having more positive benefits than negative effects.

However, a third study cited in the review noted that 71 percent of students who had been hazed reported negative consequences ranging from physical to psychological issues.

"The numbers are striking," said Alex Diamond, D.O., MPH. "Very few—if they report it at all—will identify it as hazing. Then if you ask what actually happened to them or for them to describe the events, overwhelmingly, the description turns out to be hazing. We need to educate athletes to understand what hazing is versus what positive team building is."

Diamond, an assistant professor of Pediatrics and Orthopaedics and Rehabilitation who specializes in sports medicine, was the lead author of the article published recently in the *British Journal of Sports Medicine*. VUMC colleagues Todd Callahan, M.D., MPH, Kelly Chain, M.D., and Gary Solomon, Ph.D., co-authored the report.

Hazing could be a result of the failure to address the [mental health](#) of high school and [college athletes](#), Diamond said.

Last year, a special [task force](#) he served on issued a lengthy and comprehensive [consensus statement](#) for recognizing and assisting high school athletes with psychological concerns. The "Interassociation Recommendations for Developing a Plan to Recognize and Refer Student-Athletes With Psychological Concerns at the Secondary School Level: A Consensus Statement" followed one for college athletes published by the same task force in 2013.

Hazing is addressed in both publications along with several other scenarios that could affect student-athlete mental health.

"I think mental health is the next big area that we in [sports medicine](#) need to tackle because we have ignored it for so long," Diamond said.

Student-athletes are more at risk for mental illnesses, he said, because of several stressors, including the pressure to perform and developing a self-identity dependent upon a particular sport.

"Suicide is the third leading killer of college athletes," Diamond said.

"That's crazy to me—the third leading cause—and we almost never talk about it."

Providing better education and developing more awareness about [mental health issues](#) and [hazing](#) can change the alarming statistics, he said.

"When done properly, sports are an amazing area for someone to help manage stress," Diamond said. "It is a great stress reliever. It is a great place for dealing with anxiety and depression, to be successful, to be around teammates and peers who truly build you up and support you and to help you learn good time management skills. But if not done properly,

someone can get lost in that realm."

Provided by Vanderbilt University Medical Center

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