

## Systematic Abuse

On October 13, 2013, The Sunday Star-Ledger ran a front page article written by Matthew Stanmyre entitled *"In high school, a blurry line between coaching, abuse"- Many fear that once common tactics could now lead to allegations of bullying. A link to the article is below:*

[http://www.nj.com/hssports/blog/football/index.ssf/2013/10/bullying\\_accusations\\_in\\_high\\_school\\_sports\\_blur\\_lines\\_between\\_good\\_coaching\\_and\\_abusive\\_tactics.html](http://www.nj.com/hssports/blog/football/index.ssf/2013/10/bullying_accusations_in_high_school_sports_blur_lines_between_good_coaching_and_abusive_tactics.html)

If you're not aware, NJ first enacted anti-bullying legislation sometime in the early 2000's in response to tragic school shootings. The law, widely referred to by those in the teaching profession as HIB (Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying) was expanded in 2011 after Rutgers University student Tyler Clementi's tragic suicide brought the seriousness of cyber-bullying to the forefront of society.

Whether you are a player, a parent, or a coach, we've all seen and heard instances over the years of individuals who probably shouldn't be in the coaching profession. Some, in fact, could be guilty of legitimate abuse and those individuals whom I believe are in a very small minority should be held accountable both personally and professionally.

In his column, Stanmyre points out, *"With the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act in place and memories of the Mike Rice coaching scandal at Rutgers lingering, the line between motivational coaching and abusive tactics is blurrier than ever in high school sports."*

However, he later explains, *"Officials from the state's governing body for high school athletics say they're fielding more complaints about coaches than ever before, while some coaches say the recent emphasis on bullying has allowed vengeful parents angry over playing time an easier avenue to go after their jobs."*

In my book **Our Time- A High School Baseball Coaches Journey**, I referred to this exact type of vengeful behavior on behalf of disgruntled parents. Hoping to raise awareness on what has become epidemic, I referred to it as "systematic abuse." In short, systematic abuse is when a parent uses the system by any means necessary to put all of the actions of a coach under a microscope with the intent of twisting who he or she really is.

Below is an excerpt from my book demonstrating systematic abuse:

*But the disgruntled parent seldom, if ever, stops. While trying to re-strategize, they will try to dig up any form of dirt on a coach that they possibly can. And if a "witch hunt" is well orchestrated, you can probably find something on even the most honorable and ethical coach if you try hard enough and put your own spin on it.*

*For example, every coach in the country at some point has made his players run. The parent who is in the process of re-strategizing their attack on a coach will twist what would normally be considered to be ordinary conditioning into an allegation that the coach unmercifully "corporally punished" his players. There is usually no end to this type of systematic abuse toward coaches, as it often goes on and on.*

*I had seen it happen in countless communities and always knew to never corporally punish a player or to ever utter a curse word. If I had to literally bite my lip or say "dang it," I would. I never wanted to give parents any ammunition whatsoever outside of their playing-time complaints, but that was never easy to do when people were trying to put all of a coach's actions under a microscope with the intent of twisting who he really was or what he really did.*

*In fact, one former coach who is one of the most well-respected coaches that I know was a victim of this exact kind of systematic abuse. One of his players had played very sparingly and failed to meet the minimum number of innings played in order to earn a varsity letter. Therefore, he followed the criteria outlined by the school athletic department as he always had and did not grant him one. The player's mother was the school superintendent's secretary. The administration overruled the coach's decision and awarded the player a varsity letter. The coach was fired soon after for what the superintendent claimed was insubordination for conducting a practice on Good Friday. No pun intended, he had practiced religiously on Good Friday during each season in his lengthy and highly successful career. He had also always excused any player in the event of a religious conflict. In all those other seasons he had always received high praises for coming in to work with his players on that morning and giving them extra reps. What had always been seen as a testament to his work ethic and dedication was now considered to be a form of insubordination and the reason that his supporters were told why he was fired. What had started out as a complaint about a varsity letter eventually turned into an attack about a virtuous man's religious beliefs and personal integrity. This entire travesty was like systematic abuse on steroids! Sadly, in the end, it was systematic removal.*

Most coaches who I know and/or coach against are good people, good human beings who want what's best for the student-athletes under their charge. They care about the lives of their players off the field and have no intentions other than to help them. They invest endless hours trying to coach them up for very little pay in return. They serve as role models who teach them right from wrong, promote them to local media, nominate them for conference, county, and state recognition, and go out of their way to help them get into colleges of their choice. I'm also certain that if they ever learned that one of their players was being bullied according to what is outlined in the Anti-Bullying Act, they would be the first to step in and defend them and also request that school administrators help offer appropriate measures of protection.

Is the fact that state officials are fielding more complaints about coaches than ever before an indication that countless coaches in NJ are now guilty of committing legitimate abuse? Or is it far more likely that the new Anti Bullying Laws and comparisons to the Mike Rice scandal have now expanded the system and provided parents with additional means to "systematically abuse" coaches?

When a coach is systematically abused, he or she at that moment becomes a victim of abuse and is left with a feeling no different from a student who has been harrassed, intimidated, and bullied. In the event that they are fully exonerated, they have no recourse and there is no penalty or consequence toward the accuser for their unfounded allegation. If you've never been a coach or a teacher, please take a moment to consider that in some cases the accuser doesn't even need to attach a name to their allegation. That's the system and it gets played like a fiddle far too often.

I have talked to my own high school coach, Mr. Jack Lynch and we agreed that he would not be able to do some of the things he did back then today. He was also the greatest influence in our adolescent lives outside of our own parents. What some now refer to as abuse used to be called coaching.

My sentiments about Mr. Lynch, who was inducted into the NJSCA Hall of Fame in 2012 and whose number 21 is retired at Cedar Grove High School, are identical to what [Moneyball](#) author Michael Lewis, described in [Coach: Lessons on the Game of Life](#). Lewis highlights the struggles his high school coach, Billy Fitzgerald faced when dealing with today's highly sensitive kids and their parents. As "Coach Fitz" is viscosly attacked by parents, Lewis attempts to honor the difference that he made in his and several teammates lives by naming the school gym after him.

Interestingly, as parents continued to depict Coach Fitz to be a more evil form of Darth Vader, one former player in particular credits him as the individual who made him a man and instilled a certain toughness in him that he still draws upon today. That former player happens to be Denver Broncos quarterback Peyton Manning, who believes Fitz's influence factored in largely in helping him to become an NFL MVP and a Super Bowl champion.

It's a shame that an ever growing litigious society now makes student-athletes less likely to be influenced in the same way that Manning was influenced by Coach Fitz. It is the exact kind of influence

that my high school teammates and I experienced that helped us to foster adulthood at a time when we truly needed it.

Even more alarming are the growing number of coaches, some of whom I know personally who have chosen to leave the profession in order to protect their reputations if not their teaching certificates after coming under similar fire to that described in Stanmyre's article. Equally alarming to me is an email that I recently received from John McCarthy, professor at Montclair State University, who is very active in educating sports parents at the Yogi Berra Museum and Learning Center. John expressed his concern that students in his coaching class are afraid to enter the coaching profession because of what they've heard, and seen, about over-involved parents. His firm belief is, we, coaches, ADs etc. need to change the narrative and make attempts to regain control over parents through seminars similar to the ones that he will be conducting at the Yogi Berra Museum this spring.

In the course of opening up that dialogue, perhaps this question can be raised. What has happened to our culture and society when a man like Billy Fitzgerald, a man who touched Peyton Manning's life as much as anyone including his father Archie, and a man who most alumni agree should have a building named after him, suddenly became a ruthless ogre unfit to work with teenagers?

If quality coaches continue to leave our profession, and top flight candidates become reluctant to enter into our profession, one can only wonder who that may leave to coach the kids?

As I digress, I never met Coach Fitz but his words continue to resonate with me,

*"All this is about a false sense of self-esteem. It's now bestowed on kids at birth. It's not earned. If I were to jump all over you today, you would be highly insulted and deeply offended. You would not get that I cared about you."*

Lewis, Michael. Coach: Lessons on the Game of Life. New York. W.W. Norton, 2005. Print