



BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE

Preventing Hazing on Your Team

"Hazing is the practice of rituals and other activities involving harassment, abuse or humiliation used as a way of initiating a person into a group."

– Merriam-Webster unabridged dictionary, 2010

The first step in preventing hazing on your team is to understand what it actually means. Many people think of "hazing," only in its most extreme forms, such as pressuring new players to engage in dangerous activities as initiation to the team.

In the thousands of workshops for coaches and athletes that Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA) conducts, we ask people to reflect on their experiences with hazing and their team's or school's "traditions." Opinions differ about whether or not these constitute hazing:

- Requiring freshmen (or other new players) to always carry equipment.
- Making all of the new players get a specific haircut.
- Pressuring new players to wear embarrassing clothes.

Some coaches feel pressure to maintain such traditions. Players say things like, "I had to do these things when I was a freshman, and now it's their turn."

It takes a strong (student or adult) leader to reconsider these traditions and change them, when necessary. In our workshops, some athletes who were initiated this way say it was no big deal; others say they really did not like it. When we ask, "So, why are you now doing this to other people?" it can be an a-ha moment, as players see they have the power to change things.

For those who maintain that hazing brings athletes closer together and helps with team bonding, we share an Alfred University study reporting that 71% of students subjected to hazing report negative effects, such as getting into fights; being injured; doing poorly in school; having difficulty eating, sleeping, or concentrating; or feeling angry, confused, embarrassed or guilty.

However, there are ways to positively initiate new team members, many of which we have learned from athletes and coaches in our workshops:

- 1) Pair new members of the team with more senior members to create a "Big-Brother" or "Big-Sister" program.** Big-Brothers/Sisters take responsibility for the new members and teach them what they need to know to succeed on the team.
- 2) Create a tradition around new players getting their uniforms.** This can be a symbolic moment they always remember. The coach or captain might talk about what it means to represent the team/school when wearing this uniform and then welcome the new players to the "family."

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Preventing Hazing on Your Team, continued

- 3) **Kick the season off with an unusual whole-team activity.** Most high school sports have rules about when they can officially start practicing, so for example, some cross country teams set out on a team run with flashlights and headlamps at 12:01 AM on their first official practice day.
- 4) **Engage in activities outside of your sport together.** This might be as simple as cooking dinner or going camping together. Perhaps your team attends another sport's game together.

Regardless of your team's traditions, it is important to prevent hazing. In the moment, find the courage to be an "up-stander," who stands up for teammates who are being hazed and ends any humiliating or harmful treatment. If you feel at risk confronting the hazing alone, seek help (most often from an adult) as soon as possible.

PCA hopes that adults (coaches, parents and sports leaders) reading this article might come away with questions. Perhaps you're thinking about your team's or school's traditions in a new way. Use this as a chance to talk with your fellow coaches and athletes about the kind of culture you want to create and be intentional about it. Breaking the cycle of a negative tradition may not be easy, but this may be one of the most important leadership moves you can make.