

# Ten survivors' and bystanders' observations regarding bystander behaviors in situations of interpersonal violence and abuse in sports

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## Introduction

It is time to go beyond heralding the importance of attention for safeguarding policies in the field of sports. At this time in the development of the field, scholars are well aware of the different forms of violence and abuse against athletes (e.g., Parent & Fortier, 2017), the severity and prevalence of the problem (e.g., Vertommen et al., 2016), the “most-likely” perpetrators (Vertommen et al., 2017: 172), and the minimum policy requirements to ensure safe sports environments at local sports clubs (e.g., Reitsma et al., 2021).

In our view, the focus on bystanders and bystander interventions is the next step to determine how coaches, parents, local sport club managers, peer athletes, and others involved at a local sports club can play a vital role in ensuring a violence- and abuse-free sports setting.

This factsheet addresses a qualitative in-depth understanding of the dynamics of bystander behavior through the eyes of survivors of abuse in sports and entourage members. It offers ten valuable observations which are useful for improving bystander interventions for the promotion of safe sports environments.

## Methodology and definitions

The observations are derived from interviews with survivors (n=2), a group conversation with survivors (n=3), and a focus group with survivors (n=3) and entourage members (n=1) of cases of athlete abuse and interpersonal violence in sports.

Including survivors' voices is important for the scientific progress of the field of violence and integrity in sports. The value of survivors for scientific progress is best described by a quote from one of the participants: “... survivors understand the blind spots that people commonly have regarding abuse and how it can look in sports; simply because we were walking right in the trap of the perpetrators.”

With the permission of the participants, we recorded the sessions (284 minutes) and transcribed them. After the meetings, the transcribed documents were shared with the participants, to check for inconsistencies. All participants agreed to the usage of the data for the Erasmus+ Safe Sport Allies project. The observations are derived inductively; through open and axial coding of the transcripts, observations emanated from the collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The qualitative analyses of the data led to the distinction of ten aspects that need to receive attention in the development and improvement of bystander interventions.

We hope the observations not only contribute to the field of violence and integrity in sports but also help those who are responsible for ensuring a safe sport environment at local sports clubs. What follows are the ten observations.

## 1. Warning signs and attention

The participants' first observation is that athletes adopt several coping strategies when experiencing forms of interpersonal violence and abuse. These coping strategies can be warning signs for bystanders. One participant described how he actively tried to avoid having to go to soccer practice:

*"... the episodes of abuse in my team happened over a period of a few months. Every Tuesday and Thursday after the group training, six teammates started touching me on intimate parts of my body. To escape the bullying and violence, I decided to tell my parents that I still got homework to do. I knew that, as a consequence, I would not be in the starting eleven the next Saturday. I also made sure that I forgot my towel so that I did not have to shower after training. At the end of the season, I had to pay 15 euros to the group activity jar since it costed me 50 eurocents as a punishment whenever I forgot my towel. During the season, no one asked if there was something going on with me, while this could have been an evident question after forgetting my towel more than twenty times."*

Participants agreed that there is *"... no specific type of behavior by which you can detect that a person is experiencing incidents of abuse."* Victims of abuse do not always behave differently. During the time of abuse, they just act, or try to act, as normal as possible. Two survivors, however, point out that there are specific signs to which bystanders could have paid attention to:

*"... in our group, teammates could have gotten a sense of what was going on simply by looking at how I responded to specific friendly touches or moments of attention from my perpetrator—their coach—during training sessions."*

*"... it is remarkable that none of the parents of my teammates, who joined us every weekend at the matches and the trainings, who knew what I am capable of, did not ask me if*

*something was going on in my life when I underperformed on the pitch. They were only interested in their own kids' development and did not have an eye for teammates that struggled. Just a simple question or gesture would have helped me."*

According to several participants, the best way to approach a young athlete whom you expect experiences abuse is to ask open questions, without any judgment. When the person opens up to you, ask if there is anything you can do. Never blame the child. However, some victims are not yet ready to disclose what they are going through, even if people ask them if anything bad has happened to them:

*"... I have carried the secret for 25 years with me. I did not disclose to anyone. But if a sports parent had asked and reached out to me about what is going on, I am not sure if it would have solved the situation since I did not feel I was ready to share my secret."*

## 2. Climate of secrecy

A second observation is that perpetrators of athlete abuse often establish a climate of secrecy, making it difficult to detect a case of abuse. All survivors described the incremental process of gaining trust and pushing boundaries before a "big" incident of abuse happened: *"... it went in different episodes."* These are typical elements of a grooming process (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005).

One survivor described the incremental process of the coach–athlete abuse:

*"... he really made sure that he gained my trust; we had the same ethnical background, therefore he recognized a lot of the things I culturally liked—like good cooking. From the beginning, he highlighted the big potential I had to become a big athlete. At a young age, he also made sure that I got in contact with guys who already had a contract at the club. In this way, I believed that he really cared for me and would help me to become a professional player. From time to time, I spent the night at*

his place, but he told me that also other players did that. His sons were also always home, so I did not see any danger in that. But more and more I grew dependent on him, and he isolated me from the others on the team. The build-up happened slowly and took months. Then, one day before an important selection match, we were alone at his house. Of course, he had planned this moment. Not immediately, but step by step, that evening he came closer and closer. Just like a roaring lion, he forced himself on top of me.”

Another survivor described in much detail how, within the team, a climate of “what happens in the locker room, stays in the locker room” emerged:

“... we were a team of 15-year-olds. Early in the season, someone ignited fireworks in the dressing room. Although the janitor was furious at the team, the coaches responded that it was just a case of boys being boys. For six teammates this was the moment that they realized that they could do whatever they wanted without being stopped by the coaches. I became the target of the bullying behavior. Where it first started with throwing sand and clay at me after I had showered, the incidents grew bigger and bigger. They touched me on my intimate parts or twerked against my butt. Two times a week at the training and once a week on a Saturday, for a period of 6 months, the abuse continued. At a certain point, the six perpetrators felt so invincible that they could hold my arms and legs, while they jerked me off against my will. Other teammates passively watched, knowing that if they spoke up or intervened, they could be the next ones that would be quartered. For months, a culture was developed of ‘do not snitch otherwise you are next.’ Our coaching staff did not know, because they were never in the dressing room, as protocol tells, and no one spoke up about it until my parents found my diaries.”

The participants did not think that there are clear ways to observe incidents of abuse, unless by accident a bystander catches a

perpetrator red-handed: “... in that sense, I think it is really hard to see it happen because the perpetrators who have wrong intentions are so sneaky, calculative, so filthy, that they really pick out the moments that others will not see what they do to their victims.”

Another participant said how difficult it also can be for a bystander to report a case of abuse because a perpetrator or a club can manipulate a bystander not to report a case:

“. . . I am not sure if I would have reported a case. Sometimes people really pressure you not to speak up, like if you speak up or say something about it to a third party, then you will be sacked, or I will do something to myself that you do not want to be responsible for. Sometimes you are really blackmailed. So, for a bystander, it is sometimes also not that simple.”

### 3. Self-blame and nonreporting

Observation three is about self-blame. Self-blame is one of the most toxic parts of the abuse. Victims of abuse typically blame themselves for the abuse rather than putting responsibility with the perpetrator(s). Self-blame withholds a victim from opening up easily or filing a report.

“... at that time, I did not want to reach out to anyone. It cost me years—years before I finally wanted to admit that he crossed a line and had perverse intentions. That was quite a step for me to admit that. When the abuse happens, you downplay it. It is not his intention to violate me. I see it wrongly. Maybe I provoked it. Now, I know these thoughts are wrong. But the doubt and mostly self-blame made me not share my negative experiences with anyone.”

“... before the penny had dropped that he was abusive and that it was completely not my fault, I have had so much self-guilt. I was upset about myself, why I had not said that he has to take his hands off me, and that kind of responses, these negative thoughts about my own nonresponse made that I felt I was

*responsible for the situation, and therefore afraid to share my story with others because I questioned whether they would believe me.”*

The participants recognized that, in the past years, the reporting mechanisms have improved at the sport federation and local sport club level. The survivors, nonetheless, stated that, *“... no matter how good the reporting structures and mechanisms are, if a person has a lot of self-guilt or self-blame, he or she will not go to a safeguarding officer.”*

Their advice is to communicate in social branding campaigns to any athlete that if someone touches you without consent it is never your fault and nothing to be ashamed of—make sure you report it, and do not keep it a secret.

Participants also pointed out how vital it is to empower a new generation of young athletes:

*“... our duty of care starts already at a young age, so that every young athlete has a voice and is able to use it. If we start empowering a new generation, we have less problems in the future because then they will be able to speak up more quickly and communicate about what is going on at every level and stage in life.”*

#### **4. The (distant) informal helper**

The fourth observation is that persons outside the sport club setting can be important sources of support and aid during times of adversity for victims of interpersonal violence and abuse in sports. In the literature, these persons are defined as informal helpers (Haggler et al., 2018):

*“... there was one person that asked if there was something going on with me, it was my high school teacher. The high school teacher did not know what went on at the sport club, but I appreciated that she looked after me a bit. I did follow-up on her suggestion to see a school psychologist.”*

There are different types of informal helpers who vary in closeness, frequency of contact,

and accessibility. A participant indicated that he appreciated more distal ties to the informal helper:

*“... I reached out to my secondary school teacher. In class, I was one of her favorites. I knew that there was no connection between the sport club and her. There was a connection between her and my parents. Maybe I hoped that she could disclose my case to my parents. We met several times. She provided me a safe space to breathe again and think about a way to make an end to the abuse.”*

Besides emotional support, an informal helper can be of assistance in a more instrumental way:

*“... the secondary school teacher advised me to start writing diaries if I was not ready to tell my secret to my parents. In that way, I would build up evidence about what happened to me. Also, we talked about ways in which I could tell my parents what was going on with me. Unfortunately, she passed away too quickly since she was terminally sick. With that also my informal support fell away.”*

One of the participants felt that in current times, with all digital communication systems, it is easier to *“... connect the dots.”* Caretakers and bystanders should try and combine the signals they pick up in the different contexts in which a victim is a part of in everyday life, making it easier to respond more adequately to situations of abuse in sport:

*“... I believe it is nowadays easier with all communication systems for a teacher to reach out to, for example, a safeguarding officer at a sport club. They can discuss together what they observe and ask whether these signs are also visible at school or at the sport club. If multiple signs come together, they can collaboratively try and do something about it by reaching out to the youngster or the parents. In different contexts, a victim can leave different clues that he or she needs help.”*



## 5. Chaos and confusion in the aftermath

Observation five highlights the chaos and confusion victims experience after an incident of abuse or interpersonal violence. This can again happen when the incident is disclosed. The athlete may, as a response, distance from social relations and prefer solitude. One of the participants indicated the following:

*"... after the incident I could only think of why me? Why me? My dream of becoming a professional athlete vanished. Full of shame I did not tell or disclose it with anyone, not even my mother, who has been everything for me. I attempted to play at other sport clubs. But without any success."*

Another participant said this:

*"... my parents found my diaries and insisted to have a big conversation with the team, just to clear the air. I was confused; things went so fast. I was not a part of the conversation. I could not be there that night. I felt too numb. Three weeks later I had to join the training sessions again. I was confused. Why did I have to go back to the unsafe environment? Now, 15 years later, I feel I can only count on myself, and my relationship with my parents has changed—more distanced, but now with no aversion anymore."*

Not all bystanders seem to realize that even after having 'solved' a problem, the process may have long-lasting emotional impact on the victim. Victims will be at their most vulnerable at the moment the storm sets in. A participant, therefore, advised the following:

*"... do not be too judgmental at these moments. And mostly do not ask questions of why did you not say things earlier or why did you allow other people doing harm to you? These are questions where I had to deal with myself. Yes, why did I get in the car? Or why did I not resist? People should be aware that it takes a lot for victims to disclose their case. People need to let them know they support them, and they are there for you. Do not ask too many questions, especially not if we did*

*something wrong. Just ask what you can do for a victim."*

## 6. Cultural change vs. administrative 'tick the boxes'

As a sixth observation, participants highlighted that there is a difference between a victim's reality and an administrative reality. A victim of abuse does not see a system in which people have different tasks, roles, and responsibilities. A victim merely sees a group of people who can intervene, if they pay attention, and keep an eye on the athlete or provide a listening ear. Specifically, one of the participants stated the following:

*"... the ultimate goal is to mobilize everyone in the sport club. Everyone can be a helper for the victim. That is how a survivor sees it. A survivor does not make a distinction between people with certain tasks or roles within the club unless the perpetrator has a specific responsibility. Victims are simply looking for a person who can help them make the abuse stop. Tasks, roles, and responsibilities are often an administrative reality, not a victim reality. I did like the proposal for posters within the canteen or changing rooms, it increases the awareness of people at the local sport club. By outlining what the rules are at the club and by offering instructions of how people can intervene, the janitor, a parent, a club coach, a peer athlete, or anyone at the club can ask a person who they expect is experiencing a case of abuse, 'How are you doing? Is there something you are struggling with? Do you need a person that helps you?'"*

Another participant said this:

*"... currently, too many discussions at local sport clubs are about having a minimum number of safeguarding policies or measures in place. Based on a checklist, local clubs indicate that they have a safeguarding officer, do background checks of trainers, etc. This is an administrative response to managing interpersonal violence in sport. We do have to ensure, however, that this administrative reality on paper becomes a culture which helps*

*potential new victims to not experience abuse at the sport club.”*

### **7. Survivors’ sharing stories**

The seventh observation highlights the value of survivors’ contributions to educational programs regarding abuse in sports. According to all participants, persons who have not suffered abuse do not understand how a seemingly “innocent” or small incident can turn into a bigger case of abuse. Therefore, survivors’ stories could serve as crucial elements in bystander intervention and education programs. These stories can be useful for local sports club managers, trainers, and peer athletes:

*“... I do not know whether local sport club managers know how incidents of abuse unfold. I think raising awareness and educational programs are essential. Local sport club members and trainers will of course know that you should keep your hands off the athletes; but I do not expect them to exactly know how it develops. By educating them and sharing stories, they can look for ways to foster a safe sport environment at the sport club.”*

*“... persons who have not experienced abuse still have a blind spot. They do not know how terrible a situation can become; we need to tell them.”*

*“... I am not a pessimist, but I do not give people the benefit of the doubt anymore. The added value of survivors is that they know situations of abuse. You know the warning signs, and you know that something can turn into something big. Of course, a threatening situation will not always turn into an incident of sexual abuse, but our stories can be of added value for young athletes and educate them to see the blind spots and make them aware that a situation can grow into something devastating for a person.”*

Two participants elaborated on the value that educational programs have for young athletes:

*“... we need to make 12- to 18-year-olds aware of the things that can happen and that they also have a responsibility in looking after each other. Of course, not making them responsible if things go astray, but you want to educate them about abuse and about how they can help to minimize it. Just like you give them sexual education at secondary school, and you give them the options that are possible for safe sex, they also need to know that they can make certain choices in situations that are threatening, an education that tells them how a situation can turn into an incident of abuse and how they can detect and try and avoid it. Also make them aware that they are the first responders for many peer athletes, and that they are the eyes and the ears in the locker room. We, adults, should then assure that there is a good reporting and disciplinary system in place.”*

*“... just a form of education and awareness raising, what is appropriate behavior from teammates or coaches or others involved at the sport club and what is not appropriate, what abuse entails, how it normally is a long process before there is an incident of abuse, the grooming and what bystanders can do to intervene I think that are important topics.”*

Such an education and awareness-raising training should be a repeated activity at the start of every season:

*“... at the beginning of the season, in the locker room with the team or with a group of athletes, you need to discuss abuse in sport. It needs to be repeated every year, for example, by the coach that stands before the team. Maybe it should also be obliged that every coach speaks about it with the group of athletes they are responsible for at the start of every season. It is in a sense a way of raising awareness and giving crucial information. Together they can agree on rules within the team. A kind of 10-rules plan—an agreement to which everyone keeps him- or herself.”*

### **8. Proactive bystander and normalized conversations**

The eighth observation that participants address is that bystanding is an activity that already starts long before an incident of abuse happens. There are particular actions and activities that parents and local sport club managers can perform to promote child safety and safe sports environments at sports clubs. Parents can, for example, ask when they make their child a member of the club about what safeguarding policies and procedures are in place.

*"... I do find it strange, if you as a parent bring your child to child day care or a new school, then you, for example, ask about all safety aspects that are related to the child's well-being, in some cases even how cold the temperature of the fridge should be to keep the milk, but when it comes to sport, parents do not ask about what a club does to ensure a safe sport environment."*

*"... as a parent you should preventively ask about a club's safeguarding policies and protocols. What do they do to ensure safe sport environments? You want to know of course what disciplinary and reporting mechanisms are in place and how the trainers and coaches are educated about the topic. Maybe every parent of a new member should receive a booklet where in detail it is explained what the club does to ensure child safety. A parent can also ask for this—I mean that is a possible way to normalize conversation about abuse and interpersonal violence at the grassroots level."*

Local sport club managers should choose for child safety and ensure enough staff (i.e., minimum of two trainers or coaches) on a team:

*"... many local sport clubs struggle with finding enough coaches and trainers for the lower teams. The four-eye principle should be leading. So, if you do not have a selection team and you cannot find a second trainer or coach, the decision of the club should be to not have a team with a single trainer. That is how hard you should play this game."*

Participants also advised to make use of posters in canteens and locker rooms:

*"... posters can be of great help in the canteen or changing rooms. Posters can make people aware that they also have a part to play, that they can also intervene. Such a poster should show clear language and visuals that make it also easy for children to understand. Such a poster should also show the phone numbers of safeguarding officers. In this way, parents, volunteers, athletes, local sport club managers, and everybody who is active at a sport club know who to reach out to if they observe some unwanted behaviour."*

Ultimately, participants indicated that conversations about abuse at sport clubs should be normalized. There should not be a stigma about the conversation or questions parents, volunteers, athletes, or board members can have:

*"... it should be normal in a club to talk about incidents, to discuss how many incidents there have been at the club that year, what the local sport club managers and safeguarding officer did about it, what happened with the reports. It should just be normalized to ask questions like, 'How often does this occur at our club? How do we respond to these reports? How did you handle reports of abuse? Have there been proper arrangements to disclose cases? It is a form of proactive bystander behavior to regularly discuss and check these procedures and policies within a grassroots sport club?'"*

## **9. Approaching a safeguarding officer**

Observation nine relates to the interaction between a victim and a safeguarding officer. Participants argue that you cannot expect a child athlete to easily contact a safeguarding officer if there is only contact information available, with – at best – a picture posted on the club's website.

*"... I do not know if I would have dialled the phone number. I was fifteen, and if a safeguarding officer then says, 'I am neutral; come to me,' would it really have helped my case? I do not know what exactly would have*

*helped. Sometimes I think that reporting should be organized with a much lower threshold. Although, I really wonder if a fifteen-year-old will dial a number after you only see a picture on the website. It is a matter of trust. On a website I cannot see if I can trust a person. I see a face, or not, sometimes only a name, and one should realize that I will not immediately contact a safeguarding officer then. Especially, if you still struggle with the shame and the self-blame. When the abuse happened, I only wanted to find a safe haven, and dealing with the reporting would only have added to the stress and pain.”*

Participants did point out that it is a good development that in recent years there are more safeguarding officers to whom you can reach out to report an incident. They further stressed it is important that safeguarding officers reflect on whether they are the most suitable persons for victims to talk to:

*“... what if I do not get along well with the safeguarding officer, that I do not identify with him or her or that I do not feel at ease. There needs to be assurance that a safeguarding officer is then looking for other solutions. That can both be with a male or female safeguarding officer, but if I do not feel comfortable with the person, that I can indicate that, and that we look for another officer to help me. Or that a safeguarding officer, if he or she notices that our conversation does not go that smooth, realizes whether it is not better to bring the victim in contact with another person.”*

For many participants, a safeguarding officer, or a place where you can report a case, should be ‘neutral’ (i.e., no ties or separate from the local sport club or even the sport federation). Such a neutral—and mostly professional—safeguarding officer feels safer for most participants:

*“... I did tell my story to someone that I had never seen before but who was for me the absolute right person to share it with; the safeguarding officer could relate to what I was going through simply because of her*

*professionalism and experience. From her neutrality, she could tell me how I could improve the situation, and which steps I can take from there on.”*

## **10. Group dynamics**

The final observation introduces a group perspective to bystanding. Some participants’ stories were not “... a single perpetrator stories” because they experienced peer–athlete abuse by multiple perpetrators:

*“... in my story there were other young athletes with different roles in the group. I mean when in a group dynamic, in the locker room, you see something, and you do not do anything—then that is also already a choice or a decision not to act. You see the protectors of the victim, the cheerleaders of the perpetrators, and the egoists that do not want to become the next victims. Sometimes there were guys that did not touch me, but they were shouting and applauding for the perpetrators that did touch me. At the same time, there was one guy that asked—often after the training sessions—how are you coping? I remember that I thought, thank God there is one guy watching out for me.”*

Participants argued that therefore, in education programs and bystander interventions, there should not only be a focus on what role bystanders can play in avoiding abuse but also how bystanders’ behaviors can facilitate the abuse, as well as amplify its duration and impact:

*“... in education programmes it should also be mentioned that by applauding, laughing, encouraging the perpetrator, doing nothing, or staying outside of abuse that is going on in front of their faces, bystanders incite the perpetrators and reinforce the abuse.”*

## **Final reflections**

Bystander interventions are important strategies in efforts to prevent abuse and interpersonal violence against athletes at local sports clubs. Although scholars highlight the



importance of prosocial and active bystanding in situations of violence and abuse, more research is necessary to understand how to promote this kind of behavior in sports settings.

The ten presented observations allow us to reflect on the role peer athletes, parents, trainers, coaches, and local sport club managers play in ensuring safe sports environments at the grassroots level.

Furthermore, they serve to inspire the design of bystander interventions in local sports clubs. As such, the survivors' and bystanders' observations will be used as input in the Erasmus+ Safe Sport Allies project for the development, implementation, and testing of a bystander intervention program to protect young athletes in sport and prevent abuse from happening.

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