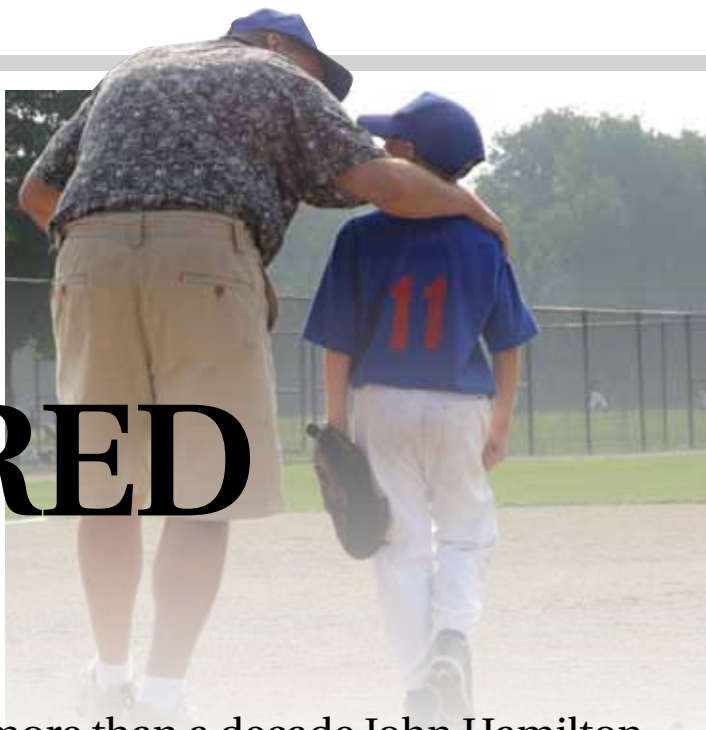


# BROKEN TRUST, SHATTERED LIVES



In recent months across the youth sports landscape there have been plenty of disturbing reminders that child predators lurk everywhere, manipulating and tormenting children in unimaginably horrific ways.

From soccer and baseball fields to basketball courts and hockey rinks, no sport is immune. So the question is: How safe is your child's athletic program?

*This is the first in a series examining child abuse in youth sports.*

By Greg Bach

**F**or more than a decade John Hamilton was a well-liked figure in Virginia's Fairfax County, coaching and umpiring youth baseball.

He had an engaging personality, a friendly smile, he loved working with kids and when a child needed a ride home he was often more than willing to help out.

But it turns out Hamilton had a darker side – every parent's worst nightmare. He was a serial predator and master manipulator, and the 39-year-old is spending the next 55 years in prison after pleading guilty to molesting five players between 1992 and 2008.

"People always assume they can pick out those who are predators," says Dr. Kristen Dieffenbach, assistant professor of athletic coaching education at West Virginia University. "Unfortunately, people who violate the trust of children are able to do so precisely because they don't look like monsters. They fit into the community and into the smaller sport family. This is how they go unnoticed."

Ever since Jerry Sandusky became a household name and rocked the national sports landscape, it also shined the spotlight on a chilling topic that all too often gets

nudged to the side because it's too uncomfortable and unpleasant to talk about. Yet, it is individuals like Hamilton who terrorize children and destroy lives in the communities in which they live – oftentimes with great ease and for many years – all while masquerading as a caring and devoted volunteer coach.

Welcome to today's child molester: They don't look menacing and lurk in the shadows; they're smart and skilled in their own twisted way. They operate in the public eye at ball fields and gyms in your community while harboring some of the most appalling motives and, most disturbing of all, they know how to connect with children.

They can be your neighbor, your friend or a long-time community member.

They can be white or black; young or old; male or female.

"They are often attractive, competent, charming and successful," says Dr. Bob Shoop, director of the Cargill Center for Ethical Leadership at Kansas State University. "They are very good at what they do: molesting children."

Shoop has been a forensic expert in more than 80 cases of abuse involving coaches and teachers, he has interviewed convicted abusers locked in prison cells for their heinous deeds and he's authored more than a dozen books on the topic.

"Even when parents see inappropriate behaviors they find it difficult to believe that their hero could have harmed a child," he says.

## GROOMING VICTIMS

Pedophiles use grooming techniques to gain the trust of not only their victims but even the child's unsuspecting parents. It's a horrific and methodical approach to gain access to children, abuse them for their own pleasure and then make sure that what has happened is never repeated by their victim.

"They get to know them, give them special attention to gain trust and even befriend their parents and family members all in order to gain trust for abuse later," says Dr. Thomas Plante, a psychology professor at Santa Clara University who has studied and treated pedophiles.

Alarming, Plante points out that about 5 percent of all men have a predilection to be sexually attracted to children. Some purposely set out to act on those impulses when they step forward to volunteer to coach and gain access to children while others unexpectedly make these decisions during the course of their volunteering.

"Many may not know ahead of time but after they get involved with kids, get close and perhaps also use alcohol or find themselves in intimate quarters away from home, such as traveling to meets and games, one thing leads to another," Plante says.

Individuals who are unable to maintain successful adult relationships or are dealing with other problems in their lives often turn to abusive behavior, too.

"The second type of abuser is a person who has a very poor self image and relates to the student athletes almost as a peer," Shoop says. "They hang out, joke, horseplay and become one of the student athletes. They share personal information and encourage the child to do the same. These people may actually believe they have done nothing wrong, because they love the child."

Combine children who are vulnerable and not fully able to reason effectively at this point in their young lives with parents who think abusive coaches only operate in other communities, and it becomes a gold mine of potential victims for the pedophile.

"No one wants to believe that someone they know, someone they like, someone who is great with children, someone who has a great job or a wonderful family could also be someone who sexually abuses or is sexually inappropriate with children," says Yvonne Cournoyer, program director for Stop It Now!, which implements community-based

programs to prevent the sexual abuse of children. "And, people who sexually abuse children often are very aware that they need to create a sense of safety and trust with the people around them so any thoughts or concerns they might have almost get dismissed before we allow ourselves to entertain our concerns. We have to allow ourselves to consider the possibility."

Pedophiles are adept at finding the triggers which keep kids silent – which can be anything from providing candy or access to alcohol to granting permission to do anything their parents won't allow them to do.

"There is some oblivion to the risk, but this is in part because people do not fully understand the dynamics of abuse and the nature of some abusers," says Dr. David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire. "It is also because parents and youth want to win coaches' favor and not appear to have suspicions."

## FACING THE FACTS

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused before their 18th birthday. The math is startling: That's potentially three girls on a 12-player soccer team or five boys on a 30-player football team, for example. Darkness to Light, which provides programming and resources for adults to

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– Cindy McElhinney, director of programs for Darkness to Light

prevent and recognize child sexual abuse, reports on its website that more than 90 percent of abusers are people that children know, love or trust; and that 20 percent of child sexual abuse victims are under the age of 8.

"Sadly the research suggests that kids do get sexually abused whenever adults have power, access and are unsupervised with kids," Plante says. "The numbers are striking."

Equally alarming, countless children suffer in silence, enduring the abuse – oftentimes over a period of many years. Furthermore, those who never come forward as adults wind up dragging that unthinkable baggage around with them for the rest of their life, wrestling with the agonizing memories every day.

"We know that today still most children do not disclose abuse," says Cindy McElhinney, director of programs for Darkness to Light. "With coaches, the trust and bond that is developed between coach and athlete is a very strong one, and the pain of revealing abuse can be too great for a child to speak up. In many cases the coach is a loved, trusted and highly respected member of the community. The child has been manipulated by the abusive coach

and will have been groomed to believe that it is their fault or that no one will believe them if they tell. For boys, it may be especially difficult because they feel like they should have been strong and should have been able to stop the abuse from happening in the first place.”

There are a lot of factors that work in the predator's favor when he or she occupies a coaching position. Most notably, these individuals control playing time and determine positions, so many times parents are so consumed with their child's game day minutes, their development and their pursuit of scholarships that they are blinded by the abuse being inflicted upon their child.

Furthermore, from the time athletes are very young they are taught by their parents to mind the coach, listen and do what they are told. Over time, with the wrong coaches, that message can backfire when parents aren't carefully monitoring what is happening at all times.

“Parents need to understand that sexual abuse often begins with very minor boundary violations as a way to test a child,” says Cournoyer. “It might start with hugs, or arms around the shoulder or with small gifts or telling a child how they are different and more special than others and this attention can be very positive initially for a child.

## “Remind children that if someone does something inappropriate or uncomfortable with them, it's never their fault.”

– Yvonne Cournoyer, program director for Stop It Now!

“As the behaviors escalate, children can feel complicit in the abuse. This, combined with someone telling them it's their fault, can leave a child feeling isolated and afraid to tell. Remind children that they always have the right to say no even if they said yes before and that you will back them up and that it's not their fault.”

Signs of sexual abuse are most commonly presented in children as changes in mood, behavior or demeanor, says McElhinney. She points out that this can include anxiety, depression, anger, aggressiveness toward other children or adults, a change in attitude about school or sports or other activities they may have previously enjoyed or abnormal sexual behavior or language that is advanced for their age.

Child abusers aren't going to suddenly stop looking for victims; every day they are doing anything they can to get their hands on children. That means parents must keep pace and be proactive. That means having those uncomfortable conversations and instilling in children the importance of speaking up.

“Remind children that if someone does something inappropriate or uncomfortable with them, it's never their fault,” says Cournoyer. “People who sexually abuse or are sexually inappropriate with children sometimes tell children it's their fault or blame them so it's important to specifically counter that message.”

She also points out that it is helpful if parents talk about some of the tricks these individuals use to get closer to children. This includes explaining how it isn't okay for a coach to single out one child for special attention or privileges, or to give gifts or offer drugs or alcohol.

### DAILY RISK

We know that children are at risk every day. Stories of abuse in youth sports continue to emerge, each a horrifying example of a child's life forever altered.

In Pawtucket, R. I., last summer a youth football coach and his wife were arrested on child molestation charges. The 37-year-old husband was arrested after the father of an alleged victim reported his 15-year-old son and his two friends were sexually assaulted. The coach is accused of molesting several youngsters between the ages of 12-17 – at least eight victims had already come forward and more were expected – and his 29-year-old wife was also arrested on three counts of third-degree sexual assault as it is believed she was acting in conjunction with her husband.


The abuse is everywhere. A former youth football coach and head of a youth football organization in Nebraska will stand trial in the spring on charges he sexually assaulted a child. The

63-year-old is accused of sexual contact with a girl over a period of six years. Furthermore, a detective – calling it some of the most disturbing evidence he's ever seen – testified that he found hundreds of graphic images of children on the man's computer, some depicting sex acts with children as young as 1.

A former female hockey coach of a girls team in Alaska was arrested and charged with five counts of first-degree sexual abuse of a minor. According to court documents there are five different incidents of her alleged abuse of the same 14-year-old.

In Oregon a prominent soccer coach was arrested and faces charges of third-degree rape, second-degree sex abuse and furnishing alcohol to a minor regarding two girls, including one 16-year-old who disclosed to police that there had been sexual contact with her coach over the course of two years; in the Chicago area a 24-year-old coach was charged with having sexual contact with a 12-year-old boy; in Abilene, Texas a youth football coach is facing three counts of sexual crimes against a child; in Northern California a 29-year-old youth soccer coach and foster parent was facing more than 50 charges of continual child molestation and was being held with bail of \$12 million; and on it goes.

Clearly, no sport or community is immune from abusive coaches, and every child is a potential victim.

“I was a youth, high school and college athlete and believe that athletics serve a very important function,” Shoop says. “I further believe that the vast majority of coaches are competent, capable and caring people. But, some are not. If parents are not paying attention they will be the people who say, ‘He is the last person we would ever have suspected.’” 

## Proactive parenting: Use these tips to help prevent children from ever being abused



Jill Starishevsky knows the horrors of child abuse better than most – she’s a prosecutor of child abuse and sex crimes in New York City. The mother of three is also the author of *My Body Belongs to Me* ([www.MyBodyBelongstoMe.com](http://www.MyBodyBelongstoMe.com)), a children’s book intended to prevent child sexual abuse by teaching children that their bodies are their own.

She shares the following 10 tips for keeping children safe from predators:

**1. Safety in numbers.** Find out what the policy is for one-on-one contact. Organizations can limit or eliminate the opportunity for abuse if there is a policy requiring a third person to be present (whether it is an adult or another child). In a sport such as tennis where there may not be a third person, parents should consider being present for the lessons.

**2. Safe touching vs. unsafe touching.** Have a discussion with your child about what types of touching are appropriate in that particular sport. With a contact sport such as football or

wrestling, be explicit about what behavior is acceptable and what is not. Teach your child to come to you and ask questions if they are uncertain. Discuss whether there are other touches that you have not addressed.

**3. Use a broad brush.** While parents may have concerns about protecting their child from a coach, they should keep in mind that other children can be perpetrators of sexual abuse against a child as well. All lessons should apply to anyone who might touch the child inappropriately, whether adult or child.

**4. No secrets. Period.** Encourage your children to tell you about things that happen to them that make them feel scared, sad or uncomfortable. If children have an open line of communication, they will be more inclined to alert you to something suspicious before it becomes a problem. The way to effectuate this rule is as follows: If someone, even a grandparent, were to say something to your child such as “I’ll get you an ice cream later, but it will be our secret.” firmly, but politely say “We don’t do secrets in our family.” Then turn to your child and say “Right? We don’t do secrets. We can tell each other everything.” Secrecy is the most powerful weapon in a child abuser’s arsenal.

**5. Identify a “safety zone” person.**

Teach your children that they can come to you to discuss anything, even if they think they will get in trouble. Convey to them that you will listen with an open mind even if they were doing something they should not have been doing. A safety zone person can be a neighbor, family member, religious official or anyone who your child feels comfortable confiding in should something happen to them and they are reluctant to discuss it with parents. The safety zone person should be advised that they have

been chosen and should be instructed to discuss the situation with the parents in a timely manner. Keep in mind that child predators often “entice” their prey with something inappropriate, such as allowing a child to watch an adult movie or miss school, letting them smoke a cigarette or drink alcohol. Children will often be reluctant to tell about inappropriate touching for fear they will get in trouble for the drinking or missing school. Explain to children that if someone touches them inappropriately, they should tell the parent or the safety zone person, even if they did something that they were not allowed to do.

**6. Teach your child the correct terms for their body parts.** This will make them more at ease if they need to tell you about a touch that made them feel uncomfortable. Teaching children only the nicknames for their private parts can delay a disclosure. An 11-year-old who only knows the term hoo hoo for her vagina may be embarrassed to tell someone if she is touched there. If a 5-year-old tells her busy kindergarten teacher that the janitor licked her cookie, the teacher might give the child another cookie, not realizing she just missed a disclosure.

**7. Practice “what if” scenarios.**

Say to your child, “What would you do if someone offered you a treat, or a gift when I wasn’t there?” Help your child arrive at the right answer, which is to say no, and ask you first. Many parents also encourage children to walk or run away in this situation if the person is a stranger. Parents should note that giving a child a gift and asking them to keep it a secret is a very common step in the process of grooming a child for sexual abuse.

**8. Teach children to respect the privacy of others.** Children should learn to knock on doors that are shut before opening them and close the door to the bathroom when they are using it. If they learn to respect the privacy of others, they may be more likely to recognize that an invasion of their privacy could be a red flag meaning danger.

**9. Let children decide for themselves how they want to express affection.** Children should not be forced to hug or kiss if they are uncomfortable. Even if they are your favorite aunt, uncle or cousin, your child should not be forced to be demonstrative in their affection. While this may displease you, by doing this, you will empower your child to say no to inappropriate touching.

**10. Teach children that No means No.** Teach children that it is OK to say No to an adult. Without permission from you, many children may be reluctant to do so even if the adult is doing something that makes them feel uncomfortable. Teach children that all of these lessons apply to children as well. If another child is touching your child in a way that makes him or her uncomfortable, teach your child to say No, get away and tell someone. When someone tickles a child, if the child says No, all tickling should cease. Children need to know that their words have power and No means No.

