

# Criminalize school hazing

The hazing ritual, once associated mostly with college fraternities and sororities, seemingly is becoming more frequent in high school athletics — and more dangerous. There is nothing new about hazing. It's been done for generations by college athletic teams and Greek societies to provide both those doing the hazing and the initiate with a sense of bonding through harmless pranks.

But over the last decade high school athletes have distorted the concept of "team bonding" by making hazing more violent and sexual in nature. Too often the ritual becomes a felony, much like the behavior of a street gang in which the initiate is violently beaten in order to gain membership.

Over the last few years several high-profile cases of ritual hazing by high school athletes have occurred in New York City, Los Angeles, Chattanooga, suburban Chicago and Sayreville, New Jersey. But the most recent incident to capture national headlines allegedly took place in suburban Philadelphia last October and has compelled state legislators to consider toughening Pennsylvania's anti-hazing law.

The alleged incident

involved three senior members of the Conestoga High School football team, including a captain, and a freshman who was trying to leave the locker room during a violent hazing, authorities said. Two of the seniors allegedly held him down while the other sodomized him with a broom handle.

The school's football coaches maintained they knew nothing about it. But students insisted that sexually oriented hazing rituals often took place in the locker room on "No-Gay Thursdays" during the last three years, according to Thomas P. Hogan, the Chester County district attorney, who headed the investigation.

Recently, Chester County police charged the seniors with assault, unlawful restraint, making terroristic threats and other related offenses. Because the suspects all were 17 at the time of the alleged offenses, they were charged as juveniles, according to Hogan. They were not charged with sexual assault.

Nor were the alleged offenders charged with hazing, since Pennsylvania's current anti-hazing law, which makes the offense a third-degree



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misdemeanor, covers only colleges and universities.

But a bill passed in the state House last November aims to expand the anti-hazing law to cover grades seven through 12. The bill likely will be put to a vote in the Senate within a

few weeks and has a good chance of passing.

Until now, schools appeared to have been at a loss for how to address hazing. Certain student-athletes believe they can get away with what they consider to be a "rite of passage." In some instances, the coaches are not only aware of the hazing, but condone it as an essential part of the team-building process because they experienced it themselves as athletes.

More often schools are in the dark about hazing, either because it happens off-campus and is therefore difficult to monitor, or because administrators, teachers and coaches are more focused on other issues at the forefront, such as drugs and weapons.

In fact, there are several steps that schools can take to prevent hazing. First, administrators must clearly define the term, establish a policy to deal with it and outline

the consequences. Punishments should include forfeiture of the season, elimination from state competition, expulsion from the team, and/or long-term suspension from school, depending on the severity of the hazing.

Second, teachers, coaches and other supervisory personnel must be made aware of the possibility of hazing and placed in a position to monitor students who might haze others, especially in locker rooms, on buses or in other areas where the ritual is most likely to occur.

Third, there should be coach-led discussions on every team about what constitutes hazing, and these must be ongoing among all the school's teams.

Finally, parents need to talk with their children about hazing, emphasizing that any time the child feels uncomfortable with a situation they should immediately leave and report it to an adult.

Together with a strong anti-hazing law, these measures will allow Pennsylvania to drastically reduce, if not eliminate altogether, these shameful acts.

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