

Respect in Sport and the Canadian Red Cross Receive International Recognition for Abuse Prevention in Canada

Coaching the Coaches in Canada

The Canadian Red Cross is on a mission to protect hundreds of thousands of youngsters from abuse that can destroy their lives.

SHELDON KENNEDY's greatest dream as a young ice hockey player was realized when he was just 14 years old. The Canadian from the western province of Manitoba was recruited to play junior-level hockey — the first stage in becoming a professional hockey player.

But it wasn't long before that dream turned into a private nightmare.

While his family and friends celebrated his achievements, Kennedy was suffering from terrible abuse.

Years later, he made the difficult decision to share his nightmare with the world. In 1997, the former professional ice hockey player disclosed publicly that for years he was sexually abused at the hands of his ice hockey coach, Graham James. James controlled Kennedy's hockey career and his life from the time he was 14 to 19.

Shocking statistics

"The coach is so respected," says Kennedy. "Your parents send you away and say, 'Do what he says.' At that age, you listen — it's the first step if you want to play pro."

It was Kennedy's testimony against his former coach that helped end the silence about the physical and sexual abuse of athletes. James pleaded guilty and was sentenced to three and a half years in prison for sexually assaulting Kennedy and another unidentified player. He is banned for life from coaching in Canada.

"I'm sure the sporting world was hoping that my story was going to be an isolated case and the issue would go away," says Kennedy. "But it didn't go away and it wasn't an isolated case."

Statistics illustrating the prevalence of abuse in sport are shocking.

In Canada, studies show that up to 50 per cent of sport participants have experienced mild harassment to abuse. More than 20 per cent of elite athletes have had sexual intercourse with people in positions of authority in sport. In a study of high school students, over 40 per cent identified sporting environments as places of harassment.

After Sheldon Kennedy roller-bladed across Canada to raise funds and awareness for the issue of sexual abuse, he got in touch with the Canadian Red Cross and its RespectED Violence and Abuse Prevention programme. RespectED aims to stop the cycle of abuse and violence that destroys lives.

“We had been offering a volunteer-driven workshop for sport called ‘It’s More Than Just a Game’,” says Judi Fairholm, the national technical director for RespectED.

“Around the same time, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that organizations were legally responsible if a young person was found to be unsafe while in their care. The combination of Kennedy’s disclosure and the ruling threw the sporting world into chaos.” Kennedy went on to donate the proceeds from his skate — over US \$900,000 — to RespectED.

Interactive RespectED presentations tackle issues relating to all forms of abuse — physical, mental, emotional and sexual — as well as relationship violence, bullying and harassment. Delivered by highly-trained volunteers, It’s More Than Just a Game is designed to give coaches, trainers, parents and sports administrators an understanding of these issues and how to protect children and youth in the unique context of the sport environment.

“In my case, I believe there were a lot of bystanders,” says Kennedy. “A lot of people knew what was going on and didn’t know what they could do or just put blinders on. These issues scared people — we needed to eliminate that fear.”

New programme

Fairholm approached Hockey Canada, the governing body for amateur ice hockey in Canada, on how they could work together to safeguard young athletes.

“We realized we needed to address these problems head on,” says Todd Jackson, the senior manager of safety and insurance for Hockey Canada. “We put together a group of experts including the Red Cross who came forward with a number of recommendations. One was a workshop for

coaches on how to prevent abuse in the future.”

The Red Cross helped develop the “Speak Out: It’s More Than Just a Game” workshop and trained hockey facilitators across the country to deliver it. Today, 120,000 hockey coaches, trainers, officials and volunteers across Canada have been trained.

Jackson says the programme has had significant impact in raising awareness about what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in the hockey world. “We now see that coaches are coaching differently and using positive approaches,” says Jackson. “The programme has grown significantly over the last ten years and has helped make the environment safer for kids.”

Kennedy and business partner Wayne McNeil wanted to take this approach one step further. In partnership with the Red Cross, they developed Respect in Sport, an organization that offers a series of online training courses to assist coaches, parents, volunteers, officials and youth in identifying and dealing with issues of abuse, neglect, harassment and bullying. Much of the content deals with the attitudes of coaches and how they can either positively or negatively affect their athletes. “We wanted to use technology to simplify the message, make it consistent and reach the masses from coast to coast,” says McNeil.

Mandatory course

The three-hour course can be taken at the coach’s own pace. The audio- and animation-based programme applies to all sports and is designed to be an identical experience for the user — whether they are using a low- or high-speed Internet connection. And thanks to technology, Kennedy and McNeil say their programme has the potential to reach all stakeholders in sport across the country and around the world. “We realized that every sport was struggling with delivering positive, values-based training,” McNeil says. “Because this programme is online, we can reach the masses in their own homes — they don’t have to go to a classroom for training.”

Launched in 2006, Respect in Sport is already having an impact across the country. Gymnastics Canada is the first national organization to make the online training programme mandatory for all of its coaches.

More than 3,000 gymnastics coaches have been trained so far with another 3,000

in progress.

Recently, Sport Manitoba, the principal agency for amateur sport in the province, made the programme a requirement for all of its coaches. Janet McMahon, director of provincial sport development for Sport Manitoba, is pleased with the quality and the progress of the training.

"The online component was attractive compared to asking coaches to come to another training session," says McMahon. "The package itself was appealing too. The fact that it's audio- and animation-based means that it will stay current."

McMahon sees this as one component in their continuum of risk management tools. "We've had a very good response to the training," she says. "Coaches are telling us they feel more confident in knowing what to do if potential situations arise."

Keeping children safe

The Red Cross also operates a free phone service for sporting organizations in two provinces. The support staff help callers by letting them know where they should go with their complaints or by offering advice.

The Canadian Red Cross, Respect in Sport and Hockey Canada have high hopes for the impact their work will have on the lives of children.

"Together we want to reach every coach, referee and parent in the country," says Fairholm. "Now hundreds of thousands of children and youth will be safer because the adults around them are taking responsibility for creating and maintaining safe environments."

Garth Stonier
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