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# Sexual abuse and the grooming process in sport: Learning from Bella's story

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## ABSTRACT

Through a process of collaborative autoethnography, we explore the experiences of one female athlete named Bella who was groomed and then sexually abused by her male coach. Bella's story signals how the structural conditions and power relationships embedded in competitive sporting environments, specifically the power invested in the coach, provide a unique sociocultural context that offers a number of potentialities for sexual abuse and exploitation to take place. We offer Bella's story as a pedagogical resource for those involved in the world of sport to both think *about* and *with* as part of a process of encouraging change at the individual and institutional levels.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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According to Brackenridge, Bishopp, Moussalli, and Tapp (2008), although the exact prevalence of sexual abuse in society is difficult to determine, 'it is clear that it occurs across all classes of society and in any context where there is the opportunity for exploitation and an individual with the will to exploit' (p. 387). They note that sexual abuse has been reported in a number of institutional settings including that of sport. On this issue, Leahy (2008) states that during the last few years, 'the occurrence of sexual harassment and abuse in sport has been systematically documented in a number of countries in Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States' (p. 351).

For Leahy (2010, 2011), the sexual abuse of athletes within sport systems challenges the commonly accepted view of sport as an unproblematic site of youth empowerment and positive development. This challenge has been particularly powerful when researchers, such as Brackenridge and Fasting (2005), have provided the stories of individual athletes who have been sexually abused. Following their lead, in this article we focus on Bella's story of grooming and sexual abuse in sport.

Various forms of abuse may be inflicted on young athletes who can be subjected to several forms of abuse at the same time, such as, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. Regarding the constituents of sexual abuse in sport, Stirling, Bridges, Cruz, and Mountjoy (2011) include the following: sexual relations with the athlete; inappropriate sexual contact; exchange of reward in sport for sexual favours; sexually orientated comments, jokes or gestures; sexual propositions; and exposing an athlete to pornographic material.

Distinguishing between sexual harassment and sexual abuse, Brackenridge and Fasting (2005) note that the former is associated with unwanted attention on the basis of sex. The latter involves the groomed or coerced collaboration in sexual and/or genital acts where the victim has been entrapped by the perpetrator:

Grooming is central to the abusive relationship ... It involves slowly gaining the trust of the potential victim before systematically breaking down interpersonal barriers prior to committing actual sexual abuse. This

process may take weeks, months or years with the perpetrator usually moving steadily so that he is able to maintain secrecy and avoid exposure. Grooming is important because it brings about the appearance of co-operation from the athlete, making the act of abuse seem to be consensual. In other words, whereas harassment is *definitely unwanted*, abuse may *appear to be wanted* (or consented to) when the victim has been the subject of grooming. (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005, p. 35)

Grooming, therefore, refers to any strategy used to convince or coerce a child or young person to engage in sexual behaviour. Brackenridge (2001) constructed a generalised model of the grooming process in sport that contained the following stages: targeting a potential victim; building trust and friendship; developing isolation and control—building loyalty; and initiation of sexual abuse and securing secrecy. Brackenridge and Fasting (2005) comment as follows on this model and previous studies on the grooming process:

The previous studies suggest that, for the abuser, grooming is a conscious strategy. The athlete, on the other hand, is usually an unwitting party to the gradual erosion of the interpersonal boundary between her and the coach. The power afforded to the coach in his position of authority offers an effective alibi or camouflage for grooming and abuse. Incremental shifts in the boundary between coach and athlete go unnoticed, unrecognized or unreported by the athlete until the point where she has become completely entrapped and is unable to resist his advances. (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005, p. 37)

With regard to understanding the dynamics of sexual abuse in sport, Brackenridge and Fasting (2005) conclude that research on sexual abuse would benefit from the greater use of narrative and biographical analysis to expose the multiple meanings of grooming as part of this process. Accordingly, in what follows, we explore the experiences of one female athlete named Bella (a pseudonym as are all those named in her story) who was groomed and then sexually abused by her male coach.

### Introducing Bella: Ethical and methodological considerations

Bella suffered undisclosed sexual abuse<sup>1</sup> as a young athlete from her male coach for a number of years beginning when she was 13 years of age. It has had detrimental effects on her life since then in multiple ways:

It took me years to realise what happened was wrong ... I was in so much pain ... Initially, I tried to think of ways to end the pain that muted me and my existence. It's taken me years to work it through and things have only got better by talking and processing the abuse. (Bella)

Leahy (2010, 2011) suggests an association between sexual abuse in athletes and long-term post-traumatic symptomology, with core symptoms including re-experiencing, avoidance and hyperarousal. Furthermore, disclosing or recounting the experience of sexual abuse can be traumatic and lead to a 'double-trauma', which can cause an aftermath involving intense ruptures in day-to-day life.

Bella, therefore, is a vulnerable participant. Given our commitment to a feminist ethics of care, the development and production of this article has been part of a delicate, complex and challenging process. Both authors know Bella in different ways. Helen knows Bella as a long-term friend with shared involvements in similar sports. In their conversations about sport over the years, Bella often touched upon her experiences of being groomed and then sexually abused by her coach when she was younger. On her own volition during this period, and more recently as part of her involvement with a professionally qualified psychosexual, relationship and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing trauma therapist named Laura, Bella began to explore and express some of her experiences in poetic and story form, some of which were shared with Helen. When, recently, Helen received university ethical approval to develop a study that investigated the issue of sexual abuse in sport, Bella asked if she could become involved. She expressed a desire to make her own story public via an academic journal that was read by those who could potentially shape policy and practice in sport settings.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and their relationship as close friends, Helen suggested to Bella that a supportive but 'critical friend' (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) be involved in the project who was

distanced from their relationship and from the data (poems/stories) provided by Bella. This critical friend was to act as both an ethical and a conceptual sounding board for how the article on Bella's life was composed and represented for the purposes of publication in an academic journal. Following further discussion, and with Bella's permission, Helen approached Andrew whom she had known for several years in his role as co-supervisor for her Ph.D. study and whom she trusted to act as a critical friend to her and, by association, to Bella.

As part of this critical friendship, a number of issues emerged for discussion. For example, besides concerns about the potential emotional harm to Bella in recalling her sexual abuse, Andrew was also concerned about the emotional demands placed on Helen having to learn more fully about the sexual abuse of her friend and having to turn these experiences into 'analysable data' to be presented in textual form as part of an 'academic' project. In this sense, Helen, like Bella, was a vulnerable participant within the study. Another concern revolved around the social, personal and institutional power differentials that existed between Andrew as a male professor, Helen (a former Ph.D. student and now a lecturer), and Bella as an abused athlete, and how beyond just acknowledging these differentials, they might be overcome in practice.

Beyond these concerns, both Helen and Andrew felt an ethical obligation to use their positions of relative power and privilege, along with their academic skills to assist in creating a space for Bella's silenced voice and story to be heard by various audiences that shape sports policy and practice. The use of Bella's story has the clear intention of raising the awareness of sexual abuse in sport and supporting change at the individual and group level. A refusal to assist Bella in her quest to get her story into the academic domain, as Hartill (2013) points out, would be to condone the widespread tendency in higher education 'to avoid rendering the truth of sport explicit' (p. 252).

Regarding Andrew's involvement in the project, it was agreed that it would not be appropriate for him to meet Bella in person, or to have direct connection with her via email as this would reveal her identity. All communication, therefore, between Bella and Andrew was via Helen who would delete all identifying features of emails before passing them on. It was also agreed that Andrew would have no direct contact with Laura, the therapist working with Bella. As before, he could raise questions with her via either Bella or Helen. Prior to the start of the collaboration, Laura was asked if she felt it was appropriate for Bella to become involved in the project or if she has any concerns. Laura's response was that it was appropriate at this stage of her therapy to become involved in such collaboration and that this could have positive benefits for Bella. Similar questions have been asked of Laura throughout the process in terms of Bella's well-being. It was made clear to Laura that she could contact Helen at any point if she felt the collaboration was placing undue stress or having a detrimental effect on Bella.

Given the collaborative nature of our engagement, it is important to qualify the status of Bella's story, and how it has been co-constructed for the purposes of this article. Initially, Helen and Andrew invited Bella to supply them with any work she had produced over the years that she felt best described her experiences of sexual abuse. Bella made a large volume of short stories and poems available. A number of these clearly identified Bella, her abuser, and sporting colleagues and so were eliminated at this stage as they compromised the anonymity of those involved. Following a further reading by Helen and Andrew, it became clear that, given the volume of work provided, it would not be possible to do justice in a single article to the complexity of the whole process of sexual abuse as experienced by Bella that included the following phases: the grooming phase, the abuse phase, the resistance phase, the exit phase and the recovery/survivorship phase.

Following discussion with Bella, it was agreed that the grooming phase would be the focus of the first article, and that further publications would deal with the other phases in detail. Once this decision was made, further discussions ensued as to which stories and poems would best describe this process and various combinations were considered before the selection that appears in this article was finalised. Beyond some grammatical changes suggested by Helen and Andrew, for example, changes of time tenses for the purposes of consistency and sentence structure to enhance clarity, the poems and stories presented below are unedited.

Ultimately the choice about how, when and if to proceed with this project has been left with Bella. It was crucial that she have full ownership and control throughout in terms of how the collaboration developed, what was included in the article and the interpretations that were provided. Bella could have terminated the project at any time in the process and would have received support in doing so. That she has not done so is testimony to Bella's perseverance and determination to have her story told in the public domain.

The process we have engaged in to get to this stage is like the collaborative autoethnography process described by Zanker and Gard (2008) who, with their co-writer/participant, produced an evocative performance text that explored the experiences of the latter in relation to disordered eating and over-exercising. Like them, we hope that the vignettes and selected poems about Bella's grooming and undisclosed sexual abuse that follow offer her a space in which to tell, retell and re-understand her own life. We also hope that the forms of representation we have chosen will invite a range of responses in the reader beyond that which a more 'formal' and cross-case thematic analysis of her experiences might instigate (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2005). In short, we seek to involve the reader in the grooming process of a young female athlete so that they might react from the different social positions they currently occupy.

## **So this is how it happened: memories of the grooming process**

### ***Introducing Bella aged 13***

A weak skinny runt,  
Building confidence; self-esteem,  
Training techniques, hard graft; rough regime,  
Enhanced bodily control; bear the brunt.

Years of dedication; tough girl built,  
Perfected sequenced flowing moves,  
Performances never wilt,  
Masculinity she had to prove.

Look closer ...  
Take off the concealed cloak,  
Behind this loyal dutiful kid,  
Accumulative little sordid secrets hid ...

### ***Feeling naughty***

Kate and me get dropped off at the service station—the usual place we meet on our way to competitions. It's perhaps our third or fourth time away with the team to compete in a competition. I get teased about being a 'skinny little runt' and I'm not a 'natural' athlete, but I'm trying to work on being tougher and train with an increasing amount of self-discipline.

The road trips seem fun, but there's quite a lot of banter, which I'm not used to. Ray, the Instructor, 'the god', who's in his early 30s, always takes the piss out of me, telling me that I just follow Kate around like a little sheep, which makes me feel stupid. In classes, he's spotted when I've worn make-up and teased me about it.

There are a few other lads around—they all dutifully follow Ray's lead, including myself who look up to him as my instructor, coach and a father figure. Ray's not only well respected by his whole team, but also when we go to competitions he's got a tough reputation and seems to know *everyone*; quite a few are rather scared of him. He's fearfully respected.

It's a sunny day and I've got my ripped denim shorts on. Arriving at the service station, I feel a little self-conscious seeing everyone else in baggy tracksuit bottoms and long shorts. As Kate and me walk

up the steps towards the service station, Ray dashes up past us and slaps the back of my thighs saying, 'Hey skinny legs!' I jump uncomfortably and Kate laughs at me. We both giggle, but I feel my face blushing nervously. I was already feeling hugely self-conscious and his sharp slapping on the backs of my bare thighs has made me feel even more exposed. I want attention from him, I want him to notice me, but the attention he gives me makes me crumble into my shell. He teases me about my tastes in music, my clothes, the way I speak and even what I order to eat. But *everyone* else very well respects him. On the last road trip I asked, 'What time's Supper?'

'Supper? How posh!' he ridicules.

They all laugh. I blush, hang my head, remain quiet and try not to speak for the rest of the journey. I just assume that I'm not used to the banter and feel ashamed about my 'privileged' upbringing that I'm always getting teased for. So I hide it and try not to speak quite so well. I see it all as a way of learning how to be more 'cool' like the rest of them so I can fit in and not get picked on. I start to desperately seek his approval.

Once the entire teams have arrived, Ray announces all the carloads and ensures that Kate and me always travel with him. When we arrive at the hostel to stay over the night before, Ray comes bouncing into the girls' dorm and 'jokes' about making sure that 'the younger girls', Kate and me, have the job of doing the washing up after breakfast the next morning. After the teams have had dinner, Kate and me settle in the dining area chatting and playing cards; the rest of the group are in the 'play-room'. We see Ray as he's on his way to the bar and seems quite excited:

'Hey, I'll get you two girls a drink eh? What'ya want?' he shouts strutting over. He puts his heavy arms round both of our shoulders and urges, 'Oh bloody 'ell girls, have a drink to relax! Take the edge off before tomorrow! Try a bit of Jack Daniels and Coke. That's what I drink.'

We both look at each other giggling; we're both underage to be drinking at 13.

'Yeah, yeah alright!' we both reply eagerly, feeling naughty.

He dashes off excitedly and returns with one glass. 'Here you go girls!' he charmingly offers. 'Don't tell the others, eh?'

'Cheers!'

'Yeah thanks' we reply. 'Cool!'

'No problem!' he replies with a wink.

### **Waiting for mum**

'See you next week!' Ray bellows to the class, as they all disperse. I loiter around after the class almost moping whilst Sarah, his girlfriend, packs everything away and Ray sits on the desk. At 14 years of age, there are plenty of distractions away from sport to deter me—I have to miss parties all the time but I guess I don't feel like I'm missing out *that* much. I initially felt lost after Kate left, but I'm starting to feel that I'm getting 'looked after' and I actually enjoy the extra special treatment from Ray but it's that 'home time' that I dread again. My Mum always seems to be late and I feel neglected by her. It's never been the same since my dad died; I've lost my cosy, safe 'family life'. I casually wave goodbye to Sarah and Ray and shuffle down the stairs, where I am to wait and see who will pick me up—my mum or a taxi. I sit at the bottom of the stairs with my head leaning miserably on my hands.

It must be 10 minutes that pass before I hear Sarah and Ray coming down the stairs. I'm the last student left in the empty community hall.

'Still here?' Ray calls down. 'Mummy late *again*?' He laughs.

'Yeah' I drone.

'Ha, busy, busy, *busy* is she?!' he teases.

'Probably,' I mumble. On the odd occasion when my Mum has been in to see Ray, I feel embarrassed by the way she goes on about how *busy* she is and telling him all about our distress. I don't like the way my Mum tells everyone that life's really hard for her, seeking *pity*. Ray sympathises with me one day after the class.

'You know, my sister died when I was younger, so I know *just* how you feel' and he's assured my Mum that he will look after me.

Today, Ray sits down next to me on the step. I'm nervous about being left alone in the empty community building and hope that my Mum turns up soon.

'Oh dear,' he says flatly. Sarah passes, turns and pauses for a second, rolls her eyes before carrying on to the car with their bags. 'Don't worry,' he assures me. 'I'll wait with you.' I feel a sense of relief, comfort, and security as he puts his large arm round me.

### Massaging feet

After seeing me so upset Ray invited me round his house for a video and a 'sleepover' with Sarah. I've been dropped there previously because the teams have met there before going away for competitions. I'm quite good at art and so he asked me to design some new leaflets, which I've brought along to show him. I'm excited to have been personally invited round my instructor's house and he's offered me private tuition for free as well. My eldest sister drove me to his house and I fed her some story about going there to meet for a competition:

'Is this it?' my sister asks.

'Yep! Thanks!' I reply hurriedly opening the car door and jumping out. 'See ya!'

'Wait!' my sister suddenly shouts before I dash off. 'Well, who's here? Are there others, I mean does he have a wife?'

'Yeah, yeah, his girlfriend's here,' I reply hastily and slam the door.

Things are volatile at home. I seem to be becoming a rebellious teenager: answering back, being disobedient, throwing parties—all, which infuriate my mum. Furthermore, unbeknown to my mum I've started smoking, drinking and slowly getting involved with a crowd who take drugs and go petty shoplifting. My mum frequently loses her temper and screams at me. What's worse is when my mum starts ranting on about killing herself where she threatens that she'll 'get in the car, drive into a brick wall and never come back! Then how will everyone cope?'

So here I feel relieved, like it's a much-needed escape from all that emotional chaos. I am slowly being accepted: a step further into the team, into 'the family', a family I feel I could do with. When I arrive at his flat, I feel a bit uncomfortable but am welcomed by Ray. He's chosen a scary film to watch. All of us squeeze onto the sofa—me at one end, Sarah in the middle and Ray at the other end. Ray displays his usual banter and continuously embarrasses me by teasing me and making me feel self-conscious. But I just giggle. He stretches his legs out on the sofa, rests them over Sarah and tells me to massage his feet:

'Oh, don't make her do that!' Sarah protests.

'What? I've got my socks on! Don't be silly!' He defends strongly. 'Oh, she doesn't mind, go on Bella. Massage my feet, then you can have some ice cream!' he winks and waggles his feet like a child.

I don't object. At the age of 14 years, I don't feel that I can. Anyway, I feel *flattered* that he wants me to massage him. So, I do the best I can to try and impress him. I've been massaging him in the car on the way to competitions as well. He orders me to switch positions with whoever is sat behind him in the car, despite my weak protest and leans his seat back, squashing me. I normally massage his rough, shaven, spotty head for as long as possible. Despite being trapped uncomfortably tight by his chair, I don't make a fuss; I just want to impress him by doing a good job. I feel appreciated and valued.

I don't usually watch horror films, so tonight I jump, grab a pillow and bury my head in it every now and then. Ray just laughs at me, and I feel 'uncool', immature and embarrassed.

'I'm not sure Bella should be watching this,' Sarah voices. 'It is an 18'.

'Oh, don't be silly!' Ray replies. 'She's fine, aren't you?'

I'm not but obviously I nod earnestly, not wanting to disagree with Ray, or even to be seen as 'too young' or 'uncool' to watch the film. I spend the rest of the film trying to *not* watch it and manage my fear silently without drawing unnecessary attention to myself. I jump a couple of times and quickly regret it when Ray teases me incessantly. Eventually the film finishes and it's off to bed—phew!



I go to the spare room where his 12-year-old son usually sleeps when he visits him. The mattresses are on the floor and I get ready for bed as quickly as I can and hear someone approaching the door. Ray slowly shoves the door open and creeps in wearing his dark blue baggy T-shirt and grey shorts. He lies down on the floor next to me and starts chatting.

'So, you've had a good time tonight?' he asks.

'Yeah, thanks!' I affirm flattered by all this attention from him and the safe knowledge that he'll look after me when things are hard.

'Good' he smiles. 'How's things at home?'

'*Rubbish!*' I confess. 'I *hate* it!'

'Awww,' he pities, 'I'll look out for you, OK?' he continues as he leans over and tucks me into bed playfully. He gives me a brief kiss on the forehead and whispers, 'G'night'.

### **The routine**

I arrive at the train station and look for Ray's car. I'm going round more frequently to his new house to do computer work for his sport business. I had to stop going to class for a few months when I injured myself after being punished and pushed too hard in the class by him, but Ray invited me for a walk with his son and we all seemed to have a fun day together. He chatted a bit more about his sister and again said how much he understood me and told me how similar I was to him. I felt comforted and it made me feel less 'alone'.

Now, I'm feeling less pain in my lower spine and I'm back training hard again, totally devoted to getting back on track and succeeding despite the occasional niggles in the base of my spine. But my mum has shown a concern about it.

'He doesn't *hit* you does he?' she asked sternly as she dropped me off at the train station to go to school.

'No! Of course not!' I retorted defensively (answering honestly because he doesn't actually hit me). There's a sense of familiarity and security going to his house. He makes me feel important and special because he's 'cool', he's older, and 'has a laugh' making things fun. He says that my art skills would be really useful so he's been getting me round *more* frequently doing computer work and designing stuff for his business. A day with him usually involves going to a health club, where we train together and sauna, he gives me special personal tuition, then he treats me to lunch, sometimes with his wife and we go back to his house to type up some letters for his business. In the afternoon, I'll give him a massage so that he can nap before he teaches later that evening—it's important that he gets his nap.

I spot him in the station car park and wander over casually with an air of carefree teenage angst:

'Hey' he greets. 'Alright? Oooo, nice hair'

'Alright' I reply coolly. 'Er yeah thanks' with a timid smile. He looks at me with gleaming eyes and I feel shyly flattered that he's noticed my new haircut.

'We've got quite a bit of work to do today so we need to go back to my house first before we go training' he states.

'OK?'

'OK' I reply dutifully with a warm sense of having been noticed.

He drives to his house and when we arrive, I follow him upstairs into his office. I go in and sit by the window opposite the computer. He sits next to me, next to the door and stretches his legs across onto the desk against the wall. It's a very close encounter working in the office with him, which always makes me feel nervous; but it's a nervous excitement, because *my instructor, my coach* thinks that I'm clever and important. He playfully jokes around and nudges me every now and then and tries to make me giggle.

'I think that'll do for today and we can go to the health club now,' he commands.

'OK,' I say obediently.

We hop into the car again and he drives us to the health club. He pays for me to enter and we train in the gym. He's developed a training and diet plan for me since he promoted me into the Top Team. He keeps pressuring me to keep my weight down if I want to compete internationally because if I go over a certain weight then I'll be in a much tougher category. I'm finding this incredibly hard and I'm



really struggling with the diet. I'm so desperate to lose the weight and impress him that I've recently started throwing up to try and control it. I'm scared that he'll find out about all of this, but I'm more scared of not losing the weight in case I get dropped from the Team and in case he gets angry with me. When I compete I'm already more scared of facing his criticism than facing my opponent. Nothing ever seems to be enough. Even when I win, my performance is never good enough. But I am an extremely dutiful student and I just keep trying and trying ... That's what it takes.

After running 3 miles on the running machine, we go into the squash room where he gives me some personal tuition. He grabs a chair and sits at one end of the court and tells me to show him the new techniques I've been learning. At the end of my demonstration of my work he smiles.

'You know, you'll never get a boyfriend,' he says shaking his head. 'No boy will ever be able to handle you. You're too independent. No boy could ever *tame* you like a real man like me could!'

I remain standing in my disciplined position and feel confused and also disheartened after his comments like there must be something wrong with me.

## Boys

In the sauna, he continues the subject of boys with me. He sits up on a high bench row near the door and I perch on the bottom bench row in the corner.

'So, do you have a boyfriend then?' he inquires subtly.

'Yeah! I've got a boyfriend' I reply defiantly. I've had a few boyfriends. They've not been very serious and they've only ever lasted a couple of months because I normally lose interest.

'Oh yeah?' he continues. 'Oooooo! What base do you get to then? Come on!'

I start fidgeting, feeling embarrassed and slightly confused. I giggle and look away.

'Have you had sex?' he asks suddenly. I immediately blush feeling all the heat from my body race to my face.

'Um ... er ... ' I stutter.

'Ha! I bet you have, haven't you?' he contends smirking. 'Who goes on top? Dirty ... ' He mumbles something under his breath that I can't quite hear.

I blush even more but it's also nice to have someone interested in my personal life. When I get up from the bottom shelf, I notice a bulge in his shorts as I pass him on the way out. Shocked, I glance away quickly and open the door swiftly, banging it shut on my way out. I breathe out heavily and tell myself that I was imagining things slipping into one of the pools to cool off.

On the way to lunch Ray continues the conversation about boys and teases me:

'You give an impression that you're all innocent and posh, but I bet you're dirty really!' he suggests, smirking. I start feeling a bit uncomfortable and start wondering whether I really *am* like he is suggesting. Also I feel flattered by this recent particular interest he is showing me; he makes me feel more grown up.

But during lunch, I start feeling guilty. I hang my head and avoid eye contact with Sarah:

'How was training then?' Sarah asks both of us. She's also training hard and I want to be better than her. Sarah's getting better and when we compete against each other we are always close in the class. Ray's always warning me that eventually I need to beat Sarah if I want to get on the Top Team; I've heard him tell Sarah the same but at the moment, Sarah's in the adults whereas I'm still in the cadets at 15yrs of age so outside the club it's not a problem.

I pause and look at Ray, worried. Ray intervenes speaking for me:

'Fine, Bella's training was good today' Ray responds looking at me. 'You did well today Bella. It was good wasn't it? And she's lost a couple of pounds as well! She's nearly 8 stone now!'

I nod silently. Ray smiles, slaps me on the shoulder and turns back to carrying on his conversation with Sarah about how her day's work is going. I sit quietly and then start worrying anxiously about how much 'lunch' will affect my weight.

## Freezing

After lunch, back at the house, I finish off some of the computer work and Ray gets ready for his afternoon nap, changing into his T-shirt and boxer shorts.

'Right, come on!' he shouts upstairs to me. 'Common and give my feet a massage'

I go downstairs and sit on the sofa and wait. Sometimes I have to go into his bedroom to massage his feet. Sometimes I have to massage his back when he's dressed only in his boxer shorts. Sometimes, I have to lie on the floor with his face in my lap and massage his head, sometimes with a pillow, sometimes without.

Ray makes everything seem normal. Today it's going to be on the sofa. Ray puts on his new CD and lies down on the sofa throwing his feet onto my lap. He gives me some body lotion and I rub it into his feet carefully but firmly. His feet are hard and crusty from all his tough skin he's developed from training. It doesn't feel nice at all, but this has become normal for me. I'm used to handling the discomfort and doing things I don't really want to do. After all, 'we all have to do things that we don't want to do in life, don't we?'

'My feet smell alright, don't they?' he states and playfully wiggles them.

I giggle and nods, 'Er ... yeah' I say pretending to smell them.

'Oi!' he jests.

He gets his stopwatch and times it; I do 15 minutes on each foot. Again I try to impress him by doing a good job and not making a fuss, just like in the car:

'Right, do my other foot' he demands as he rests his leg on the back of the sofa behind my head. When I finish he sits up and asks *me* if I'd like a massage again. Last week was the first time *he'd* ever massaged *me*. He rubbed my back and legs on the sofa.

'You know, I'm really good at massaging as well' he'd said dominantly 'I can give you a *proper* 'sports' massage if you like. That'll help your back as well if it's still painful'

I'd felt a bit odd, like it wasn't right and looked at him worryingly.

'Oh god, nothing funny' he'd said. 'Just a massage! *Jeez*, whad'ya take me for?! I'm very professional!'

I felt incredibly stupid for feeling odd, like it might've been 'wrong'. I didn't want to offend him, make him cross with me, feel humiliated or him think me 'uncool'. So I'd acted cool about it and he'd given me a quick shoulder massage with him sitting behind me on the sofa and then massaged my legs fully clothed. Also, I felt special; I felt like a 'real' athlete because I was getting a 'proper' sports massage:

'You've got lovely long legs' he'd commented. 'You know, good for this sport.'

I thought that he rubbed me a little too close for comfort but assumed he had done it by mistake. After all, he was being 'professional' and I didn't want to show distrust or 'accuse' him of anything again; I didn't want to feel *stupid* again.

This week he suggests the same. This time he says it's better if I lie down because it was an awkward position for him last week. I lie face down on the sofa, waiting for my 'proper' sports massage. This time he says it's better if I undo my bra because it's 'in the way' and this time he starts slipping his hand up my top and rubbing my bare skin. I start panicking inside but try to remain 'cool', remain still. I tell myself that it's fine, just like last time. He starts pulling off my trousers because 'it's difficult to massage through jeans'. I don't object because I trust him but I'm also too scared to. Despite the panic I feel deep inside my body, I just keep reassuring myself. This time he rubs the body lotion on my legs and starts massaging up my thighs, as he slowly edges up more and more and more:

I freeze.

Ray continues to rub my legs, going up past my thighs and slowly his fingers creep into my knickers ...

I'm frozen, struck by shock, disbelief, excitement and extreme fear. The music fades out and all I hear is his breathing getting heavier and feel the weight of him lean forcefully on my back. He groans,

I feel his breath in my ear and smell the strong scent of his sweet aftershave staining my skin. He edges in and I feel his coarsely shaven chin brush over my neck as he opens his mouth and drools a slobbery kiss on the edge of my lips. I'm petrified and stiff still. I do not move a muscle. I do not kiss him back.

Then he stops.

'Mmm, that was nice, wasn't it?' he whispers stroking my hair. 'You *are* very special, you know.'

## Reflections

Ray's 'little secret' and serious sexual abuse of Bella continued for a number of years. The story of how Bella came to realise the nature of the abuse, challenge her abuser and break his hold on her is a story that will have to wait for another day. The following poem will have to suffice for the moment.

### A lucky escape

I fell for your stealth,  
For too long, finally leaving,  
Staying I would have failed myself!

Now, *slowly* path  
Re-learning from the past,  
I think I've probably had the worst!

A new life; a bodily pulsating process  
Through which I awake,  
No shame; *your* shame,  
Thank goodness I had a lucky escape.

Other athletes may not have such a 'lucky escape' and be able to voice their experiences (even if anonymously) in a public arena. Therefore, it is important to learn what we can from Bella's story as told above. This learning can take various forms depending on one's views on the nature of stories. In narrative terms, as Frank (2010) reminds us, Bella's story of abuse reports on something that has been enacted elsewhere and so is an enacted truth. This truth is not a copy of the original. Rather, as Frank argues, 'they are enactments in which something original comes to be, as if for the first time, in the full significance that the story gives it' (p. 40). In saying this, Frank rejects the *mimetic* understanding of stories which is based on the idea that stories merely imitate a reality independent of the story, and that 'they are surrogate versions of what the storyteller would have experienced, had she or he been where the storyteller was, proximate to the events being described' (p. 88). Thus, Bella's story is not a clear window through which the viewer can see the world of grooming and sexual abuse it describes. For Frank, her story is more like a sketched window. Here, 'the viewer does not attempt to look through it to something beyond, much less assume that the sketch perfectly represents what lies beyond. Instead, the sketch itself is well worth looking at' (p. 89).

In presenting Bella's story as a sketch well worth looking at, the reader might think *about* her story by reducing it to content and then analysing that content. This is a worthy analytical task in which connections can be made to the extant literature. For example, Bella's story can be used to think about the following:

- The elements of the triangulated relationship that Brackenridge (2001) suggests need to exist in order for a coach to act on their intent to abuse an athlete in their care (sport opportunity, coach/authority figure inclination and athlete vulnerability).

- The dynamic relationships between the three main types of coaches in the sport typology produced by Fasting and Brackenridge (2009): the flirting-charming coach; the seductive coach; and the authoritarian coach.
- The structural conditions and power relationships, embedded in competitive sporting environments, specifically the power invested in the coach, provide a unique socio-cultural context that offers a number of potentialities for sexual abuse and exploitation to take place

Bella's story also invites a more aesthetic reading in which readers interpret the text from their own unique vantage points, contributing their own questions, answers and experiences to the story as they read it, becoming co-participants in the creation of meanings. Here, readers think *with* the story and see where it takes them. For Frank (2013), thinking with stories involves allowing one's own thoughts to adopt the story's immanent logic, its temporality, and its tensions and contradictions. To think with a story is to experience it affecting one's own life and to find in that affect a certain truth of one's life. He suggests that the first lesson 'is not to move on once the story has been heard, but to continue to live in the story, *becoming* in it, reflecting on who one is becoming, and gradually modifying the story' (p. 159). The goal, according to Frank, is empathy, not as internalising the feelings of the other or making their self-story one's own, but as resonating with their story so as to feel its nuances and anticipate changes in plot.

Importantly, this 'thinking with' is available to Bella as a reader of her own story which opens up the possibility of re-storying described by Grant, Leigh-Phippard, and Short (2015) that 'enables the re-interpretation and re-narration of lived experiences in line with co-evolving preferred personal and relational identities' (p. 280). Such re-storying, Frank (2013) argues, is not only a transformational tool, but constitutes an informed ethical choice about how best to make sense of one's past, present and future life, and relationships. As Bella comments:

Although working on this paper has felt erratic at times, writing about my abuse, along with the professional therapy I have received along the way, has slowly helped me find a way out of that anger, that pain, that silence, and self-abusive behaviours that have so often captured me in my darker moments ... Being involved in this project has helped me to channel of those feelings. It's been a way of getting what was festering inside me, silently, and causing me the pain, out of me. I just keep telling myself that I'm helping others by speaking out. By breaking this silence I'm taking back control from my abuser and re-asserting my right to define myself as a person in my own way and in my own terms. Even though it was far from easy, and I couldn't have done it without the care and support from Helen and Andrew, it's a story that needs to be told, to help others speak out and understand sexual abuse in sport. Since writing this, I have learnt a great deal about abuse and that others can be lured much more quickly into an abusive situation (e.g. hours as opposed to days or years). I want people to be aware that 'nice' (or charming) people are not always who they seem and to question people's motives and behaviours much more. I would like others to learn from my experience and to know that they are not alone. And, I want people to speak out more! (Bella)

In closing, given her wishes for people to learn from her experience and to speak out more about the subject of sexual abuse in sport, we offer her story as a pedagogical resource for those involved in the world of sport to both think about and with as they see fit. Like Sparkes (2007), we hope that as part of this process, should Bella's story resonate with readers, that they will look after her story and, when it is needed, share it with others with a view to supporting and encouraging change at the individual and institutional level. Once thing is for sure, whatever the reader chooses to do with Bella's story, they cannot now claim not to have heard it. As King (2003) reminds us, once a story is told it cannot be called back. Rather, it becomes loose in the world to act in uncontrollable ways.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Note

1. Undisclosed sexual abuse refers to sexual abuse that has gone unreported and undiscovered. The child might not recognise the events as sexual abuse for several years after the event. The child who reaches adulthood has found some way of coping with the memory of that abuse.

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