Tall Poppies: Bullying behaviours faced by Australian High Performance School-Age Athletes

Recent Research has found that Australian school-age female athletes are bullied by their peers because of their sporting successes. Twelve high performance athletes were interviewed as part of a larger study involving nineteen current or former national and international Australian school-age athletes. Interviews focused on how these students balanced their commitments to school and their sport but did not include any questions on bullying. Independently all female participants reported experiencing bullying at school from their peers and sometimes from their teachers. None of the seven male participants reported on bullying. NVivo 10 SP 6™ matrix queries was used to analyse interview data.

The types of bullying reported included being marginalised, alienated, ostracised, excluded from social events, teased, and behaviours such as stealing books, bags and occasionally some physical violence. Jealousy was the underlying cause identified by most of the female participants. This was often disguised through taunting and name calling and was especially evident when there was a perceived failure in the sporting performances of the female athletes. Interestingly bullying occurred at both state and independent schools.

The practice of bullying successful athletes by their less successful schoolmates is an attempt to socially normalise those more successful than themselves. A culture of envy as well as schadenfreude (pleasure at another’s misfortune) are common practices throughout Australia and New Zealand. High achievers are often publically subjected to negative criticism, a practice reinforced by media reports on the “fall from grace” of popular athletes and others. As a result young Australians and New Zealanders are familiar with “tall poppy” behaviours but are less aware of the lasting impact this has on the lives of those they bully. Our research has indicated that being bullied at school leaves young female high performance athletes with lasting psychological and social problems that they carry into adulthood.

Equally important is the silence about bullying behaviours experienced by high performance male athletes in this study. This topic urgently needs researching as mental health issues experienced by high performance male athletes are of growing concern.

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