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The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) is one of the most powerful organizations in sports, with significant influence in the United States, and growing influence worldwide.

Alongside this powerful presence, the NCAA bears the burden of being associated with an increasing number of athlete-involved violence against women. Fifteen years ago, a study of 107 cases at 30 NCAA D1 schools found that “male college student-athletes, compared to the rest of the male student population, are responsible for a significantly higher percentage of the sexual assaults reported to judicial affairs on the campuses of Division I institutions.” Limiting the scope to ten schools, the study found that student-athletes comprised 3.3% of the male student body, but were involved in nineteen percent of the reported sexual assaults and 37% of domestic violence cases. In 2010 alone, constant news stories about athlete-involved violence against women suggest the problem has gotten much worse.

In response to this growing epidemic, the National Coalition Against Violent Athletes, (NCAVA), has proposed a Gender Violence Prevention Policy in the hope the NCAA will provide meaningful oversight for the apparent failure of existing entities to redress and prevent athlete-involved sexual and domestic violence.

For example, despite recent reports of sexual violence involving two Michigan State University (MSU) basketball players, one of which admitted to raping the victim, neither man was charged criminally or even disciplined by the school. An earlier report of similar violence involving two other MSU basketball players also went un-redressed. In the past two years alone, 37 reports of sexual assault by MSU athletes have been reported, but not one disciplinary sanction was imposed by school officials against any of the men involved.

With a Gender Violence Policy in place, NCAA officials would have had an opportunity to impose sanctions in at least some of those cases. If a school failed to enforce the sanctions, it could lose its NCAA membership status.

It bears stating the obvious that when athletes believe they can commit serious crimes with impunity, they are more likely to repeat the harmful behavior. But fear of causing their team to lose status in the NCAA will provide a strong deterrent, particularly given the powerful allegiance athletes feel toward their school and their teammates. That the NCAA could take such action against an entire team because of the actions of a single player will incentivize all athletes to practice restraint and will encourage even non-offending athletes to pressure each other to avoid situations that might expose the team to a risk of NCAA sanctions.

A Gender Violence Policy will also enhance existing NCAA policies as the NCAA has long



promoted values of sportsmanship and good character. Indeed, in 2008, former NCAA President Myles Brand stated that “a college education prepares students for a successful life by guiding them in forming attitudes and life-plans that enable each of them to be excellent family members, productive contributors to their community and engaged citizens.” Clearly, any form of violence against women is inconsistent with this philosophy. Furthermore, the NCAA has already published at its website specific guidelines on sex-based harassment in education in general. Thus, the proposed policy requires only a marginal additional change to give the NCAA authority to ensure compliance with those guidelines in the applied context of athlete-involved violations.

The proposed policy also reflects an approach apparently supported by the NFL, as demonstrated by Commissioner Roger Goodell who recently took it upon himself to impose sanctions against Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger. Twice accused of sexual assault, Roethlisberger was never criminally charged or punished by the Steelers administration. Roger Goodell’s proactive leadership on this important issue should be seen as an example for other professional organizations, such as the NCAA.

To this point, it is worth noting certain poignant language in a section of the NCAA’s State of the Association, which speaks to the social benefits of intercollegiate athletics. Such activity: “a) helps create community on campus; and b) contributes to social justice”. Given the current environment of tolerance for gender violence among athletes, it seems more apt to say intercollegiate athletics contributes to anti-social behavior and injustice.

The proposed policy offers the NCAA an opportunity to assert desperately needed leadership, and to send a clear message of intolerance for gender violence. Male athletes in leadership can be extremely effective at setting cultural standards that inhibit violence against women because they epitomize masculinity. This affords the NCAA a tremendous opportunity to be particularly impactful. Even the simple act of adopting clear and enforceable rules against such conduct will likely cause a change in attitudes and behavior; a goal NCAA President Mark Emmert recently suggested was a priority for the organization: “At the national level, we have to have serious conversations to see if we can find a way to send an unequivocal message that this will not be tolerated...I would describe it as just in the taking stage right now, but it’s something we’d like to move on quickly. We’ve done a great job in terms of educating and working on alcohol abuse and drug abuse. We haven’t done everything we can in regards to domestic violence and we absolutely have to. One incident is too many.”

President Emmert now has a chance to send that unequivocal message by embracing a policy that will hold individuals and institutions accountable not only for violence against women but also for the failure of existing oversight systems to respond promptly and effectively to every reported incident, without exception.