

HAZING AND INITIATIONS: THE HIDDEN TIME BOMB

Many athletic programs today are quick to promote and condone time-honored traditions in their sports. Many of these traditions are wholesome and a positive part of the total athletic experience. Unfortunately, some traditions from the past are both dangerous and illegal. These dangerous traditions often center on initiations and rights of passage required of younger teammates by their older counterparts. Many times these “initiations” are nothing more than disguised forms of hazing. Often these events can become out of hand and the physical and emotional welfare of all involved are at great risk. An athletic administrator and coaching staff that ignore these situations and consider them a playful part of the game are in danger of allowing themselves to become a part of some very ugly situations. A pro-active approach to the topic of hazing and initiations can help to prevent some major problems for coaches, athletes and athletic administrators.

The administration at our school tries to make it very clear to coaches, parents and athletes that hazing and initiations are never to be a part of our program. Quite often acts of hazing and initiations can escalate to the point that the student athlete is at risk. It is also quite possible that many of the acts of hazing and initiation will result in legal action being taken against the coach, athlete administration and/or the school district. Many of our newspapers and professional journals are full of descriptions of acts of hazing that result in legal action. A quick scan of the internet with a reliable search engine can provide countless examples of hazing and initiation on the high school and collegiate levels. These reports can be easily copied and distributed to all associated with your athletic programs. We attempt to convey our message in a multitude of forums. I would like to give you some ideas for how we attack this potential problem.

Our administration on the school and corporation level has adopted a “zero tolerance” stance on the hazing of students and athletes. The hazing and initiation policy is in our coaching handbook and is also summarized in our student athletic handbook. The school and school corporation also make the same stand with their written policies. Any student that participates willingly in a hazing or initiation ritual is subject to our Athletic Code of Conduct policy and will subject to a minimum of 10 % reduction in his or her competitive athletic season. Any hazing or initiation that requires legal action could result in termination of all athletic privileges. Any student-athlete that observes and does not attempt to stop or report such a violation can also be subject to disciplinary action by our school and/or athletic department. Repeated acts of hazing and initiation can result in further school action as well as removal from all athletic competition.

Every coach in our program is required to hold a meeting of all parents and athletes before the start of the season. At that meeting our student athletic handbook is distributed and discussed. The hazing and initiation policy is part of that handbook. Parents and athletes are required to sign a form indicating they have read and understood the portions of the handbook discussed in the meeting. A follow up letter is also sent to every athlete and parent describing our policy. We make it very clear in the meeting and in the letter that all forms of hazing and initiation are not considered appropriate in our athletic program.

The difficult part of the hazing and initiation dilemma is coming up with a definition that every coach, parents and athlete can understand. Our general directive is that no student shall be required to perform any act by a coach and/or other student that makes them feel emotionally or physically uncomfortable. To make things simpler for all involved, we have come up with a list as an athletic department that covers most of what our coaches, parents and athletes feel is hazing and initiation. We distribute this list to all coaches, parents and athletes as a general guideline for behavior. The list cannot cover ever area of concern, but will provide benchmarks for behavior. We call it the “ 20 Most Common Examples of Hazing”.

Castle High School's 20 Most Common Examples of Hazing

1. Assigning pranks such as stealing, painting objects or harassment of other groups.
2. Modifying one's appearance with unusual haircuts, shaving, tattoos or skin markings.
3. Engaging in public acts of buffoonery.
4. Consumption of undesirable foods and/or liquids.
5. Apparel that embarrasses is lewd or interferes with the educational atmosphere.
6. Playing games where the loser must perform embarrassing acts.
7. Agreeing to do demeaning tasks for others (servitude).
8. Spanking, swatting or hitting with great force.
9. Throwing in the shower, dousing, powdering or dumping in the toilet or urinal.
10. Require acceptance of verbal abuse and/or name-calling.
11. Sitting or standing in uncomfortable positions.
12. Pushing, shoving or tackling team members under orders from others.
13. Sexual activity of any kind.
14. Any use of alcohol or drugs.
15. Any tests of emotional stability.
16. Disruption of sleep.
17. Spreading of false rumors.
18. Any act that produces mental anguish.
19. Any act that could pose a safety risk to the student-athlete.
20. Any act that could bring shame or discredit to the team or school.

We would love to say we have prevented and will continue to prevent every case of hazing and initiation that happens with our student athletes. The reality of the situation is that you cannot prevent every act by every athlete. What you can do is educate, inform and have in place rules and regulations that deal severely with those that wish to intimidate others with hazing and initiations. Once the line is crossed, swift and consistent action must be taken to prevent further acts that are similar in nature. We owe this strong pro-active stance to our coaches, our parents, our athletes and ourselves. If we truly believe that every child is valuable, we must do everything in our power to protect its physical, social and emotional well-being.