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Lack of moral reasoning = bad behavior by jocks

Associated Press

MOSCOW, Idaho -- Sharon Stoll knows why the sports page often reads like a police blotter -- filled with news of illegal drugs, rapes, beatings and other crimes committed by athletes.

Stoll, a professor at the University of Idaho, has spent her career studying the values and morals of elite athletes, and concluded that a great many jocks are deficient in moral reasoning, which governs honesty, fairness and responsibility.

"In sport we have moved away from honorable behavior," Stoll contends, with more emphasis on winning at all costs and material rewards.

Stoll's conclusions are the result of a 17-year-study during which 72,000 athletes filled out questionnaires designed to measure their moral reasoning abilities.

"The environment of athletics has not been supportive of teaching and modeling moral knowing, moral valuing, and moral action," Stoll's 2004 study found, in part because there are few consequences for immoral behavior in sport.

Stoll operates the Center for Ethical Theory and Honor in Competitive Sports. The center contains the results of tens of thousands of Hahm-Beller Values Choice Inventory tests, developed by Stoll and her colleagues. It measures athletes ranging from junior high to college sports on their moral reasoning.

Jennifer M. Beller of neighboring Washington State University is the measurement specialist for the center, and one of the principle authors of the test.

Stoll's most recent client is the Atlanta Braves baseball team, whose coaching staff will receive a teaching curriculum by next February intended to produce better teamwork, better anger management and a steroid-free environment, Stoll said.

Stoll and her team develop the curriculum and teach it to coaches, who then teach it to their players.

The Braves plan to use the program throughout their minor league system, said Dayton Moore, assistant general manager of the Atlanta team.

The Braves have long had a program to teach good behavior to players, but felt Stoll's proposal was more concrete, Moore said.

Moore said one key area for the Braves is teaching young players to appreciate diversity. Former Braves pitcher John Rocker gained infamy in 1999 for remarks he made in an interview with Sports Illustrated in which he bashed gays, minorities and foreigners.

The Braves also want to impart character traits like learning to deal with failure.

"We want to stress having balance in their lives and making good decisions off the field," Moore said.

While athletes have traditionally scored well for values such as teamwork, loyalty, self-sacrifice and

work ethic, they have not done as well in moral values such as honesty, fairness and responsibility.

Stoll works not from an ivory tower but from real life.

In a program for Arizona State University, players studied the life of alumnus Pat Tillman, a professional football player who forsook sports to join the U.S. Army after Sept. 11. He died in Afghanistan.

"He believed in something," Stoll said. "He was an honorable man."

Unfortunately, Stoll doesn't need to look hard to find examples of prominent athletes behaving badly.

Rapes, brawls and drug abuse are in the sports pages daily.

Her research has found that members of male sports teams scored lower in morals than individual sport athletes. The longer they compete in sports, the more morally calloused male athletes become. That also appears to be happening to female athletes in team sports.

Stoll's clients include the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Air Force Academy, the CIA, the American Bar Association, the President's Commission of the NCAA, the National Youth Sport Coach's Association and the National Federation of High School Activities Association.

The first step is an organization's mission, Stoll said.

"If you say your mission is to win, I can't work with you," Stoll said. "You can be vastly immoral and win."

But if an organization values honesty and respect and responsibility, Stoll can help them find ways to impart those values to athletes. Stoll's courses require a coach to spend about 45 minutes a week passing the information to students. But the time is worth it, she said.

"You wouldn't have me coming and working with you if you didn't have a major problem," Stoll said.

Coaches are especially interested in teaching young people about responsible sex, she said.

Charges of rape have been leveled against football players at the University of Colorado, against basketball star Kobe Bryant, and many, many lower-profile athletes in recent years. Unplanned pregnancy and out-of-wedlock children also pose problems.

"We do a large section on responsible sexuality, to make them understand the ramifications of recreational sex," Stoll said.

She instructs male athletes to treat women the way they would want their sister to be treated. Athletes are also taught how to properly deal with women who are offering themselves for sex.

"We want to develop young men to be decent human beings," she said. "Many of these young people have no sense of what is acceptable behavior."

Stoll is a partner in a company called Winning With Character with Bobby Lankford, who is the assistant coach for character and leadership for the University of Georgia football team. Lankford said Georgia coach Mark Richt is interested in instilling proper values in his players.

The main goal, Lankford said, is to get athletes to consider two questions: Is it honorable? Is it responsible?

"If you can't answer yes to both questions, you better turn and go in another direction," Lankford said.

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