

Chalk Talk: *Same-Sex Teammate Romantic and Sexual Relationships* (Pat Griffin)

When people spend a lot of time together relationships develop. Friendships and sexual or romantic relationships are possible. This is true of mixed-sex settings and same-sex settings. It is only recently, as lesbian, gay and bisexual people have become more visible in athletics that coaches and administrators have begun to identify ways to address this occurrence that respect the rights of individuals on the team and acknowledge the priorities of building and maintaining team cohesiveness and performance.

At first, forbidding romantic or sexual relationships among teammates might seem like a simple solution. However, this policy assumes that an open romantic relationship on an athletic team will have an inevitable negative effect on the team's unity, performance or public image. We take the position that it is indeed easier if teammates do not become romantically or sexually involved with each other. However, lesbian and gay teammates have always found each other and developed romantic relationships, just as heterosexual athletes have. This is nothing new.

Lesbian or gay romantic relationships on teams have usually been secret or at least not publicly acknowledged outside the team. Forbidding such relationships or insisting on secrecy encourages dishonesty and unfair treatment. Sometimes coaches and teammates tolerate the relationship as long as the participants are discreet and do not call attention to their relationship. If they are found out, coaches often dismiss the players from the team or admonish them to end their romantic involvement. Secret or forbidden romantic relationships among teammates can be a distraction from team goals. However, we believe that it is possible for athletic teams to accommodate romantic relationships between teammates if they occur without compromising team goals or cohesion. This requires maturity and responsibility on the part of the athletes in the relationship and their willingness to abide by appropriate behavioral expectations within the team setting: In short, this means that they should conduct themselves as team members first in the team setting.

If coaches or teammates perceive a romantic relationship between teammates to be a problem, it is important to determine the source of the problem before taking action. Are team members concerned because of their own feelings of discomfort or because of the actions of the partnered teammates? Often the source of teammates' discomfort is rooted in homophobia or fear that the relationship will lead people to assume that everyone on the team is lesbian or gay. Sometimes teammates are uncomfortable with the idea of a lesbian or gay relationship and project this discomfort into the situation. If team disruption is caused by homophobia and not the conduct of players in a relationship, then it is the team homophobia that is causing a problem, not the romantic relationship between teammates. Education and discussion with the team can address fears, stereotypes and concerns.

If the romantic relationship is having a negative effect on team performance or cohesion because of inappropriate behavior by the players in the relationship, then their behavior must be addressed. They need to know the specific expectations for them as team members in a relationship. The goal is to create policy that both respects individual choices and makes clear fair expectations for relationship behavior when in the team setting.

Several policy options are possible in response to romantic and sexual relationships on teams, whether they are between men and women on coed teams or between same-sex couples on same-sex teams:

- Forbid romantic and sexual relationships among teammates. This policy encourages secrecy and dishonesty and is difficult to enforce and we do not recommend it.
- Ignore romantic and sexual relationships among teammates. This non-policy also encourages dishonesty, secrecy and can lead to problems that might fester if the team members in the relationship act inappropriately or other teammates are uncomfortable.
- Discourage romantic relationships among teammates, AND be prepared to deal with them openly; emphasizing fairness, reasonable accommodation, honesty, and responsibility to the team.

This last policy option acknowledges that romantic relationships on a team can complicate team dynamics and require responsible behavior by the teammates in the relationship. It is important for the coach to set appropriate boundaries and expectations for all team members, especially teammates in a relationship. It is an added responsibility for teammates in a relationship to conduct themselves professionally and respectfully. This means being team members first in the team context. Coaches have a responsibility to the team to make these expectations clear to the athletes involved.

Recommendations for Addressing Teammate Romantic and Sexual Relationships:

- Be proactive, set broad policy that applies fairly to all romantic and sexual relationships among the team and between team members and non-team members regardless of their sexual orientation.
- Be straight forward and open about addressing the possibility of a same-sex relationship. This is not something to be secret about, it happens.
- Encourage team members to find romantic relationships outside the team because of potential complications – the same as workplace relationships between co-workers in a business setting.
- Do not require secrecy, let athletes set their own comfort level in revealing the relationship to others.
- The coach should talk to the teammates in a relationship about their responsibilities to the team:
- Team performance and unity take priority over the relationship in team settings (Do not pair off or exclude other team members on the team bus, meals, practice, hotels).
- No public displays of affection in the team context are appropriate (holding hands, kissing). Compare to appropriate professional behavior in the workplace.
- They should deal with relationship issues or conflict on their own time, leave them outside the locker room door.
- Talk with them about how to handle knowledge of the relationship with the team: Tell teammates in team meeting, tell them individually, let teammates find out.
- Make sure that teammates in a relationship understand that the consequences of not abiding by the expectations are that one or both team members will have to leave the team.
- The coach should make sure the rest of the team understands their responsibilities to be fair and address their own prejudices and fears about the relationship as well as speaking up in the same way they would about any other team issue if they think behavior by the romantic partners is affecting team performance or cohesion.

