

Critically discuss the ethical issues raised by the Conference on Ethics and Sport.

'Ethics' – moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity. This was the main topic covered on a conference on ethics in sports and media in Trinity College Dublin on Saturday 3rd November. It was a talk given by many different, well-known sports and media people. Focusing mainly on the area of ethics in sports. There were two main topics talked about within the talk. They were *'duty of care' – The responsibility or the legal obligation of a person or organization to avoid acts or omissions to be likely to cause harm to others.* (HOW HAS THIS TERM IMPACTED YOUR LIFE?) and *'do no harm' / 'Nonmaleficence' – Obligation not to inflict harm intentionally (ANON)* Both of these are huge phrases within the world of ethics and these were two phrases used multiple times throughout the conference. Two main areas I choose to focus on when talking about the ethical issues raised by the conference were on the ethics of coaching and the ethics of silence, both play huge roles within sport.

Ethics in Coaching

The role of a coach in any sports team is the centre figure of a team or individual. They are there to pass on their knowledge of the sport onto the people they are coaching. A good coach will get to know the people they are coaching on a personal level, so they know how that person will react to certain types of training and how they will recover both physically and mentally, so they become better at that sport. A coach has a duty of care to ensure that he does no harm to anyone that they are coaching.

“A victor, not a victim” – Karen Leach. This statement from a woman who has gone through more pain and suffering in one year of her childhood than most people go through in their entire life is only a small part of the amazing woman that she is. Straight away we were placed deep into a story of how a young girl by the name of Karen was in a state of mind that the only way she could be set free was by committing suicide. All of this was the blame of

one man in particular, Derry O'Rourke. Karen was only a young girl when she started to develop her love for swimming. It would not be long though until she realized that moving to a swimming club in Palmerstown after being scouted for the club would be one of the worst decisions of her life. This was the day Derry O'Rourke started his mental and physical breakdown of young Karen. The deep anguish and pain that was caused by this man could be felt by the tone of Karen's voice as she talked about the horrendous and completely unethical acts that were carried out on her by Derry O'Rourke. The term 'Do no harm' was a term he clearly didn't know anything about. Derry O'Rourke was placed in a position of power as he was the coach of a local swimming club and the international swimming team. He had a duty of care as he was in charge of training many minors and he never carried out his duty of care.

The first ethical issue we encounter is when Karen opened up about being in an asylum after trying to take her own life. This opens up a huge can of ethical worms as there are many different ethical issues around the topic of suicide. It begs the main question, is suicide ethical or unethical? In most religions the teaching is that one's life is the property of God and thus that to take one's life is to deride God's prerogatives. (CAN IT BE RIGHT TO COMMIT SUICIDE?) In many cases it is unethical to take one's life. The way Karen's abuser O'Rourke got inside her head made it in such a way that Karen felt trapped. There was no way she could get out. Karen was trapped in that vicious circle of constant physical and mental abuse for seven long years. This severe abuse left her in a psych ward for 10 years after multiple attempts at taking her own life. Leach got to such a bad point in her life that it had led to the plan that she had formulated, a plan to take not only her own life but also her sons' life too. The only thing that stopped her was the dream she had the night before she had planned to end it all. In the dream she seen her son Jake roaring crying. This was the deciding factor that caused her not to carry through with her plan. All of this was caused by the damaging affect that O'Rourke had on her life from such a young age. O'Rourke had not carried out his duty of care as a coach for the 18 girls he had mentally and physically abused. He was sentenced to twelve years in prisons in which the last three were suspended, that means he only served six months for each girl he had abused.

In stark contrast to O'Rourke the Meath football team of the 1980's and early 1990's was managed by one of the greatest sports managers of all time, Sean Boylan. He was nothing like O'Rourke. This team was notoriously known for being quite a strong hard-hitting physical team. Bernard Flynn was one of the star footballers on this team alongside other greats of the sport such as Trevor Giles and Mick Lyons. Flynn talked of how Boylan spent nearly a full day once in his house while he was not there and talked to his family to try and get to know the type of person Flynn was. Boylan was a manager to the team, but he also acted as psychologist. These men were training and playing football nearly seven times a week. Flynn talked of how at one training session the team were running laps, but he was so tired that he sat out one lap. He thought he could just sneak back in the next lap and he would not be noticed. Unfortunately, his plan did not work out and he got caught. Boylan called the whole team in and publicly humiliated Flynn in front of the team. This was used to build strength in the team, so no one would be skipping anything and everything that the team did they did together. This built a tremendous bond within the team which was key to latter success. Boylan knew the best way of getting the most out of the team was if he knew all of his players inside out. He did this by finding out every detail about the players lives that played for him. He felt his duty of care was to bring that team the most success possible and to make sure his players were well looked after. In my opinion he done an excellent coaching job on his team. The result of this was the reward of winning three consecutive Leinster titles and then winning two All-Ireland titles, the highest possible result in the GAA. Flynn did talk however about the reason he feels they did not win so many tittles. Flynn talked of how they were such a hard-hitting physical team that it almost held back their football playing ability which ultimately cost them many different titles.

Another well-known figure of the GAA who talked at the conference was Cyril Farrell. 'It is in the giving of things that you will feel good' - Cyril Farrell. Farrell would be regarded as one of the greats with the GAA community, coming from a simple up-bringing in which he said it had 'many ups and downs' He played hurling growing up and he describes himself as an 'ordinary club hurler'(THE MAKING OF A MANAGER: HOW A 30-YEAR-OLD 'ORDINARY CLUB HURLER' ENDED GALWAY'S ALL-IRELAND FAMINE) but that was not why he has become such a well-known star of the GAA. It was for his excellent

managerial role in which he managed the Galway team of 1980 to winning the All-Ireland hurling championship at just the age of thirty. He was first introduced to the team in 1979 as the strength and conditioning manager. This was while he was working full time as a teacher in Dublin. He went over and back to Galway every Tuesday and Thursday night. Not getting back until half two in the morning after these sessions. He was then asked to take over and manage the senior Galway hurling team. He taught the team one thing they needed to change was to stop apologising for being good at something. Instead they needed to have the attitude that 'I am good enough' and that it was their right as a team to win that All-Ireland title in 1980. He thought his team belief and that the sky was the limit, this made the team an unstoppable force. Farrell carried out his duty of care by making sure the team had complete and full belief within themselves. Farrell led his team to such great success by changing the way the game was played. This is very similar to how Jim McGuinness changed the way football is played which led to the Donegal team of 2012 to win the All-Ireland. McGuinness implied the tactic of a 'blanket defence'. Farrell changed the style of hurling which was get the ball and 'belt' it down the field, to a new style of 'playing the percentages' this involved getting the possession stats up so not just getting the ball and hitting it straight away. This had a knock-on effect which led to players sticking more to staying in their positions and not being like sheep and all following the ball. This revolutionised the game and could be single handily been the reason for Galway winning their first All-Ireland title in 57 years. This was all down to having such an excellent manager.

Silence

A lot of ethical issues are never raised due to people keeping silent around certain ethical issues. These issues can range anywhere from silence about a certain injury such as a concussion to something which may be slightly harder to find out about, such as a person suffering from depression. A lot of the time people do not want to talk openly about this for many reasons.

For example, with a concussion, if someone on a team feels like they may have suffered from one they will stay silent as they feel if they tell someone they may be substituted and possibly lose their place on a team. In rugby especially, there has been a lot of recent reports about people suffering concussions. (IRFU SATISFIED WITH HEAD INJURY PROTOCOLS DESPITE CONOR MURRAY'S DELAYED CONCUSSION) In 2015 Conor Murray suffered a concussion while playing a match against Zebre's. Murray went through a Head Injury Assessment (HIA) and he had passed it. This meant he was deemed fit to return to play. Murray came back on and played the rest of the match. After the match Murray went through a much more invasive concussion test and it came back that he had in fact suffered a concussion during the game. The medical team have a duty of care to make sure a player does not have a concussion and are able to continue playing. The medical team had not carried out a duty of care as they let Murray return onto the pitch even though he had suffered a concussion that they were not able to detect. Although Murray may have felt he was not right he did not say anything as he was allowed return to the pitch to continue to play. Kevin Doyle unfortunately had to end his professional soccer career early due to numerous concussions received during his playing career. Doyle has gone on to talk openly about concussions.

Another type of silence that happens is the silence and taboo around the area of mental health. A lot of the time there has been many cases where famous sports stars have opened up about their mental health issues that they have suffered from. Nicole Owens talked during the ethics conference about her own personal battle with depression. Owens talked about how her depression developed from her teenage years. It would hit her for a day or two while she was a teenager but then it would go for nearly a month or six weeks, then comeback. By the time she had reached college those month-long gaps had dramatically shortened. Her mental health had gotten bad. Luckily, she did not keep it to herself though as she stopped being silent and she opened up to her mam about it. Unfortunately, last year Owens had gone through a bad relationship break-up alongside with work problems which led her to being in a very bad place. Owens had contemplated taking her own life but the main reason she chose not to was that she had a vision of how upset her mom would be, so she chose against taking her life. Owens had bottled all of this up and had kept it to herself. She did not talk about it for possible fear of how she may have been seen by the public. Her manager knew of her

depression though and helped Owen's through that rough patch. Owens talked about how her manager acted as a psychologist as he was with her nearly fifteen hours a week. She talked about how her last year of football would not have been possible except for the duty of care that he carried out making sure that she was ok. Owens was then able to open up and talk about her struggle with her mental health. Owens now feels that she can open up to her friends, team-mates and colleagues about her mental health. She talked of how if she said to one of them, she was not feeling great that they'd ask her to go for lunch or walk and go talk about it. This really removed the stigma around talking about mental health for her. The way Owen's talks to her friends about her mental health is so encouraging. If more people could open up and not stay in silence, then in my opinion I really feel that the rate of suicide especially amongst young men would drastically drop. All too often people feel as if they can't open up and they just stay in silence about their mental health as they feel they'll be judged or look upon differently from their friends or family when this is not the case. We need more people like Owens who actively talk about their struggles with mental health to show the important message that it is ok not to feel ok and its absolutely ok to ask for help. If this messaged can be spread, then it will break the stigma around talking out about your mental health, so it will hopefully break the silence people feel like they need to have when suffering from mental health issues.

The NHS in England recently released a report that showed nearly 400,000 young people aged 18 and younger are in contact with the British health service over mental health problems. Although it is awful that such a high number of people are suffering mental health issues, it is very positive to see that such a huge number of young people are reaching out and asking for help. They are breaking this stigma around what has been called 'a silent catastrophe' (Young people's mental health is a 'worsening crisis'. Action is needed | Mary O'Hara) The number of 'active referrals' is a third higher than this time two years ago. In my opinion I do not feel as if more people are having mental health issues, I feel as if the way people with mental health issues are treated has drastically changed in the last few years. This has led to many more people being able to seek help for the problem they may be having without fear of how they may be seen by their family or friends. The suicide rate in Ireland per 100,000 people in 2011 was 13. In 2016 that number had fallen to 9. It is not huge drop,

but it is still very positive to see this rate falling. (SUICIDE – NATIONAL SUICIDE RESEARCH FOUNDATION)

From this conference it is clear we must look at previous cases including the ones talked about to prevent any such issues arising again. We must safe-guard our youth so they can grow up in a world where they can be safe and protected. We must ensure that people of power and people who interact the youth are correctly vetted, and all the processes are carried out correctly. It can no longer be a case of just ticking the boxes. A proper infrastructure must be in place to ensure what happened to Karren Leach will never happen to any young person ever again. Also, we must continue to try and break the stigma around mental health issues, we need people to feel safe and not be worried about speaking out about their mental health issues. We also need to break the silence around concussion in sport, we need players to be honest with themselves and coaches about when they feel they may have suffered a concussion.

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