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Hoelzer: Swim Crisis Is Society's Crisis

Craig Lord *Apr 22, 2010*

In an excellent article on the latest developments in the crisis in American swimming relating to abuse cases in the coaching community, Margaret Hoelzer tells AP reporter Paul Newberry of her disappointment that some have tried to portray the problem as especially egregious within USA Swimming.

Hoelzer, a former world champion and a three-time Olympic medallist, does not believe the problem is more widespread in swimming than in any other sport or sector of society. Her views are all the more poignant because she is among those who were consulted by the federation in the wake of the Beijing Olympics - at which she claimed two silvers and a bronze - when she revealed her own experience of having been sexually abused as a child by a playmate's father.

"These people don't need to be in sports around children," Hoelzer told Newberry at AP. "If everyone is working together and talking about it, that's how you get rid of it."

Hoelzer was consulted a few weeks ago by USA Swimming as it worked on a [7-point plan](#) and policy, announced yesterday.

"Frankly, I don't know what happened before," she told AP. "But something is going to be done from here on out. That's a good thing. Even if they're getting a late start, a late start is better than no start at all."

She noted statistics showing that one in four girls and one out of seven boys will be victims of sexual abuse. That is a problem worldwide, as indicated in our [comment](#) yesterday.

"This is a problem in any avenue where adults work with children," Hoelzer told AP. "Since going public with my own abuse, many people in life have come forward and told me their stories. I can't think of a single one who's a swimmer. There's a problem in USA Swimming, but not any more so than society as a whole."

The point being made by Hoelzer is to be found far and wide in the bigger debate on the Catholic Church. This from columnist Michael Coren in *The Toronto Sun*:

"The vast majority of sexual abuse occurs in the family, generally by step-brothers and boyfriends of mothers. The next highest amount comes from teachers. These two institutions and people account for more than 75% of all charges, compared to less than 2% for the church. Next are sports coaches, with some horribly infamous cases in hockey.

"Other sports are equally bad, with one swimming coach in the United States being moved from team to team even after he was revealed as a pedophile. Secular youth groups such as Scouts also experience abuse, as do synagogues, mosques and Protestant churches, foster homes, youth clubs and pretty much anywhere else.

In fact, a Catholic Church today is arguably the safest place for a young person to be. But the church is held to a higher standard and that is entirely appropriate."

Newberry also reports that Jonathan Little, an Indianapolis attorney who filed one of at least four ongoing sexual abuse cases against USA Swimming, is skeptical of the federation's 7-point plan.

"This was a rash, rushed reaction from USA Swimming," Little told the AP in a telephone interview. "Since its inception, USA Swimming has been trying to police itself. They know that coaches have sex with athletes. Everyone knows it, but no one does anything about it."

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To many in the sport that will read as a very broad-brush statement. He could just as well have said that far, far greater numbers of coaches have never had sex with a swimmer of legal age without consent than have done. As for USA Swimming policing itself, the federation, like all other institutions, lives in a nation and a wider world in which the first authority victims ought to turn to when dealing with sex crimes is the police.

In many cases, that is what happened, the fallout now as much to do with the understandable justice and cultural changes being sought, it seems, as to do with finding a party who might compensate and pay for costs.

The difficulty in pointing a finger at USA Swimming is highlighted by the case of Deena Deardurff Schmidt, a 1972 Olympic gold medallist who last month disclosed that she was molested by her coach while training in the 1960s. The name of the man will surely be of interest to USA Swimming but even when armed with a name that the swimmer refuses to provide and in the absence of any criminal prosecution, if that is indeed the case, what is the federation supposed to do? The name of the alleged abuser is one that has raised eyebrows beyond American borders, so it may be one that is of interest to more than just USA Swimming.

USA Swimming stands accused by Little and others of "policing itself" but has it truly any authority to police alleged sex-crime offenders in the absence of criminal prosecution?

There is evidence that at least 36 coaches have been banned for life by USA Swimming over the last 10 years because of sexual misconduct. "This is an opportunity for us to change youth sports and USA Swimming," Little told AP. "You can already see that USA Swimming knows they have to change. We are starting to see that happen. But until they are willing to remove the bad apples from their midst, they're not serious."

The USA Swimming board of directors says it is serious. It will meet on May 1, Newberry notes, to define the timeline and procedures for implementing its new plan. "We're not in a bubble on this," USA Swimming head Chuck Wielgus told Newberry. "Quite frankly, I've had multiple phone calls from people from other organizations, sport and otherwise, who have expressed that they too are facing this problem."

Little wants the federation to extend obligatory checks beyond the convicted to the FBI database.

Newberry, fittingly, gives the last words to Hoelzer in his piece. "Swimming was something that helped me deal with my abuse and the emotions I was having," she said. "That was my safe haven. I'm glad I had something to put my energy and effort and frustration into. I don't know that these people have been able to do that. I was lucky that I had swimming."

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