

## TESTIMONY: Why Survivors Delay Disclosure of Sexual Abuse.

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It seems hard for the public to understand how a coach or person in power could sexually abuse a male athlete. And believe it or not, it is just as hard for that male to comprehend. It is equally difficult for the public to understand why a male does not report the incident. The patriarchal stigma, stipulations, and expectations of "what it is to be a man" have enslaved males into silence and forced them to deal with sexual abuse independently due to fear, shame, and even guilt. Many men do not know where to turn for help or resources because of the societal mentality that "men cannot be raped" or "you must have allowed it to happen," resulting in emasculation. Many men think that they can handle it and push the experience aside, so they do not have to remember it, or as many may say, "Simply, get over it." But as studies indicate, many men who have suppressed their trauma deal with it later in life, leading to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, crime, and suicide.

My story is more familiar with other men who choose not to come forward. Although everyone's trauma experience is unique and individualized, the pressure to keep silent usually outweighs the degradation when reporting. The humiliation of sharing the details with the police is an oppressive experience in itself. There is the constant fear of not being believed if the victim cannot provide all the requested details. What about the predator's reputation? A predator may be a respected contributor to society. Many organizations cover up the allegations to protect themselves, as we have seen with Dr. Larry Nassar, Dr. Robert Anderson, Dr. Richard Strauss, James Levine, and Jerry Sandusky, to name a few.

As an Amateur Athlete, I could not accept any outside financial support directly connected to my athletic abilities. When I started competing, I had to pay for my coach, practice time, swimsuit, travel to meets, lodging, etc. The initial investment was challenging because my parents were struggling financially. Living in an old farmhouse in rural Southwestern Ohio, with six children, meant we were barely making ends meet.

When I was fifteen, I finished eighth at the Junior Olympics in Lincoln, Nebraska. By sixteen, I competed internationally in springboard and platform diving competition with dreams of Olympic glory. The pressures and sacrifices that came along with this level of competition provided an environment of secrets. Relationships between athletes and coaches, and medical examiners were heightened and manipulated. Leaving my family behind while still developing mentally, emotionally, and physically made me prime prey for a predator's fantasy and the perfect candidate to be groomed into the world of silence, shame, and denial.

My mother was approached by a lawyer who groomed her by proposing an offer she couldn't refuse and indicated it was the only solution for me to remain in the sport. He promised to set up a fund at a local bank where people could make donations; he would manage the money and pay the diving costs in alignment with the legalities to keep my amateur status. He indicated that he knew other professionals who wanted to help and provide the family with their expertise. What the lawyer failed to tell my mother was that there was a cost for this transaction. The lawyer took

me to the city to meet a doctor who wanted to help me get into the university and was left with him for the weekend or the week on several occasions. I was then passed off to others and then to others and still others. I was wined and dined, the financial pressures eased, and other pro-bono services such as free doctor appointments, eye exams, medication, etc., were provided for the whole family.

Confusion, shame, and depression littered my teenage mind as I tried to comprehend what the professionals represented. I did try and tell someone that the abuse was happening. As a black Towncar drove up the driveway to our farmhouse, I told my mother that I didn't want to go. She asked why, and I tried to explain that the men touched me. I thought this would be the end of it. Mother looked at me and then slapped me. She said that the men were professionals, highly respected by the community, and helping the family with medicine, exams, and treatments. She sternly told me that it was a sin to make up lies about people, and if I wanted to continue to dive, I would have to do my part. She informed me that it was probably my fault if anything ever really happened. She handed me my coat and escorted me out the door. I quickly learned that if my mother did not believe me, no one would. So, I choose to remain silent. I somehow figured out a way to disassociate the abuse and present myself to function in everyday life. I told myself if I could excel in diving, I could pretend none of this happened.

The coach noticed a change in me and started asking questions. He said he was worried that whatever was happening could affect my potential and interfere with my upcoming international competitions. He expressed that I could tell him anything and seemed very concerned. He approached my mother and told her that I had the potential for the Olympics and a College Scholarship, but he had noticed a change in my attitude. He explained to her that he would step in and that I needed to listen and do everything he said. He informed her that he would have to take me on overnight trips to practice with the OSU diving team. He wanted absolute control over my practices and diet and needed my trust without outside interference, especially from her. He even extended a payment plan, which she assumed the family could manage with assistance from the lawyer and the professionals. My mother agreed to this arrangement.

Only after gaining my mother's trust did the coach implement his subtle and inconspicuous grooming methods on me. The coach acted as if he knew my secret, and it didn't change how he felt about me and wanted us to become close. He whispered diving corrections in my ear, so the other divers could not hear. He informed me that the teammates were jealous because I would compete at the Norway Cup and Canadian Cup. He began complimenting me on my diving and physical appearance. He touched me more and more while giving corrections. He started hugging me after a good dive or after a good performance. He asked me about school and family issues and encouraged me to only talk with him about anything.

All this played in normalizing his actions and making me feel special. He informed me that my diving career was not possible without him, and he was the only one who believed in me enough to get me to the Olympics. He made me promise that although his coaching methods may seem odd, I was not to let anyone know about them. He didn't want his coaching techniques used by other coaches. His grooming elevated to more alone time outside of practice, which included alcohol and eventually sex. He always confessed that he was not able to remember anything because of the drinking. We spent more and more alone time together when I was not with the

professionals. He stated how special our relationship was, and we needed to protect it by keeping it a secret. No one would understand. If anyone ever found out, it would ruin everything. He advised me that no one would believe me since he was a well-known and respected coach. He explained that I would lose my financial support, he would not be able to coach me, and my dreams of a college scholarship and the Olympics would end. He also informed me that no one would ever want to coach me.

My religious father shared Bible verses at home that depicted how I was an abomination and going to hell. I felt incredibly alone and had nowhere to turn for help. My inner world began to fall apart while my external world appeared held together. It took everything I had to keep all the pieces together, but it was too much to comprehend. I started trying to figure where to put each thought, memory, idea into some regions of my mind to function every day. The puzzle pieces did not always fit, so I created different identities to survive: the son, the student, the diver, and the sinner. I juggled anger, shame, confusion, pleasure, attention, and acceptance and organized them every morning so I could face and function throughout the day. I hid behind a smile as I slipped deeper into depression.

My internal battle was raging. I convinced myself that the coach was different from the professionals. How? I was not sure. The coach saw something in me and didn't want to pass me on to someone else. He thought that I could do incredible things, and he encouraged me to be my best. I trusted the coach. When the touching escalated to physical, I thought I could handle it by saying, "No!" But my teenage body betrayed me. If the wind blew against me, my hormones always reacted. It didn't matter who touched me, I responded, even if it was against my wishes. He led me to believe we had a special relationship. I never told anyone about the coach because of all the dreams we had together, the Olympics and college.

I created a silent trifecta, which included my coach, the medical team, and the professions. They were all men. I learned I had two alternatives: to disappoint everyone in the trifecta and my mother; or get it over as quickly as possible, and no matter what, make sure he had the orgasm and not me. I convinced myself that this gave me control, and it wasn't sex. I struggled with my sexual orientation. Before the silent trifecta, I was concerned with which young lady to take to homecoming. I had not experimented with anyone my age before the first traumatic experience. I was confused that since my body responded, that I must have been homosexual. Did the silent trifecta choose my sexual identity for me?

It was not until later in my life, while I was teaching high school English when a student came into my classroom and wanted to talk. He shared with me that he was gay and had a boyfriend who was older, much older, in his thirties. The student shared that he was sexually active and that his mother and grandmother were supportive of this. When I asked, "Why?" he responded with, "He helps pay the bills and groceries." I felt this rush of heat inside of me as my heart constricted. I explained that I was going to have to report it. He seemed okay with it and almost relieved. When I shared the information with the assistant-principal, she informed me that she and the principal knew the situation and nothing could be done since the mother and grandmother were aware. I was told, "This boy has a history of this."

I remember leaving the school and feeling disturbed. Why was this single-story bothering me so much? Other students shared stories with me. Why couldn't I shake this off? Why did I feel that I let this teenager down? As the months passed, I started noticing a sense of depression come over me, a sense of low self-worth, a feeling of powerlessness, and dread. I did my best to ignore it, to pass it off by saying that I was working too hard. But flashes of images and memories became more intense than ever, and I realized that I lived in a continuous state of anxiety, alienation, nonexistence, and guilt. I felt like a liar. I lied to myself and others because I was hiding something. And my secret was that I was sexually abused. Not once, but on many occasions throughout my high school years as a male athlete.

As I struggled with the student's story and the revelation of my own, I slipped deeper into depression. By the end of December 2016, despite my fight, depression took hold, I had gained over 30 lbs., my health was terrible, and I felt that I no longer was a contributor to society. I wrote a note to my partner of fifteen-years, said goodbye to my two Boston Terriers, and went to the garage. While sitting in the car inhaling the exhaust fumes, I heard a small voice that said, "This isn't fair for Nathan to find you like this. Get out of the car and go back into the house," which I did. I fell to the floor and cried. I picked myself up and decided to break my silence and say something.

Studies indicate 1 in 6 males are sexually abused—and those are only the cases reported and investigated. In athletics, the numbers are higher and rarely reported. The long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse may not be evident until later in life, like depression, anxiety, denial, and even suicide. 93% of victims know their abuser. 90% don't report it, which is higher in athletics. Recent events have shed light on this "secret." Abused males are still hiding since our society's conditioning believe these acts are a rite of passage, simple hazing, or initiation.

If you can take a moment and step into a sexually abused person's shoes, you may understand why we don't report the event, especially males and especially male athletes. Our societal expectations of what it is to be a man, the cultural and systemic problems of sports regarding medals and money more than an athlete's wellbeing, and the unawareness of grooming, manipulating, and stigmatizing may help you understand this epidemic. Each victim's response and experience are unique, and each survivor has different symptoms.

Do I wake up every morning feeling guilty that it all was my fault? Yes. Does the constant ramification impede daily chores and obligations? Sometimes. Have the experiences prevented me from contributing to society? No! I no longer need to carry the labels that I have created for myself because of the choices an adult, mentor, coach, and others have made.

Healing is a long-term process. It may take many years before the victim is even aware of the abuse they sustained. By not permitting the person to decide on their own when to come forward, we encourage victims to remain silent. Remaining silent empowers the predator to abuse more and more people. By eliminating the civil statute of limitations, it forces predators/abusers to be responsible for their actions and face the consequences for the lives they have destroyed for a moment of their narcissistic pleasure. As a society, we need to understand and acknowledge that even if a predator/abuser is convicted and sentenced does not mean the trauma is over. The victims face a lifetime of healing.