her during those three months of silence, he openly and actively encouraged a rival swimmer, and team-mate, to try to beat me. During rest periods, he would shout encouragement to my rival, telling him how to improve, pointing out my weaknesses to him, never addressing me directly. I hated my "rival" because I thought he was stealing my coach away from me. It's embarrassing to admit but I was completely dependent on my coach and felt that I would never achieve anything without him.

At one point relationships were so strained because of these psychological mind games that on a four man relay team, which set a record, the backstroke swimmer refused to talk to the breaststroke swimmer; the breaststroke swimmer in turn wouldn't talk to the butterfly swimmer; and all three barely acknowledged the freestyle swimmer. There was genuine hate among swimmers who were supposed to be team-mates. As it turned out, this coach—while abusing me psychologically—was doing far worse to other members of my swimming team. They were sexually abused. My coach did try to abuse me once; I was 9 years of age and away from home. Fortunately I was uneasy and requested him to leave my bedroom.

I have over the last few years tried to contact some of my team-mates from my years in swimming. I am glad to say that the rival whom I detested is now a good friend. Other swimmers have suffered long term problems. I have read widely on the outcome of people who have been abused as children. I can recognize many of the symptoms in people I knew.

Ironically, there are others who may have gained in some way from the experience. These persons have a high self esteem, and developed very strong characters. It's extraordinary to think that there could be an unexpected positive side to abuse, but I would count myself among this group.

My dependency on my coach has changed and I now consider myself strongly independent. I have emerged from my swimming years, certainly with some regrets that I didn't form the friendships many in swimming deserved, but I have an appreciation for the risks involved in sporting situations.

So how can we prevent persons getting involved in sport that should never be allowed to take charge of children? It's difficult. By definition the typical abuser is the very person you would never suspect, they have to be the "trustworthy type". But you cannot legislate against people who are determined to abuse children. What you can do is make people more aware of the potential situations that lend themselves to abuse. Any in my opinion that is the essence of any preventive programme, addressed at ending child abuse in sport.
Verbal encouragement of voluntary muscle action: reply to commentary by Roger Eston.

P J McNair

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