

Sport and Social Development

Evaluating a Professional Sport League's Domestic Violence and Sexual Abuse Camp

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Abstract

We explore the use of sport to address the sensitive issue of domestic violence and sexual abuse (DVSA) by evaluating a professional sport league's pilot DVSA Camp in the United Kingdom. The league served as a hook to engage target groups before using the sport as an analogy to educate on DVSA. We found the DVSA camp had a limited effect on participants' knowledge about and beliefs toward DVSA, but was able to engage an at risk target group and increase awareness of DVSA. Certainly, greater engagement is required to address serious social issues if behavioral change is the goal. We feel the program was well intended and served as a strategic positioning mechanism for the professional sport league. However, a broader and more long-term focus on developmental outcomes should be sought.

Keywords: *Sport-for-development, domestic violence, sexual abuse*

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Domestic violence and Sexual Abuse (DVSA) is a critical issue the United Kingdom (UK) where one in four women will experience intimate partner violence, and on average, two women are killed by a current or former partner weekly (Office for National Statistics, 2015). At present, education of DVSA is lacking, and sex and relationship education is not a statutory requirement in UK schools (PSHE Association, 2015). Moreover, Ofsted (i.e., the regulatory body for UK schools) has been critical of sex and relationship education whereby teachers lack the necessary expertise to educate on the issue (Department for Children, Schools, & Families, 2008). The purpose of this manuscript was to evaluate a professional sport league's Character Development Camp, which used the league's sport as the mechanism to attract participants and educate them about DVSA in the UK. Since this was a pilot endeavour, there are several limitations to the approach. Accordingly, recommendations to enhance the delivery of the camp were reported to the league after the data were analyzed, which are included in the back matter of this article.

Background and Theory of Change: The Intervention

The Character Development Camp, focused on DVSA, was delivered via two single-day camps over a weekend in July 2016, where Saturday was for 16- to 21-year-olds and Sunday was for 22- to 30-year-olds. All participants were participants in the sport of the league, recruited via teams across the United Kingdom.

Sport as a Hook

Within the academic literature, a prominent role of sport in development is to serve as a hook, which involves the use of sport to attract participants (Green, 2008). Sport's value as a hook is due to its global following and the unique strong connection sport fans have with sport brands (Heere & James, 2007). The sport league's intervention offered coaching and practice with NFL players and coaches, but only after participants had engaged in DVSA education. NFL players and coaches were also part of the DVSA education and message delivery.

RQ1: Will using the professional sport league as a "hook" attract at-risk participants, who would not otherwise engage, to DVSA education?

According to Green (2008), once participants are "hooked," core social messages can be delivered. The sport league engaged a DVSA abuse charity to support their intervention. Refuge provided trained, qualified, and highly experienced DVSA counselors to work alongside sport league personnel. The experts delivered factual information, which helped increase awareness and understanding of DVSA.

RQ2: Will the DVSA Camp result in increased awareness and understanding of DVSA issues?

Sport as an Analogy

Limiting the DVSA education to the DVSA counsellors alone, would have run the risk of disengaging participants who had been “hooked” by the sport league brand. Therefore, the sport league engaged current and former NFL players to work alongside the DVSA counsellors. To frame the DVSA messaging in a manner that resonated with participants, the sport league delivered the DVSA education using their sport as an analogy, whereby comparisons were made between the sport and DVSA for the contextual purpose of explanation. For example, players facilitated a discussion about the importance of respecting your teammates, coaches, opponents, and the game, before juxtaposing the importance of respect to the DVSA context.

RQ 3: Will the DVSA Camp initiate a dialogue about DVSA by providing a catalyst for more responsible beliefs toward DVSA and DVSA victims?

Method

This study assumed a mixed-methods pre-post approach by collecting questionnaire data from participants and qualitative data from administrator interviews and participant focus groups at both ends of the intervention.

Quantitative Technique

The academic literature on DVSA was reviewed to ensure valid and reliable scaling that matched the program objectives was used. Awareness and understanding of DVSA was measured by (1) general knowledge questions derived from the lecture notes and slides provided by the DVSA charity, and (2) the Dopel Domestic Violence Survey (Doepel, Connel, & Hoff 1994). Responsible beliefs toward DVSA were measured via the Domestic Violence Myth Acceptance scale (Peters, 2008), which assessed the extent to which participants are willing to accept myths about domestic violence.

Qualitative Technique

Two focus groups reflected the two age groups of the camps. Each group contained nine participants, all of whom were male. In total, six focus groups, at three different time points, were conducted: (1) three days prior to the camp, (2) immediately following the camp, and (3) two weeks after the camp. The same participants took part in all focus groups. The first two focus groups (i.e., pre and post) established changes in (1) awareness and understanding of DVSA issues, (2) beliefs about DVSA. The follow-up focus group took place two weeks after the camp to determine whether any action (e.g., following up with the DVSA charity, initiating conversations with friends about DVSA, etc.) had occurred. The post-intervention groups also considered the delivery of the program to establish the processes that lead to any tangible impact. The data were triangulated against administrator interviews and quantitative results to provide a picture of program

delivery and the processes contributing to any possible impacts. Thus, the results are presented as “impacts” and “processes” behind the impacts.

Results

RQ1: Engagement of “At-Risk” Group: Impact

The camp engaged $N = 81$ male participants over two days. Ages ranged from 15 to 30 ($M = 20.25$ years old), 66% were single, and 34% were in a relationship. Descriptive statistics revealed the majority had witnessed some form of DVSA. In particular, 64.2% previously witnessed a women being verbally abused; 37% previously witnessed a women being physically abused; and 8.6% witnessed a women being sexually assaulted. The majority of camp participants had not previously been exposed to (or were aware of) DVSA educational opportunities. In particular, 58% of participants had not engaged in any form of education about DVSA prior to the DVSA Camp, and 77% were not aware of any available domestic violence or sexual abuse education opportunities.

RQ1: Engagement of “At-Risk” Group: Process

The professional sport league and its sport represented “the hook” for participants to attend the DVSA Camp, which was confirmed by participants who self-reported motivation to attend the camp. Improving sport skills was rated as the strongest motivator, followed closely by meeting players and coaches, while understanding more about DVSA was the weakest motivator.

Table 1

Mean Scores of Motivations to Attend DVSA Camp

Rank	Motivation	Mean (<i>out of 5</i>)
1	Developing Sport Skills	4.79
2	Meeting Players & Coaches	4.52
3	Understanding DVSA	3.73

Process Theme #1: A Synergy between Social Problem and Participants.

A program designer noted that football was used to access groups that would otherwise have been hard to engage: “.. Using [sport] as a way to break down barriers, we accessed a high risk, and otherwise hard to access group, to discuss very important and very sensitive social issues, in this case, domestic violence and sexual abuse.” This was achieved by leveraging synergies between the target group, sport in the UK, and the ‘hook’ of players, coaches, and alumni:

We used the [league] brand, the power it had with the target group to attract those people to the camp. Bringing over six [league] players, coaches, and alumni to coach it, gave the camp credibility, and gave participants interest in wanting to be part of the camp. [...] In having access to such an experience they were responsive to the other messages of the camp.

(Program Administrator)

Process Theme #2: A Powerful Hook. Focus groups confirmed that without the league as a “hook,” they would not have engaged in DVSA education: “... you’re doing something with the [league]. Something personal with the [league] and not many people get the opportunity to do that”. Another participant noted “... I would not have attended a session on DVSA. It is a big issue that needed to be raised, but I don’t think it would engage me. It wouldn’t resonate with me as a young person.” Additional data confirmed that, once participants had been “hooked” by the league, only then was DVSA considered a salient issue for participants: “... On the [sport] side, it was everything I expected, but on the domestic violence side, it was a lot more interesting than I had expected.” Other participants stated:

I came into the camp thinking that, other than the [sport], none of it would be relatable to me. Without the involvement of the NFL or the players being there, I probably would have sat through it and not listened and be bored, to be honest, because I thought it was something that did not apply to me personally. But having the input from [players] helped me to relate and reflect and find something in the session that did apply to me.

RQ2: Awareness and Understanding of DVSA Issues: Impact

Participants reported an increased awareness and understanding of DVSA after the camp. In comparing these results with participant self-reported motivations, DVSA was not as strong a motivator to the league-related hooks (see Table 1). Once hooked, however, self-reported development in awareness and understanding of DVSA was similar to development in the league’s sport, demonstrating effective use of sport as a “hook” (see Table 2).

Table 2

Mean Scores of Self-Reported Development

Rank	Outcomes	Mean (<i>out of 5</i>)
1	Sport Skills	4.77
2	DVSA Awareness	4.56
3	DVSA Understanding	4.32

Despite self-reported development in awareness and understanding of DVSA, a paired samples *t*-test (i.e., testing one individual’s response at one time point to the same person’s response at a later time point) revealed no significant difference in general knowledge about DVSA before and after the intervention, which is reflected in the negligible mean score change (see Table 3). However, a positive and significant pre- post-intervention effect for participant understanding of DVSA was revealed ($t = -2.43$, $df = 64$, $p = .018$). The effect size for this result was, however, small ($d = .22$).

Table 3*Mean Scores of DVSA General Knowledge Before and After Intervention*

	Mean (<i>out of 5</i>)
Pre-Program	3.17
Post-Program	3.24

Impact Theme #1: Refined Understanding of DVSA. The focus groups revealed a better understanding of DVSA. Prior to the DVSA camp, participants had a limited understanding of what constituted DVSA. When asked what a respectful relationship looked like, the focus was on the league's sport rather than personal relationships. One participant stated "... Sexual violence is rape," whilst another stated "... Respect is understanding each other on the field," and "... A respectful relationship is helping each other to get to the top of the league." In the post-intervention, and follow-up focus groups, participants reported greater awareness of DVSA, "... I found the Camp very insightful [...] It raised my awareness of the issues that are within our society." Furthermore, understanding of DVSA was refined. One participant reflected "... Sexual abuse is pressuring a girl or your partner into a sexual act that she doesn't do or doesn't feel comfortable with." Another participant added that "... It could be sexting unwanted pictures of yourself to a girl or posting pictures of a girl that she didn't agree to you posting onto Facebook."

RQ2: Awareness and Understanding of DVSA Issues: Process

Process Theme #1: Credible DVSA Experts. According to a program designer, a critical factor in developing awareness and understanding of DVSA issues was collaborating with credible experts:

It was important to have credible experts in domestic violence and sexual abuse present and able to be part of that because it gave a credible and authentic background to what we were doing. [Player] isn't a domestic violence therapist, so the strategy was to use the [league] to get the participants talking, to have the discussion points, get the barriers broken down, and then pass it on to the experts to take those kids forward.

DVSA expert credibility was confirmed by one focus group participant who noted, "... it was effective because the [league] players were there, but it was the [DVSA charity] staff that provided the facts that made us sit up and take notice of DVSA as an issue." The credible message was made accessible to the participants by the league's role models. As conceptualized by one focus group participant, the DVSA charity staff and league players both played an essential role in the DVSA camp "... The [DVSA charity] staff provided the nail, but it was the [league] players who acted as the hammer to knock the nail in. They needed each other to make that session work."

RQ3: Initiating a Dialogue Toward Responsible DVSA Beliefs: Process

Process Theme #1: A Taboo Subject. Initiating a dialogue about DVSA was a challenge because it is a taboo subject. According to a focus group participant, "... It's a difficult conversation to have. You don't know what to say." Another added "... It's a taboo subject. No one will talk about it within their group of friends." Even with a pathway to discuss further, discussions can be difficult and even embarrassing:

There's no one to talk to. Even if there is a helpline, you don't want to open up and talk about it to someone you don't know. It's hard finding someone you know to talk about it to because it's embarrassing to talk about.

Process Theme #2: Extending League and Sport Values to DVSA. The league and sport served as a meaningful context to discuss DVSA issues. First, team camaraderie was identified as a way to break down the barriers that restrict DVSA discussions. According to the program designer, "... We were using sport, and particularly [sport] and that camaraderie and that unique team work you have around it to break down the barriers to talk and start a dialogue about domestic violence and sexual abuse." Participants responded to values being defined in a sporting context (e.g., respect for your teammates, coaches, and the game) before values were extended to the DVSA context (e.g., respect for your partner). This resonated with focus group participants, as one noted, "... just as you respect your team mates and opponents, you should respect your partner as well." Skills taught in the league's sport can help with DVSA. According to one focus group participant, "... it teaches control. Controlling your temper, controlling your aggression, and channelling it to something else, rather than just lashing out."

Process Theme #3: Respected and Relatable Role Models. The respect participants had for the league's players resulted in their attention and acceptance of the camp messages. According to one participant, "... The love we have for the sport is unconditional. [...] The message that we get from the [league] players, we're more inclined to hear their words and really take it in way more than we would do from anyone else." Sans the league players, there was a risk the messages could have been preachy and not accepted. According to another participant, "... If it had just been [DVSA charity], I think it would have run the risk of being preachy. I think it was better to have a discussion of life experience that we could relate to."

League players were effective at engaging participants. According to a program administrator, "... They [the players] were telling them about personal experiences they had, they were crying alongside them and laughing alongside them, which set the tone for the camp." According to the program designer, "... When [the league players] were engaging with the participants, that's when we got the most real discussion, players and participants sharing thoughts in a practical way." The camp provided a safe environment with peers from which the taboo conversation

of DVSA could begin and participants were empowered by their role models to reflect on the issues and serve as leaders in their community.

RQ3: Initiating Dialogue towards Responsible DVSA Beliefs: Impact

Responsible beliefs toward DVSA were captured by the extent to which participants were willing to accept myths about factors to blame for DVSA. A paired samples *t*-test (i.e., testing one individual's response at one time point to the same person's response at a later time point) revealed a significant and positive (i.e., blame decreased) pre- post-intervention effect ($t = 8.622$, $df = 74$, $p = .00$) on willingness to blame the victim for DVSA. This change revealed a large effect size ($d = .67$), which confirmed this aspect as very influential. However, other paired samples *t*-tests revealed the camp had no significant impact on participant willingness to exonerate the perpetrator from blame, to blame society for DVSA, to believe that DVSA is a minimal problem, or to blame the behavior of the victim for DVSA.

Table 4

Mean Scores of Participants Before and After Intervention

	Pre-program Mean (out of 5)	Post-program Mean (out of 5)
Victim Character*	3.56	2.28
Society	3.11	3.09
Exoneration	2.62	2.63
Minimization	2.56	2.56
Victim Behavior	1.95	1.96

*Significant effect

Impact Theme #1: Taking the Next Step. Follow-up focus groups identified that participants continued a DVSA dialogue following the camp, including attempts to influence the behavior of others. According to a focus group participant, "... I've had some open discussions with my friends about what constitutes consensual sex." Another shared their new understanding with their friends:

I talked and reflected on the day with my friends. Now that I know the particulars that go into consent and how to treat a woman right [...] I warn my friends to be aware of their actions in case it is misconstrued as domestic violence or sexual abuse.

Impact Theme #2: A Desire for Follow-Up. The DVSA camp provided information on a pathway to discuss DVSA issues further. According to one focus group participant, "... If we experienced it [DVSA], then we now know where we could go to." However, participants were expecting some kind of follow-up from Refuge. A focus group participant noted "... I thought there would be some sort of follow-up or emails from Refuge." Another added that "... It made me more aware

of that type of charity, but I haven't had any more contact or exposure to Refuge since the camp."

Discussion and Implications

The DVSA camp had a limited effect on participant knowledge about and beliefs toward DVSA. In other words, there were no significant differences in general knowledge about DVSA before and after the intervention. There was a significant difference in DVSA understanding, but the small effect size makes this result practically meaningless. Furthermore, of the five beliefs about DVSA, only one significant and positive effect was found on willingness to blame the victim. There was no significant effect on participant willingness to exonerate the perpetrator from blame, to blame society for DVSA, to believe that DVSA is a minimal problem, or to blame the behavior of the victim for DVSA. These results stand in contrast to participants' self-perceptions of increased understanding of DVSA, as well as a refined understanding of DVSA that was evident in the focus groups. The intervention had greater success in engaging its target group and increasing awareness of DVSA, which is a more realistic goal for a one-day camp. Based on this cursory impact, we strongly suggest that to enhance knowledge and beliefs about DVSA requires a prolonged intervention, certainly beyond the duration of a single day.

Despite the disappointing evidence produced by the quantitative analyses, the qualitative data established the potential of sport to play an important role in addressing sensitive problems in society. Participants would not have otherwise engaged in DVSA education without the professional sports league brand. As such, charities tackling sensitive issues, such as DVSA, should collaborate with sport organizations to provide the "hook" to reach their target groups. Likewise, sport organizations should collaborate with experts to ensure they are working from a well-informed and credible foundation. This mutual exchange will be more effective when tackling sensitive issues, before using sport as an analogy to ensure the messages resonate with target groups who identify with sports leagues or teams.

To this end, a one-dimensional use of sport as a hook does not fully leverage the potential of sport to tackle sensitive issues. This research shows how sport can be an effective (albeit temporal) analogy to address sensitive issues, extending the use of sport throughout the intervention to engage participants across all intervention components. For example, the importance of respect was explained and clarified within a sporting context before a comparison was made to DVSA and partner respect. For the audience of the players/camp participants, sport was a bridge to approach the sensitive issue discussion. However, it was not sufficient to achieve substantial knowledge change, belief change, or (most importantly) behavior change. Indeed, it is questionable whether violent and abusive behavior can be changed through education given that a lack of knowledge is unlikely the

cause of abusive behavior. In this sense, the use of sport role models as opinion leaders is likely a more effective strategy than using DVSA experts as educators. Importantly, to reinforce such change, follow-up research over an extended intervention period is required. Through our prior work, we can also confirm this limited intervention approach has been the norm rather than the exception. In other words, professional sport organizations either have adopted a “squeakiest wheel gets the grease” approach or have approached S4D in a reactive, as opposed to a proactive, manner (Walker & Hills, 2017). While doing something is certainly better than doing nothing, public scepticism of such an approach is likely to ensue. To assuage this issue, sport organizations should engage in long-term and impactful programming to ensure optimal levels of behaviour change are not only achieved but empirically validated.

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