

OAMPS Sports Risk Management Newsletter

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Sports Important Contribution to Combating Cyber Bullying

Harassment, humiliation and insults using technology such as social networking sites, mobile phones, websites and chat rooms, generally referred to as cyber bullying, has received considerable exposure as a threat to the safety and wellbeing of society. The invasiveness of technology provides virtually unlimited access to potential victims. As our young people have grown up in a digital world and 'being connected' is extremely important to them it is this group that are most exposed to the negative use of technology.

An article in Melbourne's Herald Sun on 23rd September 2011 demonstrated that cyber bullying is an issue for sport. It also highlighted the fact that sport has an important role to play in combating this problem.

The article outlined the actions taken under the Victorian Country Football League's (VCFL) landmark Cyber Safety Policy. It involved four under 16 community AFL players being banned for almost 40 games and a coach being deregistered over threats and intimidation towards an opposition player made on Facebook. Another under 16 player was rubbed out for 8 games (4 suspended) for cyber bullying a junior umpire. In another case a junior was sanctioned over vulgar comments posted online about another player's mother.

The VCFL introduced the policy to its 44 leagues this season. It came after incidents last year where two players were deregistered for posting inappropriate comments about a



female league employee and two other players were sanctioned for posting inappropriate comments about an umpire on Facebook.

The VCFL policy document consists of a Rationale where the purpose behind the policy is outlined, the leagues Underlying Principles that support the purpose, the Policy Statement itself, the Procedure to be followed in the event that officials or members feel that they have been victims of misuse of technology and the Penalties that can be applied for any proven charges.

An article in the Australian Sports Commission produced 'Sports Coach' magazine written by cyber safety expert Susan McLean, emphasises that it is crucial for organisations to be aware of all issues relating to the misuse of technology and ensure that they send a very clear message to their members and the local community that such behaviour will not be tolerated. Club requirements regarding technology use can be included in codes of behaviour, member protection and associated policies and duty statements.

Other important issues are: -

- The reporting process for the misuse of technology must be clear, concise and simple
- Clubs must undertake to treat complaints promptly, seriously, sympathetically and confidentially; and to investigate complaints impartially
- Sporting organisations should provide its members with advice on how to be safe online. Taking a pro-active approach - rather than acting after the event - is always preferable.

Ms McLean noted that Facebook had taken sledging in sport to a new level. She praised the initiative of the VCFL in introducing its cyber bullying policy, but identified that as the only football league in Australia to have such a policy there is still a way to go with education, with a lot more to do to make sure players are aware.

Cyber bullying is obviously not just a sport issue, but as is so often the case, sporting organisations can be a most positive influence by setting an example in acceptable behaviour to the broader community.

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