

The Power to Keep Victims Silent: How Should Schools Address This?

A 54-year-old former youth swim coach in Oakland, California was charged with 30 felonies of molesting a then-teenage girl in the early 2000s.

The former coach has been out on bail since 2020 when he was charged with 10 counts of molesting a girl whom he coached with the now-defunct local club team, the Oakland Barracudas. According to the district attorney, the former coach's crimes weren't thoroughly investigated until the victim began cooperating with law enforcement in 2019. According to the alleged victim's testimony, she was sexually abused by her former swim coach for more than a year.

The alleged victim said she joined the team in elementary school to help her get into college. She said her former coach was "intimidating" and he would "withhold coaching" when she disobeyed.

The plaintiff said, her former coach began massaging her feet during exercise sessions. He also insisted on having one-on-one meetings with her. During one of those meetings, he forcibly kissed her, and according to the alleged victim, that was the beginning of what became daily abuse. The complainant said the abuse escalated to "forcible touching and oral copulation" that happened "constantly", "multiple times a day, up to four times a day. At least once a day, but that would be an easy day."

USA Swimming had already banned the accused in April 2012 over the same allegations. The alleged victim reported the allegations to USA Swimming in 2010 but she did not cooperate with police investigators until 2019.

The plaintiff said when the abuse started happening, she felt like she "was being preyed on." She said she felt trapped. "He had just a look in his eyes that was really terrifying. There was a dynamic of ownership, like he could make me do whatever he wanted." The alleged victim said she remembered resisting for a long time until the abuse "just became routine." She said she became like "a robot or a sex slave," and that it was as if she had no will of her own when the abuse continued.

The complainant said she reported the abuse to USA Swimming in 2010 when she saw media reports about other sexual abuse cases within swim clubs. However, a police investigator gave her the impression that if she cooperated, her identity would become public. So, she held back for nine years. James Sutherland ["Former Oakland Youth Coach Charged With 30 Felonies of Molesting a Student"](#) (Sep. 13, 2022).

Commentary and Checklist

In 2020, six women filed lawsuits against USA Swimming. The plaintiffs said they were sexually abused by coaches in the 1980s, but the organization failed to protect them or take action against the men they say groomed and assaulted them when they were still minors.

Other reports say, "Hundreds of USA swimmers were sexually abused for decades and the people in charge knew and ignored it." In fact, the article points out how USA Swimming "repeatedly missed opportunities to overhaul a culture within American swimming where the sexual abuse of underage swimmers by their coaches and others in positions of power within the sport was commonplace and even accepted by top officials and coaches."

The perpetrator in the source article was a swim coach at a local club who exerted such power that the alleged victim just came to a point when she stopped resisting and just did what the abuser wanted her to do for him. Any school coach, mentor, or teacher is in a similar position of power, which, if used in a criminal manner to abuse a minor, can make a student victim feel powerless and not supported by those around them.

School leaders should know how to listen to students who report allegations of sexual abuse:

- Listen calmly
- Don't blame or criticize the student.
- Contact your local child abuse social services agency or law enforcement immediately.
- Inform your employer.