Managing Intra-Team Dating Relationships: Developing Effective, Legal and Fair Guidelines

NCAA Inclusion Forum
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Dating Teammates: Every Coaches Nightmare?
College Woman’s Coach:

“I don’t care if my team dates each other. I just want them to get together before the season starts and not break up until after the season is over!”
Managing Dating Relationships on a Team

• Make Policy at the Department Level
• Place In Larger Context of Overall Relationship Issues
• Fair
• Effective
• Proactive
• Focus on the Team Goals
Address Same-Sex Dating in the Context of Other Relationships

- Managing Relationship Issues
- Heterosexual Dating
- Same-Sex Dating

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Wide Range of Relationship Issues on Teams

• Heterosexual dating on mixed teams
• Two women on a team dating the same man
• Same-sex dating on a women’s or men’s team
• Two best friends on a team have a falling out
• Sisters on a team are in conflict
• Heterosexual dating on men’s and women’s teams that practice together
• Cliques or group conflicts on a team
Focusing on Same-Sex Dating is Discriminatory: Possible Title IX Violation

Lesbian athletes are treated differently than heterosexual women athletes

Women athletes are treated differently than male athletes
Approaches to Dating Relationships on Teams

• Prohibit
• Ignore
• Discourage & Set Expectations
• Set Expectation
Prohibit Dating

Secrets

Illegal

Dishonesty

Homophobia

Tattling Dilemma

No Guidance

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Ignore Dating

Possible Crisis

Secrecy

Homophobia

No Guidance

Tattling

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Set Expectations

- Proactive
- Clarity
- Respect
- Honesty
- Team Focus

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Sample Guidelines for Intra-Team Dating

- Differentiate Team Time and Team Space from Personal Time and Space
- Focus on Relationship as Teammates on Team Time and in Team Space
- Be Specific about Behavioral Expectation
- Respect Team Time and Space: No PDA’s, No Drama, Don’t Be Exclusive

NCLR Model Policy
Important Role of Captains and Assistant Coaches
Resources

Office of Inclusion Video Webinar
Intra-Team Dating Overview Handout from COR
Model Policy Handout
Legal Issues Handout
Tips For Athletic Administrators & Coaches

• Create a Fair, Inclusive, Comprehensive Departmental Policy for Relationships Among Athletes
• Be Proactive, Talk to Your Team
• Treat All Dating Relationships the Same Way
• Expect Same Level of Commitment and Respect from Gay and Straight Team Members, Men and Women
• Identify Campus Resources for Managing Relationships in Crisis
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Managing Dating Relationships Among Teammates

Managing dating relationships on sports teams is one of the most requested topics for discussion among college coaches. Though this topic is currently of most interest to coaches of women’s teams, as gay men continue to come out to coaches and teammates, it will be of more interest to coaches of men’s teams as well.

Perhaps many coaches’ response to the possibility of dating teammates can be summed up in the following statement from a coach, “I don’t care if they date each other as long as they get together before the season starts and don’t end the relationship until after the season ends.” The concern expressed here is that it is beginning and end of dating relationships (whether same-sex or not) that have the most potential to cause drama and trauma on a team. No coach wants a team to be embroiled in interpersonal conflict during the season that distracts from team goals, whatever the cause.

Identifying policies for dating teammates requires thoughtful consideration of what is legal, what is best for the team as a whole, what is fair and workable for all individuals on the team and is based on broad principles of fairness that apply to all genders and sexual orientations. The following suggestions are intended to provide coaches with guidance in identifying fair and effective policy:

Develop a departmental “relationship” policy that applies to all teams and all dating relationships

Part of the problem with addressing intra-team dating is that it is often approached as an individual team issue. At one school, individual coaches might adopt different approaches to intra-team dating or have no policy at all. This means that, depending on what team an athlete plays on, they will have different expectations. For example, if some teams have a “no teammate dating” policy and other teams allow teammate dating, this is potentially an issue of discrimination. This problem is more evident if only women’s teams have "no dating” policies while men’s teams do not.

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Another example might be that heterosexual dating among athletes on a mixed gender team or on men’s and women’s teams that practice and travel together, but compete separately is accepted, but same-sex dating on a women’s team is prohibited.

For these reasons, a departmental athlete relationship policy that applies to all athletes and all teams equally is probably the best approach to avoid potential discrimination issues.

Frame intra-team dating as part of broader relationship management issues that can distract a team from competitive goals, such as:

- Best friends on a team either being exclusive of others or having a big falling out during the season
- Two women on a team dating the same guy on a men’s team
- One teammate getting dumped by her boyfriend and who then starts dating one of her teammates
- Heterosexual dating on a mixed team (Sailing or rifle teams) or between women and male practice players on the same team (Women’s basketball)
- Heterosexual dating on men’s and women’s teams that practice together and travel to competitions together, but compete separately (Track & Field or Swimming, for example)
- Conflicts between student-athletes of color and white teammates
- Conflicts between gay and straight teammates
- Conflicts between Christian and non-Christian teammates

Develop policy that applies to all relationship management issues rather than focusing on same-sex teammates dating

Make policies about dating apply to all dating relationships not just same-sex dating

Range of possible policies on intra-team dating

- Prohibit intra-team dating (Not recommended)
- Ignore intra-team dating (Not recommended)
- Allow intra-team dating with proactive expectations (Recommended)

Some Pros and Cons of Different Policies on Intra-Team Dating:

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**Prohibit Intra-Team Dating**

The potential negative consequences of adopting a policy prohibiting dating among teammates outweigh the positive outcomes of such a policy. First, it is questionable whether or not coaches have the legal or moral authority to dictate the personal relationships of their team members. Recent interpretations of Title IX make it clear that discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity may be prohibited by Title IX in addition to discrimination based on sex. This means that “no dating” policies that apply only to women’s teams or only to same-sex dating on women’s or men’s teams is potentially in violation of Title IX.

Second, prohibiting intra-team dating is an impractical policy that rarely is effective. This approach to teammate dating often encourages secrecy, dishonesty and fear as dating teammates attempt to hide their relationship from coaches and teammates. Other teammates who know about the relationship are also caught in the web of secrecy and dishonesty and face the dilemma of whether or not to tell their coach. If the policy targets same-sex dating only, it is discriminatory and the coach may be perceived as homophobic. In addition, if the coach finds about dating teammates, she or he has no choice but to impose some kind of consequence since the dating teammates have violated a team rule. Moreover, the teammates who are dating have no guidelines about how to manage their relationship. All of these consequences distract from the focus of the team and achieving competitive goals. For these reasons, prohibiting dating among teammates is an ineffective, impractical and potentially illegal policy.

**Ignore Intra-Team Dating**

Some coaches choose to ignore dating among teammates. This strategy puts the entire team at risk of facing a crisis that has the potential to cause a major distraction from team goals. Coaches sometimes choose to ignore same-sex dating on teams because they are uncomfortable addressing the topic or because they do not know how to address it without appearing to be prejudiced against lesbian, bi or gay members of their teams.

As with prohibiting dating among teammates, ignoring it has many negative consequences. Coaches have no control over the situation when they ignore the possibility of intra-team dating. Dating teammates have no guidelines about what is and isn’t appropriate behavior. Their teammates have no guidance about how to respond to teammates who are dating. Homophobia always thrives in silence and ignoring the possibility of dating teammates creates an opening for prejudice and fear to guide reactions. As with policies prohibiting intra-team dating, ignoring it

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promotes secrecy and dishonesty as team members are likely to interpret silence as non-acceptance. Finally, if there is no policy about intra-team dating, there is likely no well thought out response when it comes to the coach’s attention and that can lead to crisis management decisions that can threaten team performance and unity.

**Allow Intra-Team Dating with Proactive Expectations**

Accepting intra-team dating while providing proactive expectations for this possibility is the most effective and fair team policy. Moreover, it avoids potential legal problems, especially when adopted as an athletic department policy that applies to all teams and all dating relationships. This approach encourages honesty, responsibility and maturity from the members of the team who are dating and from their teammates. This policy provides clear behavioral expectations for dating teammates and consequences for failure to live up to these expectations. Such a policy is based on principles of respect for team members of all sexual orientations.

This approach does require that coaches of sex-separate teams to overcome their own discomfort with talking about same-sex dating on the team and enables coaches to set a positive tone for the team’s response to lesbian, gay or bi teammates. This policy informs all team members about what is expected of them as members of a team who must work together for the good of the team.

Participation on a sports team is like a workplace for student-athletes. As with dating in the workplace, they have responsibilities to the team and a commitment to being a team member who is focused on contributing to achieving team goals. This focus on the team and what is good for the team should guide a policy allowing intra-team dating.

**Sample Expectations for Dating Teammates (Gay and Straight): Describe Specific Behaviors**

When with the team, the team comes first. Conduct yourselves as teammates, not dating partners. Being a member of a team is like your job, conduct yourself professionally when with the team. This includes practice, competition, on the team bus, in hotel rooms, athletic training room, the weight room, team meetings, locker room, and anywhere else when you are “on team time.”

- Focus on the team and your role as a team member. You don’t have to hide your dating relationship, but treat your partner as a teammate when on “team time:”

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o No PDAs (Public Displays of Affection) This includes hand-holding, kissing, hugging
o Don’t be exclusive – Sit with other teammates on the bus, eat with other teammates, share hotel rooms with other teammates, sit with other teammates in team meetings.
  o Respect Team Space: No drama on team time. Leave relationship conflict at the locker room door. Resolve relationship issues on your own time, not the team’s time
  o If you need help resolving a relationship issue with a teammate or teammates, dating or otherwise, ask for counseling assistance

Possible Consequences for Failing to Meet these Expectations:

- Dating teammates meet with the coaches – Review expectations and consequences of not abiding by them
- Dating teammates meet with a relationship counselor
- Dismissal of one or both dating teammates from the team for failure to abide by expectations

Team Captains Play an Important Role in Maintaining a Positive Team Oriented Climate and Helping Dating Team Members Maintain Team Focus.

- Remind dating teammates about coach’s expectations and why they are important
- Communicate with coaches when team dating issues need to be addressed

Coach Behavioral Expectations:

- Make expectations clear at the beginning of the season. Be proactive. Don’t wait for a crisis.
- Treat all dating relationships the same way
- Expect the same level of commitment to the team from gay and straight players in dating relationships
- Expect all team members in dating relationships to respect teammates and the team space
- Identify campus resources who can provide assistance or counseling to team members having relationship issues – dating or otherwise

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**What About Sharing Hotel Rooms?**

Rotate room assignments so all teammates share a room with everyone on the team during the season. This helps teammates get to know each other and discourages cliques of any kind.

Expect everyone to treat everyone else with respect.

**What About the Locker Room?**

Expect everyone to treat everyone else with respect

The locker room is part of team time and all expectations for dating teammates apply

Provide private changing space in the locker room for anyone who wants it

Sexual harassment policies apply to everyone regardless of sexual orientation or gender
MODEL PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP POLICY FOR COLLEGIATE STUDENT ATHLETICS

We trust all members of our teams to be honest, responsible and mature. We desire what is best for the team as a whole, what is fair and workable for all individuals on the team and is based on broad principles of fairness. These expectations are for all members of our teams who must work together for the good of the team. Student athletes have responsibilities to the team and a commitment to being a team member who is focused on contributing to achieving team goals. Relationship issues can distract a team from its competitive goals. For this reason [Institution] has the following expectations for all team members regardless of the type of relationship.

The following is a list of possible relationships that may be addressed with these expectations (other types of relationships not listed may also apply):

- Close friends excluding or ignoring others, or having a falling out
- Two people dating the same person
- A person dating someone whom another person had a past relationship with
- Dating on the same or different teams (regardless of whether the dating couple is an opposite-sex couple or a same-sex couple)
- Conflicts between student-athletes based on race, sexual orientation, sexual identity, personal belief systems or religion

When with the team, the team comes first. Conduct yourselves as teammates. Being a member of a team requires responsible behavior and professional conduct. This includes at practice, during competition, on the team bus, in hotel rooms, in the training room, in the weight room, at team meetings, in the locker room and anywhere else when you are on “team time”.

Focus on the team and your role as a team member. You don’t have to hide your relationships but when on “team time” the following behaviors are expected:

- Respect team space: Avoid drama on team time. Leave relationship conflict at the locker room door.
- Resolve relationship issues on your own time, not the team’s time.
- No PDA (Public Displays of Affection), this includes hand holding, kissing, hugging, etc.
- Get to know others on your team. Sit with various teammates on the bus, eat with various teammates, share hotel rooms with various teammates and sit with various teammates in team meetings.
If you need help resolving relationship issues, please contact [Institution’s counseling or mental health services or relevant Dean of Students staff.]

Possible consequences for failing to meet these expectations:

- Meeting with Coach, review expectations and consequences of not abiding by them
- Requested to meet with a counselor
- Suspension or dismissal from team for failing to abide by the expectations

Team Captains play an important role in maintaining a positive team-oriented climate and helping team members maintain team focus. Captains can help by:

- Reminding teammates about these expectations and why they are important
- Communicating with coaches when relationship issues need to be addressed

Adapted from Champions of Respect: NCAA LGBTQ Resource Guide, Pat Griffin (2013)

For further questions or inquiries contact:

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Frequently Asked Questions about Title IX and Policies on Intra-Team Dating in College Athletics

Many college athletic programs have adopted policies addressing interpersonal relationships of student athletes. In some cases, these policies prohibit dating or romantic relationships among team members on single-sex teams. Because such restrictions apply only to lesbian, gay or bisexual athletes, they may raise serious legal issues under federal and state laws, including Title IX. This FAQ is intended to assist administrators and coaches considering the legal implications of intra-team dating policies.

What is Title IX?

Title IX is a shorthand reference to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (“Title IX”), a federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in any education program, such as a college or university, that receives federal financial assistance. In the athletic context, for example, Title IX prohibits schools from providing more funding, better facilities, better equipment, or more opportunities to male athletes than it provides to female athletes.

What are the consequences of violating Title IX?

Institutions that violate Title IX may have to pay civil damages and could lose federal funding. Lawsuits and investigations may be instituted by the Department of Education, Department of Justice, other federal agencies, or private parties.

Does a policy banning intra-team dating on a single-sex team violate Title IX?

Very likely yes. A rule against intra-team dating likely violates Title IX’s prohibition on sex discrimination. Such a rule discriminates against lesbian, gay, and bisexual students by restricting who they can date while leaving heterosexual students free to date anyone they wish. Many federal courts as well as the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission have recognized that federal sex-discrimination laws protect individuals against discrimination based on their sexual orientation or based on being in a same-sex relationship.

In a recent case, a federal district court allowed a Title IX lawsuit against Pepperdine University to proceed based on two former student athletes’ allegations that coaches and other staff had harassed them and ultimately drove them off the team for being in a dating relationship. The judge said:

“Plaintiffs allege that they were told that ‘lesbianism’ would not be tolerated on the team. If Plaintiffs had been males dating females, instead of females dating females, they would not have been subjected to the alleged different treatment. Plaintiffs have stated a straightforward claim of sex discrimination under Title IX.”
Can a policy banning intra-team dating violate any other laws?

Yes. Some states have laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sex and/or sexual orientation in higher education. Intra-team dating policies may violate these laws for the same reasons they violate Title IX. Intra-team dating policies may also lead to claims under state privacy laws, particularly if enforcement involves intrusive inquiries into student athletes’ personal lives. Public colleges and universities should also be aware that rules against intra-team dating may violate students’ rights under the federal and state constitutions.

Is it possible to have a policy dealing with intra-team dating that does not violate Title IX?

Yes. Institutions can adopt policies that require student athletes to be aware of the full range of personal relationships, on and off the team, that may detract from team unity and competitiveness. Such policies should not single out intra-team dating for different treatment from other types of relationships and should not include an absolute ban on intra-team dating. A sample model policy accompanies the FAQ.

Download the “Model Personal Relationship Policy for Collegiate Student Athletics.”

Is a policy banning all dating by student athletes regardless of gender a good solution?

No. For many students, especially younger students just out of high school, college is a key time to explore new relationships of all kinds, including dating relationships. A policy banning students from dating anyone, on or off the team, is simply not a realistic solution. In addition, restrictions on dating have often been adopted only for women’s teams, which again raises the potential for legal claims under Title IX or other laws. Finally, for public institutions, restrictions on dating may violate student athletes’ constitutional rights.

Download the “Model Personal Relationship Policy for Collegiate Student Athletics.”

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