Leadership Failure: Chicago Blackhawks Organization and the NHLPA

Article By

Paul V. Kelly

Jackson Lewis P.C.
Collegiate & Professional Sports Law Blog

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Inaction in Face of Sexual Assault Allegation

A 20-year-old player in the Chicago Blackhawks organization, Kyle Beach, filed a lawsuit against the team in May 2021 alleging he was sexually assaulted by the team’s video coordinator in May 2010, while the team was involved in the Stanley Cup playoffs. The senior management of the Blackhawks, including its president, general manager, and head coach, were made aware of the assault soon after it
occurred, and elected not to promptly investigate the allegations, protect or respond to the player, or discipline the employee involved.

The fallout from the team’s election to put this matter to the side and, instead, focus on the playoffs was –– unfortunately–– foreseeable. The video coach, Brad Aldrich, was allowed to remain on the club’s payroll for several months, receive a playoff bonus, have his name engraved on the Stanley Cup, and quietly resign. Predictably, this failure to effectively deal with this serious allegation, and to terminate Aldrich for engaging in sexual misconduct, allowed him to secure successive employment with a private high school, where he allegedly assaulted and molested another teenage player.

Further, Beach reportedly also timely reported the assault to the National Hockey League Players Association and its leadership, including Executive Director Donald Fehr, and the players’ union failed to take any action to protect the player or help him to vindicate his legal rights. In an interview with Canadian sports network TSN, Beach said about Fehr, “For him to turn his back of the players, when his one job is to protect the players at all costs. I don’t know how that can be your leader. He supposed to have the players’ back, and they definitely didn’t have mine.”

Following the filing of lawsuits against the Blackhawks by Beach, and by a sexually victimized high school player in Michigan, the organization engaged a former Assistant U.S. Attorney to conduct a comprehensive investigation. The report concluded that “no action was taken for three weeks” after the senior leadership of the Blackhawks were informed of the unwelcome sexual activity and alleged sexual assault by the video coach. This lack of response was a violation of the team’s own sexual harassment policy –– which required investigation of all reports of sexual harassment to be conducted “promptly and thoroughly.”

Based on the findings of this investigation, general manager Stan Bowman was forced to resign and his top assistant was dismissed. The former head coach of the Blackhawks, Joel Quennville, who went on to become the head coach of the Florida Panthers, summarily resigned his position in Florida following a meeting with NHL Commissioner Gary Bettman. The NHL has also imposed a substantial fine against the Blackhawks.

This sordid tale is about a sports team prioritizing winning over the well-being of a young player to which it owed a moral duty and responsibility. It’s also about a players’ union that appears to have failed in one of his principal missions –– the well-being of players. The consequences of these failures include lawsuits, the end of several management careers, an avalanche of adverse publicity, and an embarrassing distraction to the team, the league, and the sport. Kudos to Beach for his courage in coming forward and addressing the unfortunate situation in a brutally honest and direct manner.

The message for sports teams and employers generally is to be aware of your existing policies dealing with sexual harassment and other forms of employee misconduct, involve human resource professionals upon learning of such events and seek their input and advice, promptly and thoroughly investigate all allegations of sexual assault, harassment or misconduct, offer counseling or assistance to impacted employees, be prepared to discipline or dismiss the responsible parties,
and be aware of any reporting responsibilities that may exist under state law or other regulations. Jackson Lewis attorneys are available to conduct thorough investigations, to help guide employers through such challenging situations, and to provide advice on appropriate employment decisions and other corrective actions.

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