Issues Related to Pregnancy & Athletic Participation: The Foundation Position

The Women's Sports Foundation urges educational institutions, national sport governing bodies and athletics organizations to adopt policies concerning pregnancy and sport that protect both the health and rights of female athletes to participate in sports and physical activity. The following guidelines are consistent with the civil rights and antidiscrimination laws that protect women from discrimination, such as Title IX,[1] Title VII,[2] the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978,[3] the Americans with Disabilities Act[4] and the body of research regarding the physical and psychological development of women and girls.

I. WHEN IS IT APPROPRIATE OR NECESSARY FOR A FEMALE ATHLETE TO DISCONTINUE ATHLETIC PARTICIPATION DURING PREGNANCY?

POSITION: There is no definitive point during pregnancy when a female athlete should cease competition; decisions regarding participation should be made by the female athlete in conjunction with her healthcare provider.

The American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians position states, "It is impossible to provide a set of definitive recommendations that apply to the safe participation of all pregnant females in any type of exercise or sporting event. There is simply too much variability with respect to individual fitness levels, intensity and nature of the exercise and specifics of each individual pregnancy."[5] For example, think of a female golfer compared to a female wrestler. A female golfer might be able to compete well into the third trimester of pregnancy without posing any risk to herself or the fetus due to the low volatility of the sport. However, a pregnant athlete might be more limited if she participates in contact sports such as wrestling, basketball or boxing, which carry the risk of falls or abdominal trauma. Because of the great variety in the demands of certain sports and in the health and fitness of the pregnant female athlete, no standard timeline for the permissibility of competition during pregnancy should be established. "It is up to the healthcare provider to assess the specific needs of the patient and to establish an individualized recommendation based on the details of one pregnant individual at a time."[6]

II. SHOULD A COACH OR A TRAINER PROHIBIT A PREGNANT FEMALE ATHLETE FROM COMPETING OUT OF CONCERN FOR HER SAFETY?

POSITION: A coach or trainer should treat pregnancy like any other type of temporary medical condition. The physician in conjunction with the athlete should determine the length of participation and any activity restrictions.

The Foundation recognizes the desire of coaches and athletic personnel to restrict the activity of a pregnant female athlete out of concern for her safety. However, this desire is often based on antiquated stereotypes regarding the permissible level of physical activity during pregnancy. As a result, it is the female athlete and her physician who are in the best position make informed decisions about the specific nature of the pregnancy and what limits should be imposed on specific activities.

III. IS IT APPROPRIATE TO TEST FOR PREGNANCY OR TO REQUIRE PROOF OF NOT BEING PREGNANT AS A CONDITION FOR COMPETITION?

POSITION: It is not appropriate to test for pregnancy or to require proof of not being pregnant as a condition for competition.

Female athletes should undergo the same type of physical examination and tests to be eligible for athletic competition as males.

IV. DO FEMALE ATHLETES HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO INFORM THEIR COACH IF THEY BECOME PREGNANT?

POSITION: The obligations for a female athlete to report the condition of her pregnancy to her coach should be no different than the obligations of the athletes to inform their coach of other medical conditions.

Female athletes' right to privacy is the same for pregnancy as it is for any other personal medical information. The decision to inform a coach about the condition of pregnancy should remain at the discretion of the athlete, in accordance with the school or association's rules regarding the release of medical information to coaching personnel. If coaches are informed, they should maintain the privacy of the information, and furthermore, they should not counsel the athlete on pregnancy issues, such as abortion, adoption or parenting. Instead, they should provide references to neutral outside counseling.

V. WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS OF SOUND SCHOOL POLICY ON ATHLETE PREGNANCIES?

POSITION: School and college athletic program policies should contain the following elements:

Information on the pregnant athlete's eligibility options and rights to participate.

Assurance of confidentially regarding the athlete's medical conditions.

Prohibition against coaches counseling athletes on issues relating to pregnancy.

When a pregnant female athlete informs the athletic department of her pregnant status, the department should first advise the student on her options within the athletics department and how they relate to her future scholarship status and participation on the team. The NCAA Division I Manual Rule 14.2.1.3 states:

Pregnancy Exemption. A member institution may approve a one-year extension of the five-year period of eligibility for a female student-athlete for reasons of pregnancy.[7]

This same rule is stated in the NCAA Division II and III manuals. In the NCAA Division II and III manual it also states in Rule 14.2.2.2:

Pregnancy Exemption. A member institution may approve a two-semester or three-quarter extension of this 10-semester/15-quarter period of eligibility for a female student-athlete for the reasons of pregnancy.[8]

High schools should adopt similar rules and inform athletes of other eligibility rules that may apply. The athlete should be fully informed of her athletic program participation options and the implications of various decisions she might make.[9]

VI. WHAT STANDARDS SHOULD APPLY WHEN MALE OR FEMALE ATHLETES REQUEST A LEAVE OF ABSENCE FOR THE ADOPTION OF A CHILD OR A PARTNER'S PREGNANCY?

POSITION: Male or female athletes requesting leave for the adoption of a child or a partner's pregnancy should be eligible for an appeal for an extension of the five-year period of eligibility to complete their NCAA athletic careers or high school eligibility if similar limits exist.

Athletes requesting a leave in the aforementioned situations should be granted a right to appeal for an extension of eligibility to compete in school and college competitions. This extension would be without a scholarship on the college level and without penalty of forfeiture of rights to compete on the team upon return. (Note: this situation is not the same as women who become physically disabled through pregnancy, who would be red-shirted under NCAA policy.) This same consideration should be afforded in situations in which the athlete requests a leave for the purpose of caring for an immediate family member with a serious medical condition.

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• Resources on the medical considerations of participation in athletics during pregnancy can be found online at http://www.acsm.org, the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology at http://www.csep.ca/main.cfm?cid=574&nid=5091, and the NCAA Sports Medicine Handbook at http://www.ncaa.org/library/sports_sciences/sports_med_handbook/2006-07/2006-07_sports_medicine_handbook.pdf.

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ENDNOTES

[1]Title IX Regulations 1975 provide that "A recipient shall not discriminate against any student, or exclude any student from its education program or activity, including any class or extracurricular activity, on the basis of such student's pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy or recovery therefrom, unless the student

requests voluntarily to participate in a separate portion of the program or activity of the recipient."

[2]Title VII stipulates that "it shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin."

[3]The Pregnancy Discrimination Act provides that "discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, childbirth or related medical conditions constitutes unlawful sex discrimination under Title VII. Women affected by pregnancy or related conditions must be treated in the same manner as other applicants or employees with similar abilities or limitations."

[4]The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 provides that "No qualified individual with a disability shall, by reason of such disability, be excluded from participation in or be denied the benefits of the services, programs, or activities of a public entity, or be subjected to discrimination by any such entity."

[5]American Chiropractic Board of Sports Physicians. Position Statement on Exercise and Athletic Participation During Pregnancy. http://www.acbosp.com/PositionPreg1.html.

[6]Ibid.

[7]NCAA. 2006-2007 NCAA Division I Manual (Indianapolis, NCAA) 2006 p.140

[8]NCAA. 2006-2007 NCAA Division II Manual (Indianapolis, NCAA) 2006 p.113; NCAA. 2006-2007 NCAA Division III Manual (Indianapolis, NCAA) 2006 p.92

[9]Rosenberg, Beth. Legislative Proposal Crafted to Benefit Pregnant Athletes. National Collegiate Athletic Association. 4-12-04. http://www.ncaa.org/wps/portal/newsdetailWCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/wps/wcm/connect/NCAA/NCAA+News/NCAA+News+Online/Associationwide/Legislative+proposal+crafted+to+benefit+pregnant+athletes+-+4-12-04