

The Winslet Dragons: Going Viral

When Student Athletes Break the Rules

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Ethical Leadership Case Study Collection

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Winslet College and its Winslet Dragons	1
The Team Get Together and Its Aftermath	2
Other Protagonists: Their Background and Their Positions	5
Questions	7

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Introduction

Coach Kerry Jones is very proud of the Winslet Dragons, the championship-winning Winslet College women's hockey team. Looking to create a good team spirit leading into the coming season, the captain and alternate captains hold a team-building session at their sorority house, where they all live. After the formal part of the session is finished, Mary, a first-year rookie, decides to stay on to socialize with other members of the house and those from a male sorority who are visiting for the evening. During the evening, Mary consumes too much alcohol and passes out. As the alternate captains for the team guide Mary back to her dorm, they are stopped by security. Finding Mary to be under-age and inebriated, security files an infraction report with the university. Mary, seeking to avoid trouble, ultimately tells authorities that her drunken state was all part of a hazing—rituals that are banned at Winslet College. As a social-media storm arises in the aftermath of Mary's claims, the university administration looks to make an example of the Winslet Dragons. Coach Kerry Jones, herself not yet clear on the facts, wants to ensure her team leaders, and the team itself, doesn't suffer in the absence of all the facts.

Winslet College and its Winslet Dragons

Winslet College, located in the heartland of Michigan, is a small, liberal arts college, celebrated for the quality of its education as well as its athletics. Several Winslet graduates have gone on to succeed at Ivy League universities as post-graduates, or as professional athletes, and its alumni include many prominent jurists, diplomats, policy makers, and sports journalists.

Winslet's athletic program, which includes several championship teams in a wide variety of sports, has become a significant source of funding and school pride. At Winslet, athletic staff work in concert to develop their athletes' performance both on and off the field. Athletes are expected to maintain a 3.0 or better GPA, and to be community leaders and role models. The Winslet Dragons, the female hockey team, is one of the most successful teams at Winslet, being the NCAA Division I Champions in the last two years.

Since joining Winslet four years ago, Kerry, who played right wing on Canada's female Olympic hockey team, has worked hard to build up the team. With the help of the Winslet's scholarship program and the support of the college president, Redford Thompson, and the athletic director, George Mammoth, Kerry has been able to attract a number of star players to Winslet. The team has become very popular with the many sports fans at Winslet not only because of the quality of their play, but also because they are led by a trio of individual players who have been able to capture the hearts of the fans and the community. This trio consists of Captain Alison Anderson, and Alternate Captains Joyce Crooks and Nancy Legros.

The Team Get Together and Its Aftermath

Heading into the current season, Alison, Joyce and Nancy feel both trepidation and excitement: trepidation because they are the defending champions with a reputation to uphold; and excitement because they look forward to becoming the first team to be Division I Champions for three consecutive years. They are particularly concerned in that they have, through graduation, lost one crucial defender and have a cadre of new players, who are untested at the college level. Given the situation, the women decide to kick the season off by inviting all players to a team-building session at the sorority house where Alison, Joyce and Nancy all live. Team members, but no coaches, are invited.

Team members arrive at the sorority house for 4 p.m., starting off with a spirited game of touch football, refreshments at 6, and dinner at 7 p.m. At the refreshment hour, the players are served a variety of juices and sodas, and everyone participates in a number of games designed to get people sharing and talking with each other. During dinner, team members are offered non-alcoholic beverages, and have an option to drink wine if they are 21 or over. The "official" team building exercise finishes at 9:30 p.m., although team members are told that they were welcome to participate in the activities of the sorority house if they so desire.

The sorority house has a games room with a dart board and pool table. On that evening, members of a nearby male fraternity have also come over for an impromptu visit, an activity that normally would have been well supervised if the house mother wasn't away in Chicago caring for a sick parent. At the end of dinner, Alison departs to her own room as she has a paper due the next day. Joyce and Nancy go for a drink in town to a bar frequented by college students, before returning to the sorority house around 11:30 p.m.

When Joyce and Nancy arrive back at the house, they are informed by their fellow sisters of the sorority that one of the team's first year rookies, Mary Beck, has been doing vodka shooters. Not used to alcohol, Mary became violently ill and is now sleeping it off. Joyce and Nancy decide to get Mary up, walk her back to her dorm room, and see her safely in bed.

While they are walking Mary back Joyce and Nancy are met by campus police. As it turns out, Mary's parents, accustomed to receiving a phone call from their daughter every evening at 10 p.m., have called the college, concerned when Mary does not answer her phone and her roommate is unable to tell them where she is. As the college has a strict no-drinking rule for under-age students, and Mary is only 18 and clearly inebriated, the campus police feel obliged to report the incident to authorities. Since Mary is on athletic scholarship, Joyce and Nancy both know that the complaint will soon be brought to the attention of the coach, the athletic director and the college president.

The seriousness of the incident is significantly escalated when Mary tells authorities that it was all part of a hazing ritual for rookies that included the pre-dinner "get-to-know-you games" and after-dinner drinking games. The college is worried that members of the team and the sorority house are in collusion to cover hazing rituals, which are clearly forbidden by the college following a student death several years earlier. Over the next two weeks, all coaches, team leaders, and team members, as well as residents and guests at the sorority house on the evening in question are interviewed by an investigator hired by the college.

The hazing angle also attracts public notice. Some details of the incident soon go viral, quickly gaining momentum as some clearly enjoy spreading a story that attacks the excellent reputation of Winslet College and its Winslet Dragons.

Coach Kerry Jones, with the increasing social media attention, sees that this situation is getting out of hand. When interviewed by the local news about the situation, she tells the reporter, “Not all the facts are in, and I plead with everyone to keep an open mind. We still don’t know who is involved and how but please understand there are individuals and careers at stake. We should not pre-judge until we know the facts.

At the end of the day, Coach Jones believes in second chances if they are deserved. In the past, for example, she has taken steps to “save” a students, like the one who was caught, drunk and disorderly by the campus police in the Union Building; another who took amphetamines one night to help her stay up to cram for her exams; and, a third who had yelled racial slurs at a competitor in a very public display of poor sportsmanship. Given the attention now be given to the issue, the future of the Winslet Dragons is at stake. Coach Kerry must decide what she can and should do.

Other Protagonists: Their Background and Their Positions

Mary Beck, age 18, is a first-year student and rookie for the Winslet Dragons on athletic scholarship, yet untried in terms of athletic ability at the college level. Mary's parents raised her as a Mormon and they reluctantly agree to allow their daughter to attend Winslet because Mary received a generous scholarship to play a game she loves. They also think Winslet College can offer Mary the gateway to the law career to which she aspires. While Mary is concerned about the impact this incident will have on her scholarship and career aspirations, she is most concerned about the impact it will have on her relationship with her parents and the likelihood that they will pull her out of Winslet. As a result of these concerns, she tells the hazing story.

Alternate Captains Joyce Crooks and Nancy Legros are both 21 years of age. Juniors at Winslet College, they are key spokespeople and valued players for the Winslet Dragons. Joyce, who was raised in Chicago, is the daughter of Winslet alumni and not a scholarship student. Nancy, a Quebecer, is a scholarship student, hoping to do a Master's in public policy at Harvard. Both have grade point averages above 3.7. They are stunned by Mary's story, and feel she has betrayed them and the team. They feel that at every step they have only tried to do the right thing.

Captain Alison Anderson, age 22, is in her last year at Winslet and a valued leader for the Winslet Dragons, with a 3.9 academic average. Alison, herself a Mormon, does not drink alcohol, and has never been known to drink alcohol. She too is perplexed by Mary's story and is concerned that the situation will provoke significant punishments for Joyce and Nancy, and potentially others, given the now public nature of the incident.

Athletic director George Mammoth is primarily responsible for the funding and resourcing of Winslet College’s athletic programs in all sports and has a good working relationship with Coach Jones. While an advocate for Coach Jones and the Winslet Dragons, George is between a rock and a hard place as this incident has the potential to have an impact on the school’s funding and reputation. He supports the investigation initiated by the college president.

Redford Thompson is president of Winslet College. As president, Redford has ordered the investigation into the incident, concerned that the college’s strict prohibitions against under-age drinking and hazing are being violated. He is wondering if he needs to make an example of some of the Winslet Dragons to send a message to the wider Winslet College community.

Questions

Please analyse this case from the perspective of Coach Kerry Jones.

1. What is (are) the ethical issue(s) in the situation? How is this situation potentially damaging to someone or to some group?
2. What are the relevant facts of the case? What facts are unknown? Are there any professional standards or policies that apply to this case?
3. What individuals and groups have an important stake in the outcome? Do some have a greater stake because they have a special need or because there are special obligations to them?
4. What are the options for acting? Have all the relevant persons and groups been included in the analysis?
5. Considering all the perspectives, which of the options is the right or best thing to do? Why?
6. Implement your decision. Outline the steps that need to be taken to implement the decision in chronological order.