

Our Community Has A Problem With Victim-Blaming

Some prominent horsemen have done so on social media, making it difficult to change a culture that has long allowed abusers to maintain power over victims.

By Kelsey Baker

On Aug. 8, The New York Times released an article detailing the ban of George Morris from horse sports to the wider world. The ban, in accordance with the U.S. Center for SafeSport guidelines regarding “the most egregious offenses,” comes following an investigation into accusations of sexual misconduct with a minor. Social media commentary on the ruling has been passionate on both sides, sparking heated conversations.

These debates mirror what we see in the larger #MeToo movement across society. Some groups support Morris, hailing him as the modern “godfather” of U.S. show jumping, incapable of harming an athlete under his charge. They see him as the victim of a faulty SafeSport system that unfairly discounts “innocent until proven guilty.” The other side views Morris as a proven offender to be removed from show jumping immediately, regardless of how long ago an incident may have occurred.

When a beloved community leader is accused of unspeakable crimes, almost as if on cue we see collective blame rise. The division amongst equestrians seems to be on three major points of contention: that Morris is a community leader and mentor; that the accuser’s identity and claims are hidden by SafeSport; and that doubt surrounds claims of an incident that he says is from almost 50 years ago.

The most urgent point in these debates isn’t whether Morris is guilty or not, but that we can’t publicly and heartlessly question a victim’s report and hope for the cycle of abuse to get better. We can’t allow fame or authority to play lead roles in supporting individuals who are accused of sexual assault. By proclaiming unanimous support for the accused, we keep victims stuck in the shadows for fear of not being heard, being shamed and being ostracized.

MORE THAN ONE TRUTH

When a role model and community leader is accused of a heinous crime it’s understandably difficult to process. The notable HBO documentary “At The Heart Of Gold” explores Larry Nassar’s fall from beloved doctor to child molester. His professionalism, medical expertise and indiscriminating friendly demeanor made him an invaluable asset to all the communities he belonged to. Yet his ability to cultivate trust had a dark side, allowing him to manipulate adults, betray his responsibility as a doctor, and groom minors for abuse.

The dissonance that admirers of Nassar faced is the same as that we face with Morris—and with every “good” celebrity, mentor, politician or hero accused of sexual assault: How can a person who embodies our most treasured values also be capable of trespassing against our most fundamental boundaries?

The way we respond to that question is where trouble—in the form of burying our heads in the sand, abandoning critical thinking and embracing faulty logic—takes root. When we avoid that dissonance altogether, it becomes impossible to conceive that one person can do both good AND harm, be both good AND bad. So it comes down to an ultimatum: choose one and one only. There we find ourselves in the throes of a logical fallacy: the false dilemma.

When we look at Morris through this lens, the easier, more pleasant choice—and the one that arguably requires the least thinking—is to refute the possibility that he is capable of committing a shameful crime. When his admirers assert their individual experience of him as a role model in defiance of the accusations he faces, they privilege one truth over another. But each person’s unique experience of the world means that truth is a many-sided idea.

Instead of blinding ourselves with polarized thinking, we need to summon the courage to navigate that gray area, in which a person can be both good and bad, with questions that dig deep. Most of all, we need to look at ourselves. What motivates us to judge others as good or bad, trustworthy or deceitful? What are the consequences of elevating our own judgments to a position of righteous authority? What does our judgment accomplish for us, for Morris, for the accused, for sexual predators, for victims who are telling the truth?

Social media users have wondered why someone would wait decades to make this accusation. Perhaps most glaringly, 2008 Olympic gold medalist Eric Lamaze asked, "What he's [accused] of doing in 1968 is a joke; it sure reads like one. Who's accusing him after all these [years]? Is this an angry client? Is this someone [who wants] to be in the limelight? Who [is] this person?"

Lamaze questions the victims' truth, accuracy and pain. He ignores the low rates of false accusations of sexual assault, which are between 2% and 7%, and he's insensitive to his admirers who might be victims struggling with the aftermath of sexual assault themselves. By calling an accusation "a joke," Lamaze demeans and dehumanizes a struggle that may have been painful for decades—for these victims or others. This wasn't a "big deal" until now for any of us, as it's only now been brought to mass attention. It most certainly has been a big deal for select individuals, and it should be a big deal for all of us as we seriously reflect on how to change a sport that shames victims.

An aggressive, overly confident assertion (especially from another prominent horseman) further ostracizes the accuser from the community and depreciates victims' testimonies everywhere. These words mirror our collective desire to rush to defend those we admire and condemn those whom we don't know. They reinforce victims' fears that their reports of assault will be ignored or result in retaliation. They allow an environment of total obedience to powerful individuals to thrive.

This is especially important in cases when minors are abused by adults they idolize and can cause them to blame themselves or internalize negative messages about themselves.

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In fact, one accuser, Jonathan Soresi, has possessed child pornography, although this doesn't change the validity of his experiences. When Soresi contends, in The New York Times article by Sarah Maslin Nir, that, "The transgressions of my past do not invalidate the reality of what happened to me," he is right. He tells the Times he "long struggled with the sense that even as a child [he] was somehow complicit."

Consider abusers or victims in our community who read internet commentary supporting Morris. Blind support by over 7,500 people in a Facebook group ("I Stand With George Morris") is not exactly encouraging to others who are struggling in the aftermath of an assault. It may force some victims to feel they cannot speak out against their abuser and continue competing in the sport they love.

It's not easy to change deeply ingrained ways of thinking, but if our community doesn't advocate for victims, then we continue the cycle of abuse, as offenders typically have multiple victims throughout their lifetimes.

A RED HERRING

People often wonder why a victim would choose to come forward after decades have passed and how an alleged offender can be deemed "guilty" after so long. Many believe a victim has a responsibility to come forward immediately after an assault.

Olympian and former chef d'equipe for the U.S. dressage team Robert Dover observed on social media, "The '70s especially were a crazy time and men and women, gay and straight, did crazy things ... It was not called the 'sexual revolution' for nothing. But retroactively attempting to judge one's behavior in today's world based on those times, what was for instance, going on in Studio 54 or Studio 1, is not only impossible but is unfair."

But equating the sexual revolution of the 1960s and '70s to child abuse is not right. The sexual revolution was focused on freeing ourselves from the expectations of conservative values and the empowerment of women's rights and gay rights. To say that "because it was acceptable then, we should not judge people for what they did" is, in military terms, FUBAR.

Dover's perception is that because sexual misconduct (including sexual abuse of children) was more often ignored in the 1970s it's somehow more excusable, and it doesn't account for the millions of adults who managed to not abuse their authority or fame when working around children. Bringing up the amount of time that has passed is a red herring to distract from the real issue: that sexual abuse of minors and sexual assault in general has been rampant for far too long and is still alive and well now.

Soresi reported Morris to SafeSport decades after the alleged offenses, which puts him well outside the statute of limitations most states have for sexual assault. While it varies by state, the Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017 allowed for an increase in the statute of limitations for child sexual abuse, a federal crime, increasing the limit from three years to 10 for victims after reaching their 18th birthday (or realizing that a crime occurred).

A credible argument may be made to do away with a statute of limitations entirely for "egregious crimes." Murder cases have no statute of limitations, and some states, like California, will allow charges like public funds embezzlement to be brought at any time.

Other individuals have worried online that "it was not only a different world, but that's also a long time for memories to cloud." Questioning the validity of a victim's memory is common and has sparked concern from major organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union, which fears that "eliminating statutes of limitations will result in innocent people convicted of crimes that they did not commit based on untrustworthy evidence."

But if so few reports are false right now, and so few of all incidents are even reported (one in four), then it's illogical to assume that ending the statute of limitations of sexual abuse and sexual assault will lead to an increase in false accusations.

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SafeSport has no statute of limitations and for good reason. A criminal who seeks to abuse others isn't likely to change their ways. The hard data available on sex offender recidivism is spotty, in large part due to the fact that so many sexual assaults go unreported.

Sexual abuse has long been found everywhere in the world, either flagrantly overlooked or better disguised under the surface. Blaming victims strengthens rape culture and allows abusers to maintain power over victims, and the hunter/jumper community has a problem with victim blaming.

If we can't move past constantly questioning victims, then we'll continue to deal with abuse and the effects on abused victims. We pride ourselves as horsewomen and men, dedicated to the welfare of the horse at all times. Let's maintain the same level of protection for victims of sexual abuse, no matter how old they are, and no matter when the abuse occurred. 🍷

Kelsey Baker was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and began riding when she was 5. She competed at the regional grand prix/1.45-meter level from 2007-2013, including trips to represent Zone 7 at the FEI North American Young Riders Championships in 2009 and 2010. After graduating from the University of Denver with a bachelor's degree in history, she joined the U.S. Marine Corps and is now a captain and logistics officer and has deployed twice to the Middle East. She's also served as a Uniformed Victims Advocate, trained to respond to and support military victims of sexual assault, and she holds a master's degree in diplomacy/international terrorism.

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