In 2005, McGill University took an unprecedented stand against hazing in university sport. Following a serious hazing incident involving rookie and veteran football team members, university officials suspended the entire program for the remainder of a season. After a thorough investigation, officials at McGill released a statement that described the initiation ritual involving “nudity, degrading positions and behaviours, gagging, touching in inappropriate manners with a broomstick, as well as verbal and physical intimidation of rookies by a large portion of the team” (Drolet, 2006, p. 1). The players directly involved in the hazing incident were penalized by the university and required to do community service as a group to learn more appropriate ways of team-building. The McGill hazing incident and the news it generated forced the governing bodies of football throughout the country to review their policies and
procedures around hazing. This chapter explores hazing in Canadian football in the aftermath of the McGill incident.

PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF HAZING

Few players that I interviewed for this research actually used the word hazing the way it is typically employed to describe processes of initiation for new players on a team. Instead, players at the junior level used the term “rookieing,” university players used “initiations,” and professional players used “pranks.” For players at all levels, the term hazing carried a negative connotation that they felt did not describe their activities. Hazing, to them, referred to what happened at McGill.

One university player illustrated what he considered the distinction between initiations and hazing: “Initiations are non-serious jokes or pranks, while hazing is more serious, causing either long-term embarrassment or having the potential to emotionally or physically harm the player.” Revealing the negative connotations of the term hazing, a CFL player stated: “If we were to call it hazing, we would have to call it ‘gentle hazing.’” Athletes at all levels spoke about hazing as an activity that only hockey players engaged in, and not football players. One university offensive lineman asserted that “Hazing is wild in hockey.” A professional player made a similar statement, “I don’t know what it is with those hockey players. It’s like it’s always got to be sexual with them or something.”

Each of the terms athletes use at the various playing levels have a somewhat different meaning. Besides the common approach there is “rookieing,” a process that lasts
an entire season. As long as a player is a rookie, they are susceptible to being “rookied,” although initiations typically occur at the beginning of the season, or just before. According to the players I interviewed, the most common initiations are usually conducted in one evening, often referred to as a “rookie night.” Rookie nights are prevalent at both the junior and university level. The difference between the initiation rituals for each level is that junior rookies often must “earn their place” for the entire season, while university players become accepted members of the team after they have successfully undergone “rookie night.” At the professional level, there is less emphasis on initiating rookies, and more on playing pranks on one another. Rookies are most often the targets for pranks, but they can be pulled on anyone, regardless of how many years they have been on a team. A common ritual CFL athletes engage in is to play pranks on a team member having a birthday. As one player explained, “sometimes we’ll tape a guy to the goalpost on his birthday and coat him in ketchup, Gatorade, and things. It’s great fun.”

Every player reported experiencing some form of initiation when they joined their current team. Players at the professional level noted that initiations become both less prevalent and less severe at higher playing levels. One quarterback noted, “I got it bad in high school, bad in university, but not so bad in the CFL.” An offensive lineman believed that initiations in the CFL are less common than at other levels because,

everyone is a grown man. Nobody wants to get their toes stepped on, so people don’t have a lot of tolerance for it. Players are also in the spotlight, so they
don’t want to do anything that could look bad for themselves or their team.

The idea expressed by this player is that grown men are less likely to haze one another.

While professional players reported harsh hazing rituals at the junior and university levels, the CJFL and CIS players I interviewed did not confirm this. Contrary to the perceptions of the CFL players, the testimonies I gathered in my research suggests that hazing is more prevalent in their league than it is at the junior and university levels in Canada. However, when the current CFL athletes were playing at the lower levels, it is possible that hazing rituals were more common and severe than they are today. One professional player recounted his hazing experience as a junior player:

I had it very bad. I had a raw egg cracked in my ass, and a guy had to get it out with his head. It was pretty ugly. I knew a couple of guys that quit that football team because of the stuff that happened. Mine was pretty bad, but there were a couple that were even worse.

Other professional players also stated that they were “hazed pretty bad” at the junior and university levels, while current players in both leagues did not report similar experiences.

According to the junior players I interviewed, “rooki- ing” typically begins with a rookie night. Coaches are often fully aware of the team’s plans and commonly chaperone during the events. One junior player described the course of events:
We had a rookie party for the team where we dressed them up in some ridiculous outfits, and we all went out together. All the vets paid for everything and everyone had a good time. The coaches were aware about all of it.

A junior offensive lineman noted, “coaches supervised rookie day, which was more a team bonding thing than a hazing.”

Following rookie night, junior rookie players are not considered full members of the team until they “earn their place.” According to the players I interviewed, rookies gain membership over the course of the year by performing various tasks for the whole team and specific veteran players, such as carrying equipment, cleaning the practice facility, or cleaning up the bus after a road trip. One junior linebacker described it as a positive experience:

Any so-called hazing that happened was completely harmless and was all in fun. I wouldn’t even call it hazing compared to some of the things that you hear about. Some of the things our rookies had to do were clean up the bus after road trips, or the field after practice.

It is also common for rookies at the junior level to engage in a variety of embarrassing tasks to, as one junior offensive lineman described, “prove their commitment to the team.” One example of such a task was to get a rookie to walk up to a group of young women and say an embarrassing line or phrase to them. Another was to have a rookie sit down at an already-occupied table in a fast food restaurant, not say anything, and start eating his food. A
junior defensive halfback described the embarrassing act used on his team: “We had all of our rookies memorize a line from the song ‘Small Town Girl’ and played [it] on our ferry ride home with each different rookie singing a line for everyone on the ferry.”

Just like the junior players, university football players were adamant that hazing did not exist at their playing level. However, like the other athletes, each university player recounted having undergone some form of “initiation” that according to them could “hardly be considered as serious as hazing” or “wasn’t really hazing at all, but . . . .” With a firm precedent set by McGill University against hazing, university players are adamant about not labelling their initiation rituals “hazing.” However, when asked directly, the majority of players I interviewed reported that the McGill suspension had little to do with their negative perceptions of the term hazing. I interviewed several football players from McGill, and none thought the suspension had any influence on their current initiation practices. One player argued, “the incident was just blown out of proportion by players who were not even involved. Nobody really gives it much thought.” Another player from the school reported, “It is still a sensitive issue here, but we all know that that stuff is unacceptable,” and a third stated, “it happened, it’s over, our program has moved on. That kind of sick stuff would never happen on this team.”

Other players at universities across Canada reported similar sentiments, saying that the McGill hazing incident

1 It is important to note that the players I interviewed were not on the McGill roster at the time the suspension occurred.
has little to do with their current initiation practices. Most players do, however, express concern that they could be penalized by their coach for any acts of hazing. As one university offensive lineman claimed, “the coach that I played for had a rule that if someone left because you hazed him, then you might as well leave too.” Players reported that coaches were concerned about the possibility of hazing, and would often chaperone initiation activities to ensure that no one was harmed. A university linebacker noted, “during our rookie initiation night this year, a coach was present throughout the whole event. We were often warned by him about the consequences of hazing.”

Players described a number of activities that took place at a university football rookie initiation night. The most commonly reported activity was having rookies dress up in female clothing to go out and party for a night. One team organized a Jell-O wrestling competition for rookies at a local nightclub. They filled a children’s pool with Jell-O, and rookies wrestled one another in front of a crowd of onlookers. Another common initiation ritual reported by players was shaving rookies’ various body parts, such as the head, armpits, chest, legs, and in one instance, eyebrows. After going through some form of initiation, university players reported that rookies were generally considered part of the team, and that few divides existed between rookies and veterans.

From the standpoint of most professional football players, hazing is perceived as “child’s play” and not something done by grown men. However, pulling creative pranks on teammates is considered an acceptable activity. Every professional player I interviewed had a favourite prank that they had personally used on a teammate, or had seen or
heard done to another. A CFL linebacker described several pranks: “Pubic hair in rookies’ chinstraps, snakes and pig-heads in their clothes, farting in their water bottles.” Similarly, another player described the ultimate CFL prank as putting a hogshead in a rookie’s locker, partly because it “stank up the whole locker room.” A third described nailing the shoes of all of the team’s rookies to the floor before practice. A CFL quarterback described one incident where a rookie’s equipment was duct-taped around the locker room, requiring the man to find and unwrap it fast enough so that he would not be late for practice.

Not all pranks in the CFL are directed toward rookies. As already noted, pranks are common on a player’s birthday. According to several players, they can be played on a veteran if he is not keeping his locker tidy, has made a costly mistake in a game, or simply to laugh at his expense. One player described putting a catfish in one of the team’s ice baths to surprise an unsuspecting player after getting into the already unpleasant tub. Another player who is allergic to peanuts had his car coated in peanut butter by teammates, requiring him to have it professionally cleaned before he could go anywhere near it.

Like teams at the other playing levels, teams in the CFL often have a rookie night at the beginning of the year to initiate new players. These nights, in contrast to the other playing levels, typically involve drinking games instead of forcing rookies to engage in humiliating acts. Former CFL quarterback Matt Dunigan (2007) wrote,

on rookie night the vets took us out the night before the intra-squad game, bought the food, paid for the booze, tried to initiate us. . . . There was a method to
this madness: the next day in the intra-squad game
the vets would look great because the rookies were
so hung over their hair hurt. (Dunigan, 2007, p.117)

Like other rookieing rituals, team initiations in the CFL
also persist throughout the season. One rookie offensive
lineman was charged with the responsibility of buying
veteran players breakfast on road trips. Another rookie
from the same team had a similar experience, which he
labelled “monetary hazing.” A third player described the
initiation practices on his team, where rookie players were
paired with veterans for the entire season and forced to
do tasks at their request. He indicated that typical tasks
he had to do involved making sure the player arrived to
all meetings and practices on time and helping to clean
up after him.

The most common hazing ritual in professional foot-
ball is singing: rookies are forced to sing their university’s
song in front of the entire team during mealtimes in the
cafeteria at training camp. A rookie fullback described
his hazing experience in the CFL:

Hazing exists, but in a friendly way, at least on my
team. For the rookies, we had to sing a song in front
of the whole team, so it was in good fun. I also got
a hard time from one of the veterans. I just had to
make sure that he was up on time, that he made it
to all of his meetings. When he needed things, I had
to go get it. Things like that. It is all in good fun.

While hazing does appear to be more prevalent in the
CFL, most players noted that it was not a negative expe-
rience for them.
The players I interviewed at all three levels provided a number of explanations for why initiation rituals are conducted by their team each season. Overall, they described these rituals as being not overly pleasant, occasionally harmful but usually not; the players considered them a somewhat functional and unavoidable aspect of playing football. The most common response players gave to justify initiations is that they build team cohesion. Explaining the purpose of rookie night, a junior wide receiver noted, “to me, it brings you closer to the guys and makes the team come together. It is a chance to spend time with your new teammates outside of the field or gym.” A junior fullback added, “it’s just something to break the ice, to let the rookies know they belong.” Similarly, a university offensive lineman reported, “it just helps us become a more cohesive unit right from the beginning of the season.” A CFL rookie noted: “It’s just a rite of passage that you have to go through to know that you are part of the team.”

Several players noted that hazing occurs as part of a cyclical process, where players experience hazing as rookies, and then feel as though they need to haze subsequent generations of players. Describing this sentiment, one professional offensive lineman explained, “with hazing . . . everyone always remembers back to what happened to them when they were a rookie, and they just feel that it gives them the right to continue it on.” The problem with this attitude, according to several players, is that it leads some to increase the intensity of hazing rituals from year to year. One university player noted, “It’s like ‘this is what happened to me, now I’m going to make the rookies next year get it even worse.’” This player suggested that each year the hazing ritual becomes more severe until it gets
to a point where a group of veterans thinks things have gone too far, or an outside party steps in, such as the university’s administration. This notion of hazing as part of a cycle of violence was also reported by Johnson (2000) and Abdulrehman (2006) in their research of hazing in Canadian sport.

Some players asserted that hazing helps to lessen the inflated self-confidence or “egos” that young players bring to a team when they were stars at a lower level. A junior defensive halfback stated, “with most guys being all-stars in high school before playing in junior, it humbles them a little so everyone is on the same level.” A few players at the professional level reported that players who need to be taught a lesson are often hazed. A CFL fullback explained,

> it exists in places where . . . rookies have behaved in a manner that team veterans deem inappropriate and [so they] must teach said rookies a lesson. I could run on and on about stories of A535 in people’s jockstraps, hiding people’s helmets, or garbage cans of water leaned against dorm room doors.²

Other players indicated that some engage in initiations simply because they are fun and entertaining. Initiations typically occur, or are at least most severe, during team training camps where players are exhausted from practising two or three times in a single day. For players, initiations can be a fun break from the difficulties and stress of pre-season training.

² A535 is a muscle relaxant that causes pain when it is applied to sensitive body parts.
Several players argued against hazing, asserting that it has no purpose in football and that there really is no rationale for its existence and prevalence. A junior wide receiver stated,

I never really liked the idea of rookie initiations, or stuff like that. One thing that is a constant on any team I have been on is that rookies do the extra chores that all the players are supposed to do, like carrying equipment from here to there. . . . I don’t think it serves much purpose.

Along similar lines, a professional player reported that initiations are just “a dumb excuse for guys to drink and have a night off from training camp.” Consistent with these players’ sentiments, a university coach declared, “hazing is just not productive. The young kids coming in are already under enough pressure to make the team, learn the plays, and adjust to the university game; the added pressure isn’t needed because it doesn’t amount to anything.”

DRAWING THE LINE OF CONSENT

While some initiation rituals are perceived as harmless and even considered enjoyable, many forms of hazing are seen as harmful and unacceptable to Canadian football players. The players I interviewed identified a number of criteria to define the acceptable limits of team initiations in football, although not everyone described the same ones. The most common response from players was that the act should not cause any physical, psychological, or
emotional harm. Another frequent response was that players should not force rookies to do anything they would not feel comfortable doing themselves. A junior offensive lineman explained, “it is all about what you are willing to do. If you are not willing to do it, then it is inappropriate.”

A third response given by numerous players is that the initiation should not involve anything sexual. Several players pointed to reports of initiations involving various acts of a sexual nature in hockey as being well beyond the line of consent. Similarly, while describing the “Mr. Broomstick incident” at McGill University, a professional offensive lineman stated, “what happened at McGill a few years back is pretty much crossing the line.”

Another criteria reported by several players was that hazing is not consensual if the person being hazed says “no,” or asks for the hazing to “stop.” According to the players I interviewed, being on a football team does not imply that you have consented to be hazed. Similarly, several players indicated that if an individual does not appear to enjoy the initiation, then it should be stopped. According to one CFL quarterback,

I think going too far is basically when you can see that the guy is not taking it light-hearted. You never know what is going to get a guy’s goat and you hope that everybody just goes out there to enjoy it, but I have seen it where a player just wasn’t too happy about having a missing uniform or having all of his stuff frozen before practice. With those types of things, you hope that someone steps in and stops it because you don’t want it to be a thing that makes people angry. That is taking it past the limits.
Some players noted that a great deal of discretion is required in the initiation process, as one player might be willing to shave his eyebrows, while another does not want his hair touched for religious reasons. A CFL fullback noted, “I think pranks and initiations are something that have to be handled very delicately. . . . People have to use their individual discretion and judgment to make sure things don’t cross the line.”

In total, the players I interviewed named five main criteria for engaging in consensual hazing: (1) no physical, psychological, or emotional harm or distress should occur; (2) no act should be required if all the players involved are not willing to do it themselves; (3) no form of sexual abuse should occur; (4) if the participant says “no,” the act should stop immediately; and (5) participants must be willing and not be visibly angered by the process. Failing to meet these criteria is crossing the line for acceptable limits of hazing.

The football players also provided specific examples of initiation rituals that they felt crossed the line of consent:

- paddling players
- violating religious freedoms
- forced consumption of toxic substances
- forcing players to engage in illegal activities
- anything involving feces or urine
- harming players’ personal relationships outside of football
- beating or causing physical injury
- public displays of nudity
Hazing in the Aftermath of McGill’s Mr. Broomstick

- sexual abuse
- forced consumption of anything in excessive quantities like alcohol, hamburgers, or syrup.

DISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES ON HAZING

In the aftermath of the McGill Mr. Broomstick incident, universities across Canada tightened their policies on hazing, prohibiting any initiation ritual or act. Most players at the junior and university levels reported that the zero tolerance rules on hazing in their leagues were excessive. Many players viewed the McGill incident as an overreaction that unnecessarily penalized athletes who were not directly involved.

For those acts that players deemed non-consensual, most players indicated that the perpetrators should face lengthy suspensions. Every player I interviewed indicated that individuals involved in harmful hazing activities should face disciplinary review and league penalties. But punishing an entire team, including those not involved in the hazing, was considered excessive and unfair.

Although a zero tolerance policy against hazing exists in Canadian university football, every university player in this study indicated that they had gone through an initiation process or ritual of some kind when joining their university team. Both players and coaches ignore the rules that completely ban any form of initiation. According to one player,

McGill has a zero tolerance policy when it comes to hazing, where we can participate in no activities that
will endanger or significantly embarrass our teammates in the name of initiation. That being said, veterans do put the rookies through initiation, but nothing that will harm them, or could be considered hazing.

Similarly, a quarterback from another university stated, “yeah, there are regulations. Officially, you are not allowed to haze. But, the team will come together and decide what they are going to do regardless of the rules.”

Coaches suggested to me that players are going to engage in initiations without much regard for the rules, so most officials at the junior and university levels tolerate initiations under their supervision. Numerous players indicated that coaches were present at their rookie night initiation to ensure that no harmful acts occurred. A junior coach argued, “they are going to haze each other whether we like it or not, so we just ensure that they understand the consequences of their actions and [that they] don’t take anything too far.”

According to Johnson and Donnelly (2004, p. 139), coaches occupy a vital yet often contradictory position in hazing in football. “The role of the coach is double: he or she is seen both as an agent of change and as someone who supports and encourages the continuation of traditional initiations.” On the basis of their interviews with athletes and administrators of university sport in Canada, these two authors found that hazing policies had one of three outcomes: initiation bans, modified initiations, or hazing moving underground.

None of the players at the professional level reported concern over the lack of disciplinary policies and procedures pertaining to hazing in the CFL. Arguing for the
merits of his own disciplinary review process for hazing, a CFL running back claimed, “if someone does something to me that I don’t like, I want to be the guy getting him back, not Mark Cohon.” With no formal policies against hazing in the CFL, there is minimal disconnect between players’ perceptions of the act and the league’s disciplinary review process. Most players appear content with the lack of formal rules around hazing in the CFL.

Despite this laid-back view taken by CFL athletes, every player I interviewed indicated that athletes should be held criminally accountable for certain acts involving hazing. The most common statement made by players was that any type of hazing involving a criminal act should be treated as such. If a player is forced to engage in a sexual act, then the hazers should be charged with sexual assault. Or if a player is physically harmed, a charge of physical assault should result. A junior centre reinforced this belief, stating, “the excessive stuff has no business being in sport, period. That is just disgusting stuff. If somebody got assaulted then sure, absolutely they should be charged to the fullest extent of the law.”

None of the players indicated that individuals should be given any leniency for criminal acts they engage in during hazing rituals; however, few thought that Canada should inaugurate legal statutes to specifically criminalize hazing. As one CFL player argued, “initiations can be a team-building experience. There’s no need to criminalize that just because some guys will take it to the limit.” A junior wide receiver commented, “hazing should not

3 Mark Cohon is the commissioner of the Canadian Football League.
be a crime unless a crime occurs.” Overall, most players suggested that whether an act was part of a hazing ritual or not, it should have no bearing on whether a crime has occurred; instead, the individual incidents of hazing should be investigated as possible criminal acts.

During the interviews, players named four groups of individuals who could be held criminally liable for hazing incidents in Canadian football: players directly involved, players who were witnesses, coaches, and the university or league in which the hazing took place. All players agreed that individuals directly involved in hazing incidents that include criminal acts should be held legally liable for their actions. A small number of players also indicated that legal liability should be considered for those who witness a serious hazing incident and do nothing to stop it. Likewise, a few suggested that individuals who witness a serious hazing incident and fail to report it or lie about it to protect teammates should face legal sanction.

Players indicated similar provisions for the legal liability of coaches and league or university administrators. In general, players stated that coaches and administrators should be held criminally liable for any acts that they engaged in; although no player could think of an incident where one of their team coaches had taken part in the hazing process apart from helping to shave heads or chaperoning a rookie night. Several players also said that any attempts to conceal a hazing incident by coaches or administrators should result in legal sanctions or penalties, such as a fine or being fired. Players did not think that coaches or administrators should be held liable for failing to provide adequate rules to prevent hazing.
As with on-field violence, there is a disjuncture between players’ perceptions of consensual hazing and their views on criminal culpability and liability. Players draw the line on consensual hazing with five main provisions; acts outside of these are considered non-consensual. But for most players, lack of consent does not necessarily imply that an act should be labelled criminal. Much like their perspectives on violence, these athletes think some hazing might be non-consensual and immoderate, but not extreme enough to warrant legal prosecution. Instead, they believe immoderate hazing might be better dealt with via league penalties.

Most players indicate that they do not consent to all forms of hazing when they join a football team. In Canadian courts, however, it is often assumed that participation on a team implies consent to hazing. Many players expect initiations to be an enjoyable experience where they will get to know the new members of their team through a humorous game, challenge, or prank. While players expect to be initiated on new teams, they do not expect the process to be harmful, and do not willingly consent to such acts.

According to the players I interviewed, there is really no way to get out of the initiation process. One professional offensive lineman explained, “initiations are pretty much a part of every sport at every level. It is just something you have to go through, whether you like it or not.” Players suggested that they could resist certain initiation rituals, but must undergo some form of initiation before they are fully accepted on a team. Thus while players might consent to certain acts, they do so knowing they must.
SUMMARY

As with on-field violence, Canadian football players perceive the consent defence as invalid in most incidents of hazing. The players I interviewed outlined five conditions that must be met for an act of hazing to be considered consensual: (1) there must be no physical, psychological, or emotional harm or distress arising from the act; (2) no act should be required if all of the players involved are not be willing to do it themselves; (3) it must involve no sexual abuse; (4) if a player says “no,” the act must be stopped immediately; and (5) players must be willing participants who are not becoming visibly angered by the initiation process. But even after listing these requirements, the players I interviewed suggested that failing to meet them was not grounds for a criminal charge. Arguing about whether a criminal act has occurred based on consent is irrelevant to them. They draw two different lines to mark the limits of appropriate behaviour, one defining their consent to be hazed in football, and another to indicate a crime has occurred. Players do, however, strongly agree that those who engage in criminal acts while hazing should be penalized in the Canadian legal system.

While a disjuncture exists between players’ perspectives on hazing and how it is handled by the justice system, there is less of one between their perspectives and the disciplinary proceedings of league administrations. At the junior and university levels, leagues put in place a number of rules and procedures against hazing. Most players report that these rules are harsh and excessive, and few express any concern over how they are enforced,
although several did indicate that they thought the McGill suspension was unwarranted. At the junior and university levels, coaches allow initiations to occur in violation of the official rules, but monitor the process closely to ensure that no players are harmed. For the most part, the junior and university players I interviewed supported this approach to handling the disciplinary aspects of hazing. At the professional level, no rules or direct disciplinary procedures for hazing exist. The CFL players interviewed indicated that this approach, or lack thereof, resonated with how they thought disciplinary reviews should be handled in their league. They expressed no need for harsher penalties by the CFL head office for incidents involving hazing on their teams.