

F JACQUI Mengler's parents told her to do something, like most 15-year-olds, she would argue the point. If her coach told her to do the same thing, she would do it, no questions asked.

And because of it, her life changed forever.

In 1996, the name Jacqui Mengler was one of the best known in Australian sport but not for anything she had achieved as one of the country's most promising kayakers.

It was because she had been sexually abused by her coach, Olympian Steve Wood, and spoken up.

At the time, Mengler's accusations — and the subsequent suicide of Wood — were seen as a shocking aberration. A rare case of a coach taking advantage of an innocent child. A tragic one-off betrayal of trust.

Five years on, things have changed. It is now known Mengler wasn't a rarity. She was one of hundreds of youngsters of both sexes who have been abused by their coaches.

Two weeks ago, Federal Sports Minister Jackie Kelly announced a policy of "zero tolerance" to harassment in sport. While the announcement of the policy — and the guidelines and educational campaign that will accompany it, earned headlines — it was the statistics which Mrs Kelly released which caused the most shock.

The Australian Sports Commission surveyed 370 club and elite athletes, finding 21 per cent of males and 31 per cent of females had been sexually abused.

While the suggestion that one in four athletes had suffered some form of sexual abuse shocked many, one person who wasn't surprised was Gold Coast-based Mengler.

"I've said all along that it is prevalent," she said this week. "I think when my story broke a lot of people started coming out. It got the ball rolling. There are a lot more cases being brought out into the open, but what is frightening is the number which stay hidden."

"People fear a backlash. They know they will be brought out into the public

spotlight like I was, and they are too frightened to speak out."

Mengler believes speaking out about her relationship with Wood cost her the chance to represent Australia at the past two Olympics.

She claimed she was left out of the team for Atlanta because of the continued stigma which also saw her omitted last year from the team for Sydney.

"I am being punished for something I did not do," she said at the time.

But this week she said she had no regrets.

"If I've stopped one person from going through what I did, it has been worth it," she said. "If my case gave some impetus to this government pol-

icy or gave a child the strength to tell their parents about something going on, I don't regret a moment of it."

Mengler believes her unquestioning trust of Wood is typical of many young athletes.

"It is just the nature of the athlete-coach relationship," she said. "There is great vulnerability there. Your parents are alienated because you spend so much time with the coach, training and travelling. The coach becomes like another father or mother."

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"At the same time, if my parents told me to do something, I might question it. If my coach told me to do something, I'd do it."

It is a story repeated often in courtrooms and newspaper columns in recent years. Impressionable youngsters, conditioned to follow implicitly the instructions of their coaches, being taken advantage of.

Last week, Olympic kayaker Kerri Randle recounted her sexual abuse at the hands of her swimming coach in the late 1980s.

"It happened because he had control of me," said Randle, now 26. "That's the power, the control he had over me,

I trusted him, my parents trusted him. He was my coach."

One of the most publicised — and tragic — cases was that of rugby league international Peter Jackson.

Jackson, who was molested by his football coach as a schoolboy, died of a drug overdose after years of depression.

His widow Siobhan had no doubt Jackson's death was a direct result of the betrayal of trust.

"His drug abuse was due to the sexual abuse," she said soon after his death in 1998. "Absolutely, I'm sure of that."

Jackson's abuser, Hugh McNamara, was convicted of molesting another schoolboy and placed on a bond. Other coaches in tennis, softball, soccer and athletics have been jailed for abusing their young charges.

It is such cases that Sports Minister Kelly hopes to stamp out.

"It's something that is not going to be tolerated," she said.

"We're not going to support organisations that tolerate it, we're not going to support coaches and clubs which tolerate it."

But as well as protecting athletes, the new program is aimed at protecting the majority of coaches who are involved in sport for the right reasons.

Sports Commission education consultant Sean Scott, who worked on the government guidelines, said the program would include the implementation of a code of behaviour and ethics for accredited coaches and the introduction of protection policies.

With the Government threatening to cut funding for sports which do not adhere to the policies, it is hoped the public's faith in coaches will be restored.

But, for some, peace of mind will only come through vigilance.

Aged 21, Jacqui Mengler doesn't have children. But if she did...

"Knowing the way I alienated myself from my parents, and knowing what happened to me, I would take a day-to-day interest," she said.

"I would have direct contact. I would always want to know what was going on. Always."

Betrayal of Trust

By Mike Coleman

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