The practice of sport is a human right.

Every individual must have the possibility of practising sport without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.

Fourth Fundamental Principle of Olympism
The Olympic Charter

Risk factors: Why does harassment and abuse occur in sport?

There are a number of factors which may increase the risk for harassment and abuse in sport. These include:

**The hierarchical nature of sport**

“The cultural context of harassment and abuse is rooted in discrimination based on real or perceived power differentials across a range of social and personal factors”

(Mountjoy et al., 2016)

**Commoditisation of athletes at the risk of their physical and/or psychological well-being**

Defined as “the extraction of economic and performance value to the point where athletes become indistinct and interchangeable”

(Burry and Fiset, 2020)

**A win-at-all-costs mentality**

“A winner-take-all reward system may induce coaches and athletes to use whatever means necessary, including abusive methods, to achieve results”

(Frank and Cook, 2013)

**There are low protection mechanisms in place**

Protection mechanisms include:

- Athlete safeguarding policies which are clear, reflect best practice and are survivor-focused
- Robust reporting and investigation procedures for responding to a concern
- Access to trained support persons
- Stakeholder guidance, education and signed guidelines for behaviour
- Safe recruitment and training practices
- Frequent periodic monitoring, evaluation and risk assessment
#SafeSport is: “...when she is treated with respect and is also viewed as a human being, not just as a means of winning gold medals. Her safety should also be looked after, both psychologically and physically.”

Anonymous YOG 2020 Athlete

What is Harassment and Abuse in Sport?

Harassment and abuse can be expressed in five forms which may occur in combination or in isolation. These forms of abuse are defined here as:

**Psychological Abuse** means any unwelcome act including confinement, isolation, verbal assault, humiliation, intimidation, infantilisation, or any other treatment which may diminish the sense of identity, dignity, and self-worth.

**Sexual Harassment** means any unwanted or unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature whether verbal, non-verbal or physical. Sexual harassment can take the form of sexual abuse.

**Sexual Abuse** means any conduct of a sexual nature whether non-contact, contact or penetrative, where consent is coerced/manipulated or is not or cannot be given.

**Neglect** means the failure of a coach or another person with a duty of care towards the athlete to provide a minimum level of care to the athlete which is causing harm, allowing harm to be caused, or creating an imminent danger of harm.

**Physical Abuse** means any deliberate and unwelcome act that causes physical trauma or injury including things such as inappropriate training loads, forced doping, training whilst in pain, punching, etc.

Whilst not all cases constitute a criminal offence, all are a breach of human rights and can have a multitude of severe detrimental impacts on athletes.

Harassment and abuse:

- May be based on power differentials in sex, gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, indigeneity, (dis)ability, age, athletic ability, athletic longevity, faith, or socio/economic/financial status
- May include a one-off incident or a series of incidents
- May be in person or online (or by other means)
- May be deliberate, unsolicited and coercive
- Often results from an abuse of authority

Full definitions can be found [here.](#)
Impacts of Abuse in Sport

**Impact on athletes**
- Physical illness or injury
- Performance loss
- Sport drop-out
- Economic loss
- Doping and other forms of cheating
- Disordered eating and eating disorders
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Self-harm
- Social isolation
- Low self esteem
- Volatile mood states
- Depression and anxiety
- Challenging interpersonal relationships
- Suicide

**Impact on organisations**
- Reputational damage
- Loss of players and fans
- Loss of sponsorship
- Reduced medal tally & world performance
- Reduced public confidence
- Loss of trust
- Asset depreciation
- Reduced youth enrollment
- Staff turnover
- Economic loss
- In-fighting
- Legal entanglements

(Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2020, Mountjoy et al., 2016)

Normative Frameworks

One of the key roles of this stakeholder group is to ensure the development and implementation of Safe Sport policies and procedures in your sports organisation, or to ensure that these are in place within the organisations with whom you are looking to collaborate.

“It is incumbent upon all stakeholders in sport both to adopt general principles for safe sport and to implement and monitor policies and procedures for safe sport which state that: all athletes have a right to be treated with respect and protected from non-accidental violence.”

IOC Consensus Statement: Harassment and Abuse in Sport (2016)
Foundational Aspects

The foundation for developing and implementing safeguarding policies and procedures in sports organisations can largely be divided into three aspects:

1. **Applicable sports regulations and frameworks**
   For example:
   - The Olympic Charter, IOC Code of Ethics, Basic Principles of Good Governance
   - Individual sport organisations’ statutes, code of ethics, etc.
   - International Federation Guidelines/recommendations

2. **Applicable international regulations**
   For example:
   - United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (e.g., Article 31)
   - UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (e.g., Article 30)
   - Lisbon Treaty, Article 165
   - UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Article 12
   - American Convention on Human Rights, Article 16
   - UNESCO International Charter of Physical Recreation, Physical Activity and Sport

3. **National regulations within your own jurisdiction concerning safeguarding in sport**

**Did you know?**
In some instances the implementation of safeguarding policies and procedures may be set as a condition of receiving national/state funding. (for example in the UK and Canada)

**Remember**
Further advice and guidance on safeguarding in sport can be found in the "Safeguarding athletes from harassment and abuse in sport: IOC Toolkit for IFs and NOCs" found on the IOC website and Athlete 365
Checklist: Lawyers working within sports organisations

Ensure that your organisation has a safeguarding policy and procedure in place. This policy should:

- Apply to all involved in the organisation
- Identify and address issues related to harassment and abuse in sport
- State that all members have a right to respect, safety and protection
- Specify procedures for reporting and handling complaints
- State that the welfare of members is paramount
- Ensure that your organisation has a clear point of contact who is responsible for implementing and upholding safeguarding policies as well as addressing wider safeguarding concerns. This person should be well advertised to all members of staff so it is clear who they should approach if needed
- Specify what constitutes a violation
- Specify the range of consequences for such violations
- Provide details of where parties involved in a complaint can seek advice and support both internally and from external organisations
- Specify procedures for maintaining records
- Provide guidance for third-party reporting ("whistleblowing")
- Be clear, easy to understand and people focused
- Be approved by the relevant management body (e.g., Executive Board)
- Be incorporated into your organisation’s constitution and/or regulations
- Be developed in consultation with athletes
- Be regularly reviewed and updated, particularly when there is a major change in the constitutional regulations of the organisation or in the law

Ensure well-being of athletes is a central element in planning and contracting with third parties including any sub-contractors.

Ensure that all lawyers working with athletes have knowledge of the referral pathways to support in the event that harassment or abuse is suspected.

Ensure that lawyers take an individual, person-centric approach to clients who have experienced harassment and abuse, noting that even cases which do not meet the criminal threshold may still be against the values of sport, have a devastating impact on athletes and contravene the organisation’s rules and regulations.

Did you know

When developing reporting procedures, it is important to keep in mind that:

- It is estimated that 86% of child sexual abuse in general society goes unreported in the United States
- Survivors of abuse, in or out of sport, often take years or even decades to disclose
- A survey completed during the Youth Olympic Games in 2018 found that of those athletes responding, 37% stated that they would not know where to report an incident of harassment and abuse or would be uncomfortable in doing so, and yet 34% reported that the occurrence of harassment and abuse was likely or very likely in their sport.

This presents a significant risk to athletes and to organisations. The absence of a case does not mean it is not happening.

This is why it is so important that a holistic, athlete-centred approach to developing and implementing safeguarding measures is adopted.

How reporting procedures are perceived and made sense of by athletes and others in sport is important for understanding their potential as well as their limitations.

Solstad 2019
Checklist: Sponsors

Sponsors can play an influential role in promoting athlete welfare. This may include:

- Fostering purpose-led partnerships with sports organisations who place athletes’ welfare and the promotion of human rights in, through and around sport at the centre.
- Ensuring key partners have policies and procedures in place to protect vulnerable groups.
- Sharing best practices related to anti-discrimination and other key related areas.
- Promoting or engaging in athlete education programmes which underlie the principles of safe sport: sport which is fair, equitable and free from all forms of harassment and abuse. This may include for example ensuring that athletes with social media partnerships receive training on how to protect themselves online.
- It is important to remember for safeguarding concerns should they arise as a result of your sponsor agreements.

Checklist: Agents

- Ensure your activities align with the fundamental principle that the safety and welfare of athletes is paramount.
- Invest time in educating yourself and raising awareness of harassment and abuse in sport, including key signs and symptoms, and the role that you play in fostering safe sport environments.
- Take time to research third-party organisations that support victims of harassment and abuse should your athlete require assistance.
- When collaborating with sports organisations, look to research what measures are in place related to the protection and promotion of athlete safety and welfare. Familiarise yourself with the organisation’s processes for redress in order to support your client if needed.
- Ensure that you foster person-centred working relationships with your clients and make sure to have open conversations around their welfare on a regular basis.
- Ensure that the well-being of your athlete is of foremost importance when working with sports organisations.

For further information, please go to the [Athlete365 Safe Sport](https://www.athlete365.org) page.

References & Resources

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