

CENSUS OF  
ATHLETE  
RIGHTS  
EXPERIENCES

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WE  
CARE







**C**ENSUS OF  
**A**THLETE  
**R**IGHTS  
**E**XPERIENCES

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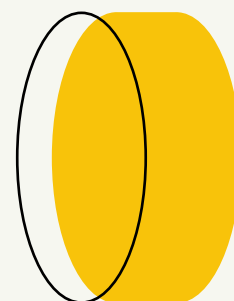
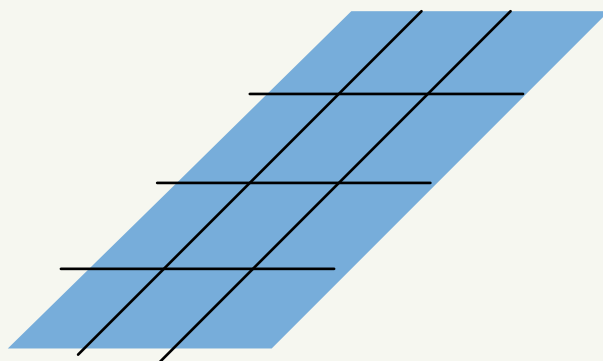
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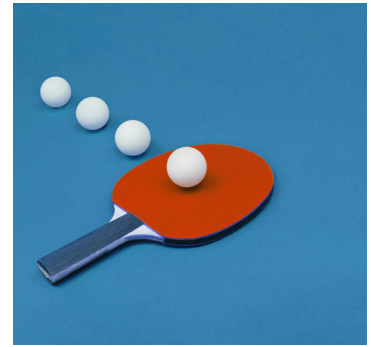
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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## BACKGROUND

Project CARE (Census of Athlete Rights Experiences) aims to ensure that the rights of child athletes are respected throughout the world of sport. The project is a collaboration between World Players Association, its affiliates and Loughborough University.

## METHODS

During the months of December 2019 – June 2020 an online questionnaire was shared with both currently active as well as former professional athletes affiliated with World Players in order to understand their childhood experiences in organized sport. A total sample of 297 athletes completed the questionnaire and 13 interviews were conducted.

The standards set out by World Players with respect to safeguarding had to be met in order for an organization to participate. A website was set up which outlined all of the support available for athletes both within their own affiliate organization as well as the available resources and support services provided by relevant external agencies. In order to participate, respondents had to be over the age of 18. The survey was available in English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Japanese and Hungarian.

## CHALLENGES

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of the relatively small sample. Considerable effort was invested into building relationships with affiliates to facilitate athlete recruitment and we would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank everyone who supported this project. However, challenges were experienced regarding a range of factors including the outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic, other local context (e.g. external and internal pressures), engagement (e.g. at all of the levels required to reach the players), administration (e.g. practical and logistical issues) and sensitivity (e.g. the nature of the topic and cultural issues). The recommendations of this report stem from the entire project experience and not solely from the empirical data.



**PLEASE BE AWARE THAT THIS REPORT CONTAINS PERSONAL ACCOUNTS OF A RANGE OF DISTRESSING EXPERIENCES INCLUDING SEXUAL, PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE AS WELL AS EATING DISORDERS. PLEASE CONSIDER THIS BEFORE READING THIS REPORT AND PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOU ACCESS SUPPORT AS REQUIRED.**



To access local support services available free of charge in different localities around the world, please check: [www.worldplayerscare.co](http://www.worldplayerscare.co)

#### KEY FINDINGS

**37%** of athletes reported having experienced one form of physical abuse at least once as a child in sport.

**61%** of athletes reported having experienced one form of emotional abuse at least once as a child in sport.

**69%** of athletes were not always aware they had rights when they were children in sports.

**51%** of athletes were never aware of a union/player association before the age of 18.

**45%** of athletes did not feel sport always promoted their mental health.

**51%** of athletes experienced economic exploitation as a child athlete.

**69%** of athletes felt that their best interests were not always taken into account.



#### RECOMMENDATIONS

Sport which respects the rights of child athletes can be built on 6 key pillars, which use the acronym RIGHTS. Everyone has a role to play to help embed these pillars throughout sport to ensure that the rights of all children are always respected: sports organisations, governments, civil society and trade unions, player associations, sponsors.

# THE RIGHTS PILLARS FOR BUILDING SPORT WHICH RESPECTS THE RIGHTS OF ALL CHILDREN



## REMEDY

Establish truth commissions to look into non-recent abuse and well resourced and independent safe sport centers to manage cases.

Refer abuse cases to law enforcement for criminal investigation, and where appropriate, apprehension and detention.

Ensure survivors of abuse and harassment in sports have access to remedial justice, including a public apology, acknowledgement and compensation.



## INFORM

Collect on-going data regarding athlete rights experiences and identify trends over time.

Disseminate promising practice regarding the promotion and protection of athlete rights and how to safely report abuse in sports.

Educate and empower athletes to know and realize their rights.



## GOVERN

Engage and advocate with national governments to adopt and implement law explicitly banning all forms of abuse against child athletes in organized sport.

Develop, adopt and enforce compliance with formal policies to protect child athletes from abuse.

Ensure effective, adequately resourced, trauma-centered and survivor-led systems and procedures are in place to support and receive cases of abuse and harassment in sports.



## HARNESS the athlete's voice

Organize and engage with athletes who have lived experience of abuse in sports in a sustainable and safe way.

Ensure that the athlete voice is represented throughout sport.

Invite, hear and respond to a range of child athlete voices regarding the realization of their rights.



## TRAIN

Require and conduct child wellbeing, safeguarding and protection training.

Develop child-focused structures and programmes within player associations.

Provide guidance and training to player managers on how to exercise their duty of care for athletes who disclose abuse, harassment or trauma in sport.



## SUPPORT

Provide sensitive and supportive approach, guided by each individual's preferences throughout.

Ensure free, ongoing, professional psychological, social, medical and legal support services for child athletes who have experienced abuse.

Analyze and ensure holistic security (physical, mental and digital) is made available to whistleblowers and people that disclose abuse in sport.

## KEY CONCEPTS

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) sets out the rights of all children.



The UNCRC defines a child as any person under the age of 18.

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### THERE ARE THREE GENERAL CATEGORIES OF RIGHTS UNDER THE UNCRC:

- *Rights of protection: e.g. Article 3:*

States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services, and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform to the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision.

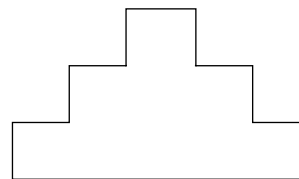
- *Rights of participation: e.g. Article 12:*

Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.

- *Rights of provision: e.g. Article 24:*

Every child has the right to the best possible health. Governments must provide good quality healthcare, clean water, nutritious food, a clean environment and education on health and wellbeing so that children can stay healthy.

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) are a set of guidelines for states and companies to prevent, address and remedy human rights abuses committed in business operations (UNGPs, 2011).



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### THE UNGPS REST ON THREE PILLARS:

*Pillar I* State duty to protect human rights

*Pillar II* The corporate responsibility to respect human rights

*Pillar III* Access to remedy for victims of business-related abuses

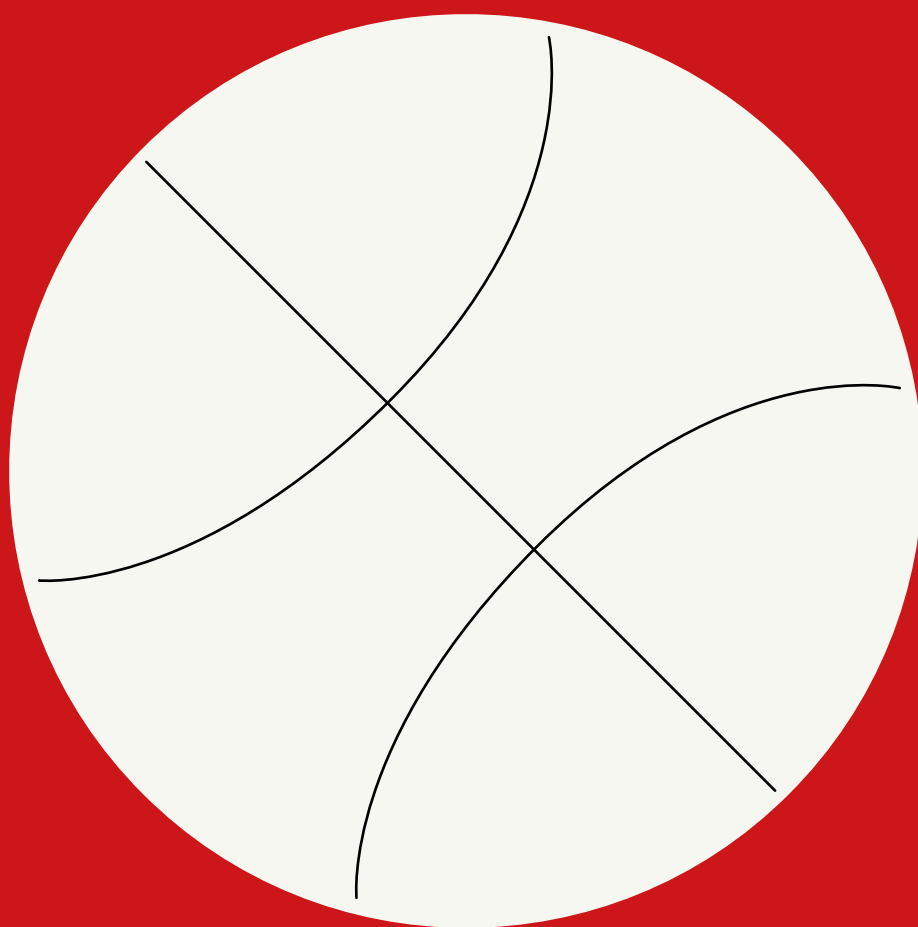
The context of sport for elite child athletes exists at the intersection between the UNCRC and the UNGPs with sports organisations being required to respect the rights of all child athletes.

The Universal Declaration of Player Rights (UDPR) sets out the rights of all players in sport (World Players, 2017a).



# INTRO- DUCTION

## CHAPTER I



# INTRODUCTION

There are a range of key documents which have implications for all social settings, including sport.



These include the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). A series of recent harms have powerfully illustrated how children's rights are not always respected in elite sport.

Project CARE was grounded in the UNCRC and this outlines three general categories:

- (1) Rights of Protection
- (2) Rights of Participation
- (3) Rights of Provision

## 1. Rights of Protection

As the name suggests, rights of protection ensures the right to be protected from violence and abuse. The violation of this right in sport has been clearly evident in a number of cases around the world, cases which in many instances only became high profile years later. For example, in December 2018, a report by the law firm Ropes & Gray LLP detailed how the team doctor, Larry Nassar, abused hundreds of elite and Olympic gymnasts and other children in the US since the early 1990s. The report identified the cultural and governance failures that enabled Nassar's criminal behaviours. The United States Olympic Committee (USOC) and United States of America Gymnastics (USAG) permeated a "self-limiting" and "loose governance model" in which Nassar "thrived". There was a "marked disconnect at both institutions between adopted policies and effective action" that "*permitted the unchecked growth of policies, practices and cultural norms that were not reflective of a child-first approach and led to the absence of effective, on-the-ground protective measures*".

Gigi Alford (2019), Sport and Human Rights Director at World Players Association explained:

“As the USA Gymnastics tragedy shows, the institutional culture of placing profits and medals above people is what enables sexual predators to thrive in the silence and shadows of sport’s resistance to institutional accountability. This is not solely a problem in the United States, but a global one that has rocked the world of sport most recently in South Korea, as well as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Canada and more -and these are just the ones we know about. What is clear everywhere, from the grassroots to the very top, is that the power imbalance in sport-immense for all athletes and compounded for those who are children-creates prime conditions for child sexual abuse, exploitation and harassment.”

## 2. Rights of Participation

Brendan Schwab (2018), Executive Director at World Players, has questioned the legitimacy of current sports law due to the lack of player involvement in the making of this law. At the collective level, some progress has been made in relation to athlete representation. Examples include the International Olympic Committee’s (IOC) Athlete Commission that provides a mechanism through which athletes can be consulted. The World Anti-Doping Association (WADA) also has an Athletes’ Committee to represent the voice of clean athletes. It is important that such strategies do ultimately have a positive impact on athlete rights and that they do not hinder athletes’ rights to organize and collectively bargain.

There remain significant gaps in relation to the representation of the voice of child athletes at the collective level. At the individual level, child athletes also have the right to be involved in all decisions which could impact them. There is a need to inform children of their rights, harness their voice and ensure that the voices of child athletes are heard. The UNCRC ensures that all children have the rights to participate in all aspects of their lives including having a voice and equal opportunities. Georgia Cervin (2021), an honorary research fellow at the University of Western Australia, stated:

“Athlete voices have been absent from decision making for too long. Welfare concerns now plaguing many sports are a symptom of this. It’s time to recognize athletes are the experts they are. They know their sports better than anyone.”

### 3. Rights of Provision

This relates to all children having the right to access education and healthcare. However, there are examples which illustrate that elite child athletes are not always afforded these rights. For instance, diver Tom Daley gained a considerable amount of publicity when he competed at the 2008 Beijing Olympics aged just 14 years old. He went on to have a very successful career which included winning bronze medals at both the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympics. When Tom returned from the Beijing Olympics, he faced increasingly stressful bouts of bullying from his school peers: one peer allegedly said 'How much are those legs worth? We're going to break your legs' (Eason and Bruxelles, 2009). His father had to move Tom to another school as a result. Tom said:

"It's gone on a long time now but it reached a peak after the Olympics and has just stayed there. They've been taking the mick for ages, calling me 'Diver Boy', but now they spend most of their time throwing stuff at me ... It's sad and annoying that I can't have a normal life. But I put up with it because I'm doing something I love." (Cited in McRae, 2009, p. 13)

This raises the important issue of how sport, through working with state agencies and other child-focused settings, can work to ensure that these rights are provided to all elite child athletes. It also highlights how, due to their profile and success, child athletes become more vulnerable to suffering harm and abuse.

In another example, the extent to which elite football academies provide an environment which facilitates the holistic development of boys has been questioned (Conn, 2017). In the UK, thousands of young boys are recruited to join academies from the age of 8 with only 1% actually predicted to go on to become a professional footballer. Improvements have been made through the Elite Player Performance Plan with boys who are awarded a 16-18 scholarship being required to continue with education. With only 17% of these scholarship players going on to be professionals at 21, the need to ensure that these academies do provide these children with access to education is paramount. Chris Platts, a researcher who has conducted studies on elite young footballers, concluded:

"For those who leave, the whole process of the academy has had a huge impact on them as a human being, emotionally, psychologically and on their social development. When they are released, they are suddenly rushed into the normal world, and many struggle to cope with it."

Eddie Oshodi, a former academy footballer explained:

“Looking back, the academy boys were in a bubble and the wider education provision was limited. As a youngster you are fed a dream, very little else. That is all you aspire to: football, football, football.”

## 4. Growing Recognition

The right to a safe and nurturing environment is a fundamental right of all children under the UNCRC. This has recently been acknowledged by governing bodies in sport. For example, Gianni Infantino, FIFA President, said (FIFA, 2019):

“FIFA has established guiding principles and minimum requirements that will help leaders and organizers in our sport to ensure a safe and nurturing environment for the youngest members of the football family. Such an environment, far from a privilege, is every child’s right.”

It has also been recognized that everyone has a role to play in ensuring that athletes are safe and can enjoy healthy relationships. Thomas Bach, President of the International Olympic Committee, stated (IOC, 2017):

“The safety and wellbeing of athletes are paramount to the IOC and the Olympic Movement. It is the responsibility of all of us to keep athletes safe and to guard their rights.”

Recommendations have been made in a report by Rachel Davis and Prince Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussain (2020) to inform the IOC’s human rights strategy. The report calls for high level support from within the IOC, the hiring of a human rights expert to lead this work, finalization of the terms of reference and membership for the Human Rights Advisory Committee, and the preparation of a human rights strategic plan. This growing recognition is an important step on the journey towards embedding human rights for all athletes across world sport.



## 5. Project CARE

A fundamental issue that World Players aims to address is the fact that the internationally recognized human rights of athletes are currently not embedded in world sport. Child athletes are particularly vulnerable to this institutional deficiency. This project makes a significant contribution through addressing 3 important gaps:

### GAP 1

There is a lack of systematic data regarding the extent to which the rights of child athletes are respected. Recent media stories and research in Japan, UK, USA, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada and Australia all suggest that this is a key issue. However, the scale and extent of the harm being suffered by elite child athletes in or through sport is simply unknown.

### GAP 2

There is a lack of representative testimonies from athletes regarding how their rights were respected in sport as children and the associated impact on their performance, health and wellbeing. Yet such testimonies are essential in achieving restorative justice and for creating cultural change to help prevent future harms.

### GAP 3

There is a need for a coordinated and global effort that engages with key stakeholders to address sexual violence, harassment and abuse in sports. Athletes with lived experience of abuse should be central to this process with their engagement being facilitated through a sensitive and supportive approach which is guided by each individual's preferences throughout. The lack of a proper and safe reporting mechanism places the burden and risk on the survivors while perpetrators remain unpunished and are even promoted. Where established, safeguarding efforts tend to focus on the prevention of future harm in order to preserve the perceived integrity of the relevant sport (and sport governing body), and most of the times fail to place the victim at the heart of the effort with the requisite commitment to ensuring harm is remedied to the maximum extent possible.

## 6. Overall Project Aims

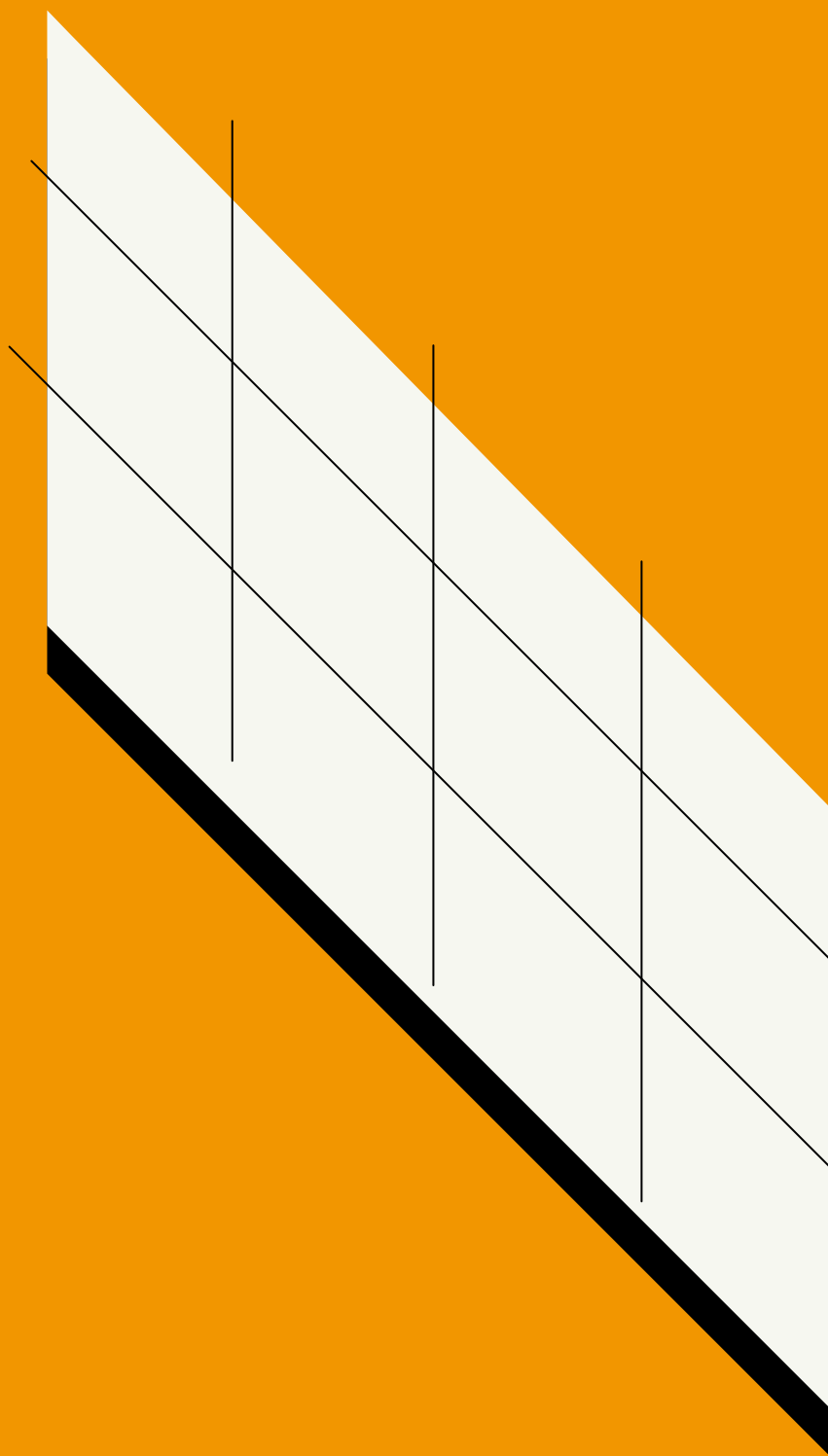
The present study therefore addressed the following overarching questions:

→ To what extent do elite child athletes experience their rights to protection, participation and provision?

→ What steps can be taken to ensure that these rights are embedded across global sport for all elite child athletes?

# METHODS

## CHAPTER II



# METHODS



To address the over-arching aims of the project, data were collected through an online survey and in-depth interviews.

## 1. Supporting Participants

The project team was acutely aware of the sensitive nature of the topics covered in the survey and interviews. As a result, a key consideration was to ensure that appropriate support was in place for participants within each of the affiliate member organizations. The standards set out by the World Players with respect to safeguarding had to be met in order for an organization to participate. A website was set up which outlined all of the support available for athletes within their own affiliate organization as well as the available resources and support services provided by relevant external agencies. The project team adopted a trauma informed approach based on the guidance provided by the Army of Survivors (Army of Survivors, 2020). Ethical approval was granted by Loughborough University's Research Ethics Committee (REF R19-P257). A working group met periodically throughout the project to discuss key decisions and strategies at each stage. This group was comprised of the researchers as well as representatives of both World Players and five of the affiliate member organizations who had agreed to participate in this project.

## 2. Questionnaire

### – *Census of Athlete Rights Experiences*

The Census of Athlete Rights Experiences (CARE) is a new questionnaire that has been developed through this research. Potential questions were identified through reviewing a wide range of relevant sources. This included key international documents (e.g., the UNCRC, UDPR and academic literature). We had an extensive feedback phase to ensure the input of 60 people representing a range of stakeholders including people with lived experience of abuse in sport, advocacy and support groups, researchers, child rights experts and sport governing body representatives. Player Development Managers (PDMs) were also consulted throughout the development of the survey. As explained by World Players, “The role of the PDM is to promote the personal development and wellbeing of players through empowering them to take ownership of their own development both on and off the sporting field” (World Players, 2017b). PDMs represented a valuable source of feedback both in terms of the content and administration of the survey.

A full draft questionnaire was then completed by 30 athletes who provided further feedback. A final version was then developed and made available in a range of languages (i.e., English, Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, French and Hungarian). It was developed as both an online version and a paper-based version. Each of the translated versions was reviewed by a native speaker who also spoke fluent English to ensure that a coherence between the meanings of the different questions had been maintained. The questionnaire asked participants about their childhood experiences of the full range of rights as well as their current wellbeing. A total sample of 297 athletes completed the questionnaire. In order to participate, respondents had to be a current or former professional athlete over the age of 18.

---

#### **Player Associations part of the CARE Project:**



## 3. Challenges

Initially, the overall target was to invite 8,000 athletes to participate with a 25% response rate to achieve a sample of 2,000. However, the survey was actually sent to approximately 1,500 athletes with a response rate of approximately 20%, resulting in the sample of 297 athletes. Considerable effort was invested into building relationships with affiliates to facilitate athlete recruitment and we would like to take this opportunity to sincerely thank everyone who supported this project. To understand the lessons which should be learned from this project, a follow-up evaluation survey was sent to 28 affiliates who had expressed an interest in taking part in Project CARE to capture their experiences (16 responded, 57%). Four key challenges were highlighted.

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### **3.1 Context**

There were a range of contextual factors which were perceived to have represented barriers to achieving a higher response rate. This included significant external events (e.g. the global COVID-19 pandemic) as well as significant internal events (e.g. restructuring or financial challenges). It also related to concurrent projects such as contract negotiations or other surveys being administered. Whilst we did have a series of meetings to support affiliates to navigate these challenges, this still was perceived to be an important reason for the lack of response. The survey link was kept open for 7 months and hence it appears that different contextual factors combined to prevent higher completion rates throughout this extended period. Presumably such factors will always be salient in different forms and hence participation in projects like this one really needs to be prioritised if these barriers are to be overcome.

---

### **3.2 Engagement**

This proved to be a challenge at all levels. Overall, the chain of communication between the project team and the players being asked to complete the survey was perceived to be reliant on too many links. The messages about the survey sent by World Players needed to go through the affiliate members and often down through a series of personnel at the regional, national or club level before reaching the players. A lack of engagement at any level served to prevent any messages being effectively communicated to players and hence jeopardise the response rate. There was perceived to be a lack of connection between the stakeholders and this survey due to survey overload. Driving such projects at the local level was identified as a possible strategy to address this barrier.

---

### **3.3 Administration**

The lack of direct support and the absence of an appropriate setting to complete the survey were viewed as significant barriers. The use of the online survey and website with support resources were designed to mitigate these risks. However, practicalities often meant that the survey was administered before or after a meeting with all players and hence providing privacy and support in such contexts proved challenging. The length and level of the survey were also identified as possible barriers. We did pilot the survey extensively and the data indicates that 95% of people who clicked on the link did actually go on to complete the survey. This suggests that the lack of response was due to fewer people clicking on the link as opposed to people starting but not finishing the survey.

---

### **3.4 Sensitivity**

Clearly this survey contains questions on very sensitive topics. Respondents recognised that this is an important issue, but they did feel that this sensitivity may have led to some athletes not being willing to complete the survey. This reluctance was thought to be due to fear of reprisals, concerns around disclosing negative experiences and a lack of capacity to provide support. Particular sensitivities were also identified regarding the cultural contexts in which the affiliates operated.



## 4. Interviews

There has been a recent call for the use of qualitative research in the study of athlete health promotion (Becker, et al., 2020). In depth interviews were conducted to capture and amplify the experiences of the participants. Participants were identified through the questionnaire and a diverse sample was identified to ensure a range of sports and geographical locations were represented. A total of 13 interviews were conducted. Of these, nine were professional athletes and four were currently in the role of a Player Development Manager (PDMs). Table 2.1 provides descriptions of the athlete interviewees. Details regarding PDMs are not provided to maintain anonymity.

**(TABLE 2.1) INTERVIEWEES**

<b>PARTICIPANT</b>	<b>GENDER</b>	<b>SPORT</b>	<b>COUNTRY</b>	<b>HIGHEST LEVEL ACHIEVED AS A YOUNG ATHLETE</b>
<b>ATHLETE 1</b>	FEMALE	ARTISTIC SWIMMING	CANADA	JUNIOR WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS
<b>ATHLETE 2</b>	MALE	RACE WALKING/ LONG DISTANCE RUNNING	UNITED KINGDOM	DOMESTIC COMPETITIONS
<b>ATHLETE 3</b>	FEMALE	SWIMMING	NORTH AMERICA	WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS
<b>ATHLETE 4</b>	FEMALE	GYMNASTICS	USA	OLYMPICS
<b>ATHLETE 5</b>	FEMALE	HANDBALL	NORWAY	WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS
<b>ATHLETE 6</b>	FEMALE	SWIMMING	CANADA	WORLD CHAMPIONSHIPS
<b>ATHLETE 7</b>	MALE	TABLE TENNIS	USA	OLYMPICS
<b>ATHLETE 8</b>	MALE	HANDBALL	NORWAY	NATIONAL JUNIOR TEAM
<b>ATHLETE 9</b>	MALE	FOOTBALL	PORTUGAL	INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIONS

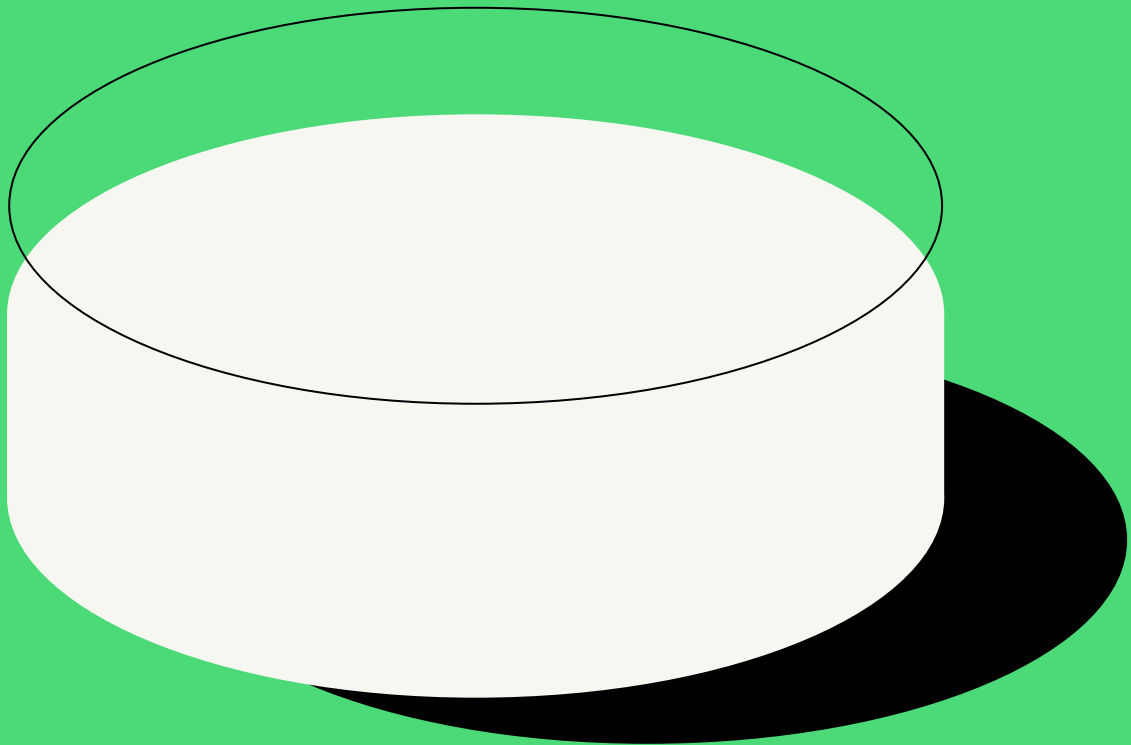


The key themes identified when designing the CARE survey were used to highlight specific experiences to explore further during the interviews.

Interviews used a semi-structured schedule, tailored to allow the participant to focus on their own experiences and tell their story. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. The purpose of the interviews was to better understand the extent to which athletes and PDMs consider that player's rights are respected in sport during childhood and the associated impacts on athletes' performance and wellbeing. The interviews then addressed how the rights of future elite child athletes could be better respected.

# OVERALL RIGHTS EXPERIENCES

## CHAPTER III



# OVERALL RIGHTS EXPERIENCES

As detailed in the UNCRC, all children have a series of fundamental rights. Sports organizations need to ensure that these rights are respected.

## 1. Background

Until recently, the rights of all elite child athletes had not been clearly articulated. As a result, World Players has pioneered work in this area through clarifying these rights and collaborating with sports organizations to change policies, procedures and practice. DeMaurice Smith (cited in World Players, 2017a), Executive Director of the NFL Players Association, highlights that these are critical rights which should be provided for everyone involved in or affected by sport, including athletes:

“The reality is that while we love the game and the people who play it, we can never forget the men and women whose work gives us our sport. These union leaders have dedicated themselves to ensuring that all athletes have the basic human rights we all deserve.”

In 2017, World Players launched the Universal Declaration on Player Rights (UDPR). This identifies 17 key rights (all sourced under international human rights standards) which must be respected for all athletes. It is important to emphasize that while the general public becomes aware of the majority of elite athletes when they have reached adulthood, most of these athletes started participating in sport as children. Athlete rights thus need to be protected from the playground to the podium. Rights are therefore applicable at all stages of the athletic journey and not just at the elite level. This sentiment is shared by Minky Worden, Director of Global Initiatives at Human Rights Watch, who stated (cited in World Players, 2017a):

“All athletes start their careers as children and have basic human rights to express political views and to safe, fair and just working conditions and pay.”

## 2. The Universal Declaration on Player Rights (UPDR)

In order to drive a global movement towards protecting and promoting athletes' rights, including child athletes, it was critical that the specific rights which should be respected were clearly conceptualized. The UDPR thus provides a framework against which to analyze the extent to which these rights are being respected in sport and hence this report is grounded in this key document. The UDPR outlines 17 rights as follows:

**(TABLE 3.1) PLAYER RIGHTS**

<b>UDPR – EVERY ATHLETE:</b>
(1) HAS THE RIGHT to a sporting environment that is well governed, free of corruption, manipulation and cheating and protects, respects and guarantees the fundamental human rights of everyone involved in or affected by sport, including the player.
(2) HAS THE RIGHT to access and pursue sport as a career and profession based solely on merit.
(3) IS ENTITLED to equality of opportunity in the pursuit of sport without distinction of any kind and free of discrimination, harassment and violence. A player's right to pursue sport cannot be limited because of his or her race, color, birth, age, language, sexual orientation, gender, disability, pregnancy, religion, political or other opinion, responsibilities as a carer, property or other status.
(4) Who is a minor IS ENTITLED to the opportunity to freely pursue sport in an inclusive, adapted and safe manner, and to have his or her rights as a child protected, respected and guaranteed.
(5) HAS THE RIGHT to work, to the free choice of employment, and to move freely in pursuit of that work and employment.
(6) HAS THE RIGHT to organize and collectively bargain and to form and join player and athlete associations and unions for the protection of his or her interests.
(7) HAS THE RIGHT to share fairly in the economic activity and wealth of his or her sport which players have helped generate.



## UDPR – EVERY ATHLETE:

(8) HAS THE RIGHT to just and favorable remuneration and conditions of work, including a minimum wage, fair hours of work, rest, leisure, the protection of wages, the certainty of a secure contract, the protection of his or her status as a worker within the employment relationship and equal pay for equal work.

(9) IS ENTITLED to a safe and secure workplace and sporting environment, which promotes the player's safety, physical and mental health and his or her social wellbeing. He or she must be treated and supported with utmost integrity by healthcare professionals when injured or ill, and have direction and control over that treatment and support.

(10) HAS THE RIGHT to an education and the pursuit of work and life beyond sport supplemented by the resources of the sport.

(11) HAS THE RIGHT to a private life, privacy and protection in relation to the collection, storage and transfer of personal data.

(12) IS ENTITLED to have his or her name, image and performance protected. A player's name, image and performance may only be commercially utilized with his or her consent, voluntarily given.

(13) HAS THE RIGHT to freedom of opinion and expression.

(14) HAS THE RIGHT to the protection of the law and equality before it.

(15) IS ENTITLED to due process including, where charged, to the presumption of innocence. Any penalty must be lawful, proportionate and just.

(16) IS ENTITLED to have any dispute resolved through an impartial and expeditious grievance mechanism in which the player has an equal say in the appointment of the grievance panel, arbitrator or other decision-making person or body. His or her sport must ensure he or she is provided with access to an effective remedy where his or her rights under this Declaration have not been protected or respected.

(17) HAS A DUTY to respect the rights of his or her fellow players under this Declaration, and to respect the fundamental human rights of everyone involved with or affected by sport.

### 3. Key Findings

#### – General Experiences

#### 3.1 Awareness of Rights

Lack of awareness amongst children of their rights has been identified as an important issue. For example, a survey of over 17,000 8 year olds from 16 countries has revealed that only 45% of these children were aware of having rights (Af Ursin & Haanpaa, 2018). One cannot make direct comparisons with such findings and the present study due to the retrospective nature of the study and the broader age range being used. However, it serves to highlight the broader issues around awareness beyond the context of sport. Participants in Project CARE were asked to indicate the extent to which they knew that they had rights in sport as a child.

**(TABLE 3.2) ATHLETES AWARENESS OF THEIR RIGHTS IN THEIR SPORT AS A CHILD**

AS A CHILD I WAS AWARE THAT I HAD RIGHTS IN MY SPORT	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	31.0 (87)	33.1 (93)	22.5 (66)	12.5 (35)
<i>GENDER</i>				
MALE	25.6 (55)	35.8 (77)	25.1 (54)	13.5 (29)
FEMALE	49.2 (32)	24.6 (16)	16.9 (11)	9.2 (6)

#### KEY FINDINGS

69% OF ATHLETES WERE NOT ALWAYS AWARE THEY HAD RIGHTS WHEN THEY WERE CHILDREN IN SPORT

MORE FEMALE ATHLETES (49%) REPORTED ALWAYS BEING AWARE THEY HAD RIGHTS RELATIVE TO MALES (26%)

The general lack of awareness identified through the survey data was supported during the interviews. One interviewee explained that the awareness of their rights as a child only came as she grew up: →

“You have conversations as you grow up, things happen to you and little pieces of your childhood, get taken away. And then again and again and again. What you used to think back on as this like great experience, just gets chipped away as you get older. And so, in the moment I probably didn’t realize everything was so bad but it’s actually just worse. Being an adult and knowing the reflection on it is actually worse.” (Female Olympian)

## 3.2 Respecting Rights

As well as being aware of their rights, it is important that children understand that these should be respected and enforced. Research has suggested that 59% of 8 year olds think that adults respect their rights in their society (Af Ursin & Haanpaa, 2017). As highlighted above, comparisons between this research and the current project are limited but it serves to emphasize the need to explore athlete’s experiences in this area. As a result, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which sport fundamentally respected the rights of everyone involved.

**(TABLE 3.3) EXTENT TO WHICH ATHLETES CONSIDERED THEIR SPORT FUNDAMENTALLY PROTECTED THE RIGHTS OF EVERYONE INVOLVED WHEN THEY WERE A CHILD**

MY SPORT FUNDAMENTALLY PROTECTED THE RIGHTS OF EVERYONE INVOLVED	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	42.2 (119)	49.3 (139)	8.2 (23)	0.4 (1)
<i>GENDER</i>				
MALE	37.2 (80)	54.9 (118)	7.4 (16)	0.5 (1)
FEMALE	59.1 (39)	30.3 (20)	10.6 (7)	0.0 (0)

### KEY FINDINGS

OVERALL 42% OF ATHLETES FELT THAT SPORT ALWAYS FUNDAMENTALLY PROTECTED EVERYONE’S RIGHTS

MORE FEMALE ATHLETES (59%) FELT THAT SPORT ALWAYS FUNDAMENTALLY PROTECTED EVERYONE’S RIGHTS RELATIVE TO MALES (37%)

One athlete highlighted how this is a multi-level issue with clubs having a key role to play:

“Our national federation was pretty disorganized, but in terms of where the rights are really not protected or overseen very well, it is within the clubs.” (Male World Championships)

## 4. Key Findings

### – *Fundamental Principles*

#### 4.1 Best Interests

A fundamental principle underlying the UNCRC is that the best interests of the child should be central to all actions and decision-making. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt that their best interests were taken into account in sport.

**(TABLE 3.4) THE EXTENT TO WHICH ATHLETES CONSIDERED THEIR BEST INTERESTS WERE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN ALL ACTIONS OR DECISIONS AFFECTING THEM AS A CHILD**

I FELT MY BEST INTERESTS WERE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN ALL ACTIONS OR DECISIONS AFFECTING ME	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	30.5 (85)	55.9 (156)	12.5 (35)	1.1 (3)
<i>GENDER</i>				
MALE	24.6 (52)	62.6 (132)	11.8 (25)	0.9 (2)
FEMALE	49.3 (33)	34.3 (23)	14.9 (10)	1.5 (1)

#### KEY FINDINGS

OVERALL 69% OF ATHLETES FELT THAT THEIR BEST INTERESTS WERE NOT ALWAYS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT

THIS FIGURE WAS HIGHER FOR MALES (75%) RELATIVE TO FEMALES (51%)

These findings are an interesting contrast to section 3.2 above. Whilst 42% of athletes felt that sport fundamentally protected everyone's rights, only 31% felt that their best interests were always taken into account. The interviewees also explained that their best interests were not always prioritized when decisions were being made, particularly in relation to performance:

“But it’s hard to say that my health was a priority, it was more about performance.” (Female World Championships)

## 4.2 Non-Discrimination

Another fundamental principle underlying the UNCRC is that no child should be subject to discrimination of any kind. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they had experienced discrimination in sport.

**(TABLE 3.5) THE EXTENT TO WHICH ATHLETES EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION IN SPORT**

I EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION IN RELATION TO MY SPORTING CENTER	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	0.7 (2)	8.6 (24)	23.6 (66)	67.1 (188)
<i>GENDER</i>				
MALE	0.5 (1)	5.6 (12)	21.9 (47)	72.1 (155)
FEMALE	1.6 (1)	18.8 (12)	29.7 (19)	50.0 (32)

### KEY FINDINGS

**33% OF ATHLETES EXPERIENCED DISCRIMINATION AT LEAST ONCE AS A CHILD IN SPORT**

Athletes provided a range of different examples of discrimination. Female athletes described being treated differently based on their gender. One athlete described how this discrimination could be rather subtle and only identified with the benefit of hindsight:

“It’s funny because it’s a sport where it’s equal right? I never felt on paper that I was discriminated against because I was a woman. I had every opportunity that the boys had, if not more, I mean when you look at it swimming is, is awesome. Prize money’s not high, but everyone has the same and it’s always equal. But then, it wasn’t until a few years ago I realized....Wow, there was discrimination because I was a girl. It just took these totally different forms that I never, ever was able to define or realize at the time.” (Female Olympian)

Other athletes experienced discrimination due to their parents or where they lived. For example:

“I was overlooked at 15 because my father couldn’t make games through commitment and wasn’t friends with the correct crowd.” (Male Olympian)

“Kids coming from rural areas were always afforded less chances and opportunities to progress in sports.” (Female Olympian)

Athletes reported a form of discrimination due to cultural differences between themselves, the coach and the broader training squad. For example, a table tennis player who went on to compete at the Olympics explained the discrimination he experienced.

“When I was growing up, there were certain clubs where the coaches were from a certain part of the world, there was a degree of racism, so if, in our club, for example, all of the elite coaches were from (country name), and if you didn’t speak their language, and if you weren’t from their country, they really didn’t take us seriously. They dismissed those students as if they were never going to amount to anything. So there were a number of barriers to being able to really participate.” (Male Olympian)

A female artistic swimmer provided a similar example:

“When I was on the national team at the highest level, my coach was (nationality) and didn’t like swimmers who were (a different nationality). She would always select athletes with her nationality over athletes from different nationalities...when I started on the team, it was 50/50 (between the 2 nationalities). I was finished four years later, I was the only (own nationality) person on the team. And I don’t think that was so nice.” (Female Junior World Championships)

## 5. Key Findings

### – *Disciplinary Procedures*



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**The UDPR provides that every athlete:**

*Article 16* is entitled to have any dispute resolved through an impartial and expeditious grievance mechanism in which the player has an equal say in the appointment of the grievance panel, arbitrator or other decision-making person or body. His or her sport must ensure he or she is provided with access to an effective remedy where his or her rights under this Declaration have not been protected or respected.



## 5.1 Awareness of Disciplinary Procedures

Athletes were asked about their awareness of disciplinary procedures.

**(TABLE 3.6) THE EXTENT TO WHICH ATHLETES WERE AWARE OF THE DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES IN THEIR SPORT AS A CHILD**

I KNEW ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	32.7 (91)	37.8 (104)	19.4 (54)	10.1 (28)
GENDER				
MALE	28.6 (61)	39.4 (84)	20.7 (44)	11.3 (24)
FEMALE	46.9 (30)	31.3 (20)	15.6 (10)	6.3 (4)

### KEY FINDINGS

ONLY 33% OF ATHLETES WERE ALWAYS AWARE OF THE DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES

MORE FEMALE ATHLETES (47%) WERE ALWAYS AWARE OF THE DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES RELATIVE TO MALE ATHLETES (29%)

Many interviewees explained that they were never aware of such procedures:

“I would say, like the disputes, I wouldn’t even have known that that was a thing.” (Male International)

Other athletes only became aware of the disciplinary procedures as an adult:

“...as a child, I wasn’t really aware of the disciplinary side and what the federation does for things like that. I think my first sort of experience with those procedures wasn’t until I was 22.” (Male World Championships)



## 5.2 Fairness of Disciplinary Procedures

Athletes were asked about the extent to which any disciplinary procedures were fair as a child. This was highlighted as a key characteristic of a disciplinary procedure which promotes athlete rights:

“It is difficult for young athletes to resolve their problems by themselves. To protect each right for young athletes, a fair and impartial grievance system is so important.” (Player Development Manager)

**(TABLE 3.7) THE EXTENT TO WHICH ATHLETES FELT THE DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES IN THEIR SPORT AS A CHILD TREATED PLAYERS EQUALLY WITHOUT FAVORITISM OR DISCRIMINATION**

THE DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES IN MY SPORT TREATED PLAYERS EQUALLY WITHOUT FAVOURITISM OR DISCRIMINATION	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	32.5 (90)	47.7 (132)	14.1 (39)	5.8 (16)
GENDER				
MALE	30.2 (64)	50.5 (107)	14.2 (30)	5.2 (11)
FEMALE	40.6 (26)	37.5 (24)	14.1 (9)	7.8 (5)

### KEY FINDINGS

ONLY 33% OF ATHLETES ALWAYS FELT THAT THE DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES IN THEIR SPORT WERE FAIR

MORE FEMALES (41%) ALWAYS FELT THE DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES WERE FAIR RELATIVE TO MALE ATHLETES (30%)

Interviewees reported that there was not fair access to the disciplinary procedures and that this was often associated with access to resources:

“Current resources at a National level are stretched very thin and can only deal with a few cases.” (Male National)

Athletes explained how they had to work together to access the disciplinary procedures:

“Most athletes have to find someone who’s willing to help them with the grievance, the problem is mostly athletes don’t have much money. So we didn’t really feel like there was much support. So I made up a couple of the options in the pooling their resources to hire an attorney who’s willing to do it for very, very cheap, and they were able to get that.” (Male World Championships)

## 6. Conclusions

With only → **31%** of athletes always being aware of their rights as a child, there is a clear need to ensure that the children are made aware of their rights during inductions and through on-going communications.

With only → **42%** of athletes feeling that sport fundamentally protected everyone’s rights, there is a need for organizations in sport at all levels to review their policies, procedures and practices to ensure that the internationally recognized Rights are embedded.

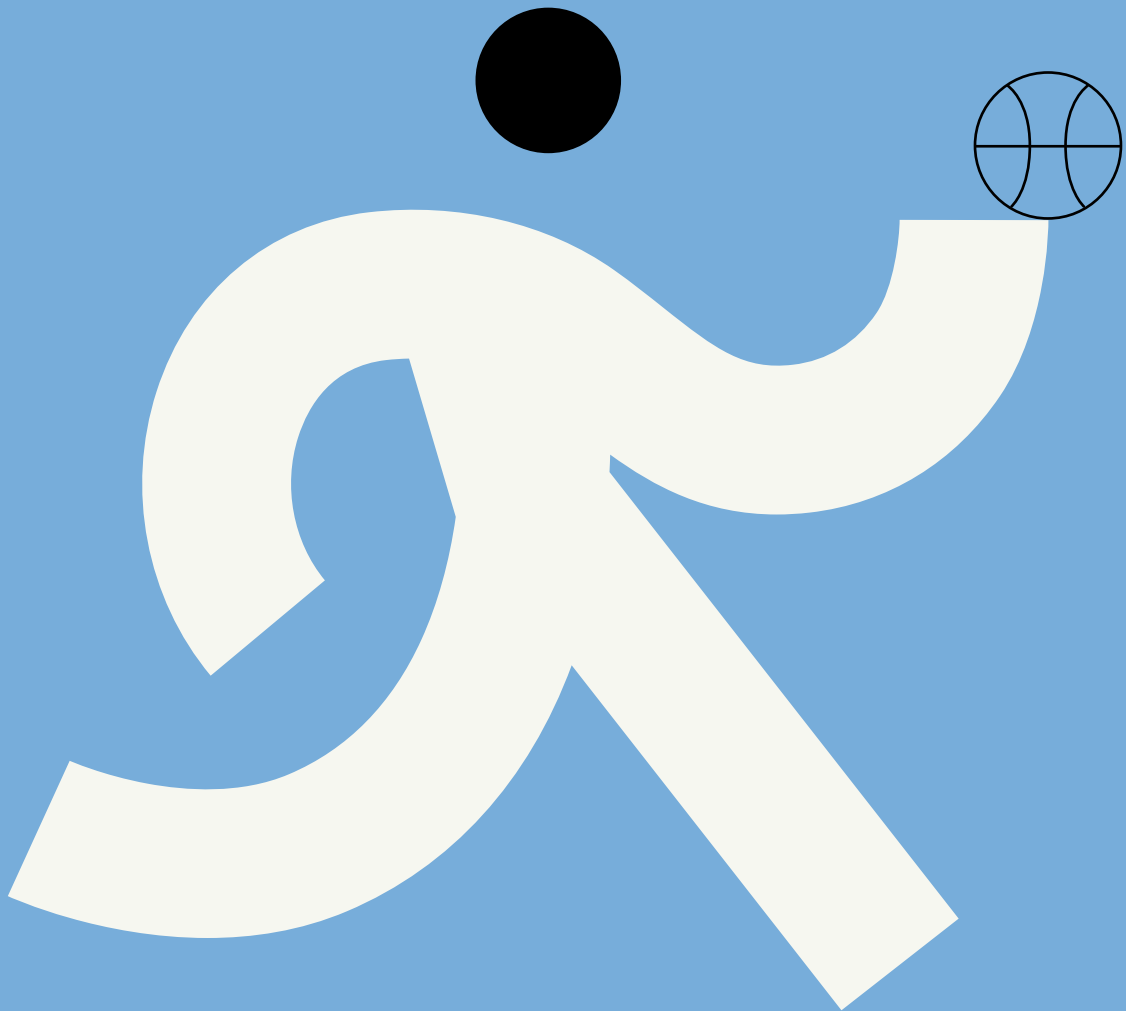
With only → **31%** of athletes feeling that their best interests were always taken into account, there is a need to identify the most effective ways of engaging with children as well as their families and members of their support team, to ensure that the child’s best interests are paramount.

With only → **33%** of athletes always being aware of the disciplinary procedures, there is a clear need to raise awareness during inductions and through on-going communications and workshops with all stakeholders.

# RIGHTS OF PROTECTION

EXPERIENCES OF ABUSE

CHAPTER IV



# RIGHTS OF PROTECTION

## EXPERIENCES OF ABUSE

Athletes develop a range of important relationships in sport. When these relationships are healthy and effective, they can have a positive impact on the development, wellbeing and performance of athletes. However, recent high-profile cases have served to powerfully illustrate how such relationships can also become abusive.



### 1. Background

Over recent years, there has been a growing body of evidence which illustrates how relationships in sport can become physically, emotionally or sexually abusive. The report by Human Rights Watch in partnership with World Players Association (Human Rights Watch, 2020), focused on sport in Japan, highlighted a series of examples of physical abuse. One athlete explained:

“I was hit so many times, I can’t count...we were all called to the coach and I was hit in the face in front of everyone. I was bleeding, but he did not stop hitting me. I did say that my nose was bleeding, but he did not stop.”

The report documented coaching practices including hitting children with bats and bamboo kendo sticks, slapping children across the face, and holding children's heads underwater to simulate drowning. Takuya Yamazaki, Executive Committee Member of World Players and leading sports attorney-at-law in Japan, concluded (Yamazaki, 2020):

"The reality is that many coaches and parents in Japan regard corporal punishment as a necessary part of training, with no understanding that physical abuse can be detrimental to the future development of their children. The fact that so many great educators, who care deeply about the growth of children, still believe in the effectiveness of corporal punishment underscores how complex this problem is."

There have also been distressing cases of emotional abuse. Recent allegations centered around British Gymnastics have described a toxic culture characterized by fear. One gymnast described her experiences of being an elite child athlete in the sport as follows (Sky Sports News, 2020):

"Mental and physical abuse was entirely the norm. Our coach mimicked the most extreme abuse as if it were a training method. We were taught to be more scared of our coach than of the skill we were attempting and that that was the only way to achieve it. I'll never know if it was possible to be my level without it or if I could have been even better if I wasn't beaten into submission."

Similar experiences were reported by Diana Teodoru, who was part of the junior Romanian team from 2010-2014. In an Instagram post, Diana outlined how she was mistreated and body shamed. She described a culture in which coaches would not believe the young female gymnasts who said they were hurt or injured.

Contexts which are characterized by emotional abuse can develop cultures in which abuse becomes normalized and the boundaries as to what constitutes acceptable behaviours can shift towards more harmful extremes. Such cultures can result in people abusing their position of power and athletes becoming more vulnerable to experiencing other forms of abuse.

For example, in the USA Gymnastics sexual abuse scandal, 368 people have disclosed abuse perpetrated by gym owners, coaches and staff. At the center of many of these allegations was the USA Gymnastics team doctor, Larry Nassar, was accused of perpetrating acts of sexual abuse under the pretense of medical procedures. Nassar is now serving a lengthy prison sentence for these crimes.

In the US, the Senate recently passed S. 2330, Empowering Olympic, Paralympic and Amateur Athletes Act of 2020, by unanimous consent. The Act establishes safeguards for amateur athletes and was based on the findings of congress which included the following:

—→ *USA Gymnastics and the United States Olympic Committee knowingly concealed abuse by Larry Nassar, leading to the abuse of dozens of additional amateur athletes during the period beginning in the summer of 2015 and ending in September 2016.*

—→ *Ending abuse in the Olympic and Paralympic movement requires enhanced oversight to ensure that the Olympic and Paralympic movement does more to serve athletes and protect their voice and safety.*

Thomas Bach, President of the IOC, has stated:

“The second issue intensively discussed [at the IOC Executive Board Meeting] was the prevention of harassment and abuse in sport. This is an important topic in particular with regards to developments in the past months. The Executive Board has decided to drive our initiatives further. The Toolkit was made available to all Olympic Stakeholders but we learned from the recent reports that we must strengthen our efforts in this respect.”

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**As a result, 3 initiatives were proposed:**

- The IOC Executive Board approved the development of the International Safeguarding Officer in Sport Certificate.
- IOC will conduct 11 Webinars in 4 different languages (delivered between October-December 2020).
- IOC will develop an athlete campaign to build awareness in the months prior to the Tokyo Games.

Such developments represent an important first step by the IOC in the drive towards safe sport. These efforts should provide a foundation for systemic change such that athlete rights are clearly articulated, respected and enforced throughout sport. There is also a need to go beyond principles and commitments to establish accessible accountability mechanisms. It is important that these developments are evidence based and informed by athlete experiences.

## 2. The athlete's right to safe sport

As enshrined in the UNCRC, all children have the following rights related to having safe sport:

- **Article 3:** States Parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform to the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision.
- **Article 19:** Governments must do all they can to ensure that children are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and bad treatment by their parents or anyone else who looks after them.
- **Article 34:** Governments must protect children from all forms of sexual abuse and exploitation.
- **Article 39:** Children who have experienced neglect, abuse, exploitation, torture or who are victims of war must receive special support to help them recover their health, dignity, self-respect and social life.

Within the UDPR, every athlete:

- **Article 4:** Who is a minor IS ENTITLED to the opportunity to freely pursue sport in an inclusive, adapted and safe manner, and to have his or her rights as a child protected, respected and guaranteed.
- **Article 9:** IS ENTITLED to a safe and secure workplace and sporting environment, which promotes the player's safety, physical and mental health and his or her social wellbeing. He or she must be treated and supported with utmost integrity by healthcare professionals when injured or ill, and have direction and control over that treatment and support.

## 3. Key Findings – Sexual Abuse

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### 3.1 Nature of Sexual Abuse

Overall, 13% of athletes experienced one form of sexual abuse at least once as a child in sport (21% of females and 11% of males). The most reported forms of sexual abuse involved receiving sexual content online (4.6%), exposing private parts (3.5%), being spoken to in a sexual way (3.2%) and sending naked photos (3.2%).

Statistically significant gender differences were identified with females being more likely to have experienced feeling upset because of someone speaking to them in a sexual way (10.3% compared to 0.9% for males), experience sexual exploitation (2.9% compared to 0%), being asked to send naked photos (8.8% compared to 1.4%), being asked to record themselves or show themselves online (4.4% compared to 0%), being groomed (2.9% compared to 0%), meet with someone who was not the person they presented to be online (2.9% compared to 0%) and being talked to in a sexual way (2.9% compared to 0%).

**(TABLE IV.1) NATURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE**

	MALE	FEMALE	P VALUE
<b>(1) DID ANYONE MAKE YOU LOOK AT THEIR PRIVATE PARTS OR LOOK AT YOURS WHEN YOU DID NOT WANT THEM TO?</b>			
NO	207 (95.8%)	67 (98.5%)	PR = 0.293
YES	9 (4.2%)	1 (1.5%)	
<b>(2) DID SOMEONE MAKE A SEX VIDEO OR TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS OF YOU ALONE, OR WITH OTHER PEOPLE, WHEN YOU DID NOT WANT THEM TO?</b>			
NO	215 (99.5%)	68 (100.0%)	PR = 0.574
YES	1 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	
<b>(3) DID ANYONE TOUCH YOUR PRIVATE PARTS IN A SEXUAL WAY, OR MAKE YOU TOUCH THEIRS?</b>			
NO	211 (97.7%)	66 (97.1%)	PR = 0.771
YES	5 (2.3%)	2 (2.9%)	
<b>(4) DID ANYONE MAKE YOU UPSET BY SPEAKING TO YOU IN A SEXUAL WAY OR WRITING SEXUAL THINGS ABOUT YOU?</b>			
NO	214 (99.1%)	61 (89.7%)	PR = 0.000
YES	2 (0.9%)	7 (10.3%)	
<b>(5) DID ANYONE EVER HAVE OR TRY TO HAVE SEX WITH YOU WHEN YOU DID NOT WANT THEM TO?</b>			
NO	215 (99.5%)	67 (98.5%)	PR = 0.386
YES	1 (0.5%)	1 (1.5%)	
<b>(6) I WAS ASKED TO HAVE SEX OR ENGAGE IN OTHER SEXUALLY RELATED ACTIVITIES IN EXCHANGE FOR MONEY OR OTHER TYPES OF BRIBE (E.G. FOOD, CLOTHES, ETC.)</b>			
NO	216 (100%)	66 (97.1%)	PR = 0.011
YES	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.9%)	



**(TABLE IV.1) NATURE OF SEXUAL ABUSE**

	<b>MALE</b>	<b>FEMALE</b>	<b>P VALUE</b>
<b>(7) I WAS ASKED TO GO TO ANOTHER AREA IN ORDER TO ENGAGE IN SEXUALLY RELATED ACTIVITIES FOR MY AND/OR ANOTHER PERSON'S FINANCIAL REWARD</b>			
<b>NO</b>	215 (99.5%)	67 (98.5%)	PR = 0.386
<b>YES</b>	1 (0.5%)	1 (1.5%)	
<b>(8) I WAS ASKED TO GO TO ANOTHER AREA IN ORDER TO ENGAGE IN SEXUALLY RELATED ACTIVITIES FOR MY AND/OR ANOTHER PERSON'S FINANCIAL REWARD</b>			
<b>NO</b>	215 (99.5%)	67 (98.5%)	PR = 0.386
<b>YES</b>	1 (0.5%)	1 (1.5%)	
<b>(9) I WAS FORCED TO WATCH PORNOGRAPHY</b>			
<b>NO</b>	214 (99.1%)	66 (97.1%)	PR = 0.219
<b>YES</b>	2 (0.9%)	2 (2.9%)	
<b>(10) I WAS GROOMED FOR SEXUAL ACTIVITY</b>			
<b>NO</b>	216 (100%)	66 (97.1%)	PR = 0.011
<b>YES</b>	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.9%)	
<b>(11) I WAS TALKED TO IN A SEXUAL WAY ONLINE</b>			
<b>NO</b>	216 (100%)	66 (97.1%)	PR = 0.011
<b>YES</b>	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.9%)	
<b>(12) I WAS ASKED TO RECORD MYSELF OR SHOW MYSELF LIVE VIA THE INTERNET I WAS ASKED TO RECORD MYSELF OR SHOW MYSELF LIVE VIA THE INTERNET</b>			
<b>NO</b>	216 (100%)	65 (95.6%)	PR = 0.002
<b>YES</b>	0 (0.0%)	3 (4.4%)	
<b>(13) I WAS ASKED TO SEND NAKED PHOTOS VIA THE INTERNET (E.G. FACEBOOK, ON YOUR MOBILE PHONE)</b>			
<b>NO</b>	213 (98.6%)	62 (91.2%)	PR = 0.555
<b>YES</b>	3 (1.4%)	6 (8.8%)	
<b>(14) I RECEIVED CALLS, EMAILS, TEXTS, PHOTOS ON MY MOBILE PHONE OR MY COMPUTER THAT HAD A SEXUAL CONNOTATION OR WERE SEXUALLY EXPLICIT</b>			
<b>NO</b>	207 (95.8%)	64 (94.1%)	PR = 0.555
<b>YES</b>	9 (4.2%)	4 (5.9%)	

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## 3.2 Characteristics of Sexual Abuse

Focusing on the most reported forms of sexual abuse, athletes who reported receiving sexual content online experienced this either once or twice (62%) or on more than 10 occasions (38%). This occurred between the ages of 14-17 (46%) or 10-13 (54%). It was primarily perpetrated by fans (44%) or other players (33%).

Athletes who reported inappropriate behaviour related to the exposure of private parts did so once or twice (50%) or between 3-10 occasions (40%). This occurred between the ages of 14-17 (75%) or 10-13 (25%). It was perpetrated by other players (78%) or their coach (22%).

Athletes who were asked to send naked photos reported a range of frequencies from 1 or 2 occasions (44%) through to more than 10 occasions (10%). This occurred between the ages of 14-17 (67%) or 10-13 (33%). It was perpetrated by fans (75%) or other players (25%).

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## 3.3 Experiences of Sexual Abuse

During the interviews, one swimmer, who made the national team in her sport at age 15, explained how she had been exposed to inappropriate sexual behaviour as a child in sport:

“...my rights as a girl child were not protected. The national team environment was highly sexualized. They were all male coaches. That environment was very negative.” (Female International)

This also occurred within her club, due to her sporting ability she would join the University swim team twice a week.

“There were always older men around and the coaches actually invited, my male coaches, certainly never protected or stopped, sexualized talk, sexual harassment, just sex stuff everywhere. So I think that that’s probably one example and that continued in college after I became an adult. It got worse because it then became what I would call sexual harassment. I was always just trying to prove myself. You have to be everything if you are going to be the best swimmer in the country or whatever. You also have to be cool and you also have to be sexy and you also have to do what all the boys want.” (Female International)

Another interviewee was sexually abused by his coach as an 8-year-old boy within the club environment:

“It was grooming. Yeah, there was grooming and then he took advantage of the fact that I was a naive eight-year-old and I was sexually abused for about a year and a half. And then he disappeared.” (Male International)

Athletes who experienced sexual abuse emphasized challenges related to disclosing their experiences at the time. One athlete identified that a key barrier was the fear of negative consequences:

“I wouldn’t go to the national team coach with a problem at the risk of not being selected.” (Male International)

A gymnast highlighted how abusive relationships can develop as a result of grooming. This refers to the building of relationships, with children and those around them, such that the perpetrator can manipulate and exploit them. It can often start out as emotional abuse and then this provides the foundation for subsequent physical or sexual abuse. When she managed to tell her parents about her experience, it did not lead to a satisfactory outcome:

“I do remember trying to talk to my parents about it and saying that I didn’t want to work with this coach anymore. And they went to the gym and said something, and I ended up being switched to a different group and not having that coach anymore. Either I didn’t do a good job of communicating it or it wasn’t talked about as it was not described as sexual abuse or grooming and he wasn’t fired, so it shows you that people weren’t addressing these topics and they weren’t recognizing any kind of protection of the athlete.” (Female International)

Another athlete who experienced sexual abuse explained how she told her coach, but no action was taken to safeguard her or other athletes:

“I told my coach about it, nothing was done. You know, the Federation knew about this guy doing things, and nothing was done. So the story of my career was, nothing was done to correct for the injustices like this.” (Female International)

The athletes emphasized that these experiences continued to have a significant impact on their lives today.

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### 3.4 The legacy of sexual abuse

The athletes described the ways in which these experiences of sexual abuse had significant consequences for their wellbeing. Athletes had not typically talked about their experiences, with some only recently speaking out in response to the high-profile media cases of sexual abuse in sport. One interviewee explained:

“It’s something that’s sort of stayed there and traumatized me since then. I’ve only really started to talk about it in the last few years when what’s called Safe Sport in America has become a thing which is protecting the current generation. And as an athlete, I’ve sort of taken it upon myself to make sure that we apply all the rules they’re putting in place for our local Association.” (Male International)

Another survivor described how the extent and range of the impacts were only revealed through therapy:

“The impact, you don’t see it. I didn’t see it. At first it took me a long time until I was in my 40s before I sought therapy, and then I started to understand that some of my behaviours post gymnastics were attributed to the sexual abuse that I suffered. You know, just acting out and they are common symptoms of people that have been sexually abused. The way that they process and deal with their abuse. The way that they want to have control over the things that they can manage. Their sexuality, their agency, it’s all impacted and it has a life lifelong effect.” (Female Olympian)

Another survivor of sexual abuse explained that their experiences had contributed to their obsessive behaviours related to training:

“I think that a lot of my behaviour, my almost obsessive training, partially comes from it. It is just a way of getting over things. I would go out for miles and miles when I was running, up to 140 miles a week. I think some of that was self-medication.”  
(Male International)

These experiences also had significant longer-term impacts and contributed to a range of on-going negative emotions, as explained by an athlete who experienced sexual harassment:

“I was in a sport where I was in a bathing suit all day, every day and there were a lot of people that would look at you and judge you and make comments about your body and your weight and your periods, if you’re pretty, if your boobs are too big, and a lot of those kind of comments. I think that was something that really affected me negatively. So that was a really big challenge for me when I was in sport and then leaving the sport as well. It’s stuck with me for a while after.” (Female Olympian)

Other survivors of sexual abuse also emphasized the on-going psychological impacts:

“You don’t feel safe in an environment and you feel that you don’t have agency. So I think I spent a lot of time feeling as though I didn’t have any control over what happened to me in my life. I didn’t have the ability to say no. I didn’t have the ability to seek help from anyone, I felt very isolated.” (Female Olympian)

Talking about his experiences of being sexually abused as an 8 year old boy in sport, another athlete highlighted the long lasting impacts:

“I believe this was a causal factor in my over-achievement need in athletics, and several other mental scars.” (Male International)

There were also important legacies for athletes in terms of their relationships with their parents. For example, one survivor outlined the disappointment she felt towards her parents for not noticing the abuse they suffered, which had a lasting impact on their trust and relationship.

“I think though, I do feel a little bit like, how did they not know sooner? How did they not see it? I think they were blinded by my success. So I was so good, so young and doing so well. On the outside I looked perfect.” (Female Olympian)





The interviews powerfully illustrated how being an athlete was central to these individual's sense of identity. It was this identity as an athlete that had been associated with their experience of sexual abuse. These experiences had led to these athletes questioning their identity as well as their relationships with significant others and the sport as a whole.

## 4. Key Findings

### – Physical Abuse

#### 4.1 Nature of Physical Abuse

Overall, 37% of athletes experienced one form of physical abuse at least once as a child in sport (35% of females and 38% of males). The most reported forms of physical abuse were being punished with excessive exercise/training (27%), being forced to train or compete when injured (20%) and being kicked (15%).

Only one significant gender difference was identified with males (14%) being more likely to be hit or punched and kicked (18.1%) relative to females (5%).

**(TABLE IV.2) EXPERIENCES OF PHYSICAL ABUSE**

	MALE	FEMALE	P VALUE
<b>(1) I WAS HIT, PUNCHED, SLAPPED</b>			
NO	185 (85.6%)	63 (95.5%)	PR = 0.032
YES	31 (14.4%)	3 (4.5%)	
<b>(2) I WAS KICKED</b>			
NO	176 (81.9%)	62 (95.4%)	PR = 0.007
YES	39 (18.1%)	3 (4.6%)	
<b>(3) I WAS PUNISHED WITH EXCESSIVE EXERCISE/TRAINING</b>			
NO	159 (74.0%)	45 (68.2%)	PR = 0.358
YES	56 (26.0%)	21 (31.8%)	
<b>(4) I WAS BEATEN WITH AN OBJECT (SHOE, RACKET, BAT)</b>			
NO	201 (93.5%)	59 (89.4%)	PR = 0.269
YES	14 (6.5%)	7 (10.6%)	
<b>(5) I WAS FORCED TO THE GROUND/KNOCKED DOWN (IF NOT PART OF REGULAR TRAINING/AND OR SPORT)</b>			
NO	199 (92.6%)	61 (92.4%)	PR = 0.971
YES	16 (7.4%)	5 (7.6%)	
<b>(6) I WAS SHAKEN HARD</b>			
NO	195 (91.5%)	64 (97.0%)	PR = 0.136
YES	18 (8.5%)	2 (3.0%)	

**(TABLE IV.2) EXPERIENCES OF PHYSICAL ABUSE**

	<b>MALE</b>	<b>FEMALE</b>	<b>P VALUE</b>
<b>(7) I WAS FORCED TO TAKE A BANNED DRUG</b>			
<b>NO</b>	212 (98.6%)	65 (98.5%)	PR = 0.943
<b>YES</b>	3 (1.4%)	1 (1.5%)	
<b>(8) I WAS STABBED OR CUT ON PURPOSE</b>			
<b>NO</b>	209 (97.2%)	64 (97.0%)	PR = 0.918
<b>YES</b>	6 (2.8%)	2 (3.0%)	

**4.2 Characteristics of Physical Abuse**

Focusing on the most reported forms of physical abuse, athletes who reported being punished with excessive exercise/training tended to experience this on multiple occasions. Of those who reported this experience, 87% did so on at least 3 occasions with a further 13% doing so on 10 or more occasions. It tended to occur at ages 14-17 (84%) and to be perpetrated by the coach (95%).

In terms of being forced to train or compete with an injury, this tended to happen relatively less frequently with 56% of the athletes experiencing this doing so on 1 or 2 occasions and 37% doing so on at least 3 occasions. It also happened at the ages of 14-17 (50%) and tended to be perpetrated by the coach (74%). It is important to highlight that 19% of these experiences were perpetrated by someone else in the organization (e.g., Performance Director or Medical personnel).

A range of frequencies were reported by athletes who reported being kicked. Of those who reported this experience, 43% did so on just one occasion but 33% reported that it happened on over 10 occasions. It tended to first happen between the ages of 10-13 (38%) or 14-17 (50%). The primary perpetrators were other players (68%) or the coach (18%).

<b>I WAS KICKED</b>	<b>I WAS KICKED – IF YES, HOW MANY TIMES DID THIS HAPPEN?</b>			<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>YES</b>	13/ 43.33	7/ 23.33	10/ 33.33	30/ 100.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	13/ 43.33	7/ 23.33	10/ 33.33	30/ 100.00



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### 4.3 Experiences of Physical Abuse

These trends were reflected in the athlete interviews. For example:

“I mean, this was a mind-set that was applied not just to me but to lots of athletes in my environment but asking us to do you know too much, you know, I remember I broke my arm. Not in an athletic environment in my school. But my coach thought it was reasonable to tape up the arm, and it was a bent arm cast, and swim with it.”  
(Female Olympian)

Athletes also discussed injuries through overuse due to the intensive training required by their sport. One swimmer who started the sport at age 6 highlighted the demand on her body from a very early age. She explained that she was forced to take part in some training that had a huge strain on her body.

“Just the amount of load I put on my body. At that time, I mean, looking back on it was like my goodness, I couldn’t eat, no one thought about the potential risks of doing that kind of thing. It’s such a young age as well, it’s a lot on your body. I think that they didn’t have the awareness of the detriments. I started lifting weight at the direction of a coach in the gym at age 10, which is too young. I honestly don’t think that they really even knew that that was a problem.” (Female Olympian)

One gymnast who started in the sport at age 5 described the environment within her sport where injury was belittled:

“I didn’t have a lot of injury. I was very lucky, but it did affect the people around me. There was a lot of discussion about other gymnasts that had injuries and their injuries were belittled. Get rid of those crutches, don’t come in the gym with those crutches, and keep training. If you can’t do something, if you were injured player, you were demoralized, you were made to feel less than, you weren’t given any attention or coaching. You just tried to manage the condition on your own and that was a really big part of my sport for sure.” (Female Olympian)

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## 4.4 The legacy of physical abuse

The athletes described the ways in which these experiences of physical abuse had significant consequences for their wellbeing. This was not always something that the athletes were aware of as a child. For example, one athlete explained:

“You don’t really think about it when you’re 15. You’re so excited and even though it hurts, they say it’s okay. So then I play, and then it kind of develops in a really bad way.” (Male International)

With the benefit of hindsight, athletes identified the physical consequences of their experiences:

“I thought it was kind of cool to be so tough. And that didn’t necessarily bother me. But now as an older person I recognize, you know, goodness, like there are problems, you know, musculoskeletal now that I have to deal with because of those injuries I just kind of looked past and was encouraged to ignore.” (Female Olympian)

Many of the interviewees described how their experiences as a child in sport continued to have significant impacts on their physical wellbeing:

“I have some friends that played for small clubs, but they really wanted to do well. And they were some of the better players. And if they had injuries or something like that, they would still have to play because they wanted to win so badly. So the clubs weren’t really thinking of the player’s best interests. And a friend of mine, she had some bad knees and she’s still suffering years later with them. She played lots of games when she was 14, 15 16 and 17. I’ve been lucky with my general health, but three of my friends at least, who played at a young age have old injuries that still give them problems in their general life.” (Female International)

“That was the mentality, just push through everything. Today I have joint irritations that I’ll be taking care of for the rest of my life.” (Female Olympian)

“I did something to my elbow once that I still don’t know to this day. The effects still linger. If I try to do a push up, I can feel it.” (Male International)

Athletes clearly experienced strong emotions in discussing the legacies of these experiences, including disappointment and frustration:

“There’s a sort of sense of stigma that you couldn’t deal with it and in some ways, feeling it was your own fault. That stays with you. Talking about the details of what happened, I find pushes my blood pressure up and if I had my heart rate monitor on you would see the changes.” (Female International)

“I think about all these moments in time where a good coach could have guided me to perform better and to greatness. Even when I got injured at 19, a good coach could have seen that it was that drive that I had that pushed me too far. I got injured and I didn’t take the time to heal. Instead of thinking it was weakness, they could have curailed that. That’s what is disappointing.”  
(Female International)

It is very clear that these elite child athletes were pushed to, and beyond, the limits of their bodies.

These childhood experiences not only jeopardized their development as children but they continue to impact the physical wellbeing of these athletes as adults.



## 5. Key Findings

### – Emotional Abuse

#### 5.1 Nature of Emotional Abuse

Overall, 61% of athletes experienced one form of emotional abuse at least once as a child in sport (52% of females and 64% of males). The most reported forms of emotional abuse were being insulted and criticized (46%), being shouted at in an angry or critical manner (41%), and being looked at in a way that made them feel uncomfortable (12%).

Significant gender differences were identified with males (49%) being more likely to be insulted or criticized relative to females (34%), while females (30%) were more likely to be looked at in a way that made them feel uncomfortable when compared to males (6%).

**(TABLE IV.3) EXPERIENCES OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE**

	MALE	FEMALE	P VALUE
<b>(1) I WAS INSULTED OR CRITICISED</b>			
NO	109 (50.9%)	42 (65.6%)	PR = 0.038
YES	105 (49.1%)	22 (34.4%)	
<b>(2) I WAS THREATENED TO BE ABANDONED/REFUSED INTO MY HOME</b>			
NO	197 (92.5%)	62 (96.9%)	PR = 0.212
YES	16 (7.5%)	2 (3.1%)	
<b>(3) I WAS BULLIED</b>			
NO	203 (95.3%)	59 (92.2%)	PR = 0.334
YES	10 (4.7%)	5 (7.8%)	
<b>(4) I WAS SHOUTED AT IN AN ANGRY OR CRITICAL MANNER</b>			
NO	122 (56.7%)	44 (68.8%)	PR = 0.086
YES	93 (43.3%)	20 (31.3%)	
<b>(5) I WAS TOLD I WAS NOT LOVED</b>			
NO	207 (97.6%)	63 (98.4%)	PR = 0.702
YES	5 (2.4%)	1 (1.6%)	

**(TABLE IV.3) EXPERIENCES OF EMOTIONAL ABUSE**

	<b>MALE</b>	<b>FEMALE</b>	<b>P VALUE</b>
<b>(6) I WAS THE SUBJECT OR TARGET OF SEXIST JOKES/REMARKS</b>			
<b>NO</b>	197 (92.9%)	56 (87.5%)	PR = 0.169
<b>YES</b>	15 (7.1%)	8 (12.5%)	
<b>(7) I WAS TOLD I WISH YOU HAD NEVER BEEN BORN OR WERE DEAD</b>			
<b>NO</b>	212 (99.5%)	61 (95.3%)	PR = 0.013
<b>YES</b>	1 (0.5%)	3 (4.7%)	
<b>(8) I WAS LOOKED AT IN A WAY THAT MADE ME FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE</b>			
<b>NO</b>	201 (93.9%)	45 (70.3%)	PR = 0.000
<b>YES</b>	13 (6.1%)	19 (29.7%)	
<b>(9) I WAS THREATENED TO BE HURT OR KILLED</b>			
<b>NO</b>	203 (96.2%)	62 (96.9%)	PR = 0.803
<b>YES</b>	8 (3.8%)	2 (3.1%)	

## **5.2 Characteristics of Emotional Abuse**

The data suggests that those who reported experiencing emotional abuse did so on a regular basis. Athletes who were insulted or criticized tended to experience this on multiple occasions with 47% doing so at least 10 times. This primarily occurred between the ages of 14-17 (65%). It was perpetrated by coaches (32%) and teammates (25%).

Similarly, athletes who reported being shouted at in an angry or critical manner tended to experience this on multiple occasions with 44% doing so at least 10 times. This primarily occurred between the ages of 14-17 (60%). It was perpetrated by coaches (67%) and teammates (12%).

Athletes who reported being looked at in a way which made them feel uncomfortable tended to experience this on one or two occasions (56%). This overwhelmingly occurred between the ages of 14-17 (93%) It was perpetrated by coaches (43%) and other staff at the club (25%).

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### 5.3 Experiences of Emotional Abuse

All of the athletes talked openly about their experiences of emotional abuse during the interviews.

“Like I feel very comfortable saying that he abused me mentally. There was constant psychological manipulation.”  
(Female International)

“It was his (the coach's) attitude and the way he was talking to us and a lot of the players, there was no fun, and he was only yelling. When he came into the hall, he didn't look at us. He didn't say hi, he would just walk past us.” (Male World Championships)

This ultimately led to one athlete feeling like a failure, despite achieving significant success in their athletic career:

“I was very ashamed and disappointed with all of my sporting achievements. I looked back about 10 years after my swimming career had ended, I looked at my swimming career as a total failure. And that included, you know, getting Commonwealth medal to Olympics, you know, National Championships, all of it was a total failure. And it wasn't until years later that I realised that there were things that I could be proud of, not only does that mess you up mentally as an adult, but it actually probably totally ruined my performance. We all now talk about mindfulness and being present and living in the moment and all that stuff. There was none of that. And so we now know that that kind of thing is totally detrimental to performance as well. So there is no positive. It wasn't like that was worth it, because then I did really well and was fine. You know, but I think that's the manipulation that happens, I would have done anything to win a gold medal in the Olympics. In the pool, meaning like, I would have trained as hard as it took and I thought that I did. The sad part is that they took that and use that for evil instead of for good.” (Female Olympian)

A number of important themes emerged through the analysis of these experiences. The first concerned the athlete's perception that the emotional abuse was a way of gaining control over them by their coach.

“It was ultimate control and no concern for my wellbeing.”  
(Male World Championships)

"I was completely under his spell." (Female Olympian)

This became more apparent as athletes observed other coach-athlete relationships:

"There was so much control, which at first you don't really mind or notice, it's probably good to have, you know, there's probably benefits to some of that. When I went to the Olympics, and I saw the other relationships, the way other people weren't afraid, I was terrified of him. I was afraid of him. Then I realized, when people asked me why are you afraid of your result? Like, why are you afraid of your coach?" (Female Olympian)

This athlete went on to explain the different ways in which their coach controlled their life:

"He controlled everything, he wouldn't let me go on national team training trips because he was afraid other coaches would get their claws in me... He you know, the whole eating disorder thing he wanted to control my life, he always talked about you can't have boyfriends." (Female Olympian)

The athletes were asked about their views on the reasons underlying the emotionally abusive behaviour of their coach. One athlete felt that this was the only approach that their coach knew:

"With my coach there would be verbal abuse if he wasn't happy with what you were doing, or if he was if he wasn't unhappy with your development, rather than any other kind of approach, the approach my coach would default to would be to insult you." (Female Olympian)

Another athlete explained how there had been a lack of evolution in coaching styles:

"Coaches see it as that they're trying to help the athlete and that they know the best way to do it. And they don't have any education. They don't have any training. What worked for them in the 1970s and they're still doing the same thing. Our culture has changed and sport has changed and the way children are parented has changed, but there's an evolution that hasn't happened in the world of coaching. If you got results by yelling at a kid and belittling them, and then they performed, you say that that works, and then you just keep doing the same thing." (Female Olympian)



Athletes also felt that, although there were bystanders to the emotional abuse, people did not challenge it:

“So it was strange, but nobody ever really said anything. There were others who seemed uncomfortable sometimes when they witness this stuff, but nobody really said anything because the culture was this is the best coach in the club. He was the best athlete as well. He must know what he’s doing. People didn’t want to get into the business of trying to interfere.” (Female Olympian)

Ultimately the athletes believed that the intention was to facilitate peak performance:

“It’s hard to say my health was a priority. It was all on performance.” (Female Olympian)

One world record holder explained that the behaviours she experienced were a motivational tool by her coach to encourage her best performance. As she described:

“I think he just wanted to get in my head and make me feel like a failure because he wanted to maintain control over me. He thought if he can make me feel like I wasn’t good and a failure then I would always be motivated.” (Female International)

Other athletes described how the emotional abuse was a reaction to poor performance:

“..if we weren’t playing well, the coach would become very angry, he would rage at us and most of the team were scared of him. He would just continually shout at us and call us names and discredit our performance.” (Female International)

The emotional abuse was understandably perceived to have a negative impact on performance. As one athlete explained, being healthy in all aspects is an important contributor to performance:

“There’s always a component of health that contributes to great performance.” (Female Olympian)

“If your primary motivator is extrinsic, and it’s sort of the fear of failure, that really doesn’t translate well into the most elite levels where you might be able to get away with it, at the junior levels at the lower levels, just on pure hard work and technical ability and physical ability and all of those things that you’ve developed. But when you come up against people in big competitions, or on an equal playing field, so you have equal ability, that those were the situations where I tended to find that it was easy for me to fall apart mentally, especially if there was any type of adversity, my mind returned to ‘Oh no’ you know ‘Not again’ type things. Whereas I’ve never really developed the ability to intrinsically get myself through those times because subconsciously the fear would kick it. So that really hurt.” (Female Olympian)

One athlete, who competed at National level at age 13, commented that her coach was “more of a detriment to my performances than he was a help”. She explained that her best performances were achieved when she was distant from her coach.

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## 5.4 The legacy of emotional abuse

The athletes described the ways in which these experiences of emotional abuse had significant consequences for their wellbeing. At the time, it clearly impacted their enjoyment of the sport. Athletes commented that they were “fearful” and it “made them angry” and ultimately, they were not happy within their sport. Several interviewees highlighted that they felt the sport was something that they had to do and felt it was being forced upon them, and that the abuse they experienced was “what you had to put up with in order to be good”. This then impacted their psychological wellbeing:

“I remember at a point in time when I was about 15 and then again at 17. I started feeling not good. Just mentally, emotionally. You know, I just I didn’t know what to make of it. I just felt like I needed to be tougher. But looking back on it, of course, I recognise it wasn’t a healthy environment. And, of course, I didn’t feel good.” (Female International)

Athletes also described a real low sense of self-worth and a need for approval at the time:

"After I broke the world record I called my coach. I said, Is that okay? Is that good enough? People thought that I was just being humble and naive and young, but no, I was, I was actually just concerned he was going to tell me it was shitty and another bad performance. I just learned to believe things about myself that weren't true." (Female Olympian)

This sense of not meeting the standard was found to continue into their adult life:

"Gymnasts are incredibly self-disciplined and very harsh on themselves, and very critical of themselves because they feel that they can never live up to that potential and never have the fit body that they used to have. And I think it causes them a lot of angst." (Female Olympian)

In some cases, this contributed to clinical depression:

"15 years of harmful consequences of me believing I was basically a piece of shit and also depression, not feeling like any of my efforts were whatever pay off and not trying to do anything meaningful in life. Because everything I accomplished in sport, I felt like was, you know, completely nullified by all the costs I accrued." (Female International)

Other significant impacts were identified with respect to the athlete's close relationships. In particular, this concerned the relationships with the parents:

"The constant psychological bullying and telling me I was a failure. With nobody else influencing my life as of 12. I literally had no meaningful conversation with my parents after the age of 12." (Female International)

The relationship became strained when the athletes raised concerns about how they were being treated:

"I was a child and it messes up your relationship with your parents as well. When I finally turned on him (my coach), it took my parents a little while. They eventually were totally supportive of me turning on him, because they realised he was manipulating me. My mom and I fought every day that year because I was fighting with him. It was the worst year of my life and that did enormous damage to my relationship with my mom." (Female Olympian)

There was also a sense of resentment:

“I was lucky that my parents were very involved. On the flip side of it, I do blame, you know, have a tiny bit of blame for them because they didn’t see it sooner. But then there was no alternative way. There was only one club in my town and I lived on an island. So you know, the, That was my dream, and there were not really many options.” (Female International)

There was a further legacy for athletes’ other close relationships as an adult, for example, one participant explained:

“There are a lot of things where I still default to now. My interaction, for example, with my spouse or other people, you do get the feeling sometimes that I better do this or else they are going to be upset with me. That’s not a healthy way to live.” (Male International)

It was evident that all of the interviewees described experiencing emotional abuse and this supports the survey data in terms of this being the most prevalent form of abuse. Although one should not assume all abuse comes from coaching alone, part of the emotional abuse appeared to be a manifestation of the coach seeking power and control over the athlete with the goal of facilitating peak performance. However, the athletes vividly outlined how such behaviours had the adverse effect with a detrimental impact on their performance and wellbeing both as children and now as adults; including their ability to form healthy relationships and develop a positive self-perception. It is very clear that experiences of emotional abuse have significant, wide ranging and long-term implications for elite child athletes.

“Sometimes you tend to do something nice or do something that you shouldn’t be doing, but you’re doing it. Then I tend to look for some kind of approval. Instead of being satisfied that I did it, or being content, that you were able to do something for somebody else.” (Male International)

These experiences had significant legacies for the current wellbeing of the athletes.



## 4.6 Conclusions

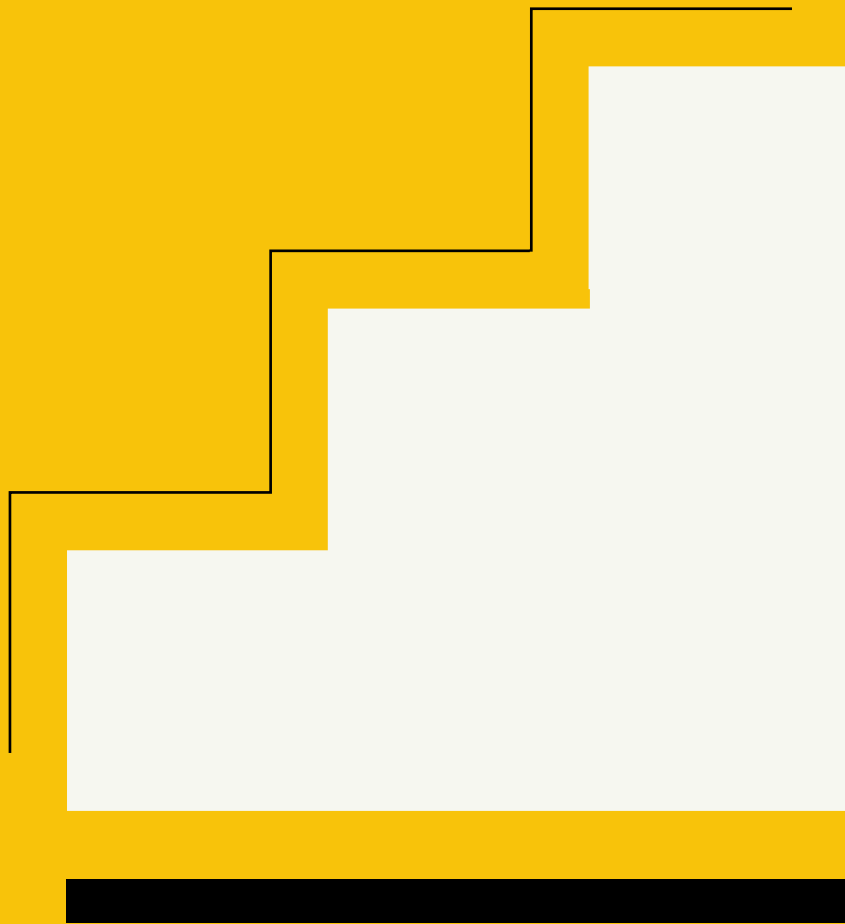
**13%** → of athletes reported having experienced one form of sexual abuse at least once as a child in sport.

**37%** → of athletes reported having experienced one form of physical abuse at least once as a child in sport.

**61%** → of athletes reported having experienced one form of emotional abuse at least once as a child in sport.

# RIGHTS OF PARTI- CIPATION

THE ATHLETE VOICE  
CHAPTER V



# RIGHTS OF PARTICIPATION

## ATHLETE VOICE

Athlete voice is key to ensuring the rights and interests of athletes of all ages are defended and promoted. It is one of the key means by which sport's rules and regulations are shaped to benefit and support the actors at the heart of sport – the athletes – from the recreational fields to the professional arenas.



## 1. Athlete Representation

The growth of the player movement over the past 60 years has been fueled by collective bargaining. This began with athlete registration before focus turned to issues such as the recognition of the employment status of athletes and the regulation of this labour market. Harnessing the voice of the athlete is central to the strategic vision of the World Players Association. Don Fehr, World Players President and Executive Director of the National Hockey League's Player Association, explains (Fehr, 2017):

"The purpose of World Players is to ensure that the players across sports who have common interests get together and play their role so that the key decisions in world sport that affect them are no longer made without their agreement. As a guiding principle, we hold that all players should be free to negotiate the terms upon which they are involved in world sport, and to be represented by persons and organizations of their choice."



Great strides have been made in Canada by AthletesCAN, which is an association for the national athletes of Canada. The Athlete Representative Leadership Manual produced by AthletesCAN states:

“Ensuring that there is a process for the opinions of athletes to be heard and acted upon is an important step in making sure that sport is focused on athlete’s needs and on athletes in general. AthletesCAN believes that the most effective ways for athletes to be heard is through Athlete Representatives, an Athletes’ Council and Athlete Directors. In support of this belief, we strive to provide sport system stakeholders with the tools and governance structure recommendations necessary to support an athlete-centered environment promoting the holistic development of its participants in a safe and healthy manner.”

In his decade ending view of world sport, Jens Sejer Andersen, International Director of Play the Game, stated (Andersen, 2019):

“One of the most important challenges of the next decade will be to develop the forms in which athletes can best express their individual and collective visions, negotiate their disagreements and influence the decisions that decide the future course of sport.”

It is therefore critical that we understand the experiences of current athletes to inform efforts to harness the athlete voice more effectively in the future.

## 2. Promoting children’s rights through the adult athlete voice

The voices of adult athletes are often heard in the media on topics such as future or past performances and product endorsement. There have been examples of activism in which athletes have addressed a social issue related to children’s rights. For example, the UK Government extended the voucher scheme for free school meals over the summer this year in response to work by Manchester United footballer, Marcus Rashford. This ensured that over 1 million children had access to meals in times when the schools were closed. This powerful example demonstrates that the athlete voice can help to promote children’s rights beyond sport. It shows that players care about the next generation and want to take care of them. Player Unions can facilitate such efforts by supporting and amplifying the athlete voice. This has also raised expectations of sports amongst our communities to use their platform to positively impact the lives of children.



Recent examples have also demonstrated the power of the athlete voice in promoting children's rights within sport. For instance, the SAVE Association is a survivor-led community in the UK that was established by former England footballers Paul Stewart and David White. They have both spoken out regarding their experiences of sexual abuse as children. In the US, Rachael Denhollander, Jeanette Antolin and Jessica Howard, as well as many other gymnasts subsequently, gave powerful testimonies of how they had been abused by the team doctor, Larry Nassar. This has led to a series of court cases, independent investigations and proposed reforms. In response to an independent investigation, Susanne Lyonns, Chair of the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee stated (Lyonns, 2019):

"We promised changes to our structure and our practices that are revolutionary and substantive, recognising the importance of the athlete role in organisational decision making, robust compliance and certification protocols and reflective of the population that makes up the Olympic and Paralympic community in the United States."

### 3. The role of Player Unions

As well as the need to engage with adult athletes to advocate for children's rights in sport, there is also a pressing need to directly engage with children. There is a role for Player Union's to play in seeking and hearing the voice of child athletes. However, there are a series of important challenges which need to be navigated. First, there is the absence of the structures required to facilitate effective communication with child athletes. Secondly, there are examples of closed institutional cultures which discourage and disempower the voice of child athletes. Finally, there are legal challenges in relation to issues such as child labor laws and minimum contract ages for leagues. Child athletes are often in a disguised employment relationship whereby they train like it is a job, they compete like it is a job and when they are deselected they say that they have been sacked. However, they are not employees and therefore cannot join a union.



## 4. The child athlete's right to have a voice and be heard

As enshrined in the UNCRC, all children have the following rights:

- **Article 12:** Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously.
- **Article 13:** Every child must be free to express their thoughts and opinions, and to access all kinds of information, so long as it is within the law.
- **Article 15:** Every child has the right to meet other children and to join groups and organizations, so long as it does not stop other people from enjoying their rights.

Within the UDPR, every athlete:

- **Article 6:** HAS THE RIGHT to organise and collectively bargain and to form and join player and athlete associations and unions for the protection of his or her interests.
- **Article 13:** HAS THE RIGHT to freedom of opinion and expression.

## 5. Key Findings

### – Athlete voice

#### 5.1 Union/player association

For most sports and in most countries, Player Unions work with professional athletes and typically this means athletes who are over 18 years old. This creates a critical gap which needs to be addressed in relation to children. Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they knew about the existence of a union/player' association.

**(TABLE V.1) THE EXTENT TO WHICH ATHLETES INDICATED THEY KNEW ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF A UNION/PLAYER' ASSOCIATION AS A CHILD**

AS A CHILD I KNEW ABOUT THE EXISTENCE OF A UNION/PLAYER'S ASSOCIATION	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	15.9 (45)	13.1 (37)	20.1 (57)	50.9 (144)
GENDER				
MALE	14.0 (30)	14.9 (32)	19.5 (42)	51.6 (111)
FEMALE	20.9 (14)	7.5 (5)	22.4 (15)	49.3 (33)

#### KEY FINDINGS

51% OF ATHLETES WERE NEVER AWARE OF A UNION/PLAYER ASSOCIATION AS A CHILD

SIMILAR AWARENESS WAS REPORTED BY FEMALE (49%) AND MALE (52%) ATHLETES

All interviewees had a lack of awareness of player and athlete associations when they participated in sport as an under 18. Athletes discussed not having any knowledge of who they could go to for independent help, only their coach or parents.

“The only people I would think to tell was my parents and my parents were very supportive. I was very lucky with that, but I don't know what else I would have done if I was in a situation that needed help.” (Female World championships)

Athletes talked about only becoming aware of athlete representatives later in their career. This is currently unsurprising because, for most sports and in most countries, Player Unions represent professional athletes over 18 years old. One athlete explained:

“...there was nothing that I was aware of, nobody that I could talk to. I only learned as an Olympian, when I qualified for the team, that there was even an athlete representative for the Federation, I had no idea. I was young and completely isolated.”  
(Female Olympian)

Athletes emphasised the importance of the role played by unions and player associations:

“Somebody has to be looking out for them, because they don’t have a voice...they don’t have any awareness of something that is impacting them, you know, or any way to change it, and they’re relying on other people to put the protections in place to make the environment safe.” (Female International)

Athletes often only identified that there was an issue when they saw effective systems working in other countries:

“I think that it’s very important for us to have a Players Association... I was really impressed with Canada and Australia at what they were doing with respect to the players associations, and the collective bargaining and the rights and just the ability to have to speak and to have some impact on the athletes organizations, on the governing bodies, and that’s really missing in my country.” (Female International)

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### 5.5.2 Silencing the athlete voice

Through the interviews, the athletes also explained that a real challenge to the athlete voice was the way in which whistle blowers were treated. This acted as a perceived barrier, as explained by one athlete:

“To be honest, if I had pursued that it would have been really ugly. With no support, I don’t know that I would have done it.”  
(Female International)

There was a general fear that the process was not anonymous or confidential and that they could suffer reprisals:

“If we said anything to our physio, or we said anything to anyone, I felt it would get back to the coach.” (Female Olympian)

It was also highlighted as a genuine barrier by athletes who have raised concerns and then experienced negative consequences, for example:

“I spoke about him (the coach) in swimming circles and I’ve recently learned that the Swimming Federation still thinks that I should have never said anything to anybody, that it was completely disrespectful to talk about him in that way and that they would never want me involved with their organisation because of the things I’ve shared about his behaviour.” (Female Olympian)

## 6. Key Findings

### – *Equality and Inclusion*

Children’s rights to participate also include the concepts of equality, fairness and inclusion. The UNCRC is grounded in the notion of all children having equal opportunities. It states:

- *Article 2:* States parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child’s parents or legal guardian, race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, nationality, ethnic or other social origin, poverty, disability, birth or other status.

Within the UDPR, every athlete:

- *Article 1:* HAS THE RIGHT to a sporting environment that is well governed, free of corruption, manipulation and cheating and protects, respects and guarantees the fundamental human rights of everyone involved in or affected by sport, including the player.
- *Article 2:* HAS THE RIGHT to access and pursue sport as a career and profession based solely on merit.
- *Article 3:* IS ENTITLED to equality of opportunity in the pursuit of sport without distinction of any kind and free of discrimination, harassment and violence. A player’s right to pursue sport cannot be limited because of his or her race, colour, birth, age, language, sexual orientation, gender, disability, pregnancy, religion, political or other opinion, responsibilities as a carer, property or other status.

• **Article 8:** HAS THE RIGHT to just and favourable remuneration and conditions of work, including a minimum wage, fair hours of work, rest, leisure, the protection of wages, the certainty of a secure contract, the protection of his or her status as a worker within the employment relationship and equal pay for equal work.

Athletes therefore have the right to participate in sport that is fundamentally fair and inclusive.

## 6.1 Equal Opportunities

**(TABLE V.2) THE EXTENT TO WHICH ATHLETES CONSIDERED THEY HAD EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THEIR SPORT AS A CHILD**

I HAD EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AS OTHER PEOPLE IN MY SPORT	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	39.6 (109)	41.8 (115)	14.5 (40)	4.0 (11)
GENDER				
MALE	36.7 (77)	44.8 (94)	15.2 (32)	3.3 (7)
FEMALE	48.4 (31)	32.8 (21)	12.5 (8)	6.3 (4)

### KEY FINDINGS

OVERALL 40% OF ATHLETES FELT THAT THEY ALWAYS HAD EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

60% OF ATHLETES THEREFORE FELT THAT THEY WERE NOT ALWAYS GIVEN EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES

MORE FEMALE ATHLETES (48%) FELT THAT THEY ALWAYS HAD EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES RELATIVE TO MALES (37%)

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt that they were provided with equal opportunities in their sport. The interviewees identified a range of ways in which the opportunities in their sport were not equal for all. One such factor concerned the cost of participation, as one athlete explained:

“My sport is actually a fairly expensive sport to get into. The hourly lessons are not as expensive as something like tennis or golf, but it racks up, especially when you’re younger. In the United States, there’s not as much of a group training mentality as there is with Europe and China and the rest of Asia. There aren’t as many other kids to train with. So you have to train with the coach. So money is a huge barrier for most people to train seriously.” (Male World Championships)

Another athlete who participated in track and field also discussed a lack of equality with respect to resources but in relation to a comparison of different events:

“Being a race walker or a shotputter, or a hammer thrower, possibly to a lesser degree a steeplechaser, seems to put you at the bottom of some strange pecking order within the sport... But you’ve got this sense of stratification. That it’s okay to give less resources to some people at some event groups because nobody really cares.” (Male International)

He also emphasised that this has an impact on the availability of education opportunities:

“If you are a National high school champion, you’d have half the schools in the county beggin for you to come there and have your full way paid. But because you’re a racewalker, few schools got in touch.” (Male International)

## 6.2 Meritocracy

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt that their progression in sport was based purely on merit.

**(TABLE V.3) THE EXTENT TO WHICH ATHLETES CONSIDERED THEIR PROGRESSION IN SPORT WAS BASED ON THEIR ATHLETIC ABILITY AS A CHILD**

MY PROGRESSION IN MY SPORT WAS BASED ON MY ATHLETIC ABILITY	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	42.2 (119)	48.2 (136)	8.5 (24)	1.1 (3)
GENDER				
MALE	35.3 (76)	53.5 (115)	9.8 (21)	1.4 (3)
FEMALE	63.6 (42)	31.8 (21)	4.5 (3)	0.0 (0)

### KEY FINDINGS

OVERALL 42% OF ATHLETES FELT THAT THEIR PROGRESSION WAS ALWAYS BASED ON MERIT

MORE FEMALE ATHLETES (64%) FELT THAT THEIR PROGRESSION WAS BASED ON MERIT RELATIVE TO MALES (35%)

The interviewees explained how progression in their sport was not always completely associated with performance. The athlete's highlighted the influence of both physical and behavioural factors, as illustrated by the following quotes:

"They referred to body types and shapes as a basis for athlete selection." (Female World championships)

"I was given a lack of coaching feedback and attention because I didn't flirt with the coach." (Female International)

### 6.3 Corruption

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt that their sport was well governed and free from corruption or dishonest behaviour.

**(TABLE V.4) EXPERIENCES OF CORRUPTION**

EXTENT SPORT WELL GOVERNED & FREE FROM CORRUPTION/DISHONEST BEHAVIOUR	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	35.4 (98)	39.4 (109)	15.2 (42)	10.1 (28)
<i>GENDER</i>				
MALE	28.3 (60)	42.0 (89)	17.5 (37)	12.3 (26)
FEMALE	59.4 (38)	31.3 (20)	7.8 (5)	1.6 (1)

#### KEY FINDINGS

OVERALL 35% OF ATHLETES FELT THAT THEIR SPORT WAS ALWAYS FREE FROM CORRUPTION

65% OF ATHLETES THEREFORE FELT THAT THEIR SPORT WAS NOT ALWAYS FREE FROM CORRUPTION

MORE FEMALE ATHLETES (59%) FELT THAT THEIR SPORT WAS ALWAYS FREE FROM CORRUPTION RELATIVE TO MALES (28%)



## 7. Conclusions

There is clear evidence that the rights and interests of child athletes are particularly harmed by sport denying athletes of any age access to effective representation, fair disciplinary procedures and protection from reprisals for reporting abuse and maltreatment. There is a need to empower all athletes to have a fair say in matters that affect them and this will involve the democratisation of power within sports organizations. Through sharing the power more equally with athletes, both individually and collectively, these rights can be realised. Through harnessing the voices of athletes, all stakeholders will benefit from a more collaborative, communicative and co-creative culture. In order to facilitate this, the following recommendations are proposed:



→ Invite, hear and respond to a range of child athlete voices regarding the realization of their rights.

→ Develop child-focused structures and programmes within player associations.

→ Promote athletes' right to collectively and independently organize to achieve legitimate athlete representation in all decisions that affect them.

→ Ensure decisions that affect child athletes follow the application of international principles of child participation and the best interest of the child.

# RIGHTS OF PROVISION

PROMOTING ATHLETE WELLBEING  
CHAPTER VI



# RIGHTS OF PROVISION

## PROMOTING ATHLETE WELLBEING



The fundamental principle underlying the realisation of the rights of elite child athletes is the promotion and protection of their wellbeing. This concerns both their wellbeing as a child and their long-term wellbeing as they transition into adulthood.

## 1. Background

There has been a noticeable shift over recent years with work focused on the realization of athlete rights broadening from the prevention of negative experiences to also consider the promotion of positive experiences. Such efforts therefore aim to protect athlete welfare whilst facilitating wellbeing. The debate in sport is often framed as a trade off between wellbeing and performance. For example, Baroness Tanni Grey-thompson concluded the following within a key independent report for the UK government regarding a duty of care in sport):

“Recent media reports and anecdotal evidence from across a range of sports has led to questions about whether welfare and safety really are being given the priority they deserve in elite sport. At a time of success for British sport in terms of medals, championships, and profile, this raises challenging questions about whether the current balance between welfare and winning is right and what we are prepared to accept as a nation.” (Grey-Thompson, 2017, p. 4)

The primary focus of work related to athlete wellbeing has been on mental health. This has led to the launch of a Mental Health Strategy by UK Sport. The strategy aims to facilitate a positive environment across the Olympic and Paralympic system. It is built on four key pillars:

### **EDUCATION**

The education pillar will promote positive mental health in the high performance system, and to enhance individual self-awareness on what constitutes good mental health and the identification of potential mental health problems.

### **PROVISION**

The mental health provision will deliver a comprehensive package of support for all athletes in the high performance system from induction, through performance and competitions, to transition out of the high performance system.

### **COMMUNICATION**

The communications pillar will support the education and provision pillars in order to de-stigmatise mental health and ensure parity of esteem with physical health. A comprehensive and multi-media campaign will be developed to provide all World Class Programmes with resources and support to allow an informed and persistent discussion of mental health by all stakeholders.

### **ASSURANCE**

Annual assurance through the Culture Health Check will provide feedback on efficacy of the mental health strategy and whether it needs further review. The expectation is that satisfaction ratings should be comparable with physical health. In addition, the strategy will be externally reviewed after the first four years of operation to identify further scope for improvement. This will be done through a combination of academic review and benchmarking against other sectors, such as the armed forces and the construction industry.

UK Sport Chair Dame Katherine Grainger said:

"In both sport and society, it is vital that we work towards creating the most positive mental health environment whenever possible. We are pleased to be promoting new measures today, including the launch of our Mental Health Strategy, as we continue to build structures that will help promote a positive environment for athletes, coaches and support staff." (English Institute of Sport, 2018)

This strategy has been supported by a new Code for Sports Governance, a 'Culture Health Check' which was conducted across funded programmes and a clear focus on sporting integrity through a sporting integrity function.





## 2. Athlete's Rights to Wellbeing

As enshrined in the UNCRC, all children have the following rights:

- **Article 3 (2):** States parties undertake to ensure the child such protection as necessary for his or her wellbeing, taking into account the rights and duties of his or her parents, legal guardians or other individuals responsible for him or her.
- **Article 24:** Every child has the right to the best possible health. Governments must provide good quality healthcare, clean water, nutritious food, and a clean environment and education on health and wellbeing so that children can stay healthy.

Within the UDPR, every athlete:

- **Article 9:** IS ENTITLED to a safe and secure workplace and sporting environment, which promotes the player's safety, physical and mental health and his or her social wellbeing. He or she must be treated and supported with utmost integrity by healthcare professionals when injured or ill, and have direction and control over that treatment and support.
- **Article 10:** HAS THE RIGHT to an education and the pursuit of work and life beyond sport supplemented by the resources of the sport.
- **Article 7:** HAS THE RIGHT to share fairly in the economic activity and wealth of his or her sport which players have helped generate.

### 3. Key Findings

#### – *Body Image and Eating Behaviours*

Participants were asked whether the culture of sport had promoted a healthy body image.

**(TABLE VI.1) BODY IMAGE**

MY SPORT PROMOTED A HEALTHY BODY IMAGE	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	1 (3)	6.7 (9)	31 (88)	61.1 (173)
<i>GENDER</i>				
MALE	1 (2)	6 (13)	30.6 (66)	62.3 (134)
FEMALE	1.5 (1)	8.8 (6)	32.3 (22)	57.3 (39)

#### KEY FINDINGS

OVERALL 61% OF ATHLETES NEVER FELT THAT THEIR SPORT PROMOTED A HEALTHY BODY IMAGE

THIS FIGURE WAS SLIGHTLY LOWER FOR FEMALE ATHLETES (57%) RELATIVE TO MALES (62%)

A key theme related to wellbeing concerned the impact of sport, and the coach in particular, on the athlete's body image. One athlete explained how it was commonplace within his club for the coach to comment on players particularly when there were large groups of young athletes around, for example by calling athletes fat:

“When we have a lot of kids around, especially the female athletes tell them that they're fat, been eating too much chocolate or you know, stuff like that. This was common on a weekly basis.” (Male International)

A female swimmer described how an unhealthy context had been created related to weightings and how she felt that this particularly impacted female athletes: →

“We were not provided with accurate information on eating healthily, on working out and things like that. So what happened was, we had weigh ins, so I was weighed every morning, from the age of 14 to 18 on a scale that my coach brought in and put down on the pool deck. We were paraded along. Everything was set up on the boys side of the pool where we stretched. The scales were there, you would walk by and the guys would be there. Of course, the boys never had to lose weight.” (Female Olympian)

These experiences clearly impacted athlete’s self-concept:

“I was manipulated into thinking that I was overweight, and that that was going to impact my swimming. Every week we had to make a weight and it had to be lower than the week before. I’ll tell you right now, there was no weight on me. I didn’t need to be losing weight constantly.” (Female Olympian)

There was a clear link between body image and the associated impact on eating behaviours. Participants were asked whether the culture of sport had promoted healthy eating.

**(TABLE VI.2) HEALTHY EATING**

MY SPORT PROMOTED HEALTHY EATING	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	1 (3)	15.1 (43)	40.1 (114)	42.9 (122)
GENDER				
MALE	1.4 (3)	16.7 (36)	43.1 (93)	38.9 (84)
FEMALE	0 (0)	10.6 (7)	31.8 (21)	57.8 (38)

**KEY FINDINGS**

OVERALL 43% OF ATHLETES NEVER FELT THAT HEALTHY EATING WAS PROMOTED

THIS FIGURE WAS HIGHER FOR FEMALE ATHLETES (58%) RELATIVE TO MALES (39%)

The interviews discussed the impact of the culture of sport on their eating behaviours. This influence went far beyond the sporting arena:

“It wasn’t just that my coach controlled me at the pool, but he controlled me every time I sat down at the table. Every time I put something in my mouth he was there in my head, manipulating me.” (Female Olympian)

In some cases, these experiences were perceived to have contributed to eating disorders:

“I became bulimic, probably from age 15 to 18. It was only when I left and went to university that it ended immediately. So I look at it as being very specific to me being controlled by somebody in my childhood.” (Female Olympian)

“They knew that I was being manipulated and it happened with many people before me. We were a very successful club, but the women came out like shells of themselves. Everybody around us knew. But nobody did anything or felt they could do anything. People called us the anorexic swim team, because we were so skinny. It was a known factor that these things were happening. It makes it even worse, doesn’t it?” (Female Olympian)

“I feel fortunate that I didn’t develop an eating disorder. I know a lot of my teammates did and still struggle with body and weight issues. I didn’t but I still think it has definitely affected me and I don’t like it.” (Female International)



## 4. Key Findings

### – *Physical Wellbeing*

Participants were asked whether the culture of sport had promoted their physical health.

**(TABLE VI.3) PHYSICAL HEALTH**

MY SPORT PROMOTED MY PHYSICAL HEALTH	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	0 (0%)	3 (9)	28.7 (81)	67.3 (190)
GENDER				
MALE	0 (0%)	3 (6)	30 (64)	67.4 (145)
FEMALE	0 (0%)	4.4 (3)	25.3 (17)	70.1 (47)

#### KEY FINDINGS

OVERALL 67% OF ATHLETES NEVER FELT THAT SPORT PROMOTED THEIR PHYSICAL HEALTH

THIS FIGURE WAS SLIGHTLY HIGHER FOR FEMALE ATHLETES (70%) RELATIVE TO MALES (67%)

Athletes were concerned that they had not being given access to quality healthcare support when required. Interviewees explained that often when they needed medical attention clubs didn't have anywhere to send the athletes for treatment. As one athlete commented:

"It was quite a small club and there was nothing like any medical resources. I had a really bad like overstep in my ankle when I was like 14 or 15. And I now that I think about it, I think I might have torn some something or broken something, but it was never checked out. I just wrapped it up and waited some days, had some crutches for some days, but there was like, no place for me to go."  
(Female Olympian)

Some athletes actually felt that healthcare professionals did not always have their health and wellbeing as the primary consideration. This was particularly discussed in relation to the management of injuries:

“Working on injuries and competing on injuries and even having team doctors that told you to go back into competition. That’s still happening today in my sport. I know for a fact that my gym has a doctor that’s aligned with them and tells them exactly what they want to hear and pushes gymnasts to compete when they’re not healthy.” (Female Olympian)

## 5. Key Findings – *Mental Wellbeing*

Participants were asked whether the culture of sport had promoted their mental health.

**(TABLE VI.4) MENTAL HEALTH**

MY MENTAL HEALTH	ALWAYS % (N)	USUALLY % (N)	RARELY % (N)	NEVER % (N)
OVERALL	1.4 (4)	8.4 (24)	34.7 (98)	55.3 (156)
<i>GENDER</i>				
MALE	1.4 (3)	8.4 (18)	36.7 (79)	53.5 (115)
FEMALE	1.4 (1)	8.9 (6)	28.3 (19)	66.1 (41)

### KEY FINDINGS

45% OF ATHLETES DID NOT FEEL SPORT ALWAYS PROMOTED THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

THIS FIGURE WAS HIGHER FOR FEMALE ATHLETES (66%) RELATIVE TO MALES (54%)

The interviewees clearly felt that the focus had been on the ‘athlete’ rather than the ‘child’.

“I think the emotional aspect of my health was completely disregarded. That aspect of being a young person was just not even relevant.” (Female Olympian)

Athletes often felt that the collective focus was on their athletic development over and above their development as a human-being:

“They were so focused on making me the best athlete to the detriment of me being the best human that I could be. It took me a long time to realise that being a good human was more important than an athlete.” (Male International)

Another athlete supported this view and highlighted how this had resulted in them feeling as though they were behind their peers when they left sport:

“I think the manipulation from my high school coach and from my child coach, it definitely stunted my growth as a human for sure. Either in university or in law school or even in work, I feel like I’m five years behind my peers in terms of development and emotionally, mentally.” (Female International)



## 6. Key Findings

### – *Financial Wellbeing*

World Players (2016) conducted an analysis of the publicly available data regarding the economics of international sporting federations. Players were highlighted as being central to the generation of income for these federations, particularly through major events. However, players did not always benefit financially in line with their contributions to the economics of these organisations. An extension of these findings is a concern regarding the potential economic exploitation of players. Participants were therefore asked whether their financial wellbeing had been protected and hence whether they had been economically exploited.

**(TABLE VI.5) THE EXTENT TO WHICH ATHLETES FELT ECONOMICALLY EXPLOITED THROUGH THEIR SPORT AS A CHILD**

<b>I FELT ECONOMICALLY EXPLOITED THROUGH MY SPORT</b>	<b>ALWAYS % (N)</b>	<b>USUALLY % (N)</b>	<b>RARELY % (N)</b>	<b>NEVER % (N)</b>
OVERALL	8.8 (24)	17.2 (47)	25.2 (69)	48.9 (134)
<i>GENDER</i>				
MALE	4.7 (10)	15.6 (33)	27.4 (58)	52.4 (111)
FEMALE	23.0 (14)	23.0 (14)	16.4 (10)	37.7 (23)

**KEY FINDINGS**

51% OF ATHLETES EXPERIENCED ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION AS A CHILD ATHLETE

MORE FEMALE ATHLETES (62%) EXPERIENCED ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION RELATIVE TO MALES (48%)

Athletes described different forms of economic exploitation. Examples ranged from the unfair distribution of funds to the denial of financial benefits and the removal of a university scholarship:

“There was other travel money that would come in. And all of that was managed by the club. I didn’t really see it. I think that there’s a potential for some kind of financial manipulation. I really should have been the beneficiary, the majority beneficiary of that money and yet it was shared amongst the team.” (Female Olympian)

For example, one athlete was told that in order for her to compete in college, she would have to deny all of the prize money and sponsorships that she was getting offered, something that she accepted and did. She was told by the coach not to consult with anybody else. As the athlete explained:

“He (coach) told me, he was the reason for my success. So I turned down a bunch of money over the years, and at the Olympic Games, you know, I won a silver medal. And the deal was, if I won a gold medal, I’d have a break. I think at that point, I hadn’t had a break for two years. So I won the silver medal and I got a week or two off. When I got back, he revoked my college scholarship.” (Female Olympian)

## 7. Key Findings

### – *Access to Education*

Access to education was not directly assessed through the survey but it was a recurrent theme during the interviews. Several interviewees felt that their involvement in elite sport as a young athlete impacted on their right to education and described difficulties combining education with several hours training every day. Furthermore, they expressed that they were not encouraged to care about education at the time. As one athlete stated:

“School was sort of more like a barrier to my swimming success, which was why, for me, the US was such a perfect model because you go to school in the United States to swim as your primary purpose. My primary goal was to be a great swimmer. And I wasn’t going to let school get in the way.” (Female Olympian)

A number of interviewees explained that they were encouraged to sacrifice their education and career for sport, and they highlighted that at the time they were not always aware of the importance of education. They only came to recognise this when they had retired. One gymnast explained how her coach was upset at her for not taking time off school to train full time and it was only because of the support of her parents that this fundamental right was not neglected.

A former table tennis player who competed as a young athlete in the National team for several years explained that the intensive training involved in his sport meant that many of his opponents in Asia and South America don’t go to college or they go to college after they retire. He explained:

“So if you’re not full time you cannot compete with them. It’s not reasonable to do that and have a career unless you’re going to commit to play professionally.” (Male International)

He felt that education had to be second to his sport when competing as a young athlete. He also identified challenges related to returning to education after retirement as an athlete:

“But the difference for our country is if you’re going to come back to the United States, nobody’s really looking to take on a 30 year old, former table tennis athlete and give them any sort of special treatment in a collegiate programme to actually be in education. In China, for example, in a lot of universities, if you’ve been an elite athlete of any sort, they’ll accept you into a programme, even if it’s to become someone who’s going to work in sports marketing or something like that. Whereas I think in the United States, either they don’t exist or they’re not accessible or if you’re not an athlete with a high profile with a profile there, it’s going to be really difficult for you to get educated.” (Male International)

In addition, some athletes felt that participating in their sport helped them to get a full scholarship to top colleges. This was particularly the case amongst American athletes. One athlete who had experienced sexual abuse as a young athlete stated:

“I got a scholarship to one of the top colleges in the country. And I think that part of my mind-set was that, well, it was all worth that, whatever I had to go through I did ultimately get this top reward for putting up with it all. I think that I did have a really great educational opportunity that my gymnastics afforded me, but the question to ask is at what cost?.” (Female Olympian)

## 8. Key Findings

### – *Access to Close Relationships*

Another issue which emerged through the interviews that was not directly assessed through the survey concerned athletes' ability to access close relationships. Athletes describe how sport, and particularly their coaches, created barriers which impacted the quality of their relationships with significant others. This included their relationships with peers and friends, which is clearly important in facilitating the wellbeing and development of a child. A swimmer explained how her coach isolated her from her friends to maintain his control:

“One of the things he (coach) taught me to do, and I was like a little girl and I just listened to whatever he told me to do, and that was not to have any friends. Preferably, no friends, definitely no friends out of the swimming team.” (Female Olympian)

Some athletes described how sport had contributed towards a distancing between themselves and their parents. In some cases, this was due to the parent's lack of knowledge of the sport and complete trust in the coach, as explained by an athlete who experienced emotional abuse from their coach:

“How is our daughter an Olympic hopeful and world record holder. We have no idea how this happened. My mother doesn't even know how to swim. They were just told by the coach don't interfere and they said okay. They really didn't and, I think it was like 10 years later after I retired the first time, my mother said to me, you know, do you think we should have stepped in at some point? I was like, yeah, sure. Obedience is enriched and over politeness.” (Female Olympian)

This distancing was also explained as resulting from intimidation:

“In my club, because you’re so young, you’re not given the agency to make your own decisions. So the parents are making decisions for them. The parents are listening to the coaches and they are intimidated, and you know that that is very much the case with the gym that I attended. The parents were afraid of the coaches.”  
(Female Olympian)

It was also associated with parents not being allowed or able to fund attending tournaments with the athlete:

“That was very much the case that parents were not allowed to travel. And if they were allowed to travel, my parents didn’t have the money to afford to go to the competitions and we couldn’t call them, we didn’t have cell phones. We were really under the thumb of the coaches and if the coaches weren’t happy with you, that would cause a lot of stress.” (Female International)

A final explanation was particularly concerning as some athletes viewed it as a strategy used by the coach to control them:

“The coaches wanted the parents not to be there because then they could control what you were eating, what you were doing and it was easier to manipulate. They liked that control because then they felt that they had more ability to control the outcome. If you’re with your parents, maybe your parents were going to let you have a milkshake, eat two rolls with dinner.” (Female Olympian)

When coaches were in a significant position of power, this was viewed by athletes as potentially jeopardising the wellbeing and development of athletes:

“The coach becomes the pivotal figure, the person giving you your everyday workout. At the point when the coach is the problem, you’re really stuck. We’ve got this sort of dead end. It’s like, well, who is guarding the guardians here?” (Female Olympian)





## 9. Conclusions

**61%** → of athletes never felt that their sport promoted a healthy body image.

**43%** → of athletes never felt that healthy eating was promoted.

**67%** → of athletes never felt that sport promoted their physical health.

**55%** → of athletes never felt that sport promoted their mental health.

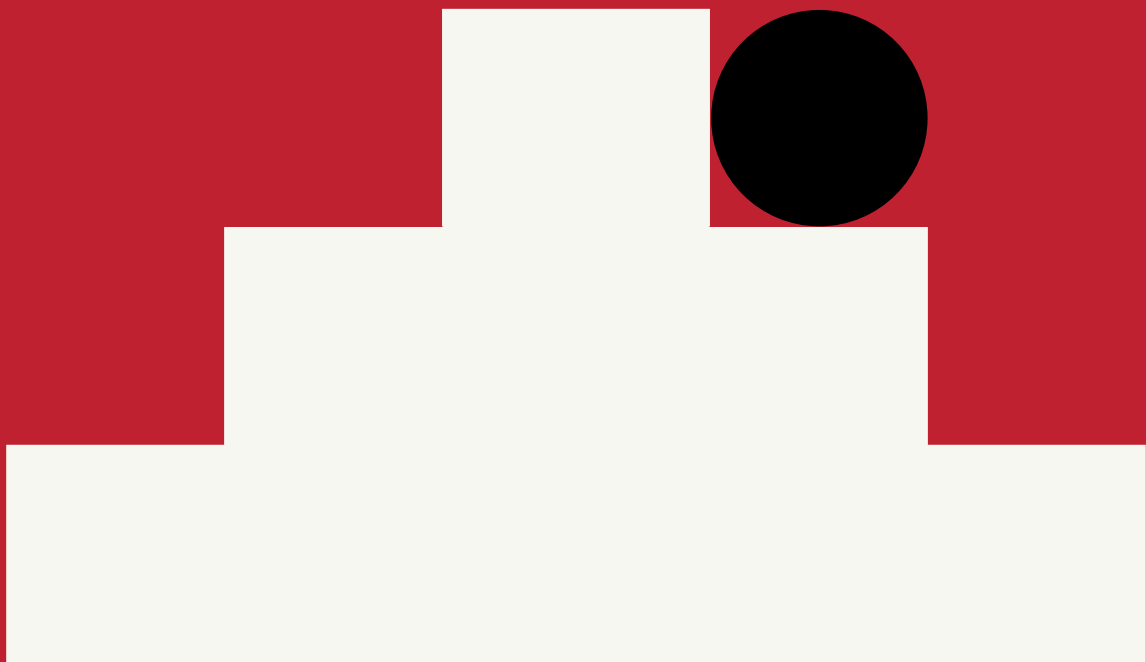
**51%** → of athletes experienced economic exploitation as a child athlete.

Sport had a significant impact on child athlete's ability to access their rights to education, healthcare and close relationships.



# CONCLU- SIONS

## CHAPTER VII



# CONCLUSIONS

Based on the survey data, the interviewees, and the experiences of our team throughout Project CARE, there is a clear need for sports organisations, governments, civil society and trade unions, player associations, sponsors to work together to ensure that internationally recognized children's rights are more embedded and respected in sport.



## KEY FINDINGS

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**37%** of athletes reported having experienced one form of physical abuse at least once as a child in sport.

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**45%** of athletes did not feel sport always promoted their mental health.

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**61%** of athletes reported having experienced one form of emotional abuse at least once as a child in sport.

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**51%** of athletes experienced economic exploitation as a child athlete.

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**69%** of athletes were not always aware they had rights when they were children in sports.

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**69%** of athletes felt that their best interests were not always taken into account.

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**51%** of athletes were never aware of a union/player association before the age of 18.

Sport which respects the rights of child athletes can be built on 6 key pillars, which use the acronym **RIGHTS**. Everyone has a role to play to help embed these pillars throughout sport to ensure that the rights of all children are always respected.

**R**

**REMEDY**

Establish truth commissions to look into non-recent abuse and well resourced and independent safe sport centers to manage cases.

Refer abuse cases to law enforcement for criminal investigation, and where appropriate, apprehension and detention.

Ensure survivors of abuse and harassment in sports have access to remedial justice, including a public apology, acknowledgement and compensation.

**I**

**INFORM**

Collect on-going data regarding athlete rights experiences and identify trends over time.

Disseminate promising practice regarding the promotion and protection of athlete rights and how to safely report abuse in sports.

Educate and empower athletes to know and realize their rights.

**G**

**GOVERN**

Engage and advocate with national governments to adopt and implement law explicitly banning all forms of abuse against child athletes in organized sport.

Develop, adopt and enforce compliance with formal policies to protect child athletes from abuse.

Ensure effective, adequately resourced, trauma-centered and survivor-led systems and procedures are in place to support and receive cases of abuse and harassment in sports.

**H**

**HARNESS**  
the athlete's voice

Organize and engage with athletes who have lived experience of abuse in sports in a sustainable and safe way.

Ensure that the athlete voice is represented throughout sport.

Invite, hear and respond to a range of child athlete voices regarding the realization of their rights.

**T**

**TRAIN**

Require and conduct child wellbeing, safeguarding and protection training.

Develop child-focused structures and programmes within player associations.

Provide guidance and training to player managers on how to exercise their duty of care for athletes who disclose abuse, harassment or trauma in sport.

**S**

**SUPPORT**

Provide sensitive and supportive approach, guided by each individual's preferences throughout.

Ensure free, ongoing, professional psychological, social, medical and legal support services for child athletes who have experienced abuse.

Analyze and ensure holistic security (physical, mental and digital) is made available to whistleblowers and people that disclose abuse in sport.

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