Advancing Safe Sport in Your Organization

Gretchen Kerr, PhD
University of Toronto
The Promise and Potential of Sport

- Individual Growth, Health and Well-Being
- Community Building
- Public Good
To Realize the Promise and Potential of Sport, We Must Evolve

Inclusion of women

Threats of Criminal Prosecution for Physical Assault

Inclusion of Para Athletes
Next Steps in our Evolution: The Safe Sport Movement

- Prompted by numerous high-profile cases of maltreatment in Canada and internationally
- Resulting in fear, cautiousness, doubt, desire for information and advice, and questioning of traditionally accepted practices
Why Now?

• Societal norms have changed. What was okay in homes, schools, workplaces and relationships in the past are not necessarily okay now.

• Sport must be held to the same standards.

• Sport must align its practices to be consistent with other domains in which people, including young people, live, work, learn and develop.
Understanding the Current Landscape in Canadian Sport

Exploring the Prevalence of Maltreatment Among Canadian National Team Athletes
What is Maltreatment?

Maltreatment is an umbrella term that encompasses all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to health, survival, development or dignity in the context of the relationship of responsibility, trust, or power.

(World Health Organization, 2010)
Key Features of Maltreatment

- Based upon power imbalances
- Preventative: potential for harm
- Holistic: addresses physical and psychological harm
- Intent of perpetrator is irrelevant
- Key Guiding Question: is the objective behaviour potentially harmful?
Purpose

- Intended to understand the various types of maltreatment that Canadian National Team athletes are experiencing:
  - How often and by whom?
  - Sexual, psychological, physical harm, neglect
  - Health outcomes

- Climate regarding Disclosure and Reporting
Methods

- Survey developed for purposes of this study
- Online, confidential survey distributed to Canadian National Team members
  - Current and Retired Athletes (retired in last 10 years)
- 121 item survey
  - Physical, sexual, psychological abuse, neglect
  - Health outcomes
  - Disclosure and reporting
Results: Participants

- Athletic Status: 794 Current, 237 Retired
- Gender: 38% Male, 61.5% Female, .1% other
- Age: Mean 27.3
- Disability: 11%
- Racialized: 9.7%
- LGBTQ2I+: 7.3%
- Indigenous: 1.6%
Summary: Athletes’ Reports of Various Harms

- **Sexual Harm**: 4 Current, 6.9% Retired
- **Psychological Harm**: 17 Current, 23% Retired
- **Physical Harm**: 3 Current, 5% Retired
- **Neglect**: 15 Current, 21% Retired
Importance of Intersectionality

- Athletes who identified as female, LGBTQ21+ and racialized reported more experiences of maltreatment.

- Too few Indigenous athletes in the sample to draw any conclusions.
TYPES OF MALTREATMENT & PREVALENCE
Psychological Harm

- Acts of aggression (hitting, throwing objects, physical intimidation)
- Repeated verbal behaviours (name calling, criticisms of the person)
- Degrading, belittling, humiliating comments
- Denial of attention (ignoring athletes, expulsion from practice)
- Threats/humiliation
- Body shaming (public weighing, public posting of weight/body fat)
- Negative comments about the body

Current Athletes: 17%
Retired Athletes: 23%
Examples

- “We would be called ‘useless’ and a ‘waste of time’ regularly”, ‘fucking stupid’ and ‘fucking retards’ all the time. No one on the team escaped it.”
- “If coach wasn’t happy with our practice she would just sit on the bench with an angry look on her face and she wouldn’t talk to us. No feedback, no direction.”
- “One time our coach was so angry about a game we lost he didn’t speak to us for a week. And all we did for practices that week was skate.”
- “When our coach got upset about our effort or our times, he’d throw flutter boards at us. One time he got so mad he threw a chair into the pool.”
Most Frequently Experienced Behaviours

- Shouted at: Current 31.3% Retired 39.1%
- Gossip/told lies about you: Current 29.3% Retired 31.7%
- Put down/embarrassed/humiliated: Current 25.5% Retired 34.8%
- Intentionally ignored: Current 24.8% Retired 34.8%
- Criticized as a person: Current 21.5% Retired 30.7%
- Removed from practiced: Current 18.4% Retired 25.7%
- Weight criticizim: Current 17.8% Retired 25.7%
- Sworn at: Current 15.7% Retired 17.3%
- Called names: Current 14.8% Retired 24.8%
Neglect

- Acts of omission
- Examples include:
  - Ignoring basic needs (adequate hydration, nutrition, sleep)
  - Failing to attend to an injury or athlete’s report of pain
  - Inadequate supervision
  - Ignoring educational needs

Current Athletes: 15%
Retired Athletes: 22%
### Most Frequently Experienced Behaviours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Current</th>
<th>Retired</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unequal treatment</td>
<td>47.5</td>
<td>63.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training while injured/exhausted</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>41.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacrifice education/career</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignored</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trained in unsafe conditions</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate support of basic needs</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try new skills before ready</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left alone without care</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denied medical attention</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sexual Harm

- Behaviours can be contact or non-contact
- Examples include:
  - Touching
  - Intercourse
  - Reward for sexual favour
  - Indecent exposure
  - Sexually oriented comments or jokes
  - Intimidating sexual remarks
  - Sexting

Current Athletes: 4%
Retired Athletes: 7%
Most Frequently Experienced Behaviours

- Sexist jokes/remarks: 14.3% (Current) 16.4% (Retired)
- Intrusive sexual glance: 7.9% (Current) 12.9% (Retired)
- Sexually explicit communication: 3.4% (Current) 6.0% (Retired)
- Sexually innappropriate touching: 3.0% (Current) 7.0% (Retired)
- Indecent exposure: 2.4% (Current) 4.0% (Retired)
- Attempt of sex against your will: 2.2% (Current) 5.9% (Retired)
- Forced to have sex: 1.2% (Current) 3.0% (Retired)
- Asked to undress: 0.8% (Current) 2.5% (Retired)
- Made to kiss someone: 0.7% (Current) 3.5% (Retired)
Physical Harm

- Contact or non-contact behavior that can cause physical harm to an athlete

Examples include:
- Exercise as punishment
- Stretching to the point of injury
- Hitting an athlete with sports equipment
- Excessive repetition of skill to the point of injury
Most Frequently Experienced Behaviours

- *Excessive Exercise*: 11.0% (Current), 18.4% (Retired)
- *Slapped/hit*: 1.5% (Current), 1.0% (Retired)
- *Forced to the ground*: 1.0% (Current), 1.0% (Retired)
- *Hit with an object*: 2.5% (Current), 0.7% (Retired)
- *Punched/Hit*: 0.3% (Current), 0.5% (Retired)
Why are Athletes Vulnerable to Maltreatment?

- Power and authority of the adults in sport system
- Socialization into norms of sport
- Value of background and criminal record checks is limited
- Emphasis on winning and performance (funding and employment structure)
- Accepted as athlete development strategies (e.g., developing mental toughness and resilience)
- Uncertainty about when to report and who to report to, concerns about consequences of reporting
HEALTH OUTCOMES
Eating Disorders

- Thought about engaging: Current - 20.2%, Retired - 27.9%
- Engaged in behaviours: Current - 15.7%, Retired - 22.3%
- Diagnosed: Current - 4.4%, Retired - 2.5%
Self-Harm

Thoughts about engaging in self-harm

Engaged in self-harming behaviours

Percent of athletes

8.9
5.4
6.0
11.4

Current
Suicidal Thoughts

- Current (n=593): 13.2%
- Retired (n=202): 19.8%
Disclosure & Reporting: If you experienced abuse... Did you tell anyone?

Current
- Yes: 56%
- No: 44%

Retired
- Yes: 52%
- No: 48%
Disclosure & Reporting: If you experienced abuse…

Did you submit a formal complaint?

- Current: 84% Yes, 16% No
- Retired: 87% Yes, 13% No
Normalization & Complicity

“There is still a culture of excusing inappropriate coach behaviour by labelling them as 'passionate.' Former athletes go on to marry their coaches, with whom they had experienced imbalanced power and underaged sexual relationships. Abusive foreign coaches are excused of their behaviour toward children because they 'produce'. Clubs turn a blind eye/excuse bullying of young LGBT athletes by their peers as 'kids being kids.' Parents are brainwashed into thinking that only the toughest coaches will turn their children into champions, and support them blindly.”

“The high performance director thinks that the tougher the coach is the better we will become, so horrible conditions and abuse were not just tolerated but in fact, glorified.”
Silencing

“Knowing we can be replaced and our careers are on the line, you are regularly forced to ignore issues or maltreatment out of fear. I have witnessed blackmail, intimidation, favouritism, experienced verbal and mental abuse personally. We are silenced or put down if you ask questions. I am fearful that after I speak out, I will be punished.”

“I never felt like there was anyone I could speak to about [concerns about harmful behaviours] because [sport] was my life and I didn't want to jeopardize my career.”
Fear of Reprisal with Reporting

“I would never feel comfortable going to my National Sport Organization if I were harassed in any way and would 100% need an individual body to report the harassment too. I would be far too scared to say anything to my coach or my HPD.”

“Asking sport organizations to deal with abuse in their ranks is like asking them to incriminate themselves”
Increase Education on Safe Sport

“Coaches are educators. Most math teachers would be fired for negatively screaming at a person for a wrong answer. Out with the old in with the new.”

“More education is needed on ‘It’s not okay to do X anymore.’”

“I didn't realize that the way I was being treated was inappropriate.”
Enhance The Focus on Athletes’ Holistic Well-being

“Negative environments should not be left unchecked just because the club/program is producing results. I know a lot of athletes who produced great international results but are still seeking medical attention from the mental abuse they endured. Canadian sporting results are not worth that kind of damage. This isn't about the pressures of competing at a high level, but mostly the mental abuse that can happen when people turn a blind eye.”

“To truly advance safe sport Canada needs to take a long hard strategic look at how they are funding athletes. As long as the pressure and bottom line of money for medals exists, challenges around safety in sport will remain because the pressure to perform and the impacts of other people on athletes to perform will continue.”
REALIZING THE PROMISE OF SPORT: CHANGING THE CULTURE
If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one.

Mitchell Garabedian (2015)

... and, it will take a village to change the sport culture and eradicate maltreatment
Changing a Culture: A Systemic Approach

- Societal Influences
- Organizational
- Interpersonal
- Individual
ALIGNMENT OF NORMS AND STANDARDS IN SPORT WITH THOSE IN BROADER SOCIETY

- Best practices for teaching and learning
- Child and youth-centred
- Duty of Care for adults working with young people
- Athlete health and well-being is the means to performance outcomes
SPORT ORGANIZATIONS’ RESPONSES

- Mandated Education
- Policies and Codes of Conduct
- Independent Reporting & Investigations
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

- Understanding and Sharing Power
- Professional Boundaries
INDIVIDUAL CONDUCT

- Maintaining awareness of power as an adult
- Duty to Report
- Ethic of Care
“All we needed was one adult to have the integrity to stand between us and Larry Nassar. If just one adult had listened, believed, and acted, the people standing before you on this stage would never have met him.”

- Aly Raisman (2018)
SUMMARY: Athletes’ Recommendations for Changing the Culture

- Broaden lens on maltreatment to include all forms
- Address normalized maltreatment (“abuse in plain sight”)
- Increased education for all stakeholders
  - Align practices in sport with those in other sectors
  - Align practices in sport with best practices in learning and talent development
- Provide safe, neutral place outside of sport organization to raise concerns
- Increase accountability
- View athlete health and well-being as fundamental for optimal sport performance rather than performance at expense of athlete health