

See It. Stop It. Heal It:

Ending Cycles of Abuse in Sports and Society

No athlete, no child, no human being should have to endure abuse in pursuit of their dreams. Yet as the courageous Senate testimony of world-class gymnasts Simone Biles, Aly Raisman, Maggie Nichols, and McKayla Maroney demonstrated, abuse is all too common. Biles voiced the visceral agony of the victims. “The scars of this horrific abuse continue to live with all of us.”¹

Thus, it is imperative that children and adults learn to recognize and prevent all forms of abuse in sports and society. Focusing on egregious sexual abuse and the flagrant failures of USA Gymnastics, the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, and the FBI is way too little and way too late.

As with other epidemics, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse can be stopped. Together, we can create comprehensive systems of prevention, so that no one has to suffer the injuries and live with the scars of abuse, much less reopen those wounds in front of the U.S. Senate.

Covert emotional abuse (CEA) is almost always the initial form of abuse, and it all too often leads to physical and sexual abuse. CEA is a tightly woven, *almost* invisible spider’s web meant to ensnare and control the victim. My intention is to make the web, patterns, and shimmering threads of CEA visible so we, individually and collectively, can see it, stop it, and heal it.

¹ [*Biles and Her Teammates Rip the F.B.I. for Botching Nassar Abuse Case*](#)

My analysis and recommendations are informed by diagnostic criteria of both emotional abuse in sport² and spiritual abuse^{3 4}, well-documented examples of CEA in sports, and my experience with a covert emotionally abusive life coach. As a physician, mindfulness coach, and former Stanford gymnast, my life's purpose is preventing and relieving suffering, and supporting people (particularly athletes) in enhancing their well-being and finding joy and flow.

While this article focuses on covert emotional abuse in sports, the behaviors and solutions apply to all forms of relational abuse, in any setting: entertainment, politics, academics, business, religion, armed services, recreational clubs and groups, and families. Since this article examines CEA in the context of sports, I will use athletic terms: “athlete,” “coach,” “coaching.”

An All-Too-Common Problem

A 2016 International Olympic Committee Consensus Statement regarding harassment and abuse (non-accidental violence) in sport confirmed that “psychological abuse is at the core of all other forms [of abuse].”⁵ In July 2021, a woefully underpublicized study by the US Center for SafeSport detailed a disturbingly high incidence of “emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of athletes in the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement”: 65% of participants experienced at least one of eighteen indicators of psychological harm or neglect. Athletes of color, LGBTQ+ athletes, and athletes with disabilities were more likely to be victims of all types of abuse — emotional, physical, and sexual.⁶ While the specific real-world examples of athletes I share in this article involve female athletes, abusive coaching can occur in any coach-athlete gender combination. Note that in all populations, all forms of abuse, as well as the devastating effects, are significantly underreported.

² [*Defining and Categorizing Emotional Abuse in Sport*](#)

³ [*Characteristics Associated with Cultic Groups Spiritual Abuse*](#)

[*Resources*](#)

⁴ [*Signs Of Spiritual Abuse*](#)

⁵ [*International Olympic Committee Consensus Statement: Harassment and Abuse \(Non-Accidental Violence\) in Sport*](#)

⁶ [*2020 US Center for SafeSport Athlete Culture and Climate Survey*](#)

An inherent power imbalance exists between a coach and an athlete. An athlete trusts the coach to use their power wisely and to make the athlete's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being the absolute highest priority.

Unlike overt emotional abuse (which involves yelling and screaming), covert emotional abuse is *almost* invisible and extremely hard to detect. The covertly abusive coach employs very subtle methods: exploiting the athlete's desire to excel, making little comments that create doubt and fear, invalidating an athlete's experience and concerns, and denying that the coach said or did something, thus creating more doubt.

Renee Thomas, a brave former UC Berkeley soccer player who spoke out against coach Neil McGuire, captures the subtlety of covert emotional abuse. "It wasn't an issue of a yeller, it was emotional and mental abuse because he treated some girls so poorly they started becoming depressed and mentally not stable." Thomas' teammates expand on her comments, describing a culture of fear, fat-shaming, bullying, intimidation, and mistreatment.⁷

Covert emotional abuse can exist independently of any other form of abuse or may be combined with overt emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. All too often, covert emotional abuse precedes physical and sexual abuse, and is a form of grooming: the predatory act of manipulating another individual, making them more isolated and dependent, and thus, increasingly vulnerable to abusive behavior.

The International Olympic Committee's Consensus Statement regarding harassment and abuse (non-accidental violence) in sport documents that "relative to sexual and physical abuse, childhood psychological abuse has been found to be the more powerful correlate of long-term post-traumatic and dissociative symptomatology among athletes." CEA frequently causes anxiety, depression, eating disorders, PTSD, and even suicide.

⁷ [*Surviving the Game: Allegations of Abuse in Cal's Soccer Program*](#)

The IOC consensus statement indicates that such coaching abuse may also lead to long-term debilitating physical injuries. Abusive coaches may compel an athlete to train or compete when they are injured, and athletes may unconsciously injure themselves as a way out of the abusive relationship. This may occur with or without more obvious physical abuse, such as coaches forcing athletes to maintain unhealthy weights, stepping on, pushing, shoving, hitting, punching, or kicking athletes. And in sports (like gymnastics) that require spotting, abusive coaches may “accidentally miss,” resulting in serious injury.

The IOC Consensus Statement elaborates: “In addition to the serious long-term health effects listed in the paragraphs above, many athlete victims of nonaccidental violence (abuse) suffer performance detriments, opportunity costs, reduced medal chances and loss of sponsorship. Non-accidental violence has also been associated with doping and an increase in willingness to cheat. Some [athletes] choose to change or even to quit their sport, and others suffer personal consequences for years.”

See It. Stop it: An Emotionally Abusive Coach Weaves a Web

The covert emotionally abusive coach weaves four primary patterns together to create the web of covert emotional abuse: tangling feelings of specialness and fear, controlling the environment, isolating victims, and distorting the truth. If the patterns and threads described below appear entwined, it is because they are. The following descriptions will allow you to see the individual filaments and intricate design of the web of covert emotional abuse.

Tangles Feelings of Specialness and Fear

The covertly abusive coach creates a sticky tangle of specialness and fear that ultimately ensnares the athlete.

Spins a Trap of Specialness and Creates the Feeling of Being the “Chosen One”

In a *NYT* article, Kara Goucher, an Olympic distance runner who trained with Alberto Salazar of the Nike Oregon Project, vividly describes this experience.

Her description eerily captures the experiences of the Olympic gymnasts and other victims of abuse.

When you're training in a program like this, you're constantly reminded how lucky you are to be there, how anyone would want to be there, and it's this weird feeling of, "Well, then, I can't leave it. Who am I without it?"⁸

As Goucher describes, the athlete—ensnared by this sense of specialness—feels they can't escape.

“Love Bombs” and Lacks Clear Healthy Boundaries

To create the trap of specialness, the coach will “love bomb”: showering the athlete with praise, giving the athlete “generous” gifts, and taking the athlete on special outings. Maggie Haney coached Olympic gymnast Laurie Hernandez. Haney’s “love bombing” of Hernandez is detailed in a NYT article. Haney took Hernandez to the beach and restaurants, and to get her nails done. She gave Hernandez a tuition break at the gym, invited her to sleep at her house, and treated Hernandez as part of her family.⁹

While these behaviors may appear generous, they are manipulative. They are designed to gain the athlete’s trust and adoration, and to have the athlete discount, ignore, and suppress concerns regarding the other threads and patterns listed below.

In a rare rendering of justice, Haney’s emotional and physical abuse resulted in a 5-year suspension from USA Gymnastics. In subsequent sections, I will use Haney’s abuse of Hernandez to illuminate additional threads and patterns.

Cultivates Fear, Shame, Self-Blame, Self-Doubt, and Dependency

The coach manipulates the athlete, exploiting the athlete’s deep desire for improvement and fear of failure. The coach subtly implies, and/or directly

⁸ [*I Was the Fastest Girl in America, Until I Joined Nike*](#)

⁹ [*Olympic Gymnast Recalls Emotional Abuse ‘So Twisted That I Thought It Couldn’t Be Real’*](#)

states, that the athlete's success is entirely due to the coach, and that the athlete won't progress and achieve their goals without the coach. The coach repeats fear-inducing statements such as, "I made you the success that you are," "Without me, you would be nothing," "Without my coaching, you will never live up to your true potential."

Over time, these abusive techniques cause the athlete to lose faith in themselves and develop a debilitating dependency on the coach. Ultimately, these tactics magnify the inherent power dynamic, making the coach completely overpowering, and the athlete increasingly powerless and ripe for physical and sexual abuse.

Alternates Love Bombing and Shaming

The emotionally abusive coach combines the tactics above in an endless cycle designed to coerce, control, and manipulate the athlete. When the athlete is compliant, performing well, and expressing appreciation and adoration for the coach, then the athlete maintains their coveted "special" status. But, when the athlete fails to perform, or questions the coach, the coach humiliates and degrades the athlete. For the coach, public love bombing and shaming (combined with gossiping and lying) have the added benefit of instilling the same desire to please and fear of being shamed in all athletes in the program.

Hernandez's description of her former coach Maggie Haney epitomizes this cycle. In the *NYT* article, Hernandez said, "Any compliment was like holy water... It went from one day walking on eggshells with her to her saying the next day that 'we're in this together.'" Haney's shaming included "calling [Hernandez] weak, lazy, and messed up in the head." Ultimately, Hernandez was diagnosed with "full on major depression."

Psychological research has repeatedly demonstrated that intermittent reinforcement (alternating love bombing and shaming) is an extremely potent method of controlling behavior.

Instills a Desperate Desire for Success and Approval, and Evokes Intense Intertwined Fears

The coach exploits the athlete's love — love of the sport and love of the coach — promising “You are on the verge of a breakthrough,” and implying, “You will be my favorite; I will love you when you break through.” The coach simultaneously creates self-doubt and fear, saying, “Your fear and weakness are holding you back,” and “You will regret leaving.”

Mary Cain, known as “the fastest girl in America,” heartbreakingly describes how this crazy-making behavior (aka gaslighting) can even compel an athlete who has left an abusive coach to beg to return (just as some victims of domestic abuse beg to return to their abusive partners).

For many years, the only thing I wanted in the world was the approval of Alberto Salazar. I still loved him. Alberto was like a father to me, or even like a god. Last spring, I told Alberto I wanted to work with him again — only him — because when we let people emotionally break us, we crave their approval more than anything. I was the victim of an abusive system, an abusive man. I was constantly tormented by the conflict of wanting to be free from him and wanting to go back to the way things used to be, when I was his favorite.¹⁰

Cain's story poignantly depicts an athlete who internalized her coach's abuse, and no longer trusts her truth that something is wrong. She is paralyzed by fear — fear of her coach, fear of failure, fear of being rejected by the coach, and worst of all, fear of her own fear. Like a fly struggling to escape a spider's web, the more she struggles, the more entangled she becomes.

Controls the Environment

A covert emotionally abusive coach creates an environment where they are the absolute authority, and people are afraid to challenge them. Over time this deliberate and devious process divides people involved in the program into categories – us and them, supporters and detractors. Ultimately, this insidious

¹⁰ [*I Was the Fastest Girl in America. Until I Joined Nike*](#)

process results in vulnerable athletes being isolated from caring friends and family and tangled in the coach's web of abuse. I spell out this cruel progression in the next two sections.

Asserts an “Infallible” Authority and Demands Compliance

Rather than working in true partnership with the athlete, the abusive coach asserts an absolute and “infallible” authority. If an athlete speaks up, voices concern, questions, disagrees with, or challenges the coach, the coach claims that the coach knows best.

The coach questions the athlete's commitment and loyalty, and preys on the athlete's devotion to progress, fear of failure, and self-doubt. The coach says things like, “I made you the success that you are,” “Without me your dreams won't come true,” “Maybe you just don't have what it takes to be a champion,” “No one else on the team has a problem with my coaching,” “Your fear and doubt are holding you back,” or “You are the only one on the team complaining.”

Again, these tactics cause athletes to doubt themselves, their inner wisdom, and their truth that “something isn't right.”

Resists Being Questioned or Engaging in Constructive Dialogue

For an athlete (or staff member) to remain in an abusive coach's inner circle, and retain their coveted “special” status, the coach requires that the athlete consistently prove they will not question the coach, or associate with people who do.

Narcissists [many covert emotionally abusive coaches] don't want honest relationships, they want cheerleaders... They want blind loyalty. They want unconditional acceptance, no matter what they do. As long as you don't question anything they do... they might just leave you alone. But watch out, if you disagree with them, or go against them in any way. In their eyes, this is the deepest betrayal. And it never goes unpunished. Narcissists are spiteful and vindictive.¹¹

¹¹ Facebook quote attributed to Maria Consiglio

Refuses to be Observed, and Evades Independent Oversight

The covert emotionally abusive coach is terrified of having their toxic behaviors exposed, and limits access to the training environment. Remember Maggie Haney, the gymnastic coach suspended by USA Gymnastics? Her gym handbook (excerpted in the NYT article) stated “Parents are NOT allowed to stay and watch practice;” and “There are NO EXCEPTIONS!” And Olympic Gold Medalist Jordyn Wieber noted in an ESPN interview, “The whole abusive culture [at USA Gymnastics] was contingent on it being very closed off from the world, including from your own parents.”¹²

The next section details the specific steps an abusive coach uses to progressively isolate athletes.

Progressively Separates People to Ultimately Isolate Victims

The progression from division, to separation, to complete isolation is a deliberate and devious process. The process intensifies the control of the environment described above. The coach divides people into supporters and detractors, demonizes the detractors, demands that “loyal” supporters shun the detractors, and ultimately isolates the victim from their support system. An athlete isolated from concerned friends and family is much easier to abuse. The real-life examples below demonstrate this insidious process.

Demonizes Those Who Raise Concerns

An emotionally abusive coach subtly undermines or directly demonizes and ostracizes athletes, parents, and staff who courageously question the coach. The coach will say that a teammate who is raising concerns “doesn’t have what it takes,” or “is just jealous,” or that the astute assistant coach pointing out patterns “doesn’t know what they’re talking about.”

If an athlete’s parents point out patterns, the coach will tell the athlete: “Your parents don’t understand what’s required to get to the next level,” “Your parents don’t support your desire to excel,” and “Your parents’ doubts are holding you back.”

¹² [*Jordyn Wieber Survived Abuse, and is Now Out to Change Gymnastics Culture*](#)

Demands that “Loyal” Supporters Shun Detractors

The next step in the process is that the coach demands that “loyal” supporters shun anyone raising concerns. In the example below, Northern Kentucky University Basketball player Taryn M. Taugher describes how her coach, Camryn Whitaker, forced players to shun teammates who were raising concerns about Whitaker’s abusive coaching. Taugher writes,

She [Coach Whitaker] would warn players not to hang out with other players, calling those players "negative" or saying that "they weren't in a good place." These players were the ones that were not shy about their dislike of Coach Whitaker.

Word quickly spread that if you associated with Shar'rae (one of Taugher’s teammates who was raising concerns), then your playing time would diminish, and you would face the wrath of Coach Whitaker. Shar'rae sat alone on the bus, in the restaurant, and was even moved into her own hotel room when everyone else had a roommate.¹³

Abusive coaches demand similar obedience from parents and staff. Expanding on her description, Taugher says that Whitaker told a player, “If your parents don't get on board with what I'm doing, then you don't have a place on this team next year.”

When teammates, family, and staff don’t revere and comply with the emotionally abusive coach, the coach demands that “loyal” athletes separate from and shun those with concerns.

The abusive coach uses the demonizing and shunning to exile people raising legitimate concerns, thus, prevent detractors from exposing the coach’s abusive behavior, and ultimately isolating the athlete from caring friends and family who recognize the abuse.

¹³ [*Behind Closed Doors: Abuse In Northern Kentucky University Women's Basketball Program*](#)

Isolates Victims from Family and Friends

An isolated athlete is easy to abuse.

U.S. Soccer star Carli Lloyd's experience provides a heartbreaking example of a coach slowly and deliberately separating and isolating her from her family. Over the 17 years that James Galanis coached Lloyd, he deviously drove a wedge between Lloyd and her family. Galanis told Lloyd to "Steer clear of anything [including family] that isn't helping you get where you want to go."¹⁴ Initially, Lloyd felt that such commands were supporting her athletic excellence.

However, when analyzed through the metaphor of the web, the statement is one shimmering thread Galanis wove to isolate Lloyd from her family and her teammates, and to make her dependent on him.

Like so many victims of covert emotional abuse, Lloyd referred to her coach James Galanis as her "guru". For over a decade, she rarely communicated with her family. She did not invite her parents to her wedding; she didn't attend her sister's. Her family did not immediately tell her about her father's heart surgery, and they weren't with her to celebrate her historic hat-trick at the 2015 World Cup Final. The family blame Galanis for the estrangement

During the pandemic, Lloyd had COVID and surgery. Time away from Galanis allowed her to recognize his abuse, the damage he had done to her relationships with her family, and what had been lost. To repair her relationship with her family, she broke her 17-year tie with Galanis.¹⁵

She now says that she was "brainwashed and manipulated" into separating from her family for 12 years, and she regrets "missing out on so many things."¹⁶

¹⁴ Lloyd, Carli; Coffey, Wayne. [When Nobody Was Watching: My Hard-Fought Journey to the Top of the Soccer World](#). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2016

¹⁵ [Carli Llyod was estranged from her family for 12 years. A lost year reunited them.](#)

¹⁶ [Hey, I'm Carli Lloyd](#)

With her parents, sister and brother now back in her life, Lloyd said, “I feel whole again.”¹⁷

Distorts the Truth

The covert emotionally abusive coach lies and compels athletes and staff to lie. Ultimately the coach creates an environment where truth and lies are transposed: The abusive coach presents their lies as the truth, and aggressively asserts that people who are telling the truth about the coach’s abuse are lying.

Coerces Secrets and False Confessions; Gossips and Lies

An abusive coach may control athletes by coercing them to share secrets and even compel them to confess to things they didn’t do. For example, a coach may accuse an athlete of minor infractions, such as not completing their drills or having a bad attitude. To avoid the coach’s wrath, the athlete will simply apologize and promise to do better.

The coach uses these tactics to determine if an athlete is vulnerable and willing to lie; to intimidate, humiliate, and alienate the athlete; and, to portray the athlete as untrustworthy.

If coercing and disclosing confessions isn’t enough to undermine an athlete’s or concerned person’s credibility, an abusive coach will also gossip, spread rumors, and lie about them. And at the same time, the coach will lie about their own behavior, vehemently denying accusations and portraying themselves as beyond reproach. These tactics are intended to simultaneously discredit those who speak out against the coach and enhance the coach’s reputation.

Two popular quotes will help you see these threads of abuse. “Never trust anyone who tells you other people’s secrets.” “When a toxic person can no longer control you, they will try to control how others see you.”

¹⁷ [Carli Llyod was estranged from her family for 12 years. A lost year reunited them.](#)

Requires Silence and Lying

Like an abusive spouse, boss, teacher, movie producer, scout leader, or priest, an emotionally abusive coach may also require their athletes to maintain silence and/or tell progressively more incredible lies, to the athlete's own detriment.

The abusive coach uses phrases commonly used by abusers: "Don't tell anyone about this;" "Let's keep this between us," "If anyone asks, just say...", "I didn't say/ do that," "You misunderstood," "You aren't remembering it correctly," "That's not what happened," "I only want what's best for you," or "If you don't..., then I will..." (e.g., "If you don't lie, I will cut you from the team.")

Consider the following example. As described in a *USA Today* article, John Geddert, a former USA Gymnastics coach convicted of multiple felonies, is an extreme example of an emotionally abusive coach lying and compelling an athlete *and* her prospective college coach to lie. Bridgette Frost, special agent for the Michigan Attorney General, testified that due to Geddert's abuse, one of his gymnasts attempted suicide. Frost said:

At a meeting shortly after the suicide attempt, Geddert required her to apologize to him for the attempt on her life. He was concerned it would ruin both of their reputations and cause her to lose scholarship opportunities. At the meeting it was decided that they would lie, and she would say she had an allergic reaction.

After the girl received a college scholarship, Geddert called her coach and advised the coach to pull the scholarship because she was "lazy and did not want to work." Geddert asked the coach to put in writing that he had never contacted her.¹⁸

Consider how cruel this is. According to special agent Frost, Geddert was so abusive one of his gymnasts attempted suicide. When Geddert found out, he

¹⁸ [*Court Records Show Ex-USA Gymnastics Coach John Geddert Inflicted Extreme Emotional Abuse on Young Athletes*](#)

did not demonstrate concern or remorse. Instead, he made her apologize for the suicide attempt and the affect it would have on *his* reputation. Then he coerced both the gymnast and her future college coach to lie.

Special Agent Frost’s testimony demonstrates how narcissistic and immoral an abusive coach can be, and that athletes in emotionally abusive relationships will lie, to their own peril, to appease their coach and retain or restore their “special” status.

Plays the Victim and Is a Master of DENIAL!!!! (emphasis per Dr. Goldberg)

Renowned sports psychologist Dr. Alan Goldberg says, “Unfortunately, most coaches who engage in abuse also refuse to take an honest look at themselves. Because of a well-honed sense of denial, they would never admit to themselves or others that they might be doing something wrong. In fact, the abusive coach sees him/herself as a very good coach!”¹⁹

Suspended USA Gymnastics coach Haney exemplifies this absolute lack of insight, level of denial, and absence of remorse. In a NYT piece, Haney declared that USA Gymnastics used her as a scapegoat after its missteps in the Nassar case, and that the accusations (including those from Hernandez, whom she coached from age 6) had come out of nowhere. She said, “These situations are not at all the way I recall them,” and “I think my mistakes were that I cared too much.”²⁰

Gaslights and “Messses with Your Head”

The psychological term for this subtle, insidious, and increasingly manipulative transposing of truth and lies is gaslighting. *Gaslighting* is a form of emotional abuse or psychological manipulation involving distorting the truth to confuse or create doubt in another person to the point they question their sanity or reality. As Olympic gymnast Laurie Hernandez poignantly stated in the NYT,

¹⁹ [*Coaching ABUSE: The dirty, not-so-little secret in sports*](#)

²⁰ [*A Gymnastics Coach Accused of Emotional Abuse Speaks Out*](#)

“The toughest part about it was that there were no bruises or marks to show that it was real. It was all just so twisted that I thought it couldn’t be real.”²¹

The ultimate cruelty is that eventually the emotional abuse becomes internalized. The athlete blames themselves, and convinces themselves that they are being weak, that their success depends entirely on “The Coach,” that they just need to work harder, and that they deserve the abuse.

Abused Athletes Succeed Despite, Not Because of, the Abusive Coach

All too often parents, staff and institutions enable abusive coaches because their teams are winning, or they are producing champions. Although abusive coaches love to take credit for their athletes’ success, the success of an abused athlete belongs entirely to the athlete who has overcome unimaginable cruelty.

In a *New Yorker* interview, Olympic Gold Medalist, Aly Raisman, eloquently states, “There’s a better way — building someone up instead of tearing someone down, creating an environment where abuse is not allowed. I always say that I competed and did well while I was being abused, and we were being traumatized repeatedly, and there was so much pressure. If you take away the abuse, and you make it an environment where I’m not doing well out of fear, and I’m not terrified that if I fall I’m going to get in so much trouble, don’t you think that we would do even better? I think it’s a no brainer that you’re going to do better when you’re not being abused at the Olympics.”²²

One Abused Athlete is One Too Many

As with any form of abuse, we must remember that just because some athletes claim they weren’t abused by a particular coach does not mean that the coach didn’t abuse other athletes.

²¹ [*Olympic Gymnast Recalls Emotional Abuse ‘So Twisted That I Thought It Couldn’t Be Real’*](#)

²² [*Aly Raisman Still Wants Answers*](#)

Consider these comments from an external review of Coach Whitaker at NKU. “There were four players who alleged that Whitaker was emotionally abusive to them as a coach but 10 who felt the experience at NKU was positive and that no abuse occurred. All but one player who was critical did not get significant playing time.”²³ The comments imply that players complained of abuse because they were getting less playing time. Apparently, the reviewers did not consider the possibility that, as Taugher described, the players exposing Whitaker’s abuse were being punished with decreased playing time, manipulation, and isolation.

In an article from Insider.com, former Cornell softball player Hillary Dole explains why some athletes defend an abusive coach. “Teammates are apt to keep quiet in the presence of wrongdoings out of fear of missing out on playing time or jeopardizing their future on the team. As a result, coaches face minimal to no consequences for their actions, allowing for continued mistreatment of their players. Meanwhile, those who try to speak up are discarded and portrayed as unhappy with the amount of playing time they got, or unable to handle the demanding schedule college athletics requires.”²⁴

An abusive coach has favorites. Their favorites keep silent or, worse yet, defend the coach. Abused athletes are portrayed as disgruntled and weak. Institutional enablers look the other way. And the abuse continues, especially if the team is winning.

Heal It: Ending Cycles of Abuse

Once the threads and patterns are made visible, we can see the entire web of covert emotional abuse. Seeing it allows us to stop it. And stopping it allows us to heal it.

²³ [External review of NKU women’s basketball program finds no evidence of ‘emotional abuse’ by head coach](#)

²⁴ [Female college athletes from across the US say they’ve been bullied, manipulated, and psychologically abused by their coaches](#)

The global sports community's highest priority must be to heal abused athletes. Yet to end the cycle of abuse, the abusive coach and the culture that promotes abuse must be reformed.

Healing the Athlete: Treatment

Healing the athlete begins with *believing* the athlete (or the schoolkid, musician, actor, grocery store clerk, business executive, parishioner, military cadet, family member). Courageous victims speak out to have their experiences witnessed and validated, to heal, to show others suffering in silence that they are not alone, to prevent further abuse, and to serve justice.

My Experience

In devotion to healing, prevention, and justice, I offer a brief account of my story. In August of 2020, a neuropsychologist determined that my relationship with my life coach of thirty-one years, Georgina Lindsey, was one of “undue influence” (aka covert emotional abuse). The neuropsychologist made this determination based on seven hours of neuropsychological testing, two hours of conversation with Lindsey, and one hour of conversation with my husband. When the neuropsychologist shared this heart-wrenching diagnosis, the web became visible, and I began the excruciating work of untangling and healing.

Throughout the course of this coaching relationship, loved ones pointed out many of the threads and patterns of covert emotional abuse. Yet, no one saw the whole web. The coach had conditioned me to trust her and reject the concerns of family and friends — concerns that ultimately proved to be valid.

Abuse Rehab and Return to Play

The debilitating mental, emotional, and spiritual injuries resulting from all forms of abuse (including covert emotional abuse) must be treated with state-of-the-art care, equivalent to the treatment of “visible” physical injuries (such as ACL tears) and “invisible” physical injuries (such as concussions).

Using the analogy of a visible injury of a ruptured ACL, consider the mental, emotional, spiritual equivalent of grimace-inducing physical therapy, deep tissue massage, stretching, weightlifting, conditioning, gradually increasing training and then playing time.

The shift required to heal the hidden injuries of abuse is exemplified in the rapid evolution of concussion care. Although the evolution was far too long in coming, now when an athlete is concussed, we no longer say “The hit wasn’t that hard. You are fine. Quit exaggerating. Get back out there.”

For both visible and invisible physical injuries, we now acknowledge the devastating effects of the injury, provide scientifically based, individually-paced rehab, and do everything we can to facilitate true healing and safe return to play. We must do the same with athletes who have experienced emotional, physical, or sexual abuse.

It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed discussion of state-of-the-art treatment for abuse. But a brief list of some modalities with proven benefit includes talk therapy, embodied movement, EMDR (eye movement desensitization and reprogramming), somatic therapy, medication as needed for anxiety and depression, as well as mindfulness and self-compassion (both of which have been scientifically shown to decrease anxiety, depression, and PTSD, and to enhance athletic, academic, and work performance).

Each individual should be treated according to their unique circumstances, by a team of trauma-sensitive providers who have expertise in both sport and abuse. Victims should be compassionately supported to engage in personally paced rehab, to trust and honor their unique healing process, and to offer themselves both tender and fierce self-compassion as they feel their rage and grief.^{25 26}

For most athletes, this strenuous emotional rehab is more than enough. And, as with physical rehab, skipping preliminary steps and rushing the healing process may result in reinjury, and even long-term disability.

²⁵ Neff, Kristin. [*Self Compassion: Stop Beating Yourself up and Leave Insecurity Behind*](#). William Morrow, 2011.

²⁶ Neff, Kristin. [*Fierce Self-Compassion: How Women Can Harness Kindness to Speak up, Claim Their Power, and... Thrive*](#). Penguin Life, 2022.

Forgiving the Coach?

Some athletes may find that forgiving the abusive coach is healing. I do.

However, there is absolutely no need for an athlete to forgive an abusive coach. Any athlete considering forgiving an abusive coach should do so *only if and when* they feel truly ready. And an athlete should not attempt forgiveness *until* they have completed the essential, preliminary phases of rehab described above, and returned to their desired level of “play.” (Recovering athletes deserve to define play as they wish, in sport and in life.)

In the excerpt from my book cited below, and again in the section titled Begin Cycles of Healing, I draw on Rachel Denhollander’s wisdom regarding the value of coupling the elite level skill of forgiveness with seeking justice. In my book (which was written before my diagnosis), I say

Forgiveness doesn’t mean that the behavior that you’re forgiving was okay. If a behavior needs to be forgiven, then it was unkind, harmful, or even cruel. Also, just because you forgive someone doesn’t mean you don’t take steps to address the situation. Have a rigorous, supervised conversation with the person who harmed you; set clear expectations; if necessary, set strict limits on your interactions; and get support from a coach, therapist, institutional governing body, and legal adviser.

If thoughts arise such as “there are some behaviors that are unforgivable,” consider Rachel Denhollander. Rachel is one of the hundreds of gymnasts abused by Larry Nassar. After experiencing unspeakable abuse, Rachel offers an extraordinarily powerful demonstration of forgiveness practice. When she was asked “What does it mean to you that you forgive Larry Nassar?” she *responded*, “...I release bitterness and anger and a desire for personal vengeance. It does not mean that I minimize or mitigate or excuse what he has done. It does not mean that I pursue justice on earth any less zealously. It simply means that I release personal vengeance against him...”

Rachel chose to let go of the coal of vengeance and apply the healing salve of forgiveness to her wounds. As with her gymnastics, Rachel's forgiveness practice demonstrates a level of mastery many of us may not attain. So as you begin to develop this skill, start where you are, diligently practice your fundamentals, and consistently build toward this high degree of difficulty.²⁷

In summary, to support an athlete's healing we must do all of the following: believe the athlete has suffered a crippling injury, acknowledge the associated devastation, help them honor their unique process and timeline, and encourage them as they do the grueling, healing work — work that is the foundation for the gradual progression from victim to survivor to thriver. Then we can celebrate with them when they return to play, however they choose to define it.

Healing the Coach: Prevention

As the saying goes “Hurt people hurt people.” Almost always, the abusive coach's behavior is due to intense feelings of unworthiness and a desperate need for power and adoration. These unconscious drives are usually the result of the coach's adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) — how they were raised, treated in school, and/or coached.

Wounded Narcissist

In his article on coaching abuse, Dr. Alan Goldberg describes this behavior specifically related to an abusive athletic coach.

Deep down, the abusive coach is a damaged human being. He/she is emotionally stunted and immature. The abusive coach usually suffers from deep seated feelings of inadequacy, and he/she unknowingly acts these feelings out on his/her athletes. Unlike healthier human beings, the abusive coach is not able to take an honest look at his/her own

²⁷ Saltzman, Amy, [*A Still Quiet Place for Athletes: Mindfulness Skills for Achieving Peak Performance and Finding Flow in Sports and in Life*](#), New Harbinger, 2018.

behaviors. This individual is too busy defending him/herself and blaming others. The abusive coach is a pro at playing head games and manipulating others.... In this way the abusive coach never takes responsibility for his/her bad behavior. Like all abusers, he/she is good at convincing the victims that it is they who should feel guilty and responsible.²⁸

In his book *Traumatic Narcissism: Relational Systems of Subjugation*,²⁹ Daniel Shaw describes this cycle of narcissistic abuse in more detail. Children raised by narcissistic parents (and, by extension, coached by narcissistic coaches) are more likely to become abusive narcissists themselves. The narcissistic mother is self-obsessed. She resents and ignores the natural feelings and healthy needs of the child. As a result, the child learns to ignore their own feelings and needs, and to fear and despise their own dependency. Thus, when the child grows up, they are more likely to become an abusive parent (or coach, teacher, record producer, therapist, boss, or even cult leader) — a person who, according to Shaw, is extremely dependent “on the follower’s submission and psychological enslavement.”³⁰ (Shaw succinctly presents this information in a YouTube video.)³¹

Healing before Coaching

This explanation in no way excuses abusive behavior. Yet it suggests that to end the cycle of abuse, society must screen coaches for adverse childhood experiences, narcissism, and other harmful personality disorders. Aspiring coaches with these predisposing issues must be supported in healing their wounds *before* they begin coaching. Coaches who actively participate in their own healing will feel whole and worthy, and they won’t need to seek power over and validation from their athletes.

²⁸ [*Coaching ABUSE: The dirty, not-so-little secret in sports*](#)

²⁹ Shaw, Daniel, [*Traumatic Narcissism: Relational Systems of Subjugation*](#), Routledge, 2014

³⁰ [*Traumatic Abuse in Cults: A Psychoanalytic Perspective*](#)

³¹ [*Traumatic Narcissism: The Psychology of Cult Leaders*](#), The relevant section begins at 31 minutes.

Identifying coaches who need support to heal their trauma, early in their careers, will significantly decrease the likelihood that they will perpetuate the cycle of abuse and perpetrate their unresolved trauma on our children. Ultimately, coaches must be required to show proficiency in positive, holistic, athlete-centered coaching.

Taking this a step further, ideally, society should identify and heal everyone's early childhood trauma during K-12 education. Yung Pueblo says "Heal yourself, not just so that you can thrive, but to ensure that people who cross your path in the future are safer from harm."³² Let's require and support everyone, especially those working with youth, to heal their wounds, so that they don't wound our children.

Healing Society: Public Health

To keep our children safe, we must not only dismantle the spider's web, but also create a safety net of prevention, healing, and protection. Enacting all ten mandates below is crucial to ending the epidemic of abuse and beginning cycles of healing.

1) **Screen and Train Coaches and Staff**

- Complete background checks for all coaches and staff as part of the hiring process, and once a year thereafter.
- Check national and international SafeSport and sex offender databases (to prevent abusers from moving from one age group, gender, club, or country to another).
- Require that all staff be licensed/ credentialed by the relevant governing body.
- Require that all staff be SafeSport I, II, and III certified.
- Obtain references from at least two previous employers for any potential hire.
- Ask three verified former athletes to complete the [anonymous athlete experience survey](#) for any potential hire.

³² Pueblo, Young. [Clarity & Connection](#). Andrews McMeel Publishing. 2021

- Be thorough during the [hiring process](#), and insist on specifics if we are told anything along the lines of “We had a parting of the ways.” “We didn’t share the same coaching philosophy.” “The coach left for personal reasons.” When in doubt, investigate further.
- Ask [screening questions](#) designed to detect abusers.
- Require all new hires to read and sign a [conduct agreement](#) form.
- Train all staff regarding all types of prohibited conduct as part of the hiring process, and once a year thereafter.
- Offer training to enhance [positive, holistic, athlete-centered coaching](#) as part of the hiring process and once a year thereafter.
- Promote coaches and staff who prioritize athletes’ physical, mental, and emotional health and well-being.

2) Educate Athletes, Parents, Coaches, and Staff to See and Stop All Forms of Abuse

- Recognize the inherent power imbalance in the coach-athlete relationship, the vulnerability of athletes, and the high risk for abuse.
- Recognize that (non-coaching) staff, and teammates may be abusive.
- Recognize that covert emotional abuse is as harmful as overt emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.
- Use simple, age-appropriate examples to teach athletes of all ages (and their parents) how to spot sneaky (covert) emotional abuse, which is often a gateway to physical and sexual abuse.
- Promote [“How to Spot Spider”](#) viewings (or equivalent training) for all new athletes and parents and offer training to all athletes and parents at least once a year.

3) Establish Systems of Accountability for All Coaches and Staff

- Implement and conduct an ongoing review process, including third party observation of all coaches and staff.
- Distribute decision-making and prevent situations in which athletes feel they must please one specific coach. (This includes having at least three

independent decision-makers recommend/select athletes for regional, national, or Olympic teams.)

- Require that all staff (e.g., management, front office personnel, coaches, trainers, equipment managers) act as legally mandated reporters.
- Empower athletes, parents, coaches, and staff to report all types of abuse.
- Create simple, clear, well-publicized, anonymous, safe reporting systems for victims and whistleblowers.
- Establish an Athlete Safety Committee (ASC) that includes a trauma-sensitive health care professional and at least two athletes (or parents if athletes are under 18).
- Schedule ASC meetings at least twice a year, and within one week when any concern is raised.
- Proactively and anonymously [survey](#) athletes about what they see and how they feel in their sporting environment, at least once a year.
- Use clear, specific language when asking athletes about their experiences with coaches and staff.
- Ensure that an athlete never has to directly interact with a person of concern.
- Ensure an athlete has an advocate of their choosing to support them and/or speak on their behalf in all conversations regarding potential abuse.
- Provide an independent, trauma-sensitive health care professional to support and/or speak on the athlete's behalf in all conversations regarding potential abuse.

4) Promptly investigate all complaints of abuse

- Initiate an investigation within one week of receiving a complaint of any type of abuse.
- Engage a truly independent, trauma-sensitive third party to respond compassionately and comprehensively to every report of abuse.

- Unless initial findings unambiguously determine no wrongdoing, suspend the accused person until the full investigation is completed.
- Complete each investigation within one month of receiving the complaint.
- Complete each investigation even if the accused “steps down,” “retires,” “moves,” or “is released”

5) Act to Protect Our Athletes and All Athletes

- When an investigation determines that abuse has occurred, hold ourselves to a standard of timely personal and institutional transparency, responsibility, public apologies, and all-inclusive amends (emotional, procedural, and financial).
- Maintain a zero-tolerance policy and fire coaches and staff who emotionally, physically, or sexually abuse athletes.
- Promptly report abuse to the appropriate sport and legal authorities.
- Enforce professional consequences for any adult (coaches, staff, owners) who fails to be proactive, responsible, and responsive in addressing athlete safety, health, and well-being (including covering up or failing to report abuse of any type).
- Forbid retaliation (demoting, cutting, firing, blacklisting) against athletes, parents, and staff who report abuse.

6) Consistently adhere to ALL [SafeSport](#) policies

7) Respond Promptly and Compassionately to All Reports of Abuse

- Recognize that covert emotional abuse is as harmful as overt emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.
- Fully fund and staff club, national, and international programs to respond compassionately and comprehensively to every report of abuse within one month.
- Ensure truly independent, trauma-sensitive investigations are performed by people with expertise in all types of abuse. In an article on female

college athletes' experiences of psychological abuse, Shannon Thomas, a trauma therapist, said "The people conducting these [independent] investigations are most often trained in law and procedure — they might not know what psychological and emotional abuse looks like and might overlook it. 'It would be like having a foot doctor try to diagnose brain cancer. They don't even know what they're looking for.'"³³

8) Enact Laws That Protect Athletes and Deter Abusers and Conspirators

- Create a trauma-sensitive legal system to minimize the re-traumatization and maximize the empowerment of victims.
- Abolish the statute of limitations for all forms of abuse.
- Make covert and overt emotional abuse, and overt physical abuse, criminal offenses— punishable to the same extent as sexual abuse.
- Incorporate restorative justice practices into all legal proceedings.
- Specify the right to punitive damages for all types of abuse.
- Expand sex offender databases to track all types of abuse.
- Allow the public disclosure (at the victim's discretion) of the terms of any settlement.
- Enforce professional and legal consequences for any adult (from club owners to local police, to the FBI) who fails to be proactive, responsible, and responsive in addressing athlete safety, health, and well-being, including failing to investigate and report, or covering up abuse of any type.

9) Heal Athletes

- Provide and fund sport-informed, trauma-sensitive therapy for all victims of abuse.
- Skillfully and compassionately support victims throughout their healing process.

³³ [*Female College Athletes from Across the US Say They've Been Bullied, Manipulated and Psychologically Abused by Their Coaches*](#)

- Optimize treatment of each individual according to their unique neurodevelopmental, abuse, and sport history.

10) Maximize Media and Sponsor Influence

- Support trauma sensitive, investigative journalism that reports the truth, uncovers coverups, and holds abusers and accomplices accountable.
- Promote solutions-based reporting.
- Encourage athletes to harness the power of social media to tell their stories.
- Amplify athletes' messages so they know people believe and support them.
- Publicly pressure sponsors to insist that clubs and leagues enact protective policies.

This comprehensive safety net will ensure that coaches are held accountable, and that staff and institutions do not become bystanders, enablers, or worse, conspirators. Any program that fails to include all ten mandates is dangerously incomplete. Furthermore, similar mandates should be incorporated into every sector of society — entertainment, politics, academics, business, religion, armed services, recreational clubs and groups, and families.

Begin Cycles of Healing

In combination, the mandates detailed above will protect millions of people from the severe psychological harm caused by covert emotional abuse (and the often compounding physical and sexual abuse); ensure their safety and well-being; let them thrive physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually; and ultimately create cycles of healing.

Jordyn Wieber, former Olympian, abuse survivor, and current head coach of the University of Arkansas Women's Gymnastics, provides an exquisite example of a cycle of healing. Wieber says, "The culture we're trying to develop is open and vulnerable and communicative. The way we get our athletes to do that is by modeling communication and vulnerability. It also takes our team

leaders being willing to speak up and say things that are uncomfortable. When one person does that, they give permission to others to do the same."³⁴

Sometime after accepting my devastating diagnosis, I reread Rachel Denhollendar’s full interview on forgiveness.³⁵ In the interview, she goes on to make two crucial distinctions. First, forgiveness must be coupled with justice. Second, “the extent that one is willing to speak out against their own community is the bright line test for how much they care and how much they understand.”

I care. I understand. And I am speaking out to help prevent even one more person from being abused, and to support the healing process for survivors.

Resources

Title	Description
ACEs Questionnaire	Assesses adverse childhood experiences
Army of Survivors	Brings awareness, accountability and transparency to sexual violence against athletes at all levels
Champion Women	Advocates for girls and women in sport
Darkness2Light	Empowers adults to prevent child abuse

³⁴ [*Jordyn Wieber Survived Abuse, and is Now Out to Change Gymnastics Culture*](#)

³⁵ [*My Larry Nassar Testimony Went Viral. But There’s More to the Gospel Than Forgiveness*](#)

<u>Neuro Sequential Network</u>	Integrates core principles of neurodevelopment and traumatology to inform work with children, families, and the communities in which they live
<u>Positive Coaching Alliance</u>	Cultivates a positive youth sports culture
<u>Project Play</u>	Develops, applies, and shares knowledge that helps stakeholders build healthy communities through sports
<u>US Center for SafeSport</u>	Makes athlete well-being the centerpiece of the nation's sports culture through abuse prevention, education, and accountability
<u>SafeSport Code of Conduct</u>	Formalizes the official safe sport policy for all Olympic, Paralympic, Pan American, and Para Pan American sports in the United States

References