

Policies and Procedures for Ending Abuse in Sports



This document is for ALL adults who are responsible for protecting athlete safety, health and well-being and preventing all types of abuse in their spheres of influence. Abuse includes covert and overt emotional abuse, as well as physical and sexual abuse. Responsible adults include parents, guardians, coaches, club directors, national and international governing body leaders, SafeSport leaders, International Olympic committee members, state, national, and international legislators, health care and law enforcement professionals.

We all know that teaching children to cross the street is necessary but not sufficient to ensure their safety. As with traffic safety, sport safety also depends on carefully considered, universally recognized, and diligently enforced rules of the road.

Children, teens, and young adults can be taught to recognize and report both the subtle behaviors of grooming and covert emotional abuse (the behaviors of sneaky spiders) and the blatant behaviors of overt abuse (the behaviors of obvious spiders).

However, teaching athletes to spot sneaky and obvious spiders is necessary but not sufficient to ensure their safety during sports participation. Unfortunately, our current “rules of the road” for protecting athletes from abuse are wholly inadequate, and the rules we do have are rarely enforced. Thus, we need a comprehensive system for protecting athletes from all types of abuse.

Such a system includes the following:

- a clear, unequivocal, international code of ethics (equivalent to traffic laws);
- mandatory education for coaches and staff (equivalent to professional driver training); and
- promptly enforced consequences such as firing, suspending, and banning abusive coaches, and those in positions of authority who enable abuse (equivalent to suspending and revoking the licenses of dangerous drivers).

Together we can prevent abuse and create healthy environments for athletes to achieve peak performance and find flow.

Below is a list of eleven mandates. Mandates 1-6 come directly from Spot a Spider’s recommended [Code of Ethics](#). Mandates 7-11 address the legislative, therapeutic, and societal measures we must enact to end the epidemic of abuse in sports and begin cycles of healing.

Policies and Procedures for Clubs and Leagues

We commit to

- Prioritize athlete physical, mental, and emotional safety, health and well-being.
- Ensure a positive, holistic, athlete-centered sport experience for every athlete.
- Prevent all types of abuse (sneaky/covert emotional abuse, as well as obvious/overt emotional, physical, and sexual abuse) by doing the following

1. Screen and Train Coaches and Staff

- Check national and international SafeSport and sex offender databases for all coaches and staff as part of the hiring process and once a year thereafter. These checks 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.
- Obtain references from at least two previous employers for any potential hire.
- Have three verified former athletes complete the [anonymous athlete experience survey](#) for any potential coaching hire.
- 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, we investigate further.
- Ask [screening questions](#) designed to detect potential abusers.
- Require all new hires to read and sign a [conduct agreement](#).
- Require that all staff be SafeSport I, II, and III certified.
- Train all staff regarding all types of prohibited conduct as part of the hiring process, and once a year thereafter.
- Educate coaches regarding [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 also may be abusive.
- Recognize that covert emotional abuse is as harmful as overt emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.
- Understand that covert emotional abuse is often a gateway to physical and sexual abuse.

- Use simple, age-appropriate examples to teach all new athletes (and their parents) how to spot sneaky (covert) emotional abuse (aka grooming), and obvious (overt) emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (using “How to Spot Spider” videos or equivalent training).
- Offer abuse prevention training to all athletes and parents at least once a year.

3. Establish Systems of Accountability for All Coaches and Staff

- Require informed consent in every athlete interaction (especially in sports like gymnastics that require physical adjustments or spotting).
- Implement and conduct an ongoing review process (including third party observation) of all coaches and staff.
- Require that all staff (e.g., management, front office personnel, coaches, trainers, equipment managers) act as legally mandated reporters.
- 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.
- Create simple, clear, well-publicized, anonymous, and safe reporting systems for victims and whistleblowers.
- Forbid retaliation (i.e., demoting, cutting, firing, blacklisting) against athletes, parents, and staff who report abuse.
- Distribute decision-making, to prevent situations in which athletes feel they must please one specific coach. (At the elite level, this includes having at least three independent decision-makers recommend/select athletes for regional, national, or Olympic teams.)
- Establish an Athlete Safety Committee (ASC) that includes a trauma-sensitive health care professional and at least two athletes (or parents if the athletes are under 18).
- Schedule ASC meetings at least twice a year, and within one week when any concern is raised.
- 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 (with expertise in grooming, covert emotional abuse, coercive control, and overt emotional, physical and sexual abuse) to respond compassionately and comprehensively to every report of abuse.
- Suspend the accused person until a 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. Be Accountable. Report Abuse. Make Amends.

- When an investigation determines that abuse has occurred, hold ourselves to a standard of timely personal and institutional transparency and responsibility.
- Maintain a zero-tolerance policy and fire coaches and staff who emotionally, physically, or sexually abuse athletes.
- Promptly report the abuser to the appropriate sport and legal authorities.
- Enforce professional consequences for any adult (coaches, staff, or owners) who failed to be proactive, responsible, and responsive in addressing athlete safety, health, and well-being. (This includes enforcing consequences for those who fail to report, or who cover up abuse of any type).
- Make public apologies, and all-inclusive amends (emotional, procedural, and financial).
- Report the abuser to the media to prevent them from moving from one age group, gender, club, or country to another.

6. Consistently Adhere to ALL SafeSport Policies

Legislative, Therapeutic, and Societal Mandates

7. Mandate Improvements in SafeSport and National Governing Bodies (NGBs) Abuse Prevention and Investigation Processes

- Require that SafeSport and NGBs ensure that their member organizations implement all the measures listed above.
- Require that the SafeSport and NGB processes for reporting abuse be well-publicized, clear, anonymous, and trauma informed.
- Require that SafeSport and NGBs resolve the current backlog of cases within one year, initiate investigations of new cases within one week, and file a preliminary response regarding every allegation within one month.
- Require that SafeSport and NGB investigations be conducted by independent, trauma-sensitive staff with expertise in grooming, covert emotional abuse, coercive control, and overt emotional, physical and sexual abuse. This will minimize the re-traumatization and maximize the empowerment of victims.
- Require that SafeSport and NGBs suspend the respondent until the investigation is completed.
- Require that SafeSport and NGBs complete investigations even if the respondent “steps down,” “moves,” or “is released.”

- Offer athletes, especially victims/survivors, the opportunity to lead the process of reforming SafeSport and NGB policies and procedures.
- Mandate that the revamped investigation process include collection and retention of verifiable data and ongoing review, oversight, and improvement.

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

- Recognize that covert emotional abuse is as harmful as overt emotional, physical, and sexual abuse.
- Make covert and overt emotional abuse, and overt physical abuse, criminal offenses—punishable to the same extent as sexual abuse.
- Specify the right to punitive damages for all types of abuse.
- Expand sex offender databases to track all types of abuse.
- Abolish the statute of limitations for all forms of abuse.
- Enforce 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).
- Allow the public disclosure (at the victim's discretion) of the terms of any settlement.

9. Provide Therapy for Victims

- Mandate that clubs and NGBs provide and fund sport-informed, trauma-sensitive therapy for all victims of abuse for as long as the victim and the therapist deem necessary.
- Optimize treatment of each individual according to their unique neurodevelopmental, sport, and abuse history.

10. Establish a World Abuse Prevention Association (WAPA), with the Authority to Sanction and Ban Coaches, Clubs, NGBs, IGBs, and Countries that Perpetrate or Enable Abuse

- The International Olympic Committee (IOC) should establish WAPA as the functional equivalent of WADA (the World Anti Doping Association). If the IOC can create a program to remove athletes who dope from sport, then they can create a program to remove people who abuse athletes and those who enable abuse from sport.
- WAPA should bar individuals and organizations that fail to protect their athletes from abuse from international competition, including junior and senior World Championships, and the Olympics
 - Enforce a lifetime ban for abusive individuals and individuals who enable abuse.
 - Bar sports organizations (NGBs like USA Gymnastics, countries like the US and Canada, and IGBs like FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football

Association), FIG (Federation Internationale de Gymnastique) that allow abuse until the organizations

- Resolve all pending cases.
- Make amends to the victims (including providing financial support for therapy for as long as it is needed).
- Hold abusers and enablers accountable.
- Establish robust, effective abuse prevention programs.

11. 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 (e.g., every salacious story regarding abuse should include specific recommendations and resources for preventing abuse.).
- Encourage victims/survivors to harness the power of social media to tell their stories (when they are ready).
- Amplify athletes' messages so they know people believe and support them.
- Publicly pressure sponsors to insist that clubs and leagues enact protective policies.

It is crucial that parents, club directors, Congress, SafeSport, NGBs, IGBs, and the IOC prioritize athlete safety and well-being over money and medals. **Together we can protect athletes from abuse and the devastating psychological after-effects.**

And if sport continues to demonstrate that it cannot self-govern and is incapable of protecting athletes from abuse then then the UN Commission for Human Rights must establish an independent body to ensure athlete safety.

To protect people of all ages, in all settings, from abuse, we should insist that similar mandates be incorporated into every sector of society: education, entertainment, politics, business, religion, armed services, recreational clubs and groups.