

## *NWSL Growth and Growing Pains: Best Practices in Abuse Prevention*

By [Amy Salzman M.D.](#)

April 8, 2025

Multiple news outlets ([NPR](#), [New York Times](#), [San Francisco Chronicle](#)) have reported on the growth and growing pains, specifically continued concerns regarding abuse in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL).

The NWSL is responsible for ensuring player safety on all teams in the league. In 2022, the [Yates report](#) detailed long-standing abuse throughout the NWSL and mandated the league enact comprehensive [reforms](#). Unfortunately, since July 2024, employees at the [San Diego Wave](#), and players on both BayFC and the [Utah Royals](#), have raised serious concerns about ongoing abuse. These concerns challenge everyone in the soccer ecosystem—NWSL leaders, team management, coaches, staff, players, and fans of all ages—to implement best practices in abuse prevention. Beyond the confines of the NWSL, each of us has a responsibility to ensure that our sports teams, schools, community organizations, and religious institutions, especially those that serve children, also implement rigorous abuse prevention protocols.

I am a physician, internationally recognized abuse prevention expert, and member of the US Soccer Federation Participant Safety Taskforce. The taskforce was created to push beyond the recommendations of the Yates report, establish best practices in abuse prevention, and protect all players—from youth clubs to professional leagues—from all types of abuse.

The incidents on each of the three NWSL teams have been reported separately. Yet, based on my expertise, a pattern of [covert emotional abuse](#) connects the reports of abuse on all three teams.

Covert emotional abuse is a subtle pattern of behavior designed to intimidate, manipulate, and subjugate victims. The [International Olympic Committee](#) states that covert emotional abuse is a distinct form of abuse and the foundation for overt emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. I'd add that people trained to recognize covert emotional abuse can prevent the hiring of abusers, and stop covert abuse before it causes harm or escalates to overt abuse.

**The NWSL is responsible for protecting players (and staff). It must build its abuse prevention protocols on best practices based on an operational understanding of covert emotional abuse.**

Recent events at BayFC demonstrate the gap between the league's mandated reforms (and recent improvements) versus effective implementation of robust prevention measures by both the team and the league. After the NWSL enacted the mandated reforms, [BayFC hired Graeme Able](#) (a known abuser who has since resigned), and multiple players reported serious complaints about the head coach, Albertin Montoya. Former players and staff described textbook signs of covert emotional abuse. The players were insidiously targeted, bullied, and punished for asking questions and voicing mental health concerns.

Players' complaints were diminished. According to the SF Chronicle, "the team initially denied receiving complaints from players, then later admitted to examining and ultimately clearing a complaint last summer. That gives the appearance of either a cover-up or extreme nonchalance from those in charge" The players "begged and pleaded for help and change, and it never came." One player stated, "The BayFC chapter of my life gives me huge PTSD."

Whistleblowers were given the "cold shoulder," removed from the starting lineup, and had playing time reduced. One current player implied that the whistleblower players were complaining because of reduced playing time. But this likely reverses cause and effect. Often, decreased playing time is evidence of abuse—retaliation for players raising concerns.

Although some [current players support Montoya](#), this doesn't mean he didn't abuse other players. Abusive coaches usually have favorites and scapegoats; frequently, favorites praise the coach. For those who understand emotional abuse, the contrast between the supporters' praise and the victims' concerns is a major red flag.

The departure of eight players from BayFC in 2024 indicates that the team failed to address serious concerns. Former athletes' and employees' vague answers to the journalist's questions suggest they fear retaliation and don't want to jeopardize their careers in the league. That the team required multiple employees to sign NDAs also implies abuse. This is why the Yates Report recommended prohibiting the use of NDAs to "shield information about abuse allegations."

(Note: Although this particular defense was not raised regarding BayFC, often in cases of abuse, management and teammates mistakenly diminish players' complaints by claiming that players who raise concerns are "weak," too sensitive," or "just don't have

what it takes.” But every player in the NWSL has excelled in elite soccer and is accustomed to the demands of tough coaching and the sport. They want to play, and therefore only speak up reluctantly when coaching crosses the line from tough to abusive.)

The allegations of “an abusive and hostile work environment” outlined in the lawsuit filed by six San Diego Wave employees, and the statements regarding “emotional and psychological abuse” made by former Utah Royals goalie Carly Nelson, echo those voiced by players at BayFC. In combination, these detailed reports represent a troubling pattern of covert emotional abuse. The NWSL **must implement [comprehensive abusive prevention policies](#) to ensure that athletes are protected, abusers and enablers are held accountable, and the league’s future liability is minimized.**

What, then, are best practices for preventing abuse in sports?

**Hiring:** The NWSL must eliminate its tiered screening process and require that all coaches and staff complete rigorous screening. Rigorous screening goes beyond the current Tier 1 background checks (the highest level screening mandated by the Yates report). Tier 1 checks are reserved for coaches and general managers. Importantly, Tier 1 checks include third-party references from players and coaches who worked with the employee outside of the candidate’s list of references.

Thorough vetting requires conducting a comprehensive online search; insisting on specifics from previous employers about the coach’s behavior; contacting former athletes (especially those who retired early or transferred); and conducting [screening interviews](#) designed to detect tendencies toward covert and overt abuse. Had the NWSL required and BayFC adhered to these policies BayFC would not have hired Abel.

Fortunately, the NWSL now requires teams to disclose if a coach was “let go” because of abuse. This reduces the likelihood that abusers move from team to team.

**Systems:** As part of the Yates-mandated reforms, the NWSL implemented anonymous player surveys. This was a crucial and overdue step in protecting players from abuse.

Yet, concerningly, the SF Chronicle reported that two former BayFC players said the results of the mid-season player surveys were shared with the team but then never mentioned again, and that the NWSL did not share the survey results with the Players’ Association. The Players Association is the labor union for all NWSL players and negotiates with the league on their behalf. Encouragingly, BayFC—after receiving the second-lowest coaching scores in the NWSL—sought to improve coaching and communication and the end-of-season player survey showed marked improvement.

Why didn't team management clearly communicate to the players that they understood the players' concerns and had a plan to address the issues?

While I applaud these improvements, the NWSL must engage independent trauma-sensitive professionals to redesign any existing [conduct agreements](#), and the post-Yates [athlete surveys](#) to specifically address covert emotional abuse, as well as overt emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Furthermore, these independent professionals must administer and analyze the surveys and make detailed recommendations based on the results. And, given the league's stated commitment to eradicating abuse, it should conduct a retrospective review—surveying players and staff who have left the league in the last three years.

Then, the experts should share the results of the retrospective survey, subsequent annual surveys, and respective action plans with the league, the Player's Association, the players on each team, and the public.

**Responsibility:** It is concerning that BayFC CEO Brady Stewart is still [downplaying documented reports of covert emotional abuse](#) as “communication issues,” and that sporting director Mark Potter and coach Montoya are attributing the high player turnover to the typical growing pains of a new team. Also unsettling is that when NWSL commissioner Jessica Berman responds to questions about the “toxic” environment at BayFC, she continues to assert that the mandated, NWSL-wide reforms are working. She said, “We’re very confident that the system we have in place will ensure that we surface the issues that need to be addressed.”

Following best practices, the responses should have been, “Our highest priority is player and staff well-being. We recognize that coaching behaviors described by former BayFC players and staff are covert and overt emotional abuse. While we have been working hard to protect players we acknowledge we have more work to do to ensure the safety and well-being of all of our personnel. We will redesign our systems accordingly.”

NWSL must engage experts to educate and empower players, coaches, staff, front office, and league personnel to spot and stop the subtle, insidious, “grey area” behaviors of covert emotional abuse.

**Investigations:** It is encouraging that BayFC investigated a complaint filed last summer and found “no evidence of misconduct.” Yet concerningly, it is unclear who conducted the investigation, and what their mandate was. (Unfortunately, many internal investigations, and investigations by law firms, are designed to limit an organization's liability and protect its reputation, rather than discover the truth, and protect players.)

Best practice requires that complaints of abuse are promptly and thoroughly investigated by independent, trauma-sensitive experts. And, to detect patterns of abuse, the experts must solicit anonymous input from all current and former players who played under the individual being investigated.

In addition, the NWSL must stipulate that any individual being investigated will be suspended until the investigation is complete; all investigation results will be made public (while protecting the anonymity of individuals who made complaints); teams will fire abusers, managers, and owners who enable abuse. When mistakes (like hiring Abel) are made, or an investigation determines that abuse has occurred, then the team and the NWSL will publicly apologize and make prompt and meaningful amends.

**Excellence:** To enhance athlete health, well-being, and performance, the NWSL also should require that all coaches are trained in [holistic, positive, athlete-centered coaching](#). And—since the Yates report states “abuse in the NWSL is rooted in a deeper culture in women’s soccer, beginning in youth leagues”—the league and its teams must incorporate robust abuse prevention into all affiliated youth academies.

**Service:** The NWSL can also serve the greater community by educating its 17 million fans to spot and stop all forms of abuse in sports, schools, community settings, and personal relationships.

I applaud the league’s progress in enacting the reforms mandated in the Yates report. And there is more work to be done. As fans, we can encourage the NWSL to rise to the occasion and set the world standard in comprehensive abuse prevention. And, as community members, we must require our sports teams, schools, community organizations, religious institutions, and businesses to also implement best practices.

Implementing comprehensive policies founded on an operational understanding of covert emotional abuse protects people from all types of abuse and the devastating long-term consequences.

