Editorial 1-2024 – Together we stand, divided we fall

Safeguarding, together we stand, divided we fall

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The Swiss abuse in sport scandal is now almost four years old. That is a long time, one might say. It probably depends on the point of view. To an athlete experiencing breaches of safeguarding in his or her daily sporting environment, this will most definitely feel like a lifetime. To sports federations, this timeline may be more familiar and acceptable, akin to an Olympic cycle. What is it to you?

In October 2023, Sport & Exercise Medicine Switzerland (SEMS) has chosen “safeguarding” as the main theme for the annual SEMS congress. Recognizing the absolute urgency of finding solutions to protect athletes’ health and wellbeing, SEMS has put the content of the congress in the hands of the Health4Sport group (H4S), the alliance of medical doctors, physiotherapists, psychologists and dieticians in Swiss sport. Thanks to the dedication and contacts of H4S members, we were able to attract many of the top stakeholders around safeguarding in sport, national and international, to a record audience of 400+ participants.

The content of this issue on safeguarding in sport has been inspired by the presentations and discussions in Interlaken, and we are very thankful to all the people who have taken the time in their busy schedules to contribute to it. First, we wish to thank our international guest speakers at the congress and authors, Nicola Phillips (Cardiff University, Wales, UK), Margo Mountjoy (IOC Working Group on the Prevention of Harassment and Abuse in sport), and Chiel Warners (Safe Sport International). Second, we are very grateful to Swiss Olympic (Ethics group) and Swiss Sport Integrity who bring us up-to-date information from Switzerland. In addition, you will find valuable content from sports psychology (Hindi & Chappuis, Piffaretti et al.) and psychiatry (Schmidt et al.), and sports medicine (Schaub et al.).

You will also read interviews with the two legal representatives from the congress through their interviews (Thilo Pachmann and Bettina Aebi), and the opinion of Swiss Coach president, Andrea Zryd.

We have also captured the whole panel discussion from Interlaken, moderated with the help of Joelle Flück (Swiss Sports Nutrition Society).
Working together for healthy, respectable, fair and successful sport.

The nine principles of the Charter for Ethics in sport

1. Equal treatment for everyone. 
   Nationality, age, gender, sexual orientation, social background, religious and political affiliation do not lead to discrimination.

2. Sport and social environment in harmony. 
   The demands in training and competition are compatible with education, career and family life.

   Athletes are involved in decisions that affect them.

   Measures to achieve sporting goals do not damage either the physical or psychological integrity of the athletes.

5. Educating on fairness and environmental responsibility. 
   Behaviour towards others and towards the environment is characterised by respect.

   Physical and psychological violence as well as any form of exploitation are not tolerated. Raising awareness, maintaining vigilance and rigorous intervention.

7. Rejecting doping and drugs. 
   Ongoing information and immediate intervention in the event of consumption, administering or distributing substances.

8. Abstaining from tobacco and alcohol consumption during sport. 
   Demonstrating the risks and consequences of consumption at an early stage.

9. Opposing all forms of corruption. 
   Encouraging and stipulating transparency in decisions and processes. Dealing with conflicts of interest, gifts, regulating financing and gambling, and consistent disclosure.

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Start with WHY and read the Athlete voice by Marine Winckelmann

As clinicians, we all need to reflect strong and hard about why we do what we do. Somewhere, we do our jobs because we care about health and wellbeing and understand that the, at first glimpse, pure sometimes-grueling beauty of sports performance must stand in an acceptable balance with these two key elements for all humans: Health and wellbeing.

In a very strong letter, the former elite gymnast tells us about her experience and takes us through the consequences of a toxic sports environment. She also gives some critical pieces of advice to clinicians: “What I really also needed was for healthcare professionals to […] tell me that it is understandable to feel that way in this context, but that this state is not normal and that they are going to help me get out of it”.

We can all agree that no young athlete should feel that those who care about health and wellbeing are letting him or her down.

We cannot turn our eyes away from complex problems

Solving the ethical issue in sport is not an easy task. Nobody ever said it was easy. There are so many areas that need to be addressed, as depicted by the 13 points of H4S. But we cannot shy away from complexity. It simply needs to be broken down and steps must be taken in the right direction, systematically.

It must include the education of all stakeholders. From clinicians to coaches, from parents to athletes, from governing bodies to sports managers and more. But before anything else, there needs to be a vision shared by all involved. One that can unite the world of sports. No athlete should be the victim of any form of abuse. And whilst we must focus on the athletes, particularly when there are underaged, we must not forget that victims can belong to other stakeholder groups as well.

A shared vision can help align projects and actions, benefit from synergies and interdisciplinary competence, and this is what SEMS, together with Health4Sport is advocating for. The rest is up to us.

These could be your next steps

- If you could not attend the congress, we are confident that this collection of articles will give you a good sense of the main areas that require your attention. So please read carefully through. In turn, you may find that you can contribute here or there.
- Educate yourself on safeguarding now (The IOC website has good resources available), know what the Charter for Ethics in sport (figure), the Swiss Olympic Statutes on Ethics in Swiss sport [1], and the SEMS Charter for Ethics say.
- Maybe start by asking simple questions on mental health during your consultations (and use the questionnaires that have been created by SEMS for the preparticipation examinations, see article by Schaub et al.).
- You can enquire at the local sports organisation about their approach to safeguarding and offer some assistance.
- Do you work in an interdisciplinary fashion? With sports physiotherapists, most probably. What about sports psychologists and nutritionists? If not, go find one or two and start collaborating.
When symptoms and athlete’s complaints are a bit weird, when you feel there may be a psychosomatic cause, when things are simply not going the way they would be expected for an athlete, without an obvious explanation, think about potential abuse and go from there.

If someone opens up, even in the slightest way, about a delicate situation that breaches ethical standards, do not let them down. Listen hard and take action. Swiss Sport Integrity can help, call them.

We are four years from the first Swiss media reports on abuse in sport, but violations of safeguarding principles and ethics in sport are older than this. We cannot be asked to take responsibility for what has happened in the past, but we must together own what comes from now on. A future for sport where the vision promoted by H4S can help athletes and their entourage blossom:

“All athletes in Switzerland can practice their sport in the best possible mental and physical health, in a performance-oriented manner, with joy and passion, and are well and sustainably protected against abuse”.

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