Safeguarding in Swiss sport – Why is everything going so slowly?

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Abstract

A lot of valuable work is done in Swiss sport. This is one of the main reasons why our athletes are able to repeatedly achieve success at the Olympic Games, World and European
Championships in the elite and junior categories. However, sport also has its dark sides, one of which concerns abuse in all its possible forms. Scientific studies conducted over the last three years have shown that the proportion of people affected in Switzerland is in line with the alarmingly high figures from surveys conducted abroad. The numerous reports received by Swiss Sport Integrity's ethics reporting office, which has been active since January 2022, can only underline this fact.

Safeguarding, the creation of a sport that is safe from all forms of abuse, must be the goal of all decision-makers in sport. The complexity of the issue and the way in which borderline and unhealthy behavior occurs clearly show that the problem requires a systemic and holistic approach. A proposal from Health4Sport with 13 points is presented.

For safeguarding to succeed, all stakeholders in Swiss sport must take responsibility for and with the athletes: parents, teammates, coaches, officials at all levels, physiotherapists, psychologists, nutritionists, sports physicians, other health professionals including sports scientists, but also the national and international sports federations and the state and national authorities of our country.

Zusammenfassung


Safeguarding, das Schaffen eines gegenüber allen Formen von Missbrauch sicheren Sports, muss das Ziel aller Entscheidungsträger/innen im Sport sein. Die Komplexität der Thematik und die Art und Weise des Auftretens von grenz- und gesundheitsverletzendem Verhalten zeigen klar auf, dass die Problematik einen systemischen und ganzheitlichen Ansatz verlangt.

Ein Vorschlag von Health4Sport mit 13 Punkten wird vorgestellt.


Schlüsselwörter: Schweiz, Stakeholder, Sicherheit, Verantwortlichkeit, Führung
Swiss sports federations and clubs pass on a lot of valuable information

Healthy, safe and positive sport, which is offered by the 19,000 Swiss sports clubs and 196 sports federations, has a lot to offer to people in Switzerland:

- Improved physical and mental health
- Good and successful sporting experiences
- Sustainable participation in sporting activities in clubs and federations, including after their sporting careers as coaches, officials, judges or volunteers
- Better athletic performance
- Experiencing good and healthy relationships
- Learning important life skills

And yet, we need to carefully consider the flip side to that shiny coin, as safeguarding is not a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Abuse in sport is widespread internationally – the Magglingen Protocols, the Pachmann and the Rudin Cantieni Report confirm the facts and the figures for Switzerland

The numbers for abuse in sport internationally are alarming. The 2016 IOC Consensus Statement states that athletes report psychological abuse in up to 75% of cases. This includes - belittling, humiliating, shouting at, scapegoating, isolating, ignoring, withdrawing attention and support. There are also data for other forms of abuse in this review, e.g. sexual harassment ranging from 19 to 92% and sexual abuse from 2 to 49%. The wide range of prevalence figures for the latter is due to the different measurement methods used in the various studies [1]. For all those who have been passionate about sport themselves and are still active in sport, perhaps sport has even become a profession, but ultimately for all of us, these
Two journalists set the ball rolling in Switzerland in 2020 with an investigation into what they called “the Magglingen Protocols”. Eight female athletes from rhythmic and artistic gymnastics reported on their humiliation and the abusive treatment they suffered from at the National Performance Center in Magglingen [2]. The media reports sparked a political response. First, the Swiss gymnastics federation (STV-FSG) mandated an independent inquiry – the Pachmann Report was presented at a press conference in January 2021. Second, our Minister of Sport, Viola Amherd, ordered a broader investigation, conducted by the law firm Rudin Cantieni in the fall of the same year. Both internal and external reports confirm the facts depicted in the original media investigation and the statements from the eight young gymnasts. Action was badly needed to help Swiss sport [3,4]. Our two Swiss national surveys mirrored the international experience mentioned at the beginning. Whilst the vast majority of athletes active in Switzerland can take away positive personal development and numerous valuable life experiences from sport, it meant that, unfortunately, not only a small group but, depending on the issue, many athletes have been and apparently still are affected by breaches in safeguarding.

"More than 90% of the gymnasts who responded to the survey were regularly shouted at, 60% were regularly insulted, 50% regularly had to put up with comments about their physical appearance, 30% were regularly embarrassed and 25% were regularly hurt by the coaches.” [Pachmann Report 2021]

"The survey results on emotional and psychological violence showed that: 16% of the athletes reported being or having been regularly verbally abused in training or at competitions; 20% reported having quit competitive sport or toyed with the idea of doing so because of unfair treatment, mental exhaustion or conflicts with coaches; 40% of respondents who had negative experiences did not tell anyone about them for fear of disadvantage. Of those athletes who reported their negative experiences, 62% to 70% reported that the situation had not changed after they told someone about negative experiences; 9% to 26% reported that the situation had become more difficult for them after reporting it.” [Rudin Cantieni Report 2021]

**Why is sport particularly at-risk and which groups are especially vulnerable?**

But why is sport especially vulnerable or at-risk for abuse? Sport has long been an important pillar and part of our society. Sport is therefore no longer just an enjoyable and meaningful leisure activity or passion. It also should and must fully comply with all the laws of our society.
This naturally includes observing and guaranteeing all rights and obligations, including the well-being of everyone. Table 1 shows that the uniqueness of sport also harbors risks.

<table>
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<th>Focus on performance</th>
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<tr>
<td>Hierarchical organizational structures (keyword: power imbalance)</td>
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<td>Close contact between athlete and coach and familiarity between athlete and official</td>
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<td>A lot of time together, in training and on trips, often just the two of them</td>
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<td>Usually lack of involvement of parents/guardians</td>
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<td>Sport is a world of its own, autonomous and self-determined</td>
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Table 1: The uniqueness of sport also harbors risks (adapted from Willson 2022 and Kerr 2019 [6,7])

As numerous studies show, no one is immune to abuse. Abuse of athletes can occur at any age, in any sport, at any performance level, in any country and at any time [8,9,10]. However, some groups of athletes appear to be particularly vulnerable. These are the following four groups: child athletes, competitive athletes, athletes with disabilities and athletes who identify as LGBTQI+ [1,8,11]. A combination of these, for example junior competitive sport with athletes in childhood or early adolescence, further increases the risk of abuse. This is also confirmed for Switzerland. Initial feedback from Swiss Sport Integrity’s ethics reporting office refers remarkably frequently to youth competitive sport.

**Ethics is a management problem and can neither be prescribed nor delegated**

The word ethics is defined in the Duden dictionary as follows: “The totality of moral norms and maxims that underlie a responsible attitude” [12]. The word ethics generally has a positive connotation and is associated with responsible, respectful and prudent behavior and conduct. This can certainly be paired with high performance goals that require hard work. Competitive sport and ethics therefore go well together. But not automatically, since responsible and respectful interactions with one another are essential to enable positive, valuable and safe sport [1,13,14]. Why do ethics need leadership and commitment? It is worth considering the somewhat crass, but in this case appropriate, saying: “The fish starts to stink from the head first”. It describes precisely that positive behavior and respectful treatment, i.e. an ethically exemplary attitude, cannot simply be prescribed or delegated to employees. Ethics must be exemplified and embodied. Otherwise, you will see, and even before you see, you will smell that ethics at the management level are far off the mark. It is obvious that ethics cannot simply be administered, i.e. ticked off with checklists. The Magglingen Protocols, the Pachmann and the Rudin Cantieni
Reports in particular, underline the fact that Swiss sport can also convey a highly organized and well-managed impression to the outside world [2,3,4]. On the inside, however, the door was opened to abuse, some of it hidden, some of it out in the open (!). The possible establishment of continuous contact between athletes and a medical team, for example, was systematically hindered by management of the Swiss Gymnastics Federation (STV-FSG). These so-called sports administrators or “managers” tick off every checklist, no matter how sophisticated, without batting an eyelid. In short: everyone must show their true colors. This is where true leadership comes in, with leaders acting as role models and showing an unrestricted commitment to this cause [1,13,17].

**Not Bad Apple but Bad Barrel**

Take a story oftentimes repeated: a power player comes into the sports system, someone who decides how unilaterally things go, ruthlessly and clearly violating boundaries. That someone is typically not alone but has been allowed or even empowered to act this in way. This is not simply one accidental “apple turned bad”. On the contrary, there are undoubtedly several people at the helm of the same sport who are practicing this type of behavior violating boundaries and putting health at risk. It could affect the entire coaching team and usually trickles down the line, whilst being covered up or even encouraged from the top. It goes something like this: the manager in charge of young talents supervises and directs the coaching staff. Above them stands the high performance manager, who wrongfully agrees to walk that harsh line, and tolerates the creation of victims of abuse. This orchestrated principle with the occurrence of perpetrators of abuse in groups, often also in hierarchical lines, is called “bad barrel” in technical jargon – the Rudin Cantieni investigation reports precisely on this [15,16,4].

**Safeguarding must be addressed systemically, and everyone is responsible**

All those involved in the everyday life and sport of athletes are responsible for their well-being and the facilitation of safe and positive sporting activities: parents, teammates, coaches, physiotherapists, psychologists, nutritionists, sports physicians, any other members of the interdisciplinary support staff (including sports scientists), sports officials and other stakeholders in sport. This includes national and international sports federations, as well as the state and national authorities of our country [1,8,11].

Notably, the role of parents in Swiss competitive sport is too fuzzy and passive, whilst it requires special attention. We must absolutely involve parents more actively. Since the problem of abuse in sport is highly complex, sport highly autonomous, self-determined and performance-oriented, and since borderline or health-endangering behavior are often orchestrated by an entire group of responsible parties in sport, the problem must be tackled systemically [6,7]. Safeguarding principles should and must be taught and promoted in a sustainable manner at all levels and amongst all the aforementioned stakeholders in sport [1,7,17].
13 points from Health4Sport as an approach

Health4sport (H4S) is made up of the four Swiss sports health associations that are also members of Swiss Olympic: Sport and Exercise Medicine SEMS, Sports Psychology SASP, Sports Nutrition SSNS and Sports Physiotherapy SSPA. Safeguarding is about focusing on prevention and on those factors that protect and support mental and physical health and promote personal development and healthy sporting success. In other words, those factors that can turn the following vision into a reality in Switzerland [17]:

“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.”

A checklist of 13 points is presented below (figure 1 and table 2), which could ensure the fields of action for effective safeguarding in Switzerland in a comprehensive manner [17].

Figure 1: The Health4Sport safeguarding flower
Table 2: The 13 principles for safeguarding in sport by Health4Sport

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<thead>
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<th>H&amp;S key principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Respectful and appreciative culture</td>
<td>The culture in Swiss competitive and popular sport is explicitly based on the values of fair sport, which integrates and strengthens the health and personal development of all participants.</td>
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<td>2. Protection of the individual (protection)</td>
<td>The individual is protected and human/children’s rights are respected.</td>
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<td>3. Positive personal development (positive youth development)</td>
<td>The principles of positive youth development are applied; the self-determination and psychological needs of the athletes are respected.</td>
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<td>4. Developmental stages are respected (maturation)</td>
<td>Maturation processes (physiological, cognitive, emotional and social) are respected and included.</td>
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<td>5. Health before medals (health before medals)</td>
<td>Health has priority over medals. If certain health risks are taken in rare exceptional situations, then only in accordance with the principles of shared decision making with the athlete, doctor and parents.</td>
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<td>6. Annual sports medical examination (preparticipation evaluation)</td>
<td>Annual sports medical examinations of athletes according to the standards of the IOC/SEMS and SO, as well as the examination of the sporting environment and sport culture for abnormalities are important.</td>
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<td>7. Health monitoring</td>
<td>Athletes’ health and the health of the sporting environment should be monitored over the course of their careers.</td>
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<td>8. Interdisciplinary support (interdisciplinary team)</td>
<td>Interdisciplinary care with specialists in sports physiotherapy, sports psychology, sports nutrition, sports science and sports medicine is standard and must be accessible to all athletes and embodied by a highly functional network.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Communication</td>
<td>Communication principles are established between all parties involved, with transparency playing a key role.</td>
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<td>10. Parents</td>
<td>Parents are important stakeholders in children and youth sport and are actively involved.</td>
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<td>11. Sustainable awareness campaigns</td>
<td>Broad awareness campaigns are needed to raise awareness of the principles of safe sport.</td>
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<td>12. Education and training of ALL stakeholders</td>
<td>All stakeholders (including health professionals) are trained to prevent, recognize, report and manage abuse. Continuing education and training programs are mandatory.</td>
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<td>13. Continuous funding (financial support)</td>
<td>The Health for Sport (H&amp;S) ecosystem (human resources, access and logistics) is secured through planned and sustainable funding.</td>
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Don’t run into the big dead end!

Watching a Swiss athlete win a medal at the Olympic Games in front of the live stream and sharing some of the joy and happiness is a wonderful and welcome feeling. It is however much more difficult to accept the darker side of our Swiss competitive sport. To recognize that a lot of suffering and harm has been and is still being done to many promising young people in our country is both necessary and confronting. It is easier for anyone to believe that “everything is not so bad after all”. The abusive situations are easily and repeatedly wrongly “normalized”, meaning that elite sport dismisses the problem as part of the range of normality and acceptability. How many of us have heard statements like “it is just part of the game”, or “as a top athlete, you just have to put up with that stuff” [6,7]? To the extent that a sports psychologist recently reported that parents came to her with their child, a school-age junior athlete, to help her cope with the yelling and the harsh
tone of the coach (!). Hello? Can we please wake up and reassess the values we need to be promoting?

All too quickly, the familiar performance motto “No pain, no gain” is grotesquely taken to mean everything possible or impossible, right up to the absurd: “No effort, no humiliation and no abuse...”. In the same way, the bearer of bad news in sport is shunned, hushed up, ignored and disregarded, especially in the context of a sports federation [8]. The topic is too uncomfortable, too challenging, too problematic. Nobody seems to know how to properly deal with, accept, listen to or reintegrate someone who has experienced abuse in a sporting environment. On the contrary, these people are usually ostracized. They will end their sporting career and, in the best case, be referred to some therapist and that’s that! Everyone involved remains at a dead end. The Official Swiss sport has no answer since no one seems to be responsible nor in charge.

Yet, it would be a typically Swiss virtue and great strength to keep at it and persistently pursue the noble safeguarding goal with a good plan. It will be only possible to achieve this as a team. Not without obstacles, of course, because sport is a completely normal part of our society. Like any change management process, the impending cultural change will face resistance and trigger the usual excuses and defense mechanisms. Anyone who expects anything different, perhaps better, from sport is misjudging the situation and is not only a hopeless romantic but should definitely inform themselves better.

On sticking with it, leadership and commitment and where these are unfortunately lacking

“If it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one.” This quote by Stanley Tucci in the role of Mitchell Garabedian comes from the film Spotlight, in which a team of journalists from The Boston Globe document the abuse cases of the Roman Catholic Church in Boston [18]. The first part of the statement “It takes a village to raise a child” comes from an African idiom that has been adopted into the English language and means: every member of a group of people living together (community) should engage and interact positively with children so that these children can grow up in a safe and healthy environment [19].

So, what does sport have to do with the Roman Catholic Church? In essence not much, except that both organizations focus on the well-being of the individual. Have you ever thought about the numerous parallels that exist between youth competitive sport and the Roman Catholic Church in particular? Or swap the word “village” for “sport community” or a sports federation name of your choice [20].

This conclusion to this article is intended to point out once again that everyone is called upon. Swiss Olympic’s Ethics and Sport Group, led by Samuel Wyttenbach and Natalie Barker-Ruchti, continues to work tirelessly on its projects. This work is valuable and important and will give the complex safeguarding problem a good direction.

The topic of safeguarding probably needs all those people in Swiss sport who have the moral courage to stand up for the values of sport in Switzerland seriously, honestly and responsibly. There are probably some people among them who lead training sessions for children and
young people several times a week. Presumably also those in middle management positions somewhere in a sports association or larger sports club – from the 196 federations and 19,000 clubs in Switzerland. Because at the very top, in the Federal Office for Sport (FOSPO) and also on the side of the authorities, something seems somewhat stuck in slow motion. Either these stakeholders are insufficiently empowered, seriously out of their depth or they are not taking the issue seriously enough. Perhaps all of the above. The time to act and stand up is not now, it was yesterday. We all need to look first in the mirror and ask the following questions: are we sufficiently informed on the question or safeguarding in sport? Are we doing what we can to prevent, identify, report, manage and support (young) people in sport suffering from abusive situations and environments? Are we using all the power at our hand to help with the necessary change? Stop abuse in sport and make safeguarding the starting point.

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