This article looks back at the 2023 SEMS conference on safeguarding, where a roundtable was organized with representatives of various key stakeholders in the area. Namely:

– **Safe Sport International**: Chiel Warners (Netherlands), vice-chair.
– **IOC working group on harassment and abuse in sports**: Prof Margo Mountjoy (Univ. of McMaster, Canada), Head.
– **Swiss Olympic Association**: Samuel Wyttenbach, head of ethics department.
– **Swiss Sport Integrity**: Ernst König, Director.
– **Swiss Coach**: Andrea Zryd, president.
All members of the panel introduced their organization and activities in short presentations, which were followed by a 75-minute discussion moderated by Joëlle Flück (Swiss Sports Nutrition Society president, and Health4Sport Board member) and Boris Gojanovic (Sport & Exercise Medicine Switzerland president, and Health4Sport Board member). This article is a transcription of the debate, and all statements have been revised and approved by the participants.

**Moderator (Boris Gojanovic)** – After the initial early response to the announcements of 2020 (Magglingen Protocols), there were some responses that needed to happen very fast, because the media kept pushing and found other problematic situations. This empowers people to speak up, people who did not have the courage to speak up. It brings then the question of “what do we do
now?”. We’ve heard of the difficulties to implement actions. So where do we start? I would like to ask Samy on the initial SO response. You showed us the timeline and the first phase mandated by the government. How do you quickly coordinate the massive number of people that need to be involved, and how do you define what we are going to work on?

**Samuel Wytenbach** – I think that it is a huge undertaking to give an appropriate response, when abuse situations come out. It would be a delusion to think that we can edit a brochure to address the problem. We have very early on decided that we needed to act in two stages. Initially we needed to respond with the aim of providing safety, reassurance and guidance with immediate measures that can only be far from perfect. In a second stage, we need to have sufficient time to be able to work intensely in the background.

How it came that all these organizations could function together so well, it is not an exaggeration to say that I have never experienced this in my 12 years in the field. In this case, it definitely has to do with the amount of external pressure. Not only the media pressure, but also the political institution forced us to quickly organize an operational response at the highest level. This led us to be in this good position now, where this network is activated and we can conduct the necessary work. However, we also understand that we are not nearly so far to meet the demands of athletes facing this complex problem.

**Moderator (Boris Gojanovic) to Chiel Warners** – Safe Sport International (SSI) is here to define standards and try to help. When safeguarding issues emerge in the next country, what can you do? Are you a resource that can help with the first catastrophic emergency response? What do we do and where do we start?

**Chiel Warners** – Ideally you are ahead of the catastrophic situation in the first place. My experience is it helps to have a crisis to instigate a change period, but there is so much that you do ahead as well. We are a resource not just with material or the research we and others have done, but also in providing a network of people that can help work on this. The bigger the group is, the more evidence-based research and examples of policies you have at your disposal. Because what I see in sports, not just Switzerland but around the world, is that everybody is trying to reinvent the wheel. This happens on the level of federations, but also at country level. It is easier to be proactive by looking at what has been done in other countries. For example, we, in the Netherlands, are looking actively at what is being done in Switzerland with Swiss Sport Integrity, to see if we should follow your model. So, to your question, one thing is resources, second is the network to help you work on it. That could be the role of SSI.

**Moderator (Joëlle Flück)** – I would like to ask Margo Mountjoy and Ernst König, how much time do we have when athletes report complaints, to implement those measures.

**Ernst König** – The situation is not specific to Switzerland. But we project to have 400 reports
this year. So, every day we lose, we get a new report in and we keep losing days. When I listen to Samuel Wyttenbach, whilst I am not against the groundwork-in-progress, I feel that the urgency that was there 2 years ago has disappeared. This urgency needs to be there. We must be aware that there are people suffering. It is just not good enough to say: “we are working on it and we will have a perfect concept in 2025 and we will start implementing it”. There is a need for an immediate response, whilst at the same time we must work on basics as well.

**Margo Mountjoy** – It is a delicate balance. The athlete needs to know they were heard and that something will happen. At the same time, time is required for due diligence, for investigations. You would not want to act too quickly that there would be wrongful accusations or inappropriate remedy without full investigations. How deep is the problem? The investigations you did in gymnastics took time and it took time for people to come forward. This costs money and requires an infrastructure of human resources and multidisciplinary people to work on. So, having a system that will accommodate all of that.

I am delighted that the IOC has put 10 million USD towards opening two hubs [1], in Australia and South Africa, that will be a resource where athlete can report and there will be investigation, remedy, hearings and sanctions through that process. We will see, it is a trial in areas where we currently do not have such resources, like you have here in Switzerland, like we have Canada or there is in the USA and UK.

*From left to right: Chiel Warners, Ernst König, Margo Mountjoy and Samuel Wyttenbach.*

**Moderator (Boris Gojanovic) to German Clénin** – As healthcare practitioners in medicine, when all of this came out, we quickly realized that we will be facing more situation, as the
athletes come forward with the experiences. What is your point of view on the role of the medical doctor in the consultation, and what do you need to help things get started? It usually happens initially behind closed doors at your consultation.

**German Clénin** – I think that we have different levels of action. On an individual level, the doctor (or the sports physiotherapist, the psychologist, the nutritionist), we are a person of trust, someone people can address to. We can listen, see where the needs are and take measures if needed. Depending on the case, it may be simply comforting of other appropriate measures, or even guiding towards an announcement to Swiss Sport Integrity, when a severe case demands reporting. There is another level. Many of us here are members of a federation, again no matter the healthcare profession. As members of these teams, we are multiplicators to bring the good messages to the federations. We are also careful observers in a certain way. On the conceptual side, we could do a lot, and this how we joined forces as Health4Sport to propose some measures.

**Margo Mountjoy** – Thank you German for the excellent response, and I would add to that. A couple of other things that we, as clinicians working with athletes, can do. We must recognize the signs and symptoms. I can guarantee you very few athletes are going to book an appointment next Tuesday at 11 am to disclose their abuse. It is probably not going to happen. But you might see patterns of mental health behaviors, you might see behavioral disruptions, poor performance, injuries that do not make sense. You must be aware to look at the signs and symptoms. At that point, I often say to athletes: “you know, I’m concerned about what is happening to you. In other situations, where there has been a difficult environment to work in, often other people with your signs and symptoms have had troubles with harassment. Could this be your experience?”. What you have done by that is given them permission to talk. You have said: “I understand, and if you want to speak to me, I am open to that”. And they may not speak then, maybe not for a week or two, or a year or ten years, but you have given them permission and the knowledge that you are someone who understands. I think that we can do this. Know the behavioral, mental health, and the physical signs and symptoms of abuse. The other thing we can do is support them through the process. Once it is handed over to the authorities, they will need professional support, the sports psychiatrist, the physical carer if it is injury related. And so will also the family members, the teammates, and the other members of the athlete’s entourage. As clinicians, we an important multi-level role to play.

**Chiel Warners** – I used to be the chair of our NOCAC (national Olympic committee athletes commission) for four years, and I had 15 different athletes come to me with different kinds of abuse cases, because they did not know where to go. And often times those they should go to, the sport governing bodies, were perceived as part of the problem. They did not know what the process would be if they reported to the authorities. So, it is important for you guys to know what that process is. First of course, you must recognize, but then guide them in the right direction and explain what is going to happen if the make a report. This is a big barrier for them to get over, before they report.
**Moderator (Boris Gojanovic) to Margo Mountjoy** – How confident do you feel you can detect, screen and manage such situations. We see that there is room for improvement because we are unsure in how to approach it. This just shows that there is a need for awareness raising at all - levels. I say this a medical professional: we need to look at what we are doing and must educate ourselves. This is also what Health4Sports tries to do.

**Margo Mountjoy** – I am concerned that sports medicine physicians are not comfortable in looking for signs and symptoms of harassment and abuse and do not have the clinical skills to respond to it. So, I am conducting an IOC research grant project, surveying physicians around the world, asking them: “what is your knowledge, what is your belief and you role, and how likely are you to respond. How confident are you in your training”. I just looked at the data this week, with 400 responses around the world (thank you if you participated!). What we found is the physicians recognize it is a very important thing. They know it is serious and we should be responding. The problem lies with the younger physicians, who do not feel empowered to respond. They recognize there could be repercussions against them and their early career. Also, very few felt that they had trauma-informed care training to know how to respond without re-traumatizing the athlete. Also, many sports doctors, because they like the knee and the shoulder, do not necessarily like to get into “this other business” of mental health and harassment and abuse, being uncomfortable with the topic. So, stay tuned, because I think we need to improve our sports and exercise medicine curriculum, which is my next project.

**German Clénin** – We conducted a workshop with Nicola Phillips at this conference on Dos and Don’ts, for sports physios and doctors in the field and there are plenty of aspects we can look at: from organizational or personal developments, to being courageous to speak up, which is the starting point for us as well. The important is to have a team and, not be alone and have alliances. Look for persons you can talk to. If you are a physio, find a doctor. If you are a young doctor, talk to the physio who has maybe more experience and share to get closer to the problem.

**Samuel Wyttenbach** – Margo and German have mentioned that it may be hard to report concerns and that it requires courage. I believe that the root of the problem lies even deeper. Because of the strong pervasive culture of “no pain, no gain”, many people do not even notice or think that something is wrong or could go differently. It already starts with the understanding and awareness of the athlete that their experience may not be normal and must not be so. This would give them the impetus to start addressing the problem.

**Andrea Zryd** – I totally agree. What I think is important is that the federations are in as well. We have to train our coaches in concrete situations. For example, the physios were discussing what the limits of touching the athlete can be. It goes the same for coaches. We have old-school coaches, who socialize like that and they do because it is just normal for them. We should be able to accept that the younger generation (Gen Z) is a new generation and that they will not
accept everything. This is good and I agree with it, but we have to train them. Nice papers and studies are insufficient, it has to happen in practice.

Question from the audience (Dr Alexandra Nowak) – I followed a young swimmer who was suffering abuse from the coach. I contacted Swiss Sport Integrity and got a very quick response to encourage the athlete to file a report to them. The athlete did not go ahead initially, afraid of negative repercussions for her. She finally did report the problem but nothing else happened. It cost her a lot of energy to file a report, but she was alone in complaining, although others were suffering as well. In the end nothing happened. Are there not ways to get some prevention actions that could be put in place when such complaints come isolated?

Ernst König – We need to consider different aspects. First, we receive a lot of reports, and we are not always able to respond as quickly as expected by everyone else and by ourselves. Second, we get feedback after the procedures from the victims, in the sense that they lacked information during the procedure. We must be careful to consider all aspects of the procedure. We collect information before we can decide whether an official investigation is warranted. During that time, we cannot share any information. We understand this situation is not ideal. Our resources are insufficient to communicate regularly, but also, we are not allowed to do it. An investigation must consider the rights of all parties.

Samuel Wyttenbach – I think that we are lacking a good system to accompany athletes in these processes, as this does not really exist today. Clinicians can be isolated during that time.

Chiel Warners – Maybe you do not have to write about the content of the investigation, but it is possible to inform the athlete that the case is moving forward. This can support the athlete, without breaking the law.

Ernst König – We are always open to assist anyone who has further questions regarding the procedures, and you are welcome to contact us directly. We are aware that these procedures are “tough stuff” for all stakeholders, and there is way to improve. It is a process and we do not want to rush it or put additional pressure by accelerating it.

Margo Mountjoy – You raise a very good point about the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator. Often, as in all cases of domestic violence as well, the perpetrator is someone close in their life. The coach-athlete relationship, the physician-athlete relationship, and the perpetrator may be someone they care very much about, or they are very close with. It is important that we, as clinicians working with athletes, do not denigrate the perpetrator, do not put them down. We must be non-judgmental.
Moderator (Joëlle Flück) – It appears very clear that we need measures in all disciplines, from professional to the procedural aspects. But also, we need to raise awareness, to educate athletes and coaches, and I would like to hear your opinion. What do you think will be implemented for Swiss coaches and athletes in this regard.

Andrea Zryd – We have done a brief survey with our coaches. They are not sure about what they are allowed to do, actually. There is a form of hysteria. I am afraid one thing is present: it may be somewhat easier for me as a woman if I work with young male athletes or boys, and it should actually not be like that but it is. There is also uncertainty about what language to use with the athletes. We are losing the flow or lucidity in our sessions with the athletes because of some fears: can I touch the athlete or not? Can I say this like that or not? We should protect the natural mood in coaching the athletes. For sure, we absolutely agree about the things that have been implemented by Swiss Olympic and other stakeholders, encouraging us to react and to change as well.

Moderator (Joëlle Flück) – Are there any solutions or ideas on how to tackle this in your
Andrea Zryd – Well, we already have a group who is linked to Swiss Olympic. We try to implement things. We have intentions to bring a form of “coaches offensive”, but it always has to do with the athletes. We need to work with the health professionals, the psychologists, the people from the medical staff. We are on it. I would like to act quicker, but there is a political time to respect. I am very sure that we will find a good way, as it is necessary for us. Otherwise, it is not possible.

Samuel Wyttenbach – Education for ethics is a key point of our current work. The four or five main stakeholders in Switzerland, that is the Federal Office for Sport (FOSPO) with Youth & Sport (Jugend und Sport, J+S), Sports Coach Education Switzerland (Trainerbildung Schweiz, TBS), Swiss Olympic with the club and federation management department, are sitting together now the develop a curriculum to define the competencies required at which stage for athletes, coaches, parents, and people working in the federations. The second phase consists of development of the modules, e-learning or not (to be determined), by the end of 2024. There will be a coordinated education system for all relevant players in Swiss Sport.

Chiel Warners – Are you also developing something for board members?

Samuel Wyttenbach – Yes, we understand board members as “people working in the federations”.

Moderator (Boris Gojanovic) to Andrea Zryd – Building on this discussion about coaches and education, I would like to ask you how you work with The Swiss coach education program (TBS), being a separate professional organization looking after your members, i.e., coaches. Do you work together on these issues now?

Andrea Zryd – Yes, we work together a lot. We have monthly meetings, addressing the question of education regularly. We may sometimes have different opinion from TBS or even Swiss Olympic, since we are on the side of the coaches, whom we try to protect. This is my job. I really would like to say something important here: it is not like the coaches are not trained on ethical issues. They have been doing it all the time. But in the abuse cases that came to the media (like the Magglingen Protocols), we are all more aware about it. We try to have better programs. My wish is that the federation would hire and put their trust in coaches that have undergone the Swiss Coaches Education program with a recognized diploma, whether national, European or another global diploma. We need to know where the coaches come from and what their history is. We should not simply hire a coach with a big name or who is a big shot for the media, without the adequate education about our philosophy of working with athletes in Switzerland.
Question from the audience (Dr Matthias Wilhelm) – First of all thank you and congratulations for setting up this topic and bringing it to the agenda in such a stimulating form for us to have this discussion. I have heard once in the roundtable the mention of the “no pain no gain” mantra. I think this is still a narrative amongst athletes, trainers and physicians. However, concerning the international pressure on all them, everything being about money and success, I think that there is a dilemma – how many gold medals can Switzerland win versus the health of the athletes. How can we get out of it?

Andrea Zryd – Well, no pain, no gain has no place. But we understand that high level sport requires a lot of training hours and that there will always be some pain. Which pain is ethically correct or is not? You will never will a gold medal by training twice a week, it is not possible. Every athlete has been injured once or more, that is a reality. Some athletes also may have had “bad” coaches, and hopefully good ones, too. A friend of mine, also involved in politics, once told that it should also be possible to do training sessions with less pain or especially less training hours. This is simply not possible. You can do it better, but you cannot train less in some sports if you want to win a medal. Honestly, this is possibly the case for some sports like a little running or cycling, but not the high-level sports we are looking after.

German Clénin – I would like to add that from the side of sports medicine and also Sport & Exercise Medicine Switzerland (SEMS), we have nothing against performance. That is not the problem for us. Rather, it is more about the attitude. Training can be hard at times; some sweat
is needed otherwise you will not achieve anything. Actually, sweating is good for health as well. At a high level, you possibly need to push some aspects, but the attitude can be wrong, and we need to learn from that.

**Margo Mountjoy** – To expand on that, there is a cultural shift, a change of how we think about it. No elite athlete says they got there without being tough. The training can be fun. How did we take the fun out of it and how can we put it back, change the narrative and the culture, without pain being required. But remember, elite sport is only the tip of the iceberg. Developmental sports, youth sports, children sports, they should not be having pain to gain. They should be enjoying sport, having fun and learning skills, enjoying the camaraderie of accomplishing goals as a team. That is not pain, but the positive aspects of sport.

I would like to underscore that 99% of our coaches are fantastic people. How do we empower them and not have them frightened and leaving, afraid of being accused one day?

**Chiel Warners** – We are having this discussion int the Netherlands. It should not be about medals without fun, health, etc. Then you talk to the athletes, and they tell you they do want to win medals, of course. If you set aside the winning of medals, and instead focus on the process and the fun, you can then focus on why you train, and do it as well as you can. Yes, it will hurt as some point when you try to get the best out of yourself. The medals should be a result of the process and not the only thing you look at.

**Samuel Wyttenbach** – You take the words out of my mouth! The system can inflect this at one point. We should not pay for gold medals, but rather for good structures and for potential. We are really working on this as well, and it should be a game-changer.

**Margo Mountjoy** – If you invest in good governance and good structure, the rest will follow.

**Moderator (Boris Gojanovic) to Samuel Wyttenbach** – We have heard from Andrea Zryd about the coaches’ difficult position and career paths. She made the point very clear that the profession is in dire straits. Now, there is a lot of fingers pointed, whilst of course, as Margo said, 99% of coaches are doing a fantastic job, for which they may be underpaid. What is the position of Swiss Olympic, or the national federations (even if you cannot directly speak for them)? How do we empower the coaches to be safe in what they do, understanding that safeguarding is not just about the athletes, but also about the coaches being safe?

**Samuel Wyttenbach** – We must underscore that the coach has a central position. There is no other actor that works as much and as close with the athlete as the coach does. It makes sense that we show the coaches not only the dark aspects, but the many positive things that can be done. In the working group on education, we strive strengthen to competence of coaches, so that they feel comfortable with such topics and confident to provide a safe environment. We also work in this group, together with Andrea Zryd, to improve the working conditions of the
coaches. Maybe also worth to mention a third recurring point: coaches may fear Swiss Sport Integrity. It is important to say that SSI is a neutral institution. When coaches are wrongly accused, say by parents or athletes filing a report, aiming to remove a coach, SSI is here to protect them as well. SSI is not a penal authority, aiming to primarily defend the people turning to them, but rather an independent organ trying to clarify a situation by investigating.

*Question from the audience (Bettina Aebi) to the panel – On the aspect of media. Where do you see media’s responsibility on the safeguarding issue, and do you think their role has changed, now that you have this independent reporting body (SSI).*

*Margo Mountjoy* – Historically, the media has also been guilty of perpetuating some of the abuse on athletes. There have been some considerable efforts in trying to educate the media on how to report certain things and not harm athletes in their reporting. There is work to be done and the media has a significant role in changing the culture around reporting of abuse.

*Chiel Warners* – It should be about the process and the media can help with this. It is not only about people winning or not winning medals. Oftentimes, it is mostly negative, somehow negativity sells. It helps to not put the winning coaches on a pedestal, which promotes the win-at-all-cost culture. They can help there, as we need them to bring these positive aspects to public. We cannot live without the media.

*Andrea Zryd* – The media are partners that we should consider carefully. Maybe we should educate them about the destructive consequences of their negative reporting. It is their job, but sometimes their research is too shallow, which is a problem for all of us: coaches, Swiss Olympic, Swiss Sport Integrity. An athlete or coach’s life can be destroyed, not only by print media but also social media. These are societal problems we can change easily.

*Margo Mountjoy* – There is no filter nor accountability on social media, which there is in print media or television. At least some filter and accountability.

*German Clenin* – I think we are lucky to have had them investigate and write “the Magglingen Protocols” piece. Without that, it wouldn’t move the lines. Now, I have worked 4 years in Magglingen and there are a lot of good things happening there. It is one of the most central places in Swiss sports, and I believe that it was a good thing that they highlighted this important but difficult topic of this iconic place in Switzerland.

*Ernst König* – We must acknowledge that without the media writing “the Magglingen Protocols”, we would not be sitting here. We probably all agree that something positive comes out of it. We understand that problems have happened before, but they were simply not visible. Visibility matters here. There are a lot of procedures and reports that we can work on, sometimes out there in the open. Everything you do is quickly published somewhere in the
media, which does not make it easier for any of the stakeholders. At the same time, the big media reports on cases of ethical violations in Swiss sports increases the numbers of reports that we get. Pretty much immediately, especially for the most prominent cases. Our team is submerged, and this increases the workload massively. Last night there was a report on television, and we must expect a dozen or so new reports soon because of it. I understand their position. If it is happening, we need to see the hidden parts of the iceberg. It can encourage athletes to come forward. It is part of the prevention process. The media are important, they challenge our work and in the end, it is probably a good thing. These stories generate clicks, whether we like it or not.

**Samuel Wyttenbach** – It seems easy to report “bad news” on this topic, and a lot harder to read “good news”. It is not the fault of the media, maybe us consumers are responsible, too.

**Moderator (Boris Gojanovic)** – Talking about the media, I feel like the TV presenter that must now cut the debates short and not let everyone speak further... Let me ask you, in one minute, to look over the horizon. What do you need for your organization to help your members with safeguarding? What would you put under the Christmas tree?

**Chiel Warners** – We, at Safe Sport International, need to become more sustainable financially as an organisation, as we have a lot to give. We need people and organizations to help. If you want to take a step, we are there to help you. Please contact us or me to do it together.

**Ernst König** – We need all the people here in the room and beyond to work on this together. In prevention, everyone has a responsibility towards safeguarding.

**Margo Mountjoy** – Teamwork, as Ernst König said (and stole from me)! We need more evidence, as it creates the impetus for policies to change. Research is important. You may not be researcher, but answering researchers means being involved. Please be involved in research.

The second thing is resources in experts and knowledge translation. Once we get the evidence, how do we translate it at this level, and down to the grassroots level where it is more important to start off on the right foot. So, evidence, knowledge translation and teamwork.

**Samuel Wyttenbach** – Time as well. Do not wait until Swiss Olympic or other institutions have finished their work, or don't wait until the system has changed, Be part of the change yourself, be informed on the topic, and act.

**Andrea Zryd** – Being a coach is the best job ever! I wish that the federations and the clubs educate their coaches and give them a chance at a career plan.

**German Clénin** – We should have better awareness for clinicians, all of us. As persons of trust,
it is very important for doctors. We must continue the work we have started. Health4Sport needs to continue, and we can help raise the awareness for all the sports environments.

Moderator (Joëlle Flück) – *I would like to thank everyone on the panel for the fruitful debate and invite all of you to continue the work and discussions.*

Boris Gojanovic

Joëlle Flück