

Vulnerability of Adult Elite Athletes

Why are elite athletes considered a group who are at increased risk of harm and abuse?

ann craft trust
acting against abuse

The need for safeguarding

Over the last 5 years, there have been increasing reports, allegations, criminal convictions and media coverage of abuse, bullying, harassment and misconduct in the elite sporting world.

Reports of cultures where athletes feared speaking up, or serious complaints dismissed and brushed under the carpet and inappropriate behaviour ignored.

Some very high profile and world-renowned coaches, mentors and professional practitioners have been accused and convicted of inappropriate and illegal behaviour which, in some cases, spanned decades and affected many.

Abuse within sport is sadly not new, however as a result of some high-profile cases and increased media coverage, there is an ever-increasing awareness of the need to

safeguard athletes in elite sport, regardless of age*.

In December 2015 the Minister for Sport commissioned an independent review into the Duty of Care in Sport has towards its participants. Baroness Tanni Grey-Thompson conducted the review and within her report highlighted several recommendations and stated:

“While rightly, there is reluctance to say that every adult who competes in sport is vulnerable, when someone is in a team or on a pathway vulnerability inevitably increases, as so much is taken out of their control” *Duty of Care in Sport Independent Report to Government*

* The following guidance is based upon the vulnerability of adult elite athletes. Much of the information is applicable to both children and adults involved in elite sport however, there will be additional vulnerabilities specific to child elite athletes which are not included. For further information relating to child elite athletes visit thecpsu.org.uk.)

'I knew where I wanted to get and **I thought that this is what I had to do**'.

Chris Unsworth, footballer abused by his coach Barry Bennell

"**I was worried I would lose my funding and position on the programme**, but that should never have been the case. I should have felt like I could trust the staff to help me work through that time, not threaten me."

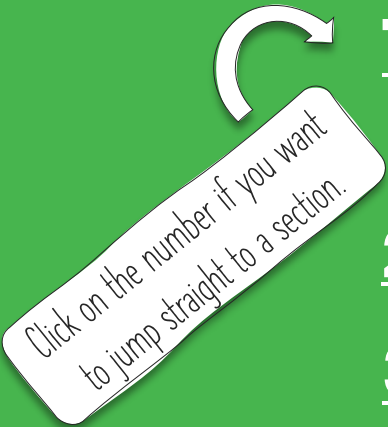
'Sending those messages, **I was scared**. I thought, what if it's really nothing? **What if I lose my spot on the team?** How bad would it be to keep it a secret?'

'Rosa' - racing with the development squad of a Women's World Tour cycling team

What can only be described as **abusive behaviour** was so **ingrained** in our daily lives, that it became **completely normalised**.

Becky & Ellie Downie, British Olympic Gymnasts

This guidance explores factors that:

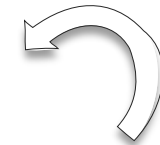


1. Can **contribute** to the increased risk and vulnerability of elite athletes
2. **Prevent** athletes reporting concerns
3. Help **reduce** the level of risk and vulnerability

1. Factors that can **contribute to** vulnerability

The following sections provide examples of factors that can contribute to the vulnerability of elite adult athletes to abuse and harm.

In many cases it is the combination and culmination of factors that impact levels of vulnerability.



Click on the icon if you want to jump straight to the specific section.



1. Factors that can **contribute to** vulnerability

Environment



Significant travel and time away from home

- Increased isolation from others.
- Reduced contact with family, friends, support networks.
- Increased opportunity for inappropriate behaviour to go unnoticed by others.

Elite sport 'bubble'

- Culture of doing things a certain way.
- Limited friendships outside of the sport to a) talk to b) highlight when behaviour or practice is not appropriate c) encourage to speak up
- Not knowing any other way.
- Lack of involvement in other areas and relationships outside of sport.
- Lack of reference points outside the sport to validate what behaviour or practice is appropriate or not.

Intense pressure of training and competing

- Pressure to achieve results, gain selection, keep funding, satisfy sponsors.
- Prepared to do what ever it takes.
- Funding dependent on results - 'livelihood'.
- 'all eggs in one basket'.

Language and/or cultural differences

- Based abroad for long periods of time.
- Coach/ support staff may have a different first language or cultural expectations to athlete or vice versa.
- Different coaching/ training expectations, styles and methods.
- Limited ability or unable to communicate concerns.

Lack of involvement in or planning for career outside of the sport

- Adds to the pressure to perform at all costs and put up with anything.
- Fear of what else would I do?

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1. Factors that can **contribute to** vulnerability

Organisation



Lack of communication to athletes

- Unsure who to talk to.
- Finding someone who is independent/ not part of the system, so can talk freely.
- Information about welfare officer/ policies and procedures in place to protect athletes not being filtered down to athletes.

Lack of Code of Conduct (or lack of it being adhered to or challenged)

- Poor practice and inappropriate behaviour unnoticed/ unchallenged.
- People not held to account for their actions.
- No set standards of expectations and behaviours.
- Inconsistencies of behaviour.
- Lack of, or unclear, boundaries.

Lack of policy/ guidance

- No clear process for challenging inappropriate behaviour or action.
- Policies/ guidance not followed.
- Lack of understanding what is appropriate or not.

Lack of training for coaches, support staff, athletes

- Unaware of how to deal with situations.
- Unable to identify possible signs and indicators of abuse.
- Lack of education around issues that can be facing athletes and how best to help.

Unhealthy culture

- Poor leadership.
- Lack of accountability.
- Strong influential characters setting the scene.
- Unwilling to change.
- Unwilling to listen or respond to complaints, feedback, views from athlete or staff.
- 'This is how things have always been done'.
- Repercussions for anyone who shares concerns or questions systems.
- 'There are others who will happily take your place'

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1. Factors that can **contribute to** vulnerability

Personal



Care and support needs

- Level of dependence on others.
- Potential dependence on equipment/ aids.
- Increased opportunities for someone to control/ neglect.
- Imbalance of power and control.
- Potential for being unable to protect themselves.

Life challenges outside of sport e.g. family bereavements/ relationship issues/ life transitions.

- In addition to the extra pressures of the environment athletes are in, they still experience the same challenges as others in life outside of sport which could further increase an individuals vulnerability.

Image/ body/ weight expectations

- Acute awareness of body changes; visually and weight.
- Pressure to meet weight categories.
- Conforming to the sports image/ cultural 'norms' e.g. muscular build, thin frame, certain weight.
- Meeting own perceptions and expectations of weight/ image/ shape.

Injury/ health

- Pressure to not miss sessions (from self and others).
- Commitment questioned if missing too many sessions.
- Concerns over selection of others instead.
- Keeping quiet about illness/ injury/ mental health.
- Self-harm/ eating disorders.
- Over training.
- Pressures to stay well and injury free.

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1. Factors that can **contribute to** vulnerability

Trusted People



Intensive working relationships with coach, support staff, other athletes

- Regular one to one training environments.
- Strong influence over athlete.
- Unable to easily avoid someone who may be causing harm.
- High level of loyalty developed.
- Personal relationships with coach, support staff or management.
- Not wanting to disappoint.

High levels of trust placed with others

e.g. coaches, support staff, management, fellow athletes.

- Do you question those who are considered the best in the world?
- Imbalance of power and control.
- Potential for positions of trust to be abused.
- Potential culture of not being able to question those in authority or positions of power.
- Control over athlete's training, competition, planning and opportunities.

Independent/ self-employed coach or support staff

- Who is checking qualifications and references?
- Are they following best practice, legal requirements?
- No one to check and challenge behaviours.
- Can operate 'under the radar'.
- Not accountable to anyone (other than the athlete).

Independent agents

- Not governed by or accountable to anyone.
- Lack of training in welfare and wellbeing.
- Potential for being financially driven, not having the athletes welfare as priority.
- Can have imbalance of power over athlete.
- Control over athlete's opportunities.
- Lack of communication with coaches/ support staff.

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1. Factors that can **contribute to** vulnerability

Transition from Junior to Senior



New environment

- New training partners, staff, coaches.
- Loss of existing support network and friends.
- New training and competition locations.
- Increased pressures and expectations .
- Increased levels of responsibility.
- Increased intensity of competition and training.

Lack of consideration to levels of maturity (physically/ mentally)

- Overtraining.
- Lack of support and guidance as considered not required.
- Increased pressures.
- Lack of experience.

In awe of senior athletes, coaches, support staff

- May do everything asked by them.
- Feel unable to question or challenge.
- Not wanting to disappoint.

Difficult transition period in life generally

- Newfound freedoms, independence.
- Lots of changes.
- Potentially moving away from home - family/ friends.
- Increased domestic responsibility and looking after self.

Intensity in competition and training

- Body still developing.
- Possible increase in weight/ competition categories or difficulty rating.
- Bigger age gaps between competitors.

Wanting to fit in

- Not wanting to appear 'weak'.
- Wanting to keep up with the rest (who may be much older, more experienced).
- Athlete 'prodigy' extreme levels of expectation.

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2. Factors that can be **barriers to reporting**

Being aware of potential barriers or worries about reporting a concern, will enable an organisation to pro-actively work to break down the barriers and ensure everyone feels able and safe to report.

Feeling they won't be listened to or believed

- Person causing harm is held in high esteem/ in a key role in the sport.
- Know of others whose concerns have been dismissed.
- Worried they will be considered a trouble maker, or that they just have a grudge against the perpetrator e.g. not having been selected.

Previous experience of reporting

- Have tried before and not been listened to.
- Inaction following previous reports.
- Negative repercussions following speaking up e.g. not selected, ignored, further harm, ostracised from other team members.
- Treated like a trouble maker.

Fear of the affects on sporting career

- Worried will be isolated from team/ squad.
- Olympics opportunity only every 4 years. May feel need to wait until after to report.
- Effect on selection and funding prospects.
- Effect on future or alternative opportunities.
- Effect on sponsorship.

Effect it might have on others

- Effect on the rest of the team e.g. Key coach- others will miss out on coaching/ potential medal chances.
- Effect on family members and friends .

2. Factors that can be **barriers to reporting**

Threats from perpetrator	Threats of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Exclusion from programme/ squad/ competition.• Harm to family and, or, friends.• Losing access to facilities and support services.• Being unable to be involved in clubs/ teams elsewhere (perpetrator may be very influential within the sport).• Further or increased levels of harm.
Concern of escalation of harm	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Worried if the perpetrator found out, the level of harm would increase.
Not being aware of wrongdoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Culturally accepted behaviour.• Unaware of being potentially groomed.• May believe it is what is required to be the best.• Living in a 'bubble' may not have the external influence to suggest something is wrong.

3. Factors that can **help reduce** risks

There are actions an organisation and individuals, including athletes, can take which can help reduce the risk of harm and abuse that can come from increased levels of vulnerability. The following tables provide some examples.

Athlete and staff Inductions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Everyone knows expected behaviours and organisation's values.• Everyone knows who to speak to if they have concerns.• Everyone aware of the policies and procedures to support and protect them.
Athlete Voice mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Athletes know their views are welcomed and valued.• Systems set up with athlete voice at the forefront.
Good Education and Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Everyone made aware of Safeguarding; how to spot signs of concern, what to do and who to speak to.• Continuous professional development of staff, coaches and athletes.
Limit one to one working	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Where possible, avoid or limit one to one working.• Clear codes of conducts and boundaries in place.
Positive open culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Culture where wellbeing and welfare is priority and promoted.• Open and welcoming of feedback and thoughts.• Action taken when expected values and behaviours are not met.
Good communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Between staff, support staff, volunteers and athletes.• With parents of athletes transitioning from junior to senior levels.• Clear, concise and transparent information.

3. Factors that can **help reduce** risks

Good governance

- Clear, transparent and readily available policies and procedures.
- Communication of policies and procedures.
- Policies and procedures followed.
- Empowering athletes and staff.

Codes of Conducts

- Inappropriate behaviour and practice challenged early.
- Processes in place to deal with breach of Codes; appropriate sanctions imposed where required.
- Codes communicated and understood by all.

Safe procedures for travel and overnight stays

- Designated Welfare Officer.
- Limit one to one training, travel and accommodation wherever possible.
- Details of travel and accommodation arrangements provided in advance and agreed upon.
- Clear process and contact details for sharing concerns.

Safe recruitment and vetting of staff

- DBS Checks, references, probation periods.
- Clear job roles.
- Regular reviews.
- Athlete feedback.
- Appropriate consideration of personal qualities for role with focus on person centred approach as well as technical knowledge and experience.

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What next?

Consider what your organisation has in place already and **identify actions you can take to help:**

- **Reduce the opportunities for harm and abuse to take place.**
- **Increase the opportunities people have to feel able to report concerns.**
- **Ensure there are no barriers for people reporting concerns.**
- **Ensure your organisation has an open transparent culture where the welfare and wellbeing of everyone involved is at the forefront.**
- **Actively seek and welcome feedback, views and thoughts from those involved.**

Further resources and guidance can be found at anncrafttrust.org

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Everyone has a right to be treated with respect and dignity.
Everyone deserves to be safe.