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## **REVIEW ARTICLE**

# **Safeguarding Athletes Against Emotional Abuse**

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**Abstract:** This review article examines emotional abuse in the coach–athlete relationship, a pervasive yet often underrecognized form of relational maltreatment in sport. Emotional abuse is characterized as a repetitive, non-contact pattern of intentional behaviors aimed at control, which harm the victim's emotional, cognitive, or physical well-being. It encompasses acts such as humiliation, belittling, yelling, threats, isolation, withholding attention or affection, inducing guilt, excessive criticism, and disregarding athletes' concerns or needs. In sport, these behaviors frequently manifest when coaches prioritize performance and winning above athlete well-being, normalizing pressure, “suffering,” and punitive practices as necessary for elite success. Common examples include verbal assaults on appearance or performance, threats of benching or reputational damage, and neglect of emotional support—often perceived by athletes as more damaging than overt anger or physical aggression due to its erosion of self-esteem and relational security. Notably, intent to harm is not required for classification as abuse; behaviors need only be persistent and harmful over time. Many coaches remain unaware of the long-term consequences—such as diminished self-worth, fear, burnout, and eventual sport withdrawal—rationalizing their actions through moral disengagement mechanisms (e.g., goal justification, displacement of responsibility, or viewing practices as industry norms). Victims may similarly fail to recognize or report abuse due to power imbalances and fear of repercussions. The article underscores that psychological safety is essential for optimal athlete development and performance. It calls for greater awareness, education, and accountability to prevent the normalization of emotionally abusive coaching and to foster healthier, more ethical sport environments.

**Keywords:** Coach-athlete relationship, Young athletes, Withdrawing from Sport, Psychological Harm, Sport Clubs, Sport Parenting.



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## **Introduction**

A substantial body of literature supports the numerous benefits of participation in organized sport, including improvements in physical strength, coordination, self-esteem, perseverance, teamwork, and leadership. In most societies, sport is predominantly regarded as an inherently positive environment and is commonly viewed by parents as a means of promoting the overall health and development of their children (Brackenridge, 2002). In addition to the physical health benefits for children and adolescents, participation in sport during formative years enhances self-esteem and helps young people develop physical competencies and emotional regulation skills. Developmental discourse suggests that through sport participation, children acquire values, norms, and skills that contribute to healthy growth and psychosocial development. The fact that millions of children and adolescents participate annually in organized sports partially reflects parents' belief that sport constitutes a positive context for youth development. In recent years, there has also been a growing international trend toward participation in competitive sports among adolescents and young adults, such that approximately 45% to 75% of youth sport participation now occurs within competitive settings.

### **Why Do Some Young Athletes Withdraw from Sport?**

Despite the availability of opportunities for sport participation, many children and adolescents withdraw from sport each year for various reasons. A considerable number of these athletes discontinue their athletic careers not only at grassroots levels but also at advanced and elite levels, even after achieving significant success (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Since sport habits are formed during childhood and adolescence, it is important to identify the causes and factors associated with sport withdrawal at early ages (Dennison et al., 1988).

Various reasons have been proposed for withdrawal and performance decline, including lack of interest in the chosen sport, external pressure—particularly from parents—in selecting a specific sport, the modern lifestyle that increasingly facilitates physical inactivity, and exposure to high-pressure environments that discourage athletes. At elite levels, burnout resulting from excessive training has been observed to cause disappointment and fatigue among athletes, thereby facilitating withdrawal (Cresswell & Eklund, 2006). Research has also indicated that the relationship with coaches significantly influences young athletes' continued participation in sport. Coaches play a central role in creating an ideal sport environment and can positively affect young athletes by fostering enjoyment and motivating them to embrace challenges. Conversely, certain coaching behaviors may negatively affect young athletes and discourage them from continuing participation (Møllerlækken et al., 2017; Monteiro et al., 2016).

Nevertheless, abundant evidence suggests that one of the primary reasons for dropping out of sport—particularly at competitive and advanced levels—is an inappropriate sport environment and excessive pressure from significant others for rapid success and victory. One of the major criticisms of children's participation in sport in recent years concerns the highly competitive climate characteristic of most organized sports. In the early 1970s, Terry Orlick conducted several studies on children's sport participation and reported that excessive emphasis on outcomes and winning reduces children's enjoyment of sport. Although participation in sport has beneficial effects on children's and adolescents' physical and mental health, overemphasis on winning can turn it into a source of stress and anxiety.

Martens (1986) reported that competitive sport can negatively affect the psychological well-being of child athletes. Similarly, Scanlan (1986) identified sources of stress experienced by young athletes, including highly competitive anxiety, fear of failure, and concern about evaluation by others. The prevailing win-centered philosophy in sport can therefore create substantial psychological pressure. Pressure to succeed, along with poor relationships with coaches, parents, or peers, may lead to isolation and eventual withdrawal. Thus, despite generally positive views regarding sport, concerns about the competitive nature of youth sport—including the “win-at-all-costs” approach and the “high rate of injury”—have been raised for some time (Coakley & Donnelly, 2009). Research has shown that while physical activity contributes to high standards of health, intensive and early specialization training may negatively affect athletes’ physical and psychological well-being. Physical growth may be hindered by intense training, and overall health may be compromised because the athlete’s body may not be able to supply sufficient energy for normal growth under demanding training conditions (David, 1999).

Moreover, in pursuit of early success and rapid advancement, parents, peers, coaches, and media may impose psychological pressure on young athletes, placing their mental health at risk. In addition to direct pressure, athletes may indirectly internalize others’ expectations. Due to a strong sense of responsibility and loyalty, they may feel obligated to perform optimally and push themselves beyond their mental and physical capacities.

### **Courage: A Misinterpretation**

Research by Smith (2016) and Young (2004) indicates that enduring grueling training sessions, intense competition, and even injury in sport is often interpreted as an athlete’s “courage.” Athletes are frequently encouraged and rewarded by parents, coaches, and others for their ability to tolerate pain and hardship.

In many cases, young athletes do not have the autonomy to decide whether to continue participating in sport or to define their own goals. Their objectives are often determined by parents and coaches, and they are expected to pursue goals set by others rather than those they have chosen for themselves (Shogan, 1999).

### **Early specialization**

Early specialization in a single sport can lead to two distinct and often contradictory outcomes. While such specialization may facilitate athletes’ physical, psychological, and emotional development, it can also result in social isolation (Adams, 2018; Baker, 2003; Malina, 2010). Early specialization has been associated with social withdrawal, excessive dependency, loss of autonomy, maladaptive social behaviors, burnout, and injuries arising from continuous and intensive training. These conditions increase athletes’ vulnerability to abusive behaviors, largely due to heightened dependency and social isolation (Baker, 2003; Malina, 2010). At competitive levels, athletes are frequently required to focus almost exclusively on their sport, often sacrificing other domains of life. Evidence suggests that families may also contribute to this one-dimensional lifestyle by encouraging early success and prioritizing training and competition over balanced development (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). This occurs despite the fact that children have a fundamental right to family life, leisure time, and adequate rest. Nevertheless, athletes—both at elite and developmental levels—often adopt atypical lifestyles, spending limited time with family members and peers. Many young athletes involved in elite sport are required to leave home at an early age in order to pursue professional training.

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Even those who continue to live with their parents may have little opportunity for family interaction due to the combined demands of intensive training and schooling.

In addition, forming friendships may be particularly challenging for athletes participating in individual sports, as opportunities for social interaction outside the sporting environment are often restricted (Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003). For example, an elite young athlete who trains several hours per day, six days a week, has minimal time available for activities other than school, sleep, and meals. Consequently, opportunities to pursue interests beyond sport are extremely limited, particularly at higher competitive levels (Farstad, 2007). These athletes enter competitive and social environments earlier than their peers and are exposed to stressors that often exceed their coping capacities. In many cases, they also miss out on valuable educational and social experiences. Collectively, these factors illustrate the significant pressures placed on young athletes, especially at early ages.

As a result of such concerns, regulations governing children's participation in competitive sport have been introduced since the 1980s. For example, in 1977 the minimum age for participation in the Olympic Games was set at 15 years, and this was increased to 16 in 1980 due to concerns regarding the risks of elite competition for young athletes and reports of abuse. Research in elite sport has suggested that children under the age of six should not be exposed to competitive environments, as they are unable to fully comprehend the implications of such participation and therefore require protection by responsible adults, such as parents and coaches. Despite considerable effort and commitment, many young athletes fail to achieve elite success due to intensive training demands and recurring physical and psychological injuries, ultimately leading to withdrawal from sport. Only a small proportion progress to elite status and gain opportunities for medal success (Donnelly, 1997; David, 1999; Grenfell & Rinehart, 2003).

#### **When Performance Pressure Becomes Psychological Harm**

In light of the issues discussed, new dimensions of pressure placed on athletes have emerged in recent years—pressures that directly threaten their physical and psychological safety. Research examining sources of stress among athletes has highlighted the powerful influence of social agents such as parents, teachers, and especially coaches on youth development. Previous studies have emphasized that the quality of the coach–athlete relationship is one of the most critical factors in athlete satisfaction and motivation, to the extent that coaches can play a decisive role in whether athletes continue or withdraw from sport.

Stirling and Kerr (2009), in their examination of elite sport culture, identified key features such as the coach's authority, excessive closeness between coach and athlete, and the coach's involvement in multiple aspects of the athlete's life—including education, lifestyle, and personal matters. In many cases, the coach–athlete relationship becomes the most influential relationship in a young athlete's life. Some child athletes may even view their coach as more important than their parents and seek their guidance in various life domains (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2004). Interviews with former Olympic female swimmers, conducted 6 to 12 years after retirement, revealed that many still considered their former coaches to be the most influential figures in their lives (Gustovson & Ogilvie, 1977).

Importantly, a coach's authority often extends beyond training sessions to areas such as diet, sleep patterns, and even interpersonal relationships (Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). As athletes progress to more competitive levels, they spend increasing amounts of time with their coaches, strengthening this relationship.

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Coaches also hold substantial power over athletes' career trajectories (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2004). During competition seasons, athletes may spend most of their time training, traveling, and attending long training camps with their coaches—time that non-athlete peers would typically spend with family.

The coach–athlete relationship is inherently unequal. Coaches possess authority based on age, expertise, experience, access to resources and rewards, and past achievements (Tomlinson & Strachan, 1996). Athletes often seek validation from their coaches and may perceive them as the sole pathway to success. Additionally, sports organizations and clubs frequently place high value on coaches with records of repeated victories, granting them trust and autonomy. This power dynamic creates conditions in which coaches may—intentionally or unintentionally—exert physical or psychological pressure on athletes in the name of performance enhancement. Coaches may also hold influence over parents, asking them to entrust full control of their child's athletic development to them. However, interviews with parents reveal concerns that excessive trust can lead to the coach becoming the central and defining figure in the athlete's life (Smith et al., 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2012).

Although coaches can positively influence athlete performance, research shows that their impact is not always beneficial (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Certain conventional coaching practices in competitive sport may threaten athletes' physical and psychological well-being. The imbalance of power within the coach–athlete relationship creates conditions where exploitation—whether deliberate or unintentional—can occur.

Until the 1990s, such concerns received little attention. This changed when multiple cases of sexual abuse by coaches were exposed in several Western countries. One notable case involved Graham James, a prominent Canadian men's hockey coach and former "Coach of the Year," who was convicted of multiple counts of sexual abuse in the mid-1990s. Following such revelations, more athletes came forward with their experiences. Beyond sexual abuse, reports also highlighted other forms of mistreatment that had not previously been recognized as abuse. Athletes began speaking about the suffering and pressures imposed on them under the guise of training and performance preparation.

Many of the behaviors athletes described were considered routine coaching methods aimed at building mental toughness and resilience. However, reports revealed that some coaches used psychological aggression—intentionally or unintentionally—as a tool to develop athletes' mental strength (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). As media investigations brought these issues to public attention, the long-held perception of sport as an inherently moral and positive domain was challenged. Sports organizations were pressured to examine athlete safety and abuse more seriously.

Subsequent investigations revealed that sexual abuse was not the only form of misconduct involving abuse of power. Many standard coaching techniques, widely regarded as effective and even essential for producing successful athletes, were found to carry potential risks to athletes' physical and psychological health. In some cases, coaches known for producing champions were able to use harmful methods without being questioned (Smith et al., 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2014).

Research in athlete safeguarding has identified three primary forms of abuse in sport: sexual, physical, and emotional. Although sexual abuse cases have received intense media attention, the most commonly reported form of maltreatment among athletes is **emotional abuse** (Alexander et al., 2011; Kirby et al., 2000).

Studies indicate a high prevalence of emotionally harmful coaching practices. In the first large-scale study of youth experiences in organized sport in the United Kingdom, Alexander et al. (2011) interviewed over 6,000 young athletes. While many participants viewed sport positively, a significant number reported negative experiences. Specifically, 75% reported emotional abuse, 29% sexual abuse, 24% physical abuse, and 10% self-harm. Additionally, Vertommen et al. (2016) interviewed over 4,000 adults in Belgium and the Netherlands regarding interpersonal violence in sport before the age of 18. Results showed that 44% had experienced at least one form of violence (sexual, psychological, or physical): 11% reported physical violence, 38% psychological violence, and 14% sexual violence. Alexander et al. (2011) further reported that 23% of participants experienced emotional abuse by their coach before the age of 16.

### **The Nature of Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse, which is the focus of this article, is a repetitive pattern of non-contact, intentional behaviors in human relationships that are used to control individuals and are harmful to the victim's emotional, cognitive, or physical well-being. According to the National Olympic Committee, emotional abuse includes any unwanted act such as restricting freedom, isolation, verbal assault, humiliation, intimidation, belittling, or any behavior that diminishes a person's sense of identity, dignity, or self-esteem (Athlete Protection Guide, p. 30). Christensen (1999) defines *active emotional abuse* as continuous exposure to verbal insults, rejection, or lack of care and attention by a caregiver.

In some definitions, emotional abuse is considered a form of relational maltreatment. In relational maltreatment, an individual in a position of lower power depends on another for security, trust, and the fulfillment of needs (Crooks & Wolfe, 2007). Examples of significant relationships include parent–child, teacher–student, doctor–patient, and coach–athlete (Kerr & Stirling, 2019).

Emotional abuse of athletes by coaches may specifically include:

- ***Humiliation***: belittling or devaluing the athlete or their performance (e.g., insulting comments about a young athlete's appearance or weight).
- ***Yelling***, repeated denial of reasonable requests, isolation (e.g., preventing leisure time, limiting contact with family and friends, unnecessary separation from teammates, prolonged camps without reason).
- ***Threatening***: threatening to bench the athlete, deny permission to compete elsewhere, or damage the athlete's reputation.
- ***Ignoring or withholding attention and affection***: neglecting the athlete during practice or competition for poor performance or unmet expectations.
- ***Inducing guilt***: blaming the athlete for team losses or goals conceded.
- ***Frequent criticism for technical or non-technical mistakes.***

- **Disregarding or devaluing athlete concerns:** ignoring emotional needs, minimizing the importance of rest, family contact, or financial support.
- **Verbal abuse, ridicule, or extreme anger** (e.g., shouting, mocking, throwing equipment without causing physical harm).

Additionally, certain coaching practices used as punishment, such as benching a player, may overlap with emotional abuse (Battaglia et al., 2017). Athletes have reported that the most common forms of emotional abuse they experience in sport are yelling, threats, and humiliation. However, denial of attention and support has been reported to have even more harmful effects, whereas physically aggressive behaviors stemming from coach anger show comparatively lower harm. This is partly because neglecting attention is perceived as a threat to the coach–athlete relationship, often conveying a sense of worthlessness and undermining self-esteem.

Research on child abuse has reached a consensus that *intent to harm is not required* to define emotional abuse and neglect (O’Hagan, 1993; Moran et al., 2002). Similarly, in sport, while a coach may intentionally employ harmful methods, explicit intent to harm the athlete is not necessary for a behavior to be classified as emotional abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2008).

Moreover, in the general domain, research shows that emotionally harmful behaviors are often normalized as standard child-rearing practices. In many cases, the abuser may not realize they are committing abuse, and the victim may not recognize that they are being abused (Krugman & Krugman, 1984). Many coaches are likely unaware of the negative impact of their behavior and may perceive their actions as positive within the coach–athlete relationship. Although many do not intend to harm athletes, their insulting behavior can have long-term destructive effects on young athletes (Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Violence can lead athletes to experience feelings of worthlessness, fear, and anger (Brackenridge & Fasting, 2004).

A crucial point here is **awareness**. In many cases, coaches are unaware of their negative behaviors and mistakenly believe that achieving victory alone justifies their methods. However, they remain unaware of the long-term impact of these behaviors on the athlete’s future in sport. Many athletes, after prolonged exposure to such abusive practices in sport, may experience burnout and eventually withdraw from their professional athletic careers. Interviews with former athletes indicate that the consequences of such behaviors are often felt long after they have stopped participating in sport.

It is important to recognize that for a behavior to be classified as abuse, it must be *persistent and repeated over an extended period*. Behaviors that occur briefly or rarely cannot generally be considered abusive. However, research recommends that any behavior that could negatively affect an athlete’s mental health in the long term should be avoided, both to enhance performance and to protect psychological well-being. Experience shows that *the best environment for athlete development is the safest environment*, which encompasses both physical and psychological safety.

Emotional abuse often occurs when coaches prioritize athlete performance over their well-being—when winning becomes the sole objective (Gervis & Dunn, 2004; Parent & Demers, 2011). In elite sport, “suffering” is not unusual, and therefore, unnecessary pressure or hardship imposed on children and

adolescents is sometimes normalized as a necessary part of building elite athletes (Gervis, 2013). For example, evidence shows that punishment in sport may involve negative coaching methods such as forcing athletes to endure physically demanding training without rest due to misbehavior or criticizing athletes for failing to meet high-performance standards (Andrews, 2016).

Athletes report that emotionally abusive behaviors by coaches are often used as a tool for punishment because, in sport—both at grassroots and elite levels—a coach’s reputation depends on the successful athletes they develop. Many coaches have made personal investments in their athletes, which are directly linked to their career progression. Therefore, when an athlete achieves high performance, the coach’s status in the sport is elevated; to ensure this success, they may impose any form of pressure necessary on the athlete (Gervis & Brierley, 1999).

Donnelly (1997) explained that while coaches may believe they are acting in the athlete’s best interest, they quickly realize that their career advancement and income are contingent on their athletes’ performance. Thus, even if a coach’s power and control over an athlete are not intentionally exercised for harm, the pressure to achieve success may lead to decisions that compromise the athlete’s health and well-being. This creates a dilemma for young athletes who want to succeed but no longer enjoy training.

In other cases, emotional abuse has been reported as a method for establishing or reinforcing dominance and control over athletes. Often, this same power and authority serve as a reason for non-intervention in cases of misconduct. Potential complainants fear punishment from the coach, while coaches resist acknowledging abusive behavior because many justify it as a motivational tool necessary for success (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). Coaches are aware that if they achieve victory, they are unlikely to be held accountable for these behaviors.

Many of these findings can be understood through Bandura’s concept of *moral justification*. This concept explains that individuals, under “special circumstances” (e.g., when the goal justifies the means), convince themselves to override standard ethical norms. In other words, emotional abuse may be rationalized if it is perceived to enhance performance and contribute to winning a competition. Another mechanism of moral justification relates to *displacement of responsibility*, such as when a coach convinces themselves that abusive practices are widely accepted in coaching and commonly used to produce successful athletes. Finally, moral justification can shift focus onto the *victim*, with the abuser arguing that the athlete voluntarily participated in training or competition, absolving themselves of responsibility (Grove, 2016).

### **The Role of Organizations and Sports Clubs**

The role of organizations and sports clubs in this context is also highly significant. Over the years, the policies of both private and public sports institutions have largely focused on achieving victory and success. In these organizations, rewards are typically given to the player or players who win, and a “successful athlete” is often defined solely as a victorious one. Consequently, all resources and facilities are made available to the coaching staff to achieve success as quickly as possible, and athletes are expected to devote all their efforts to reaching the club’s goals.

This unconditional trust in coaches creates a culture of *coach-centered authority*, where everything revolves around the coach, who becomes perceived as the sole determinant of an athlete’s success or failure. In

contrast, emphasizing *athlete-centered development*—rather than coach-centered dominance—can foster a healthier environment for athlete growth.

Additionally, most clubs and sports organizations tend to hire coaches with prior successful experience and reputations. Given their past achievements, these coaches are often trusted completely, and their strategies and tools for preparing athletes are rarely scrutinized. In practice, sporting success is often judged solely by outcomes. Thus, the principle of “*the end justifies the means*” frequently applies to both coaches and athletes, allowing abusive behaviors to remain hidden behind victories (Gervis & Dunn, 2004).

For this reason, sport can create a context in which behaviors that would be considered abusive in other settings appear ethical and necessary. There are therefore many reasons to highlight the prevalence of emotionally abusive coaching practices (Kerr & Stirling, 2016). It is also important to consider that coaches often serve as role models for young athletes, and negative coaching behaviors may even lead to peer-to-peer violence and jeopardize the athletes’ future careers.

### **The Effects of Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse perpetrated by coaches negatively affects athletes in various ways. In the family context, experiencing emotional abuse from parents during childhood has serious consequences for a child’s mental health and psychosocial functioning, and it has been reported to have a stronger association with adult depression and anxiety compared to other forms of childhood adversity, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect (Kent & Waller, 1998).

Research in the field of sport similarly indicates that abuse against child athletes is associated with increased psychological distress and reduced quality of life in adulthood (Vertommen et al., 2018). Emotional abuse may also be linked to a range of long-term consequences, including depression, maladaptive eating behaviors, and social withdrawal (Stirling & Kerr, 2013). In more severe cases, secondary outcomes of these conditions may include self-harm and suicide (Gervis, 2013).

Numerous studies have identified “eating disorders” and “burnout” as two primary consequences of abuse in sport settings. These studies suggest that eating disorders largely arise due to psychological pressure, particularly among female athletes and especially in aesthetic sports such as gymnastics and figure skating, where there is intense focus on the athlete’s body. Excessive pressure, combined with criticism and scrutiny of the athlete’s body to achieve an ideal weight, may lead to anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa. It is estimated that in gymnastics, diving, and figure skating, approximately 35% of athletes experience eating disorders.

Another issue resulting from intensive training and continuous pressure is burnout. An athlete suffering from burnout no longer has the motivation to strive, let alone to perform at a highly professional level that involves long training hours. This lack of motivation is particularly evident among children who have been subjected to intense training from a very young age (David, 1999).

Binggeli et al. (2001) categorized the consequences of emotional abuse into five domains:

1. ***Negative interpersonal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors*** (e.g., low self-esteem, negative life attitudes, symptoms of anxiety, depression, and suicidality);

2. **Emotional problems and symptoms** (e.g., emotional instability, borderline personality disorder, impulse control problems, anger, self-injury, eating disorders, and substance abuse);
3. **Social and antisocial functioning** (e.g., attachment problems, low social competence, low empathy, sexual maladjustment, dependency, aggression, delinquency, and crime);
4. **Learning problems** (e.g., poor academic achievement, learning disabilities, impaired moral reasoning); and
5. **Physical health** (e.g., failure to thrive, physical complaints, poor adult health, and increased mortality).

In addition, abuse of athletes generates negative emotions and self-blame. Athletes have reported feelings such as stupidity, worthlessness, sadness, low self-confidence, anger, frustration, and humiliation in response to abusive coaching behaviors. These findings reflect a destructive and vicious cycle in which the athlete loses belief in their ability to succeed and perform effectively. This, in turn, may intensify the coach's abusive behavior, as unmet performance expectations lead to increased pressure on the athlete to improve performance (Gervis & Dunn, 2004).

Furthermore, Stirling and Kerr (2013) organized their findings on the effects of emotional abuse into three main categories: perceived psychological effects, perceived training effects, and perceived performance effects. Negative perceived psychological effects included decreased mood, reduced self-esteem, lowered self-efficacy, poor body image, anger, and anxiety. Negative perceived training effects included changes in motivation (both decreases and increases), reduced enjoyment, impaired concentration, and difficulties in acquiring new skills. Perceived performance effects included decreased performance.

On the other hand, it is possible that emotional abuse by a coach may initially increase athletes' efforts due to fear of reprimand. However, over time, the psychological effects of abuse may manifest in the long term, reducing athletes' enjoyment of and interest in sport. This claim is supported by previous research in which athletes reported increasing experiences of emotional abuse throughout their professional careers.

Moreover, abuse can influence the type of motivation experienced by athletes. It has the potential to shift athletes' intrinsic motivation toward extrinsic motivation. Although negative coaching methods may increase compliance, obedience, and extrinsic motivation through behavioral control techniques such as criticism, blame, and other displays of power that pressure athletes to conform, they ultimately diminish intrinsic motivation. This is a critical point, as intrinsic motivation is associated with sustained participation and enjoyment in sport. One of the factors contributing to athlete dropout—beyond issues of abuse and pressure—is reliance on extrinsic motives (e.g., pleasing others, receiving praise or rewards) rather than intrinsic motives (personal enjoyment) (Ryan et al., 1995).

### **Internalization of Abuse**

Mistreatment can be particularly destructive for athletes because they tend to internalize the harmful behaviors to which they are exposed. They attribute their coaches' misconduct to themselves and

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consequently experience feelings of shame and guilt. These athletes often perceive themselves as responsible for the coach's behavior and attempt to compensate for it. As athletes internalize their coaches' negative words, their self-esteem, mental health, and identity are damaged (Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2008). One of the reasons for this harm, as discussed in earlier sections, is the restricted nature of athletes' lives. When a child athlete progresses and becomes established in their sport, their identity becomes strongly intertwined with it and may even be entirely defined by it (Stirling & Kerr, 2007; Tofler et al., 1996). This is referred to as a unidimensional identity, which can intensify social isolation and athlete withdrawal, ultimately hindering both athletic and personal development across multiple life domains. Moreover, another key factor contributing to the internalization of abuse is athletes' lack of awareness regarding what constitutes abuse. When athletes normalize their coach's behavior due to this lack of awareness, they may interpret their own behavior as inadequate or wrong and blame themselves for mistakes they did not actually commit.

### **Barriers to Reporting Abuse**

As the literature and research in this area are still emerging, athletes' awareness of abuse in sport remains very limited. One reason for the underreporting of misconduct is athletes' lack of awareness that abuse can occur in sport at all. Many athletes assume that abuse is not possible within the sporting context. Moreover, when such behaviors occur across many teams and affect multiple players, they become normalized, reducing athletes' doubts about the appropriateness of reporting them.

In a study of retired athletes, participants recalled that all team members had experienced emotionally abusive coaching practices. Observing similar abusive experiences among teammates—and witnessing peers' acceptance of such treatment—was identified as a primary factor in normalizing and accepting these behaviors. At younger ages, peers' and teammates' reactions often serve as the standard for judging whether a behavior is right or wrong. Since a general lack of awareness about abuse is common among players, the likelihood of disclosure is significantly reduced.

Research also indicates that athletes may refrain from reporting abuse due to fear of the coach's reaction or uncertainty about whether speaking up is justified. They may believe that, given the coach's reputation for success, no one would believe their report of abuse (Stirling, 2009). Another major barrier to reporting emotional abuse is fear of being removed from the team or jeopardizing one's athletic future. Unfortunately, insufficient awareness among team officials and sport governing bodies, unconditional trust in technical staff, inappropriate responses to reports, and lack of support for athletes further discourage disclosure and perpetuate these problems.

Additionally, one of the most significant reasons for not reporting abuse is athletes' strong achievement motivation and intense desire for progress. This ambition may lead them to overlook abusive behaviors. Many athletes aspire to reach higher competitive levels and resist anything that might threaten their professional future. In some cases, athletes may tolerate almost anything in pursuit of their championship dreams. Cook and Cole (2001) highlighted specific ways in which competitive sport makes young athletes vulnerable to abuse. When winning becomes more important than other reasons for participating in sport, the athlete quickly becomes an instrument to be trained to fulfill a role. As this identity shift occurs, the

athlete is no longer viewed as an individual with personal needs and rights but rather as a tool for achieving sporting success. This places the athlete in a vulnerable position, particularly children, who risk becoming instruments for adult goals.

Ultimately, these dynamics contribute to an environment that normalizes abuse and leaves athletes defenseless. It should also not be overlooked that a considerable number of athletes, both at grassroots and elite levels, refrain from reporting abusive behaviors due to affection or loyalty toward their coaches. They may feel that disclosure would betray the coach and damage the coach's professional future. In this context, some athletes even interpret abusive behaviors as expressions of care or concern for their development.

For these reasons, emotional abuse has received comparatively less clinical and research attention, likely due to the acceptance of an aggressive sport culture, the absence of clear malicious intent on the part of perpetrators, and the failure to recognize the urgency of intervention (Brassard & Donovan, 2006). In many cases, discussing the issue with coaches does not yield positive results, as they tend to deny such behaviors. Nevertheless, one study reported that approximately 65% of coaches acknowledged using verbal aggression toward their young athletes (Yabe, 2018).

### **Normalization of Abuse**

The normalization of abuse is likely one of the primary reasons athletes may fail to report it. Abusive coaches may portray harmful coaching practices and demeaning behaviors as normal or typical. In this context, athletes themselves may normalize the abuse they experience, particularly when the coach holds a strong reputation for success within the sporting community (Cense & Brackenridge, 2001; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2012; Stirling, 2012). Abused athletes may especially normalize such behavior in response to the power held by coaches. This normalization may even intensify as athletes progress to elite levels (Gervis et al., 2016).

It appears that athletes often accept emotional abuse as part of ordinary coaching and training. When they believe that such treatment is necessary for successful performance, they are unlikely to question their coaches' behavior (Kavanagh et al., 2017; Stirling & Kerr, 2007, 2014).

Research on the normalization of abuse has also identified "positive interpretation and perception of abuse" as a contributing factor. Stirling and Kerr (2013) reported that abuse may both decrease and increase athletes' motivation. This suggests that perceptions of abuse differ across individuals. In other words, it is the individual's interpretation of the behavior that determines whether it is perceived as abusive (Findlay & Corbett, 1999). These researchers explained that athletes who achieve success and victory may develop a positive interpretation of their coach's misconduct and may even attribute their performance success to it. In contrast, athletes experiencing performance decline or plateau are more likely to interpret the coach's abusive behavior negatively. Overall, competitive level and performance outcomes significantly influence athletes' perceptions.

Research by Gervis and Dunn (2004) further showed that abusive coaching behaviors are more prevalent in unsuccessful competitive contexts and at advancing competitive levels. Consequently, such misconduct appears particularly common among "unsuccessful elite" athletes. These findings support earlier research indicating that emotional abuse is more frequently experienced by those competing at higher levels. In such cases, abusive behavior may be viewed as a necessary method for achieving peak performance. Interestingly,

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although the prevalence of abuse increases with athletic progression, its negative effects appear less severe among elite athletes compared to grassroots athletes. Sub-elite athletes not only reported continuous experiences of abuse but also held more negative perceptions of it. In explaining these findings, Brackenridge (2002) suggested that athletes may be particularly vulnerable during stages of “imminent success.” It can therefore be inferred that grassroots athletes are often, and sometimes even more than elite athletes, exposed to abuse that carries more harmful consequences. Overall, these findings suggest that success itself may contribute to underreporting of abuse, as many athletes not only fail to perceive the behavior as abusive but may even consider it a primary factor in their achievements.

Numerous studies have also highlighted “unique characteristics of athletes” as facilitating factors in the normalization and underreporting of abuse. One important factor influencing different interpretations of abuse is resilience. Resilience is a core characteristic of athletes—especially at elite levels—and may strengthen positive appraisal and perseverance in the face of adversity. However, it may also contribute to underreporting in sport. Many athletes, due to strong self-reliance, may perceive disclosure of abuse as a sign of weakness and prefer to endure the mistreatment.

In this regard, Iwaniec et al. (2006) categorized factors contributing to resilience against abuse into three domains: (1) facilitating factors, (2) internal factors, and (3) environmental factors. Facilitating factors include the nature of the abuse, early positive childhood experiences, and secure attachment style (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Internal resilience factors include positive self-perception, external attribution style, adaptive coping strategies resistant to coercive behavior, personality traits such as high positive temperament, problem-solving skills, planning ability, social competence, goal-directed planning, positive peer relationships, high self-esteem, and confidence (Daniel et al., 1999; Doyle, 2001; Wolfe, 1987; Crittenden & Ainsworth, 1989). Environmental resilience factors include a positive educational setting (e.g., school) and the presence of a supportive relationship that provides unconditional positive regard and helps the child understand how and why abuse occurs (Toth & Cicchetti, 1997; Doyle, 1997).

Other athlete characteristics that may perpetuate dysfunctional coach–athlete relationships include high achievement motivation, strong commitment, and athletic identity. Intense ambition and exemplary dedication may enable athletes to tolerate harsh conditions. As discussed previously, athletic identity is often unidimensional. Many athletes define themselves entirely through sport, and sport may be the only activity they have pursued extensively. Separation from friends, family, and other life domains makes the idea of quitting sport extremely difficult. Consequently, athletes may blindly accept both the positive and negative aspects of sport. Therefore, attention must be paid to individual differences and competitive level when interpreting abuse. In interviews on this topic, the first step should be assessing athletes’ level of awareness and their understanding of what constitutes abuse.

Normalization of abusive coaching behaviors may also occur among parents, as the elite sport environment can pressure them into silence and compliance. The value parents place on athletic success contributes to this silence. In 1998, research examining parents’ role in preventing sexual abuse in sport reported that parents often place uncritical trust in coaches, thereby increasing young athletes’ vulnerability (Brackenridge, 1998). Fewer than 45% of surveyed parents were aware of the coach’s qualifications, and

80% were unaware of whether the coach adhered to ethical principles. Some parents were even aware of unethical coaching practices but allowed respect for the coach to override their concerns, thereby enabling misconduct without fear of consequences. Over time, parents' positive perceptions of harsh treatment as "normal" may be reinforced, unintentionally making them complicit. Kerr and Stirling (2012) described such parents as "silent bystanders." In many cases, parents acknowledged witnessing abusive behavior toward their children but remained silent due to their desire to secure a successful future for them.

Athletes often model their parents' responses. They may interpret protesting against a coach as disrespectful and therefore remain silent. Following family and cultural norms, they learn to obey coaches unquestioningly, as any deviation may be perceived as disrespectful and as jeopardizing their future success. Research has shown that some athletes may not even admit to themselves that they have been abused, or may not fully recognize their experiences as abuse (Kavanagh et al., 2017; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2012; Stirling & Kerr, 2009). In many cases, athletes are simply too young to fully understand the nature of the treatment they are experiencing. They may lack the vocabulary to describe mistreatment, making disclosure unlikely at the time. A developmental perspective helps explain why many young athletes fail to recognize abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). As athletes grow older and gain experience, their confidence and awareness increase, and even if they do not report past experiences, they may later categorize them as abusive. Indeed, lack of education and awareness about abuse prevents athletes from recognizing themselves as victims, and therefore from reporting it. Arguably, one of the greatest risks in emotional abuse is the victim's inability to recognize it as problematic behavior.

Other key factors contributing to non-reporting or delayed disclosure in sport include the coach's power, fear of damaging the coach-athlete relationship, and fear of being blamed or questioned. Such fear is particularly understandable when other adults, including parents, do not label the behavior as abusive and instead normalize it (Stirling & Kerr, 2010). Furthermore, although emotional abuse may become normalized during athletes' careers, research suggests that upon retirement many athletes begin to question the dominant culture of elite sport and subsequently speak out against emotionally abusive coaching behaviors (Stirling & Kerr, 2007).

### **Who Perpetrates Abuse?**

Abuse in sport does not occur solely at the hands of coaches. According to definitions of psychological abuse and neglect, abuse takes place within a relationship where one individual holds power over another and is responsible for meeting that person's needs. In the context of emotional abuse in sport, any form of verbal humiliation, denial of attention and support, rejection, or similar behaviors carried out by individuals in positions of authority and responsibility falls within the scope of abuse.

Therefore, in monitoring and safeguarding processes, all members of the technical staff and any individuals who interact directly or indirectly with athletes should be subject to oversight.

Regarding the characteristics of those who perpetrate abuse, Stirling and Kerr (2013) reported that emotionally abusive coaching practices may have both emotional and instrumental origins. Emotional roots refer to a coach's emotional reactivity and inability to regulate emotions in performance environments, particularly in response to athletes' mistakes. Instrumental roots, on the other hand, refer to behaviors adopted deliberately to achieve a desired outcome, such as winning or improved performance.

Research also suggests that individuals who were abused during childhood—particularly by their parents—may be more likely to engage in abusive behaviors later in life. Some perpetrators may exhibit personality disorders, including narcissistic or obsessive traits. Individuals with narcissistic characteristics tend to be self-centered, self-satisfied, and inclined to dominate others. In relationships, they may exploit others to fulfill their own desires and act irresponsibly. Those with obsessive traits may be possessive, rigid, and insistent that tasks be performed strictly according to their own standards. While these characteristics may be present in some abusive coaches, they are not universal; therefore, assessing coaches' mental health should also be a priority.

Coaches must recognize that all forms of harassment and abuse—regardless of intention—violate athletes' rights. As emphasized by the International Olympic Committee, “All athletes have the right to participate in ‘safe sport’; a sporting environment that is respectful, fair, and free from all forms of non-accidental violence against athletes” (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Protecting athletes from harassment and abuse is formally embedded within the fundamental principles of good governance in the Olympic Movement and international sport under the concept of athlete safeguarding.

### **Protective Measures**

#### ***1) Developing and Evaluating Safeguarding Initiatives***

Public exposure of abuse cases through media scrutiny has prompted sport organizations to take action regarding athlete safety and maltreatment. As a result, various safeguarding measures—such as policies, educational programs, and support services—have been implemented to assist athletes. While these developments reflect positive social attitudes toward the importance of child protection in sport, it is essential that such measures be empirically evaluated to ensure their effectiveness and sustainability.

Over the past two decades, strong reactions to cases of child and youth maltreatment in sport have led to the expansion of preventive initiatives. However, without grounding these initiatives in solid theoretical frameworks and empirical evidence, their long-term impact may remain limited. It must also be emphasized that the absence of reports does not mean that abuse has not occurred. Kirby et al. (2000) noted that without effective harassment policies, not only will abuse be underreported, but the likelihood of investigation will also be significantly reduced.

Despite increasing public attention—particularly following high-profile international cases involving organizations such as the USA Gymnastics—research on sub-elite athletes remains limited in many countries. Most studies on emotional abuse in sport have focused on adult or retired athletes, often years after their professional careers ended. Given the documented negative effects of emotional abuse during formative years and its persistence into adulthood, prevention efforts should begin before athletes enter elite or professional levels. Understanding the climate within sub-elite sport may help predict and improve the future culture of elite sport.

In some national contexts, no specialized research has yet examined the prevalence of emotional abuse or athletes' responses to it. Athletes' reactions to abusive behavior can serve as indicators of their awareness and understanding of abuse. Greater transparency in this area may also support coaches who, due to lack of

knowledge, use harmful methods, helping them adopt healthier and more effective performance-enhancing approaches.

The first step in preventing emotional abuse and protecting athletes is identifying these behaviors and investigating how athletes perceive them, including the factors shaping those perceptions. This requires equipping athletes—beginning at grassroots levels—with the skills to distinguish between normal sport-related challenges and abusive conduct. Accordingly, a structured safeguarding system should exist across all sports disciplines to educate athletes about abuse, process complaints confidentially, and ensure that athletes can report concerns without fear of retaliation. Education for coaches regarding emotional abuse and its psychological and social consequences should also be an integral component of this system.

## ***2) Addressing Organizational and Structural Factors***

Nearly twenty years have passed since the first formal safeguarding initiatives in sport emerged. Although progress has been made, systematic evaluation and comprehensive analysis remain insufficient. Significant gaps persist in theoretical knowledge and robust data regarding child protection in sport.

Most behavioral science research has concentrated on individual-level factors—such as the psychological characteristics of perpetrators or victims (Mountjoy et al., 2016). Far fewer studies have examined abuse at the organizational level. Consequently, there is limited understanding of the structural and social mechanisms within sport organizations that may enable or even reinforce abusive practices.

Abuse is widely recognized as a multi-causal phenomenon, resulting from interactions between individual, organizational, and broader societal factors. Overemphasizing individual wrongdoing while ignoring systemic influences may hinder meaningful progress in prevention.

One important organizational factor is the relative autonomy of sport clubs and governing bodies. Many clubs worldwide operate informally or with limited oversight. In countries such as the United States, much athlete development occurs outside the formal education system. In nations like the Canada and the United Kingdom, only certain clubs receive government funding and supervision. In other contexts, most clubs operate privately. This raises concerns about whether minimum coaching and educational standards are consistently enforced.

Key questions arise:

- To what extent do clubs or governing bodies contribute to abusive environments?
- Do their values and norms implicitly encourage harmful coaching methods?

Research suggests that independent and insufficiently regulated clubs may fail to meet necessary safeguarding standards (Kerr & Stirling, 2014). Therefore, in addition to internal monitoring systems, independent oversight bodies should evaluate clubs' policies, norms, and practices, revising them when necessary.

Current international regulations are also insufficient to guarantee effective child protection. Although many sport federations include safeguarding clauses, oversight often focuses on competitions rather than daily training environments—where most harm occurs (Weber, 2009). Stronger regulations addressing training practices are therefore essential.

Another critical issue is the intergenerational transmission of abusive coaching styles. Coaches who experienced verbal or physical abuse as athletes may replicate similar methods. Because successful athletes often become future coaches, breaking this negative cycle is vital. Education, supervision, and competency development for both athletes and coaches should therefore be prioritized in youth sport organizations.

Clubs also play a central role in shaping sport culture. Policies that grant unconditional trust to coaches, reward success without regard for athlete wellbeing, prioritize victory over development and enjoyment, and overlook mental health risks can contribute to abuse and discourage reporting (Smits et al., 2017). Safeguarding must therefore be embedded in organizational values, not treated as a peripheral issue.

### ***3) Strengthening Reporting and Disclosure Systems***

Most children and adolescents who experience abuse delay disclosure until adulthood. Because signs of emotional abuse are often difficult for others to detect, disclosure remains the primary method of identifying abuse (Kerr & Stirling, 2012). For this reason, accessible, confidential reporting systems within organizations serving children—such as sport clubs—are essential.

However, limited information exists regarding whether reporting channels in sport are genuinely accessible, trusted, and safe for all athletes. Effective safeguarding requires that reporting mechanisms be:

- Clearly communicated to athletes and parents
- Independent and confidential
- Free from retaliation risks
- Supported by trained personnel capable of responding appropriately

Without such systems, athletes may remain silent, and abuse may persist unchallenged.

Protective measures in sport must move beyond reactive policies toward proactive, evidence-based, and system-wide safeguarding strategies. Abuse prevention requires coordinated efforts at individual, organizational, and cultural levels. Only through education, independent oversight, structural reform, and accessible reporting systems can sport environments become genuinely safe spaces that uphold athletes' rights and wellbeing.

### **What Should Be Done If an Athlete Reports Abuse?**

Stirling and Kerr (2011) suggest the following steps:

1. ***Listen carefully and calmly.***

The athlete must feel that their voice is heard and that their disclosure is taken seriously.

2. ***Encourage the athlete to feel comfortable sharing details.***

Invite the athlete to describe what happened in as much detail as possible. In some cases, it may be the athlete's interpretation of the situation that shapes their understanding of the behavior, rather than the objective nature of the behavior itself. Careful clarification is therefore essential.

3. ***Avoid speaking negatively about the alleged perpetrator and remain composed.***

Some athletes may feel protective toward the individual involved (e.g., a coach). Strong or hostile reactions toward that person may reduce the athlete's willingness to continue reporting or to cooperate with further investigation.

4. ***Reassure the athlete that the abuse is not their fault.***

Make it clear that they are not responsible for the mistreatment and express appreciation for their courage in reporting it.

5. ***Address the culture of silence in sport.***

A culture of silence often surrounds abuse in sport. Because mental toughness is frequently emphasized as a defining characteristic of athletes, they may perceive help-seeking as a sign of weakness. It is crucial to reinforce that reporting abuse is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is a courageous act that may protect other athletes and empower them to speak out.

6. ***Report the abuse to the appropriate authority.***

Proper procedures must be followed to ensure that the matter is investigated professionally and ethically.

### **What Everyone Should Know to Prevent and Address Abuse**

1. Establish clear personal boundaries in relationships.
2. Take responsibility for protecting oneself from exploitative behavior and recognize that no one — not even close individuals — has the right to abuse.
3. Respond assertively to abusive behavior.
4. Do not delay reporting in the hope that time will resolve the situation.
5. Practice assertiveness skills.
6. Avoid engaging in tasks that cause discomfort and are not part of one's responsibilities.
7. Do not yield to aggressive or domineering behavior.
8. Value rest and recovery time.
9. Refrain from becoming involved in unhealthy conflicts.
10. Regulate emotions and remain mindful of tone.

11. If abuse is experienced, speak with a trusted person (preferably a professional counselor).

### **If You Suspect Abuse but Are Not Certain**

1. Look for signs and behavioral indicators.
2. Report concerns directly to an appropriate authority so that a formal investigation can determine the validity of the suspicion. Determining the facts is the responsibility of designated authorities, not the observer.

### **How Can Sport Psychologists Contribute to the Prevention of Athlete Abuse?**

1. ***Prioritize athlete well-being above performance outcomes.***  
The physical, psychological, social, and spiritual well-being of the athlete must take precedence over competitive success.
2. ***Educate stakeholders about professional boundaries.***  
Conduct workshops for athletes, coaches, and parents on healthy coach–athlete relationships and ethical boundaries.
3. ***Promote psychological empowerment.***  
Strengthening self-esteem, self-efficacy, and assertiveness reduces the likelihood of internalizing abusive behavior.
4. ***Encourage safe reporting cultures.***  
Support the development of confidential and non-retaliatory reporting systems.
5. ***Advocate for ethical oversight.***  
Collaborate with sport organizations to develop and implement safeguarding policies and ethical codes of conduct.

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