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Around the World:
Medals & Maltreatment: Protecting Elite Child Athletes from Abuse

*Hannah Cholewinski**

I. INTRODUCTION

The trial of U.S. Gymnastics physician Larry Nassar was one of the first times the American public heard of blatant abuses perpetrated against young, elite athletes. Four years later, the ripples are still felt throughout society. In 2020, Netflix released *Athlete A*, a documentary that chronicles the abuse elite gymnasts experienced not only at the hands of Nassar, but at the hands of the trainers, administrators, and coaches of the U.S. National Gymnastics Team. However, this is far from the first instance of athlete abuse that played out on national television. Few can forget the “heroic” moment of the 1996 Olympics when Kerry Strug completed a vault on a sprained and torn ankle after being told by U.S. Coach Bela Karolyi “[Y]ou better do it,” or when figure skater Bradie Tennell performed for the entirety of the 2016 season with stress fractures across various lumbar vertebra in her back. Few will soon forget the grueling doping schedule put in place by the Russian authorities to ensure their athletes dominated the 2014 Sochi Olympics. No matter the country, there is one common thread: the ongoing abuse of our young elite athletes in the name of high medal counts at the Olympics and other international sporting events.

As we approach the 2021 Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo, a question *everyone* should be asking is what kind of protections are put in place for these athletes, particularly for elite child athletes who commonly participate in popular events like artistic gymnastics and swimming. Given recent explosive claims of severe child abuse of elite athletes in Japan, there must be a refocusing on the safety of the youngest and most vulnerable athletes in order to protect them from undue harm. To determine the required safeguards, this article will discuss the history of children in elite athletics, the rise of abuse, and policy responses to the reported abuses. The article will conclude with suggestions that the overhead agencies should adopt to ensure the safety of children in elite athletics.

II. A BRIEF HISTORY OF CHILDREN IN ELITE ATHLETICS

Children have participated in sports for years; however, only in the last sixty years have researchers seen an increase in what is known as “sports specialization,” or intense training focusing on the skills of one sport. This was particularly true in the 1990s following the heavy media coverage of athletes such as Tara Lipinski, Dominique Moceanu, Amanda Beard, and Fu Mingxia winning gold medals and attaining the title of “world champion” all before the age of fifteen. Although the United States was relatively

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late to the practice of sports specialization, this method was widely used in the former Soviet Union and throughout a number of Asian countries, including China and Japan.

Although the average age of an Olympian is twenty-seven, children as young as fourteen have taken the stage in disciplines such as track and field, diving, figure skating, and gymnastics. The Olympics themselves have a number of age restrictions. For example, Olympic soccer players *must* be under twenty-three, with only three exceptions per national team. Although the upcoming games in Tokyo have seen a loosening of some restrictions due to the cancellation of the 2020 games, the reality is that most countries only require a child athlete to be a minimum age of thirteen years old to compete on a national team, with intensive training for a number of the more popular sports beginning as young as three years old.

III. THE RISE OF ABUSE

Over the last five years, there has been an uptick in reports of abuse in athletics. The most pervasive in the United States is the story of Larry Nassar, who reportedly abused over 250 youth gymnasts across the nation. However, reports of abuse come from across the world, showing that it is not only a U.S. issue, but rather, one that spans the world.

A. *Japan*

A July 2020 report from Human Rights Watch (HRW) revealed in alarming detail the patterns of abuse present in the training of young Japanese elite athletes. The reports contained fifty-six interviews of current and former child athletes across sixteen sports disciplines. An additional 757 responses from an online survey were recorded, detailing the pervasiveness of physical and mental abuse in sports. The title of the report, *I Was Hit So Many Times I Can't Count*, comes from an interview with a baseball player about his time spent training in middle school. A basketball player detailed instances of abuse during training that included hair pulling, kicking, hits to the face, and scratches hard and deep enough to cause extensive bleeding. HRW points out that reforms made in 2013 and 2019 failed to address child abuse in athletics, despite its prevalence in training for elite athletics.

B. *Great Britain*

A report from the BBC details abuses in British Gymnastics spanning over the last decade, which current national team members allege still occur today. One elite gymnast reported that she was driven to bulimia at age fourteen from the constant weigh-ins and body shaming her coaches subjected her to; she retired from the elite level to escape the abuse a mere three years later. The BBC report details extreme training practices, including hitting gymnasts in the legs with wooden sticks, sitting on them to force flexibility, and forcing athletes to perform with broken bones. Two prominent British Olympians, Becky and Ellie Downie, released statements over the summer of 2020 detailing their abuse while on the British National team, mostly surrounding emotional abuse regarding their weight.

The BBC reported a “culture of fear” in British Gymnastics, characterizing the environment as one of grooming young children for later abuse. Following these reports, Great Britain launched an independent review by a prominent prosecutor.

C. China

Reports from the NBA China facilities indicate that children are pushed to their physical limits, do not receive adequate (if any) education, and are frequently beaten, kicked, and verbally abused in training sessions. One coach likened the training camps to “sweatshops for athletes,” with a number of coaches reportedly leaving due to their perception of the maltreatment of the young athletes (the average age was reported to be between thirteen and fourteen years old). Following these reports, the NBA stated that they would investigate the claims and reported closing one of the NBA China facilities; however, the CEO refused to acknowledge whether this decision was based on the reportedly politically contentious location of the training camp or due to the budding human rights violation claims in the camp.

IV. CURRENT POLICIES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

A. Existing Protections

Children around the world are universally granted rights via the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Under Article 19 of the agreement, nations who have adopted the CRC have an affirmative responsibility to address allegations of “physical and mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse” via legislative, administrative, social, or educational measures. Under the same article, nations have an affirmative obligation to implement and follow uniform procedures to investigate, treat, and follow up on instances of such abuse. Under Article 28, nations also recognize the right of children to education, and under Article 34, the CRC creates an obligation to protect children from sexual exploitation and abuse. The purported abuses in Japan, Great Britain, and China occurred in countries that adopted and ratified the CRC, and although the abuses have been made public, the United Nations has remained largely silent since the allegations came to light.

Another form of protection for elite child athletes comes directly from the Olympic Charter. Under “Mission and Role of the IOC,” it clearly states that the IOC holds an affirmative obligation to protect athletes from “all forms of harassment and abuse,” including those that come from both commercial *and* political factors. Interestingly, this is the only mention of abuse in the entirety of the 106-page document. In addition, there is no mention of children, their rights, or protections afforded to children participating in elite athletics throughout the entirety of the Olympic Charter.

The IOC Code of Ethics is also dismally lacking in language pertaining to protecting elite child athletes from abuse. Under Rule 1.4, there is a singular mention, stating that the IOC respects “international conventions on protecting human rights insofar

as they apply to the Olympic Games.” A brief statement rejecting “all forms of harassment and abuse” is made, but there is no other discussion of rights, recourse, or procedure for the reporting of abuse anywhere in the 118-page document. Similar to the Olympic Charter, it does not address or provide any additional rights or procedures related to protecting children, despite the presence of children as young as thirteen in the Games.

There is currently one consensus statement from the IOC addressing training methods for the elite athlete; however, these are mere suggestions. Furthermore, there is no mention of abuse in the document—the statement overwhelmingly focuses on how to appropriately physically train child athletes to avoid burn-out and extreme injuries. There is a singular line in the consensus’ recommendations that states the individual bodies should “ensure the quality of coaching and adult leadership,” but no additional suggestions to curtail the rampant abuse of elite child athletes.

B. Suggestions for Ending Child Athlete Abuse

Currently, as illustrated by the dismal number of administrative rules and lack of guidance provided by the IOC, there are very few regulations in place for the protection of elite child athletes in international competition. Given the reports of the pervasive abuse of elite child athletes across all countries, this issue should take precedence, especially as the Tokyo Games fast approach. The IOC should explicitly adopt as their own the Articles of the CRC that pertain to abuse of children. This would provide protections that most nations already agree to adhere to in legislation relating to children and provide clearly articulated rights of the elite child athlete.

The IOC should also consider updating the Olympic Charter and their Ethics Code to explicitly include sections on appropriate mental, emotional, and physical treatment and safety of their child athletes. These efforts should include clear steps to make complaints against coaches, physicians, mentors, and others, and outline efforts to monitor the treatment of elite child athletes. The IOC should also encourage the individual sports federations to adopt similar rules in order to streamline and encourage maximum protection for children in elite competition.

Finally, the IOC should conduct full and transparent investigations into each and every allegation of abuse and misconduct made by competing child athletes. There is no reason for children to have to deal with abuse on their own—be it an isolated or prolonged incident—without having the opportunity to speak on their experience and see the final outcome should they chose to move forward with an administrative hearing. The IOC and the respective world sports federations must hold their staff and coaches to the highest standard possible. Afterall, we are pushing these children to win medals; we should be holding the people behind the scenes to the same elite standards to which we hold our elite child athletes.

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