

# Breaking the Cycle

**A Systems Analysis of Maltreatment, Power,  
and Inequity in Canadian Sports**

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## Abstract

Reports of abuse in sports continue to emerge in the news alongside increasing calls from athletes for systemic change. Recent research and news stories highlight the continued and widespread prevalence of maltreatment across the sports system. The problem has been explored over the past several decades by athletes, researchers, and coaches among others with many recommendations for improvements being made. Despite positive strides, the problem persists.

Building on the existing body of work, the following research explores the persistence of maltreatment and inequity in Canadian sports. Asking the question how might we reconsider power to build a safer, more equitable sports system, I examine the structures and influences that contribute to the problem. I examine public cases of abuse and first-hand perspectives to identify the relationships and primary sources of power shaping stakeholder behaviours. These insights are used to uncover opportunities to rethink the current power distribution and identify influential leverage points for change. It concludes by exploring an ideal future and providing strategic recommendations to move towards it.



## **Land Acknowledgement**

I would like to pay respect to the Indigenous peoples on whose land I have worked throughout this research. Working from both Ontario and British Columbia, I acknowledge the lands of the Huron-Wendat and Petun First Nations, the Seneca, the Mississaugas of the Credit River as well as the unceded territory of the Wet'suwet'en. They are the traditional guardians of the land on which I have lived, worked, and created during the course of this work.



## Acknowledgements

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## Preface

The seeds of the idea for this research were planted over many years, shaped by my lived experiences as a woman, being a woman in male-dominated spaces, and reading the heartbreaking stories of athlete abuse, but mostly by my experiences as a martial artist.

My connection to sports is through Taekwon-Do which I started training in during my undergraduate degree. I immediately fell in love with it and all the benefits that came with it: the increased body awareness and confidence, the growth and sense of accomplishment, the community, and the lessons that were more than just Taekwon-Do lessons.

At the heart of Taekwon-Do, like many martial arts, is a central theme of respect along with key values. Respect for yourself, for the training space and the practice and for senior ranks. The values are a reminder of a positive way to strive to be in the world. And it can be an equalizer in that it is given solely based on the belt around your waist and not other factors such as age, size, ability. Taekwon-Do has been an important and overwhelmingly positive influence in my life but like anything, it comes with its share of challenges.

Training with different clubs gave me a range of experiences that illustrated some of the problems within the sport—the lack of senior female black belts who could be mentors or role models, being treated as less than because of gender, male instructors co-opting credit for personal accomplishments, female students being told to dress “cute” for competitions, and “friendly reminders” that they [male students] could hit me harder if they wanted. The biggest though, centres around its hierarchical training structure.

As their name suggests, martial arts often have roots in the military which can be seen in the ranking system and strict protocols and hierarchies. Along with these hierarchies come an expectation of unquestioned respect for and

deference to senior figures. This structure is a system ripe for abuses of power. Particularly when, as I have witnessed, the hierarchy and expectations extend beyond the training walls and irrespective of behaviour by the senior ranks. It can be taken to extremes where junior ranks are left in a position of having to choose between compliance at personal cost or, breaking protocol and speaking out at a risk to their community and advancement.

Rarely if ever, is the notion of reciprocal respect approached despite it being a part of the Taekwon-Do philosophy (TKD Encyclopedia). This structure may have been effective and appropriate in the comparably homogeneous military cultures it derives from, but in today’s application, where martial arts are typically pursued as hobbies with much more diverse practitioners, it is a model that is problematic. In this modern environment, there needs to be an adaptation to allow for more equitable and nuanced relationships within the training space so that the power balance is more equitable and ultimately creates a safer, more enjoyable environment for all.

It is through these experiences, the stories and experiences of those who I trained with, and those of athletes I have seen in the news, that I approach this work and hope to add to this very important conversation. As the daughter of two feminist women, awareness of gender and the inequity that exists in North American culture is something I grew up discussing and cannot ignore. I hope this work will add another perspective to the conversation that will contribute to positive change in the future of sports for the generations of athletes of all genders to come.



# Introduction

*“When we seek equality, we are seeking an effective balance of power, not the absence of power.”*

Dacher Keltner, 2007



In western culture, discussion of power likely conjures up ideas of status, wealth, and force. It might make you think of sayings such as “absolute power corrupts absolutely” or the infamous psychology experiments such as the Stanford Prison Experiment and Milgram’s Shock Experiment\*. It may bring to mind ideas of privilege. Whatever comes to mind, it likely centres around hierarchy or power over. Power researcher, Dacher Keltner, calls this a Machiavellian type of power and argues that this conception is narrow and keeps us ignorant to “the ways power pervades our daily lives” (Keltner, 2007). This conception also ignores the role that system structures play in shaping behaviour. Alluding to this, one writer suggests that the real lesson of the Stanford Prison Experiment “isn’t that any random human being is capable of descending into sadism and tyranny. It’s that certain institutions and environments demand those behaviors,” (Konnikova, 2015). In the case of sports and the persistence of maltreatment, what structures are enabling maltreatment and how can we rethink power to shift them for a more equitable balance within the system?

From the voices of those speaking out about abuse in sports, there is a clear critique of the current balance of power and the inequities it perpetuates. Examples exist across sports and geographies, from the sexual abuse of USA Gymnastics athletes to the culture of verbal abuse and disordered eating in artistic swimming to the biased media coverage of athletes\*\*. Widely cited research from the University of Toronto and AthletesCAN supports this by highlighting how maltreatment persists in the current Canadian sports system (Kerr et al, 2019a). This is not a new problem. Dating back several decades, a wealth of work explores maltreatment and inequity within

sports. Past and present athletes, researchers, coaches, and many others, have been working to address this problem and have made recommendations to improve the system. Positive strides are being made and yet the problem persists.

In the 1990s, changing priorities in Canadian sports system created a shift to an “athlete-centred model” (Thibault & Babiak, 2005). The intent was to make athletes the focus of the system, ahead of bureaucracy and performance in order to improve the system’s overall effectiveness (Clarke et al, 1994; Government of Canada, 2012; Thibault & Babiak, 2005). However, despite this shift, the research and reports of abuse are indications that the system has not fully realized this shift. They suggest a system that does not have athlete well-being as its primary priority. This then raises the question: What is the system’s priority?

A systemic analysis allows for exploration of this question. In the following chapters, I explore the persistence of maltreatment and the role of power in Canada’s high performance sports context. I use foresight and systems methods to provide a different perspective on how to build a more equitable system. I begin, in Chapter 1, by framing the system, providing an overview of its current state, its stakeholders, and layers as a foundation for further discussion. Chapters 2 and 3 summarize the key patterns which emerged from my research and then examine the relationships and barriers that shape the behaviours in the system. Chapter 4 explores the underlying mythology of the system as a foundation to build a vision for an ideal future and a path towards it. Finally in Chapter 5, I provide strategic recommendations to move towards this ideal future.

**\*Stanford Prison Experiment and Milgram’s Shock Experiment:** Two famous experiments on authority, power, and obedience. The Stanford Prison Experiment divided a random group of participants into guards and prisoners and observed how power impacted their interactions over a period of days. The Milgram Experiment asked participants to administer an increasing shock to another at the direction of an authority figure.

**\*\*Case examples:** The [USA GYMNASTICS](#) case involved former women’s Olympic team physician, Larry Nassar, who abused hundreds of gymnasts from the mid-1990s to 2016. [CANADA ARTISTIC SWIMMING](#) was profiled in a *Globe and Mail* series in December 2021 for reports of a toxic culture which promotes disordered eating. These are discussed further in the [CASES](#) section.

## METHODOLOGY

This research and the following chapters use the first five stages of the Systemic Design Toolkit as a framework for systematically exploring the topic (2021). Developed by Namahn and shiftN in collaboration with Peter Jones (Systemic Design Association) and Alex Ryan (MaRS Discovery District), the toolkit takes a systematic approach to exploring and creating change within systems. The stages I have included as chapters are: framing the system, listening to the system, understanding the system, defining the desired future, and exploring the possibility space (Systemic Design Toolkit, 2021).

### PRIMARY & SECONDARY RESEARCH

The research includes primary and secondary research. Secondary research involved reviewing existing literature and public cases of abuse. Primary research involved an anonymous online questionnaire and a semi-structured interview to gather qualitative data. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and that there are existing studies which document athletes' experiences of maltreatment, primary research for this work focused on general experiences of the sports system and power. Targeted participants were current or former athletes, subject matter experts, and representatives of organizations within the system. Responses are incorporated into the body of the work. No identifying information is used to protect the privacy of respondents. Interview and questionnaire questions are included in [Appendix A](#).

### CASES

Four publicized cases of abuse are used to practically explore the problem and contributing factors. These stories provide examples of the patterns identified during the course of the secondary and primary research. Effort was made to select a diverse cross section of cases to demonstrate the breadth of the problem: that the challenges are not limited to one sport, one level, or specific gender or age. Additional cases to support this have been noted in [Appendix B](#).

### ANALYSIS TOOLS

A mix of systems tools, stakeholder analysis tools, and foresight methods are included. They are used as generative and synthesis tools to better understand the research topic and also serve as important visualizations.

### SCOPE & LIMITATIONS

Different levels and contexts for sports exist from recreational participation to the Olympics. The Canadian Sport Policy 2012 categorizes participation into five contexts: introduction to sport, recreational sport, competitive sport, high performance sport, and sport for development (Government of Canada, 2012). This research focuses on the high performance context with the intent that improvements at this level will benefit all levels of sports as supported in the feedback in the Conference Board of Canada report (2011).

Many factors—widespread systemic racism, ableism, ageism, trans and homophobia—are inextricably woven within this complex topic. Exploring these would be their own research topics and so, to manage scope, I do not explore these within this work. As a cis-, able-bodied, white woman, these are not my lived experiences, and therefore I have focused primarily on gender and equity. However, when possible, I have highlighted where intersecting themes emerge that are important to note and merit attention and consideration.

### A NOTE ON GENDER

This work uses the traditional gender binary for clarity in aligning with the existing structures and designations in sports. However, I recognize that gender is not a binary. For those who identify differently, I recognize that their experiences will differ and typically include additional levels of vulnerability and discrimination. I have noted this as an area for further research in [Appendix C](#).

## TERMINOLOGY

**High performance context:** This is the level of sport, as defined in the Canadian Sport Policy, in which the most talented athletes perform at the highest levels of national and international competition including the Olympics and Paralympics, the Commonwealth Games, and Pan or Parapan American Games (2012; Canadian Heritage, 2021a). Athletes require highly-specialized coaching, facilities, and athlete services (Government of Canada, 2012).

**Institutionalization:** It defined as “the process through which behaviours and organization become patterned or standardized over time” so that institutionalized sports are those that “have formal rules and organizational structures” (Coakley & Donnelly, 2004, p5). This differentiates the playing of sports, e.g. street hockey among friends, with competitive hockey tournaments. In the process of institutionalizing activities, the social beliefs of the time can be codified into the rules and structures which may or may not align with future social beliefs, e.g. the requirement for revealing uniforms for female athletes compared to their male counterparts.

**Maltreatment:** The term maltreatment includes all types of harm athletes may experience which result in actual or potential harm to their health, safety, and well-being in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust, or power (Kerr et al, 2019a; World Health Organization, 2020). This includes physical, psychological, and/or sexual abuse, and/or neglect. The following definitions for the types of abuse are taken from the Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS) (The Sport Information Resource Centre & Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, 2019):

- **Neglect:** “Any pattern or a single serious incident of lack of reasonable care, inattention to [an individual’s] needs, nurturing or well-being, or omissions in care.”

- **Physical:** “Any pattern or a single serious incident of deliberate conduct that has the potential to be harmful to the physical well-being of [an individual].”
- **Psychological:** “Any pattern or a single serious incident of deliberate conduct that has the potential to be harmful to the psychological well-being of [an individual].”
- **Sexual:** “Any sexual act, whether physical or psychological in nature, that is committed, threatened, or attempted against [an individual] without [their] consent.” For minors, the UCCMS excludes consent as a factor, so that any sexual interaction between an adult and minor is considered sexual maltreatment.

**Sport Participants:** This is a term taken from the Canadian Sport Policy 2012. It is used to encompass all individuals involved in sports including athletes, coaches, officials, administrators, leaders, educators, sponsors, organizers, spectators and parents (Government of Canada, 2012).

**Sports Organization:** For the purposes of conciseness, I use the term “sports organization” as an umbrella term that includes federally funded National Sports Organizations (NSO), non-federally funded national sports governing bodies, and professional sports leagues.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Framing the System

### WHAT TO EXPECT

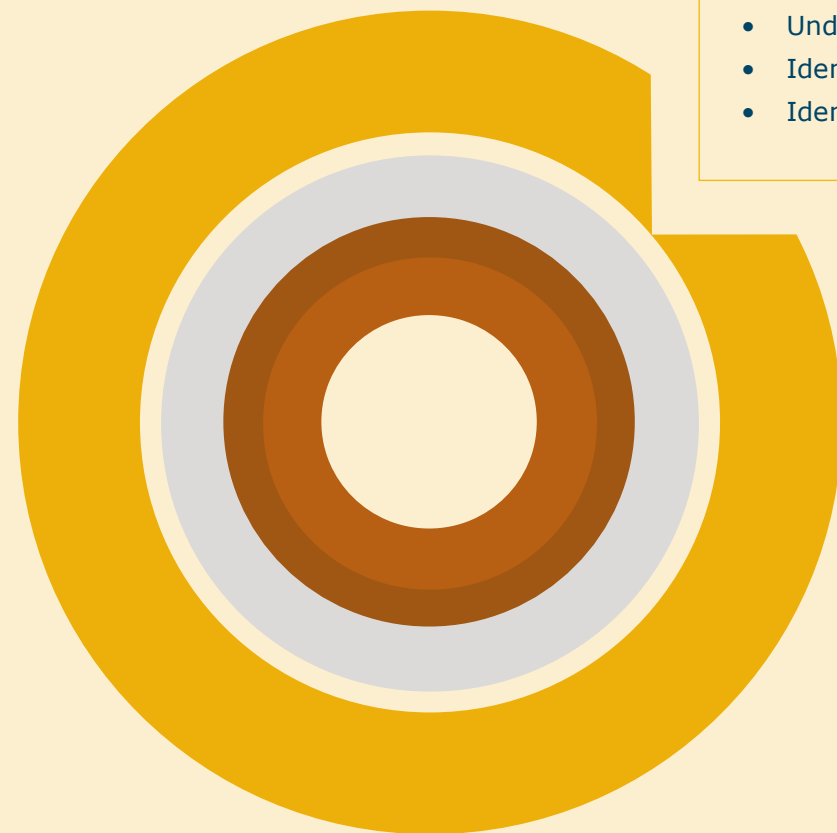
As defined by the Systemic Design Toolkit:

- Defining the initial boundaries
- Understanding the necessity for change
- Identifying the actual and future stakeholders
- Identifying the emerging initiatives (new ways of doing)

*“When you’re an athlete, you give your life to this dream, and you’re so incredibly passionate about it. You’re very vulnerable because of it.”*

**Jennifer Heil (Hall, 2015)**

To examine a system, it is important to first frame it to understand its boundaries. In this chapter, I do so by defining the stakeholders, key properties, and current state of the high performance sports context within Canadian sports. Each are summarized to provide the context for the discussion and analysis which follows in subsequent chapters.



**THE STAKEHOLDERS**

Numerous individuals, organizations, and institutions make up and influence the high performance sports context. Operating at different levels within sports, they have different goals as subsystems within the overall sports system. Here I provide a summary of each alongside a visualization of the level of power and knowledge they carry within the system.

**ATHLETES / PARTICIPANTS**

Athletes are the central figures and faces of sports. They are the vessels through which the work and goals of the other stakeholders within the system are channelled. Many athletes begin training at a young age when they are physically in their prime and their minds can absorb new skills most easily. Pay for athletes is not standardized across sports. Depending on the sport, athlete pay can range from millions of dollars in professional sports leagues to below full-time minimum wage (Interview 02-25).

**COACHES / LEADERS**

Coaches are central figures in an athlete’s life particularly at the high performance level. The relationship between athletes and coach is a close one requiring high levels of trust. Coaches provide direction and support. Canadian coaches are supported by the Coaching Association of Canada which offers certifications and training.

**ATHLETE FAMILIES**

Families include parents and guardians, spouses, and children. Each play different roles depending on the age of the athlete and the family circumstances. For young athletes, parents may be key supports, shuttling them to and from training and competitions, and paying for equipment and training fees. Or it may be more limited if continued training requires their child/ren to live with boarding families. They can also be sources of pressure if overly invested in the athletes sports progression. Regardless, childhood experiences at home carry into the athletic life.

**ADMINISTRATORS**

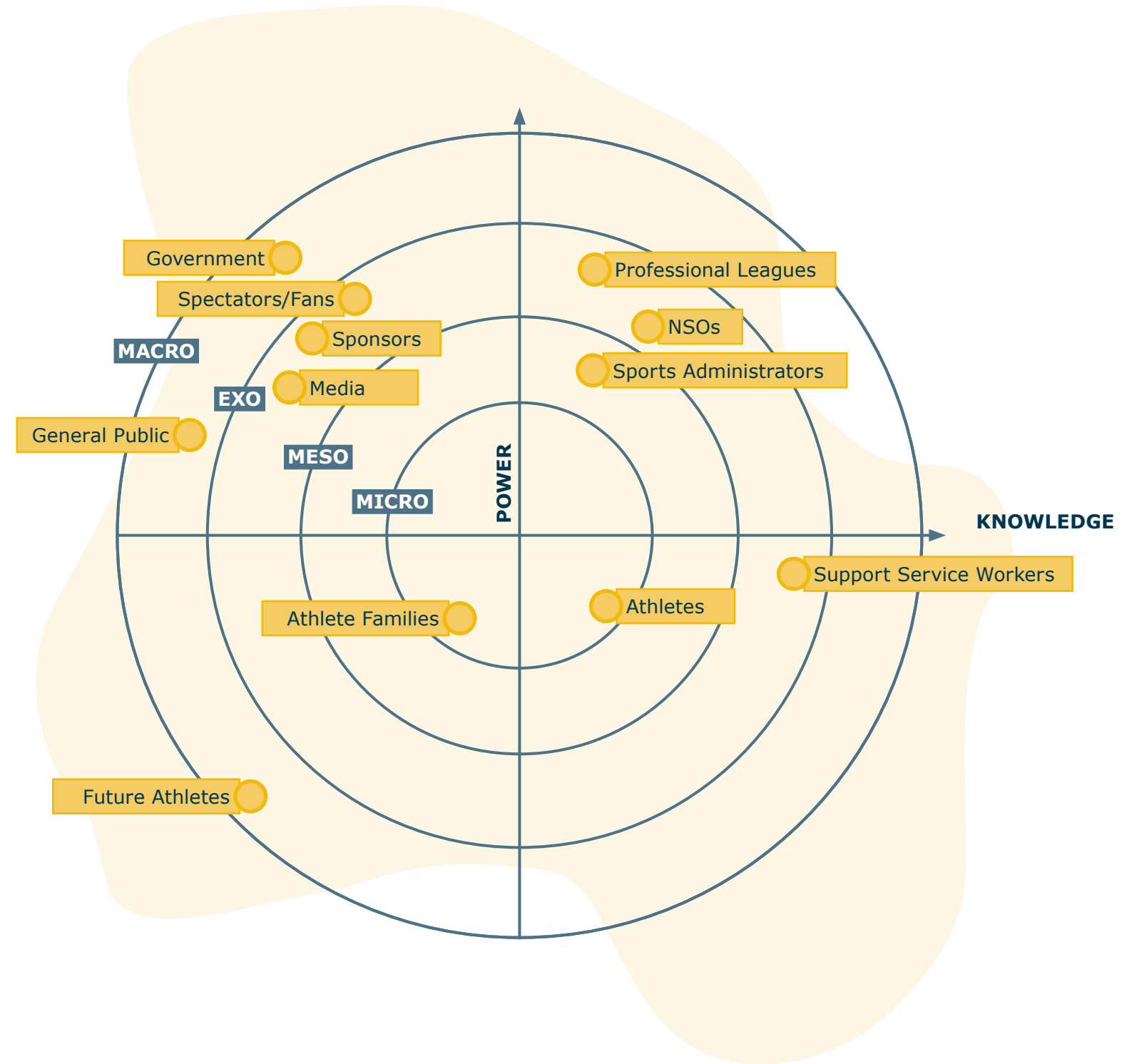
This includes high performance and athletic directors. Administrators are removed from the athlete experience but are central in the operation and setting the direction for sports organizations. They are important figures in setting the organizational culture.

**NATIONAL SPORT ORGANIZATIONS**

National Sport Organizations (NSOs) are federally funded national governing bodies for sports, e.g. Skate Canada, Canada Artistic Swimming. They are required to meet specific eligibility criteria for funding and typically oversee the high performance training programs in a given sport (Canadian Heritage, 2017a; Canadian Heritage, 2017d). Oversight for NSOs is managed by Sport Canada, a branch of the Department of Canadian Heritage (Canadian Heritage, 2017b). Currently 58 NSOs are responsible for overseeing a multitude of sports and thousands of athletes (Canadian Heritage, 2017d). NSOs also have the power to nominate top athletes for direct federal funding through Sport Canada’s Athlete Assistance Program (AAP) (Canadian Heritage, 2021a).

**MULTISPORT SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS**

Multisport Service Organizations (MSOs), also overseen by Sport Canada, support the delivery of specific types of sport services to the community such as coaching training and certification, and dispute resolution (Canadian Heritage, 2017c). Currently 24 MSOs exist including the Olympic and Paralympic Committees, U Sports, Canadian Collegiate Athletic Association, and the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC) (Canadian Heritage, 2017c).



**FIGURE 1.1:** Mapping the relative knowledge and power of system stakeholders (Actor’s Map).

## Stakeholders Continued

### SPORT CANADA

Part of the federal government, Sport Canada is a branch of the Department of Canadian Heritage and oversees all NSOs and MSOs, delivers sport programming, and administers funds (Canadian Heritage, 2017b). It leads the government response to maltreatment in sport, in part through funding criteria laid out in the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework (SFAF). SFAF is a four-stage framework used to assess which sports governing bodies are eligible to receive federal funding (Canadian Heritage, 2017b; Canadian Heritage, 2017a). It administers the AAP including regularly reviewing NSO carding criteria and athlete eligibility (Canadian Heritage, 2021a). Athlete carding is a process through which top athletes can be nominated to receive direct federal funding through the AAP (Canadian Heritage, 2021a).

### SUPPORT SERVICES

This includes professionals such as physicians, nutritionists, and psychologists, among others. These support services provide expertise and support for athletes. As trusted professionals, they can be privy to personal stories athletes may not share widely. These professionals play an important role in athlete well-being and performance development.

### PROFESSIONAL SPORTS LEAGUES

Professional sports leagues are one of the highest level of competitive team sports. In North America, they include leagues such as the National Hockey League (NHL) and National Football League (NFL). In these leagues, players are typically adults and are paid to play. However, players typically have little input into the team for which they play. A level below the major leagues, minor or semi-professional leagues operate and often serve as feeder teams for the top professional leagues.

### SPONSORS

This includes corporations, private businesses, or private citizens who provide funding to a sports organization, team, or post-secondary program to support the development of sports. These can be small businesses sponsoring local teams and athletes, or multi-million dollar contracts for corporations to be affiliated with major sporting events such as the Olympics.

### MEDIA

This includes journalists, news outlets, and social media, as well as films and television productions. News coverage plays an integral role in high performance sports, sharing the biggest events and stories with fans everywhere. Sports have their own section in the news, major events are broadcast in hundreds of countries, and team/national merchandise is sold around the world (Coakley & Donnelly, 2004). They are also the centre of popular entertainment with movies like *The Blind Side*, *Rudy*, and *The Battle of the Sexes*.

### SPECTATORS/FANS

Spectators and fans are the consumers of sports. Avid fans may have identities tied to favourite teams wearing team colours or jerseys to watch games. Spectators purchase sports merchandise and memorabilia, tickets and concessions at events, and may even plan trips around major events (Coakley & Donnelly, 2004). They also drive viewer numbers for media outlets that broadcast sports events. Their participation, whether viewing at home or in person, is powerful in shaping the decisions made by the other stakeholders in the system.



## THE SCALES OF THE SYSTEM

Within a system, subsystems can operate at different scales. In the high performance sport context, subsystems include a range from the micro—the coach–athlete relationship—to macro—the societal environment in which sports takes place. Their names reflect their reach within the system and are taken from the systemic design tool, the Iterative Inquiry. I use the Iterative Inquiry to summarize and visualize the subsystems in sports. This provides a foundation for the discussion in the following chapters.

It is worth noting that the typical speed of change is different across different scales of the system. While individuals can quickly implement a new tool, it takes much more time for the government to develop new policies or regulations. For a systemic change to last, the change must occur at all scales. This is important in understanding and planning for systemic change because it guides expectations for the timing of change. I will come back to this in Chapter 5 when discussing the strategic recommendations.

### MICRO

The micro scale is the heart of the sports system where athletes, coaches, and athlete families interact in pursuit of high performance development.

### MESO

The meso scale is the immediate environment in which stakeholders from the micro scale operate and interact: the NSOs, sports leagues, MSOs, and sports administrators. This is where the goals and priorities emerge for high performance sports training and competition.

### EXO

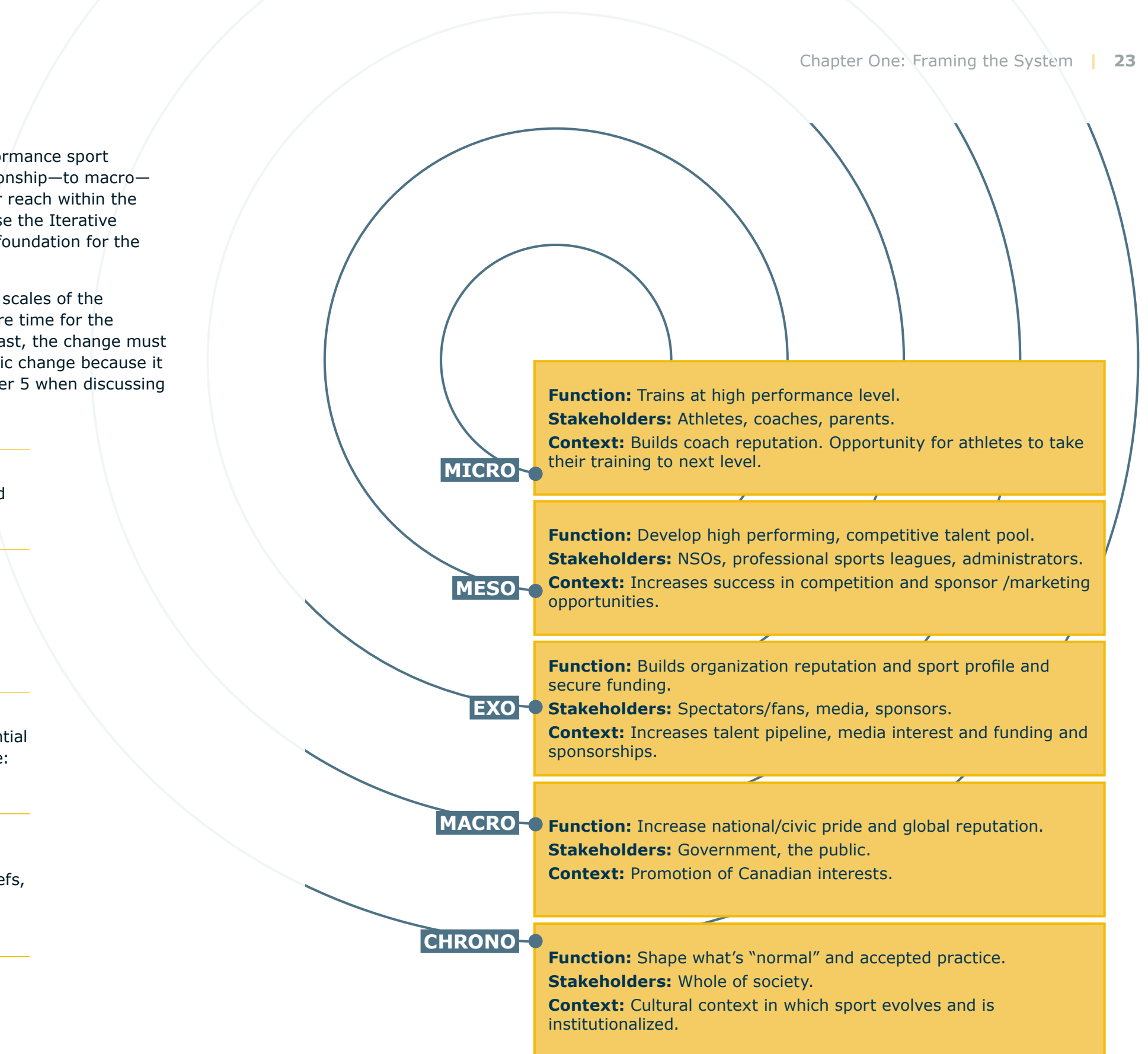
The exo scale moves a step further out to look at those invested in and influential to, but not necessarily immediately and regularly involved with the micro scale: the media, sponsors, spectators and fans, and educational institutions.

### MACRO

The macro scale takes a whole-of-society perspective including the general public and government as stakeholders. This scale introduces the societal beliefs, structures, and practices that influence and inform—consciously or not—the behaviours in the inner layers.

### CHRONO

At the outermost layer, the chrono scale takes a longer, temporal view of the system. It explores the historical, long-term socio-cultural shifts, including events and policies, which have contributed to shaping a system. It is not a scale included in the Iterative Inquiry tool. However, I have adopted it from psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner's, Ecological Systems Theory in order to capture factors that have influenced the evolution of the sports system (University of Strathclyde, n.d.).



**FIGURE 1.2:**  
The scales of the sports system (Iterative Inquiry).

## EMERGENT PROPERTIES

The following are summaries of the three emergent properties on which I focus as part of my research into the problem of maltreatment in sports. Emergent properties are those which arise out of the interactions of the stakeholders and subsystems. They can only be understood by exploring the relationships and influences within the system which I examine in the following chapters.

### MALTREATMENT

Maltreatment is an umbrella term which covers four different types of abuse: sexual, psychological, physical, and neglect. It includes “any behavior that is designed to control and subjugate another human being through the use of fear, humiliation, or verbal or physical assaults,” and “which results in actual or potential harm to...health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power” (Gavin, 2011, p707; World Health Organization, 2020). I use the term to align with existing literature on the topic and to encompass all types of abuse.

In discussing maltreatment, it is important to clarify that there is a significant difference in how different types of abuse occur. Sexual abuse follows a pattern of grooming and predation where the perpetrator is aware they are behaving inappropriately, but exploits their relationship with the victim and community to gain access and control (Stirling, 2013). This is unlike neglect, psychological and physical abuse which are often carried out publicly and viewed as a “normal” part of coaching practice and necessary to succeed at the high performance level (Stirling, 2013). Cases of sexual abuse have typically been more publicized than other types of abuse, but the most recent research indicates that it is psychological abuse and neglect which are the most prevalent (Kerr et al, 2019a; Kerr et al, 2019b).

### POWER

Discussed in North American culture, power is typically assumed to mean “power over,” that is the ability to dominate or control another (Hunjan & Keophilavong, 2010; Liu, 2014, 01:15; Miller et al, 2006). It often evokes ideas of force, status, wealth, masculinity/male (Keltner, 2007; Weir, 2017). This form of power is public and very visible (Miller et al, 2006). Power researcher and author, Dacher Keltner, argues that this narrow way of viewing power “blinds us to the ways power pervades our daily lives” and “de-emphasizes how a person actually acts,” (Keltner, 2007). Interesting to note are the similarities between this Machiavellian view of power and the definition of maltreatment, particularly that both refer to the control and dominance of another.

Work by other researchers explores alternatives forms of power—power within, power to, and power with—where power does not have to exist only as a “zero-sum game” (Hunjan & Keophilavong, 2010). In these other forms, power is acknowledged as “dynamic, shared and developed within oneself and others” and therefore can be leveraged to rebalance system structures (Hunjan & Keophilavong, 2010). By considering these other forms of power, I will explore alternative approaches and ways for historically low-power stakeholders to wield it for a more equitable system.

### INEQUITY

Very simply, inequity is about unfairness or bias. It can refer to the unequal treatment of individuals, as in unconscious bias and discrimination, or the unequal distribution of resources as in funding or access to facilities. Within sports, inequity manifests in both the treatment of its stakeholders and its distribution of resources. It can be seen in the discrepancy in pay between female and male athletes, the lack of diversity throughout sports, especially at the upper, decision-making levels, and in the gendered media coverage of athletes—the different interview questions asked, the language used, etc. According to data collected by Canadian Women & Sport, sports leadership includes a fairly equitable distribution of women and men, however it continues to be predominantly white and able-bodied (2022). Further, in the context of maltreatment, inequity is seen in the disproportionate statistics on gender of victims versus perpetrators. Female athletes are more likely to be victims across all types of maltreatment (Kerr et al, 2019a). Conversely, men are overwhelmingly the perpetrators (Kerr et al, 2019a). As part of my research, I have deliberately selected two public cases of abuse in which victims are female, and two in which they are male to bring both perspectives forward and as an opportunity to consider the similarities and differences.

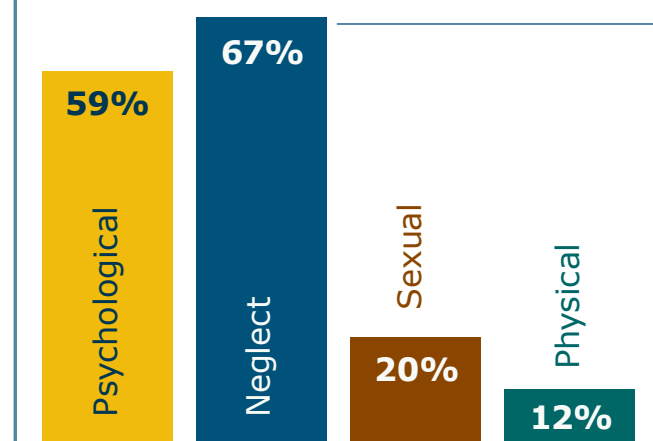
**THE CURRENT STATE**

According to prominent systems analyst, Donella Meadows, the state of a system is tied to the state of its dominant stock, a stock being a key resource on which the system relies (Meadows, 2008). For sports and the problem of maltreatment, athlete well-being is its dominant stock as an important factor in an athlete’s performance. The continuing emergence of reports of abuse, in addition to the increasing numbers of athletes speaking out, suggest that athlete well-being, as a resource, is not being valued. A CBC investigation revealed that hundreds of athletes have experienced sexual abuse between 1998-2018, perpetrated by hundreds of coaches (Ward & Strashin, 2019a). These are only the known cases of one type of abuse. Widely cited 2019 research examining the prevalence of maltreatment in the Canadian sport system supports this claim and provides updated data on the continued presence of maltreatment (Kerr et al, 2019a). This research also reveals that despite the media attention given to cases of sexual abuse, it is psychological abuse and neglect which are the most prevalent types of abuse (Kerr et al, 2019a). The statistics and quotes below and on the next page, although more focused on sexual abuse, provide key context on the prevalence of maltreatment in Canadian sports.

Signs of change are appearing amidst these disheartening findings. The positive trend in athletes publicly sharing their experiences and the increased media attention their stories are receiving is encouraging. It suggests athletes are gaining the confidence to use their voice to demand change, and that the general public is sympathetic to their cause. Others have noted this as well with several research participants commenting on this in their responses. Beyond this shift, there are long awaited interventions being actioned within the system. One of particular significance is the new Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS). Announced federally in 2021, Sport Canada assigned it to the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC) for implementation (Canadian Heritage, 2021b; The Sport Information Resource Centre & Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, 2019). The UCCMS was developed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders and subject matter experts ensuring its alignment with the latest research on maltreatment (The Sport Information Resource Centre, 2019).

In 2022, as the ten-year 2012 Canadian Sport Policy ends, work has begun on its successor. Like the 2012 policy and vision, which were informed by extensive surveys and consultations, the new policy is evaluating and building on the work achieved to date. No doubt it will identify areas for improvement and a new vision to guide the next ten years of sports in Canada. The 2023-2033 policy is set to be renewed next February (The Sport Information Resource Centre, n.d.).

**EXPERIENCES OF ABUSE BY TYPE: CURRENT ATHLETES**



• **Examples of neglect include:**  
 Being expected to train/compete in unsafe conditions and/or while injured; being encouraged to sacrifice education/career for sports, not being provided with adequate support for basic needs, (Kerr et al, 2019a).

**FIGURE 1.3:** Percentage of current athletes who experience abuse, by type. Numbers taken from Prevalence of Maltreatment Among Current and Former National Team Athletes (Kerr et al, 2019a).

*"In the first 10 years covered by CBC's analysis, from 1998 to 2008, there were 116 charges and 87 convictions. In the following decade those numbers increased to 239 coaches charged and 148 convicted."*

(Ward and Strashin, 2019a)

222 coaches have been convicted of sexual offences in the past 20 years

(Ward and Strashin, 2019a)

Offences involved 600+ victims under 18 years old

(Ward and Strashin, 2019a)

**SEXUAL OFFENCES IN AMATEUR SPORTS BETWEEN 1998-2018**

SPORT	CHARGED	CONVICTED	AWAITING TRIAL
Hockey	86	59	8
Soccer	40	27	2
Martial Arts	32	13	6
Basketball	25	15	4
Swimming	22	15	2
Baseball	21	13	2
Volleyball	18	13	1
Gymnastics	15	8	3
Football	9	6	
Track & Field	8	5	1
Wrestling	7	3	2
Figure Skating	7	3	
Equestrian	7	5	
Softball	6	5	1
Skiing	5	3	
Lacrosse	5	4	
Tennis	4	3	1
Boxing	4	2	
Bowling	4	4	
Weightlifting	3	1	
Canoe/Kayak	3	2	1
Speed Skating	2	1	
Diving	2	2	
Biathlon	2	1	
Badminton	2		1
Waterpolo	1	1	
Sailing	1	1	
Rugby	1	1	
Ringette	1	1	
Racketball	1	1	
Fencing	1	1	
Archery	1	1	

**FIGURE 1.4:** Sexual offences in numbers by sport. Table is reproduced from the CBC article, More than 200 Canadian coaches convicted of sex offences against minors since 1998, investigation reveals (Ward & Strashin, 2019a).



## CHRONOSYSTEM

The chronosystem, as the temporal scale of the system, is the period of time during which sports have been institutionalized. During the institutionalization process, informal rules become formal policies and regulations (Coakley & Donnelly, 2004). It is also during this process when the dominant social beliefs of the time are unconsciously codified into the new policies and regulations. This historical context is important in understanding the origins of the challenges facing the sports system now. Drawn from my secondary research, the following are some of the notable historical events which have influenced the evolution of the current sports system and the problems of maltreatment and inequity. Further discussion of these will occur in later chapters.

- 1918:** Influx of male soldiers returning to homes and workplaces after World War I.
- 1945:** Influx of male soldiers returning to homes and workplaces after World War II.
- 1945 on:** “Millions of women streamed into sport” where men were still typically in leadership roles giving them “increasing access to, and control over, young female athletes.” (Blaschke, 2018)
- 1952:** The Cold War prompted men take women’s sports more seriously after the Soviet Union “racked up medals in women’s events” at the 1952 Olympiad. US politicians, diplomats and male coaches responded by turning to women’s events “to score national wins in glamorous international competitions.” (Blaschke, 2018)
- 1960-90s:** Olympic sex testing era where women had to prove they were “female enough.”
- 1972:** Passing of Title IX in the United States at which point women “flooded into competitive sporting.” (Blaschke, 2018)
- 1970-80s:** The Cold War continued to spill into sports, manifesting in pressure on American athletes to win against Soviet or Eastern Bloc athletes, e.g. the American Olympic hockey team and American women’s gymnastics (Cohen & Shenk, 2020; Sey, 2008). In 1980, the US boycott the Summer Olympics in Moscow.
- 1990s-2000s:** Move to an athlete-centred sport system in order to improve the overall effectiveness of the system. (Clarke et al, 1994; Thibault & Babiak, 2005).
- 2002:** The first Canadian Sport Policy was developed, providing a road-map for Canadian sports. The policy’s focus was on the holistic development of high-performance athlete and an increase in athlete representation across the sports system (Clarke et al, 1994; Thibault & Babiak, 2005).
- 2012:** Renewal of the ten-year Canadian Sport Policy.
- 2015:** #CoverTheAthlete campaign highlights gender bias in sports media coverage.
- 2017:** Rise of #MeToo movement, marking a shift in public reception to sexual abuse cases.
- 2019:** Release of Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sports (UCCMS).
- 2021:** Canadian Government announces SDRCC will administer the UCCMS.
- 2022:** Government announces it will make participation in the UCCMS mandatory for all NSOs (Robertson, 2022).  
Renewal of the new 2023-2033 Canadian Sport Policy is underway.

## CHAPTER 1 TAKE-AWAYS

- A multitude of stakeholders are involved directly and indirectly in shaping the sports system.
- The sports system includes multiple subsystems which operate at different scales and paces, and engage different stakeholders.
- Dominant societal ideologies, such as beliefs around gender and gender roles, contribute to shaping societal subsystems like sports.
- Sports structures, policies, and regulations reflect the ideologies that were dominant at the time of their development.

## CHAPTER TWO

# Listening to the System

### WHAT TO EXPECT

As defined by the Systemic Design Toolkit:

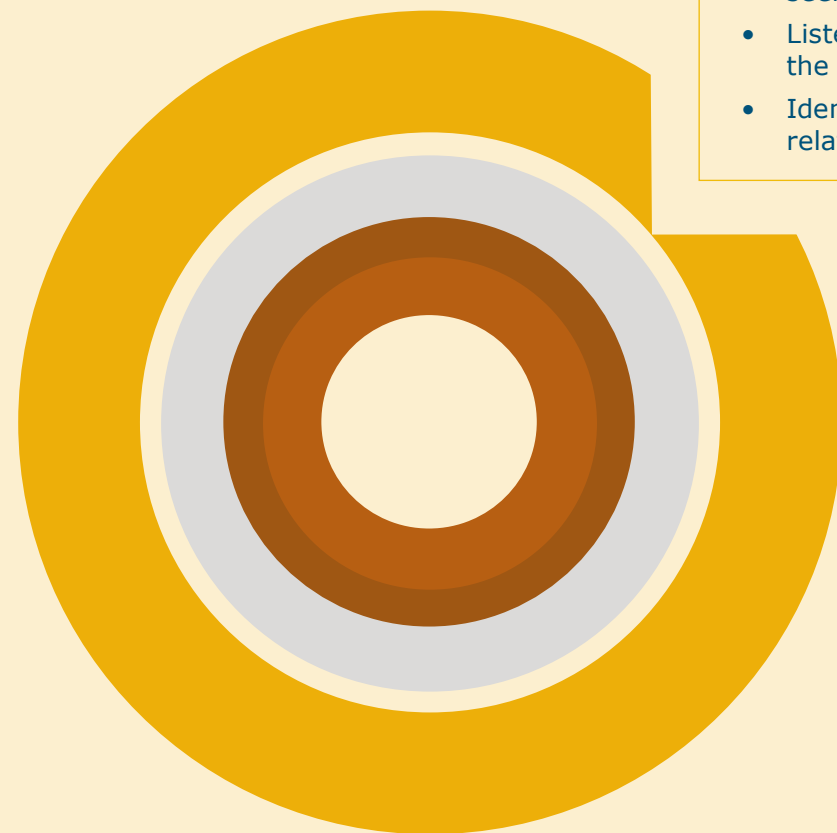
- Discovering how interactions lead to system behaviours by seeking viewpoints and experiences of people.
- Listening to as many different perspectives as consistent with the variety in the social system.
- Identifying assumptions about the system's parts, relationships and behaviours.

*“The whole is intelligent, and each part carries the inherent intelligence of the entire system. ... Respectful observation and interaction within the system, with the parts and the connections between them, is the only way to see the pattern.”*

**Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk* (p83)**

Now that I have framed the system and its parts, the next step is listening to the experiences of those within it. Listening is particularly important in a discussion of maltreatment where often the voices of those experiencing abuse are silenced, ignored, or dismissed. However, it is only with their perspectives that an accurate picture of the system's function can emerge. I gather these perspectives from the stories and experiences revealed in the literature review, primary research, and public cases. Through this observation, the common behaviours and patterns can be identified and the insights gathered provide the foundation for the following analysis.

While conducting this research, I read Tanya Talaga's book, *Seven Fallen Feathers* (2017). The book includes the story of Chanie Wenjack, an Indigenous child who was sexually assaulted in the 1960s at a residential school in Kenora, Ontario. He died from exposure while running away from the school. Although his story is from decades earlier, I was struck, when reading it, by the overwhelming similarity to current stories of sexual abuse. While the morals from this could be a research project of their own, the story is a powerful reminder of the necessity of listening to the experiences of those at the centre of a system, especially those with the least power. This chapter is another step in doing this for sports and the athletes who have experienced abuse within its system.



## PATTERNS

The following pages summarize seven cultural and structural patterns which emerged from my literature review and primary research. The summaries incorporate quotes from expert researchers and primary research participants which illustrate the effects of the patterns and give voice to those within the system. The implications and effects of the patterns will be analyzed in more depth in the following chapters.

### INSULARITY & HOMOGENEITY

Insularity in sports is the social and ideological isolation that often results from the demands of high performance training. It occurs because of time, geographical and/or financial constraints and impacts all scales of the system but particularly the athletes and coaches at the centre. The result can be “total institutions” in which the coaches and sports administrators have power over almost all aspects of an athlete’s life (Robinson, 1998; Wolfe et al, 2003). In this environment, outside norms can be overwritten or ignored through the repeated exposure to a common, insulated environment. Practices such as slapping an athlete’s thighs or buttocks, or publicly insulting or comparing athlete’s bodies, which would be challenged in other contexts, become the norm in sports (Robinson, 1998; Sey, 2008). When this is combined with institutions which have historically been white male dominated, and therefore founded in male “values, interests, and experiences,” the result is a narrow conception of normal (Coakley & Donnelly, 2004, p15). Demonstrated in one participant’s comments, they described feeling the pressure to have a “strong front” being female in a physical sport where there remains a general view that girls are “weak”

(Questionnaire Response 01). What this participant alludes to are traditional ideas of gender, where girls and women are seen to be fragile, emotional, and incapable compared to men who are tough physically and mentally and therefore can handle the stress and roughness of physical activities.

Although making strides, diversity continues to be a challenge. Recent data indicates low representation of racialized and disabled individuals in leadership roles (Canadian Women & Sport, 2022). Another respondent specifically highlighted this describing the differences in lived experiences, noting the disadvantage for racialized athletes when predominantly white coaches cannot understand the struggles and barriers they may face (Questionnaire Response 03). This narrow view of normal is then further narrowed in a system which is coach centric, where the coach’s perspective drives decisions on athlete training, even above professional opinions from support services (Interview 02-25). The dominance of coach perspectives thwarts opportunities for new ideas and approaches to come forward, impeding the sharing of different perspectives and the evolution of the system.

### NORMALIZATION OF AGGRESSIVE PRACTICES

Another pattern is the continued acceptance of psychologically abusive and neglect-based coaching practices. As noted earlier, research

indicates that psychologically abusive and neglect-based practices are the most prevalent types of abuse in sports (Kerr et al, 2019a).

*“This is one of the worse aspects of mistreatment in elite-level sports, and anywhere else really: you don’t see it happen. You don’t know that what’s happening is not okay.”*

**Geneviève Peel, Blog “Why I Quit” (2020c)**

Researcher Gretchen Kerr is quoted stating that “things like benching, screaming and running drills,” despite having been previously replaced in other arenas, are still the norm in sports (Dichter, 2021). Her work with researcher, Ashley Stirling, indicates that there continues to be a shared, unspoken belief in the necessity of such practices as part of the training process (A. Peel, 2020; Stirling & Kerr, 2014; Stirling, 2013). Many coaches, athletes, and parents alike believe that such practices are necessary to achieve athletic potential at the highest levels of sports. This normalization means these practices are carried out openly and without challenge, in front of parents, administrators, other athletes and coaches (Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Athletes both experience and witness

### RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY

Respect is an often listed value in a variety of settings—sports, the workplace, schools, etc. The 2012 Canadian Sport Policy lists respect as one of its values and in the Conference Board of Canada development consultations, 86% of sport participants indicated it is integral to sports in Canada (The Conference Board of Canada, 2011; Government of Canada, 2012). Nowhere in these documents however, is respect defined although it is repeated often and stressed as an important value (The Conference Board of Canada, 2011). The statements which add some context to the intent behind the value focus on the ways in which athletes are to demonstrate respect. The Canadian Sport Policy states that “athletes are expected to show respect for, and adhere to rules and ethics” (Government of Canada, 2012, p12). No reference is made to expectations of other stakeholders regarding respect of the rules and ethics. Nor is there a reference to mutual respect, where athletes are equal recipients. Only coaches are singled out as needing to receive a “level of respect,” (The Conference Board of Canada, 2011, p129).

Perhaps unintended, the limited discussion leaves the impression that respect is meant to be one-way: athletes giving of respect. It

similar behaviours across different coaching relationships further contributing to their normalization (Sey, 2008; Stirling & Kerr, 2014). In the absence of negative reactions or challenges to the practices, athletes internalize the belief that it is part of what it takes to be an elite athlete (Sey, 2008). This message is reinforced through movie and news depictions of the coach–athlete relationship. Research indicates that media depictions of the relationship often include use of abusive practices—yelling, screaming, throwing objects, extra drills—which contributes to their normalization (Kerr et al, 2016; Stirling & Kerr, 2014). Combined, these factors mask the harm that such practices cause and limit who speaks out against them.

may also reveal an underlying assumption that this is as it should be. A critique of the system is that athletes often feel replaceable, where coaches, because of their expertise and reputations, are valued more than the athletes with whom they work (A. Peel, 2020). Multiple questionnaire respondents commented on this, with one stating that sports culture teaches athletes that coaches are a “special class” who can “do no wrong” (Questionnaire Response 07). This perspective combined with coach reputation and experience contributes to their “legitimate authority,” as ascribed by athletes and their families (Stirling & Kerr, 2009). In this position, coaches are viewed as the ultimate decision makers and authority on an athlete’s progression (Stirling & Kerr, 2009).

This hierarchical and dominant view of authority may have roots in the military. Quotes in Laura Robinson’s, *Crossing the Line*, repeatedly compare hockey and the military, some describing it as a “quasi-military organization” where coaches use a “military manner” (1998). Insights into the origins of the descriptions emerge when considering them alongside events in the previous chapter’s Chronosystem: First, the widespread return of men to the workforce

after the World Wars, followed later by the increasing interest and involvement of men in women's sports after the start of the Cold War. Although not explored in depth for this research, it follows that there was likely some transfer of men's military experiences to their new positions, particularly considering men were likely working with other men with military experiences, thus operating in a homogeneous environment. This idea is supported by discussion in Kim Vicente's

## REPUTATION

Reputation—individual or institutional—repeatedly appears as a significant factor in decisions regarding complaints. It is often used as a defence for inaction, silence, and resistance to transparency. It stems from a belief that a good reputation equates with being unblemished and harmonious—or at least the appearance of being such. In cases of abuse, public attention is believed to tarnish that appearance, thereby damaging the organization's reputation. A damaged reputation might jeopardize funding. Fearing the negative publicity associated with a bad reputation, sponsors might withdraw support. In one example, Alpine Canada athletes were told to keep quiet about sexual abuses committed by former coach, Bertrand Charest, for "fear of losing corporate sponsorships," (Ewing, 2018).

This belief comes at the cost of athlete safety and well-being. To protect a reputation, athletes and their families may not be made aware of allegations against a coach or organization, or a perpetrator may not be removed from their position, further exposing athletes to abuse. The extent to which reputation will be defended is demonstrated

**\*Aviation industry example:** In Chapter 6 of his book, Vicente examines the role of captain—first officer team dynamics in aviation crashes. He describes two behavioural patterns. The pattern referenced in the above text is one in which the captain operates overly authoritatively, ignoring and intimidating others, and making them fearful of speaking up even in the face of fatal safety concerns. The other centres on pilots who are too individualistic and do not adequately set and delegate priorities or ask for help. He notes that many commercial pilots started their careers in the military, where traditional ideas of masculinity were reinforced, therefore possibly learning or reinforcing attitudes and behaviours that conflict with effective team functioning (2004, p156-169).

book, *Human Factors*, in which he notes the notion of a "strong, autocratic leader," which was problematic in the aviation industry\*, may have roots in the military and traditional ideas of manhood (2004, p159). He goes on to say that it may contribute to challenges in team settings and organizations, because of its role in limiting open dialogue and learning (2004). This is consistent with coaches who disregard input from support professionals to the detriment of athletes' well-being.

in an emerging case in the US. A former volleyball coach, Rick Butler, is suing a sports advocacy non-profit for public discussion of sanctions against him. Butler, who received a lifetime ban from coaching for sexual abuse, has filed the \$250M lawsuit for "[interfering] with his ability to successfully run his business" by openly discussing the sanctions, though he does not appear to dispute or deny the allegations which led to the ban (Lohn, 2022). His case is an example of an individual fighting to protect his reputation. Organizations may also file lawsuits but they have also evolved various internal defence mechanisms to manage threats to reputation: insistence on organizational self-regulation, internal cultures promoting silence and victim shaming, and resistance to open disclosure of information on complaints. I suggest that for those who are bystanders rather than perpetrators of abuse, their organizational and personal reputations are only tarnished because of their response to allegations. Responses such as denial, hiding, and inaction may be perceived as enabling abuse. Were the bystanders to put athlete safety and well-being first by taking action, the threat to reputation would be mitigated.

## RESOURCING

Adequate human and financial resources are essential to any organization. Outside of professional sports leagues, many sports organizations are challenged by resource inadequacies and inefficiencies which limit their organizational capacity (The Conference Board of Canada, 2011). The challenges they face range from access to appropriate facilities and equipment, adequacy of financial resources, and ability to attract and retain qualified personnel, e.g. volunteers, coaches, technical leadership (The Conference Board of Canada, 2011). These resources fall under "basic survival needs" as defined by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The absence of these resources leaves organizations struggling to survive, and therefore with limited capacity

## MEDIA/PUBLIC CONSUMPTION

The media and public consumption of sports surface as an important factor in securing steady funding. Public interest in a sport fuels media coverage, which in turn draws sponsorships. In this dynamic, public interest and the media add to the pressure already placed on athletes by expecting regular and immediate press appearances and flawless performances. In 2021, Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open after being fined \$15,000 for choosing not to participate in mandatory event press conferences to protect her mental health (Ponciano, 2021). Osaka is quoted saying that she "felt they perpetuated a disregard for athletes' mental health" giving the example that the timing of press conferences did not allow athletes the space to process tough losses (Ponciano, 2021). Tough losses or disappointing performances are often insensitively and harshly examined by the media and public. This is especially true for top athletes such as American gymnast, Simone Biles, who withdrew from several events at the

## EXCELLENCE VS WINNING

Excellence is another of the values listed in the Canadian Sport Policy, and described as "an aspiration worthy of pursuit in all facets of

to pursue activities not directly related to meeting these needs (Interview 02-25). This includes the resources to properly investigate complaints and allegations of abuse. This state of survival creates a tension between the organization's need for basic resources and athletes' need to feel safe. In the future, this tension is likely to be magnified as the system's "need for salaried positions [grows]" while it simultaneously struggles to find and retain adequately trained staff (The Conference Board of Canada, 2011). This in a system where amateur athletes may only earn a fraction of the money that those do in major professional sport leagues (Canadian Heritage, 2021a).

Tokyo Summer Games and American alpine skier, Mikaela Shiffrin, who was disqualified from her event (Todd, 2022). They both faced repeated questioning and critique for their actions (Todd, 2022).

Access to media and technology, however, also gives athletes unfiltered, public platforms to communicate directly with followers. Many are using social media and blogs to share their stories and perspectives of the system. Multiple questionnaire respondents cited this as an encouraging sign and source of hope for the future. One example of an athlete speaking out is former skier, Jennifer Heil. In 2015, she publicly criticized the Canadian sport system for not protecting its athletes (Hall, 2015). Geneviève Peel, a former artistic swimmer, shared her experiences of the sport and her decision to leave it in her blog, *Stories of Artistic Swimming*, in which she discusses its toxic training culture (<https://storiesofartisticswimming.wordpress.com/>).

delivery and practice," (Government of Canada, 2012, p4). In the Conference Board of Canada report findings, over 70% of individuals and

*"When you think about it, the CEO of any sport organization, their funding is dependent on Sport Canada's funding, and what is Sport Canada's funding based on? Performance of the athletes and the team."*

**Gretchen Kerr, Dean and Professor, Athlete Maltreatment, University of Toronto (Ewing, 2018)**

organizational representatives indicated that the "pursuit of excellence" should be a defining value for Canadian sports and listed "achieving excellence" as a major priority for the high performance context (2011, p31, p127). This makes clear that excellence is an important value to those within the system. What is not clear is its definition. Does excellence mean athlete personal bests? Does it include athlete well-being? There is no definition in these documents. The first example explicitly evokes the aspirational, but the goal of "achieving excellence" is described in winning: "high podium achievements, gold medals at major games, personal performance bests," (The Conference Board of Canada, 2011, p127). This ambiguity is reflected in one comment from the Conference Board of Canada report which notes that "establishing [a] clear definition of... excellence...is a clear priority," (2011, p5).

Whether because or in spite of this ambiguity, the practical manifestation of the value within the system is its measurement through performance, specifically winning. Winning, as the performance measure, is codified into various structures, implicit and explicit, within sports. Explicitly, this includes contracts which are tied to performance outcomes and measures like the Gold Medal Profile (GMP), "the excellence reference point" assessing whether an athlete has potential to win at the national and international level (Canadian Heritage, 2019). Implicitly, athletes are expected or pressured to train and compete through injury, sickness, and fatigue so as not to compromise their progress. It is also embedded in names like the *Gold Medal*

Profile. The name is not the *Podium Profile* therefore the emphasis on gold medals suggests that silver and bronze are not considered wins. Official documents like the Canadian Sport Policy reinforce this by stating that "athletes are expected...to demonstrate a strong commitment to succeed at the highest level" (Government of Canada, 2012, p12). One questionnaire respondent labelled this "overemphasis" on high performance or elite participation as "misguided" (Questionnaire Response 02).

The result is that, because excellence is measured through wins, winning, rather than the aspirational idea, becomes the focus of the system. This is magnified by the quantification and measurement of wins or win potential to determine funding allocation, a feature of the athlete carding process (Canadian Heritage, 2021a). Although not required, using elements of the Gold Medal Profile is encouraged for NSOs in developing carding criteria for their top athletes (Canadian Heritage, 2021a). In a society increasingly focused on metrics, the result is a system where athletes and their bodies are measured and monitored daily to optimize their performance (Interview 02-25). Although partly in an effort to make objective and rationale decisions about athlete potential, it also leads to athletes being reduced to their performance outcomes (Coakley & Donnelly, 2004). This is even more so for the sports organizations struggling to meet their basic funding needs, and dependent on athlete performance to secure organizational funding.

## CASES

The following are four public cases of abuse through which I explore the previous patterns. The cases are to illustrate in a practical way, how the patterns manifest. They have been selected to provide a cross section of sports to demonstrate the parallels which exist across different sports for female and male victims alike. Further, I have included a list of additional cases with summaries for the following in [Appendix B](#) to illustrate the breadth of the problem.

### USA GYMNASTICS

In what is probably one of the most infamous cases of abuse in North America, USA Gymnastics (USA G) was involved in the cover up of decades of sexual abuse perpetrated by its former women's team physician, Larry Nassar. Nassar was accused and eventually convicted of abusing hundreds of young gymnasts starting in the 1990s through to 2016 when his case exploded into the public eye (Connor & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Graves, 2021). Evidence suggests dozens of USA G coaches and support staff, including Nassar, were reported for sexual abuse to the organization's administration prior to Nassar's case becoming public (Kwiatkowski et al., 2016). Despite these complaints, Nassar's position went unchallenged until the 2016 media attention and public pressure forced USA G to take action (Cohen & Shenk, 2020). Prior to this, USA G dealt with abuse through an informal executive policy which "routinely dismissed sexual abuse allegations as hearsay" unless signed by the victim (Cohen & Shenk, 2020; Kwiatkowski et al., 2016). This problematic policy among others left a gap for staff and victims alike. As there was no independent mechanism to report complaints, victims had to raise complaints to those who influenced if not outright controlled their future. When complaints did come forward, the organization's staff lacked clear direction on how to respond. This reporting structure creates a conflict of interest, which combined with feelings of shame many victims experience, made many hesitant to come forward.

Further, the lack of clarity, structure, and separation was amplified by USA G's internal

culture which built on a foundation of respect for authority. Gymnasts were expected to obey coaches without question and give them "total control" (Cohen & Shenk, 2020; Fierro, 2020). Victims were discouraged from coming forward, often being silenced and shamed if they did. Their complaints were often denied and trivialized, and their athletic future threatened (Cohen & Shenk, 2020). The nature of the culture meant this response was practiced openly so that witnesses learned quickly that coming forward achieved nothing. Instead, rumours and jokes which alluded to the abuse circulated openly within the gymnastics community (Connor & Fitzpatrick, 2018).

This controlling environment was exacerbated by geographical and social isolation for the gymnasts. National team training was conducted at a remote training camp where the girls were removed from their support networks and life outside gymnastics (Cohen & Shenk, 2020). This insularity combined with the young age of gymnasts, typically between 12-18 years of age and as young as 10, made them more vulnerable. Their limited life experience was shaped by the training environment where they spent significant time training without family and non-gymnastics friends, allowing the abusive environment to become normalized.

These factors served as protection to the USA G brand. USA G had cultivated a "wholesome image" using the "child's dream to build [their] brand," (Cohen & Shenk, 2020). Its reputation and image attracted major national sponsors including companies such as AT&T, Kellogg's and Hershey's; relationships it wanted to

*"There were sexual predators everywhere. They were in my gym. The national team coach, Don Peters, was a known sexual abuser. They were everywhere across the country, and we knew who they were. But more broadly, emotional and physical abuse was actually the norm, and we were all so beaten down by that and made so obedient that when we knew there was a sexual abuser in our midst, we would never say anything. We ... felt utterly powerless."*

**Jennifer Sey, 1988 USA National Gymnastics Champion  
(Cohen & Shenk, 2020)**

protect (Cohen & Shenk, 2020; Kwiatkowski et al., 2016). By keeping complaints private and victims quiet, the organization was able to control the narrative thus protecting its image and funding. This was, in part, enabled by the social climate of the time, which then viewed sexual abuse complaints more as a PR scandal rather than an issue of safety. The organization's loss of sponsors after the Nassar case became public reflects this (Macur, 2021).

An interesting aspect of this case is the public reaction to the description of the training camp. The environment at the camp was by all accounts toxic and abusive—athletes faced verbal insults, daily weigh-ins and body shaming, ranking, and a pervasive pressure to perform even through injury (Cohen & Shenk, 2020; Fierro, 2020). Despite this, media coverage, including the Netflix documentary on the case, *Athlete A*, focuses primarily on the sexual abuse, referencing the camp training environment more as contextual information. This reaction is consistent with psychologist and researcher Joseph Spinazzola's view that "psychological abuse isn't considered a serious social taboo like physical and sexual child abuse" (Spinazzola, 2014). This is

despite existing research which suggests the psychological impacts of physical and sexual abuse are as important as the physical aspects of the abuse (Gavin, 2011; Spinazzola, 2014). The limited attention and lack of outrage focused on the training environment suggests a continued lack of public understanding of the harm caused by psychological abuse and neglect.

Positive outcomes have emerged from the highly public nature of the case and trial and the *Athlete A* documentary. One example is Sarah Jantzi and Tom Forster, two high performance gymnastics coaches who are using different coaching approaches to train their gymnasts. They use athlete-centred tactics which include encouraging athlete's families to be involved in training, and encouraging athletes to go home or take time off when needed (Macur, 2021). Additionally, the global release of *Athlete A* allowed other athletes an opportunity to see their training environments from a new perspective, challenging normalized practices they experience and that are able to survive in such insular environments (Macur, 2021).

## UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

In a similar case, sports physician, Robert Anderson, assaulted hundreds of student athletes, primarily male, while working at the University of Michigan (UM) (Chang et al, 2020; Marantz, 2020). From 1966 to 2003, Anderson used his position as the university doctor to sexually abuse students. Like the USA G case, Anderson went unchallenged in

his position despite complaints dating back to the beginning of his career at UM (Marantz, 2020). And like the USA G case, UM chose to internally investigate complaints and benefited from an internal culture which kept many victims silent. Victims feared the repercussions of speaking out. At least one athlete, wrestler Tad DeLuca, was publicly humiliated and kicked

off the team for coming forward (Siemaszko, 2020). A coach's son, who endured abuse by Anderson, was reportedly punched by his father after telling him about the abuse (Kalman-Lamb & Shafer, 2021). Anderson's abuse was an open secret joked about between students who used nicknames such as "Dr. Drop Your Drawers," (Murphy, 2020). Reports suggest some coaches were aware and even used being sent to see Anderson as a threat to incentivize athletes to improve their performance (Kalman-Lamb & Shafer, 2021). Explaining why he did not come forward at the time, NFL player and survivor, Jon Vaughn said he "just wanted to make the team," and carry on with his life (Marantz, 2020).

Student-athletes were often additionally vulnerable because of their dependence on scholarships. To keep their scholarships, they had to play. To play, they were required to see Anderson. Refusal to see him could result in removal from their team, jeopardizing their scholarships (Marantz, 2020; Tinsley, 2020). Therefore, victims often stayed silent. This dynamic helped the university protect its image and its funding. Like USA G, UM feared that the negative PR from public awareness of complaints would jeopardize sponsorships and endowments. What is interesting to note in this case, is that their fear included public reaction to not defending enablers of Anderson's abuse. In one example, UM feared funders would be unhappy if the university did not defend "one of their icons," a popular, high profile coach, from criticism that he knew and did not act on complaints of the physician's abuse (Kalman-Lamb & Shafer, 2021). In this way, funding was a powerful factor shaping the decisions of the student-athletes and university alike.

Although impossible to know the personal histories of all the victims, it is worthwhile noting that at least three had histories of maltreatment at home (Marantz, 2020). This history of maltreatment is consistent with research which indicates that those who experience abuse, particularly at a young age, are more likely to experience abuse or become abusers in the future (Gavin, 2011;

Stirling, 2013; World Health Organization, 2020). It therefore suggests that these victims will continue to be at increased risk of experiencing or perpetrating abuse throughout their lives.

Through the media, the case eventually came to light. In 2018, coverage of the Nassar trial and the gymnasts fighting for justice inspired survivor DeLuca, to once again file a complaint with the university (Siemaszko, 2020). This was his second, the original having been ignored and buried over forty years earlier (Siemaszko, 2020). From this, reports of Anderson's abuse began to spread through 2020 after which complaints poured into the university. UM has received over 2,100 complaints from 400 victims (Chang et al, 2020; Marantz, 2020). In response, UM hired an independent law firm to investigate the complaints, however, the process was halted when a judge ruled the university was not adequately informing potential victims about the independent lawyers (Marantz, 2020).

Although a positive turn of events, if long overdue, the media attention has come with a negative side. While earning support for victims, it also draws support for the enablers, the well-known and loved community figures like the high profile coach. Public attention has aroused a vocal and persistent support base for the coaches who enabled Anderson's abuse through their lack of action (Kalman-Lamb & Shafer, 2021). Support has included letters from former student-athletes defending the coaches and questioning the victims—their memories and experiences, and why they did not report (Kalman-Lamb & Shafer, 2021). For survivors, the public support for enablers compounds the harm caused by their abuse, gaslighting and retraumatizing them by minimizing and trivializing their experiences.

Adding another dimension, Vaughn raises the issue of institutional racism as a factor noting that 70% of the university's football team was Black (Marantz, 2020). Playing a sport in which "pain is weakness," he states that abuse is "uniquely traumatic to Black athletes"

*"We live in a society where men are expected to be strong, masculine, and straight. No world reflects that more than sports. There is great fear that men will be labeled as deviant or gay if they disclose being abused. When we deny those experiences, we make it even harder for men and boys to get the help they desperately need."*

**(Kalman-Lamb & Shafer, 2021)**

because of societal belief that Black males cannot be victims of sexual abuse (Chang et al, 2021; Marantz, 2020; Tinsley, 2020). This combination of hypermasculine culture and racial bias makes Black male athletes less likely to seek help and more likely to grapple with shame (Marantz, 2020). The racial aspect is less discussed but the impact of the hypermasculine culture is reinforced by other male victims. Survivor and Olympic wrestler, Andy Hrovat, shared his difficulty identifying as a victim explaining that "[in] our culture, it's make no excuses, you're not a victim, you have to push through it" (Siemaszko, 2020). Masculinity and its norms are managed through homophobic and gendered language so that male victims fear being labelled gay or deviant if they disclose abuse (Kalman-Lamb & Shafer, 2021). This culture and fear is evidence of societal beliefs on gender and acceptable gender behaviour.

With many similarities between this case and that of USA G, it is further interesting to note what is different. Both have a similar number of victims, a similar pattern of sexual abuse, and in both, abusers were enabled over a period of decades. Differences include the age, the primary gender of victims, and that the

## WESTERN HOCKEY LEAGUE

In another case involving male victims, major junior hockey coach, Graham James, sexually abused teenage boys on his teams in the 1980s and early 1990s. James was a coach in the Western Hockey League (WHL) and became one of the top coaches before knowledge of his abuse became public. NHL player Sheldon Kennedy came forward in 1996 to press charges against James after grappling for years with the abuse he experienced. Sheldon's high profile status as an NHL player

abuser in this case is deceased. Comparing the settlement amounts, the amount for UM victims is a fraction of what USA G victims received (Wertheim, 2020). Although not discussed in the news articles I read, it raises the question of how we, as a culture, value the legacy of trauma and who it impacts, and how we are shaped by our unconscious biases. It brings to mind Chanie Wenjack's story and the trauma perpetrated by the residential school system. Author Mikki Kendall states in her book, *Hood Feminism*, that "the problem has never been the ways that victims don't tell, so much as it has been that some victims aren't seen as valuable enough to protect" (2020, p66). Does the fact that the UM victims were male victims, in their physical prime, elicit an unconscious expectation that they should have been able to defend themselves and therefore cannot be victims? Does the fact that many were Black raise racial biases that compound the belief they cannot be victims? The Kalman-Lamb and Shafer quote above suggests that at least on the question of their gender, it may well have played a role in how the complaints and responses were handled. As for racial bias, it may well have played a role although its exploration is beyond the scope of this work.

meant the story made media headlines. While investigating the case, police had difficulty locating other victims though it was believed others existed. Like the previous cases, James' victims were hesitant to come forward. The abuse had been an open, often joked about secret, and victims feared the reactions.

Six players are on record as victims including, Todd Holt, Jay Macaulay, and NHL player, Theoren Fleury. However, James is suspected

of abusing anywhere from 25 to 100 players (Ward and Strashin, 2019). Those who have come forward have shared the long-term impacts of the abuse and silence on their lives including life-long struggles with alcohol and substance abuse, difficulty making and/or maintaining close relationships, loss of the love of hockey, and challenges with the law (Hamilton, 2020a; Kennedy & Grainger, 2006). In April 2021, Macaulay died after losing his battle with substance abuse (Hamilton, 2021).

Both Kennedy and Fleury have written books about their experiences documenting the culture of hypermasculinity, aggression, and obedience which contributed to their silence. Like football's culture, hockey players are expected to show emotional and physical toughness: no tears, no weakness, "don't be a baby," and suck it up if you are injured (Fleury & Day, 2009; Kennedy & Grainger, 2006). The culture reinforces traditional ideas of masculinity where strength and aggression are central. Sexist and homophobic comments such as "faggot" or "Graham's little wife" were thrown about by other players and staff to keep players from deviating from their masculine role (Fleury & Day, 2009; Kennedy & Grainger, 2006). In her book, *Crossing the Line*, Laura Robinson discusses peer abuse and hazing, practices known and supported by senior players and officials and intended to reinforce and prove masculinity (1998). She also notes how this culture seeps off the ice, with players abusing their female partners (Robinson, 1998). Young players, often coming from small towns and away from home, are immersed in the hockey life with their team. They look up to older players and brim with the excitement of moving closer to their dream: the NHL. This mix creates a strong desire and pressure to fit in with the team, and an

*"He was raised to respect his elders, and trust the word of authority. He didn't feel like he was in a position to say no, even if he was confused by what was happening. "When somebody with authority has power over you, then how do you not agree with them? Whether you think it's right or wrong, if they're telling you to do it then you do it and that's how I was raised."*

**(Hamilton, 2020d)**

aversion to risking that for which they have worked so hard.

Additionally, for young players, the "godlike" view of coaches is reflected in the significant role James' position and reputation played in victims' response to the abuse (Hamilton, 2020d). James was a beloved and highly celebrated member of the community, even winning the 1988-89 *Hockey News* Man of the Year award. As a coach, he carefully cultivated his public reputation and carefully controlled the public narrative (Hamilton, 2020c; Kennedy & Grainger, 2006). His stature elevated him in the eyes of the players who felt pressure to please this highly regarded authority figure. It also made it difficult for victims to come forward. As one survivor said, "[b]asically, you're screwed. You're not going anywhere because his (James) word carried a lot (of weight with) scouts and your path to the NHL," (Hamilton, 2020d). Fleury highlights the systemic culture of this, describing that players did what they had been taught to do in hockey from a young age, "listen to the coach and shut up" (Fleury & Day, 2009, p149). Those who spoke up ended up traded or fired or forced out (Kennedy & Grainger, 2006; Robinson, 1998).

Beyond this case, broader discussions are taking place on the hockey culture in Canada and the violence and abuse it perpetuates within the sport and the community. Hockey continues to grapple with its culture facing multiple accusations of abuse and problematic practices even in the new millennium. In 2010, NHL player Kyle Beach came forward and accused a former NHL coach, Brad Aldrich, of sexual abuse (Westhead, 2021). The NHL chose to hide the complaint because the Chicago Blackhawks, Beach's team, were in

the Stanley Cup playoffs at the time and the NHL felt an investigation would be a distraction (Westhead, 2021). Aldrich went on to abuse at least three other men (Anderson, 2021). In yet another case, a class-action lawsuit was filed against the Canadian Hockey League (CHL) in 2020 citing allegations of a hazing culture (The Canadian Press, 2021). The CHL is responsible for oversight of Canada's major junior hockey, in which players are typically between the ages of 16 and 21. Most recently, Hockey Canada is facing criticism for its lack of transparency about statistics: the number of abuse complaints, the number of coaches or staff who have been suspended or banned because of abuse (Westhead, 2021).

### CANADA ARTISTIC SWIMMING

In contrast to the previous cases which centred on sexual abuse, Canada Artistic Swimming has recently gained public attention over reports of a psychologically abusive culture which breeds disordered eating (Robertson & Brady, 2021b). Similar to the toxic environment of the USA G training camp, artistic swimmers experience psychologically abusive practices, including body shaming and name calling, in the pursuit of better performance. Performance in aesthetic sports such as artistic swimming, as well as women's gymnastics and figure skating, is measured in aesthetics as well as execution. Therefore emphasis is placed on appearance as well as uniformity in a team sport like synchronized swimming.

The aesthetic component is known to be subjective, however, the subjective nature allows for easy rationalization of abusive practices and the emergence of unconscious biases. In swimming, aesthetic is achieved in part through weight targets. These are often set by coaches and reported to change without consultation or warning to athletes (Robertson & Brady, 2021b). Reports in the *Globe and Mail* suggest that the process by which targets are set is arbitrary. Coaches set targets and have the power to override recommendations from health professionals should they disagree on a target weight (Interview 02-25; Robertson

Despite the continued challenges facing hockey, there are encouraging changes. Similar to the aftermath of the *Athlete A* gymnastics documentary, Kennedy's decision to publicly come forward and disclose his experience inspired other men to come forward and report their experiences of abuse (Kennedy & Grainger, 2006). The public profile and example set by his decision to come forward opened the door for other players to feel safe to speak up. Kennedy built on this when, in 1998, he conducted a skate across Canada to raise funds and awareness for victims of sexual abuse (Kennedy & Grainger, 2006).

& Brady, 2021b). Despite this, weight measurements are coded into athlete contracts making participation and funding contractually contingent on meeting them (Robertson & Brady, 2021b). Should a swimmer not meet their target, they may be "on the hook" for thousands of dollars worth of training time and resources (Robertson & Brady, 2021c). Fear of losing their place and of being required to pay back these extensive costs puts enormous pressure on athletes to comply. As former swimmer Taylor Ruck says, "there's a lot of emphasis on doing all that you can do, just to take off one one-hundredth of a second," (Robertson & Brady, 2021a). Therefore, in cases where weight targets are below what a swimmer can lose through their already active training regime, few options are left but to resort to disordered eating to shed the weight (Robertson & Brady, 2021c).

This "culture of thinness" as swimmer Geneviève Peel describes it, is highly normalized and rooted in traditional Western ideas of feminine beauty. Like in the gymnastics case, public weigh-ins are normal as well as posting each athlete's weight and increase/decrease (G. Peel, 2020b). One former swimmer explained that "[if] you're not tall and super skinny—basically if you don't look like a model—with light skin, you have no chance

to get to the top level," (Longman & Brassil, 2021). A questionnaire respondent also listed the beauty standards and gender stereotypes as harmful power dynamics within the system (Questionnaire Respondent 05). In aesthetic sports, however, body grading is justified as a necessity in pursuit of the highest artistic marks. This includes the pursuit of uniformity and ensuring a team that looks as similar as possible. However, by that logic, a team comprised of all racialized or all fat swimmers should be acceptable. I have yet to see such a North American team.

Beyond body shaming and gender bias, abuse can include blatantly racist comments as one CBC News article reported (2020). In one example, a Canadian national coach suggested a swimmer "move to Africa to lose weight," not only shaming her body but also demonstrating racial bias (Longman & Brassil, 2021). Although she does not give any examples, former artistic swimmer, Geneviève Peel, further alludes to this culture in a personal blog and speaks out against the bias and discrimination perpetrated in Canada Artistic Swimming. She states that what they have "done to and said about Black, Indigenous, Muslim and LGBTQIA+ people is unacceptable," and refuses to sit back while the organization continues to "spread fear" (G. Peel, 2020a). The limited examples may speak to swimmers' fear of speaking out. The fact that health measurements such as body weight are embedded into an athlete's contract, makes them more vulnerable.

The case of artistic swimming also highlights the international nature of the problem. In a *New York Times* article, in which over 100 swimmers from different countries were interviewed, it concludes that swimmers

"routinely endure bullying, harassment and psychological abuse" (Longman & Brassil, 2021). This reveals that the toxic culture present in Canada Artistic Swimming is not unique to Canada. Further, the ability for coaches to move from country to country without their history following them enables the perpetuation of this culture and contributes to the vulnerability of athletes. In one example, swimming coach, Gabor Szauder, moved to Canada after coaching for five years in Slovakia (Longman & Brassil, 2021). He has coached in Canada since 2018, however, it was only after he came under scrutiny for complaints in Canada that Canadian officials became aware that he had faced similar complaints as a coach in Slovakia (Longman & Brassil, 2021). This speaks to the lack of communication between national sports organizations and the lack of publicly and internationally available information on sports figures involved in the international high performance community.

On a positive note, like the other cases, the growing number of voices challenging the system are a sign of change. The athletes entering and moving through the system now are less willing to accept approaches that rely on insults and humiliation in the pursuit of performance results. Technology and social media are giving a voice to swimmers. On the Instagram account, @mental\_abuse\_nac, anonymous swimmers have shared dozens of stories of the psychological and physical abuse they experienced (Abus mental/Mental abuse, n.d.). Anonymity allows those afraid of speaking out to still be heard. In her blog, Geneviève Peel shares her experiences of artistic swimming in Canada and the toxic culture that contributed to her decision to leave the sport (G. Peel, 2020c).

*"What hurt the most though, and still hurts to this day, is that the assistant coach who had known me for years, who had seen me struggle with my body image every day, ... said nothing. I remember feeling utterly betrayed. In that moment when I was told to do something unhealthy, unreasonable and ridiculous, this person whom I trusted said nothing."*

**Geneviève Peel, Blog "Why I Quit" (2020c)**



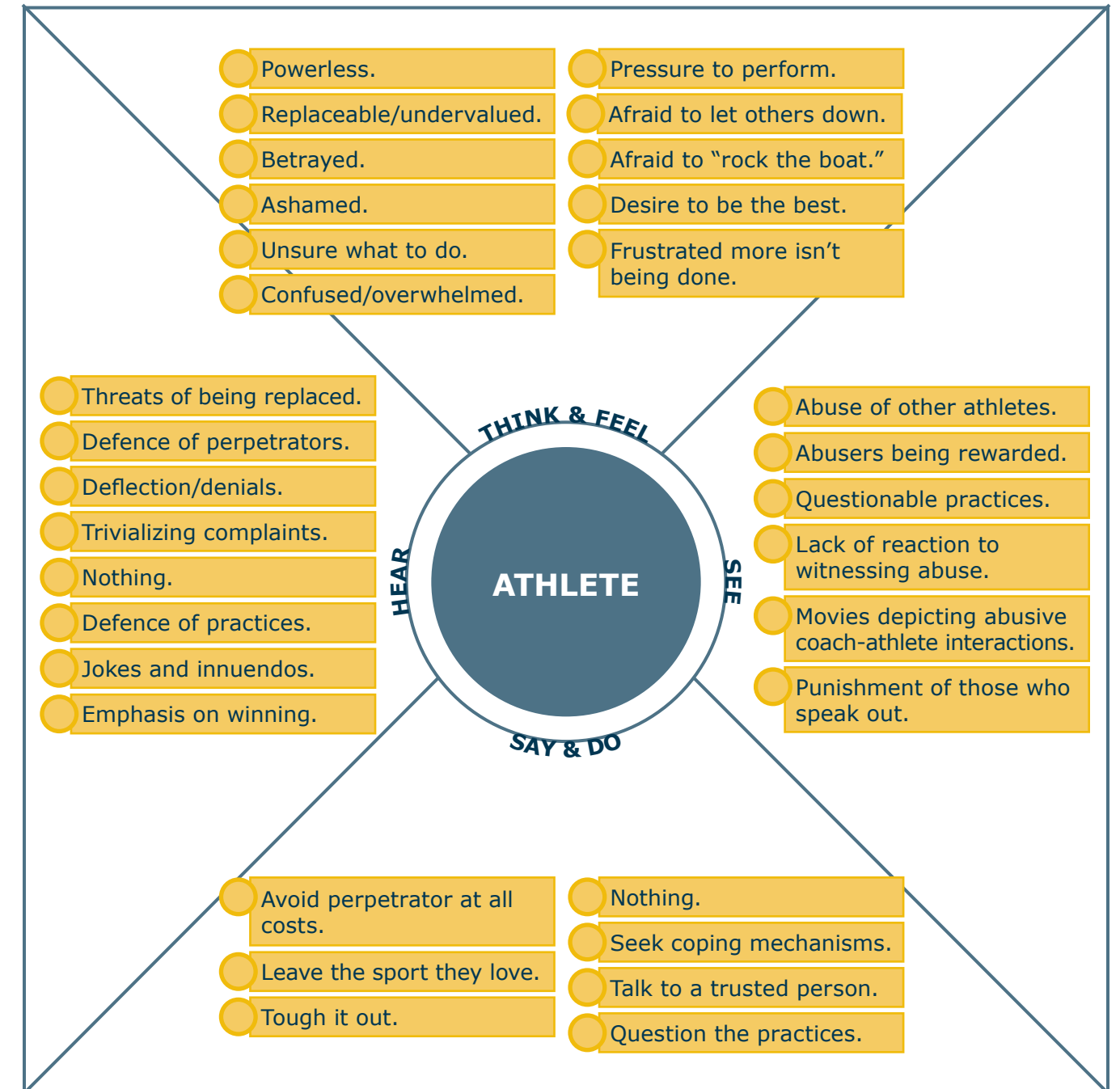
### BUILDING EMPATHY

Reflecting on the experiences observed through the cases of abuse as well as the comments and perspectives shared in my research, it is apparent that athletes witness and internalize a variety of messages throughout their training. These messages, whether implicit or explicit, are encountered across relationships and situations. They reveal the attitudes, expectations, and rules of the training environment and how those within it respond to the issue of maltreatment. This shapes how an athlete engages and interacts with other stakeholders and system structures when confronted with their own experience of maltreatment. This contributes to their vulnerability.

I use the Empathy Map tool to categorize the different ways these manifest from the perspective of an athlete. Drawing from the words of victims and witnesses, I noted the repeated themes across four dimensions: Think & Feel, See, Say & Do, and Hear. The horizontal dimensions, Hear and See, capture what athletes encounter and with what they are confronted. Looking at the map, they can be summarized as experiences which enable and dismiss maltreatment. As one questionnaire respondent described it, speaking specifically on the act of reporting abuse, these experiences are systemic “pushback” in response to “threaten[ing] the system” (Questionnaire Response 07). They are mechanisms reinforcing and preserving the status quo, and what athletes internalize throughout their training.

The vertical dimensions, Think & Feel and Say & Do, capture the athlete’s emotions and reactions to this pushback. From fear to shame to avoidance, the range is predominantly and unsurprisingly negative. It reflects the confusion an athlete faces when witnessing maltreatment being denied and enabled. If the people in positions of power are not acting as expected, what are they, the athletes with limited power, supposed to do?

This tool centres the athlete’s experience and gives them a voice when too often they are quieted or ignored. The purpose of the map is to quite literally, evoke empathy. It highlights their humanity and the very human feelings and reactions they experience and must navigate while pursuing their training.



**FIGURE 2.1:** The varied messages and feelings experienced by athletes when confronted with maltreatment in the training environment (Empathy Map).

## INFLUENCE MAP

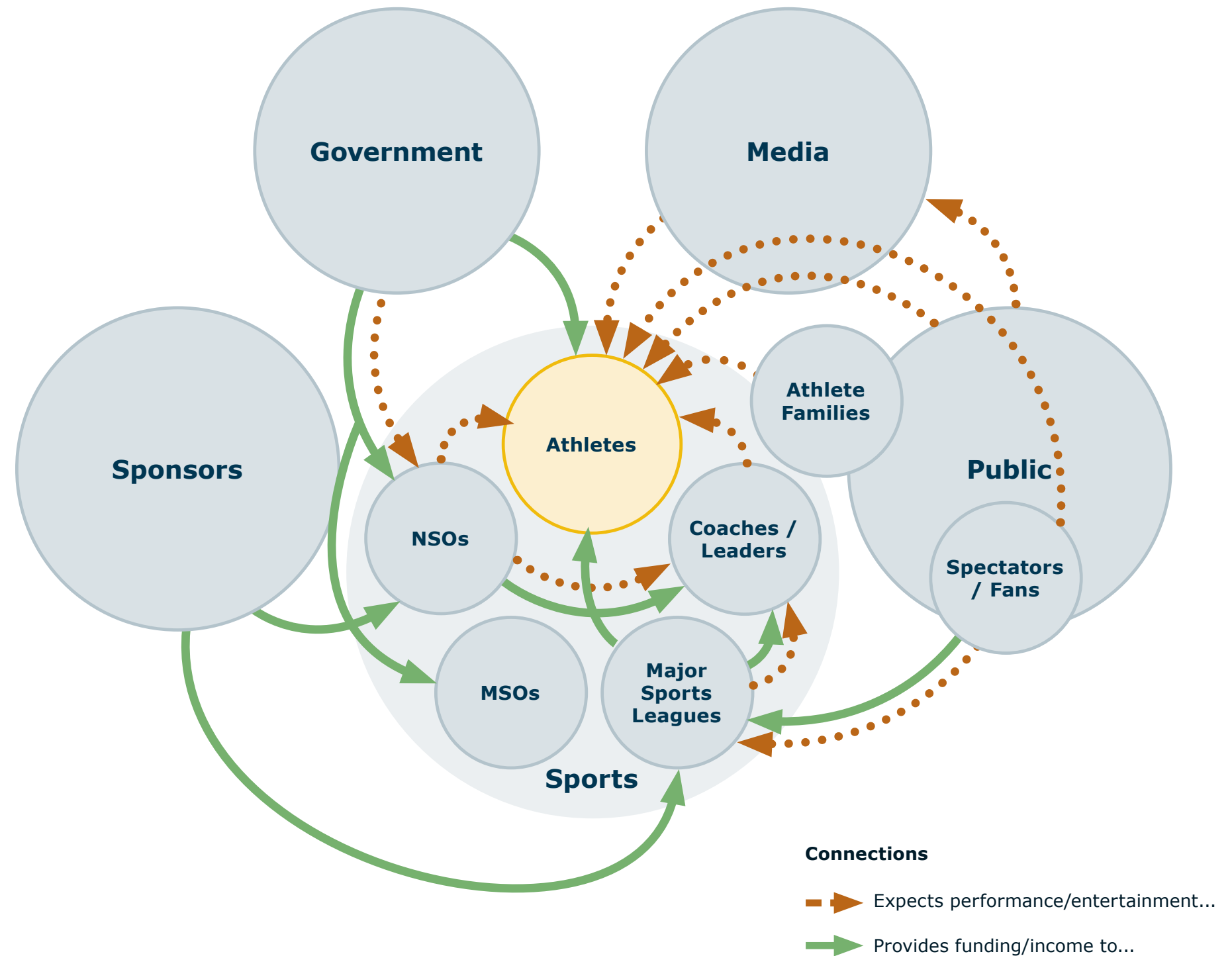
Reflecting on the key stakeholders, I use an influence map to visualize their connections as observed through my primary and secondary research and the cases of abuse. The process of mapping these connections reveals which stakeholders are most influential and conversely, which are least. I explore these connections in more depth in a stakeholder analysis in the following chapter.

While as an overall visualization it captures the interconnectedness of stakeholders, it more specifically illustrates which stakeholders hold the most influence, and which are most influenced by others. I examine the nature of this influence by focusing on two key factors which emerged through my research: money and performance expectations. Although other means exist for stakeholders to influence one another, these repeated as sources of influence. They are depicted respectively by green and brown arrows. I have focused on these in developing this map to understand their role in shaping stakeholder interactions.

Examining the influence of money, it consistently moves from stakeholders at the larger scales of the system, such as government and sponsors, to the smaller scales of the system, to coaches and athletes. Additionally, while not always the case, there is a pattern that where money flows, there is an associated expectation of performance. This reflects that money and performance are linked factors within the system. Though speaking specifically about professional leagues, one questionnaire respondent summarized that “it’s all about the money and popularity” (Questionnaire Response 06).

Further examination of the flow of expectations reveals that the majority are directed at athletes, represented by the number of performance arrows directed at athletes in the map. This highlights the central role of athletes within the system and that they carry the weight of others’ expectations and pressure. In the poetic wording of Naomi Osaka, athletes are the “vessel” for the dreams and goals of the other stakeholders in the system (Bradley, 2021).

Although central figures, the map also reveals that athletes have limited influence within this structure. There are no arrows which stem from athletes and point to another stakeholder. What this reveals in the consideration of power dynamics is that interventions need to be developed which shift influence and power to athletes. Further, it reveals that performance expectations require a balancing mechanism to counteract their disproportionate influence within the system.



**FIGURE 2.2:**  
Mapping stakeholder connections and influence (Influence Map).

**CHAPTER 2 TAKE-AWAYS**

- Seven key patterns contribute to the persistence of maltreatment in sports: reputation and transparency, insularity and homogeneity, normalization of aggressive practices, respect for authority, excellence versus winning, media/public consumption, and resourcing.
- Athletes are faced with a variety of explicit and implicit messages on the seriousness of maltreatment throughout their training. These contribute to the pressure and vulnerability they experience.
- Influence in the system is largely driven by money and performance expectations.
- Athletes and their work benefit many in the system, but their influence is limited.

## CHAPTER THREE

# Understanding the System

### WHAT TO EXPECT

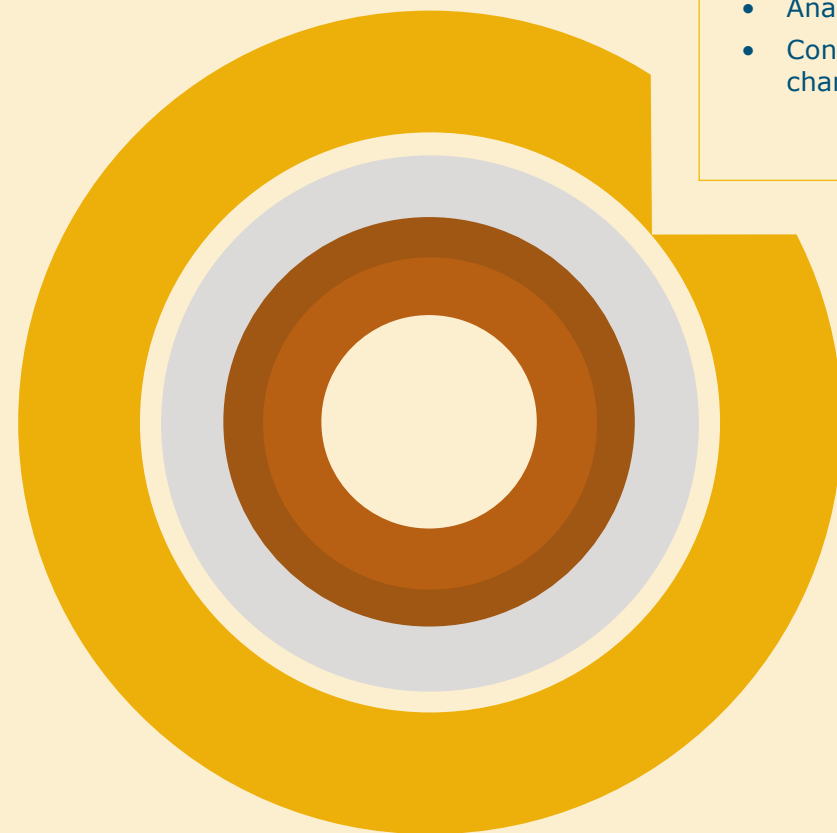
As defined by the Systemic Design Toolkit:

- Analyzing and visualizing how the factors influence each other.
- Converging on “where” interventions are needed to activate change in the system (leverage points)

*“We talk a lot about actions, but behind those actions are ideas. And if you don’t have your ideas right, the actions are not going to follow.”*

**Rachel Denhollander, gymnast and survivor  
(Nieson, 2019)**

To understand why the system operates as it does, I analyze the observations from Chapter 2 and further explore the relationships between stakeholders and structures. I examine how they influence each other and require or enable the patterns identified in the previous chapter. This process allows me to identify which are most interconnected and therefore the most influential. This creates the foundation for the strategic recommendations in Chapter 5, ensuring they can be most impactful in creating systemic change.

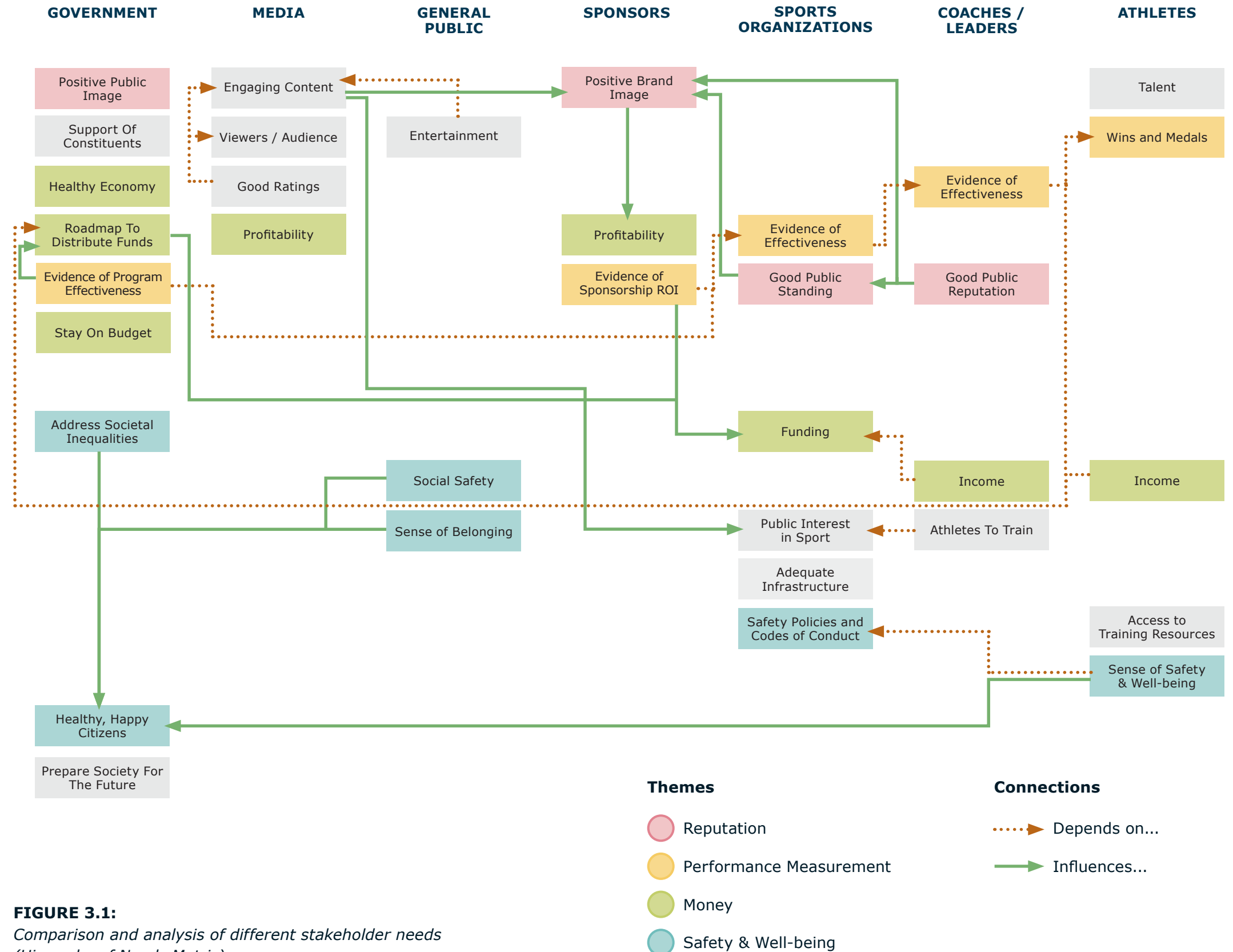


### STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS

Building on the influence map in the previous chapter, I further dissect the relationships between stakeholders using a hierarchy of needs matrix. The matrix allows me to map the specific needs of individual stakeholders and situate them in relationship to one another. In this relative hierarchy it is possible to identify the significant dependencies and influences, depicted through arrows, underlying the connections in the influence map. The needs identified here, which emerged from my research, are specific to the problem of maltreatment and inequity. Key dynamics surfaced from the literature review and cases of abuse and were reinforced in responses from my primary research. Though many other needs and dependencies exist, only on those which relate to the problem space are highlighted here.

A common need which repeated across stakeholders was that of money or funding, marked by the green squares. Though not the top need, this is only because it is dependent on the needs above it. As discussed in the patterns section in Chapter 2, factors such as maintaining a positive reputation and demonstrating medal performance potential play an important role in the pursuit of income. What becomes problematic in this dynamic is that the priority placed on money, which is a basic need, is in conflict with the basic need of athletes to feel safe. This is reflected in the low placement of the safety and well-being squares, coloured blue, compared to the green financial squares in the matrix. The absence of a mechanism to effectively mediate between these sets of needs results in the default to structural power where the financial needs of the organization, as the stakeholder in the position of authority and control, overpower the safety needs of athletes.

Turning to the dynamic between sponsors and sports organizations, we see again the role of money and reputation in the dependencies connecting the two stakeholder groups. Sponsors provide funding to selected sports



**FIGURE 3.1:** Comparison and analysis of different stakeholder needs (Hierarchy of Needs Matrix).

### Stakeholder Analysis Continued

organizations in return for public brand profile through them. Brand profile is commonly demonstrated by including sponsor logos on athlete gear, facility displays, or through a sports organization's website and social media channels. The profile creates positive publicity and brand awareness for the sponsor while providing income for the sports organization. In so doing, the public reputations of the two stakeholder groups become linked. This is a mutually beneficial relationship so long as both maintain their reputations. If a sports organization draws negative media attention, as in the cases of USA G and UM, sponsors are likely to review the associated sponsorship arrangements. In many cases, as with USA G, sponsors often withdraw their support to protect their reputation. This highlights how athletes' need for safety is further undermined when sports organization choose to protect their reputation to protect their sponsorship income by hiding and denying allegations of abuse.

Another influential factor is the need to demonstrate performance, measured through competition success—medals, podium placements, etc. Marked with gold squares, performance repeats as the top need for sports organizations, coaches, and athletes and as a lower order need for government and sponsors. It works in parallel with money in a dependency cycle where the need for performance is driven by the need for money. The cycle starts with the need for money which moves up scales of the system from athletes and coaches to sports organizations to sponsors and government. To access this money, each stakeholder relies on a stakeholder at a smaller scale, in reverse order from money, all the way to where it stops with athletes. In this roundabout cycle, the need for money is downloaded through the scales of the system in the form of performance expectations and pressure. Considering the

cases and patterns from Chapter 2, this structure is what enables the development of unrealistic performance expectations and toxic cultures which encourage athletes to adopt unhealthy practices. This was noted in participant responses, in particular one who remarked that "inappropriate behavior is okay as long as the athletes/teams continue to win" (Questionnaire Respondent 08).

The interesting and sometimes frustrating part of developing a hierarchy of needs matrix, however, is that it necessarily requires the creator to rank important and highly valued needs. Since two needs cannot be equivalent, it requires making an informed selection about which is more urgent within the problem space. The result is that, often, highly valued needs are pushed to the bottom because others are more critical. In this way, the ranking process is values agnostic. The low placement of the safety and well-being needs reflects this. Despite being valued highly by athletes, individual athlete safety and well-being is not required for the system to function. Athletes are replaceable. What is required is money, and winning and reputation contribute to securing federal funding and sponsorships. However, like the task that sits on a to-do list week after week, bumped for more pressing tasks, the only way for safety and well-being to become a priority is for it to be made one. The interventions in Chapter 5 provide recommendations to make this a reality.

An important gap in this matrix is the support service stakeholder group: psychologists, nutritionists, physicians, and other professionals. Although essential to athlete training and well-being, the scope of their influence is very limited. Along with other staff, they are somewhat "invisible to the system" as one participant commented. Further

highlighted by the participant, they reflected that support professionals are not approached for their insights or feedback on the system despite being in a privileged position to hear first-hand—perhaps more open—accounts from athletes during their sessions (Interview 02-25). As noted earlier, their professional opinions can also be disregarded by coaches if the coach prefers a different course of action. In the evolution of the sports system, failing to listen to these stakeholders is a missed opportunity.

In summary, the stakeholder analysis explores the 'why' behind the connections made in the Influence Map. It highlights the importance of money for all stakeholders and makes clear that accessing money is dependent on performance and greatly influenced by reputation and the media. It also makes apparent how this dynamic impacts prioritization of safety and well-being needs. Although central to the problem of maltreatment, they rank lowest across all stakeholders, being overpowered by the needs tied to money. Finally it reveals who is not influential in the system: support staff and professional services. Their voices are largely unheard and undervalued and currently, have limited influence within the system.



## SOURCES OF POWER

What emerges through the stakeholder analysis and the insights from Chapter 2, are three key sources of power within the system: money, position, and social media/technology. The first two, are linked and have historically not been held by athletes. The third, social media and technology, is a newer source and proving powerful for athletes.

*"To truly advance safe sport Canada needs to take a long hard strategic look at how they are funding athletes. As long as the pressure and bottom line of money for medals exists challenges around safety in sport will remain because the pressure to perform and the impacts of other people on other athletes to perform will continue."*

**Anonymous athlete respondent (Kerr et al, 2019)**

*"In the absence of alternative models and relationships, people repeat the power over pattern in their personal interaction, values, communities, and institutions."*

**(Miller et al, 2006)**

### MONEY

The most influential of the two sources is money. As illustrated in the stakeholder analysis and influence map, it is a driving need within the system, and therefore the most significant factor in decision-making. It provides stability and agency for those with access to it and leaves others vulnerable and powerless without it. Beyond a basic need, it also provides prestige through accumulated wealth, conferring additional power through status. However, within the current system, money is not equally or stably distributed. Athletes outside of major professional sport leagues are not guaranteed a living wage when pursuing their sport (Interview 02-25). For resource-strapped sports organizations, it drives decision-making that protects funding streams over athlete safety.

Referring back to the cases in Chapter 2, there are several examples of how money drives decision making by stakeholders. For the student-athletes at the University of Michigan, they feared losing their scholarships if they reported, and so they often stayed silent (Murphy, 2020). The university was also afraid of jeopardizing its own sponsorship funding, so it made decisions that tread lightly so as not to upset sponsors (Kalman-Lamb & Shafer, 2021). Similarly, in the USA Gymnastics case, executives chose not to disclose complaints to protect its image and sponsorships. In artistic swimming, Canadian swimmers feared having to repay tens of thousands of dollars in training costs if they broke their contracts (Robertson & Brady, 2021c).

### POSITION

The second significant source of power is position, defined by the hierarchical power one holds within the system. The higher in the hierarchy one is, the more control one has. It generally includes increased income, however money is not its source of power. It is the authority and control of decision making and information. This "top down approach" came through in the comments from questionnaire respondents and is discussed as one of the barriers to change (Questionnaire Response 07). Across all of my research, this hierarchical structure surfaces as an impediment to open conversation, change, and the individuals' ability to say 'no.' One interviewee described one way this hierarchy manifests, sharing that athlete feedback is often filtered through organizational levels so that what is finally shared with funding providers is a version which aligns with the desired organizational narrative (Interview 02-25).

Returning to the idea of military legacy, this approach to hierarchy reflects military-style thinking. Military structures use clear rank structures which operate on power over. Lower ranks are expected to obey those who are more senior. This is consistent with problems identified in the current sports system such as territorial disputes and command and control type structures (The Conference Board of Canada, 2011). Systems analyst, Donella Meadows, reminds us that hierarchies "exist to serve the bottom layers, not the top," balancing enough autonomy and central control between them (Meadows, 2008). The upper and lower layers are intended to work together in a symbiotic relationship to achieve the system's goals. That sports operate on a top-down hierarchy impedes this relationship, blocking the benefits that greater agency for lower layers can bring.

### SOCIAL MEDIA & TECHNOLOGY

Briefly discussed in the Chapter 2 patterns, the proliferation of media and new technologies is emerging as a source of power for athletes. Increasing access to different media, including social media, is giving athletes the ability to communicate directly with the public, sharing their first-hand experiences and perspectives. This unfiltered communication shifts some power back to athletes, allowing them to control their own narrative. It also makes it more difficult for other individuals and organizations to hide or avoid complaints. With stories and complaints able to surface and circulate publicly, athletes are less socially isolated than they once were. Reports of abuse can harness tremendous public support, channelling that power to pressure institutions into action. In addition, the availability of documentaries such as *Athlete A* are further breaking down the isolation of the training environment by revealing inside perspectives from other sports or organizations. Athletes are then able to compare and reflect on their training environments, perhaps inspiring them to speak out (Macur, 2021).

The rise of grassroots social media campaigns has also impacted sports. In cases of sexual abuse, the post #MeToo environment is much more supportive for survivors with cases of sexual abuse garnering more public attention and outcry than in years prior. It has also led to social media activism such as the #CoverTheAthlete campaign\*, developed to highlight biased media coverage of female athletes, and the anonymous @mental\_abuse\_nac Instagram account where elite swimmers can publicly and anonymously share their experiences of abuse (Abus mental/Mental abuse, n.d.; CBC News, 2015).

\*#CoverTheAthlete: Refer to [Appendix D](#), page 107, for more information on the campaign.

## CHALLENGES

Efforts to address maltreatment and inequity in sports are being impeded by the following factors. These themes emerged through literature review and the comments from research participants. An understanding of these is important before undertaking the development of interventions. Doing so will better facilitate and maximize the potential impacts of interventions and increase the rate of change within the system.

### INERTIA

Currently, a systemic inertia helps maintain the status quo. Few incentives exist, punitive or rewarding, which encourage stakeholders to change how they operate. Most notably, there are no metrics which focus on athlete well-being. Since well-being is not measured, there is no requirement and little incentive to prioritize it. This is particularly true when well-being is competing with money as a basic need as discussed in the stakeholder analysis. For the sports organizations with limited funding, their capacity to pursue systemic change may be limited by their struggle to meet their basic financial needs. Further, some stakeholders within the system may actively resist change. They may not want change either because the current structure benefits them financially or in status, or because they genuinely believe it the “right and natural” way to operate as in the coach–athlete hierarchy (Coakley & Donnelly, 2004, p14). A coach’s comment, shared with me by one interviewee, summarizes the latter attitude: “if you give athletes too much power, they’d want all kinds of things” (Interview 02-25).

This “old school mentality” is raised by several questionnaire respondents who note the systems’ hesitance to adopt new measures and policies, and the power imbalance between coaches and athletes (Questionnaire Response 04). Therefore, in order to disrupt this inertia, incentives and structures need to be developed with sufficient power to require different behaviours from those within the system.

### FRAGMENTED SYSTEM

A fragmented sports system compounds the problem. In my experience researching the Canadian sports system, the different levels and types of organizations involved made it difficult to understand its structure, such as how NSOs and professional leagues fit into the overarching Canadian sports system. Policies, programs, and organizations exist for specific groupings of athletes such as AthletesCAN for national team athletes, or the Game Plan program for high performance athletes, however little appears to exist which encompasses all sports across all levels of participation. Even the Canadian Sport Policy is limited to amateur sports (Government of Canada, 2012). The system’s complexity is reflected in comments from the Consultation Board of Canada report which states that the system lacks clear vision and shared understanding of goals (2011).

Although beyond the scope of this work, the effects of this fragmentation leave local clubs and associations with little guidance or oversight in developing and enforcing policies (Strashin & Ward, 2019). One questionnaire respondent commented on this lack of oversight stating that it prevents community sports organization from achieving “fair and transparent conflict resolution” (Questionnaire Response 08). This leaves athletes at these levels even more vulnerable.

### LACK OF PATH FOR BELIEVERS

For those who want change but are not in positions of power, a feeling of powerlessness exists. This feeling, captured in phrases starting with “I didn’t know...” and “I wasn’t sure...,” leads many to inaction despite wanting change. It stems both from a lack of clear, actionable paths and limited awareness of available resources. In my secondary research, others have discussed the importance of actions which counteract this. These have included recommendations to build parental awareness of youth protection policies, and education on harmful behaviour: what constitutes it, what are signs to watch for, and what to do if it is encountered (Brackenridge 1997; Cohen & Shenk, 2020; Parent & Demers, 2011).

Not clearly communicating and providing actionable steps for engaged stakeholders is a missed opportunity. The will and motivation of those open to change needs to be harnessed and directed. Combined, even the smallest actions can add up, fuelling momentum and creating systemic pressure.

### BIAS

The way the systemic power imbalances manifest are not the same for all athletes. Summarized in the Chronosystem from Chapter 1, the legacy of past social ideologies is the present unconscious bias many athletes must navigate. Female athletes for example, are disadvantaged by having to grapple with policies and perspectives rooted in a time when sports were exclusively men’s domain. Their contracts and pay are often less than those of their male counterparts, they are given less credit for their accomplishments, and they are treated less seriously (worse time slots, limited coverage, unnecessarily revealing required attire, sexualized imagery, overly personal and unrelated interview questions).

The impacts of bias are compounded for every additional dimension of marginalization. Therefore for racialized female athletes, female para-athletes, and trans female and non-binary athletes among others, the imbalance of power is magnified. Diversity, or lack thereof, was highlighted by two questionnaire respondents as a problematic feature of the system. One noted that for racialized athletes, they are at a disadvantage in a system where coaches are predominantly white. Therefore, to truly achieve an equitable system, interventions must consider this legacy.



**SYSTEMS MAP**

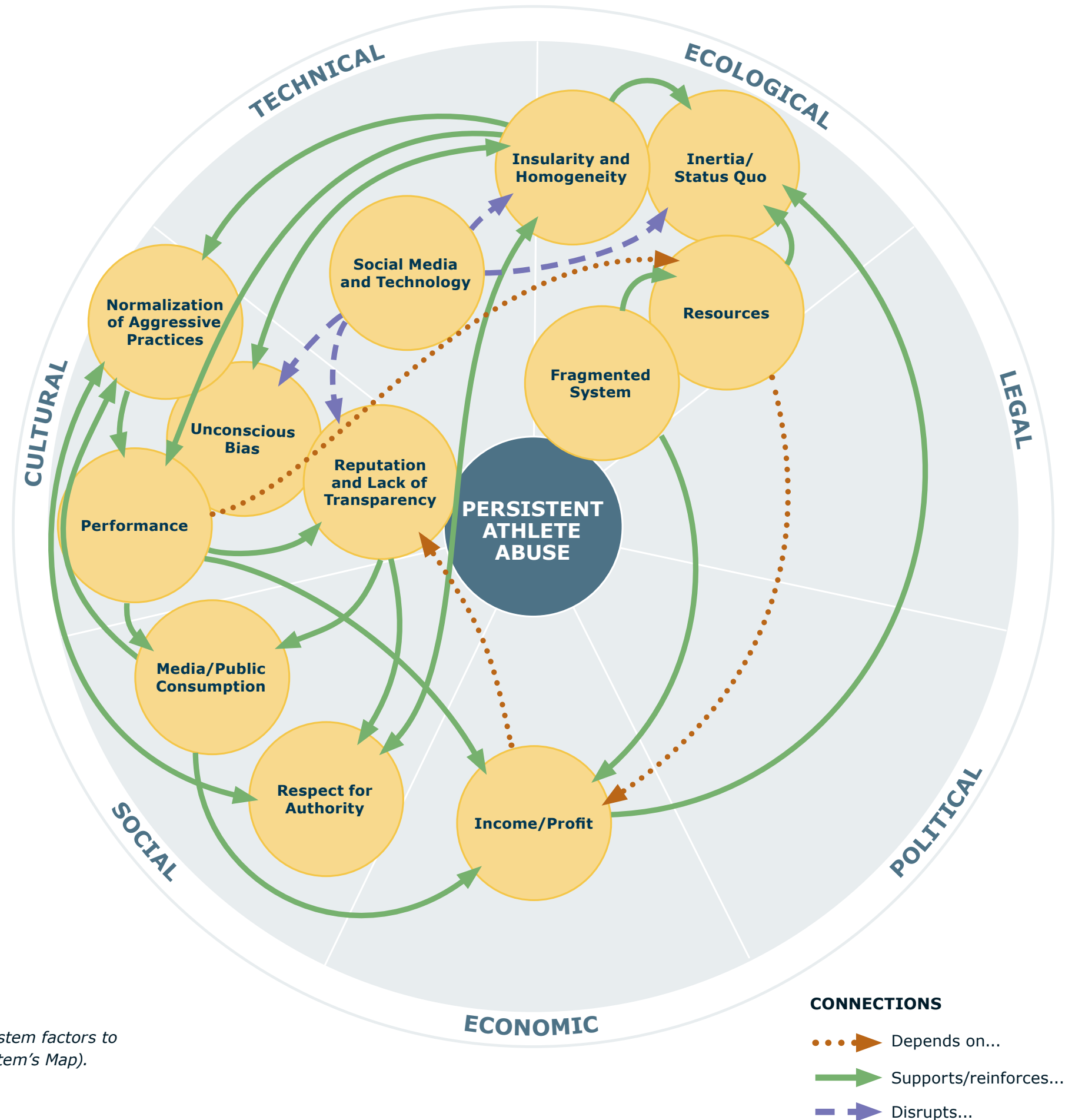
Bringing together the factors identified so far—the sources of power, the challenges, and the patterns from Chapter 2—I examine their relationships to one another using a Systems Map. The map is used to examine how systemic factors influence each other across seven societal dimensions, revealing which are most influential. The seven dimensions incorporate different aspects of society to ensure holistic consideration of the problem and its influencing factors. Influence is determined by the number of arrows connecting one factor to another.

The relationships I have depicted build on the insights from my research: primary and secondary, and the public cases. I have renamed some to summarize their theme and make them more easily understood within this diagram. This includes the pattern “excellence versus winning” which I have renamed “performance,” and “reputation and transparency” which I have changed to “reputation and lack of transparency.”

The factors which emerge as most influential are: performance, income/profit, insularity and homogeneity, and reputation and lack of transparency. Connected to no less than five other factors, they have the power to impact multiple other factors and create a ripple effect through the system. This makes them ideal targets for interventions within the system.

An important insight that becomes evident through this map is that the factors contributing to the problem are predominantly cultural, social, and ecological in nature. Social media and technology are influential from a technical perspective, and in a capitalist society, money will always have significant influence. However, none of the most influential factors originate in legal and political structures. That is not to say that these are not relevant or important. What it indicates is that what is primarily impeding change within the system are the attitudes and values of its stakeholders. Therefore, interventions which foster change along these dimensions will carry through the system to its other dimensions.

Visualizing the factors this way is an important step in understanding where the most influential leverage points exist within a system. These influential factors, identified above, are ideal targets to leverage for systemic interventions. Being connected to five or more other factors reflects their capacity to have broad impact. For example, changes to insularity and homogeneity will impact five other factors such as inertia and performance, which will then continue to cascade through to impact other factors. As noted in Chapter 1, this is important because for change to be long lasting, it must occur across the system. In the next chapter, I expand on this by presenting interventions which engage multiple stakeholders and scales of the system for widespread impact.



**FIGURE 3.2:**  
 Exploring the relationships between key system factors to identify the influential leverage points (System’s Map).

**CHAPTER 3 TAKE-AWAYS**

- A fundamental tension exists between the basic needs (funding) of sports organizations and the basic needs (safety and well-being) of athletes.
- Sports organizations structural power allows them to prioritize their needs above those of athletes.
- Safety and well-being lack structures and incentives to make them a priority within the system.
- Primary sources of power within the sports system are: money, position, and social media and technology.
- Notable barriers to change include: systemic inertia, unconscious bias, fragmented system, and a lack of path for those ready to make change.
- The most influential factors are: performance, income/profit, insularity and homogeneity, and reputation and lack of transparency. Their high connectivity makes them ideal leverage points.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Defining the Desired Future

### WHAT TO EXPECT

As defined by the Systemic Design Toolkit:

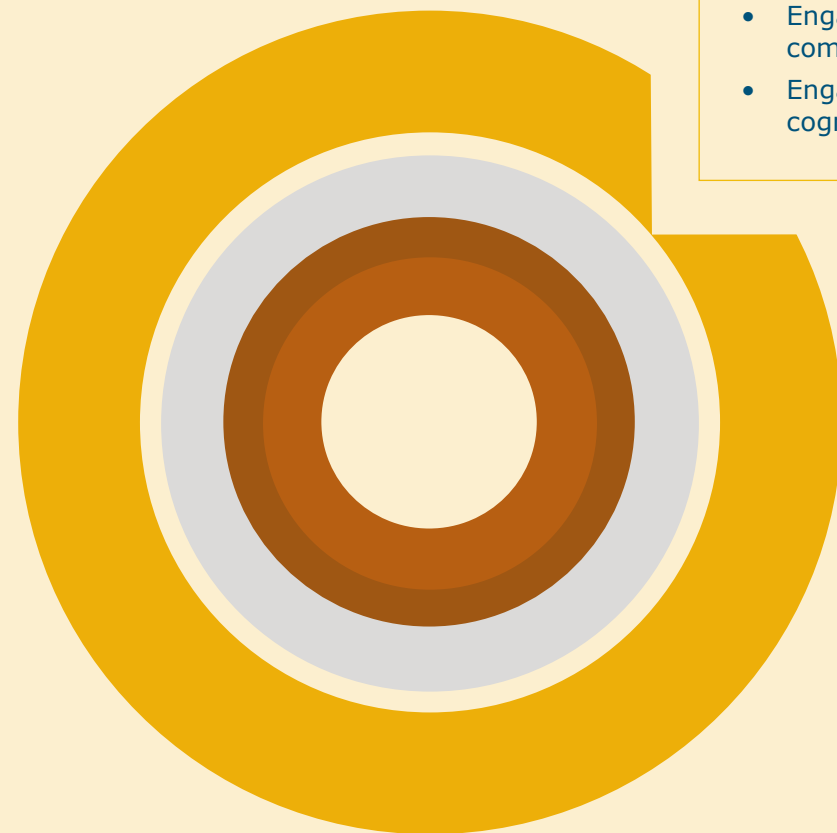
- Defining and visualizing a desired future
- Engaging the requisite variety of worldviews, interests, commitments, and perspectives
- Engaging different perceptions of the future (temporal cognition, horizon preference)

*“If we’re strong and healthy mentally, imagine where we could be.”*

***Broken Trust (Yesko, 2020)***

In the previous chapters I have mapped the system frame, have listened to the perspectives of its stakeholders, and have analyzed the causes of its behaviours. Taking a step back from this analysis of the current system, this chapter shifts to looking forward to the future of sports. I use the perspectives and learnings from the previous chapters to define a vision for an ideal future and a path towards it. This creates a roadmap for the strategic recommendations in the following chapter.

It was clear to me in conducting this research that many in the system already understand the problem. They recognize the problem and have insights on how to change it. This chapter incorporates recommendations made by others to contextualize them within the foresight tools applied in this chapter.

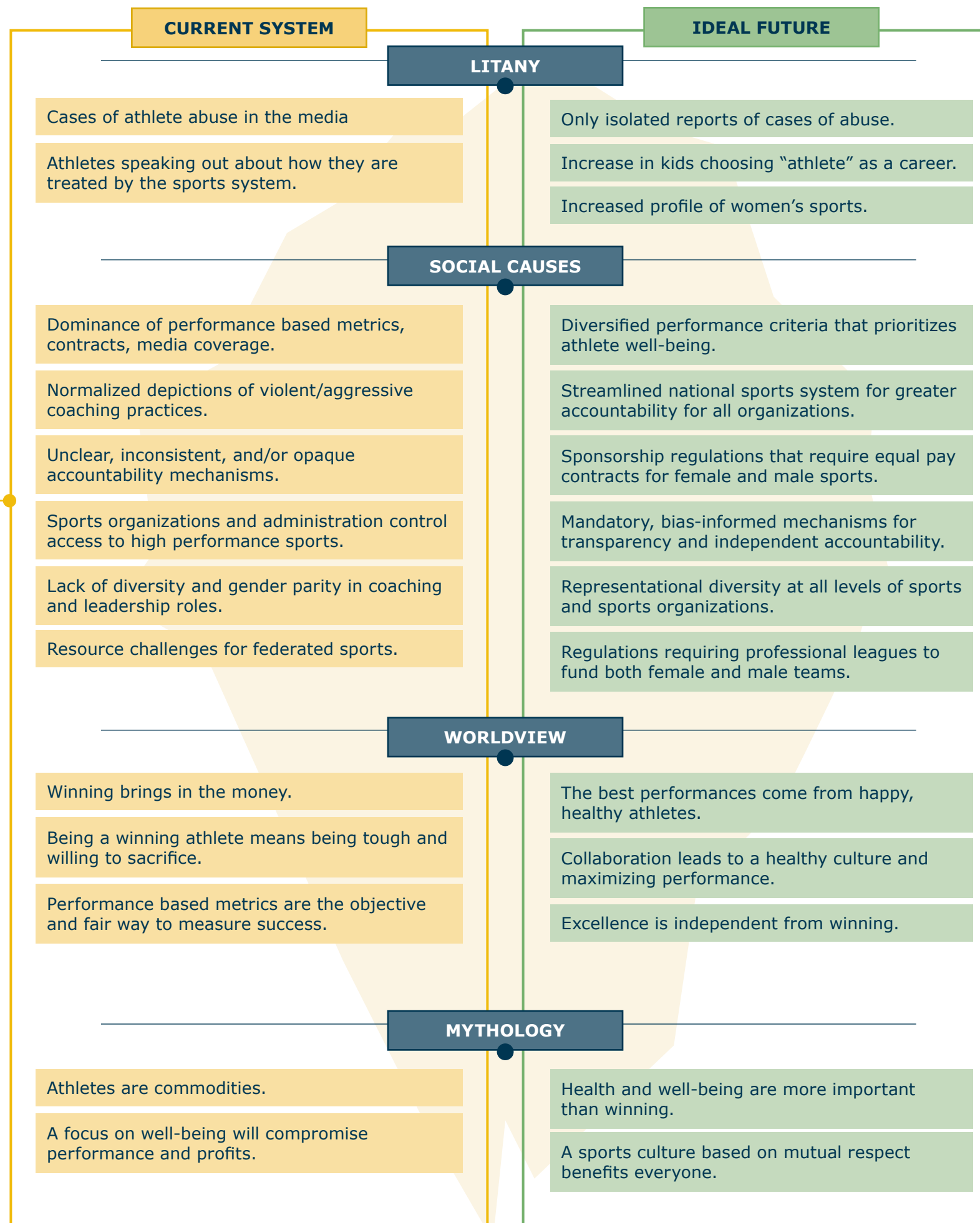


**CAUSAL LAYERED ANALYSIS (CLA)**

To build the future vision, I start with a Causal Layered Analysis (CLA), a method for progressively exploring the systemic factors influencing current behaviours and then thoughtfully re-envisioning them to reach the ideal future. This method gets beyond the surface problems and signals to uncover the deeper, unspoken beliefs that are directly and unconsciously shaping actions. With this knowledge, it is then possible to replace the problematic beliefs with those necessary in the ideal future, effectively providing a long-term roadmap and guide for measuring future change.

**CURRENT SYSTEM**

In the first iteration, I explore the current factors influencing the system from the problem signals to the underlying worldviews and mythology. These derive from the perspectives observed in my research. Working through the layers it became clear that the current system is operating as if sports are a business. Money is a driving factor within the system, as it is in businesses, and the commodity being offered is the athletic performance. Athletic performance however, cannot be separated from the athletes themselves. The result is that athletes themselves are treated as commodities, where their sports aspirations are powerful leverage for others in the system. Other stakeholders benefit from the work of athletes but the myth is that it is a fair exchange. In the current system athletes have little agency or protection, and limited recourse when there are problems. They are like employees with none of the protections that employees receive. And this ultimately costs the system when talented athletes leave because of the culture or their performance suffers because of the abuse they have experienced.



**IDEAL FUTURE**

In an ideal future, what factors are needed so that athletes are empowered agents of their own future? In the second iteration of the CLA, I replace the unconscious belief that athletes are commodities with the belief that well-being and health are more important than winning. Consistently prioritizing well-being and health will set an example for athletes and communities alike. Further, valuing non-performance metrics like well-being and safety can open the door for the sports system to consider how it influences society. Perhaps using metrics such as social return on investment, sports could measure its community impact thus widening the focus of performance expectations. Finally, a system built on mutual respect will enable collaboration and free exchange of ideas and approaches. By consistently engaging with new ideas, individuals and organizations can build a process of continual learning, adapting to changes in society and international sports. This open flow of information will make the system more resilient, helping it to evolve and stay relevant. Indicators of these changes to the underlying mythology will be seen in the social causes and litany.

It is important to note that mythology or paradigms are the most difficult and slowest types of change to foster. As Meadows says, they are the "great big, unstated assumptions" about the way things should work and therefore often face the most resistance at the societal level (2008). They are also, the most powerful, and the most necessary to make lasting change. The path forward and the strategic recommendations that follow are designed to facilitate the paradigm shift by engaging a variety of stakeholders at different scales of the sports system to maximize effectiveness.

**FIGURE 4.1:** Exploring the unconscious beliefs underlying the sports system (Causal Layered Analysis (CLA)).

**PATHWAY TO THE FUTURE**

Holding this vision for the future, I use the three horizons (3H) foresight method to build a practical roadmap to move towards it. The 3H is a tool which helps map the factors and steps necessary to reach a desired future. Across the three horizons—present, future, and transition—I map the mechanisms and structures that are helping, hindering, or needed to reach the desired future. I use a ten-year timeline as the horizon to align with the transition to the next new Canadian Sport Policy in 2033.

Key insights emerged from the research as considerations necessary to ensure the success, adaptability, and resilience of the future state. I briefly summarize them on the following page.

**Be international:** With coaches, athletes, and support staff able to move easily between countries, maltreatment is not a problem confined within one country’s borders. Measures to address maltreatment need to consider the global sports community and the well-being of athletes beyond our borders (Yesko, 2020).

**Leverage Institutional Power:** Governments and international sports organizations like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) are leaders with the political power and authority to create policies that require change from others within the system. They must treat maltreatment as a serious systemic problem and act accordingly (Yesko, 2020).

**Distribute Power:** Leverage the relationships and influence across sectors, from the media to private sector to government, to encourage and empower other stakeholders to be part of the solution. Partnerships and community building can disperse barriers such as costs and reinforce changes through knowledge and best practice sharing.

**Build Stakeholder Awareness & Education:** The problem is pervasive. Targeted awareness and education for all stakeholders, including parents, athletes, sports administrators, and coaches, will empower individuals to act.



**FIGURE 4.2:** Mapping the pathway to the ideal future (Three Horizons).

### Pathway to the Future Continued

What is important about developing this path forward is its ability to connect present and future together in a tangible path. It grounds the future vision developed through the CLA to practical measures building a trail of breadcrumbs towards the ideal future. Although the timeline I use for the 3H may be too short to fully realize the CLA future vision, it uses the vision as a north star, a reference to provide direction on moving towards it. In ten years, when the next Canadian Sport Policy is being developed, it will be an opportunity to realign and recommit to the vision, ensuring change continues to move the system towards it.

In developing the 3H, I pulled from my primary and secondary research to identify the top changes needed from the present and future. Represented in the top left and top right boxes, these are the things currently not working or missing which are needed to reach the ideal future. The former are taken from the experiences of those within the system with questionnaire respondents providing numerous perspectives. The latter are built on a combination of general feedback from stakeholders as observed in my research and my own recommendations. The support network and stable financial model were particularly inspired by one participant who noted the lack of support for athlete families and emphasized the unpredictability of current athlete funding (Interview 02-25).

To bridge present and future, the middle yellow section depicts elements that can facilitate the process. These elements, as transitional supports, will not always be needed once the future state has been reached, however, they are important steps on the path there as they build support and awareness of the need for change. Here, I first list temporary actions which have not been taken yet but will complement efforts to make change. This includes an education and awareness campaign suggested by others including Kerr and Stirling (2014). These suggested actions are followed by existing measures uncovered in my research and already contributing to change.

What becomes clear through this process is the amount of work needed to address the problem and reach the desired future. Several questionnaire respondents expressed feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment when responding to the question of what gives them hope for the future. Although there is unquestionably much work to be done, change is underway and the structure of the 3H provides an opportunity to consider examples of where things are working. These positive signs of change are captured in the boxes on the bottom left and right boxes, the pockets of the future emerging in the present and those from the present which are important to maintain. In these we see where stakeholders are making change: the athlete supports, the coaches who are adapting their practices, the brand new UCCMS. Though not only important to pave the way forward, they demonstrate that change is possible and is in fact happening.

### CHAPTER 4 TAKE-AWAYS

- Sports operates like a business, where athlete performance is the commodity.
- Athlete performance cannot be separated from the athletes themselves resulting in athletes becoming the commodities of the system. Their performance is prioritizing over their well-being.
- The desired future for sports is one where athlete well-being is prioritized above winning and athletes can depend on reliable funding and mutual respect.
- There is much work needed to achieve the desired future and interventions will need to consider the international dynamic, the role and distribution of institutional power, and the need for broad stakeholder education.
- Positive change is underway and examples exist to demonstrate where the system is working. Refer to [Appendix D](#) or additional examples.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# Exploring the Possibilities

### WHAT TO EXPECT

As defined by the Systemic Design Toolkit:

- Identifying where and how to intervene in the system.
- Identifying on what levels intervention is needed to tackle the challenges.
- Identifying interventions that are needed.

*“What tools can we put in place to make a kid feel safe enough to come forward and tell somebody? That’s something that we all need to figure out.”*

**Brian Jessup, figure skater and survivor  
(Strashin and Ward, 2019)**

In this final chapter, I bring together the learnings from the analysis and futures exploration to present strategic recommendations that will further fuel the change underway in the system. The recommendations are built from the leverage points identified in Chapter 3 and guided by the future vision and path forward laid out in the previous chapter.

Returning to the system scales summarized in Chapter 1, the following interventions have been developed to engage stakeholders across all scales. Each targets different stakeholders to provide pathways for each to use their power to tackle the problem from different angles within the system. The cumulative effect is to fuel system-wide action, to maximize the rate of change.

## STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS

### CANADIAN PORTRAYAL GUIDELINES

**Leverages:** The media's position; increased information flows and direction

**Impacts:** Systemic bias; lack of path

**Stakeholders Engaged:** Media, spectators/fans, general public

**Target System Scale:** Exo, Macro

Portrayal in the media has an important role in shaping how the public experiences sports and its athletes. The images of athletes, the language used in interviews and reporting, the questions asked are all examples of places where unconscious bias can emerge shaping public perception of those being spotlighted. Portrayal guidelines can combat this by educating members of the media on unconscious bias and ways to more equitably engage with athletes. Drawing on work done by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), I leverage this work to recommend the development of bias informed sports portrayal guidelines for Canada. In 2021, the IOC released updated Portrayal Guidelines for media (2021). While robust, these can be adapted or supplemented to incorporate and reflect Canadian values and ideology.

To socialize the guidelines once developed, collaboration with Canadian media will be an important step. This will provide an opportunity to build awareness of the guidelines and provide education on their purpose and application. It will also serve as an opportunity to encourage widespread adoption of the guidelines.

To align with evolving social ideology, conducting periodic reviews of the guidelines and the examples and cases presented will ensure they stay relevant. Updates can be coordinated with future renewals of the Canadian Sport Policy, to ensure alignment and provide a unified message from sports. In this way, sports and the media can be leaders and role models of equity, adapting to changing social values and demonstrating those in their work.

Recommended included topics:

- Language used to describe women's and men's sports.
- Questions asked of female, male, and gender diverse athletes.
- Event scheduling.
- Broadcast contracts and payment for women's and men's sports.
- Imagery (video and stills) of female, male, and gender diverse athletes.

#### LIMITS / CAVEATS

The effectiveness of the guidelines depend on the media's willingness to learn and apply them. The greater the media interest and engagement, the greater the impact of the guidelines.

As social values evolve, there will also be debate about what should and should not be included. Partnering with those in the system, such as the athlete advocacy body, and referencing updates to the IOC guidelines will provide guidance going forward.

#### INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

More equitable portrayal of female and gender diverse athletes as seen in the questions they are asked in press interviews, the imagery shared, scheduling of events, and the commentary on their athletic performances.

Fewer reports and examples of biased coverage.

### EDUCATION & AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

**Leverages:** Increased information flow to influence the systemic; social media and technology

**Impacts:** The normalization of aggressive practices; systemic bias; inertia and lack of path

**Stakeholders Engaged:** General public, media

**Target System Scale:** Macro

This is a recommendation proposed by others before me including by Kerr and Stirling (2014). Although not new, it is an important strategy. I include it in my work to contextualize it within my systemic analysis and expand on the idea by providing an outline here.

The purpose of the campaign is to raise awareness of the breadth and pervasiveness of the problem. Specifically, that maltreatment and inequity are systemic and not the result of a few bad actors. To have the broadest impact, the campaign should target the general public which will build a shared understanding of the issue and its urgency. Particularly important to this is increasing awareness of the prevalence and harm caused by psychological abuse and neglect. As the most prevalent forms of maltreatment, it is essential that all stakeholders understand their impact.

To create a campaign that resonates, and to elevate the voices of athletes so often talked over, the campaign should centre athlete experiences. The personal experiences provide first-hand accounts of the problem and the harm caused by maltreatment. It may also be an opportunity to include other overlooked stakeholders such as support service professionals to give a comprehensive view of the problem. Further, a campaign is an ideal opportunity to highlight examples of where the system is working well. This demonstrates what is possible and provides hope for the future. Backed by research and data, these stories and examples can make clear the impacts of maltreatment, and the necessity of and possibility for change.

To increase the campaign's impact, it should provide clear actions which the public can take. This will provide actionable steps which any stakeholder can take to help address the problem. This requires developing calls-to-action, building partnerships with existing allies and networks, developing consistent imagery for quick recognition, and conducting thorough audience research to best target the messaging. Launching the campaign in parallel with the other interventions will further increase awareness of the problem, and capitalize on work already underway.

#### LIMITS / CAVEATS

Campaigns are passive and take time to see results (Wakefield et al., 2010). Their long-term purpose is to shift the societal paradigm. However, this is the slowest type of change. Therefore, repetition of the campaign will be important to ensure its effectiveness.

Campaign impacts can also be limited by the cluttered media environment (Nielsen et al., 2016). However, with work and discussion already underway, this strategy will serve as an impactful addition complementing existing efforts.

#### INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Increased demand across stakeholders for changes to be made within the system.

Campaign engagement as measured through:

- Digital metrics: webpage visits, social media engagement, use of campaign hashtag, etc.
- Increased community collaboration through partnerships and recruitment of volunteers.

*"Public pressure and public outrage [drive] change. And if the public doesn't know what's going on, there's nothing anybody can do about it."*

**Rachel Denhollander, gymnast and survivor (Nieson, 2019)**



## UNIFIED ADVOCACY BODY FOR ATHLETES

**Leverages:** Ability to self-organize structure; position through expanded structural power

**Impacts:** Resourcing and fragmented system; insularity and homogeneity

**Stakeholders Engaged:** Athletes, athlete families

**Target System Scale:** Micro

This recommendation builds on structures already in place, such as AthletesCAN and the Game Plan program, and the articulated need from my research for greater athlete support at all levels. AthletesCAN and Game Plan offer many of the recommendations I make here but they only serve specific groups of high performance athletes. AthletesCAN, an MSO of Sport Canada, is an association for Canada's national team athletes (AthletesCAN, n.d.). Game Plan is also focused on high performance athletes but, as a program run by other stakeholders, it does not provide any structural power to athletes (Game Plan, n.d.). Creating a unified advocacy body, which supports all Canadian athletes and their families, will provide them structural power and a unified voice across the system. In addition, by including all levels of sports, recreational to high performance, such an organization will strengthen protection and support for the athletes and families at the lower, community and regional levels. This is doubly beneficial in that it supports this underserved group, and teaches young athletes, who may go on to be high performance athletes, about the system and their rights.

The unified national advocacy body will offer athletes and their families resources, community, and support throughout their athletic career and beyond. It will help them navigate the sports system, provide education on rights and available supports, advocate for athlete rights, and support those transitioning out of high performance sports. As a resource created solely for athletes, the organizational focus will be first and foremost on what is best for them, representing their interests, needs, and voice in larger systemic conversations.

In the current system, in which athletes' efforts are monetized and benefit so many others, it is only right that they be afforded the same

financial stability. A unified advocacy body will advocate for this including equal pay for athletes of all genders and a stable living wage for high performance athletes. These goals will redistribute financial power within the system, giving athletes more agency in their athletic career.

Centralizing this in one organization will also reduce duplication of services, minimizing the need for individual sports organizations to provide professional services. It will also allow for sharing of resources and best practices, reducing the siloed sports structure. Further, as the central organization supporting Canadian athletes, it will:

- Conduct advocacy on behalf of athletes on issues important to them (e.g. unequal and unpredictable pay, a living wage, diversity and equity, distribution of power in sports).
- Conduct public awareness and education campaigns.
- Offer community support for athletes and their families.
- Offer job and career support to grow athletes' work history and career beyond sports.
- Offer and centralize athletic scholarships and subsidies.
- Provide education on maltreatment, equity and diversity, Canadian sports system.

### LIMITS / CAVEATS

Building and launching a new organization is resource intensive. It will require a significant investment of time and money.

### INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Increased well-being of athletes: greater sense of security, stability, agency and support.

## UPDATED SPORT FUNDING AND ACCOUNTABILITY FRAMEWORK (SFAF) CRITERIA

**Leverages:** System structure; money and position

**Impacts:** Reputation and the lack of transparency; homogeneity and insularity

**Stakeholders Engaged:** NSOs, government

**Target System Scale:** Meso, Macro

We measure what matters. I suggest updating the Sport Funding and Accountability Framework (SFAF) to include metrics that measure areas currently neglected to build a more balanced assessment strategy. The SFAF, introduced in Chapter 1, is the process Sport Canada uses to determine which NSOs are eligible to receive federal funding. Diversifying its criteria will lessen the winning performance pressure on athletes and provide a tangible demonstration that medals and wins are not the only outcomes of value.

This strategy leverages the power of money within the system to incentivize stakeholders all the way through the system to change what is prioritized. While currently performance is measured in wins and medals, criteria that centre athlete well-being and safety will encourage a shift in focus and actions. This can leverage the ratings and sanctions data from the national database, outlined on the following page, to assess an organization's performance.

New criteria should include:

- Athlete feedback and ratings in the national database to ensure accountability.
- Number of complaints, open investigations and sanctions.
- Diversity at all levels within sports organizations: gender, 2SLGBTQ+, racial, disability/neurodiversity, Reconciliation—to ensure active building of a diverse and inclusive sports system.
- Transparency requirements for sanctions and investigations.
- Non-medal based performance metrics including athlete well-being and social value metrics.

### LIMITS / CAVEATS

In the current sports system, the Sports Funding and Accountability Framework only reaches federated sports. Professional leagues would not be influenced by this.

Initially, organizations are not likely to meet the desired targets. A staged plan to give organizations time to improve scores will be necessary.

This strategy will take time and education. It can be a powerful incentive since it leverages the system's primary source of power, money, but it requires giving organizations time to adapt and build the understanding of the new metrics.

If not carefully planned, these could have unintended consequences, for example, further suppression of athletes' concerns. Careful consideration will have to be given to how these are developed and weighted in order to minimize unintended consequences or gaming of the system.

### INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

An increase in organizations who meet the desired targets.

Positive changes in the areas being measured: more diverse sports leadership, increased happiness of athletes.

## NATIONAL PUBLIC DATABASE FOR COACHES AND SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS

**Leverages:** Increased information flows; technology

**Impacts:** Reputation and the lack of transparency

**Stakeholders Engaged:** NSOs, sports leagues, athletes, athlete families, media, general public

**Target System Scale:** Micro, Meso, Exo, Macro

Many others have called for a public database of coach sanctions including Brackenridge et al, 2005 and Stirling & Kerr, 2014. Next to an independent investigation body, this appears to be the most called for intervention. It is typically discussed as a database of coach sanctions to ensure public transparency. I build on this idea by expanding it to include support staff and sports organizations, tracking the investigations and sanctions tied to them as well as coaches. Adding these other stakeholders aligns with the evidence that it is not just coaches who perpetrate maltreatment, and more importantly, holds the organizations accountable for their role in creating a safe sports environment.

A national searchable database will provide transparency long called for within the system. Being public is an essential part of this intervention, allowing those in Canada as well as those internationally to verify the status of those listed within it. This limits the ability of perpetrators to move from one location to another to evade accountability.

As further protection, particularly from grooming or questionable behaviours that may be below the threshold for a complaint, I recommend that the database include a system to track microaggressions. Inspired by a system used in one of the big tech companies, the tracker allows for anonymous reporting of microaggressions to identify problematic patterns of behaviour that require further investigation and intervention.

Additionally, I recommend including an athlete feedback component to capture feedback directly from athletes. Through this mechanism, athletes can anonymously submit

feedback on coaches, their sports organization, and support staff. This will allow for direct feedback across key criteria including athlete health and well-being, diversity and inclusion, social value, etc. The result is an independent source of information, that includes first-hand perspectives of the organizational culture and training environment.

In addition to be a source of information for athletes and families, Sports Canada and sponsors can use the database to assess potential funding recipients. The SFAF could require a minimum rating and/or below a maximum threshold of open investigations as part of the funding eligibility criteria.

### LIMITS / CAVEATS

Like the national advocacy body for athletes, a database is resource intensive to setup. However, its maintenance would be less.

### INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Positive feedback from athletes and families both as a means to share their honest feedback and as a resource in assessing the sports organizations and coaches with whom they may be involved.

## SPONSOR TAX CREDITS

**Leverages:** Money as a system incentive

**Impacts:** Systemic bias including inequitable funding; inertia and lack of path

**Stakeholders Engaged:** Sponsors

**Target System Scale:** Exo

Inspired by the words of Rachel Denhollander (quoted below), I developed this recommendation to engage sponsors in an active role to address maltreatment and inequity in sports. Though not directly involved in athlete development, sponsors are important figures in the sports system. As potentially lucrative sources of funds, they wield a central source of power within the system: money. Tax credits leverage this power and the sponsor's interest in their own bottom line. They can incentivize sponsors to support a safe and equitable sports culture. Three credits encourage three different actions:

1. Sponsoring only organizations that are demonstrating a commitment to a safe sport culture.
2. Providing funding for athletes which includes the first year of their retirement from high performance sports.
3. Sponsoring in gender pairs for equal amounts of funding.

The first credit focuses on controlling the flow of funding to sports organizations so that those that are demonstrating committed action to a safe culture receive the most funding. To be eligible for the credit, sponsors, whether corporations, local business or private citizens, must demonstrate supporting only sports organizations which meet the following criteria:

- Are below a certain threshold of sanctions and open investigations.
- Members are current on their Safe Sport Training. The training provides education on maltreatment and aligns with the UCCMS.

- Rate above a certain score across a minimum number of criteria in the database.

The second credit focuses on the athletes and stabilizing their income beyond when they are actively competing. Having secured funding for their retirement will allow athletes to focus on their training and competitions right up to their retirement without the added stress of what comes next. For this credit, sponsors must include a minimum amount of funds exclusively for athletes' retirement.

The third credit encourages sponsors to fund female and male athletes or teams in pairs. For example, if Sponsor A decides to fund a male golfer, they would also have to fund a female golfer for the same amount, over the same time period to be eligible for the credit. In this way, the pool of available sponsorship dollars is more equitably distributed between athletes of all genders.

Finally, in addition to the savings from the tax credits, sponsors will also benefit from the positive PR they can claim by promoting their commitment to a safe sport culture.

### LIMITS / CAVEATS

The tax credit would have to be large enough to be an incentive for sponsors to take the time to investigate potential recipients.

### INDICATORS OF SUCCESS

Year over year increase in sponsors claiming the tax credits on their returns.

Evidence of sponsors promoting their use of the tax credit criteria in selecting sports to support.

*"If you don't want to be participating in a culture of abuse, don't fund an organization that is abusing children. It's that simple."*

**Rachel Denhollander, gymnast and survivor (Nieson, 2019)**

FINAL THOUGHTS

# Conclusion



*"We need to get to the point where winning at all costs isn't our No.1 priority. Posters and buttons and policies and procedures don't change culture. Until sport makes this a priority as they do winning, they'll never have the change that I think people expect from them."*

**Sheldon Kennedy, NHL player and survivor  
(The Canadian Press, 2021)**

In sports, the lessons and behaviour learned and the camaraderie that come from sport are invaluable when thoughtfully cultivated and maintained. They are carried with athletes throughout their lives, profoundly shaping their life experience, relationships, and their perception of the world. However, for many athletes, the experiences they carry forward are the impacts of abuse and toxic cultures. More are finding the confidence to speak out, but the problem persists. The sampling of cases in [Appendix B](#) reinforces the scope of the problem. Considering the dynamic of dominance and control central to maltreatment, I asked how we might rethink power in sports to create a safer and more equitable system? The analysis conducted in the previous pages examines the role of power in the systemic structures and relationships within sports to identify the factors contributing to the persistence of maltreatment.

Listening to the perspectives of those within the system, gathered from my review of the literature and surveying individuals directly, what became clear is that systemic change is being impeded by structures which prioritize money and position over athlete well-being. Effectively, sports, whether amateur or professional, are operating as a business with athletes as the commodities, traded and evaluated on their performance potential and success. As commodities and without incentives which prioritize their well-being, athletes' need for safety and security are pushed aside. Although no one individual is responsible for the problem, those who have the positional power and control of funds have disproportional influence within the system. Their power combined with attitudes and values rooted in an "old school" perspective

lead to decisions which maintain the status quo, enabling athlete's commoditization.

Athletes, who are the centre of the sports system, have the least power within this structure. They lack position and may lack money leaving them vulnerable to the influence of those with power: coaches and sports organizations. Further, the focus on and quantification of performance as winning, creates enormous pressure for athletes, from all angles, as many stakeholders are invested in their performance. This makes them, and will continue to make them, vulnerable to abuses of power until there is an equitable distribution of power and prioritization of metrics other than winning.

Strides are being made to change with measures such as the Game Plan program and AthletesCAN which offer support services to top amateur athletes. Additionally, athletes are finding a new source of power through social media and technology. Direct communication between athletes and the public is providing a new, unfiltered voice within the system. While historically coaches and sports organizations have been able to control the public narrative through their positional power, these new communication platforms are disrupting this pattern. This public communication is preventing organizations and individuals from hiding or dismissing abuses. Further, this power appears to be growing as more and more athletes gain the confidence to speak out about their experiences. As their confidence grows, so to does the pressure to rethink the systemic structures and behaviours which have thrived in silence.

Although this is having a balancing effect on power in the system, to truly combat the problem and make lasting change requires

a paradigm shift; a complete shift in the unconscious beliefs and attitudes within the system. This is no small feat and takes time. It involves engaging the breadth of stakeholders across the system from athletes to parents to support services to the media and beyond. It involves the simultaneous rebalancing of power through funds distribution and an injection of more diverse perspectives into positions of power: coaches, sports administrators, sports leadership. The recommendations in Chapter 5 along with the path and vision for the future from Chapter 4 provide direction to support this fundamental shift. Some, like the portrayal guidelines, are quicker to develop, but have more limited impact. Others, like a national advocacy body for all athletes, are resource intensive and will take time to implement but will have much broader impact. Their true power is in being implemented together as a multipronged approach to tackle systemic change. As each launches, their effects will add to the momentum and desire for change. Over time, this will shift the underlying beliefs.

No change is without obstacles and the slow pace of change in the face of continued harm to athletes is disheartening. In this problem space, the systemic inertia, fragmented sports system, unconscious biases, and a lack of path to action are all hindering change. The patterns from Chapter 2 and the power of money and position enable them, slowing progress. Reflecting on this, I empathize with the feelings of hopelessness and disillusionment expressed by some questionnaire respondents. However, only in confronting and understanding these barriers is it possible to overcome them. As such, I have accounted for these challenges when developing the recommendations and ensured actions are included which address them.

There is also much change underway and the future of sports is evolving as I write this. I offer positive examples of change in [Appendix D](#), as a reminder of what is possible and to highlight where things are working well. As the system changes and we move towards the desired future, we must also remember the future is not static. It will never "arrive" or be finished. We must continue to listen to the voices and experiences of the individuals within the system to ensure its structure continues to serve its intended purpose. Let us learn from the story of Chanie Wenjack, the USA Gymnastics gymnasts, the junior hockey players, the university athletes, the artistic swimmers, and the countless others from over the decades. Let us learn to listen to those at the heart of the system to protect the future generations.

In a final thought on power, when considering it over the course of this research, it was impossible not to be faced with the enormity of the problem. Power is connected to everything. It is entangled in all aspects of society and all parts of the world. In trying to address the challenge of power imbalances, it is impossible not to pull on strings that connect to other sectors and other issues. I cannot, in one paper, address the full complexity and impossibly interconnected nature of the problem. However, knowing that sports shape society as much as society shapes sports, we have a responsibility to protect, evolve, and promote positive values and to create positive experiences. The changes we make in sports will not only improve equity and safety for athletes, but contribute to improving the collective safety and equity within society as a whole.

*"When their thinking changes, they're able to change the structures."*

**(NY Times-June 7, 2021)**

# In their words

Quotes from athletes on their experiences of maltreatment, inequity, and the sports system.

*"Those stories are so powerful, and that's why you have to trust the power of your voice. You have to tell the story, because when people live through your eyes and understand what you go through, it 100 percent changes their mind."*

**Stephen Snyder-Hill, university athlete and survivor (Compton, 2019)**

*"It doesn't matter if you're a gold medallist or are playing intramurals, you should never leave sport hurt and damaged. It should be a place of empowerment and that's what I felt wasn't happening."*

**Waneek Horn-Miller, Olympic water polo player (Heroux, 2020)**

*"I had money and money is power. Because I was abused I needed that power."*

**Theoren Fleury, NHL player and survivor (Fleury & Day, 2009, p311)**

*"Men like Graham were put on a pedestal. They held the keys to the kingdom we were all dreaming about: the NHL."*

**Sheldon Kennedy, NHL player and survivor (Kennedy & Grainger, 2006, p32)**

*"It's really hard to look at yourself as a victim. In our culture, it's make no excuses, you're not a victim, you have to push through it. ... This guy preyed on athletes because he knew they weren't going to talk."*

**Andy Hrovat, Olympic wrestler and survivor (Siemaszko, 2020)**

*"What hurt the most though, and still hurts to this day, is that the assistant coach who had known me for years, who had seen me struggle with my body image every day, ... said nothing. I remember feeling utterly betrayed. In that moment when I was told to do something unhealthy, unreasonable and ridiculous, this person whom I trusted said nothing."*

**Geneviève Peel, artistic swimmer (G. Peel, 2020c)**

*"I was terrified. I was ashamed. I was very embarrassed. And I was very confused, trying to reconcile what was happening with the person he was supposed to be. He's this famous doctor. He's trusted by my friends. He's trusted by these other gymnasts. How could he reach this position in the medical profession, how could he reach this kind of prominence and stature if this is who he is?"*

**Rachael Denhollander, gymnast and survivor (Evans et al, 2016)**

*"There are people who, even with all of the information out in the press now, simply don't get it. They don't get the magnitude of the problem."*

**Sandra Kirby, Olympic rower and sports researcher (Ward & Strashin, 2019a)**

*"Michigan State University, the school I loved and trusted, had the audacity to tell me that I did not understand the difference between sexual assault and a medical procedure."*

**Amanda Thomashow, gymnast and survivor (Connor & Fitzpatrick, 2018)**

*"They would often meet with us after the fact to tell us we weren't resilient enough and could not deal with anxiety and stress in training situations. It only made us more and more fearful to report it."*

**Anonymous artistic swimmer (CBC News, 2020)**

*"That was the very first minute I knew Graham James was a predator. That dissolved my soul for hockey. It was a real defining moment for me."*

**Darren McLean, junior hockey player and survivor (Hamilton, 2020d)**

*"There is no doubt people knew. I've heard from people who were general managers, scouts, telling me they tried to do something about it. Players used to make fun of me on the ice for how close my relationship was with Graham, calling me all kinds of horrible and homophobic names. How could no one pick up on that?"*

**Sheldon Kennedy, NHL player and survivor (Hamilton, 2020d)**

*"You don't tell on your priest and you don't tell on your coach. As a society, we have set up this way."*

**Chuck Matson (Fleury & Day, 2009, p148)**

*"I had always felt like it was wrong. But I had no proof because nobody ever said it was wrong."*

**Chuck Christian, football player and survivor (Murphy, 2020)**

*"The fear of being blacklisted, kicked off a team, losing funding kept me silent when I should have spoken up and done something when I witnessed cases of bullying/harassment."*

**Anonymous athlete (Ward & Strashin, 2019b)**

*"Currently, athletes are very afraid to raise their voices in most circumstances, because of the imbalance of power."*

**Jennifer Heil, Olympic skier (Hall, 2015)**

*"I think there's been a stigma of mainly African American males that the general population can't believe could be rape victims. But in our case, everything that happened to us was under the guise of medicine."*

**Jon Vaughn, NFL player and survivor (Chang et al, 2021)**

*"At the end of the day, what I was most disappointed is the league didn't take those opportunities to make sure they were doing everything in their power to address these issues in their organization." (on Kyle Beach case)*

**Sheldon Kennedy, NHL player and survivor (Anderson, 2021)**

*"We don't talk about the permanency of the damage. And the reality is that these people are never going to be who they would have been. They will always fight battles that people who are not abused don't fight."*

**Rachael Denhollander, gymnast and survivor (Nieson, 2019)**

*"The physical part of the abuse is not what lingers. The physical abuse was like having an arm broken: the limb hurts but the bones heal and you move on, scarred but whole. It's the shame that never goes away, the feeling of loneliness, and then the same of being a drunk, which makes for double shame."*

**Sheldon Kennedy, NHL player and survivor (Kennedy & Grainger, 2006, p201)**

*"Most of the time as an athlete I didn't know who to go to. The person you're supposed to go to is your coach, and then who do you go to above that? Do you go to the high-performance manager? Cool — they're friends. OK. Go to the executive director? Awesome. They're all friends."*

**Mercedes Nicoll, Olympic snowboarder (Ward & Strashin, 2019b)**

*"There were sexual predators everywhere. They were in my gym. The national team coach, Don Peters, was a known sexual abuser. They were everywhere across the country, and we knew who they were. But more broadly, emotional and physical abuse was actually the norm, and we were all so beaten down by that and made so obedient that when we knew there was a sexual abuser in our midst, we would never say anything. We ... felt utterly powerless."*

**Jennifer Sey, USA National Gymnastics Champion (Cohen & Shenk, 2020)**

*"The coach is so respected. Your parents send you away and tell you, 'Do whatever he says.' At that age you listen."*

**Sheldon Kennedy, NHL player and survivor (Kennedy & Grainger, 2006, p30)**

*"The thing about fat-shaming in artistic swimming is that it's not only about direct comments from coaches telling you to lose weight. ... [The] reality is that these comments stem from a deep-rooted culture of thinness."*

**Geneviève Peel, artistic swimmer (G. Peel, 2020c)**

*"When somebody with authority has power over you, then how do you not agree with them? Whether you think it's right or wrong, if they're telling you to do it then you do it and that's how I was raised."*

**Lloyd Pelletier, junior hockey player and survivor (Hamilton, 2020d)**

*"He was in complete control of not only my skating career but my life as well, that I would be nothing if he wasn't part of my life. And he was quick to remind me of that, often."*

**Brian Jessup, figure skater and survivor (Strashin & Ward, 2019)**

*"When you get to a high-performance level, there's a lot of emphasis on doing all that you can do, just to take off one one-hundredth of a second,"*

**Taylor Ruck, Olympic swimmer (Sutherland, 2021)**

*"Once you retire from the sport no one will so much as write to you to ask if you're doing all right."*

**Geneviève Peel, artistic swimmer (G. Peel, 2020c)**

*"We were doing what we've been taught to do in hockey since we were 11, listen to the coach and shut up."*

**Theoren Fleury, NHL player and survivor (Fleury & Day, 2009, p149)**

*"I left [sport] because I was the favourite target of an abusive coach. I was so afraid of him and what he would do to me."*

**Anonymous athlete (Ward & Strashin, 2019b)**

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# Appendices



# Appendix A

## Interview & Questionnaire Questions

The following two pages list the questions I used for my primary research. Participants were asked to answer a series of questions about their experience of the sports system, identifying the human and systemic factors they believe contribute to the occurrence of maltreatment within sports. This included questions on power structures, stakeholders, and how to move towards a more ideal future for sports.



# Interview Questions

- What is your experience with the Canadian sport system?
- What keeps you involved in sport?
- Sport has many potential positive impacts for individuals and society. When considering the high performance level, do you believe the current Canadian sport system is realizing these positive impacts?
  - If so, what makes it successful?
  - If not, what changes are needed to achieve these positive outcomes?
- What factor(s) in the functioning of the system do you see as the most influential?
- What power dynamics stand out to you?

Continuing to think about the high performance level:

- What are the key stakeholder groups?
  - Which are the most influential?
  - Are there any groups not part of the conversation that should be? Which?
- Considering the goal of an equitable and safe training environment for athletes, do you consider this an effective distribution of power?
  - If so, why do you believe it's effective?
  - If not, how would you create a more effective and equitable distribution?

Considering the ongoing prevalence of maltreatment in sport across levels,

- What factors—systemic, societal, individual—do you believe contribute to its occurrence?
  - Why do you think the problem persists despite the research and calls for change?
  - How can we better prevent or address maltreatment?
- Considering factors such as sponsorships and funding, national pride, media coverage, and film depictions of sport, what role do you believe they play in the system?
- What else should we be talking about that isn't part of the discussion?
- Looking to the future, what is your ideal vision for sports?
  - If you could make any changes to achieve that, what would you change?
  - What gives you hope for the future?
- Is there anything else you would like to add that hasn't been covered?

# Questionnaire Questions

The following questions are intended to inform the research by asking questions about your generalized experiences in sport. In answering, please use generalized categories of groups, individuals, or institutions rather than specific names.

- How did you get involved in sport?
- How would you describe your experience with the sport system?
- In your experience, what factor(s) in the functioning of the system were the most influential?
- What, if any, power dynamics stood out to you?
- Considering a goal of an equitable and safe training environment for athletes, do you consider the current system effective and equitable?
- What would make a more effective and equitable distribution?
- Considering the ongoing reports of abuse (emotional, physical, sexual, and/or neglect) in sport, what factors—systemic, societal, and individual—do you believe contribute to the problem?
  - What could help better address or prevent abuse?
  - What are the barriers blocking change?
  - What gives you hope for the future?
- If you could make any changes to the sport system right now, what would you change?
- What do you think we should be talking about that isn't part of the discussion?
- Is there anything else you would like to add on this topic?

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## DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

- Role: athlete, parent of athlete, coach/instructor, sports admin, other)
- Highest level of sport involvement: recreational/local club; provincial level; national, international
- Years involved
- Decade(s) involved with the sport system: before 1990, 1990-2000, 2010-2020, 2021-present
- Age when training or of the athletes trained
- Sport(s)
- Gender
- Country

# Appendix B

## Additional Cases



Many other cases of maltreatment exist beyond those I highlighted in Chapter 2. The following are some I came across during my research. I include them here to reinforce the breadth and persistence of the problem. Only those from North America have been included.

### BASEBALL

#### Baseball Canada (NSO)

“Baseball Canada was the only NSO that refused outright to answer SafeSport questions” (Westhead, 2021b).

### BASKETBALL

#### University of Florida

Florida Gators, former team coach, Cameron Newbauer, accused of verbal abuse coaching practices between 2017-2021 when he was the coach (Smith, 2021).

### BOBSLEIGH

#### Bobsleigh Canada Skeleton (NSO)

Kaillie Humphries accused former coach, Todd Hays, of verbal and mental abuse. The organization investigated itself, determining claims were unsubstantiated. The findings were appealed by Humphries (Palmer, 2019; Small, 2021).

### EQUESTRIAN

#### US Equestrian Federation

In 2021, Olympic Show Jumper, Rich Fellers, was indicted on four counts of sexual abuse of former student (Carville, 2022).

### FIGURE SKATING

#### Skate Canada (NSO)

Reports of a toxic culture with standards and practices (including body shaming) that

lead skaters to develop eating disorders, post-traumatic symptoms, depression, and suicidal ideation as well as grappling with the aftermath of concussions and poorly treated injuries (The Canadian News, 2021; Kong, 2022).

### USA Figure Skating

Former figure skating coach, Richard Callaghan, was accused of sexual assault in the 1980s. It took 19 years to investigate the allegations by Craig Maurizi, which he made first in 1999, then again in 2018 after the USA Gymnastics case gained widespread attention (Madden et al., 2018).

### FOOTBALL (AMERICAN)

#### Pennsylvania State University

Jerry Sandusky, the assistant football coach, was convicted of sexually abusing 10 underage football players between 1994 and 2009 though it is suspected his abuse may date back to the 1970s (The Straits Times, 2017).

### GYMNASTICS

#### Gymnastics Canada (NSO)

Former coach, Michel Arsenault accused of sexually abusing five gymnasts between 1983-1993 (CBC News, 2021).

Former coach, Dave Brubaker faces two sexual assault charges levelled by a former student (Strashin, 2018).

### USA Gymnastics

In 2016, USA Gymnastics (USA G) was launched into the spotlight when reports of sexual abuse by Olympic women’s team doctor, Larry Nassar became public. Over the course of the investigation it was revealed that USA G played a role in covering up Nassar’s abuse in addition to abuses by dozens of USA G coaches. Nassar abused hundreds of victims with reports dating back to 1997 (Connor & Fitzpatrick, 2018; Connor & Gutierrez, 2017; Evans et al, 2016). He was convicted and is currently serving a 60-year federal term in prison; survivors sued USA Gymnastics for its role in covering up Nassar’s abuse and reached a \$380M settlement which included provisions for making survivors stakeholders in USA G to ensure there is an athlete voice at the organizational level (Evans et al, 2016; Graves, 2021). The Netflix documentary, *Athlete A*, provides an overview of the case and investigation.

American National Champion, Jennifer Sey, talks about the psychological abuse and neglect she experienced during her time as a top gymnast (Sey, 2008).

### HOCKEY

#### Canadian Hockey League

It is facing a class-action lawsuit for psychologically, physically, and sexually abusive hazing practices (The Canadian Press, 2020). The CHL is responsible for oversight of Canada’s major junior hockey, in which players are typically between the ages of 16 and 21.

#### Hockey Canada (NSO)

Hockey Canada is facing criticism for its lack of transparency about statistics: the number of abuse complaints,

the number of coaches or staff who have been suspended or banned because of abuse (Westhead, 2021a).

### NHL

Former Chicago Blackhawk’s player, Kyle Beach, accused former coach, Ben Aldrich, of sexual abuse. It was kept quiet to not interfere with the team’s Stanley Cup bid (Westhead, 2021a). Aldrich went on to abuse at least three other men (Anderson, 2021).

### University of Lethbridge

Women’s hockey team—Six hockey players accused their coach (female) of being verbally and physically abusive and neglectful. The coach was found to have violated the school’s harassment policy in 2018 and subsequently was removed from the position (Kane, 2019).

### University of Windsor

Women’s hockey team—Six hockey players complained about their head coach (female) who was verbally abusive. The university did not share the findings of the investigation (The Canadian Press, 2019).

### Western Hockey League

In the 1980s and early 1990s, former coach Graham James targeted and sexually abused players on his major junior hockey teams. He groomed and abused players while on hockey trips and at his house where he regularly invited players of and sometimes boarded players from out of town. In 1996, NHL player Sheldon Kennedy came forward and pressed charges against James, and ultimately putting a stop to the abuse. James is suspected of abusing anywhere from 25 to 100 teenage players during his time coaching (Ward

and Strashin, 2019). In addition to Kennedy’s case, James was convicted in two other cases. He pled guilty to all and was sentenced to a cumulative total of just over ten years (Hamilton, 2020a; Hamilton, 2020b). In 2001, before the most recent conviction, James was found coaching hockey in Spain, including the national team, before Canadian hockey officials became aware and informed the International Ice Hockey Federation (Maki, 2001). *The Winnipeg Free Press* series, [A Stain on Our Game](#), provides further background on Graham James’ abuse.

### MULTISPORT

#### Ohio State University

Former university physician, Richard Strauss, sexually abused at least 350 athletes from multiple sports between 1978 to 1998 (Wertheim, 2020).

#### University of Michigan

Michigan physician, Robert Anderson, assaulted hundreds of student athletes, primarily male, at the University of Michigan (UM) between 1966 and 2003 when he retired (Chang et al, 2020; Marantz, 2020). Anderson, now deceased, was never fired despite complaints dating back to the beginning of his career at UM (Marantz, 2020). After his abuse began to gain attention in 2020, complaints began pouring in to the university who has since received over 2,100 complaints from 400 victims (Chang et al, 2020; Marantz, 2020).

#### University of Southern California

In 2019, university gynaecologist, George Tyndall was arrested and charged with sexually assaulting 16 female patients. More than

350 women have spoken out. The university has agreed to pay more than \$1 billion in settlements (Madani, 2021).

### ROWING

#### University of Victoria

Three athletes and an assistant coach accused their rowing coach (male) of verbal abuse and harassment (Kane, 2019).

### RUGBY

#### Rugby Canada (NSO)

In 2021, 37 current and former players filed a complaint with Rugby Canada against then head coach and high performance director, John Tait. The head coach typically reports to the high performance director, therefore the fact Tait held both positions meant he effectively reported to himself (Dichter, 2021a).

### SKIING

Former Canadian national ski coach, Bertrand Charest, was convicted of 37 charges of sexual assault and exploitation against young skiers, including minors, which he committed in the 1990s (CBC News, 2017).

### SOCCER

#### Canada Soccer (NSO)

Two former Vancouver Whitecaps coaches are facing allegations of sexual abuse. The first, Bob Birarda, was charged with sexual assault and sexual exploitation of at least three soccer players. He was dismissed from the organization in 2008 (Larsen, 2021a).

Another former head coach, Hubert Busby Jr., was accused of sexual harassment by former

player, Mallore Enoch, between 2010 and 2011. Busby, who had previously left the Whitecaps to work for the Jamaica Football Federation (JFF), was provisionally suspended by JFF when the accusations became public (Larsen, 2021b).

#### National Women’s Soccer League (USA)

An unknown number of players have accused the league of covering up sexual abuse by several ex-coaches: then head coach, Paul Riley, of the Northern Carolina Courage; then head coach of the Washington Spirit, Richie Burke. Riley had been let go from another team over similar allegations (Dichter, 2021b).

### SPEED SKATING

#### Speed Skate Canada (NSO)

In 2018, then head coach Mike Crowe was fired from Speed Skating Canada after an internal investigation. The investigation was launched when several American speed skaters came forward with allegations of inappropriate sexual relationships with skaters when he coached the US team (Hudes, 2018).

### SWIMMING

Canadian Swimmer was abused as a student swimmer by the Ohio State University physician, Richard Strauss (Siemaszko, 2020). Refer to “Multisport for more information.”

#### Canada Artistic Swimming (NSO)

Dozens of former national team swimmers have begun the process of filing a class-action lawsuit against Canada Artistic Swimming (CAS) for “widespread abuse, neglect, and

mistreatment” by CAS coaches. Articles published by the *Globe and Mail* in December 2021, profile the allegations, describing the toxic culture, body shaming culture in the sport. Swimmers discuss the pervasive pressure to achieve and maintain target body weights to secure their position on the national team, often through arbitrary methods. The targets, which were codified in the contracts of many, led many swimmers to develop eating disorders and mental health challenges. They report that the targets would often change, with little explanation. Swimmers report that they could be cut from the national team if they failed to meet their target “regardless of their talent and execution in the pool.” Further, they could be responsible for repaying tens of thousands of dollars in training fees for breaking their contract. Coaches, who regularly weighed and compared swimmers’ bodies, would celebrate weight loss, shame weight gain, and rarely, if ever, ask how swimmers achieved the loss. (Robertson & Brady, 2021).

### USA Swimming

The organization ignored or covered up hundreds of sexual abuse cases, perpetrated by over 250 predators—primarily coaches—from as early as 1997. Like the USA Gymnastics case, USA Swimming executives, officials and coaches knew of the allegations but did nothing to stop it. There are over 590 alleged survivors (Vagianos, 2018).

### TAEKWON-DO

#### Taekwondo Canada (NSO)

Canada Olympic Taekwondo coach, Shin Wook Lim, was arrested in 2018 on allegations

of sexually abusing a 15 year old Taekwondo student between 2013 and 2015 (Hasham, 2021; Loriggio, 2021).

### USA Taekwondo

Former US Olympic team Taekwondo coach, Jean Lopez, (who coached from 2004–2016) and his brother, Olympic competitor, Steven, were accused of sexual assault by four and two women respectively (Starr, 2018).

Another coach, Jin Suh, was also accused of sexual assault by one of his elite female students in 2007 (Starr, 2018).

### TRACK & FIELD

#### Athletics Canada (NSO), University of Guelph

Former coach, David Scott-Thomas, was accused of grooming and sexually abusing runner, Megan Brown. He received a lifetime ban by Athletics Canada in 2020. Several other coaches have also been suspended for abusing athletes and other runners have condemned the organization for its inaction (Ewing, 2020).

### VOLLEYBALL

#### USA Volleyball

A top youth coach, Rick Butler, received a lifetime ban from coaching in the mid 1990s after sexual assaulting girls he coached. He was allowed to return to coaching only five years later and continued to coach until 2018 when the ban was reinstated. He now faces a class action lawsuit. (Chuck, 2018).

# Appendix C

## Areas for Further Research



The scope of this work is broad, and many opportunities exist to continue to explore the problem in more depth and from different perspectives. The following are questions and ideas which came to me during the course of my research and may serve as prompts for additional research:

- Maltreatment in NSOs versus major professional leagues:** With different relationships to money, a comparison of how these stakeholder groups manifest the systemic structures and factors identified in this work manifest will further support each athlete in each.
- The reach of positive change:** As discussed, many positive changes are underway in the sports system. An exploration of how these are reaching the lower levels of sports—the community and recreational participation—is important step to ensuring all athletes are safe. This might include what changes have already reached these levels and what strategies are already in place or are needed to ensure changes continue to reach these levels.
- Gender spectrum in sports:** Western society is redefining its understanding of gender, moving away from a binary view of female and male. How do we ensure sports evolve with society to be inclusive and welcoming of all gender identities? Can sports be a leader in this area, setting the example for spectators and the public alike? Areas to examine include the sex-based categorization of sports, gendered requirements for sports attire.
- Diversity in sports:** Exploring how gender equity intersects with other identities such as ethnicity, physical ability, neurotypes, orientation, class, cultural, to ensure inclusion across a range of identities. Although not a new topic, there are researchers exploring this area, it is an important one that, like maltreatment, continues to present a challenge within the system.
- Athletes and Para-athletes:** What are the impacts of separating them? Should they be combined? What are the barriers and opportunities if they were to be combined?
- Emerging technologies and equity in sport:** Emerging technologies include a range of devices and spaces including artificial intelligence (AI), augmented and virtual reality (AR/VR), and technologies to wear, implant, or ingest. They are slowly weaving into the fabrics of all our lives. How are they being applied in sports how do we ensure the lessons learned on equity and maltreatment are considered in their adoption and application? Particularly in light of the concerns already being raised about embedded bias in emerging technologies?
- Foresight and changing social norms:** Explore the changing social landscape through a foresight lens to build a more resilient and inclusive sports system. Combined with research on diversity and intersectionality, understanding how today's values and beliefs are being encoded into sports, along with identifying changes on the horizon will help sports be a leader in inclusion.

# Appendix D

## Signs of Positive Change



The nature and breadth of the problem can be disheartening especially when combined with what can feel like a glacial pace to change. This makes it important to identify where things are working well and find positive examples. The following are some of the cases, mechanisms, and organizations that demonstrate positive change within the system.

### ACCOUNTABILITY

#### Alpine Canada Lawsuit

In 2018, three survivors of abuse filed a lawsuit against Alpine Canada for not acting on complaints of abuse by former coach, Bertrand Charest. The case is particularly interesting because it sought over \$400,000 in punitive damages from the NSO for each survivor. Punitive damages are not covered by NSO insurance, which only covers legal costs and compensatory damages, meaning Alpine Canada would have been out of pocket a significant sum. The case was settled out of court in 2019 for an undisclosed settlement (Gordon, 2018; The Canadian Press, 2019).

### ADVOCACY

#### Canadian Women & Sports

An organization devoted to creating more inclusive and equitable sport experiences.

#### Champion Women

An American non-profit organization providing legal advocacy for women and girls in sports.

### ATHLETE SUPPORTS

#### AthletesCAN

An MSO of Sport Canada, AthletesCAN is an association for Canada's current and recently retired national team athletes.

### Canada Helpline

"The Canadian Sport Helpline is a national toll-free helpline offering assistance to victims or witnesses of harassment, abuse or discrimination in sport." (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, n.d.)

### Game Plan Program

A program to help national team athletes with skill development, performance enhancement, and access to expert resources and partners. Built on a collaboration between the Canadian Olympic Committee (COC), Canadian Paralympic Committee (CPC), Sport Canada and Canadian Olympic and Paralympic Sport Institute Network (COPSIN).

### COACHING PRACTICES

#### USA Gymnastics

Sarah Jantzi and Tom Forster, two high performance gymnastics coaches are using different coaching approaches to train their gymnasts. They use athlete-centred tactics which include encouraging athlete's families to be involved in training, and encouraging athletes to go home or take time off when needed (Macur, 2021).

### EQUAL & DIVERSE PARTICIPATION

#### Diversity in US Gymnastics

Black participation in gymnastics is rising fuelled by having role models like Olympic gymnast, Simone Biles, representing the highest level of gymnastics (Graves, 2021).

#### Female and Male Flag Bearers Requirement

Beginning at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, the IOC is encouraging all countries to nominate a female and male flag bearer to carry in the national flag during the opening ceremonies.

#### Non-binary Athlete Representation in the Olympics

American Timothy Leduc competed as the first openly non-binary figure skater at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics (Schad, 2022).

Canada's soccer player, Quinn, is the first non-binary, transgender athlete to win an Olympic medal at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics (Yaschuk, 2021).

### IN THE MEDIA

#### #CoverTheAthlete

A campaign which was launched in 2015 to highlight the gender bias in sports media coverage. [Watch the original campaign video on YouTube.](#) (CBC News, 2015).

#### Airtime for Women's Sports

*The 4% Rising Newsletter* is highlighting women's sports events in the media. A partnership with CBC Sports, 4% refers to the amount of Canadian airtime devoted to



women's sports.

### **IOC Portrayal Guidelines**

The IOC has developed robust portrayal guidelines to counteract bias in sports media coverage. The guidelines offer a variety of recommendations and examples on topics including interviews, commentary, language, and airtime (International Olympic Committee, 2021).

### **New Equity Driven Scheduling Agenda**

Also introduced at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics, the IOC has restructured scheduling of women's and men's events so that women's events are given an equal share of prime broadcasting times.

## **MENTAL HEALTH**

### **Alexi Pappas**

As an Olympic runner, she is using her platform to bring attention to mental health in sports by writing a book about her experiences and grappling with her own mental health after the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics (Benton, 2021).

### **Naomi Osaka**

In 2021, Naomi declined press conferences associated with the Grand Slam in order to focus on the competition and protect her mental health.

### **Simone Biles**

Simone withdrew from several gymnastics events at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics to protect her mental health and well-being.

## **OUTFITS & ATTIRE**

### **German Olympic Gymnastics Team**

Tired of wearing bikini-cut leotards, the German team defied convention and wore unitards which reached their ankles at the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympics (Galofaro, 2021).

### **Norwegian Beach Handball Team**

At the 2021 European Championships, Norway's beach handball team opted to wear spandex shorts in place of the traditionally required bikini bottoms. They were fined a little over €1,500 for being "improperly dressed." American singer, Pink, offered to pay the fine in support of the team's decision however they declined stating they were prepared to pay the fee (BBC News, 2021; Thomson Reuters, 2021).

## **PAY EQUITY**

### **National Women's Soccer League (USA)**

The US women's soccer team won a \$24M lawsuit over unequal pay compared to the men's team. The settlement requires women's and men's teams to be paid the same for all "friendlies and tournaments, including the World Cup" (Lenthang, 2022).

## **RESEARCH**

### **Brave New Sport**

A research study on the future of sports conducted through a collaboration between Infront and Web for Interdisciplinary Research and Expertise (W.I.R.E.). Read more: <https://bravenew.sport>

## **Future of Sport Lab**

An incubator for sports and esports innovation. It is run by the Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) and Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment (MLSE).

## **POLICIES & CODES OF CONDUCT**

### **UCCMS**

The Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS) was developed in consultation with a wide range of stakeholders and subject matter experts ensuring its alignment with the latest research on maltreatment (The Sport Information Resource Centre, 2019). In 2021 it was announced by the Government of Canada that it has been assigned to the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada (SDRCC) for implementation (Canadian Heritage, 2021; The Sport Information Resource Centre & Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, 2019).

