



USAW REPORT



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VESTRY LAIGHT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

USA Weightlifting (USAW) retained Vestry Laight LLC to conduct an assessment of its culture with respect to diversity, equity, inclusion and athlete safety, particularly for women, people of color, the LGBTQIA+ community, veterans, and adaptive (disabled) athletes. As part of its assessment, USAW also asked Vestry Laight to examine USAW's handling of a high-profile SafeSport case from 2017 for lessons learned. This report follows an April 2021 report by Prince Lobel & Tye (PLT) on race discrimination in weightlifting and an audit of USAW policies conducted by the Inclusion Playbook.

To conduct its assessment, Vestry Laight interviewed 130 individuals from all corners of the weightlifting world as well as experts from around the globe in order to develop impactful and sustainable recommendations to make USAW a leader in inclusion and athlete safety.

CULTURE

Vestry Laight found that few sports possess a greater potential for inclusion than Olympic weightlifting under the leadership of USAW. Our assessment shows the sport lives up to much of its potential in many areas and there is a great deal to celebrate. At the same time, room for improvement exists in a number of key areas.

USAW has been proactive in addressing inclusion and diversity challenges to realize its vision of "Anyone, Anywhere." Its efforts have made a palpable difference for many. Notably, the last decade has seen the rapid rise of women's participation in the sport and as medal-winning Olympians. It is a close-knit and supportive community, with many describing weightlifting as "life-changing" and "like family." And that family increasingly welcomes and includes veterans, LGBTQIA+, Black, Asian, Latinx, adaptive athletes, and lifters of all faiths.

Transition and change generate challenges. There is tension between the "old guard," who can be less welcoming to change, and the "new guard" who is supportive of the evolution of the organization's culture. Some athletes perceive they receive different treatment than those in the "in group." The smallness of the community means incidents of exclusion, misconduct and discrimination stand out and are particularly hurtful. The organization continues to struggle with how to approach social media --the dominant means of communication within and about the sport --and the weightlifting community has differing opinions on the role USAW should play in driving culture.

The impact and significance of coaches cannot be overstated. Coaches are seen as the drivers of culture. In their ranks, however, we see significant underrepresentation of women, and Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color (BIPOC) coaches, particularly at the elite levels.

Newly approved changes to regional structures and the establishment of Weightlifting State Organizations (WSOs) better enable USAW to implement its vision. These changes create opportunities to reinvigorate local leadership structures, advance culture, improve mechanisms for reporting misconduct and help create a more robust pipeline of athletes from underserved communities.

ATHLETE SAFETY

In addition to looking at culture, Vestry Laight examined perceptions and experiences relating to athlete safety. Issues relating to comfort – or lack thereof – with respect to reporting and

accountability were raised and are detailed below. We found that for several reasons, including concerns about retaliation, impact on training or the ability to participate in the sport, and a belief that nothing will happen, people are reluctant to come forward and raise concerns with either SafeSport or the Ethics Committee. Several people we interviewed expressed skepticism about SafeSport's impartiality or effectiveness. Many of those views were influenced by its handling of a 2017 SafeSport case.



THE 2017 SAFESPORT CASE

As part of this assessment, USAW requested an examination of its handling of a high-profile SafeSport case from 2017. More than four years after the case was formally resolved in a SafeSport arbitration proceeding, perceptions of how it was handled still cast a shadow over the weightlifting community, USAW, and SafeSport, impacting whether others are willing to come forward with reports of sexual abuse or misconduct. The purpose of this report is not to look at the underlying events in the case or the SafeSport investigation or ruling, but rather to provide clarity on USAW's role and draw lessons for other misconduct cases that may arise.

We found that the confidentiality requirements governing SafeSport investigations resulted in lack of transparency and communication and created an environment that allowed rumors to spread in the close-knit weightlifting community. A personal social media post on the case by USAW's board chair following the arbitration, USAW's response to the post, and ties between USAW staff and Burns created further controversy and added to the perception that USAW either favored Burns or did not make the case a priority.

USAW's lack of communication with the parties caused them unnecessary anxiety and stress. USAW could have and should have done more to communicate with the complainant to offer supportive resources without interfering with the SafeSport process. Following the decision, USAW could have made an exception to its passive stance on social media to remind members (neutrally) to behave respectfully and note that it does not tolerate bullying. The delayed and weak response to the chair's post led to the impression that different rules apply to people in positions of authority.

A number of circumstances led to this case being handled in a way that may not happen today: it was one of SafeSport's first cases; USAW had little understanding of its role as a National Governing Body (NGB) and its ability to implement interim measures pending an investigation; and SafeSport provided USAW and its leadership little to no guidance on what actions by USAW were allowed, let alone desirable. SafeSport itself has changed its policies and expanded significantly since the time it investigated this case.

Yet the impact is the same regardless of lack of bad intentions – it was hurtful to the athletes and undermined confidence in USAW and SafeSport within the broader weightlifting community.

It is to USAW's credit that it is looking to reflect on what went wrong in the case and is interested in how to improve. Although it is too late to go back in time and do things differently, there is a genuine desire to scrutinize the past, however uncomfortable, in order not to repeat the same mistakes.

This report and the feedback heard in the interviews are offered in the spirit of helping USAW identify gaps and blind spots and continue to advance towards realizing its vision and ultimately be a model for other sports in inclusion and athlete safety. Our recommendations, detailed further below, are intended to provide a roadmap with strategic priorities in areas including safeguarding, social media, coaching, leveraging the WSOs, and governance. To ensure this report is actionable and results in meaningful change, we recommend a public follow-up assessment 18 months after the report is issued to see that reforms are being implemented.

METHODOLOGY

Vestry Laight interviewed 130 people in conducting this investigation, some of whom were interviewed multiple times. Interviews were conducted by videoconference, over the telephone, or in person. Interviewees included coaches (both elite and new coaches), athletes (ranging from Olympians to masters to beginners, and some who have left the sport), club owners, referees or technical officials (“TOs”), staff members (past and present), board and committee members, and Local Weightlifting Committee (“LWC”) leaders. Eighteen interviews were with experts in diversity and inclusion and safeguarding from other sports or within the Olympic movement from the US and around the globe. Given the nature of weightlifting, many people wear multiple hats. For example, coaches may still be athletes. Club owners often coach and serve as TOs and may be involved in LWCs. Vestry Laight also reviewed USAW policies, Bylaws, codes, foundational materials, ethics files, recordings from its speaker series, coaching education materials, and internal emails.

Interviewees came from across the country and abroad. Some interviewees were suggested by USAW, but many came to us through word of mouth or chance encounters. Interview subjects ranged in age from 17 to 80 and included adaptive athletes, veterans, Latinx, Black, Asian, Muslim, non-binary and LGBTQIA+ members. Because many people had been interviewed previously for the PLT report on race discrimination in the sport, some were understandably tired of speaking about diversity and inclusion and were reluctant to speak with us. Although we spoke to many BIPOC athletes and stakeholders, particularly women of color, very few Black men participated in interviews.

Vestry Laight attended two local weightlifting competitions and the National Championships in Detroit where we found many interview subjects and were able to observe weightlifting culture. All members of Vestry Laight completed the Level I coaching course. In addition, our contact information was sent to all USAW members in a monthly newsletter and was included in a press release that was posted on USAW's website, so that anyone who wished to share their perspective had the opportunity to be included. As per our agreement with USAW, all interviews were confidential to encourage candor. Although quotations from our interviews are used throughout this report, information and details that might identify an interview subject

have been excluded. Though the identity of complainants in SafeSport cases is ordinarily kept confidential, the complainant in the 2017 case, Jennyfer Roberts, cooperated with this report and agreed to be identified by name. No one at USAW directed, inhibited, or sought to influence us in any way: the findings and conclusions are solely our own, though we did ask people who were named in the report in the section on the Burns case to review references to their experiences for accuracy. USAW, including its senior leadership, cooperated fully and promptly with all requests for information and data.

We are grateful to the many people who generously shared their time and insights. We appreciate their dedication to improving the sport and their willingness to share some difficult experiences with us.

INCLUSION

Almost no sport possesses a greater potential for inclusion than Olympic weightlifting under the leadership of USAW. From our assessment and review, we see that it both lives up to much of its potential but also leaves room for improvement in important areas.

Our interviews made clear a number of points. We saw a sport undergoing a great transition, with much to celebrate: the meteoric rise of women’s participation in the sport AND as medal-winning Olympians. We visited and heard of many clubs that welcome veterans, LGBTQIA+, Black, Asian, Latinx, adaptive athletes and lifters of all faiths; we also heard first-hand about the literally life-changing appeal of the sport. Weightlifting provides a haven, community, a home and is “like family” to so many of its participants.

At the same time, with transition and change often come growing pains. Many people spoke of a tension between “the old guard” and the “new guard,” with the old guard providing a less welcoming environment. The fact that the community is generally a very welcoming one – but also small and tight-knit – makes incidents of exclusion, misconduct and discrimination stand out and particularly painful. And, when it comes to the leaders of the sport – the coaches – we see a significant drop-off of representation of women and BIPOC coaches at each step of the ladder.

USAW has been proactive in addressing inclusion and diversity challenges to realize its vision of “Anyone, Anywhere” and to be a leader among NGBs and within sports in general. Its efforts are widely appreciated and have made a palpable difference for many. This report and the feedback heard in the interviews are offered in the spirit of helping USAW identify gaps and blind spots and continue to improve towards realizing its vision.

STRENGTHS

A sport tailor-made for inclusion

Olympic weightlifting is a “big tent,” offering opportunities to participate and compete from youth to old age. In many clubs you may find lifters ranging in age from 9 to 80+ years old. With a wide array of competitive age and weight categories, the sport “meets you where you are.”

There “is a place for you no matter how you’re built,” and this includes the “heavy, blind and amputees.” A single-arm lifter spoke of how “wonderfully welcoming” her local club and community have been, ensuring loaders are available for training and accommodating a custom bar.

Several people we interviewed commented on the importance of inclusion for improving the sport – “the more people involved, the better the pool of athletes, and the better the sport will be.” One noted that small gestures matter: “If it makes even one more person feel welcome, then hell, yeah!”

“Black, white, trans, don’t care. Just come lift.”

We heard of gyms where people of different faiths share workout space, in one instance housing both Jewish Orthodox women and Uzbekistani Muslim lifters. A Palestinian-American competitive athlete, who competes in a head covering, appreciates how accepting the sport is: “I am excited to be breaking stereotypes and leading the way for other covered females.”

Age is no barrier either. We met several lifters who discovered the sport in their 40s and 50s. Although “peak” competitive weightlifting age appears to coincide with the 20s, the existence of the Masters Competitions means that older lifters feel like “this is a sport where I can have a competitive future.” As one senior woman coach and gym owner shared: “I love that I can do the sport forever.”

One transgender athlete of color described USAW as “pioneers of inclusion.” LGBTQIA+ athletes described finding a community and sense of belonging that for some, was unexpected. As one transgender athlete and coach told us, “This is an opportunity I never thought I’d have. Growing up in relation to gym and sports as a young, trans kid, I never thought I would be a sports leader.”

Many BIPOC athletes described a “welcoming,” “inclusive,” and “inviting” sport. Having grown up as a minority in a Southern state, one athlete told us he “felt nothing but inclusion, acceptance and welcome from weightlifting. It is head and shoulders above other sports.” A white male gym owner and coach captured this ethos of inclusion: “Black, white, trans, don’t care. Just come lift.”

Across many demographic groups, we heard a consistency of appreciation for a sport that is, for the most part, inclusive and welcoming – both by design (broad age and weight categories), as well as by intention (USAW leadership). The niche aspect of the sport, coupled with the dedication it takes to master it, provide a uniting glue that often transcends differences. There is a shared sense of being part of something that no one else is. As one coach explained, “If you lift weights and I lift weights, we are automatically friends.” One leader exhorted: “Whoever wants to join this weird sport, come on in.”

The respect for the technique and strength required to excel at the sport means talent is appreciated regardless of who the athlete is. There is an overriding perception across different demographic groups that the sport is objective, unlike other sports where points for style bring in an element of subjectivity. We heard multiple variations on this theme: the barbell is the “great equalizer;” the “lifts speak for themselves;” “the beautiful thing about weightlifting is that it is objective;” “the iron doesn’t lie – either you lift it or you don’t.” One coach who leads a team of high-performing BIPOC athletes from underserved communities describes the athletes as being welcomed and appreciated at competitions. A male coach and athlete talked about the excitement of seeing “women hit large lifts.” As an individual sport, it attracts a more eclectic mix of people than some team sports might. “You can find your niche here.”

These factors result in a community that many interviewees describe as strong and supportive. At competitions, participants often cheer each other on, even if from competing gyms. A competitive youth athlete, who also plays football, described it this way: “Unlike other sports, like football, you don’t wish harm upon your opponents. It’s a supportive community on stage and behind the scenes.” We heard many stories of kindnesses extended to fellow weightlifters and coaches, even to strangers but for being united by the sport of weightlifting. Examples include offers to sleep on couches when traveling for competitions and a coach meeting a stranded athlete (not his athlete) at an airport.

***“If you lift weight and I lift weights,
we are automatically friends.”***

Interviewees describe the community as “a big extended family” and say “it feels like home.” For some, the sport provides a refuge from or counterpoint to instability at home. Some credit the sport with saving their lives and offering a path out of addiction or poverty. A coach and athlete who spent time at the Olympic Training Center described a path “from abject poverty and abuse to three meals a day.” A pioneer woman in the sport told us “I am who I am because of weightlifting.”

For youth, the stability and structure of a good program and gym can be life changing. One coach who runs a program for at-risk youth described Olympic weightlifting as a kind of safe “sublethal stress” where the routine of taking small steps provides invaluable life experience and a space where kids can take out their aggressions and emotions. Not surprisingly, we heard – whether discussing youth or adults – that “life changes in gyms” and that “so many amazing things happen day to day in the gym.”

EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN

One of the seismic shifts in the last decade is the participation of – and increasing domination by – women in the sport. Many clubs now are majority women; one BIPOC coach and athlete described being a woman in the sport now as “unremarkable.” In fact, in a recent Forbes interview, USAW CEO Phil Andrews termed Olympic weightlifting “technically a women’s sport at this stage.” From 2010 to 2020, women’s membership in USAW grew 56 percent, and their proportion of membership grew from 21 percent to approximately 41 percent today. Over 50 percent of athletes competing on the platform were women in 2020. In the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, amid an overall strong showing from Team USA (the strongest showing in 25 years and the first gender-balanced team), athletes Kate Nye and Sarah Robles won silver and bronze medals respectively. Nye’s silver medal marks the highest Olympic finish by a US woman and the highest finish by a US weightlifter of any gender in 21 years. Robles is the first US woman weightlifter to medal multiple times at the Olympics and the first American weightlifter of any gender to win multiple medals in almost 60 years.

Both the explosion of women’s participation in the sport and their strong showings in international competitions are notable when one considers that women’s weightlifting became an Olympic sport only in 2000. Of course, women had been participating in the sport for much longer than that, including in world competition.

Most attribute the exponential growth of women’s participation in the sport in the past decade to the popularity of CrossFit, which includes the Olympic lifts as part of its regimen. We did

hear that ‘origin story’ quite a bit in our interviews; additionally, many women athletes and coaches came to weightlifting after time spent in track and field, gymnastics, diving, and other sports. With fewer outlets for excellent women athletes after college (like the National Football League or the National Hockey League, for example), Olympic weightlifting is an attractive option.

They stayed for many of the reasons already described above: the welcoming, inviting environment as well as a passion for the sport. For many women, the sport is literally empowering and confidence-building. A male coach and gym owner describes the sport as “empowering for young women.” A woman athlete and coach noted that “women don’t realize how strong they are.”

The focus on strength is liberating, especially for some women who may have come from the world of dance or gymnastics. “Unlike dance, no one cares how you look.” This compares favorably to gymnastics, for example, where appearance is so important, and a certain body size or type is more desirable to succeed in the sport. With the wide range of weight categories available, one does not have to be a certain size or body type to excel. There is a streak of body positivity in the sport that is appreciated as well as a general lack of sexualization in marketing and apparel. “The beautiful part of weightlifting is that it’s not about body image,” says one woman coach and athlete. Another BIPOC coach and athlete commented that “weightlifting women just want to eat what they want and lean into being strong.” An elite athlete and coach described the transition from “skinny is beautiful” to “strong is beautiful.”

There is also a place for older women, an oft overlooked demographic. As mentioned above, we met several women lifters who did not discover the sport until they were in their 40s and 50s and they compete into their 70s. Some coaches are targeting older women as a market, responding to the increasing interest in weightlifting as a way to maintain bone density, particularly post-menopause.

Women have excelled at the sport and, according to many, are outperforming the men at the international competition level. More women are on the medal level stipend than men, leading one coach to joke, “who cares about the men?!” One impact of women’s success at the elite level of the sport is a perception that women lifters command the respect of their weightlifting peers. They are flowing into gyms, with many interviewees reporting that they coach or train in gyms that are majority women. One gym owner recounted sheepishly not buying enough 33-pound bars (the size used by women in competition) when he opened and having to rush out and buy many more when his gym opened and he found his clientele to be mostly women lifters.

*An elite athlete and coach described
the transition from “skinny is
beautiful” to “strong is beautiful.”*

ROLE OF USAW

The generally inclusive, welcoming environment described above did not happen accidentally; many see USAW, and in particular Andrews, as a positive force for changing the sport and a leader compared to other sports. The culture, according to one TO, is “profoundly better than

five or six years ago; it has jumped leaps and bounds.” This view was echoed by many. “It is a better USAW today than I have ever seen,” says one former champion woman athlete.

Those who have been in the sport for a long time recall the days when gyms used centerfolds as wallpaper and people said that “women shouldn’t be allowed in the gym because it will distract the men.” Many spoke of the sport as being dominated by older, white men who were resistant to change. Although tensions continue to exist between this “old guard” and the “new guard” (detailed in more depth below), USAW has been intentional and proactive in moving the sport forward as stated in its mission statement to “promote and support a diverse and inclusive weightlifting community.”

Phil Andrews and USAW’s staff have been essential to this effort and are greatly appreciated. Several women of color athletes and coaches told us that “when Phil came in, everything changed for the better” and that he is “exceptional.” He and members of the team work tirelessly, are accessible, and have worked hard to put the athlete at the center of the organization. “Where else would the CEO know my name?” asks another woman coach.

Intention matters, and the efforts undertaken in recent years are viewed positively and appreciated by many. USAW makes proactive efforts to be inclusive, asking people to join groups, to become higher-level coaches or referees in an effort to diversify these ranks where women and people of color are underrepresented. In interview after interview, we heard women, including women of color, coaches and referees, tell us that they had taken a certification course because of the availability of scholarships for women and BIPOC participants or because they had been personally encouraged to apply for an elite level certification or course by USAW.

This outreach, invitation and support is critical. “You have to be asked and brought along. It’s not enough just to say our door is open. It is about saying please come in,” says a leader in the sport. USAW has done much to set the table and invite everyone to the dinner. It works to eliminate barriers as well as create a place of belonging. For example, it was the first NGB to adopt a transgender athlete policy and the first NGB to celebrate PRIDE. It has fought to allow women Muslim lifters to wear headscarves and long sleeves to compete. USAW’s Bylaws include a gender representation requirement for board composition; currently the board is 50 percent women and 25 percent people of color. USAW’s strategic objectives and initiatives around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) can be found on its website at the DEI Hub and are also detailed in the PLT Report.

No other medium is as important in the sport as social media and in particular, Instagram. USAW has consciously sought to have a strong representation and celebration of women and BIPOC athletes. USAW conducted an audit of its Instagram posts from January – March 2021; half of its photo posts included BIPOC athletes and over half of its posts included women. Many interviewees take notice and appreciate this range of representation, as well as the content curated by Suzy Sanchez, which includes discussions with older women guests, veterans, adaptive athletes and a wide array of diverse participants in the sport. One coach and athlete commented appreciatively, “it is a thousand times better than it used to be.” As one woman of color athlete noted, USAW creates culture through social media and it is “setting a good tone.”¹

USAW is seen as a leader in diversity and inclusion compared to other “iron sports.”

1 USAW says it continues to audit its social media posts and the numbers have remained steady.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Although weightlifting is a “big tent,” and much progress has been made, USAW acknowledges there is still work to do. Microclimates exist within the sport, and many raise questions about how much, if any, influence USAW can exert at the gym or club level and, critically, in the important world of social media. The sport exists within a broader context and that impacts the experience of athletes who are women, transgender, and people of color – and can be compounded, at times, by less than inclusive environments, coaching, colleagues or attitudes. Blind spots, affinity bias, and gaps in knowledge may also hinder progress. Interestingly, several white men we spoke with expressed surprise that we had contacted them for interviews, underscoring that majority groups may not see a role for themselves in building inclusive cultures.

BARRIERS TO ENTRY

Barriers to entry continue to exist. Money is the primary one. Although theoretically anyone with access to a barbell can lift, the sport is so technical that instruction and coaching are essential. If one wants to compete, costs increase rapidly, not only for coaching, but also for travel to national and international competitions. Until one reaches the very upper echelons of the sport, athletes and coaches pay their own way for travel and hotel. Because it is not an NCAA sport, college scholarships are very limited. Only a handful of colleges offer weightlifting scholarships and, as we heard repeatedly from many who have spent decades in the sport, people don’t go into weightlifting to make money. It is a sport of passion. Several coaches we met undertake significant fundraising to support the athletes they train from underserved communities. Some see the sport as a “predominantly upper middle-class sport;” it is challenging to “bridge that gap” when the sport is not offered in schools. The dramatic growth in the sport has been a result of the popularity of CrossFit but, as many noted, CrossFit is expensive. Moreover, the career path of the sport is limited – even those who pursue a career in coaching find it challenging to make a living exclusively as a weightlifting coach and need to add strength and conditioning to their repertoire.

Geography can also serve as a significant impediment to access to the sport. Many said they had to drive a great distance to find a qualified club or coach. And while the ability to train remotely may have alleviated this access challenge, one may still face financial obstacles paying for equipment.

LEGACY: OLD GUARD VS. NEW GUARD

Within the “big tent,” the legacy and ongoing influence of what many interviewees termed “the old guard” still cast a shadow. Until recently, leadership of the sport – USAW’s board, elite coaches, Local Weightlifting Committee (“LWC”) heads – skewed older, white and male. We heard multiple references to an “old boys club,” the “old guard,” “dinosaurs,” and “white-male dominated.”

In the 1990s/2000s, a senior woman athlete and coach was “really blown away to find you had to fight your way into the sport. It was an old boys club.” Vestiges still exist today. As one senior woman of color noted, “threads of sexism and chauvinism still linger. Even today a lot of that old guard is still active in weightlifting, either in coaching or as officials.” Another experienced coach who is a woman of color made this distinction: “Athletes are very welcoming; coaches

need work.” Another coach who is very popular, but who according to several interviewees makes sexist and misogynistic remarks, is described as a “throwback to a different era of lifting. A lot of people still think lifting should go back there.” The experience in Masters may also reflect these patterns. A competitive Masters athlete perceives that more bias exists in Masters because older athletes are “bringing their old ways.”

Geography can also have an impact. In some areas of the country, athletes may not have many choices regarding working with USAW certified coaches and clubs. The only available option may be someone from the old guard. As recently as ten years ago, the only coach available in one woman of color’s area was known to say, “women shouldn’t lift.” Although more coaches are available now, that coach is still very active in the local weightlifting community.

As discussed in more detail later in this report, LWCs surfaced as a place where tension between the old guard and the new guard continues to play out. Although beyond the scope of this report, some perceive the International Weightlifting Federation (IWF) as still dominated by this old guard. For example, last year one of the senior leaders in the IWF told a woman board member “you’re pretty smart for a girl.” In sum, although the sport and its leadership is much more diverse and inclusive than in the past, it is a patchwork, made up of individual clubs, gyms, LWCs, and coaches. A person’s experience may vary dramatically as a function of geography, club and coach.

ELITE VS. SECOND-TIER ATHLETES

While not an anticipated focus for our research, several athletes and coaches felt very strongly that rising athletes, and even elite athletes who are not quite Olympic caliber, do not get the attention they deserve, generating a perception of different treatment for those who are in the “in group” versus those in the “out group” (or “elite plus plus plus” versus “elite plus”). As one club owner said “Elite athletes likely to make it to Olympics are coddled, but the layer below is ignored...at most there is a social media post with ‘nice lift.’” Another said he felt the “second tier of elite athletes are definitely getting the short end of the stick,” and believes that well-connected coaches and certain clubs get preferential treatment. One athlete was more blunt, stating simply that second tier athletes are “treated like shit.” Some even question whether USAW should be focused on growing the sport when it is not sufficiently caring for the athletes it has.

Some feel that USAW does not communicate enough with even extremely promising athletes. An athlete noted with disappointment “They [USAW] don’t check in... even though we might be the next Olympians.”

The lack of attention can be “demoralizing” or “crushing” particularly for young elite athletes who described feeling unappreciated even when competing for the US internationally. An older athlete too was stung by a perceived lack of recognition at USAW, even after winning national competitions. And a former Olympian lamented the lack of a path for athletes after they are no longer competitive.

Complicated and changing selection policies and procedures, which may be hard to decipher, may make the sport feel less inclusive at elite levels for both coaches and athletes.

Some coaches found they had a hard time getting any advice or guidance from USAW about how to move their athlete forward and have to figure out for themselves how to take their athletes to the next level. Even getting a response to questions is challenging: “At USAW I get passed around from person to person.” Another coach said not only does she not hear

from USAW about meets or rule changes, but she also sometimes informs them of scheduling changes. An athlete said her team found out on Instagram about schedule changes for an international competition days before hearing from USAW.

This is particularly problematic for independent coaches or those affiliated with small clubs that have not taken athletes to international competitions before. The lack of information can create substantial stress for coaches, one of whom said “If you land in a good spot because of your athlete, it is luck. I don’t even know what questions I should be asking – and my athlete is relying on me. I am afraid of screwing up.” Another felt miscommunication, or lack of communication, had negatively impacted his athlete’s ability to compete because he was unaware of changes to qualifications until it was too late. Some have developed workarounds and get information from other coaches through informal channels or by paying to join a coaching group that was set up to address this gap, but still feel frustrated with the lack of attention from USAW, even while recognizing that the staff is very “overstretched.”

The feeling of neglect by second-tier athletes is not uncommon in sports and it may well be that “there will always be a second-tier of athletes that is dissatisfied,” as one leader indicated, no matter what USAW does. An athlete may be winning their region by large margins, but still not be competitive nationally, or internationally, which may distort their perception of the attention they should be getting. Indeed, USAW points out that it offers opportunities to a far greater number of athletes than most other sports. However, the perceived lack of communication stung, and in some instances, it also was felt to have racial overtones.

Poor communication with high-performing athletes can also have a disproportionately negative impact on BIPOC communities who are not affiliated with major clubs. It, as well as a lack of understanding about how stipends are allocated, may also be construed as racism because many athletes in the number two or three positions are BIPOC. One coach said, “It could be just general neglect or could have a racist tinge,” and wondered whether elite white athletes had the same trouble getting a response from USAW as he did with his elite athletes of color. An elite athlete of color said, “You have to already be the bee’s knees before you get an invite from USAW.” Another young elite athlete of color said her emails from USAW had been spotty and she found herself overcompensating and trying to be extra nice to ensure that missed emails were not deliberate because she had been involved in a complaint about racism.

SEXISM

As detailed above, women overwhelmingly love the sport and find it inclusive and welcoming. Pockets of sexism exist, however. It is more pronounced where power and prestige are most at play – coaching – and is more fully explored in that section below. As a woman leader noted, “our sport is an extreme reflection of what goes on in society as a whole” and there is sexism in the world.

Some women spoke to us about objectification, harassment, and demeaning behavior. There is, according to one male coach, “locker room or ‘old boys’ talk.” When this occurs, it is often taken in stride and shrugged off by women. An athlete said, “Young, strong girls with bigger butts are going to get comments about our bodies, but you just shake it off and accept it as part of the territory. The comments may be ‘positive’ but they are unwanted.” Some coaches may treat their men and women athletes differently based on stereotypes: a coach may “reward men on their numbers and talk to the girls about how they look.” They may also talk to women athletes about other women athletes’ looks. One coach and former elite athlete remembered a coach saying to her about Olympian and multiple international medal winner Jenny Arthur: “Oh she’s so pretty the judges will give it to her even if she presses out.” Aside

from diminishing Arthur's prowess, this comment stuck with the elite athlete, who found herself often wondering "What if my competitor is pretty?"

With the sway of social media, another woman coach expressed concern that "we are going to start sexualizing a sport that wasn't intended to be sexualized." She noted that some women have "tried to make weightlifting pretty and 'glamify' it" and may receive more engagement on social media as a result. Despite the body positivity and "strong is beautiful" ethos in weightlifting, the pressure some athletes feel to "cut weight" may become intertwined with issues of body image and social conformity in a way that is different for women than for men. Indeed, when some elite women athletes move up a weight class, the social media commentary can be harsh. "We are not very forgiving of our women when they gain weight," noted one elite woman athlete.

"Early on, the sexism was explicit. Now it is implicit."

Biases and stereotypes may limit women's opportunities. These biases include the "mom bias," the "think leader, think male bias" and the "prove it again bias." An athlete was told she couldn't be an elite athlete and a single mom at the same time. Another was told by a coach that she was "more suited to having babies and she should just get married and have babies." Another was told by a USAW board member that she wasn't leadership material because young women do not typically lead in the Olympic movement. A woman published a book on weightlifting technique with her first initial rather than her name out of concern that, because weightlifting is "still a male-dominated sport," people would not buy a book on technique written by a woman. A woman TO felt that her rulings were questioned more by men coaches at local meets: "they came down hard on my decisions and were abusive." Bias creeps in in other forms too. We heard stories from women leaders of being subject to rumors and innuendo linking their sex lives to advancement in the sport. A coach and athlete commented that "early on, the sexism was explicit. Now it is implicit."



The recent changes in the sport mean that women who rise to leadership are often the “first” or “only” or “one of a few.” Being the first sometimes comes with battle scars. A woman leader noted: “I’ve never done anything as the first woman without there being some kind of pushback or controversy about it. I get the discredit before I get the credit.” For another woman leader, it meant “I didn’t have other women to lean on and ask advice.” It also means there are few role models, much less a range of role models, to pick and choose from for style or path. “When I look at weightlifting, I don’t see a role model I want to be,” an athlete/coach told us. It also means that decisions may be made without input from or regard for impact on the groups not represented at the table. With low representation of women on the board a few years ago, one athlete/coach felt that changes to women’s weight classes were made “cavalierly.”

INTERSECTION OF RACE AND SEX

These experiences of being the first or only or one of a few are even more acute for women of color in the sport. “Not seeing myself in the sport made me settle for mediocrity. I was ok with taking what I got,” shared one Black woman athlete and coach. We heard from several athletes the incredible jolt of inspiration they experienced watching Jenny Arthur compete.

A challenge for women to advance in the sport, particularly for women of color, is access: “access is the big barrier. It’s about who brings you into the room.” It is also about credibility and respect. Here, an intersectional lens is important. Coined and defined by legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is a means for understanding how social identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and ability intersect, combine, and overlap with one another to impact one’s experience, creating distinct experiences of discrimination and disadvantage. It is a helpful way to understand how racism and sexism may interconnect and how, for example, a Black woman’s experience may differ from both a Black man’s and white woman’s experience.

What that looks like for one Black woman coach is “I’m invisible. Coaches come from other gyms and don’t recognize me at the meets (even though I have worked at them for years). I don’t have clout.” Another Black woman athlete felt subtle signs of exclusion from a senior white male coach of the team. She felt he did not make eye contact with her or other BIPOC athletes and, more critically, that he offered extra help to her white teammates.

A challenge for women to advance in the sport, particularly for women of color, is access: “access is the big barrier. It’s about who brings you into the room.”

BIPOC athletes may also experience an “emotional tax,” the state of being on guard to protect consciously against potential discrimination or bias, which can impact health and well-being. Although the sport is widely viewed as objective, it is “not just as simple as picking up a barbell and putting it down when someone is yelling slurs.” The environment of a club and interactions with coaches and athletes have an impact. This past year, too, when so much has been asked of Black men and women – even though well-intentioned at times – means “Black athletes are tired of having these discussions.”

That emotional tax is further levied when there are perceptions of different treatment for athletes – whether it is based on truly objective measures or whether it has undertones (or overtones) of racism. There is always “some level of favoritism with team selection criteria,” shared one competitive athlete of color. She mused: “I don’t know if it’s a race thing ... it could be a commercialism thing.” As the coach of several elite athletes of color shared: “it is hard to separate the signal from the noise.” Another example recounted to us by a few interviewees (and that was the subject of blog posts) involved a judge’s disqualification of a lift by a Black woman athlete at the American Open Series 1 at the Arnold Sports Festival in 2018 on the grounds that her outfit did not comply with the rules – even though her white teammate wore a similar outfit and did not have her lifts disqualified. Observers were left to wonder about the differential treatment. It also raises another issue noted by one of the sport’s leaders: “What women wear in competition continues to get policed and sexualized by men.”

The intersection of race and sex for men of color may manifest differently. One interviewee, a Black male athlete and coach, told us of his 1996 conviction for selling drugs, for which he served his time. He said he fully disclosed this conviction for his first coach certification, with no issues, but when he recently applied for recertification and to run a USAW sanctioned club, it was red-flagged due to the 25-year-old conviction, possibly impacting his ability to coach athletes at an upcoming competition. Many states now do not permit employers to inquire about prior criminal convictions because of the disparate racial impact of criminal convictions.

LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION

USAW has taken steps to address LGBTQIA+ inclusion directly, including, for example, establishing a transgender athlete policy and requiring clubs that wish to participate as community development sites to celebrate PRIDE, a requirement that has resulted in an extremely elite club being ineligible for this status because of its religious underpinnings. This stance has been appreciated by LGBTQIA+ athletes, including one who noted that he was so nervous about being out that he talked a lot about it. He found that coaches and athletes from a variety of backgrounds were supportive, and he felt he never had to compromise his identity. However, he admitted he once heard anti-gay comments at a USAW event and thought, “Oh damn.”

Hurdles remain. Although the sport includes some celebrated lesbian champion lifters and coaches, there has not been an out male champion for the past seven years.

The issue of transgender inclusion in competition – particularly inclusion of transgender women – is a front and center issue, not only within weightlifting but within sports generally. Many in the weightlifting community struggle with a desire to be inclusive and fair at the same time and expressed the hope that Vestry Laight would shed light on how to do that in this report.

All eyes were on the sport in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics with the participation of transgender athlete Laurel Hubbard from New Zealand – one of the first openly transgender athletes to compete in the 125-year history of the Olympics. At the same time, this past year has seen an onslaught of anti-transgender legislation in the US, specifically targeting transgender youth participation in sports. Athlete Ally, an advocacy and education non-profit with the mission of advancing LGBTQ equality and inclusion in sport, termed this past year the worst year on record with respect to anti-transgender legislation.

In our interviews, we heard of four primary barriers to transgender inclusion. First, with increased primacy of this topic comes increased attention on social media where discussions and comments can quickly turn nasty. We heard in our interviews that “the most toxic place

I have found is the US Master group on Facebook” and their “big outburst about Laurel Hubbard.” Hurtful and insensitive posts also abound, such as one from an “old guard” coach and gym owner telling transgender lifters to “put a wig on.”

Second, we heard of pockets of resistance in the USAW community to transgender inclusion, often (but not exclusively) from the “old guard.” One transgender woman lifter reportedly received a direct message on social media from an LWC president telling her “You don’t have the right to wear a bra.” A gym owner told us of a transgender woman lifter who quit the sport after she was not permitted to use the 15-kilogram bar in competition and the announcer insisted on using her male name and male pronouns. Another gym owner and coach is known to joke frequently that he is going to change his name and compete as a transgender woman to win medals.

Third, this kind of exclusion – and bracing oneself for the threat of exclusion – exerts its own emotional toll that may impact training and performance. Paradoxically, and perhaps unique to transgender women athletes, is a fear of performing too well. One transgender woman athlete experiences anxiety in advance of every meet. She has medaled previously and worries that other athletes may realize she is transgender and “the other shoe could drop at any moment. There is fear of ‘What happens if I win?’”

Lastly, it is worth noting that there are challenging issues to be explored in a productive and science-based way and room for differing points of view even among like-minded and well-intentioned people. One transgender athlete we spoke with does not believe that transgender women should be permitted to compete against cisgender women. Although USAW has a policy grounded in science, many are not aware of its existence. Greater awareness could ease the tension around fairness in a strength-based sport. Others are hesitant to wade into these discussions for fear of making a mistake or asking ‘dumb’ questions or are uncomfortable with disagreement or fear inadvertently offending someone. This inhibition around having difficult conversations is itself another barrier to inclusion.

Inclusion advocates also acknowledge the challenges posed in strength sports to find ways for non-binary lifters to compete without taking gender into account and to do so in a way that is not “othering” by having it be separate. A non-binary category for competition does not currently exist. And if there were one, a concern exists that, with a smaller pool participating, it would not feel as competitive. Some have explored non-USAW sanctioned fun events like “gender-neutral throwdowns” and “lift as you are” competitions with no weigh-in and the opportunity to choose your own barbell. While there are not a lot of great examples from other sports, this is an area ripe for innovation and new approaches.

MILITARY AND VETERANS

There may be opportunities to expand inclusiveness even for groups that do not feel excluded. For example, we interviewed several veterans who had positive experiences with the sport, but felt USAW could – and should – do more outreach to attract veterans and service members, who might have a natural affinity for weightlifting and for whom weightlifting could be a means of healing from trauma. USAW’s efforts to highlight the military – through special medals and remote competitions – were not necessarily widely known and could be expanded upon.

POCKETS OF TOXICITY

It is a testament to the overall inclusiveness of the sport and its small size that we started to hear the same stories when it came to non-welcoming, inappropriate or toxic behavior. On one

hand, it is almost reassuring that this kind of behavior is enough of an outlier that people seem to know the same stories. On the other hand, this underscores the smallness of the sport and the factors that may inhibit reporting misconduct, such as difficulty in finding a new coach or negative impact on one's competitive career from losing a valued coach. Particularly at the more elite levels of the sport, everyone knows each other.

One example that we heard from several interviewees – and that was also shared on the Women in Weightlifting Facebook page – involved a gym owner and coach and some teammates regularly engaging in commentary that some found sexist, racist, fat-shaming and inappropriate. Comments included telling a youth athlete that she was “not in the fat girls’ weight class anymore;” describing “hooking up” with another young woman lifter by saying that “150 pounds is too much to move around;” comments about an Asian lifter having dog for lunch; frequent commentary about women’s breasts; frequent use of the “N” word; Islamophobic “jokes” and more. For a long time, some young women athletes tolerated it as “locker room talk” and thought “boys will be boys.” They also liked many aspects of the gym. It is especially hard to break with a gym and a coach if it’s where you “grew up” and also if there are not a lot of other choices in the area. Reporting the conduct is even harder. It comes at the price of a valued relationship and may also subject one to disdain and ostracization by others in the community as people line up to take sides. In this case, two youth athletes, who had qualified for and competed multiple times at Nationals, left the sport. “Weightlifting is now associated with bad memories and trauma,” says one.²

The small, tight-knit nature of the weightlifting community also at times leads to the circulation of inaccurate information. As one coach and gym owner remarked, it’s a small sport so “everyone knows everything – or thinks they do.” Another observed that “if something happens, rumors fly.” We were surprised, at times, to hear information presented to us as gospel that we knew from other interviews and documents was not correct. At the same time, when everyone knows each other, it can lead to blind spots. When hearing of misconduct, some will say, “I know that person, and he’s not a racist or misogynist,” so it cannot be true.

In sum, the smallness of the sport and overall welcoming environment makes examples of poor behavior and misconduct stand out. At times, these incidents become the subject of chatter, both online and live. It often becomes especially divisive; eliciting strong emotions, and a sense that people know what “really” happened because someone is a “good person,” or a valued or beloved coach or colleague.

BACKLASH AND APATHY

It is worth noting that we did hear from a handful of our interviewees a concern that USAW is “overcorrecting,” and that there are no inclusion challenges. One leader in the sport shared: “We do not have a policy or inclusion problem; we have a marketing problem. We are victims of people having thin skins. We are in an overcorrection phase. I don’t get the whole PC thing.” “Some people feel slighted” by the targeted scholarship programs for women and BIPOC members, according to another leader. These perspectives were shared by quite a few respondents to the USAW 2020-member survey, some of whom wrote to exhort USAW to “end the political/social agenda” and “stop caving to social justice warriors.”

As mentioned earlier, some white men we interviewed expressed surprise that we were interviewing them, reflecting that they may not feel part of the inclusion work USAW is undertaking. Some may feel more than excluded; as one respondent to the member survey

² In response to the Facebook post, a USAW staffer advised the person who posted her concerns to file a complaint with SafeSport.

wrote, “I am a white male. For some reasons, athletes like me are being made to feel like we are the source of injustice.”

Others in the community may not be attuned to or aware of DEI-related issues. In response to the open-ended question, “What are your suggestions for new member programs to promote DEI?”, over three dozen respondents wrote in “What is DEI?” with some expressing frustration at USAW’s use of unexplained acronyms. A leader noted that the DEI-related speaker series and webinars are sparsely attended. Even those who are supportive of USAW’s commitment to inclusion are often unaware of its DEI-related programming. Numerous interviewees made suggestions for programs or initiatives USAW should undertake, apparently unaware that such programs already existed.

The continuum of perspectives shared by its membership through to its leadership, ranging from lack of interest and apathy to alienation and disagreement with the efforts, is another area of challenge for USAW to address.

CHALLENGES FOR USAW

USAW is the first to recognize that it is on a journey to build an inclusive culture – and it is eager to get there, quickly. Its action orientation may come at the expense of a strategic approach. Sometimes USAW is faulted for doing too much, and, in some areas, for doing too little. Nor are minds united on the appropriate role USAW should or could play in driving the culture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the realm of social media.

DEI Approach: Scattershot, not strategic

As USAW’s DEI hub ably demonstrates, USAW has undertaken meaningful reviews of its policies and its culture and has launched a variety of initiatives, many of which are deeply appreciated. To some, however, USAW is perceived as deploying a “shotgun” approach, taking every DEI recommendation or being reactive because “someone emails.” Another senior level coach described USAW as “not following through on many initiatives,” concluding it would “be better to do five things well than 10 things half-ass.” An area of disappointment for some is the Women in Weightlifting Facebook group. Some felt unclear regarding whose job it is to manage it and what kinds of guidelines pertain to posts. What was seen as a site with great potential is now seen as disappointing and lacking in substance. A staff member raised concerns that initiatives were undertaken without being fully explored first and without having the human resources to execute them properly. The COVID fund was cited as an example of a project that was intended to provide free USAW memberships to frontline workers, but it was not well-known among the membership and the funds were still not used at the time of our interviews months after the program started. The staffer said, “Some may say doing something is better than nothing, but we just don’t have the human capital.”

Because staff is stretched thin, much of the DEI and culture work is driven by Andrews and Sanchez, both of whom are well-regarded but also wear multiple other hats. The admiration for Andrews’ work ethic and commitment runs deep; he is hugely valued. At the same time, many question if he should be in the weeds as much as he is. A leader in the sport said, “Phil doesn’t need to be the belly button of the organization.” His accessibility and tireless work ethic mean he is often responding to a wide range of inquiries, from the important to the mundane, such as changing someone’s password to their USAW account. As one observer noted, this “should not be where the CEO is, but he has been doing it for years, so he has set an expectation.”

Volunteers are one way to spread the work around in an organization with limited resources, but “with volunteers you get what you pay for.” The work of some committees is a substantial ask of its members, who are volunteers, many of whom have full-time jobs in addition to their volunteer committee roles. Strong guidance is not always provided to the committees and members may be elected without particular experience or expertise in the subject matter. (For more discussion, see the Ethics Committee section below). Many interviewees noted – with concern -- that the DEI committee is all-white. That committee’s work was described to us as reactive and as providing review rather than developing proactive recommendations.³ There is a recognition that USAW “needs to professionalize the shotgun approach done on the back of volunteers.” Ultimately, as one leader observed, “USAW may get in its own way by jumping on recommendations but not putting in the resources or thinking strategically. Its heart is in the right place, but they need a longer-term road map past the next competition.”

Local gyms, little oversight

With respect to driving an inclusive culture, many interviewees expressed the view that USAW has a very limited ability to control culture at the club level. Some question whether it should try: “It’s impossible – and not even appropriate – to know what’s going on in every gym.” People “will gravitate to where they feel comfortable,” and there is “not much USAW can do” at the club level to set DEI and culture standards. Sexism and offensive language at the grassroots level is “tough to tackle.” Cultures vary by region and gym and USAW is “not one big group.” Some do not see a role for USAW to play in monitoring club culture unless rules are being broken. For some, USAW’s efforts are better spent elsewhere: “Culture is driven by gyms, not USAW. USAW should have resources available for DEI, but USAW’s focus should be on training athletes.”

Outsize impact of (unregulated) social media

USAW’s approach to social media elicits strong and divided opinions. No medium is more prominent in this sport than Instagram. From decorated Olympians to non-competitive athletes, weightlifting is lived out loud on Instagram. Facebook is not far behind in its popularity among weightlifters. “The weightlifting brand is heavily influenced by high-profile athletes, coaches and gyms on social media,” observes one gym owner and coach. USAW proactively uses its social media to communicate on all matters with the weightlifting community, including USAW’s commitment to DEI – highlighting its initiatives such as women’s weightlifting camp, its DEI and wellness speaker series, posts geared towards different heritage months, and hosting affinity groups like Women in Weightlifting, LGBTQIA+ Weightlifting Community, BIPOC Weightlifting Community and Military & Veterans Community on Facebook.

Although, as detailed above, many appreciate the efforts USAW is making, criticism or gaps fall into three categories. First, some believe that USAW could more intentionally advance inclusion. We heard, for example, that BIPOC athletes should be featured more frequently on social media. A coach shared with us a time when four Black youth athletes were not featured in the competition highlight reel posted on Instagram, even though they won (including for one athlete, a consecutive national title). A USAW staffer replied

3 USAW is already taking steps to strengthen and professionalize its DEI committee by soliciting applications from membership from those with experience in DEI. It is also seeking to have committee members approved and appointed by the Board, rather than be elected by membership.



when a coach complained, “We can’t highlight all of our gold medalists.” When the issue was raised with Andrews, he asked staff to fix the problem. Another elite youth athlete noted her impression, and that of other BIPOC athletes, that USAW highlighted white elite athletes far more than BIPOC athletes who were accomplishing more and that the perception of favoritism was linked to race. As noted previously in this report and in the PLT report, USAW has undertaken a social media audit to ensure inclusive representation in its posts. Still, as one senior leader in the sport notes, “perception is more important than reality.”

Many desire to see a focus on a broader range of athletes beyond the elite, including queer, older and former athletes.⁴ In other words, they desire a democratization of social media, to reflect the grassroots, not just the Olympians. Some also want USAW to use its platform to voice more support for social justice issues. For example, some members of the LGBTQIA+ community would like to see intentional statements supporting transgender athletes, like Laurel Hubbard, and celebrating the community, including after PRIDE month is over.

Second, some of the DEI-related posts miss the mark. To some, they can feel “performative” and smack too much of “virtue signaling” or “rainbow washing.” One athlete said, “It almost feels as if it’s done for the photo opportunity.” Many interviewees (of different races and ethnicities) mentioned specifically the communication of the results of the PLT assessment. It “came across as ‘hey, we beat this.’ They said ‘We beat racism and we’re fine!’ That came across as really bad to a lot of brown people.” It was “very cringey.” Another said “OK hired a black lawyer, predictable, they found nothing, predictable. Timing was overkill and the post that came out with the report seemed boastful.”

A number of interviewees suggested it may be helpful to have posts reviewed by members of affected communities prior to posting to guard against tone-deafness or posts that unintentionally harm the groups they intended to support. “Posts specific to diversity come off as someone from the outside looking in. Looks like someone is trying – which is good to an extent. But ask a brown or queer person ‘What do you think about this?’ before putting it up.”

Third, some athletes expressed concern about how cutting weight is portrayed on some elite athletes’ social media posts. In particular, dramatic unhealthy forms of cutting weight seemed to be glamorized by some athletes in a way that may have a negative impact, especially on adolescent girls. One athlete noted that she struggled with her relationship with food for a long time in part because of a former elite athlete’s posts about dramatic measures she was taking to quickly lose weight. Though she appreciates USAW’s bans on allowing youth in saunas to lose weight, she feels that even as a young adult there needs to be sensitivity to ensuring that cutting weight is done in a healthy way and would appreciate some oversight of social media postings in this area.

Fourth, a camp exists that believes USAW should not wade into the social justice waters – and may be opposed to the DEI initiatives promoted in the posts. Some of this plays out in the comments to posts. Upsetting to many interviewees are the “nasty,” “hurtful,” “non-inclusive,” “abusive,” and “racist” comments that appear in the comments on social media posts, such as, for example, posts about George Floyd or PRIDE month. As a result, one athlete noted “posts end up being hurtful to the very people they were intended to support.”

The fissures in the weightlifting community play out very publicly in social media. A big question for USAW is – as with the issue of local culture at the gym level – what role can and should it play in that realm? One leader notes that there is a distinction between USAW

4 Since our interviews, USAW has launched on its Instagram page #MYWLStory which highlights a diverse range of athletes at different stages in their careers.

and its membership – and “the most vocal group is the one that denies there are disparate underrepresented groups.” Several say that USAW should not (and cannot) play the role of “social media police.”

On the other hand, others say that USAW does not do enough to condemn racist or abusive comments and would welcome USAW interceding more. “If we are the oldest sports federation on the planet, we should be able to hold people to certain standards,” notes a white male coach. This is even more so when it comes to people who hold USAW credentials or hold leadership positions within the sport; interviewees noted that USAW officials have made comments on social media that seem at odds with official USAW mandate and yet no one is held to account. More to the point, some advocate delineating a clear rule: “people paid by USAW should not be able to post inappropriate social media.”

As of now, expectations of the community, as defined by the Code of Ethics, are quite murky when it comes to social media. In fact, many interviewees appear to believe – and lament – that social media discourse does not properly fall into the realm of a reportable ethics complaint.⁵ The lack of accountability makes the stated commitment to DEI look performative and not real for some. With respect to handling social media commentary, interviewees recommended a variety of approaches, ranging from disabling comments to taking comments down after 12 hours, to directly confronting racist comments in posts. USAW should “condemn hate speech when it is posted on USAW’s own account.”

As discussed in more depth below with respect to the 2017 case, social media has an outside impact on the sport and its participants – and, although it may feel ephemeral, it is not. People take screenshots, save them, and pass them along to each other. The posts and commentary live on long past the date they were posted; what takes only a minute or less to post or “like” can have a long tail in the sport. USAW may not desire to be the “social media police,” but it is clear that there is a hunger for guidance, clear rules and, as one interviewee requested, training for some members of the community about how to conduct – and defend – oneself on social media. In other words, USAW needs to grapple directly with these difficult issues and provide clarity, as well as accountability.

COACHES

If there is one point of unity across our interviewees it is the centrality and importance of coaches, particularly when it comes to driving the culture. A leader in the sport said, “Coaches are the stewards of the culture.” Within gyms, “behavior is determined by the coach. The coach sets the tone.” As a member of the Olympic community noted, “the leader is the person who holds the power in the eyes of the athlete. The coach has all the power. Kids and beginners have no idea who the NGB CEO is!” As a member noted in response to the 2020 USAW Member Survey, “coaches are the daily face to face contact with new individuals” to the sport.

“Coaches are the stewards of the culture.”

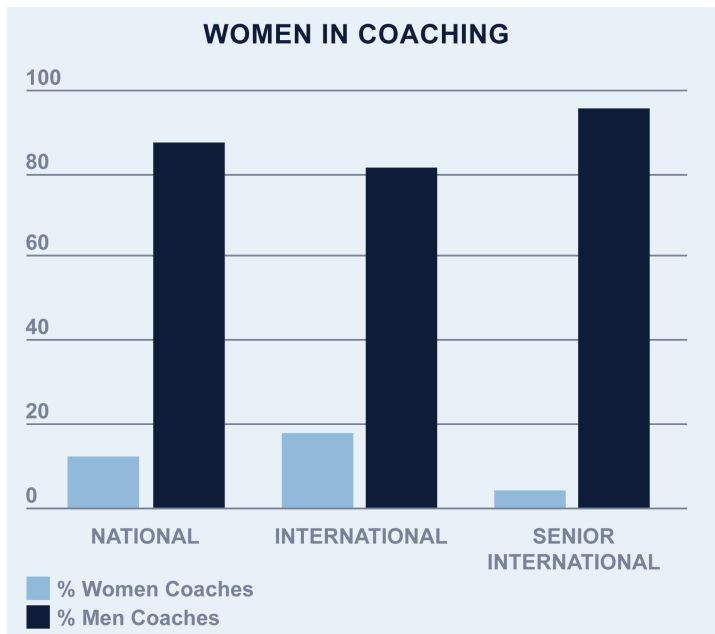
⁵ The Code of Ethics does offer some guidelines on electronic communications and social media, and the Ethics Committee has received many complaints in relation to social media posts. However, USAW does not police social media, and requires the filing of a complaint to enforce the code. Although multiple people raised concerns about inappropriate social media posts in interviews, few of those people have filed complaints.

Words like “family” and “values” surfaced in discussions of coaches. “Coaches set the culture like the head of household sets culture in a family.” Coaches transmit values and have been known to turn away athletes when their values are not aligned; one coach mentioned advising an athlete to find another coach when the athlete had a negative response to the coach’s social media posts promoting social justice. Words like “power” and “influence,” however, do not capture the depth of feeling that can be wrapped up in the coach/athlete relationship. As one Olympic coach put it simply, “I loved my coach like a father.”

For all these reasons – as a locus of power and influence and a well of deep emotion – coaching surfaced as an area where exclusion was felt most keenly and where the opportunity for impact is the largest for USAW. Barriers for women, including women of color, are most acute here.

Think coach, think man

Women’s membership in USAW has grown dramatically in the last decade, and as detailed above, US women have performed at the highest levels internationally and at the Olympics, often outshining the US men. Women remain underrepresented, however, in the coaching ranks, and in particular, the elite coaching ranks. Women currently comprise 32 percent of certified coaches within USAW. At the more elite levels – National Coach, International Coach and Senior International Coach -- women’s representation declines. For example, women currently comprise 13 percent of USAW’s National Coaches; 19 percent of USAW’s International Coaches, and a mere 5 percent of Senior International Coaches. Indeed, until 2020, there was just one woman Senior International Coach, and today, there are only two. Put another way, 95 percent of the most elite level coaches are men and the feeder to that position is 87 percent men.



It is worth noting that some women we interviewed felt that they did not experience discrimination as a female coach and that any friction comes from individual character mismatches or from parents of athletes who had a hard time thinking of a weightlifting coach as a woman. One or two people even said they believed some men prefer women coaches.

However, the experiences and insights many other women coaches shared with us exemplified what has been called “the double bind for women in leadership.”⁶ Research shows that gender stereotypes create certain predicaments for women leaders. In particular, the “think leader, think male” mindset

means that women often have to spend additional time and effort proving their competence as well as being on the lookout to surface and address stereotypical perceptions. Here, the mindset most often encountered by women coaches could be described as “think coach, think man.” More specifically, “think white man.” Women recounted many instances of having to

6 Catalyst, *The Double-Bind Dilemma for Women in Leadership: Damned if You Do, Doomed if You Don't* (2007).

prove themselves to an extent their male peers do not. Men benefit from the presumption of authority; women need to establish their credentials. “As a woman coach, I’ve had to earn my stripes a little bit.” One coach tries to address these biases preemptively by always explaining the science behind her recommendations, but “it is tiring to have to prove myself all the time.” Another, whose husband is also a coach, described male athletes ignoring her, but accepting the same advice when delivered by her husband. One coach whose husband is not a coach, nor even a weightlifter, has had her husband mistaken as the coach when they are together. The default assumption is that the man in the room is the coach. It takes a toll. “When I coach at the highest level, I bring not just my body armor but my sword and shield. I owe it to the women in my field to bring it.”

In our interviews we noticed a pattern that some other coaches mentioned. There is one primary path to coaching for women: former elite weightlifter. To be sure, many men coaches are former elite athletes – but many are not. Male coaches are injured athletes, but women are former champions, one male coach observed. Men benefit from the presumption that “you don’t have to do to teach and still be a great coach,” but women need to have been a successful, elite athlete to be a successful, elite coach.

A coach repeated to us an adage she had been told: “Men coach men and women but women can coach only women.” Although this is, of course, belied by many examples to the contrary, there is a kernel of truth to it. A very senior level woman coach was told at an international competition, “Women can’t be international coaches; women can’t coach men.” One coach termed this barrier “athlete bias.” “It’s athletes – even women – thinking a woman coach can’t really do what they need.” This athlete bias disadvantages women and BIPOC coaches. One club owner and coach took her name off her website because it was keeping male customers away; men who joined were surprised to find she was a coach. Another woman coach took it as a challenge: “I was told one too many times that women couldn’t coach men so I said ‘Watch this!’ and put together a men’s team.”

“When I coach at the highest level, I bring not just my body armor but my sword and shield. I owe it to the women in my field to bring it.”

Bias also creeps in, not just from athletes, but from other coaches. One male athlete who did well at 2021 Nationals in Detroit was asked repeatedly by other coaches if he had a coach, despite the fact that his female coach was not only present but had been very visible and vocal coaching him during the competition. A more extreme example occurred to a senior level woman coach several years ago. When being evaluated for advancement to a higher level, evaluators insisted that her ex-husband, also a coach, had coached her elite athlete rather than her. It was only resolved when her ex-husband confirmed that she was indeed the coach of the elite athlete. In other words, they took the man’s word for it.

Respect can be intangible -- to women and people of color coaches it is being asked for one’s professional opinion. “Respect has to be there to even ask the question. White men don’t often ask me,” says one senior level coach. Anecdotally, they are less likely to sign up for a coaching course taught by a woman. Another sign of respect – and critical to growing one’s business – is reposting and sharing on social media. Some perceive that many of the white male coaches repost one another’s posts, but not posts by women and BIPOC coaches. This may, at times, be an expression of “affinity bias,” also known as the like-likes-like phenomenon, where people

gravitate to people like themselves. It may also be an expression of unconscious gender or race bias. Either way it perpetuates the lack of visibility of women and people of color coaches.

If you can't see it, you can't be it

Putting aside the barriers one may face once a coach, a preliminary barrier to becoming a coach is the lack of role models. The lack of representation and visibility – particularly at high levels – is discouraging. One prominent coach recounts seeing the same people tapped on the shoulder for international coaching assignments: “It was a small group of mostly white men. I observed that there is not a place for me. Nobody put me down or said that to me – but based on the history of selection, they didn’t think I fit. I didn’t want to be a coach because I didn’t think I would be accepted.”

Social media exacerbates the problem. “On Insta you see only male coaches because so many elite athletes have male coaches. Many people find the sport through social media so the impression is that the coaches are mainly male.” Another athlete noted, “There aren’t many Caras. You need to see representation to know that it’s a possibility.” It is a testament not just to the size of the sport, but to the dearth of women, particularly women of color, at the senior coaching level that everyone knows who Cara is. No last name is necessary.

Of the elite levels of coaches, only 42 (16 percent) identify as people of color. With respect to women of color, one can almost count them on one hand. Out of the combined National, International, and Senior International Coaches, only six identify as women of color, representing a mere two percent of all elite level coaches. Despite the low numbers of women coaches including women of color coaches at the senior levels of the sport, many feel this is a problem that will resolve itself with time, rather than require active intervention. Some feel that the coaching pool is currently so male-dominated because the Olympics are a “feeder program of male coaches.” Women “just got into the Olympics, this is a fairly new thing, and there is a trickle down and that takes time.” As an aside, it is worth noting that we interviewed many male coaches; almost none of them were former Olympians (including the two just quoted). It is interesting, though, that the expectation is that women coaches will be former Olympians. Many do share the overall view that women will continue to swell the ranks of coaches, particularly as elite women athletes retire. It was heartening to hear one junior woman athlete say, “I feel I could be an international coach if I wanted to be.”

Many identify the coaching education and curriculum as an opportunity – both for enhancing diversity of instructors as well as for more intentionally shaping the culture. Several interviewees mentioned that the instructors for the coaching certification class are overwhelmingly white and male. Currently, 21 percent of the coaches on the teaching roster are women and 14 percent are people of color. Historically, people have joined the teacher pool through favoritism, and once on, it is difficult to remove them. However, USAW is currently updating its teacher pool and expects to add five to ten new teachers in 2022 to the roster to help grow diversity.

Just as critical is the content of the coaching courses. Currently the Level 1 and 2 courses do not include modules on ethics, culture or DEI, though USAW has made available to all members a full DEI course in its online Learning Academy. “We talk about technique all the time but we don’t have anywhere where we talk about issues, like weight control.” The curriculum could include an “inclusion/don’t be a jerk” training requirement for certification in much the same way SafeSport and US Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) training is required. Tellingly, one coach wrote in response to the member survey question soliciting suggestions for new member programs to promote DEI: “I don’t even know what DEI is and I’m a coach.”

The way coaching camps and mentoring are structured could also do more to model what gender partnership looks like. Although many interviewees like the mentoring programs and the women's camp, a couple interviewees commented critically on the programs being women-only. A woman coach and athlete expressed surprise to learn that only women mentors were participating in the women's coaching mentor program; no rationale was offered.

Research indicates that women mentoring men in the work context has a positive impact on furthering gender equity.⁷ Analogously, having women coach men would normalize women as leaders in coaching. A senior woman coach commented on the importance of showing women coaching men. Women-only camps and mentoring programs may reinforce the idea that women can coach only women. Likewise, as one senior male coach observed, white men may not understand the need for them to mentor women and BIPOC coaches.

A consistent thread throughout interviews with women coaches was being encouraged, "invited in" and supported as potential coaches. Several shared pivotal turning points focused on another coach encouraging them to apply for the BIPOC scholarship to take a Level 2 course or apply for a prestigious enrichment program. "I didn't think I could coach a world team because nobody like me was being selected to do those things." Another just starting her coaching career said of her coach asking her to become certified, "if it wasn't for him, I wouldn't have done it." Men have been important mentors and sponsors for many women coaches and need to be involved as allies. A woman coach credited the "outstanding men in our sport who have been there as a backbone when I was ready to give up."

For people who do not see themselves reflected in the pool, intentional outreach is key. "There's a huge difference between saying everyone is welcome and inviting them to the table." Part of that includes access to and exchange of information. We heard of a perception that "there was this fight club – and [the women] are looking for the door to the fight club." Even if it is just to find out – as one person said to us – that there is no fight club, it helps to have access to demystify the process and be part of the conversation.

REFEREES

Much as in other areas of the sport, the world of referees had been until recently dominated by men, and white men at that. In recent years, USAW's initiatives to diversify the ranks of referees have brought much progress for women, dramatically increasing their numbers. Approximately 40 percent of the total number of referees are currently women, and about 25 percent are BIPOC. There is a sense that as men are starting to retire, women are taking those spots. As with coaching, some women in the community noted with appreciation outreach by USAW encouraging them to become higher-level referees. But as we saw in the coaching ranks, because tenure is a component for promotion, the higher echelons of refereeing, particularly the international level, are still dominated by men. For example, only 23 percent of IWF Category 1 referees are women, compared to 46 percent of US National referees. As the president of an LWC said, "It used to be mostly older white men, but we are seeing more and more women involved in refereeing."

Some identified money as a significant barrier to access, but there is a general feeling among those interviewed that "USAW is doing a good job incentivizing different looking people to become refs and TOs." USAW has a "Female Referee National Testing Assistance Fund" that has been successful in encouraging women to take the referee test and alleviate some of the

⁷ Cindy A. Schipani, Terry Morehead Dworkin, and Devin Abney, *Overcoming Gender Discrimination in Business: Reconsidering Mentoring in the Post #Me-Too and COVID-19 Eras*, 23 J. Bus. L. 1072 (2021).

economic barrier to entry. We heard from an International Level 2 referee that the scholarship program has made a huge difference. The current president of an LWC we spoke to requires all members of his team to become referees after they have been on the team for six months, and mentors people in that pursuit. He himself became a referee because he was mentored by a woman who has influence in the organization – a referee and coach herself. Another LWC has established a grant program for referees. A very high-ranking referee suggested that a way of increasing the ranks of female referees is to encourage retired elite athletes and Olympians to become referees. Unlike in coaching, many referees were neither competitors nor participated as athletes in the sport – many became interested because they attended competitions accompanying a family member or friend who competes, liked the sport, and start volunteering.

But, as in other areas of the sport, we heard of challenges faced by some women just starting their careers as referees. A local referee (she can officiate meets at local level in her state) described how “horrendous” her experience was at the first meet she officiated. She said local male coaches “came down hard on decisions she made and were abusive.” She contrasted that experience with her recent experience at Nationals where she officiated under the supervision of a more senior referee and where other female TOs embraced her, talked to her, and gave her constructive criticism. A female referee shared how after a male referee at a national competition in 2017 made an unflattering comment during the weigh-in of a female athlete, USAW “from top down” made clear to all referees that they had to treat all athletes with respect. She said it was made “abundantly clear there was an emphasis on inclusivity. If you don’t like a tattoo or someone’s weight, keep your mouth shut.” She felt this was a big change for older white referees.

INFLUENCE OF LWCS ON CULTURE AND ATHLETE SAFETY

Regional leadership has been spotty but presents an opportunity for positive cultural change for USAW. The recently approved changes to the Bylaws include changes to the structure and local governance of the sport that will hopefully result in a reinvigorated and accountable local leadership structures. Historically, USAW has operated at the local level through a network of LWCs. Each LWC operated separately, under its own rules. The geographical area of LWCs varied – some encompassed a full state, while others were composed of regions of a state or even a combination of smaller states. USAW members were assigned to a LWC according to the member’s zip code.

Not surprisingly, given their de-centralized nature, LWCs perform at dramatically different levels. A board member described them as “a mess!” While there are some high performing LWCs, others were seen as bastions of “cronyism and self-dealing” or “fiefdoms” and run by the same people for decades. There is a perception that LWCs can be “too political” and “used as a tool to further the agenda of its leaders,” including directing business to their clubs and engaging in financial malfeasance. Often, they are run by “the old guard” and resistant to change. One LWC had been led until recently by a “misogynistic white male” who said he wished his “team were all men.”

Repeatedly we heard from younger, newer club owners about how their suggestions were met by resistance from those who have been running LWCs for a long time. A coach and gym owner described the attitude of the “old guard” when he started as “You don’t know anything.

Wait your turn.” A longtime LWC president made a motion to be “president for life.” Some LWCs have no website or email address, and function with out-of-date founding documents. According to an athlete representative to an LWC, in her experience, “people do not know they exist or what they do.” Someone described LWCs as “figurative poofs” with “no one steering the ship” and an absence of expertise on how to grow the sport. Two women of color coaches we interviewed believe some of this tension is a reflection of LWC chairs being “territorial,” or playing a “gatekeeping” role coupled with a fear of being “replaced.” An athlete representative from an LWC told of how, as an athlete representative, she tried to become engaged and be accessible to the members but eventually became frustrated by what she describes as an LWC run by its president like “me and the old guys hanging out,” with rules made up by him and “his cronies,” that limit competitions to suit their agenda while excluding a large section of the weightlifting population in the LWCs’ geographic area, and rejecting diversity initiatives. The negative experiences of this former athlete representative have led her to believe that LWCs serve no purpose anymore. Similarly, a former LWC board member, who is also a club owner and coach, said his LWC had not been supportive of PRIDE and has made anti-transgender comments. This person described an LWC that limits access to the training required to hold meets as a way of controlling who holds meets and where, creating an obstacle to growing the sport and to inclusion.

In contrast, successful LWCs have had a positive impact on the weightlifting community. Some have grant programs for TOs and provide support for travel for coaches and athletes. We also heard from the president of a particularly active and progressive LWC who hired a consultant to help with its diversity and inclusion initiative. As a result of its efforts, the LWC has a diversity and inclusion statement posted prominently on its website with links to policies and resources; an inclusivity grant that pays for membership for BIPOC athletes upon request; and scholarships for BIPOC coaches to get level 1 and 2 certified. It also started a free after school program that was unfortunately derailed by COVID. In addition, it created a new athlete card for competitions that added boxes for preferred pronouns, gender identity, and preferred name. Before COVID, in an effort to be inclusive, it ran a “lift as you are” competition allowing athletes to select their own bar and had no weigh-ins, thus acknowledging a sensitive consideration for transgender people. The entry fee to the competition was voluntary and donated to the local community, and the prizes were gift cards to Black-owned coffee shops. The event was seen as great fun and will be held annually.

LWCs AND MISCONDUCT

We heard of instances in which inappropriate behavior was raised to LWC members with the expectation that they would address it. However, as one former LWC president said “LWCs are in no way equipped to handle this.” That lack of training played out in a number of circumstances. Some complained about a particular LWC where the long-standing leadership appears to be “reluctant to ruffle feathers and would rather sweep bad behavior under the carpet.” When a member raised concerns about a coach hitting a young athlete on the bottom during a meet, this person was advised not to say anything and keep quiet because it was not serious enough. Instead, the “LWC joked about the creepy guy all year and did nothing.”

Others also described situations in which LWCs inappropriately handled allegations of misconduct. Three people we interviewed described how they repeatedly raised concerns about witnessing inappropriate behavior from a coach of young athletes. Two coaches and an athlete raised the issue with the LWC. One coach said his complaint was “shut down” by the LWC president who “told him to be quiet at every turn,” implied he was “jealous” of a rival gym and made him feel like he was crazy. Another raised the concern directly with the coach

by email and never received a response. A third said that the LWC did, in fact, raise it with the coach but that the LWC president was reassured by the coach who informed him that parents were present during the questionable acts. One of the coaches who expressed concern about the behavior was told the club owner told the LWC president the accusation “hurt his feelings” and that because he had put his life savings into the gym he would be devastated if anything happened. Meanwhile, the gym was approved to host coaching classes, which felt like a blow to those who had raised concerns about inappropriate behavior – to the extent that one coach offered to chaperone female athletes who planned to attend the class.

One person who expressed frustration at the lack of action said, “Why wait until someone is actually molested before taking action?” He felt like he had to “choose between picking a fight... or letting it go.” He did not file an ethics complaint because he was told to leave it alone – and he was worried it would negatively impact his team. Another said she felt the response from the LWC was “Let’s just let this play out.” She felt the passive response from leadership “adds to the problem and discourages people from coming forward. If people see the LWC president is inactive and passive it creates doubt in the person who is reporting.” Ultimately, she said of her LWC president “He is a nice man but I don’t feel safe with his leadership.”

Another club owner described an incident in which there was concern about someone being alone with a child at a meet against the regulations. Rather than file a complaint, he said the LWC held a secret meeting about it. If there was a real safety concern he wondered why it did not go to SafeSport.

WSOs AN OPPORTUNITY

Among those we interviewed many noted that LWCs have great potential as a “place to influence culture” and that “they can be key to access for the local community and for groups that traditionally do not have access.” They can also provide an opportunity to share ideas, initiatives and best practices across regions, something that several people we spoke to wished LWCs would do. Many said information sharing was done only on an ad hoc basis through personal connections at competitions but would welcome a regular forum in which they could discuss challenges and opportunities with other LWCs, something that apparently had occurred in the past and still occurs with regional governing bodies for other sports.

Starting on January 1, 2022, the LWCs will transition to Weightlifting State Organizations (“WSOs”) – 26 organizations comprised of a single state or a grouping of smaller states. Each WSO will be made up of nine elected representatives, including three athlete representatives. The Bylaws also establish a WSO Council that will liaise with the National Office. USAW, in consultation with the USAW Board of Directors, the USAW WSO Council, USAW’s Athletes Advisory Council and staff, will appoint a president for each WSO from one of the nine elected members. The structure set up in the Bylaws attempts to empower local leadership, and at the same time provide more oversight and better communication with the National Office. The term for WSO members is four years, but there appears to be no limit on the numbers of terms that can be served.

In general, those we talked to had a positive reaction to the changes to the LWCs. An elite athlete on the Board shared that the “timing is perfect to use LWCs as a place where reporting [of misconduct] can happen and it can be a place to push culture.” There is hope that the new structure will give a chance to a bigger local talent pool, avoid “popularity contests,” and be led by someone “who is truly committed to actually doing something.” There is also the expectation that the new WSO structure will bring much needed transparency and accountability to the functioning of WSOs.

Several members expressed a desire for the WSOs to have an active role in communicating and explaining the Code of Ethics and the process for reporting abuse. There is also the expectation that the new structure will provide an opportunity for “community building around the sport.”

Not surprisingly, as with all change, some members have a certain amount of trepidation about the new structure, particularly those in high performing LWCs. The trepidation comes not from the changes themselves or the principles guiding them, but from worry about the roll out and who will be chosen as leaders.

The new WSO structure will still face one of the most significant challenges of LWCs: it will be run by volunteers. This concern was raised by several people who are currently active in their LWCs.

ATHLETE SAFETY AND SUPPORT

In addition to looking at culture, we examined perceptions and experiences relating to athlete safety. Issues relating to comfort – or lack thereof – with respect to reporting and accountability were raised and are detailed below. We begin with explaining obstacles to reporting and then describe existing reporting mechanisms and the importance of supporting athletes. Finally, we examine a well-known SafeSport case for lessons learned.

REPORTING MISCONDUCT

Handling misconduct and ethical violations appropriately is a key component of institutional culture. To create an ethical culture, people must feel confident that complaints will be taken seriously, and that misconduct will be addressed. Moreover, it is important that people feel comfortable raising concerns or questions even about behavior that may be in a grey area so they can be addressed promptly before problems escalate.

The conduct and ethics of athletes, coaches and other members of the weightlifting community are regulated by both USAW and SafeSport. Both entities have their own Code of Conduct and both provide a mechanism for reporting and investigating claims of misconduct or violations of their respective codes. Complaints that do not come under the jurisdiction of SafeSport or that SafeSport does not accept, as well as the broader range of violations of USAW’s Code of Conduct or Code of Ethics, fall within the purview of USAW’s Ethics and Judicial Committees. While SafeSport is well known in the sporting world, many people, even weightlifting veterans and some Board members, are unaware of the work of the Ethics Committee and do not know they have the option of filing a complaint with it. Moreover, there is often a lack of understanding about how or where to raise questions or concerns about behavior that is troubling but may not rise to the level of a SafeSport violation. Many welcomed the idea of additional outside channels for reporting or asking questions.

As discussed at length in the 2017 case below, some instances of abuse or misconduct are well known within the small weightlifting community, and perceptions of how those complaints are handled, either by SafeSport or USAW, have a significant impact on whether others are willing to come forward. Because the weightlifting community is so close and so small, there are serious concerns about confidentiality and the impact reporting or raising concerns about misconduct may have on a team or community. As in all sports, there is also genuine fear of retaliation and the effect reporting can have on an athletic career.

It is in everyone's interest to ensure people feel safe raising all concerns and know that they will be taken seriously and addressed without retaliation.

OBSTACLES TO REPORTING

In order for institutions to effectively address misconduct, stakeholders must know about reporting options, have confidence they will be effective, and be willing to report. We found that for several reasons, including concerns about retaliation, impact on training or a team, and a belief that nothing will happen, it can be a challenge to convince people to come forward and raise a concern with either SafeSport or the Ethics Committee.

Many fear retribution if they complain about misconduct by a coach or teammate. One athlete said "The issue with reporting starts with culture. It is hard to walk in a gym, see something and report it. People are afraid of the backlash. There is no protection or safeguard against retaliation." Another said "It seems to be up to the athlete to report, but kids aren't likely to report, and adults may fear retaliation and having to leave the gym. No one wants to be a whistleblower." One elite coach noted that his peers are also reluctant "to make waves" and may be nervous to report on each other because the "good old boys" system is still there." A senior coach acknowledged that it is "a challenge how to protect people who are under a person with power."

The concern may be particularly acute in weightlifting which is a close-knit sport. Time and time again we heard that "the sport is too small," "if I complain it will get out." The ability to complain anonymously has not solved the problem. One athlete said due to social media and the small nature of the community "Complaints are not really anonymous. Everyone knows who it is. There is no confidence in anonymity." Another said, "Even if you report anonymously, because the sport is small, people will figure out who reported."

It is also particularly challenging for athletes to bring complaints against coaches since it may have impact on their ability to train or compete if they must find a new coach. The problem is particularly acute if there are not a lot of weightlifting clubs in the area and the athlete cannot easily switch to another coach or team. Even if they can move, they will likely see former teammates and coaches at local competitions. Moreover, if the coach is close to the club owner, the athlete may not feel he or she can raise a concern without risking their membership. A respected person in the sport opined that particularly for female athletes, "soul-searching and heartache go into the decision to get a new coach without harassment even being part of the equation." She added "He is going to hate me, or my teammates will hate me. Couple that with real retaliation or the chance that the team will think I'm lying. No one will believe me. All multiplied."

An athlete described a situation where a coach is on his third sexual relationship with an athlete he coaches yet nobody reports it, including her. She is not inclined to report what she knows to be inappropriate behavior because she fears it would hurt her career and she would be "ostracized" even though the behavior interferes with her training. A younger BIPOC athlete said she "would be afraid to complain about a coach." Another female athlete said that people don't want to hear complaints "about a beloved coach," and that when she told a story about inappropriate behavior by a well-known coach, the reaction was "How dare you say that!"

An elite athlete and coach also observed that there is a "strong ethos of not telling a coach how to interact with an athlete," and believed there is reluctance to follow up on ethics complaints that may interfere "with training of elite athletes."

This is consistent with a general perception that some people in the sport are “untouchable” and not held accountable for their misbehavior. “The higher in the club the more protected you are: coaches and elite athletes exist in a different tier.” One coach shared her intention to file a complaint against another coach for what she perceived to be racist comments on social media, yet she thinks nothing will happen because the offending coach is very elite. She also expected to get push back on social media once people found out, along the lines of “What, you can’t take a joke?” That the two cases that have come before the Ethics Committee involving well-known coaches resulted in minimal disciplinary action contributes to the sense that “coaches are not held accountable.” There is also a sense that those higher up in the sport have access to Andrews and others in leadership, so they will be protected.

“People are afraid of the backlash. There is no protection or safeguard against retaliation.”

Another obstacle to reporting is that many people are unaware of the options available for reporting at USAW or how to raise concerns about questionable conduct that does not seem serious enough to go to SafeSport. As one person said “Athletes need to know there are other options. We need to capture behavior that is not appropriate but not an actionable offense.” He gave as an example a situation in which he received a complaint about a coach engaging in questionable behavior with an athlete. His complaint with USAW, and concerns raised by a few others, did not lead anywhere because it was deemed a “personal matter.” A few years later the person was arrested for criminal misconduct. Other complaints about inappropriate or creepy behavior that did not rise to the level of a SafeSport offense were ignored. In his view, there is “nowhere to explore anything at all.”

Rather than filing a complaint or availing themselves of the existing process, many athletes said they would go to Andrews or to another person with power in the sport with whom they feel comfortable. While the direct line of communication to Andrews is appreciated by most, some felt going to Andrews could be a problem if the person whose behavior is in question is seen as close to him. A board member observed that Andrews “has a level of accessibility that perpetuates people going to him rather than following [the ethics] process.” Another senior member of the weightlifting community was insistent that complaints should not go to Andrews. Others expressed reluctance to share concerns with the CEO of USAW because they may view it as private or worry about how it could shape his impression of them, especially if they hope to compete on an international team. One person contacted us about a discrimination claim and said simply “Please let me know who I can speak with other than Phil Andrews.” Even if people were all comfortable approaching Andrews directly, the next CEO of USAW may have a different leadership style and may not be open to hearing these kinds of concerns.

For these reasons it is important to strengthen institutional processes to handle misconduct and to examine ways to support those going through SafeSport processes, mindful of restrictions on interference.

MECHANISMS FOR REPORTING

As mentioned above, there are two primary ways to report concerns about unethical or inappropriate behavior: the Ethics Committee and SafeSport.

Ethics Committee and Policies

USAW has four separate statements or policies establishing rules of behavior that members in the sport are expected to follow: USAW Code of Ethics, Code of Conduct & Complaint Procedures; Member Code of Conduct; USAW Athlete Safety Policy; and USAW Membership Bill of Rights.⁸

USAW Code of Ethics, Code of Conduct and Complaint Procedures (“Code of Ethics”)

The Code of Ethics purports to establish “basic, ethical boundaries, which all members are expected to honor.” It applies to all USAW members, including administrators, officials, coaches, and athletes and outlines prohibited conduct, including discrimination, sexual misconduct, and certain behavior on social media. The Code of Ethics also provides a description of the procedures for filing and investigating complaints and instituting sanctions.

Complaints of violations of the Code of Ethics are made using a link provided in the Code of Ethics itself (which appears on the website) or through the “Report an Ethics Concern” button on the bottom of USAW’s website homepage. The complaints are received by the membership department and forwarded to the CEO. Complaints may also be made directly to the CEO, unless the complaint is against the CEO in which case the most senior individual on the leadership team plays this role. The Code of Ethics suggests that “a reasonable expectation from complaint to resolution is six months or less.”



The Ethics Committee is a Standing Committee of the Board of Directors and according to the Code of Ethics it is made up of four independent members and one Elite Athlete Representative. In practice, it has two athlete representatives. The Ethics Committee’s role is to investigate claims, determine whether an ethics violation has occurred, and recommend a sanction in case of a violation. People interviewed by the Ethics Committee are entitled to have an advocate present. The Ethics Committee may recommend the interim suspension of a member during the pendency of an investigation. Such interim suspension must be implemented by the Judicial Committee, which will hold a hearing within 24 hours of receiving the recommendation of an interim suspension by the Ethics Committee. The Ethics Committee is also responsible for reviewing the Code of Ethics on an annual basis.

⁸ Athletes, coaches, referees, officials, trainers and athlete support involved in IWF competitions are also bound by the IWF Ethics and Disciplinary Code.

The Judicial Committee acts as a “sanctioning chamber.” It is also a Standing Committee of the Board of Directors and is made up of four independent members and two Elite Athlete Representatives, all elected by the Board of Directors.⁹ It is regarded as the sanctioning body – it conducts a hearing with the charged individual and implements a sanction if appropriate.

Member Code of Conduct (“Code of Conduct”)

The Code of Conduct also applies to all athletes, employees, contractors, board members, coaches and officials. It provides that those covered by the Code of Conduct must abide by the codes of conduct and ethics of USAW, the US Olympic & Paralympic Committee, USADA, SafeSport and IWF. The Code of Conduct instructs stakeholders to engage in a respectful manner, prohibits offensive language in response to officials’ decisions, discrimination and harassment, and bars “inappropriate sexually oriented behavior” including non-consensual sexual contact. The Ethics Committee is responsible for investigating complaints of violations of the Code of Conduct which is meant to be read in conjunction with USAW’s Code of Ethics.

USAW Athlete Safety Policy, Statement of Consolidated Athlete Safety and Athlete Protection Responsibilities for Members (“Athlete Safety Policy”)

The Athlete Safety Policy outlines the applicability of SafeSport’s Code and Procedures to USAW members. The Athlete Safety Policy contains specific guidelines for interactions with minors during one-on-one interactions, meetings with mental health professionals, healthcare professionals, travel, social media and electronic communications, massages, physical contact for coaching, and weigh-ins. The Athlete Safety Policy also has guidelines relating to physical contact (non-sexual) and use of video or photography for all athletes. USAW also requires that athletes selected to an international squad, coaches, technical officials, club presidents, LWC board members, club administrators, club coaches, staff, board of directors, any elected volunteer, and any adult accompanying a national team complete the SafeSport training and submit to a background check.

USAW Membership Bill of Rights (“Bill of Rights”)

The Bill of Rights states that every USAW member has the right to: participate; be treated with respect and dignity; provide input in matters that affect them; a prompt and honest response; be treated fairly and reasonably; have their health and wellness supported; receive proper instruction; and expect integrity and transparency.

Ethics Committee – The Mechanics

When a complaint is reported through the link on the website, it goes to an inbox that at the time of this assessment was monitored by the Athlete Safety Coordinator (ASC), a person designated by the NGB “as having significant responsibility for athlete safety.” The complaint also goes to the CEO. The ASC receives the complaint and enters it into the Ethics Tracker spread sheet. If the complaint relates to a minor, or raises allegations of sexual, emotional, or physical abuse, the ASC refers it to SafeSport for handling. According to the former USAW

⁹ The October 10, 2018, USAW Code of Ethics, Code of Conduct and Complaint procedures is inconsistent with the bylaws and says the Judicial Committee “is made up of four independent and disinterested individuals and one Elite Athlete Representative.” (Section VII) The bylaws are silent as to the composition of the Ethics Committee. The Code of Ethics establishes that the Ethics Committee will be “made up of four independent and disinterested individuals and one Elite Athlete Representative.” (Section VI.) At the date of this report, however, USAW’s website shows the Judicial Committee as having four athlete representatives, and the Ethics Committee as having two.

ASC, SafeSport rejects (i.e., sends back to the NGB) most cases that raise issues for which SafeSport has concurrent jurisdiction with the NGB. Though SafeSport sends a formal email accepting or rejecting jurisdiction of a complaint, it offers no explanation for its decision. Although the ASC has extensive SafeSport training, its role at USAW has been mostly clerical, functioning basically as the administrative assistant for the Ethics Committee.

As mentioned above, the Ethics Committee is made up of two athlete representatives and four independent members. All independent members are distinguished attorneys, with varying degrees of experience conducting investigations. The Committee meets the first Friday of every month, goes through every case on the Ethics Tracker, with the members reporting on the status of their assigned matters. At that time, new cases are assigned to individual Committee members for handling.

While members of the Ethics Committee believe that the members “act with great care and with high level of ethical standards,” the Committee has no established guidelines or procedures on how to conduct its business and, specifically, on how to conduct investigations. It relies on the experience of its members. And while some complaints are sent to an external investigator for handling, there are no rules or guidelines establishing when that should happen.

Members of the Ethics Committee told us they were surprised by the total lack of onboarding and guidance – one remarked she was not provided the Bylaws, the Code of Ethics, or information regarding other members of the Committee. She observed it was a group of “all volunteers with good intentions” who “needed guidance. Sometimes it felt like the blind leading the blind.” Committee members are not required to take the SafeSport training and are not necessarily familiar with its Code of Conduct. A former member of the Committee described SafeSport as a “big mystery.” Another former member said she “knew little about SafeSport and the interplay with the Ethics Committee.”

The record-keeping of the Committee is haphazard at best – members are responsible for creating the file for the cases they are assigned, and with no official guidelines, files are inconsistent. File documents, including the report and recommendations, are supposed to be added to the Ethics Tracker, but that has not always been done. Cases are not consistently updated and may appear open even when they have been closed. The Committee receives little or no administrative support from USAW, and it falls on the committee members, particularly the chair, to do all the administrative work that managing the docket of cases requires.

The Ethics Committee generally accepts the recommendation of the member of the Ethics Committee who investigated the complaint and issues its decision. If the Ethics Committee recommends a sanction the case, in theory, moves to the Judicial Committee which hears any challenges to the Ethics Committee decision and decides on the sanction. In practice, the CEO has been writing to the parties involved and sending them the Ethics Committee’s recommendations directly. The Judicial Committee convenes only if an appeal is filed, and it has convened so few times that a member the Judicial Committee we spoke to forgot that she was a member of the Committee.

Members of the Ethics and Judicial Committees like the dual committee system and believe that particularly in a small sport, it may prevent a group from becoming too powerful. Nonetheless, a member of the Ethics Committee suggested that the roles of the committees should be revised and clarified. The volume of complaints, especially in the early days of the Committee, has been a challenge for the functioning of the Committee, as its members are volunteers and have full-time jobs. Members of the Committee acknowledge that there was

a time they were overwhelmed by the volume of complaints. This led to significant turn over in committee membership and significant delays in resolving cases. A leader in the sport who had filed a complaint against a former LWC board member complained about the delay in the process, the lack of communication from the Ethics Committee, and the lack of transparency in the process. She characterized the process as “horrible.”

The sheer number of cases filed before the Committee has continued to increase. In 2019 the Ethics Committee received 14 complaints, and in 2020, 17. As of November 2021 it had already received 37 complaints. These numbers do not include cases filed with the Ethics Committee that have been accepted by SafeSport. Many of the complaints involve postings on social media and racist, sexist, or homophobic opinions expressed by members. The Committee is now working more efficiently and at the time of this report, it had already resolved 32 of the 37 cases filed this year. But as a member of the Committee said, “USAW is up to something like 30,000 members now. A handful of volunteers are hardly able to do justice to complaints that come in, and I feel like we have skated by solely because we have so few bad actors.” She added “I think everyone’s heart is in the right place, but I can’t shake the feeling that we are a sitting duck for an issue down the road if we can’t get ahead of it. There are more cases coming in than we can handle properly.”

Ethics Complaint Process – a Mystery

Notwithstanding the existence of the Code of Ethics and the Ethics Committee, the fact remains that there is a general lack of reporting of misconduct, and a lack of understanding of what misconduct comes within the purview of the Ethics Committee. While there is broad familiarity with SafeSport and what it does, most are unfamiliar with the Ethics Committee and the complaint procedure. Several members of the board acknowledged that they did not know how the Ethics and Judicial Committees work or how complaints for violations of the Code of Ethics are handled. This may, in part, be due to a lack of a clear and consistent explanation of the Committees’ work in the Bylaws and the Code of Ethics. The complaint procedure is described in at least three standalone documents: the Bylaws, the Code of Ethics and the Complaint Procedure Outline, not always in a consistent fashion.

Many athletes, including club owners and athlete representatives, said they did not know there was an Ethics Committee or had no idea how it worked. Many expressed a desire for clearer website instructions on how to file a complaint. “Who you go to with an ethics or other concern should be front and center.” Even board members and presidents of LWCs confessed to having “no clear sense of how the Ethics Committee process works” or of being “not familiar” with it.

Members of the weightlifting community across the board said they would like better communication and training, regarding the Code of Ethics and the process for reporting misconduct. There is a desire for LWCs (now WSOs), athlete representatives and individual clubs to be better educated in the ethics process and to assume an active role in promoting ethical behavior. As a female athlete explained, “abuse starts at the lower level and as a sport we are not talking about it at the lower level.”

Lastly, it is unclear how applicable the ethics complaint process is to staff. USAW has no human resources department, and while by its own terms the Code of Ethics applies to staff, it is not clear to staff members themselves what their recourse is if they face a situation of workplace misconduct or harassment by another staff member, a coach, or even an athlete. While one staff member said she believed the ethics complaint procedure applies in that situation, not everyone we spoke to believed that to be the case.

SAFESPORT

Under the Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017 (the “Safe Sport Authorization Act,” which became a public law on February 14, 2018), SafeSport has exclusive jurisdiction over reports of allegations of sexual abuse and sexual misconduct within the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committees and their NGBs.¹⁰ The Act was passed in response to increased awareness of abuse in sport brought about by high-profile cases in several sports, including, most notably, the Larry Nassar case in gymnastics. The intent was to make reporting safer and easier for athletes and to create an independent and non-conflicted entity that could make determinations without bias or favoritism towards elite athletes or coaches. SafeSport also provides the online training that is required for certification of all coaches and technical officials, as well as athletes and other stakeholders, to participate in competitions.¹¹

Though SafeSport was created to increase confidence in investigations, many expressed skepticism about it. A common sentiment is that SafeSport is set up to “shield” NGBs. One LWC president said, “People feel about SafeSport as people feel about HR – it is a corporate tool to protect the organization.” Others simply referred to it as “a cover your ass” or “check the box” thing that they do and do not believe it is there “to protect victims.” The term “SafeSport” is sometimes used as a joke – some athletes and coaches say people yell “SafeSport!” any time someone makes an off-color remark.

Many people we spoke to indicated they would not go to SafeSport if they had an issue (“I have no confidence in SafeSport whatsoever”).¹² One athlete said they did not see it as “a valid safe process” and that it just “looks good on paper.” Others “have no idea how the SafeSport process works” or think it works mainly for child abuse. As a former LWC president put it, “There are some who think SafeSport will not help them.”

Some who went to SafeSport with complaints believe nothing happened, that their complaint was not thoroughly investigated, or were frustrated with lack of transparency. Because of a case backlog, some cases take a long time for SafeSport to address, further undermining belief in its efficacy. As one member of the Ethics Committee noted, “SafeSport has backlog

10 The Center for SafeSport has exclusive jurisdiction over allegations of sexual misconduct, including child sexual abuse and any misconduct that is reasonably related to an underlying allegation of sexual misconduct; criminal charges or dispositions involving child abuse or sexual misconduct; misconduct relating to reporting of child abuse of sexual misconduct; aiding and abetting when it relates to the Center’s process; misconduct relating to the Center’s process and other inappropriate conduct as defined in the Code. The Center has discretionary jurisdiction over allegations of non-sexual child abuse; emotional and physical misconduct; criminal charges or dispositions not involving child abuse or sexual misconduct; violations of the Minor Athlete Abuse Prevention Policy or other similar Proactive Policy violations. Sexual misconduct is defined to include sexual or gender related harassment; non-consensual sexual contact; non-consensual sexual intercourse; sexual exploitation; bullying, hazing or other inappropriate conduct of a sexual nature. SafeSport Code for the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement, effective April 1, 2021.

11 As a condition of membership in USAW or participation in a USAW sanctioned event, all athletes, coaches, trainers, agents, support personnel, team staff and any person who participates in USAW or its sanctioned events agrees to be bound by the code and policies of the US Center for SafeSport and agrees to its jurisdiction for the resolution of alleged violations of those policies and code.

12 One coach told us he had asked his followers on social media if they would feel comfortable going to SafeSport if an issue arose. Of the 27 responses, 81 percent said no, and 19 percent said yes (5 out of 6 of those were white men). When asked why not, respondents gave four main reasons: they believe SafeSport is set up to protect the NGB; they would go to court instead; they were discouraged after hearing the Roberts story; and they believe SafeSport caters to the elite.

and holds on to cases for a year and a half (especially lower priority cases). What is the point in trying to report if nothing happens in a year and a half?” A club owner said, “You can’t wait for weeks if you are afraid of someone,” noting that people are reluctant to report because they don’t see SafeSport as effective. A person who has worked in the Olympic movement for decades said, “Word is if you have a problem and want it to be postponed until after the Olympics, take it to SafeSport because they are very slow unless someone is in immediate danger.”

“I have no confidence in SafeSport whatsoever”

Even if SafeSport does investigate a case, its sanctions can seem unevenly applied. Several noted that some people seem to get lifetime bans for minor offenses, and others are not punished at all. One coach said, “I have seen an old Boomer get sanctioned by SafeSport for being un-PC...but I can’t believe some offensive old dude got in trouble for something minor but nothing happens for rape.” A club owner said, “With SafeSport people feel like either SafeSport ignores you or [respondents are] suspended for life.” Another coach said of SafeSport, “I have had head shaking moments – good people get screwed and bad people get away.” On enforcement, an Olympic staffer said, “SafeSport has a reputation for having no teeth – anyone willing to fight it can get it overturned – like a speeding ticket if you show up for court.”

On the other hand, several people also expressed concern that SafeSport could be used as a tool to get back at people and that just filing the complaint, which is easy, can ruin someone’s reputation and blemish a career unfairly.

SafeSport’s reputation may in part be a holdover from the very long delays when it started and was severely understaffed. In addition, complaints not seen as posing an immediate risk of harm may be moved to the end of the queue. One person very familiar with SafeSport explained “SafeSport is on a journey and it is getting better. USADA had the same problems when it started. SafeSport is now fully staffed and it is working through the backlog. But it also needs to prioritize cases that are more urgent.”

A few who filed complaints said they had positive experiences with their investigators. SafeSport contacted one complainant eight months after she filed her complaint, but she described the investigator as “kind and patient” and said she was good about explaining the process to her.

As SafeSport continues to evolve, there are opportunities for USAW to complement its work by strengthening the ethics complaint processes, providing more information around safety, and supporting people as they go through SafeSport processes. Ultimately, though, supportive measures will not be sufficient if SafeSport itself is not seen as providing meaningful accountability for abuse.

COMPETITIONS

In addition to lack of expertise in managing problems at a local or regional level, athletes and coaches told us that there was no clear guidance about what to do at national, or particularly,

international competitions if a serious problem of sexual misconduct arises. A technical official who was sexually assaulted at an international competition said she had no idea where to go to file a report. When she shared her experience with other senior women in weightlifting, she heard responses such as “We know about [him]” and “Oh yes, that has happened to me. These guys are like that,” which was the last thing she wanted to hear. She ultimately filed through the IWF portal, though nothing came of it.

This referee would like to see more attention and protection given to those who travel to a foreign country to referee. This sentiment was shared by another veteran in the sport and international referee, who wishes there was a mechanism for reporting sexual misconduct that takes place during international competitions. She still says she feels “totally unsafe while in international competitions.”

Team Leaders do not have any guidance or specialized training on how to handle a report of sexual misconduct. Until 2017, the team accompanying the athletes was often entirely male, which could be another barrier to reporting. Having women on the team is not a guarantee of a better response, however, if they are not trained properly. One team leader said, “It is learn as you go. Training comes from being at 150 competitions.”

With a lack of information available about what to do if something happens at a competition, dozens of people said “they would go to Phil” if they had a problem or to someone they know on the board. One said, “If I heard of an incident at international event, I would go straight to the director of the competition and ask them to deal with it.” Interviewees widely shared that no information about what to do if there is a problem is included in material given to athletes planning to attend international competitions. Similarly, no information about how to report a concern or available resources is posted or shared widely at national competitions, though people are generally familiar with SafeSport requirements due to training. However, as one former athlete and abuse survivor said, “You can have as many training videos as you want, but it comes down to the culture of the team.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUPPORTING ATHLETES

Going through the process of filing a complaint can be enormously stressful for all involved, in part because there is often a great deal of uncertainty about the process. Getting access to information and support should not rest on having connections to USAW leadership. Rather, systems should be in place to provide support and information confidentially to all who need it, regardless of who is seeking help or who is in a leadership position at USAW at the time.

A well-known case that pre-dates Andrews’ tenure is an example of what can go wrong when a culture supports turning a blind eye to abuse. In earlier years, young teenage athletes would attend competitions with older athletes with little or no parental supervision.¹³ The mother of an elite athlete said, unlike other sports, there was not a community of parents who shared information and new parents “only know the crumbs the coach feeds them.” She only learned years later that the athletes were not closely supervised.

A 38-year-old married trainer initiated a sexual relationship with an athlete starting when she was 14 years-old, which she believes was common knowledge amongst the team leaders and coaches who saw them together on trips. “Everyone who mattered knew” but ignored it. She was manipulated and did not realize it was wrong until much later as she “didn’t even

13 In interviews with current youth athletes and parents, most felt that parents or chaperones provide more supervision now than in the past and they did not express significant concerns about security, though some suggested a greater physical separation of youth and more senior athletes would be a good idea.

understand advanced algebra yet.” She eventually reported the trainer to police in 2005. He pled guilty to the abuse and went to jail. In the local news story announcing the trainer’s indictment for aggravated child molestation and statutory rape, the coach who worked with them both expressed sympathy for the trainer saying “I’m sorry to read something like this happened to him.... I know that [he] is a good man. This is obviously something that is a disaster to his life.”

At the sentencing hearing, she recalled she had to sit there while her team (which had been like family), her coach, and the team doctor testified as character witnesses on behalf of the defendant. She recalls they testified that she “deserved it,” “was old enough to know better,” and essentially said “yeah that happened but he is not a terrible person.” She did not consider going to USAW with a complaint at the time because they were “not big on accountability.”

Her older sister, who competed in weightlifting at the Olympics and had trained with the same coach, described the courtroom experience as “a total betrayal.” She was still weightlifting but faced retaliation at her gym after deciding to no longer work with that coach. She felt that her former coach ostracized her and gave her friends a hard time for “traitorously talking” with her and shared that he sabotaged her training space by making essential equipment unavailable. It quickly became impossible for her to continue her Olympic training in the facility. Ultimately, she had to build a platform to train in her garage and find a new coach.

The mother recalls that USAW never once reached out to offer support during the whole ordeal and she felt isolated. USAW made no effort to determine who knew about the relationship or how the system failed to protect her daughter. Although these events happened some time ago, those involved still have a prominent role in weightlifting. Only recently, as a result of efforts by USAW’s new leadership, has the trainer been banned from the sport.

Another elite athlete recalled an incident from two years ago at a competition in which a teammate was egged on by teammates (and given \$5) to say the “N word” on camera. The videotape was then posted as part of another athlete’s story on Snapchat. It was very upsetting to several members of the team and when the competition was over, the athlete angrily confronted her teammate about it in front of USAW staff members and a coach. A staff member asked what happened and she explained the situation but was met with silence, which she interpreted to mean nothing would happen. Meanwhile, several white athletes were laughing. An ethics complaint was filed by another person and an investigator reached out to the athlete and her mother. However, to them it felt like a “checking the box” exercise. No one ever reached out to her to see how she was or apologize for not supporting her and as far as she knew, nothing happened as a result of the investigation. Ultimately, she was more upset by how the adults handled the situation than the underlying event. She said, “It made me feel like I wasn’t safe on the team and that if I had an issue with racism they wouldn’t protect me.” Even though she loves weightlifting, she still feels uncomfortable around the white teammates who laughed at the incident. What “could have been an opportunity to make people feel safe” and have a meaningful discussion with the whole team about the impact of language had the opposite effect and undermined the cohesiveness of the team and confidence in USAW.

In contrast, the TO who experienced a sexual assault at an international competition spoke positively of USAW leadership and described Andrews as “very supportive” and “a rock” which was important to her particularly since the IWF was extremely slow to respond. USAW also paid for her counseling, which she appreciated. Others who have been through SafeSport processes either as a complainant or as a respondent said they wished they had availed themselves of their right to have an advocate with them for interviews as the SafeSport Code permits. They did not recognize the need for support until it was too late.

USAW should have clear systems in place to follow up with people going through complaint processes to ensure they have the resources they need for support and are informed about the status of their case.

MENTAL HEALTH ASSISTANCE

Access to counseling may be crucial for those who have experienced trauma. Recognizing the need to provide support for its members, USAW launched an Athlete Wellness Program to provide pro bono counseling to athletes at all levels or stages in their career who have experienced trauma, the first of its kind for an NGB. USAW launched the program in 2018, partially in response to the Burns case, but also because it realized some weightlifters were former gymnasts who had suffered abuse at the hands of Larry Nassar.

USAW is rightly proud of the program which is a model for other sports. USAW organized a network of counselors willing to provide counseling gratis. An estimated 25-50 athletes have asked for assistance. In order to access resources, however, athletes need to contact Andrews or Sanchez directly and provide enough information to indicate that they have experienced trauma and are eligible. Andrews or Sanchez then try to match the athlete with an available provider in the area.

While innovative and well-intended, the Wellness Program has faced its challenges. Some athletes expressed concern about confidentiality and repercussions in the sport by revealing details of personal trauma to Sanchez and Andrews. Others complained that the system was not efficient; it sometimes took too long to get a referral and they had to prod Andrews for a response. Andrews said a challenge for him was locating pro bono providers near where athletes lived since there was often a request for help in locations where they did not have counselors available and this process took time.

Recognizing the need for anonymity and speed, USAW has recently contracted with BetterHelp Counseling who, through an app, will be able to quickly link athletes to nearby resources and guarantee complete confidentiality. BetterHelp will inform USAW only of the total number of hours of counseling that has been used and will give no information to identify the person seeking assistance. Stakeholders also suggested that, when possible, USAW should affirmatively promote these services with vulnerable populations. For example, if a coach has been arrested for sexual abuse or committed suicide, proactively informing athletes at the club or those who trained with the coach of counseling services might be an appropriate way to show support. Some expressed concern that, in general, there is not enough awareness of the program.

THE 2017 SAFESPORT CASE

The SafeSport case against Colin Burns continues to cast a shadow over USAW and SafeSport more than three years after it was formally resolved. The case was described by interviewees as “an enormous failure” and “heartbreaking.” Many people we interviewed had questions about USAW’s role in the case and saw a disconnect between USAW’s stated support for survivors and athletes and how it treated Jennyfer Roberts. One club owner described it as a “huge ding to USAW’s credibility.” Another said of USAW, “every time they should have turned right, they turned left.” One person said it seemed like it was “USAW and Colin Burns v. Roberts.” Many people felt it showed that certain athletes and coaches are “untouchable.” Others felt USAW washed its hands of the case by turning it over to SafeSport

which allowed them to say, “Not my problem.” The case has also caused many in the sport to view SafeSport negatively and express resistance to reporting, making them feel “unsafe.”

That these concerns persist is evident in responses to the most recent USAW Member survey. In response to an open-ended survey question about “what would you like to see from USAW in 2021,” one member wrote “A public apology for the handling of the Jennyfer Roberts case, along with a good faith effort to ensure such a fiasco never happens again.” Another raised the case saying “I find it difficult to support USAW now, knowing other victims may have to experience the same process.”

The circumstances of the case – where Burns was a USAW Board member and elite athlete during the investigation and his coach, Ursula Garza Papandrea, was chair of the board – added to the perception that powerful people were protected and the process was unfair. Lack of transparency around SafeSport investigations, confidentiality requirements, and lack of communication created an environment that fostered rumors in the close-knit weightlifting community. Papandrea’s social media post following the arbitration, USAW’s response to it, and ties between USAW staff and Burns add to the perception that USAW either favored Burns or did not make the case a priority. The purpose of this report is not to look at the underlying events or the SafeSport investigation or ruling, but rather to obtain clarity on USAW’s role and draw lessons for other misconduct cases that may arise.

In order to better understand the role of USAW in the SafeSport investigation and how it engaged in the process, Vestry Laight reviewed thousands of emails collected from Andrews, USAW’s lawyers, and Roberts, as well as some contemporaneous social media saved by screen shots.¹⁴ In addition, we collected documents to confirm recollections of events or payments whenever possible. We also spent hours with Roberts and Andrews and interviewed Burns and Papandrea as well as current and former USAW staff and other coaches and athletes with knowledge of the case. Because of SafeSport’s concerns with protecting the confidentiality of its proceedings, we were unable to interview former SafeSport staff members who were involved in this case to confirm their interactions with USAW. To help navigate the story, a chronology of key events is included at the end of this report.

STATUS OF SAFESPORT

In February of 2017 SafeSport was planning its public rollout. When the case against Burns case was formally referred to it on March 6, 2017, SafeSport had not officially opened its doors. Indeed, SafeSport’s Code for the US Olympic and Paralympic Movement (the “SafeSport Code”) had just been promulgated on March 3, 2017. The Burns case was one of the first cases it investigated. In the backdrop, while the case was being investigated, the Larry Nassar case was unfolding dramatically in court.

As discussed above, SafeSport was created to make reporting easier and safer for athletes and to prevent undue interference from NGBs who might be biased towards favored athletes

¹⁴ Andrews sent his laptop to be searched by Vestry Laight, but it only contained emails from May 2020 to April 2021. Communications with USOC confirmed that their servers do not keep emails for longer than two years so we were not able to perform an additional search. However, in response to an unrelated Congressional inquiry on May 12, 2018, Andrews had searched for and saved all emails involving SafeSport, sexual abuse, sexual misconduct, and his main point of contact at SafeSport. Those emails dated back as far as 2015, prior to a change in email retention policy, and were reviewed. In addition, Andrews downloaded all “SafeSport” emails on March 18, 2019, at USAW’s lawyers request in response to Roberts’ lawsuit, and shared those with us as well. While it is not possible to know whether we have been able to recover every email communication, we believe we have been able to review all available emails.

or coaches. To prevent interference and instill confidence in its independence, NGBs are kept at arm's length from cases and provided little information about investigations.¹⁵ To protect privacy, the SafeSport Code specifies that "Information will be shared only as necessary with investigators, witnesses and the Responding Party."

The 2017 SafeSport Code acknowledged, "interim measures may be appropriate to ensure the safety or well-being of the Reporting Party."¹⁶ Moreover "Interim measures may also be appropriate where an allegation against the Responding Party is sufficiently serious that the Responding Party's continued participation could be detrimental to sport or its reputation." Interim measures listed included "altering training schedules, providing chaperones, implementing contact limitations between the parties and suspensions."¹⁷ The SafeSport Code said it did not preclude an NGB "from taking appropriate interim measures upon notice of an imminent threat of harm," but did not otherwise define an NGB's authority to act.¹⁸ Unless imposed under emergency circumstances, the Respondent was entitled to notice and has a right to request a hearing to determine if there is reasonable cause to impose interim measures.¹⁹

In the time since the Burns case was investigated the SafeSport Code has been amended annually and its approach to interim measures has been revised. In addition, the U.S. Center for SafeSport has expanded significantly.

BACKGROUND

Information about the allegations involving Burns and Roberts is in the public domain but, in accordance with SafeSport confidentiality restrictions, the evidence and investigation will not be discussed here except to recount essential facts. Burns and Roberts were selected to represent TeamUSA at the Aquece Rio Weightlifting Test Event in April 2016 ("Rio Test Event"). On the last night of the event, April 10, 2016, at around 2:00 or 3:00 am, after a night of drinking, Burns entered Roberts' hotel room and engaged in sexual contact with her. That incident ultimately formed the basis of what would become Roberts' SafeSport complaint.

At the time of the Rio Test Event, Burns was a National Champion and an athlete representative on USAW's board of directors. He had also been a member of TeamUSA at the 2013 Pan-American Championship and had competed in the 2014 World Weightlifting Championships. His competition coach, Papandrea, is a renowned figure in the weightlifting community and was chair of the USAW Board of Directors. Roberts, a former competitive diver at her university, had been competing in weightlifting for only two years when she was invited to Rio but had quickly risen through the ranks and had a promising career in front of her. The Rio Test Event was the first time she had been selected to represent the US in an international

15 Under Appendix A of the SafeSport Code in effect in 2017, in the provisions governing confidentiality, it states that "It will be necessary for the Office to (a) notify the NGB of an allegation involving a Covered Individual from that NGB, (b) if the Office seeks an interim measure, (c) if the Office proceeds to a full investigation, and (d) any final decision regarding whether a violation occurred and sanctions, if any." Article II(B)(3).

16 SafeSport Practices and Procedures for the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement, Appendix A, Article V ("Appendix A").

17 Appendix A, Article V(D).

18 Appendix A, Article V.

19 Appendix A, Article V (A) and Appendix B, Supplementary Rules for U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Safesport Arbitrations, R-40.

competition. At the time of the Rio Test Event she was relatively unknown and new to the sport, having qualified for this event after only her second national competition.

On March 5, 2017, Roberts sent an email to USAW staff member Lance Williams and reported she had been assaulted. Williams saw the email the following morning and contacted Andrews who referred the case to SafeSport. SafeSport formally accepted the case after both parties consented to SafeSport jurisdiction.²⁰

Nearly a year later, on February 14, 2018, the day the Safe Sport Act went into effect, SafeSport issued its decision finding that Burns committed “non-consensual sex acts” and additionally found that Burns lied to SafeSport investigators. As a result, SafeSport issued a sanction suspending Burns from participating in any activity sanctioned by the US Olympic Committee (USOC), USAW, or any other NGB for a total of 12 years, 10 for sexual abuse and two for abuse of process. Burns appealed the decision to arbitrators. On July 20, 2018, the panel of arbitrators overturned the 10-year ban ruling that SafeSport had not proved by a preponderance of the evidence that Burns had engaged in non-consensual sex. The arbitration panel upheld the SafeSport finding that Burns lied repeatedly to investigators but reduced his suspension for abuse of process from two years to 18-months.²¹

Between the date of the referral to SafeSport and the issuance of SafeSport’s findings on February 14, 2018, Burns continued to serve on USAW’s Board, was featured on promotional materials, competed on two international teams, and continued to partake in other activities normally available to elite athletes. USAW did not affirmatively communicate with Roberts at all, either before or after the SafeSport decision or arbitration. USAW also did not discuss the case with Burns. Because no interim measures were put in place, efforts to keep the athletes apart at events were informal. Even after sanctions were implemented on February 15, 2018, requests by Burns’ lawyers to stay the sanctions to allow him to participate in events led to lack of clarity and confusion at the National Championships in 2018.

ROBERTS’ PERSPECTIVE

Roberts said that she tried to put the Rio incident behind her but found it difficult. She was hoping to compete on international teams and was reluctant to be seen as a “troublemaker” for fear it would hurt her chances at selection. She was also concerned about getting others in trouble for drinking, even though they were all over 21 and the Code of Conduct at the time did not prohibit drinking. However, over the following months she found she was increasingly unable to focus on her training and was fearful of seeing Burns at competitions.

Before Rio, Roberts had been very excited to go to the May 2016 National Championships in Salt Lake City and planned to stay to watch her friends try out for the Olympic team. However, in a note she wrote to herself from 2017, she said “I almost didn’t go to Nationals in 2016. It effected my whole life, but most notably at first was my training, because I was training for Nationals where I knew I would see him. I struggled in every training session until one day I just broke down. My coach was obviously confused and concerned.”

²⁰ Because the events investigated occurred before the U.S. Center for SafeSport had jurisdiction, SafeSport required both parties’ consent to investigate and used USAW’s Code of Conduct that was in effect in 2016 as the governing standard.

²¹ Scott Reid, “Team USA weightlifter Jennyfer Roberts reported being raped, but SafeSport process only added to her anxiety,” Orange County Register, March 13, 2019

She went to the 2016 Nationals in Salt Lake City, but after seeing Burns at breakfast at the venue hotel and elsewhere, she was glad she decided to change her flight to leave early, right after her competition.

Roberts shared that over the next several months she felt her life breaking down, both at work and in her relationships. She coped by drinking too much, which often ended in tears. She wrote in a note to herself “it took months after Nationals to feel somewhat normal.” A teammate recalled Roberts having difficulty coming to the gym and often crying during that period. In the interim, Roberts injured herself fairly seriously. Though she could not compete at the American Open in Orlando at the end of 2016, she decided to go anyway to support her friends. She said, “It was my way of proving to myself I was ok, I could handle this.” While there, she ended up confiding in a friend about the incident. He, in turn, approached USAW staffer Williams on her behalf to raise the issue of an assault, without identifying Roberts, and ask how it would be handled. Williams assured him it would be taken seriously no matter who was involved and on December 29, 2016, followed up with an email providing options for reporting.

Decision to Report

According to Roberts, in early 2017, she felt worse than ever. She was preparing for Nationals, trying to focus on her training, but also struggling to figure out how to deal with her trauma. She thought it would be better at the American Open in Orlando, and it was not. She realized she could not continue seeing Burns at competitions because it took months to recover afterwards. Meanwhile she received promotional materials from BarBend, the Official Media Partner of USAW, featuring Burns who was at the time USAW’s top male weightlifter. Roberts said she realized she was not going to be able to move on if she did not do something. Yet she was “afraid if [she] reported to USAW, where Burns was an athlete representative on the board as well as a better and more well-known and well-connected athlete that [she] wouldn’t get a fair shot.” On March 5, Roberts ultimately decided to file a complaint both for the sake of her mental health and out of fear that something like this could happen again if Burns made another international team. Although reporting was difficult, she wrote “The more time passes the more I struggle with it; and I can no longer keep watching him in this sport knowing that I could have and should have said something.” She sent Williams an email with a detailed account of what happened in Rio and made an official complaint with USAW.

Later she wrote that sending that email “was a huge turning point for me to finally find joy in weightlifting and in life again.” Williams assured her that “USAW will take this matter very seriously...I will see that we handle this matter promptly and swiftly.” After her initial contact with USAW and its lawyers about referring the matter to SafeSport, Roberts had minimal interaction with USAW: “USAW was completely out of the picture.”

Roberts’ only contact from then on regarding her complaint was with the SafeSport investigator who repeatedly assured her USAW was informed of what was happening. Roberts’ main concern was that the investigation be completed in time for 2017 Nationals. It was not.

2017 Nationals

Roberts said she was very anxious before the May Nationals and wanted to ensure she would not have to see Burns during her competition. She contacted SafeSport repeatedly, expressing concern that she would see Burns in the warm-up area because he coached his girlfriend who competed in the weight class just before her. She recalls being told by SafeSport that they could not really do anything about that and that USAW was “unable to make that accommodation.” Following a phone discussion, SafeSport sent Roberts a formal email “As

we discussed we would ask that you avoid any unnecessary or intentional contact with the other party at the National Weightlifting Competition this weekend. This would include not attending portions of the event where the other party is competing...Phil Andrews is aware of the situation and can assist you should any issues arise.”

As far as Roberts knew, apart from not attending each other’s competitions, no measure was in place to ensure the parties were separated. She did not stay at the venue hotel in order to avoid Burns and did not attend other competitions for fear of running into him, though she was still confronted with enormous banners of Burns promoting the competition. Another athlete remembers Roberts being uncomfortable at Nationals when he met her – he thought she was a loner or hyper-individualistic because she was on her own so much, but later figured out she was avoiding Burns.

Her friends acted as lookouts to divert Roberts from crossing paths with Burns and recall that Roberts could not warm up when she wanted to for fear of running into Burns. A friend said, “It seemed like [Burns] was everywhere, being celebrated and around every corner” and recalls Roberts being visibly upset the entire competition. Roberts introduced herself to Andrews who seemed not to recognize her, though SafeSport had told her that he would be coming to meet her at her weigh-in (he did not). She recalls he just said “Oh hi. Good luck,” which did not give her a lot of confidence.

When she arrived for the competition, Burns was there coaching in the warm-up area. Seeing Burns there caused her a great deal of stress and impacted her performance at competition. Roberts’ friend also recalled Burns being there, coaching and loading weights for his girlfriend and how stressful it was not having information from USAW about measures to keep them apart.

No one from USAW reached out to Roberts during the competition apart from Williams. He introduced himself to her at Nationals and congratulated her on her performance and told her how impressed he was. Williams’ outreach meant enough to Roberts that she followed up thanking him for it in an email. He later left USAW and so, apart from that supportive email exchange, she had no further contact with him.

Delays

According to Roberts, as the year passed, she was increasingly frustrated with the lack of a decision from SafeSport. On July 11, 2017, the investigator told her the decision would be made “soon.” Roberts continued to press for the decision, particularly because the Pan-American Championship was approaching, which she had considered attending but would not if Burns was going to be there. She expressed concern for the safety of other athletes with whom Burns could interact at the event. With no decision from SafeSport, Burns competed for the US at the Pan-American Championships and won a gold medal. Andrews posted a link to an article about the win and picture of Burns on Facebook saying, “Nice job Colin Burns capturing our first PanAm Championship of the week.” In the same thread, Andrews also responded to jokes about the unflattering picture of Burns by saying “This will be the credential for the worlds.” Roberts said she took that comment to mean that Andrews had no doubt Burns would be able to compete at the World Championships later in the year and she assumed that Andrews believed Burns would not be found responsible for misconduct or that he knew no decision would be made before Worlds, further adding to her impression that USAW was firmly on Burns’ side.

In early August, Roberts was informed the investigation was complete. At the end of August SafeSport told her they were in the final stages of the process and hoped to have it completed

in the near future. On October 2, 2017, in response to Roberts' inquiry on the status of the case, she was told "Just waiting on final review." Over the next few months Roberts continued to ask for updates.

SafeSport still had not reached a decision before the World Weightlifting Championships in late November 2017.

2017 American Open Finals

The American Open Finals were held in Anaheim in December 2017. Roberts said that she did not anticipate that Burns would be coaching at the American Open Series and did not raise the issue with SafeSport. While she was competing, he appeared in the warmup area just before her last clean and jerk. No measures had been taken by USAW or SafeSport to ensure the parties were not in contact. Despite the stress, Roberts won the American Open Finals. However, she said she felt the joy of her victory was tarnished by Burns' presence. Rather than celebrate winning her first major competition, she hid in the tunnel area and asked someone to retrieve her things so she would not have to go to the warmup area. She snuck out to avoid running into him.

In January 2018, Roberts received a broken trophy from USAW for the American Open Series Finals which provided an opening for her to contact Andrews and inquire about the status of the case. She sent an email to Andrews on January 30, 2018, informing him about the broken trophy and noting her disappointment about the length of time SafeSport was taking to investigate her complaint and the lack of action. Andrews responded, "Hi Jennyfer, I've been pushing the Center on this issue, and I am so sorry it has taken this long. It's out of my control but that is absolutely no excuse and frankly I am ashamed it has taken so long."

Notification of a Decision

Two weeks later, on February 14, 2018, Roberts was notified that SafeSport had made a decision and was suspending Burns for 12 years. SafeSport provided the decision via a link to a private folder containing both the decision and the investigative file. The link was set to expire on February 22 and the email warned that the documents were "*strictly confidential* and are for your review only. The documents are not to be downloaded, copied, printed, or otherwise disseminated in any way; doing so would constitute a violation of SafeSport policy" (emphasis in original). Roberts took the warning very seriously and kept information about her case confidential for fear she would be punished if she went public. She did not copy the file, or even read past the decision because she was told by the investigator she did not have to as it would be difficult for her to read. She now regrets not having reviewed the full file considering how it has all played out. "It seems all the work just 'poof' disappeared."

On February 21, Burns filed to have SafeSport's decision reviewed by an arbitration panel. The sanctions imposed by SafeSport went into effect immediately when it issued the decision though Burns had the right to request a stay of the sanctions pending the arbitration proceeding.

Roberts told us that for her, matters did not improve after the decision came down. The American Open Series 1 ("The Arnold") was scheduled for March 1 -4, 2018. Roberts again asked SafeSport and USAW to ensure Burns would not be there. She sent an email to Andrews on February 26, 2018, stating "I wanted to make sure that he would not be at the Arnold. I know he has a team and athletes he coaches (I saw him in the warmup area while I was competing at AO finals) and I just want to make sure that will not be the case at this

competition.” Andrews responded that all communication has been through SafeSport and that he assumed SafeSport had informed Burns he was not able to go to the Arnold. Andrews also said he did not have jurisdiction over the areas of the Arnold that are not the weightlifting championship.

Despite having sought assurances that Burns would not be there, while on her way to the Arnold, Roberts received a call from SafeSport’s Legal Affairs Director asking if it was ok if Burns went to the competition, noting that Burns’ lawyer had said they had competed together twice before and “it was fine.” She said she was shocked SafeSport would even ask her that since the whole reason she reported was to be able to compete without having to see Burns and she had made that very clear throughout the process. No one had informed her that a respondent could request a stay of the suspension pending arbitration. Roberts says this request felt like a betrayal – and made her question SafeSport’s understanding of its own mission, which now seemed like a farce. She refused.

Until May 2018, few seemed to know about SafeSport’s decision and the ensuing suspension. Burns’ absence from the Arnold was attributed to his being sick. Roberts thought she now would be able to attend competitions without worrying about his presence. Yet in April Roberts saw through social media that Burns had been allowed to coach at University Nationals. She heard he had been allowed to coach at another competition as well, despite the ban. She began to feel like the ban was in effect only if she asked for it.

2018 Nationals

Preparing for 2018 Nationals in Overland Park in May, Roberts felt she had a good shot at winning, but at the same time was still worried that Burns would show up. Her boyfriend at the time reassured her he would not, but after they arrived at the Nationals venue, her boyfriend saw Burns at the venue hotel and texted Roberts, “He’s here.” Roberts remembered that she immediately tried texting and calling SafeSport thinking “This just cannot be.” SafeSport was slow to respond so she felt she had no choice but to turn to Andrews. Andrews responded but did not seem clear on what was happening as he was also awaiting directions from SafeSport. Eventually Roberts heard from her boyfriend that Burns was asked to leave. SafeSport also informed her that Burns was told through his advisor that he was not allowed in the event space or related spaces and to notify them immediately if “you encounter such a situation.” Roberts did not hear back from Andrews. Ultimately, Roberts won the 2018 Nationals, but again, her celebration was short-lived. It appears that during the competition someone had discovered on SafeSport’s website that Burns was suspended and had posted it on social media. The news became the talk of the competition, though at that time most did not know that Roberts was the complainant. But immediately after her event, Roberts had to hear athletes talking about the sanction and speculating if it was true.

Arbitration Decision and the Aftermath

The Arbitration was eventually set for July 13. Roberts was given very little information about the proceeding and limited time to prepare for the hearing, which she felt went very badly. A week later the arbitrators’ decision came out reversing SafeSport’s findings on the sexual misconduct but upholding the abuse of process charge. Roberts had been on a canoe trip at the time the decision came down and did not have internet access. She learned about the arbitration decision by phone just before getting to her service-free campsite and was completely devastated. By the time the trip ended, news of the arbitration decision was already all over social media and she saw that Papandrea, then chair of USAW, had posted a picture of herself with a drink on Instagram saying “All you shit talkers bout to eat some crow.

But that's none of my business #weightliftinglife #standbymines #learntokeeppyourmouthshut #unlessyouknowthetruth." The post received 389 likes, including from Andrews, high profile coaches, and clubs.²² By the time Roberts saw it, there was already a lengthy discussion chain on Reddit in which Papandrea continued to defend her post, and in which Roberts felt Papandrea implied she should have been able to easily prove her case because of SafeSport's low burden of proof. Roberts described Papandrea's remarks in a note later that year as "Comments that sent me further into grief and continue to burden my mental health and therapy sessions to this day. Comments that solidified why I didn't come forward for almost a year after my rape." Another athlete recalled, "Given the power Ursula had, I can only imagine the pressure Jen was under" and described what he felt was a victim-shaming campaign. A member of USAW's Athlete Advisory Council also posted in an exchange about the case with another athlete, "The chick straight up lied and is the reason REAL rape victims are not believed." These posts further cemented Roberts' view, and that of others in the weightlifting community, that USAW was against her.

After the arbitration a few people sent Roberts messages of support, which suggested to Roberts that some people knew she was the complainant. She was identified as the victim in a weightlifting TMZ Instagram post. The post was redacted after a few minutes but was up long enough for a friend to send her a screen shot. Roberts wrote in an email at the time that, "training hasn't been going well. Just making it to the gym is a struggle and when I do go, I barely do anything."

After the arbitration, Roberts attended one more competition, the American Open Series 3 in Las Vegas in September 2018, which she describes as "horrendous." Papandrea was at the check-in desk so Roberts did not want to go in. She sent someone else to get her credentials. Knowing that some people knew she was the complainant, but not knowing what they knew or assumed given the confidentiality around the case, made the competition extremely stressful for Roberts.

Roberts told us that ultimately, the sport was ruined for her. A teammate recalled "She had just won nationals and couldn't lift a barbell." She placed a disappointing fifth in the Las Vegas American Open and decided never to put herself through that again. A friend recalled Roberts "left weightlifting because she felt so defeated." Moreover, she told us that the thought of continuing in the same sport as Burns once his ban was lifted was too much. That summer she wrote to a confidante, "If I ever have to be at the same venue as him while competing again, I'm not sure I could handle the emotional toll any more than I already have." She has not competed in weightlifting since.

The case also impacted others around Roberts, including her team and her coach. One of Roberts' teammates recalled feeling like "at the end of the day she [Roberts] was "completely abandoned... [the case] was so horribly handled [by USAW] it is hard for me to be associated with the sport. If I had a choice I would not be a member based on what happened with this... At the end of the day, she's a person too and she wasn't treated like a person." Their team broke up.

In March 2019, Roberts decided to go public about her experience, speaking with the media for the first time and filing a lawsuit because "if I remain silent, he wins, nothing will change and I cannot move forward in that way."

After the news became public, several people expressed support, but others were abusive and

22 Andrews says he was in Chicago at the time of the post "idly scrolling through Instagram." He left his room and went downstairs and ran into someone who alerted him to what he had liked and he removed it as soon as he realized what he had done, which he says was about 30 minutes later.

expressed skepticism about her story. Among those who commented on social media was Tim Swords, a prominent coach who had been head of the women's team in Rio when the incident happened. He posted on Facebook in response to Roberts' article "You should have come to me when this happened. The fact is that none of you followed USAW code of conduct. Brazil is a dangerous place and you all left the hotel to party. I feel terrible for what happened to you but none of you used common sense. You can contact me any time if you wish." He mistakenly believed that drinking was in violation of USAW's Code of Conduct at the time, but his response affirmed Roberts' feeling at the time: that she did not have a person she could safely report to on the Team.²³ Moreover, because a coach had urged her to keep quiet the next day about the drinking, she had believed that telling someone would get the team in trouble. USAW did not comment in response to the vitriol on social media.

Roberts describes her whole experience as "nothing short of a nightmare." All she wanted was to be able to compete in an environment without Burns. The "business as usual" approach left Roberts feeling like USAW did not support or believe her during the investigation. Lack of information about why USAW was continuing to promote Burns or what measures were taken to keep them apart led her to believe that her case was being dismissed and that Burns' status as an elite athlete was more important than allegations of abuse against him.

USAW'S PERSPECTIVE

The first time USAW became aware of the possible sexual assault report was in December of 2016, at the American Open in Orlando. There, a friend of Roberts asked Williams, then the Associate Executive Director of Sport for USAW, about what action USAW would take if, hypothetically, someone reported an assault. Williams said it would be taken seriously. He then reached out to the incoming COO of SafeSport for her advice and forwarded that advice to the friend who passed it on to Roberts on December 29, 2016. The advice suggested, in part, if she wanted to report a violation of USAW policy, she should report it to Andrews or to the incoming COO of SafeSport. Andrews and Williams did not know who the athlete was nor where or when the incident occurred, but Andrews reached out to a few people he thought it could be to encourage them to come forward.

They did not get a response and took a "wait and see" approach. The matter dropped until Williams received Roberts' email on March 5, 2017. Williams called Andrews early in the morning of March 6, informing him of Roberts' email reporting an assault. Andrews received the call while he was at the Colorado Springs Airport waiting to catch a flight to an event. In light of the seriousness of the matter, he canceled his flight, returned to his office and forwarded the report to SafeSport and USAW's outside counsel. SafeSport requested a call with outside counsel to clarify jurisdiction. The call was arranged for 10:30 that morning. During the call, Andrews was told that the investigation and the parties' identities were to be kept in strict confidence and that others could be informed on a "need to know" basis only. He was told that he was to conduct "business as usual," should not talk to the parties about the case or interfere with the investigation, and that SafeSport would take interim measures if necessary. Andrews and counsel communicated with Burns and Roberts separately and formally referred the case to SafeSport for investigation on March 6 after both parties agreed to accept jurisdiction. Andrews said he did not consider having USAW's ethics committee investigate the case because, given Burns' status on the Board and in the sport, and that Burns' coach was the Chair of the Board, the numerous conflicts of interest made "this exactly the type of case SafeSport was meant to handle."

²³ In further exchanges with others who came to Roberts' defense on Facebook, and in a later interview, Swords stated "I am completely on her [Roberts'] side on this one."

Following the referral to SafeSport, Andrews was the only point of contact between USAW and SafeSport regarding this case. Apart from Williams, and one other staff member who needed to know because of his responsibilities, no one else at USAW was initially informed of the allegation.²⁴ In April or May 2017, SafeSport contacted an athlete representative on USAW's Board as a potential witness. He informed Andrews of the matter. As a result, Andrews felt he could inform USAW Board Chair Papandrea that a member of the board was under investigation though he did not identify the Board member.²⁵ Otherwise, he kept the matter to himself, though confided in his then-wife who described him as "distracted" over the case.



Based on the belief that it was business as usual per SafeSport's injunction, Andrews treated Burns as if there was no investigation. Burns remained on USAW's board (and even voted to approve a provision in the Bylaws that would make someone under SafeSport sanction ineligible to serve on USAW's board). He was able to participate in events as expected of an elite athlete. Andrews says he did not believe he had the ability to suspend Burns from the board and also that he expected the investigation to conclude in about two or three months maximum. As time went on, Burns continued to participate actively in USAW activities because Andrews says "He was in a position where it would be odd not to use him. He was also a board member and an athlete rep and his girlfriend had a friend on my staff and to say 'We can't use you' would be a really difficult conversation." In an additional complication, as a board member, Burns, as well as Papandrea, reviewed Andrews in his role as CEO, a position he had held officially for less than a year before the Roberts case arose. Papandrea was also on the Compensation Committee, though that was not of concern to Andrews, who had actually negotiated his salary downward when he took the job, had not asked for a raise, and donated his 2018 bonus to Tokyo Strong. Meanwhile, as the investigation continued, more staff members began to figure out that there was an allegation of abuse against Burns and found it increasingly uncomfortable to continue to pretend nothing was happening.

Andrews says he did not reach out to Roberts because SafeSport had instructed him not to speak to either party about the case. Moreover, he was nervous about what to say and did not know how to support someone in this instance. He was worried that calling her would make

24 The staff member also recalls information about the case was shared on a "need to know" basis only.

25 Papandrea says she had no idea that Burns was the subject of the investigation until Burns informed her of the decision when it came out on February 14, 2018. She said he told her he had been afraid it would end their relationship and so waited until the last minute to tell her.

her relive the events and exacerbate her trauma, particularly if she was also having to talk to SafeSport about the case regularly. Despite having worked as an assistant social worker at the start of his career, he felt at a loss and so did nothing. His wife at the time remembers Andrews being very upset that he was not allowed to reach out to Roberts. She remembers how critical he had been of USA Gymnastics for not reaching out to victims and frequently expressed his frustration that he could not communicate with Roberts. In the time period before the case arose, his wife had had difficult experiences with USOC trying to get sanctions enforced against taekwondo stars Steven and Jean Lopez for sexual abuse. Andrews had shared her frustrations, something that may have also colored his views on what he was able to do.

Shortly after the referral, Andrews sent SafeSport an email expressing concern about the possibility that Roberts and Burns might cross paths at the upcoming American Open Series 1 as he wanted to ensure Roberts was not foregoing the competition because Burns was competing. He thought she should have precedence. The SafeSport investigator assured him this was not the case and stated “If any measures are deemed appropriate as the case develops, we will contact you immediately. Please continue to keep this information confidential.”

Between March and July, Andrews and SafeSport communicated by telephone with respect to upcoming weightlifting events, though Andrews said he received little direction from SafeSport. He said “I remember talking to [SafeSport] almost every time we had a competition asking for guidance as to what to do and at the same time nudging – are you guys going to be finished with this? We had to guess what to do.” During this time, Andrews did not find SafeSport to be useful in providing guidance.

The next significant competition was the National Championships in May, 2017. Burns was featured on the posters and banners for the event, a marketing decision Andrews believes was made prior to the launch of the investigation. Andrews’ understanding was that he had to proceed as if it was “business as usual” and therefore could not do anything that might reveal an investigation was happening. According to Andrews, “At the time Colin is our number one male athlete. We’re keeping it confidential and there are no sanctions against him, so I don’t have an argument about why not to feature Colin Burns. Colin would likely have caused a stink with the board and it would have been notable if we had not featured him.” Williams said he spoke to Andrews about the marketing materials and posters and that Andrews told him there was nothing he could do about it because of confidentiality concerns.

2017 National Championships

At the 2017 Nationals in Chicago in May, Andrews improvised a plan to keep the parties apart without revealing there was an investigation. Because he believed SafeSport had exclusive authority to impose interim measures, he thought his ad hoc approach was all that he could do.²⁶

His plan was for himself, Williams, and his wife (who knew Burns from his time in another sport) to stay behind the scenes during Roberts’ competition and have a conversation with Burns if he or his girlfriend went close to Roberts during her competition. He recalls staying in the warm-up room corridor and does not recall having to run interference. His wife, who

²⁶ Ironically, in a later communication with Burns, Andrews indicated that had USAW investigated the case under its policy at the time, Burns would have been suspended immediately.

was there as a referee, recalls “keeping an eye out” for Burns and trying to make sure he and Roberts were not in the same room – for example, texting Andrews when Burns was seen in one place or another as part of an effort to keep the two apart. Williams remembers Burns warming up with his athlete two or three platforms away, an experience he imagined “must have been awful for [Roberts].” He says they were not allowed to tell anyone why they were back there. Andrews vaguely recalls that he was going to see Roberts at weigh-in but was grappling with trying to be supportive without having her relive the events and they had minimal contact.

Andrews’ Social Media Posts

In July, 2017, Andrews congratulated Burns on Facebook for his medal at the Pan-Ams because he felt if he did not do so “it would raise questions that he would be unable to answer.” He said of Burns “Guy wins gold at Pan Ams and is on our board. It would look odd if I didn’t share that, but I did not think of the impact on Jen. That was a mistake and deserves an apology.” Of his following comment on Burns’ unflattering picture that “this will be his credential for Worlds,” Andrews says it was in line with his position that “I cannot display that I know about the case.”

Communication with SafeSport

A review of all SafeSport emails to Andrews from the relevant time period reveals very little substantive communication between USAW and SafeSport about the case. We were not able to find emails between March 9, 2017, and July 25, 2017, when SafeSport asked USAW for information about USAW’s Code of Conduct. On August 1, 2017, Andrews sent an email to SafeSport with a link to a Reddit post letting them know that some information about the investigation had leaked. At the end of the month, Andrews asked for an update because he believed Roberts and Burns would be at a competition together the following week and he faced a deadline for selecting the World Championship Team. He wrote “We will select the World Championship Team on Sunday evening so we need to be aware of any issues going into that selection meeting.” Andrews noted that for international teams there are deadlines after which it is impossible to replace an athlete so the lack of response from SafeSport was “very frustrating.” He also told us that USAW did not have a competitive reason to hope for a delay in the decision that would allow Burns to compete internationally. Though Burns was a top athlete in the US, he was not expected to medal at the World Championships and it was not a qualifying year for the Olympics.

Between August 31, 2017, and February 13, 2018, Andrews contacted SafeSport 14 times requesting an update on the status of the case with increasing urgency (“Any news?” “Another friendly reminder” “Sorry to keep harassing” “Sorry to bug, but C Burns?”). Andrews describes himself as “being at the end of [his] tether.” The requests were made on a nearly weekly basis after September 26 when his SafeSport contact verbally asked for a weekly reminder to update him on the case. There is no record of a response from SafeSport to any of these emails except on January 30, 2018, (when Andrews forwards Roberts’ email to SafeSport asking for an update) saying “CB at top of list.”

During that time, Andrews does not recall having a discussion with SafeSport about the December American Open Finals in Anaheim. He knew Burns would not be competing there, though acknowledged he may have been coaching. However, Andrews himself had left to attend another meeting and was not present for the competition. Because other staff did not know who the complainant was, they would not have been on alert to separate the parties.

Some of the emails reflect Andrews' growing unease with having Burns participate in events and represent the US while the investigation continued. In a January 22, 2018, email, Andrews noted it had been almost two years since the incident "Any news? Have some items where I would like to involve Colin, (for example our Masters Camp) but I really am reticent to do given he is under an active investigation." Andrews says the email was primarily intended to push SafeSport to reach a conclusion. On February 13, 2018, Andrews wrote again to SafeSport "Following up again on Colin Burns, I'm getting really concerned about how this one might play out in the media also given we have had him on two national teams since the allegation was reported to us." Andrews says as the case dragged on, he was increasingly concerned that no interim measure was in place for such serious allegations.

SafeSport Decision

The next night, on February 14, 2018, Andrews received a brief email from SafeSport informing him that Burns was to be suspended for 12 years from all sports under the auspices of the USOC, NGBs, or local governing bodies.²⁷ He was not informed of the basis of the finding and did not know that it was both for non-consensual sexual contact and for abuse of process until months later. He remembers being surprised that for (what seemed at the time) such a significant sanction, SafeSport had not put in place any interim measure in the intervening period, and it made him concerned that there were problems with SafeSport.

Following receipt of the email, Andrews asked SafeSport if sanctions went into effect immediately. Once that was confirmed, Andrews informed the board and staff of the sanctions and removed Burns from USAW's Board. He informed the board and staff that the information was to remain confidential and shared only on a need-to-know basis until the sanction became public. He also informed the US Olympic Committee and asked that they limit Burns' access to USOC or OTC site. He did not publish information about the sanctions or immediately suspend Burns' membership "to try and protect confidentiality as the process takes place" because the information would be publicly available. Andrews recalls Papandrea raising concerns about the fairness of SafeSport processes.

In response to Papandrea's questions about SafeSport's investigation and procedures, Andrews sent an email asking SafeSport how many investigators they had and if it would be possible for outside counsel to review the decision. The request was denied.

On February 21, 2018, Andrews reached out to SafeSport and outside counsel about making a public statement acknowledging the ruling and expressing support for the work of SafeSport. Andrews also asked for guidance on best practices on how to treat Burns and any athletes coached by Burns and also for a timeline if the case was going to arbitration. Andrews had a phone call with SafeSport and was advised not to comment so USAW did not make any statement.

Andrews describes this period as even "more of a mess" than the period during the investigation. In April 2018, Andrews learned from a staff member that the sanction had been made public by SafeSport without any notice to USAW. He was refereeing at a Masters event and was irate not to be notified directly by SafeSport and to be put in such a difficult position.

²⁷ Andrews does not recall if the email had any attachment but believes it did not. We were unable to locate attachments to this email in other correspondence. In fact, other correspondence seems to indicate that Andrews was only informed that he was supposed to impose the sanction. This is consistent with the format of other SafeSport decisions at the time. Andrews also recalls he did not discover the charges against Burns and the breakdown of the suspension until later. SafeSport currently provides NGBs with a summary of the decision and a summary that mentions the offense and sanction.

He wrote to SafeSport asking if Burns had been given notice and said “As you are probably aware this is very sensitive as Burns is/was a member of our Board. We are put in a really awful spot having been told to keep it confidential and going to significant lengths to make it happen” only to discover it was public as a result of a recent SafeSport policy change. SafeSport said it assumed Burns would know it is public since organizations have to know in order to enforce it. Andrews replied “This is definitely not the case since you gave very specific instruction this was to be kept confidential, which I explained clearly to our Board, Staff and to Colin himself upon his inquiry. Those informed are on a need-to-know-basis. We are now in a position where the sanction has been made public which is a 180-degree change.” Andrews says he was frustrated with what seemed to be a lack of professional process on the part of SafeSport.

Another staff member who was involved in these communications also recalled being told by SafeSport to keep everything private, only to have them drop the “bombshell” with no notice. He said they were “blindsided” as it is considered a professional courtesy to provide organizations with a few hours of notice so they can be prepared.

SafeSport told Andrews that Burns had requested a stay of sanction to attend an event in March that was denied because Roberts would be there, and that he had also requested a stay to attend three specific events in April, “and after the Center confirmed that the reporting party was not attending those events, it granted the request (so as not to create irreparable harm to the responding party should there be a modification at the hearing.)” The exceptions to the stay included the University Championships, a local competition, and training to become a Level 2 coach. Andrews recalls asking Burns to be at the competitions only for his athlete’s event and that Burns complied with that request.

Later in the month Andrews wrote to SafeSport “obviously the CB case is one that has been very tough for our NGB and I’ve been under pressure from really all sides!” Andrews says he was in an “incredibly awkward position, pulled between the Board, staff, and membership” and that “there were passionate people on all sides” leaving him feeling “he was not doing enough or doing too much.” He said, “It was one of the most difficult challenges for the NGB, and for me personally.”

2018 National Championships

Although he doesn’t recall seeing him, Andrews believes Burns went to Overland Park for Nationals because SafeSport had not yet made a decision on his participation and if he was allowed to participate (as he had been three times in April) he would not have had time to get there otherwise.

A WhatsApp exchange starting on May 23 between Andrews and USAW’s event director reveals that SafeSport was considering allowing Burns to attend Nationals and had asked Andrews “if there is a way we can have them [Burns and Roberts] not be in contact.” Andrews suggested that Burns not be allowed to stay at or access the meet hotel or to coach before or after or during certain weight categories. In the ensuing discussion it became clear that without security, they would have to rely on Burns to agree to leave if asked. The event director, unaware of any official ban until then, was surprised by the lack of guidance from SafeSport. They conveyed their position to SafeSport and waited for a response.

A staff member described this experience as SafeSport leaving “USAW hanging out to dry” because the SafeSport website at the time indicated Burns was suspended with no indication that an appeal was pending. Asking USAW to permit Burns to attend the event, while

forbidding USAW from speaking about the case, would have left the impression that USAW was protecting a predator in violation of his SafeSport ban and put them in the “difficult position of having to defend SafeSport policy, while being left in the dark about what we could or could not do.”

While they were awaiting a response, Roberts emailed Andrews to inform him that Burns was there and to ask about sanctions saying, “At the very least I hope he will not be coaching or in the back at all.” She asked if USAW is operating as if sanctions are in place or have not been notified of them “or if SafeSport is handling everything.” Andrews responded, “Our current understanding is the case has been reopened and the sanctions remain in place, however we are awaiting a decision on his specific participation this weekend.” Both indicated they had reached out to SafeSport and there was no further substantive communication between them. As mentioned above, SafeSport decided to uphold the suspension for the event and Burns did not enter the venue facility as far as the event director or Andrews recalled.

We found no record of communications about this case in the following months. Andrews believes he learned of the arbitration outcome from SafeSport, but he never saw the decision and learned some items about the case and decision only after Roberts was interviewed for the Orange County Register in March 2019. As mentioned above, Andrews did briefly “like” Papandrea’s controversial post before realizing his error and reversing course.

Andrews’ view that SafeSport badly mishandled this case was a reason he joined the NGB Liaison Group to SafeSport, supported leadership change at the Center, and became actively involved on these issues. Apart from concern about delays – both the overly lengthy investigation and the long period of time between the decision and arbitration -- Andrews felt the process lacked clarity. There was little information about the role of the NGB, what types of interim measures could be in place and who could put them in place and enforce them. The matter was further complicated by Burns’ position as a board member and an elite athlete. SafeSport provided no guidance on managing that situation. He believes that cases are handled much better now and that the rights of NGBs have improved greatly. He now has a better understanding of the role of NGBs and actions they can take. If the case arose today, Andrews says he would have handled matters differently.

BURNS’ PERSPECTIVE

Burns first learned of the complaint on March 6, 2017, when Andrews and outside counsel called to tell him that a complaint had been filed against him. He was not told who reported or what the allegation was but was informed that due to “clear conflicts of interest” the matter should be handled by SafeSport.²⁸ He was given a form to authorize SafeSport’s investigation into the matter. At the time, even though he had been on USAW’s board for two years, he knew nothing about SafeSport except for some vague discussions that it was being set up. He was given little information about the process and when he asked SafeSport or the USOC Athlete Ombuds for information, he was pointed to the SafeSport Code or their website and given no more guidance.

After the initial call, Burns said he had no discussion with USAW about this case until SafeSport issued its decision. Indeed, when asked by Vestry Laight about USAW’s role, his initial response was “What role?” His perception was that USAW left him to fend for himself,

28 Because of SafeSport’s confidentiality requirements Colin Burns did not discuss the SafeSport investigation or arbitration with Vestry Laight. He was interviewed solely about his interactions with USAW as set forth in this section and in the sections about payments and equipment.

which he found frustrating but understandable, considering the limitations on SafeSport investigations. Guidelines about behavior at competitions were given primarily from SafeSport who instructed him to avoid interactions with Roberts.

From Burns' perspective, only Andrews and Williams knew about the case at USAW. No one raised it or discussed it with him. He continued in his position on the Board while the investigation was happening "behind the scenes." He believes the marketing campaign in which he was featured on banners was decided before the investigation launched and thinks that his image was chosen in a membership vote in 2015 or 2016 and does not recall being part of a 2017 marketing campaign. Though it was business as usual on the surface, Burns said it was also a stressful time for him and remembers breaking out in shingles.

Over the next several months, Burns repeatedly reached out to SafeSport asking when the case would be resolved. He only received occasional general responses like "soon" and "wrapping up." Meanwhile, rumors began to spread in the small weightlifting community because some witnesses interviewed about the case began to talk. Burns acknowledges that he was a polarizing figure in weightlifting and had some enemies. Because of confidentiality restraints, then and later, he was unable to respond to rumors.

Burns received the email notifying him of his suspension after spending Valentine's Day with his girlfriend. He recalls it was the same day the "Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017" went into effect, which he thinks was not a coincidence because the Act contains a provision protecting the Center from liability for defamation. He also recalls getting a notice from USAW that he was suspended and removed from the board. The email exchange with Andrews the following week in which Burns asked questions about the case, was the only email exchange he recalls with USAW about the matter. Because he was trying to keep it confidential, he would have only communicated with Andrews about the case since he knew Andrews knew about it. After the decision, Burns retained counsel to get the suspension overturned.

2018 Nationals

Burns believed SafeSport was re-opening the investigation because his lawyers had submitted new evidence and made a request for further investigation. While that process was underway, he continued to coach athletes, which was his livelihood at the time. The suspension was stayed in events where he did not overlap with Roberts, and he was able to coach in two competitions and take a Level 2 coaching certification class. He was also recovering from injuring his shoulder during Worlds but hoping to return to competing.

Burns had a team competing at the 2018 Nationals in Overland Park, Kansas in May. He drove to Kansas from Colorado "in limbo" about whether or not he would be able to attend. He hoped that either the case would be resolved in his favor by then or that he would be permitted to attend while the investigation continued. After he checked in to nearby accommodations, and his team checked their weights, he received an email telling him he would not be allowed to attend the event or be on the property at all. At this point, he had to tell his mostly female team why he would not be able to coach them. Until then, his suspension had remained confidential. As they were leaving the venue, his girlfriend showed him an Instagram post with a screenshot of his sanction. That was how he learned that his sanction was public. He ended up watching his team compete from an Airbnb. He described feeling like "my entire life was collapsing."

Arbitration Decision and its Aftermath

Burns said little changed for him after the arbitration. The backlash was not mitigated by the arbitration decision, and the perception was still that his 18-month suspension was tied to the sexual misconduct charge. There was also a belief by some that USAW had somehow intervened on his behalf or helped him with the case. He did not feel he could correct what was said. He never heard from USAW after the decision and was unhappy that USAW did not correct inaccurate comments posted about the case on its social media page.

Burns has not renewed his membership to USAW since his suspension was lifted, though he still loves the sport of weightlifting. He described the whole process as extremely difficult and felt one of the biggest problems was his lack of understanding of the whole landscape or the nuts and bolts of processes, which he attributes primarily to SafeSport rather than USAW. He would advise other respondents to get counsel immediately and thinks more information and support should be available for all sides going through these processes, with the caveat that “neutral resources are rarely neutral” so resources should be dedicated to both sides.

SOCIAL MEDIA COMMENTS BY PAPANDREA

Papandrea is a former weightlifting champion and record holder. She is the first woman to attain USAW’s highest coaching level in 2003 and is still one of only two women to hold that designation. She was also the first woman to coach a men’s team to the National Team Championship with her team Texas Barbell. She began serving on USAW’s Board in 2009 and became chair of the board in 2016. In 2017 she was elected the first female vice president of the IWF and chaired its Women’ Commission. She was also interim president of the IWF and has again been nominated by USA Weightlifting for IWF presidency. Papandrea is a widely respected coach, having coached national championship teams and top-level athletes for years. She has opened doors for many other women coaches for whom she has been a meaningful mentor. She has been awarded USAW’s Mabel Rader Award for Outstanding Contribution to Women’s Weightlifting as well as the Gordon Andrews Award for Outstanding Contribution to Men’s Weightlifting. Papandrea was coach of record for Burns at various times in his career, including his competition coach at Worlds in 2017. She said she considered Burns to be “like a son” and was also close to his girlfriend.

As mentioned above, on July 20, 2018, the day the SafeSport arbitration panel issued its decision, Papandrea, posted a photo of herself with a drink (mimicking the Kermit the Frog drinking tea meme which has been used to express sarcastic disbelief at someone’s behavior) on Instagram saying “All you shit talkers bout to eat some crow. But that’s none of my business #weightliftinglife #standbymines #learntokeeppyourmouthshut #unlessyouknowthetruth.” The post received 389 likes including from high profile coaches and clubs. However, it also received negative backlash, in response to which she amended her post about 30 minutes later to add “This is not a gender issue. This is a due process issue. All those memes people made before the process was concluded...smh [shaking my head].” The post was on her personal account and did not mention her USAW position, but her status as chair of USAW was well-known. Papandrea says she also apologized via direct message to the person who initially raised concerns to her about her post.

Even for those who see the case against Burns as primarily a SafeSport problem, Papandrea’s social media comments, and USAW’s response to them, continue to raise serious concerns. While some felt Papandrea was entitled to her opinion, they believe it was inappropriate for someone in her position of leadership to comment publicly and her comments undermined their confidence in USAW leadership (“I have quit sports for less.”) USAW’s response was

characterized by some as “anemic,” “outrageous,” and “easily the worst way they could have handled it.” A former LWC president said he thought USAW’s response showed it was “scared and just wanted it to go away.” One club owner said “Ursula’s comments were so egregious it seemed inconceivable the USAW would not take action” and believes she should not have any leadership position in weightlifting. In response to a question on the 2020 USAW Membership survey about how to attract more women coaches, one person wrote in “Don’t give someone who publicly shamed Jennyfer Roberts . . . a position of power.” Another coach said “Doing anything other than firing Ursula sends a message ‘you don’t matter to us. People on top can do whatever they want. You can’t not say anything, not fire Ursula, and say you care about victims...It also says people can get away with treating people badly and nothing will happen.” Others said they would be reluctant to report as a result noting “the worst thing you can do is make people feel like they will be made fun of by the president of USAW if they report a rape.” A USAW staff member described its impact on morale as a low point in his career

“We had been working hard to create an environment of inclusion and safety and really believed in what we were doing. To have the president say what she did in the middle of this huge issue just took the wind out of our sails and was infuriating. We weren’t walking the walk.”

Papandrea says she was very emotional at the time and had been up until then silent about the vicious memes she had seen about Burns, calling him a pedophile and accusing him of bestiality which she felt was extremely hard on Burns and those close to him. She had also been upset because she believed that when the sanction against Burns was first made public, the process against Burns had not concluded because there had not been a hearing and the suspension was temporary. She said she did not believe Burns had committed the assault or she would not have supported him as she herself is a survivor of sexual assaults. She had not read the arbitration decision, which was confidential, when she made her post.

Following the post, several athletes criticized it as unprofessional or “GROSSLY inappropriate” on Reddit. One asked her to “Especially think about the other party directly involved in this proceeding as well and remember you’re the president of her NGB too.” Another said, “As a person in a leadership position, the opinions you express are going to reflect broadly on the weightlifting community” and another said, “professionalism is something many would expect from someone in your position.” Papandrea defended her post in a heated exchange saying she is “always professional,” that “those who were so fervently spreading rumors now have to accept the actual and final finding from safesport,” and “[It’s] in no way related to any position I hold and is MY opinion... I am not paid staff I am a volunteer dedicated to doing whats best for usaw in my other roles...and unless I am doing a bad job there, not sure why you’re bringing it up.” Later, Papandrea deleted the post and admitted it was “distasteful.”

USAW did not publicly disavow her statements, to the disappointment of some staff, who felt even suggesting such an action would be putting their career at risk given Papandrea’s power within the organization.²⁹

The following day, July 21, 2018, a USAW member filed an ethics complaint against Papandrea. The complaint described the post as “incredibly unprofessional” and said the actions amounted to “incredibly concerning behavior from people who are supposed to be ambassadors to the sport.” It also raised concerns about Burns’ girlfriend’s position on the Ethics Committee and about an elite athlete training with Burns while he is suspended. Another athlete filed a complaint about the social media post directly with Andrews shortly thereafter

29 One said if he filed a complaint against Papandrea he felt he would be a “dead man walking.”

and others protested informally to Andrews. Others we spoke with said they would have filed a complaint but they were unaware of the ethics process, had assumed that USAW would take action immediately, or knew that someone had beaten them to it.

By this point the Ethics Committee had reconfigured and Burns' girlfriend, Cortney Batchelor, who had also been coached by Papandrea, was the athlete representative on the committee. However, she recused herself from the matter and did not participate in any conversation about the case. There was discussion about sending the matter to an outside investigator, but a committee member who had no connection to weightlifting and did not know Papandrea volunteered to do the investigation. A Committee member recalls that the case was very concerning and a high priority given Papandrea's profile, but at the time the Committee was fairly new, and not very efficient due to high turnover and a large volume of cases.

The committee considered only written evidence, including Papandrea's response, during its February and April meetings. At its May 2019 meeting, the Ethics Committee concluded that Papandrea's conduct was not appropriate and reflected poor professional judgment. On June 3, 2019, the complainants were notified of this and told that the Ethics Committee would be forwarding a formal summary and recommendation to the Judicial Committee, which would hold a hearing on the matter. The Ethics Committee opinion was sent to the Judicial Committee on July 12, 2019. In its summary of findings, the Ethics Committee concluded "while the situation was difficult and many inappropriate comments had been made on social media during the pendency of the case, Garza Papandrea's post violated the Code of Ethics of USAW and demonstrated poor judgement in her role as a USAW Board member. We recommend that she be counseled to reduce the risk that future actions will result in negative impact on USAW and its members." The recommendation for the punishment was based on previous decisions to require counseling for irresponsible social media posts and consideration of her responsibility as a board member. Her role at the IWF was never discussed, though some speculate that her position made it difficult to act. The summary of findings stated that the USAW Code of Ethics charges USAW members "with contributing to an environment that makes participation in the sport a positive and rewarding experience" and cited to provisions of the Code providing that "each professional member has an obligation to make decisions based on the best interests of the athletes." They also cited social media restrictions on inciting attacks on an individual or group or to defame a member publicly or privately on electronic media.

On November 4, 2019, Andrews informed Papandrea that a panel of the Judicial Committee had been convened following the opinion of the Ethics Committee. Papandrea appealed the decision of the Ethics Committee and, on November 18, contacted the Chair of the Judicial Committee (through Andrews), requested a hearing and asked for clarification of the Ethics Committee's findings before she was willing to agree to such findings. Papandrea, who throughout the process was in the dark about how long decisions would take, acknowledged the post "lacked taste" but raised concerns about the version of the Code of Conduct applied to her case by the Ethics Committee (the code in effect in 2018 at the time of the post did not contain restrictions on social media). It took the Ethics Committee weeks to provide any answers to Papandrea's requests for clarification. That delay, coupled with Papandrea's travel and work schedule made scheduling a hearing challenging. After months with a lack of resolution, Papandrea decided to follow advice of a colleague and forego the hearing. Meanwhile, Papandrea was appointed acting president of the IWF in April 2020.

On April 27, 2020, Andrews sent Papandrea a final letter concluding the matter: "This letter serves as a warning about the social media conduct in question, in the opinion of the USA Weightlifting Independent Ethics Committee did violate the USAW Weightlifting Code of Ethics,

particularly in your role as Board member of USA Weightlifting at the time of the offence...In accordance with the recommendation of the USA Weightlifting Ethics Committee, we are also offering counseling in this regard..." The letter was published on USAW's website.

Andrews said the extensive delay in concluding the matter was because "The Ethics Committee was backed up and turning over. We made all the same mistakes that SafeSport did. We had 36 cases within a week of going independent and we were not ready for it." He did not consider expediting the case, despite its high profile. He emphasized that her case went through the established independent ethics process which operated as it was intended, even if some are disappointed with the outcome. He also noted that "The ability to bring an ethics complaint against the board chair without any possible interference from the board itself says a lot about where USAW is going with its independent ethics model."

When one of the complainants received word of the Papandrea decision, so much time had passed that he felt very removed from the situation. He described his reaction to the warning as an "eye roll...like they knew she did something wrong but nothing was going to happen." He felt the warning was "silly" and that USAW should think "What kind of culture do we want to support?" As someone who loves weightlifting and is loyal to USAW he felt "USAW hadn't disappointed me until then." He also said he was never contacted about the case nor given an update on its status except for when he reached out to Andrews to ask for a timeline. He believes there should have been a quicker process with more meaningful consequences. He, and others we spoke to, including members of the Ethics and Judicial Committees, felt that given Papandrea's position, USAW "should have come out right away with a firm response" and held her to account immediately. Several people we interviewed described Papandrea as "untouchable" because of her status in the sport, and the slow response to her social media post, and its weakness, added to that impression.

USAW has since changed its Code of Conduct to include more clarity on prohibited social media posts. However, it still does not actively police social media and only takes action when there is an ethics complaint, even when it is a person senior in the organization who has made the offending posts. Andrews agrees that there should be a higher standard for board members, staff and other senior members of the organization and acknowledges that "while she is entitled to her beliefs, she cannot impose that belief on the organization." Nonetheless, USAW continues to be a vocal supporter of Papandrea at the IWF. Andrews says this is because USAW is focused on "wider issues in the sport of weightlifting that we need to solve relating to doping and corruption." He notes "She has dedicated 30 years plus to this organization and she has one black mark on her record. She did not commit the offense. Her [offense] is the public support of Colin and she has been sanctioned for that," though he admits in retrospect the sanction "may have been a little light."

Papandrea still receives harassing messages about the case and, given her history promoting women in the sport, is stung by the perception that she is not a supporter of women or of sexual assault survivors. She says she regrets making the statement because she now realizes that it had an effect on Roberts as well. "I was looking at it from what it had done to Colin and I did not fully appreciate the impact of the entirety to her and did not intend to hurt her." As she thinks back to how the case was handled, she now believes USAW should have done more to offer Roberts support and counseling throughout this process.

MONEY PAID TO BURNS

One of the most persistent concerns raised about the case in interviews was payment made to Burns in 2018. Because he was suspended as of February 15, 2018, information that he

had been paid \$3,822 as a stipend and \$13,095.76 in “athlete support” between June and December 2018 raised questions about whether the money had been paid to cover his legal fees.

Vestry Laight was able to confirm that the \$3,822 payment was Burns’ stipend for January and February 2018 which had been paid prior to notice of the suspension.

Athlete support is typically reimbursement for expenses related to competing. In this case, the amounts correspond to payments for shoulder surgery Burns had relating to an injury he suffered in the 2017 Worlds. Burns explained that the surgery was delayed into 2018 because he tried rehabilitation before learning he actually needed surgery. The Orthopedic Centers of Colorado confirmed by email that “they had been told that [USAW] were paying for his surgery” and provided a credit card receipt for \$3,278.88 dated September 6, 2018. Another \$8,994.88 was paid directly to the Surgical Center for the Rockies. According to Burns, USAW was very late paying his bill, to the point that collection agencies were pursuing him, which explains why it is listed as an expense for the latter half of 2018. He said “I was definitely not paid for this. I am in significant debt.”

The remaining \$822 was an incentive bonus paid for winning qualifying points for Team USA in the 2017 Pan-American Championship. Andrews says he “had a hard time knowing what the right thing to do about the bonus was and sat on it for a while...but ultimately decided Burns had earned the bonus at a time when he was not suspended and could not justify withholding it.”

EQUIPMENT PROVIDED TO BURNS

Another question that was raised in interviews was whether USAW had given Burns free weightlifting equipment from the Olympic Training Center even though he was being investigated for sexual misconduct. Andrews stated that after USAW Weightlifting’s Resident Program was discontinued from the Olympic Training Center, USAW was required to remove all its equipment by October 31, 2016. At the time, the equipment was offered to any athlete who had been in residence, which included both Burns and his girlfriend. The offer was made several months before USAW knew about the allegation of sexual assault against Burns. Burns confirmed he received the equipment in 2016.

SANCHEZ’S RELATIONSHIP WITH BURNS

Several people raised concerns that Suzy Sanchez, Director of Culture Community & Outreach at USAW, is close to Burns’ wife and view her social media postings of her training in the Burns’ gym as an expression of support for Burns and another example of USAW’s bias against Roberts.

Sanchez explained that she became very close friends with Cortney Batchelor starting in 2013 when they were both athletes at the Olympic Training Center, prior to Batchelor’s relationship with Burns. They moved to different cities in 2015 but reconnected in person when Batchelor moved back to Colorado Springs in the fall of 2017. Sanchez frequently trained by herself or with Batchelor in their facility their facility because there was no fee and because she could spend time with her friend, who was also still training. Sanchez posted several videos of herself at the Burns’ garage gym on her personal Instagram account @thesuzysanchez between December 13, 2017, and February 13, 2018. Sanchez has a separate Instagram account, @suzysanchezusaw, for work and did not post photos or videos of her training on that account. She has significantly more followers (4174) for her personal account than for her USAW account (926).

Sanchez learned Burns was under investigation for sexual misconduct for the first time when Andrews called her into his office on February 15, 2018, the day after the decision was handed down and sanctions were to take effect. Sanchez remembers Andrews telling her “You need to sit down” and feared he was going to tell her someone had died. Instead, he informed her that there was a SafeSport sanction against Burns. She and Andrews recall her shock and the emotional conversation. Sanchez says she had a hard time with the news because she questioned her ability to differentiate between good and bad people since she had not suspected Burns of that behavior. Because she had in the past trusted a predator, the news hit her especially hard. She did not see Batchelor or Burns for the following few weeks, though she texted Batchelor. Sanchez was upset that she had trained at their gym while Burns was under investigation and ended regular training there afterwards. She considered making a public statement, but she was new to USAW and did not think of herself as being in a position of power, and was not sure it was appropriate for her to make a public comment. Because no one raised this issue with Sanchez prior to her Vestry Laight interview, she let it drop and did not address the matter publicly.

A review of Sanchez’s social media posts shows reduced training at the Burns’ gym. Her next post from their facility was on August 16, 2018. She had resumed training there because Batchelor was training for a big event in September of 2018, and she thought it would be helpful to have a training partner because she was trying to make the World Team at that event. Training after that was sporadic because of Sanchez’s work schedule, though she estimates she posted from their gym a few times per month, though sometimes more than one video was filmed in a day. Her last post of a training session at the Burns gym was in November 2019 after which she was able to train in her own space. All posts were on her personal Instagram page @thesuzysanchez. No video with Batchelor is on her @suzysanchezusaw account. Cortney Batchelor and Colin Burns moved to Louisiana in 2021. Sanchez remains close to Batchelor.

LESSONS

USAW’s stated commitment to “support US Athletes in achieving excellence” is at odds with how it approached the Burns case. USAW’s understanding that it was to conduct “business as usual” meant that both parties were not given the benefit of the doubt. By allowing Burns to remain on the Board, keeping him featured on promotional materials, and not clearly and effectively implementing any measure to keep parties apart, the organization appeared to be favoring Burns. The approach was all the more suspect because of Burns’ status as a board member and someone coached by USAW’s board chair. At a minimum, without taking sides or passing judgment, USAW should have contacted Roberts to offer support as she went through the process and to explain their understanding that, for confidentiality reasons, and as instructed by SafeSport, they were not allowed to do anything out of the normal and that they did not have the power to implement interim measures.

Andrews thought he was not allowed to communicate with the parties about the case and feared that by speaking with Roberts he would make things worse. However, the lack of communication from USAW was more traumatizing than an awkward interaction. Because Roberts knew USAW had details of her allegation, its failure to respond, combined with public expressions of support for Burns’ performance at competitions on social media at a time when SafeSport assured her that Andrews was fully in the loop, caused a great deal of anxiety and stress.

As one observer noted “a lot could have been avoided with genuine support and communication. All that was needed was one person who gave a shit to coordinate and put a

plan in place.” This could have been done without passing judgment on the case or interfering with the investigation. For example, before any competition, USAW could have sat down with Roberts, listened to her concerns and developed and implemented a safety plan with her and Burns’ input. USAW should have managed expectations up front and could do so without choosing sides. As a friend of Roberts said, “They should understand what it is like for someone who makes a claim to have to be in the same room with the person who attacked them.” A regular cadence of communications with Roberts (a monthly touch base) would have gone a long way to alleviate concerns, even if USAW also was also in the dark about the status of investigations. USAW could have, and should have, done more to press SafeSport to take interim measures even if they believed their hands were tied. As one staff member said (noting they had naively thought SafeSport would do better) “I wish we were more aggressive with SafeSport and pushed them to live up to their mandate to protect people and ensure that we did not put Roberts in such an uncomfortable position.” USAW also failed to appreciate the lasting impression Papandrea’s remarks on social media made on perceptions about the case.

A number of circumstances led to this case being handled in a way that may not happen today: it was one of SafeSport’s first cases and there was little understanding of the role of an NGB and its ability to implement interim measures pending an investigation; Andrews, who was 31 years old at the time and had been CEO of USAW for only a short time, assumed SafeSport would resolve the matter quickly. Andrews did not have experience in how to handle these matters, much less when they involved people who were on his board and received little guidance from SafeSport. Andrews interpreted SafeSport’s confidentiality requirements and the instruction to conduct “business as usual” to mean that he could not communicate with the parties or anyone else, including his board of directors, or take any action that could suggest there was a problem with Burns, such as remove him from the board or from promotional materials. SafeSport has since changed its policies on interim measures. The 2021 SafeSport Code makes it clear that NGBs have the authority to implement “necessary and appropriate measures, up to and including suspension” to address allegations of misconduct and no longer requires “imminent threat of harm.” Moreover, the Respondent’s right to challenge the measure in arbitration applies “In all instances when a Temporary Measure materially affects the opportunity to participate (e.g., suspension),” indicating that measures such as suspending someone from a board or removing him from promotional material would not be subject to challenge because they do not affect the person’s ability to compete.

Yet the impact is the same regardless of lack of bad intentions – it was hurtful to the athletes and undermined confidence in USAW and SafeSport within the broader community. Ultimately neither Burns nor Roberts has continued with the sport.

Following the decision, USAW still had a role to play. There was a great deal of hostile commentary on both sides of the issue on social media. USAW could have made an exception to its passive stance on social media to remind members (neutrally) to behave respectfully and note that it does not tolerate bullying. Failing to respond to Papandrea’s post for nearly two years, and then responding with a mild warning, led to the impression that different rules apply to people in positions of authority. USAW’s lack of response to Swords’ post also was a source of concern. Ultimately some felt it showed it was “USAW first, this was not a priority” and USAW did not do enough to support its athletes.

It is to USAW’s credit that it is looking to reflect on what went wrong in this case and is interested in how to improve. Andrews has reflected at length on this and taken active measures to become involved in SafeSport to improve the processes and learn from this case; he also spearheaded the recent introduction of the athlete wellness program to provide another avenue for support for athletes. Although it is too late to go back in time and do things

differently, there is a genuine desire to scrutinize the past, however uncomfortable, in order to not repeat the same mistakes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

USAW undertakes many actions to increase diversity and inclusion within the sport. It also challenges itself to stretch further, through self-assessments like this and the PLT report, which included 28 recommendations. The PLT report itself followed the audit performed by the Inclusion Playbook; USAW has implemented the majority of the audit's 35 recommendations. At the same time, USAW's propensity to quick action can become a weakness and comes at the expense of a more strategic approach. It has often been said that if you have too many priorities, you don't have any.

For this reason, we have organized our recommendations around the six key areas that we think will have the most impact for ensuring athlete safety and building an inclusive culture for all. They include a mix of the foundational as well as the cutting-edge and, in some cases, build on good work that is already in progress. These areas are:

- A comprehensive, multifaceted approach to **athlete safety**
- A laser-focus on **coaches** to drive the culture to which USAW aspires
- Providing guidance, clarity and accountability relating to **social media** usage
- Reimagining the **WSOs** as an engine for driving change and culture
- Strengthening good **governance** and infrastructure to ensure sustainability and accountability

Our goal in organizing and limiting our recommendations to these key areas is to avoid a laundry list of recommendations and to provide, instead, a roadmap with strategic priorities. Recommendations in the area of Athlete Safety and Ethics are subject to SafeSport's jurisdiction and meant to co-exist and supplement the SafeSport scheme, and not to interfere with it in any way. To ensure this report does more than "sit on a shelf" and is actionable, we recommend a public follow-up assessment 18 months after the report is issued to see that meaningful reforms are being implemented.

ATHLETE SAFETY

Vestry Laight has several recommendations to strengthen resources and support for members of the weightlifting community who witness or experience misconduct, and to make it easier to come forward with concerns about unsafe behavior. While USAW can do more to support those going through the process, ultimately rebuilding confidence in reporting mechanisms will depend on SafeSport and the Ethics Committee effectively holding people to account in a process that is seen as fair.

- Retain an outside independent athlete advocate (the Ombuds) who reports to the board chair to provide support and resources to complainants and respondents with questions or concerns about misconduct or ethics, and can help guide them through available processes and resources while maintaining strict confidentiality and adhering to Congress' requirements for non-interference. The Ombuds would be available to all members of the weightlifting community, not just elite athletes.

- Develop a restorative justice option for misconduct complaints that fall outside the scope of SafeSport’s jurisdiction.
- Expand the availability of ways to report misconduct. Establish an independent third-party online hotline that allows anyone to report misconduct or ethics violations. The hotline should be set up so that complaints are automatically sent to the Athlete Safety Coordinator and to the Chair of the Ethics Committee.
- Designate a person at USAW with extensive training in trauma-informed response and knowledge about complaint processes to be a resource for participants at competitions – national and international - in cases of emergency and provide contact information for that person to all participants in all materials shared prior to competitions. This person could be the Athlete Safety Coordinator who receives extensive SafeSport training and could be utilized more effectively.
- Designate a person at USAW to be responsible for ensuring that sanctions are communicated to stakeholders and are enforced.
- Regionally, designate and train one member of each WSO to be a point person for receiving safeguarding concerns with training in trauma, an understanding of processes in place and the ability to refer questions to the Ombuds, the Ethics Committee, or SafeSport if appropriate. SafeSport is already providing such training to other NGBs that operate with a strong regional structure.
- Require USAW-affiliated clubs to have a designated point person available as a resource for those with safeguarding concerns. That person can be a parent or athlete and would be required to undergo a short training to understand the Code of Ethics, SafeSport, and the process for filing complaints. This can be rolled out in phases, starting with clubs that are Community Development Sites and clubs with high profile teams.
- Develop a certification or “gold star” program recognizing clubs that have designated a person with whom to raise safeguarding concerns. As mentioned above, that person can be a parent or athlete and would be required to undergo a short training to understand ethics and SafeSport processes and how to respond appropriately to these complaints.
- Require USAW-affiliated clubs to post information about the designated contact person at the regional level, the Hotline and the Ombuds so athletes are aware of resources and support available. Promote the Code of Ethics at clubs and USAW sanctioned gyms.
- Consistent with confidentiality and reporting requirements, put in place policies that require regular monthly check ins with people who have filed complaints about sexual misconduct (as defined by SafeSport or the Code of Ethics) to ensure they are not experiencing retaliation and to monitor wellness. Actively engage with parties prior to competitions about safety plans that will be put in place to keep members apart; after a decision, explain to parties who is responsible for sanctions, how they will be enforced and whom to contact if there is a problem.
- Subject to SafeSport’s rules, have a designated advocate available to attend meetings with SafeSport with the complainant or respondent as a support person if they would like to have a person with them. This could be a role for members of the Athlete Advisory Council who volunteer for the job and are willing to undergo additional training.
- Develop an internal set of criteria for determining when interim measures are appropriate.

- Continue to ensure that requests for counseling as part of the Wellness program are confidential and responded to promptly.
- Have external periodic reviews of recommendations to see how they are being implemented and whether they require adjustment. This could be done by one of the independent board committees.

COACHES

Coaches are widely viewed across the sport as having the most influence on culture. It is also the area where USAW has the most leverage and latitude to define what makes an exceptional coach. Our advice here is straightforward: teach what you want to see; model what you want to see. In other words, reflect the importance of inclusion and culture in the curriculum and in selection of leaders, particularly at the National Coach, International Coach and Senior International Coach levels. Provide resources to promote gender partnership, address unconscious bias and stereotyping, encourage allyship, and in particular, to engage white men as allies in advancing inclusion.

Training and Education

- Integrate modules on culture, ethics, and DEI into the mandatory coaching curriculum, particularly for Level 2 coaching certification and in requirements for advancement to National, International and Senior International Coach levels. Supplement the SafeSport training by addressing respectful behavior and boundaries.
- Implement continuing education requirements to maintain coaching certification and integrate culture, ethics and DEI content into the continuing education curriculum.
- Diversify ranks of the coaches teaching the coaching training courses; remember the power of “inviting in” and intentionally recruit a range of teachers that reflect the diversity of the membership, including more women, people of color, the LGBTQIA+ community and veterans.
- Pair new teachers with a more experienced, successful teacher for mentoring with a focus on outreach and being proactive -- i.e., the unwritten rules for being successful.
- Continue the scholarship program for underrepresented groups to take the coaching certification courses.

Align the Criteria for Advancement

- Tie advancement to the most elite levels of coaching – including selection as a coach for international teams – to completion of training modules relating to culture, ethics, and DEI. This is a small group with outsize impact and influence; equip them with the skills and resources to be inclusive allies.
- Team coaches, coaching instructors, and other coaches sponsored by USAW and representing USAW at training camps and other areas must adhere to a more rigorous social media code of conduct as developed by the Social Media Taskforce. In other words, more is expected of the leaders of the sport.
- Set public targets for diverse representation at senior levels of coaching and track and publish progress. For example, publish yearly the raw numbers and percentages of National, International and Senior International Coaches by gender and race and work with

the Board and the DEI Committee to agree upon reasonable targets for improvement within a five-year timetable.

Engage White Men; Model Gender Partnership and Allyship for all

- Form an Advisory Council of coaches with the objective of increasing the representation of women and people of color as coaches; ensure that it is comprised of at least half white men as active members. This Council should collaborate with the DEI Council but operate separately with a guiding principle that it is run by coaches, for coaches.
- Expand the women's coaching mentoring program to include men as mentors.
- Provide opportunities for women coaches to mentor men coaches.
- Mandate training (and provide resources) on allyship to all National, International and Senior International Coaches as well as coaches who teach the coaching certification programs.

SOCIAL MEDIA

As the primary vehicle for communication and connection within and about the sport, social media has an outsized influence and is largely unregulated. It is time for USAW to grapple directly with the difficult issues posed by social media so that it may clearly define expectations, provide guidance and clarity, and draw clear lines of accountability. Because 1) the issues are complicated; 2) there are varying views about the proper role for USAW to play; and 3) social media is continuously evolving, but here to stay, we recommend the creation of a taskforce to define USAW's approach. This approach also provides the flexibility to adapt and respond to new trends as well as to recalibrate if policies prove difficult to enforce or unimpactful. As this report was being finalized and recommendations discussed with USAW leadership, we were pleased to see USAW and its Board announce the formation of a Social Media Taskforce. With respect to the work of a Social Media Taskforce, Vestry Laight specifically recommends:

The appointment of a Social Media Taskforce charged with providing guidance, clarity and accountability relating to social media usage

- Structure and Composition:
 - Appoint a mix of members, including one Board member, one Staff member, and representatives of USAW constituencies (e.g. elite/non-elite athletes; club owners; coaches).
 - Consider retaining an external expert advisor to guide the work of the Taskforce and ensure it stays on track.
 - Ensure appointees reflect the diversity of constituents.
- Responsibilities: Create a charter that defines the Taskforce's responsibilities (and perhaps defines what the Taskforce does NOT do so that lines between the Taskforce, the Ethics Committee and the Judicial Committee are clear). Suggested responsibilities include:
 - Fact-gathering and education. Gather information about policies and resources in place at other organizations.

- Policies and guidelines. Potential areas to be addressed include:
 - » treatment of comments to posts
 - » creation of a separate “social media code of conduct” with specific guidelines about to whom and to what it applies. More may be expected of leaders, including board members, staff, and coaches
 - » strategic approach to using social media affirmatively to highlight ‘bright spots’ within the sport and promote USAW’s inclusion goals
 - » consider how “cutting weight” is portrayed in social media
- Resources & Training. Consider what resources may be helpful for members, including how to respond to on-line harassment.
- Accountability. Define how USAW will ensure compliance with the Taskforce’s recommendations and communicate how to raise complaints or concerns and whether at a certain level people can be held accountable even without a formal ethics complaint. Collaborate with the DEI Task Force to ensure alignment.
- Review. Build in regular review of policies and impact

WSOs

The newly configured WSOs present an opportunity to drive the culture of USAW; they are a bridge between the national body and the grassroots community and should serve as an important local resource. They can be the engine that drives USAW’s objectives around safeguarding, inclusion, and outreach. There is a desire for more focused attention on attracting young athletes to the sport and more outreach to underserved communities, members of the military and former athletes. Throughout the years, USAW has made concerted efforts to expand its reach into schools and has aggressively tried to develop partnerships with youth organizations but has had limited success. The WSOs present a new avenue for energizing these efforts. The success of the new WSO structure will depend on whether USAW can eliminate the vestiges of cronyism and make the WSOs more dynamic, representative, and accountable. To that effect we recommend the following:

Leadership

- Be deliberate and intentional in the appointment of the WSO presidents to align with USAW goals.
- Screen applicants for prior misconduct or ethical violations.
- Specify the term limits for the board members of WSOs. While the Bylaws set out a four-year term, they do not include a limit on the number of four-year terms a member can serve. Though the Bylaws establish term limits for Committee membership, it is not clear that those are applicable to WSOs.
- Representation matters -- encourage and invite women and people of color to join WSO boards and include diverse representation requirements. Incorporate the gender representation requirement currently set forth for USAW’s board and committees.

Accountability

- Establish uniform key performance indicators and performance standards in areas such as recruitment, ethics compliance, and fundraising.
- As explained in the Athlete Safety recommendations above, designate a point person for questions or concerns regarding safeguarding or ethics.

Develop a pipeline strategy to attract more youth and members from underserved local communities

- Develop a pilot project for establishing local partnerships with youth organizations and state education systems that might be used as a model elsewhere. The pilot project would concentrate its efforts in underserved communities.

GOVERNANCE AND INFRASTRUCTURE

While Vestry Laight was not retained to conduct a review of the governance structure of the organization, many we interviewed offered suggestions on governance that we found appropriate and have included here. Recommendations regarding governance and infrastructure are grouped together as they both serve the underlying purpose of ensuring sustainability and accountability and are designed to ensure that USAW's progress and commitment to DEI and athlete safety is institutionalized and not dependent on the CEO.

Board and Committee composition present unique challenges – and opportunities. For example, all members of the Ethics Committee are independent and one is an athlete representative. Other than the athlete representative, the members tend to be attorneys with full-time jobs who serve as volunteers. The benefit of such a set-up is unquestionable, particularly in such a small sport – independence and impartiality. The downside, however, is that reliance on volunteers results in slow investigations and high turnover of members. The current structure also results in less accountability.

The structure of the Board of the Directors also has its limitations. Currently the board is composed of 12 individuals – 10 elected by their respective constituencies, and two elected by the board. The role of the Nominating and Governance Committee appears to be limited to ensuring that the candidates meet the required qualifications for each category of director -- Elite Athlete, National Team Athlete, Coach and Technical, Grassroot, Independent, and At-Large. The current structure deprives the Nominating and Governance Committee of its typical role of developing a slate of candidates for Board election in a deliberate and thoughtful way that takes into account the composition and needs of the board from a skill set and diversity perspective. In addition, the election of 10 of the 12 members of the board (as required by the current Bylaws) renders the election a popularity contest. Although the current Bylaws include provisions to ensure adequate gender representation on the board in all categories (with the notable exception of coaches and TOs), it does not allow the organization to be intentional in diversifying the board in other ways and open the door and invite those in who may have traditionally been excluded. These recommendations are an effort to address those issues.

Board

- The chair of the board should not be an active coach or elite athlete.
- Change the mechanism by which directors are elected to the board - at least half of board members should be elected by the board, from a slate presented by the Nominating and Governance Committee.

- People considered for board or committee membership should be screened for prior misconduct or ethical violations.
- Develop a Board of Directors' Code of Conduct that provides guidelines on fiduciary obligations and responsibilities and includes areas such as confidentiality, conflict of interest, unacceptable behavior, and social media, among others. The guidelines should reflect that the board will be held to the highest ethical standards and should clearly set forth disciplinary actions for those who fail to adhere to those standards.

Ethics Committee and Code of Ethics

- Revamp the complaint procedures and explain them in a clear consistent fashion.
- Provide several avenues to report misconduct and ethics violations. Ethics complaints should not go to the CEO. There should be a designated staff person, perhaps the Athlete Safety Coordinator, who can receive complaints and coordinate with the Ethics Committee. The Athlete Safety Coordinator could provide much-needed administrative support to the Committee.
- Create an ethics hotline with online functionality run by a third-party vendor to receive anonymous complaints about behavior that may violate ethics standards.
- Develop a standard protocol for conducting investigations of complaints that come to the Ethics Committee. The protocol should incorporate established best practices on how to conduct interviews; timelines for investigation; and guidelines for contact with the complainant and respondent. The protocol should also provide guidelines for improving the intake process.
- Establish clear guidelines for when matters should be sent to an outside investigator. Complaints against the CEO or Board members, for example, should be investigated by an outside investigator.
- Develop a restorative justice option for those who do not wish to go through the formal complaint process.
- Establish a formal onboarding of Committee members that includes training on the Ethics Code and the SafeSport Code, as well as training on the investigations protocol (above).
- Reconsider the composition of the Committee. A possible solution is to include Independent Board Members in the Ethics Committee as members, not just as a liaison, or enhance and clarify the role of Board Liaison to the Committee.
- The Ethics Committee should periodically report to the board on its work, including a roll up of cases it has investigated, providing trends and outcomes.
- Combine the USAW Code of Ethics, the Member Code of Conduct, the Athlete Safety Policy and the USA Weightlifting Code of Ethics, Code of Conduct & Complaint Procedures into one comprehensive document that is clearly accessible on the website and available at WSOs and Clubs and sets forth disciplinary measures and expectations for conduct of high-level coaches, board members, and others who represent USAW.
 - The revised and consolidated Code of Ethics should include a clear and robust anti-retaliation policy. Currently, such policy is found in the Bylaws.

- Revise the background check and “Red Light” criteria as they relate to drug offenses, to keep in line with current treatment and policies relating to drug convictions.

DEI Taskforce

Reconstitute the DEI Committee as a DEI Taskforce

- Build upon the changes already in process to strengthen the DEI Committee, including appointment of members with a mixture of people inside and outside the sport, and with demonstrated DEI expertise.
 - The Taskforce should be balanced with respect to representation by gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and other aspects of identity. It should not be comprised solely (or almost solely) of women and people of color.
 - Build in intentional touchpoints with other Committees or Taskforces responsible for projects with a DEI connection, such as the proposed Social Media Taskforce and Coach Advisory Council.
 - Provide a clear, multi-year mandate to include, but not be limited to:
 - Central place with oversight of review and implementation of the recommendations contained in the PLT report, this report and the Inclusion Playbook audit;
 - Tracking and reporting progress to the board and to the public (building upon the DEI tracker already in place);
 - Taskforce reporting to the CEO and to the Board Chair;
 - Collecting and publicizing “bright spots” and best practices from clubs and coaches;
 - Considering and piloting ideas (some of which are in process), for example:
 - » “Gender-neutral throwdowns” and non-binary meets.
 - » Explore a badging system that would permit clubs to promote themselves as LGBTQIA+-friendly or “inclusion ambassadors”.
 - » Assess ways to adjust requirements to enable adaptive athletes to compete in general competitions.
 - » Update the coach directory to include more information about coaches’ identities and commitment to inclusion (for example, LGBTQIA+ friendly).
 - » More remote competitions and advertisement/social media recognition for service member events and the “Strongest Service Member” medal.
 - » Strategic outreach to military bases for demonstrations, coach certification and recruitment of people leaving military service.
 - » As with coaching, set public targets for diverse representation for senior levels of refereeing and track and publish progress.
- * Also remember the power of “inviting in” and intentionally recruit a range of technical officials that reflect the diversity

of the membership, including more people of color, the LGBTQIA+ community, and veterans.

- Retain an independent, external DEI strategy expert to advise the Taskforce and keep it on track
- Partner with the Foundation to develop programs for at-risk youth and also make available information about potential funding sources for supporting initiatives to start such programs.
 - Make more funding available to underrepresented athletes who cannot afford to travel to competitions.
 - Create an accessible toolkit with advice from successful programs such as Performance Initiatives, Lift for Life, and Kings of Weightlifting.



TIMELINE OF KEY EVENTS IN 2017 SAFESPORT CASE

**APRIL 7-10,
2016**

Aquece Rio Weightlifting Test Event

SafeSport Code for the US Olympic and Paralympic Movement is promulgated.

**MARCH 3,
2017**

**MARCH 5,
2017**

Roberts sent email to USAW reporting an assault that took place on April 10, 2016 during Aquece Rio Weightlifting Test Event.

Roberts case is officially referred to SafeSport

**MARCH 6,
2017**

**MARCH 23,
2017**

SafeSport officially opens its doors.

USAW National Championships in Chicago, IL.

**MAY 11-14,
2017**

**JULY 23-30,
2017**

Pan-American Weightlifting Championships in Miami, FL.

World Weightlifting Championships in Anaheim, CA.

**NOV. 28 -
DEC. 5, 2017**

**DEC. 7-10,
2017**

American Open Finals, in Anaheim, CA.

Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017 is promulgated.

**FEB. 14,
2018**

SafeSport issued its decision on Burns' case, notifying both parties and USAW of its decision to suspend Burns for 12 years.

**FEB. 21,
2018**

Burns requested an arbitration hearing on his case.

American Open Series 1 at The Arnold, in Columbus, OH (“The Arnold”).

**MARCH 1-4,
2018**

**APRIL 6,
2018**

USAW learns that SafeSport has posted Burns’ sanction on its website.

USAW National Championships in Overland Park, KS.

**MAY 24-27,
2018**

**JULY 13,
2018**

Arbitration hearing on SafeSport’s decision held.

Arbitration panel issued decision. The 10-year suspension for sexual misconduct was overturned; the suspension for abuse of process was upheld and reduced to 18 months. Papandrea comments on social media.

**JULY 20,
2018**

**JULY 21,
2018**

Ethics complaint filed against Papandrea for social media post.

Ethics Committee approves opinion on Papandrea case.

**JULY 12,
2019**

**NOV. 4,
2019**

Papandrea notified that the Judicial Committee hearing panel will be convened regarding her sanction.

Official reprimand against Papandrea posted on USAW’s website.

**APRIL 27,
2020**

GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

ASC	ATHLETE SAFETY COORDINATOR
BIPOC	BLACK, INDIGENOUS (AND) PEOPLE OF COLOR
DEI	DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION
IWF	INTERNATIONAL WEIGHTLIFTING FEDERATION
LGBTQIA+	LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUEER (OR QUESTIONING), INTERSEX, AND ASEXUAL (OR ALLIES). THE PLUS SIGN ENCOMPASSES INCLUSIVITY.
LWC	LOCAL WEIGHTLIFTING COMMITTEE
NGB	NATIONAL GOVERNING BODY
TO	TECHNICAL OFFICIAL
USADA	UNITED STATES ANTI-DOPING AGENCY
USOC	UNITED STATES OLYMPIC COMMITTEE
WSO	WEIGHTLIFTING STATE ORGANIZATION

