

The logo consists of the letters 'VL' in a serif font, positioned above a horizontal line.

VESTRY LAIGHT

A close-up photograph of a weightlifter's hands, heavily coated in white chalk, gripping a barbell. The background is dark and out of focus, showing a blurred weightlifter's head and shoulders.

# USAW REPORT SUMMARY

USA Weightlifting (USAW) retained Vestry Laight to conduct an assessment of its culture with respect to diversity, equity, inclusion, and athlete safety, particularly for women, BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, veterans, and adaptive athletes. As part of its assessment, we were also asked to examine USAW's handling of a high-profile SafeSport case from 2017.

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.

Our recommendations provide a roadmap identifying strategic priorities in the areas of athlete safety, coaching, and social media leveraging the newly configured Weightlifting State Organizations.

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



# POSITIVES

## INCLUSIVE AND WELCOMING: BY DESIGN AND INTENT

Olympic weightlifting is a big tent, offering opportunities to participate and compete from youth to old age with a “place for you no matter how you’re built,” including “the heavy, blind and amputees.”

Diverse athletes and coaches – BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, veterans, lifters of all faiths – often find a welcoming community and a place of belonging within the sport.

Respect for the technique and strength required to excel at the sport can transcend differences.

USAW has been an intentional and proactive force in making the sport more inclusive and welcoming. It has diversified its leadership, made coaching more accessible to women and BIPOC members, adopted the first NGB transgender athlete policy, and undertaken external reviews of its policies and practices.

## METEORIC RISE OF WOMEN

Women’s membership more than doubled in the last 10 years, constituting over half of those competing on the platform in 2020.

U.S. women have excelled in international competitions, including bringing home a bronze and a silver medal in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.

Many women describe the sport as literally “empowering” and confidence-building.

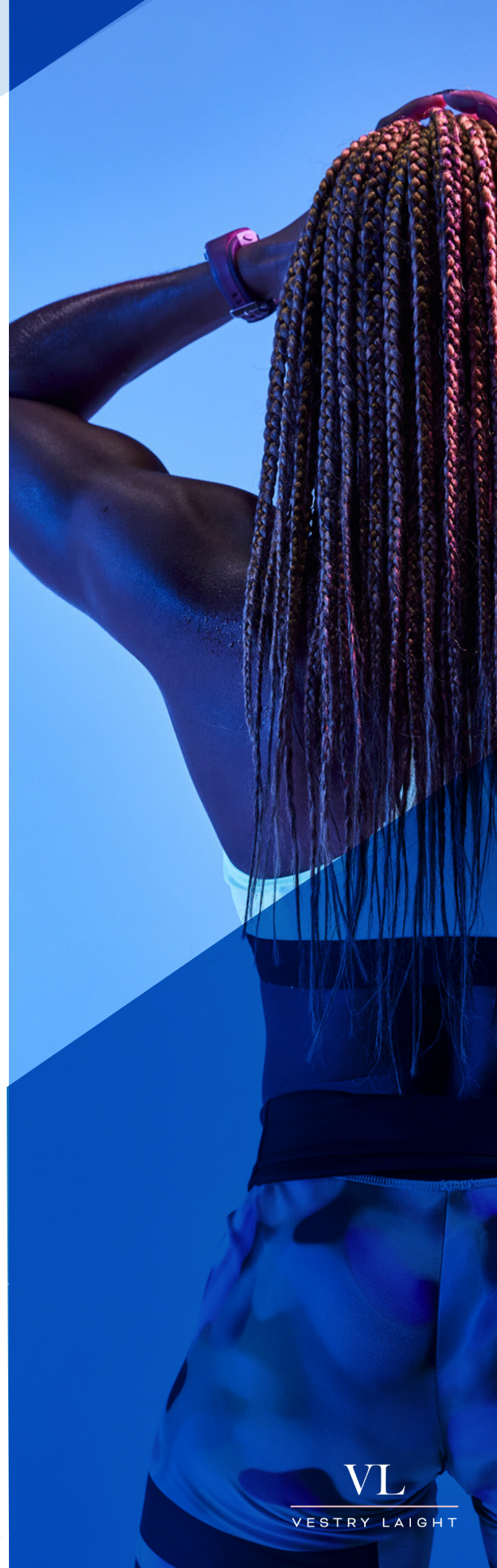
Aspects of the sport contribute to body positivity for women. The focus on strength minimizes the importance of appearance and the wide range of weight classes means many body types can be successful in the sport.

## CLOSE-KNIT, SUPPORTIVE COMMUNITY

A highly demanding and niche sport creates a strong, shared sense of community and mutual respect among weightlifters.

The sport has changed lives and given purpose to many.

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



# CHALLENGES

## COACHES

Women, especially women of color, are underrepresented in coaching, particularly at the elite level.

Women must prove themselves to an extent their male peers do not. Men benefit from the presumption of authority; women need to establish their credentials.

There are few role models for women and people of color. The lack of representation and visibility — particularly at high levels — is discouraging.

Women and BIPOC coaches need and want to be “invited in” and supported as potential coaches. 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.”

## POCKETS OF TOXICITY

“Threads of sexism and chauvinism still linger.” Women are at times subject to objectification, harassment, demeaning behavior and stereotypical perceptions.

People of color athletes may experience an “emotional tax,” the state of being on guard to consciously protect against potential discrimination or bias. In situations where there is different treatment for athletes of color, some are left wondering whether race was a factor.

In some gyms and on social media, expressions of hostility towards transgender inclusion remain.

USAW has a very limited ability to control culture at the gym level.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media has a big impact on the sport but it is largely unregulated. USAW must determine what its role should be in regulating abusive and inappropriate behavior on social media.

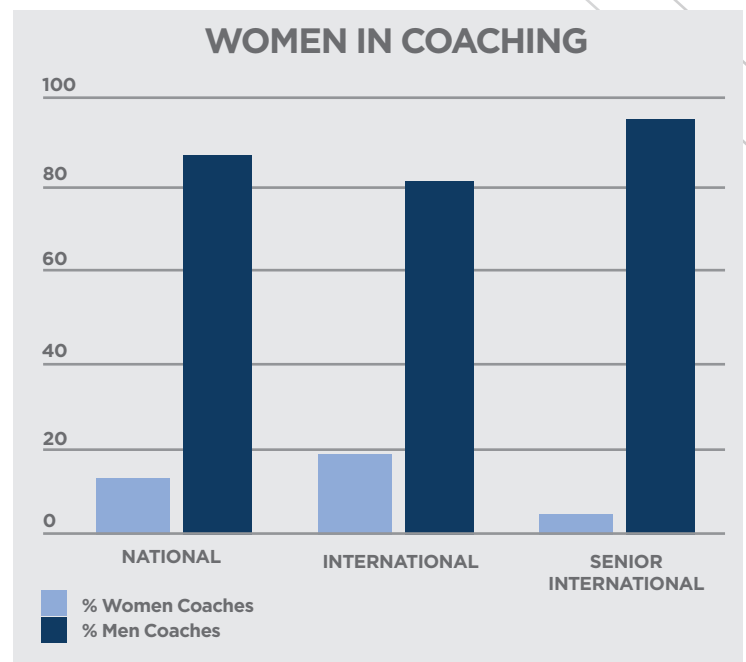
## BACKLASH AND APATHY

Some white men do not see themselves as having a role to play in advancing inclusion.

Some members believe that USAW is overcorrecting and that there is not an inclusion problem.

## REPORTING MISCONDUCT

Fear of retaliation, negative impact on continued participation in the sport, and a belief that nothing will happen, undermine confidence in raising concerns about misconduct.



**A mere 2% of all elite level coaches identify as women of color.**

# PARTICIPANT QUOTES

**There has been a transition from 'skinny is beautiful' to 'strong is beautiful.'**

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

**It is a better USAW today than I have ever seen.**

If we are the oldest sports federation on the planet, we should be able to hold people to certain social media standards.

**The sport meets you where you are.**

Stop caving to social justice warriors.

**The beautiful part about weightlifting is that it is not about body image.**

Not seeing myself in the sport made me settle for mediocrity.

**It's like a big, extended family.**

I am a white male. For some reason athletes like me are being made to feel like we are the source of injustice.

**Growing up in relation to gym and sports as a young, trans kid, I never thought I would be a sports leader.**

Men will go to a pudgy guy [coach] over an elite, fit female. Women have to smile, look good and be fit. They're held to a higher standard.

**I have felt nothing but inclusion, acceptance and welcome from weightlifting. It is head and shoulders above other sports.**

**I am excited to be breaking stereotypes and leading the way for other covered females.**

**I didn't want to be a coach because I didn't think I would be accepted ... It's a small group of mostly white men. I observed that there is not a place for me.**





# THE 2017 SAFESPORT CASE

More than three years after its resolution, the case continues to cast a shadow over USAW, undermining confidence for some in how USAW and SafeSport would handle a complaint of sexual abuse. Though the case took place in SafeSport's early days, it has left a lingering impression and has made some reluctant to report sexual misconduct.

A perception remains that powerful people are protected and that some elite athletes or coaches are "untouchable".

Social media posts by USAW leadership fueled the impression that USAW either favored Burns or did not make the case a priority.

Confidentiality requirements led to a lack of transparency and communication creating an atmosphere that fostered rumors in the close-knit weightlifting community.

Vestry Laight found no evidence that USAW interfered in the Burns case or supported him financially.

## LESSONS

**Failure to communicate with complainants leads to mistrust, stress and additional trauma.**

**It is important to implement appropriate interim measures while a case is under investigation and clearly communicate them to the parties.**

**Unchecked social media attacks on parties cause additional harm and should be regulated.**

**USAW should hold leaders to a higher standard of conduct, and violations must be addressed proactively and promptly.**

**Despite a lack of ill intent, USAW's inaction gave the impression that it was not impartial and resulted in additional harm to the complainant and the community.**

# RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1 Strengthen athlete safety

- Establish a confidential resource to provide support and advice (ombuds)
- Designate and train a person to be a resource for athletes who experience or witness misconduct at national or international competitions
- Designate and train one member of each WSO to be a point person for answering questions about misconduct concerns at a local level
- Develop a restorative justice option
- Improve reporting options, including a third-party online hotline
- Better utilize the Athlete Safety Coordinator

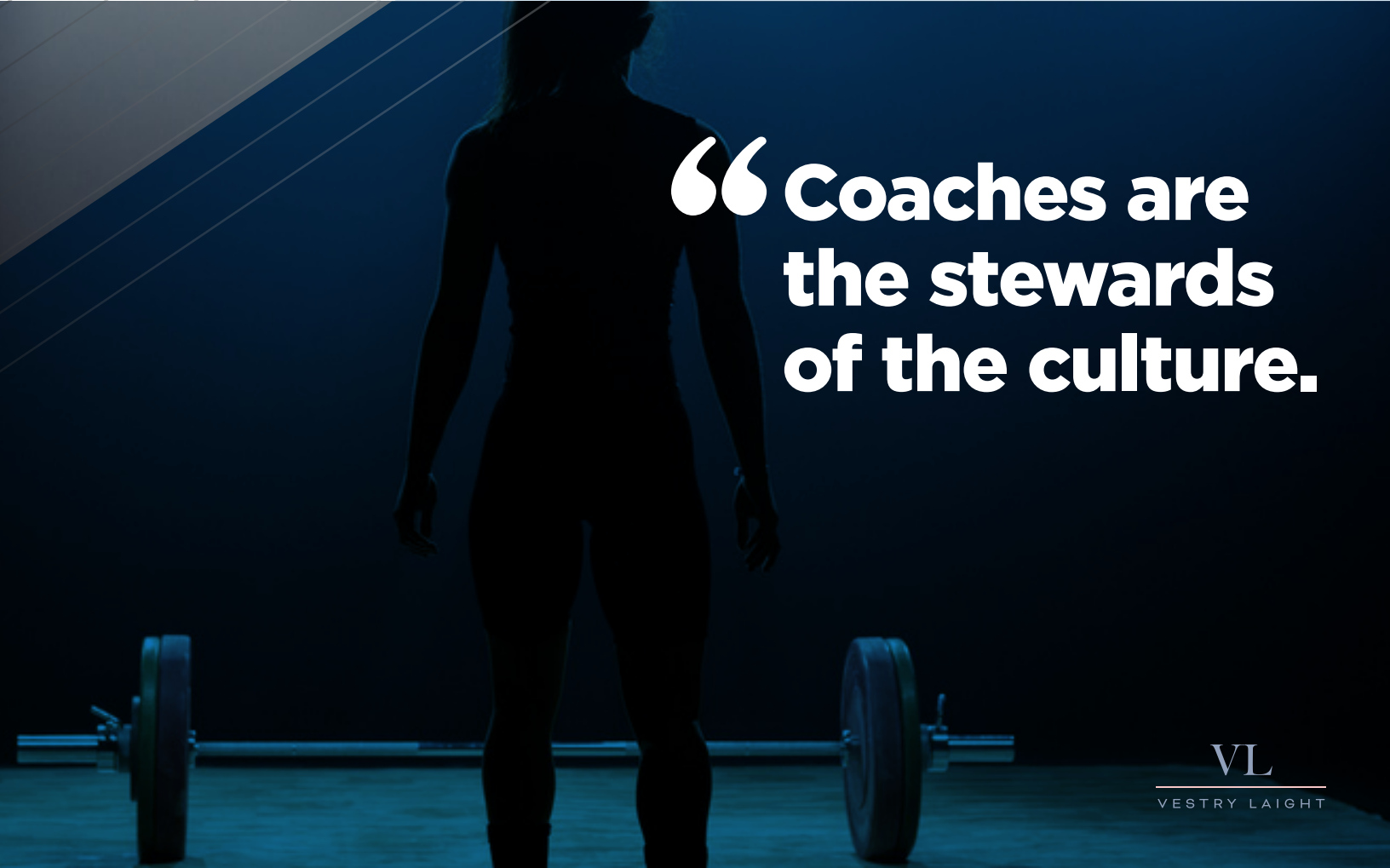
## 3 Social media taskforce to provide guidance, clarity and accountability

## 2 Focus on coaches to drive the culture

- Give elite coaches tools, resources, and training to model allyship, including gender partnership
- Tie advancement to the most elite levels of coaching to training on culture, ethics, and inclusion
- Set public targets for diverse representation at senior levels of coaching and track and publish progress

## 4 WSOs as engine to drive change

- Develop pipeline strategy to attract more youth and members from underserved local communities
- Designate a point person for questions or concerns regarding safeguarding or ethics



“Coaches are the stewards of the culture.”