



RESEARCH STUDY

WHAT ATHLETES SAY MAKES SPORT SAFE; AND WHAT MAKES IT UNSAFE

GymBC's Summary on Sport Management Review's Study: *"Informing a culture shift in high performance sport in Canada: athletes' unsafe and safe sport experiences"*, by MacIntosh, Doherty & Kerwin (2025)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study examines the culture of high performance sport in Canada through the experiences of elite athletes. Using a qualitative, interpretive framework guided by culture theory, the authors investigated how safe and unsafe sport conditions manifest, the emotions they evoke, and the underlying organizational values that drive them.

ABOUT THE STUDY. Researchers from the University of Ottawa, Western University and Brock University interviewed 28 athletes aged 18 and over, competing in winter and summer, Olympic and Paralympic, and team and individual sports. Athletes were asked what safe sport and unsafe sport mean to them, and what they had seen or experienced. The researchers then grouped the answers into three layers: the behaviours athletes observed, the feelings those behaviours produced, and the values underneath them.



SUMMARY



Safe Sport Culture

- **Manifestations:**
 - Coaches who are certified, self-aware, collaborative with support staff, and focused on long-term athletic development.
 - Placing overall health, wellness, and mental health ahead of competition results.
 - Inclusive, open, and supportive team environments built on mutual trust.
 - Access to integrated support personnel, including physiotherapists, mental health specialists, nutritionists, and media attachés.
 - Consistent enforcement of safety protocols, codes of conduct, and clean sport standards.
- **Evoked Feelings:** Trust, belonging/fitting in, and feeling valued as a whole person.
- **Underlying Values:** Caring, Credibility, Inclusion, and Respect.



Unsafe Sport Culture

- **Manifestations:**
 - Overstepping personal boundaries, gatekeeping resources, exerting power, and engaging in aggressive/exclusionary tactics.
 - Exclusionary practices, toxic group dynamics, and physical or emotional aggression.
 - Insufficient care, inadequate funding driving unhealthy decisions, poor equipment/facilities, and unenforced safety rules.
 - Flawed reporting processes, risk of retaliation/blacklisting, lack of administrative accountability, and bystander inaction.
- **Evoked Feelings:** Vulnerability, fear/intimidation, feeling devalued, mistrust of institutions/coaches, and isolation.
- **Underlying Values:** Authority, Autonomy, Meritocracy and Drive

FINDING BALANCE

Below is a summary of how the article approaches balancing performance with maintaining a safe environment



1. Issues with the Drive for Excellence

- a. The study identifies meritocracy and drive as underlying values that currently fuel unsafe practices when left unchecked. The authors argue that high performance should not be defined strictly by medals or outcomes, but by maximizing an athlete's potential within a healthy, sustainable framework.
- b. A safe environment prioritizes athlete longevity and holistic development rather than short-term gains achieved through burnout, overtraining, or injury.

2. Balancing Key Values

- a. Coaches and leaders must maintain expertise and authority without resorting to gatekeeping, aggressive behaviour, or unchecked power. Coaches are encouraged to be knowledgeable, self-aware, and collaborative with sports science and medical professionals rather than acting as sole dictators.
- b. Resource distribution and attention should not solely favour a select few top performers at the expense of other team members, which creates isolation and toxic competition.

3. Organizational Strategies

- a. Providing accessible ancillary support (physiotherapists, mental performance consultants, nutritionists, media attachés) ensures athletes have the physical and psychological resources to perform at elite levels safely.
- b. Administrators and coaches must incorporate athlete wellness indicators, check-ins, and psychological safety into how program success is measured.
- c. Enforcing transparent codes of conduct, fair selection processes, and non-retaliatory reporting channels ensures athletes feel secure enough to focus fully on training and competition.

TYING IT IN TO GYMBC



1.

Navigating Power Dynamics in a Sport of Minors

The study names authority and autonomy as core values of unsafe culture when coaches hold unchecked control over athlete progression, team selection or communication. In gymnastics, where most athletes are minors, that framework reinforces why safeguards like the Rule of Two, clear athlete-centred boundaries, and transparent selection criteria for Team BC and provincial squads matter as much as they do.

2.

Balancing Competitive Excellence with Athlete Wellness

Because meritocracy and drive can lead to injury, emotional harm and fear of reporting when left unchecked, technical committees across WAG, MAG, TG and GFA can use these findings to broaden how program success is measured — integrating long-term athlete development, psychological readiness and injury prevention alongside medal counts and difficulty scores.

3.

Coach Education and Professional Standards

Safe culture rests on credibility and caring: coaches who are knowledgeable, collaborative and self-aware. These are teachable standards, and they belong in professional development programming, judge and coach clinics, and mandatory safe sport training.

4.

Strengthening Governance and Incident Reporting

One of the study's most consistent findings is that an inattentive sport system leaves athletes fearing blacklisting, or nothing happening at all, when they report unsafe behaviour. That is the case for an independent complaint management framework, clear disciplinary policy, and explicit non-retaliation protections — and for saying so publicly, so athletes and families know the pathway exists.

5.

Expanding Integrated Support

Athletes consistently linked feeling safe to having professional care available outside the direct coach-athlete relationship. For provincial team travel, camps and major competitions, prioritizing multidisciplinary support (physiotherapy, mental performance, nutrition, etc.) gives athletes somewhere to go for both physical recovery and mental health.

SOURCES & FURTHER READING

This summary is based on a single open access study. We encourage readers to go to the original, which is free to read in full.

PRIMARY SOURCE:

MacIntosh, E., Doherty, A., & Kerwin, S. (2025). Informing a culture shift in high performance sport in Canada: athletes' unsafe and safe sport experiences. *Sport Management Review*, 28(3), 600–623.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/14413523.2025.2493430>

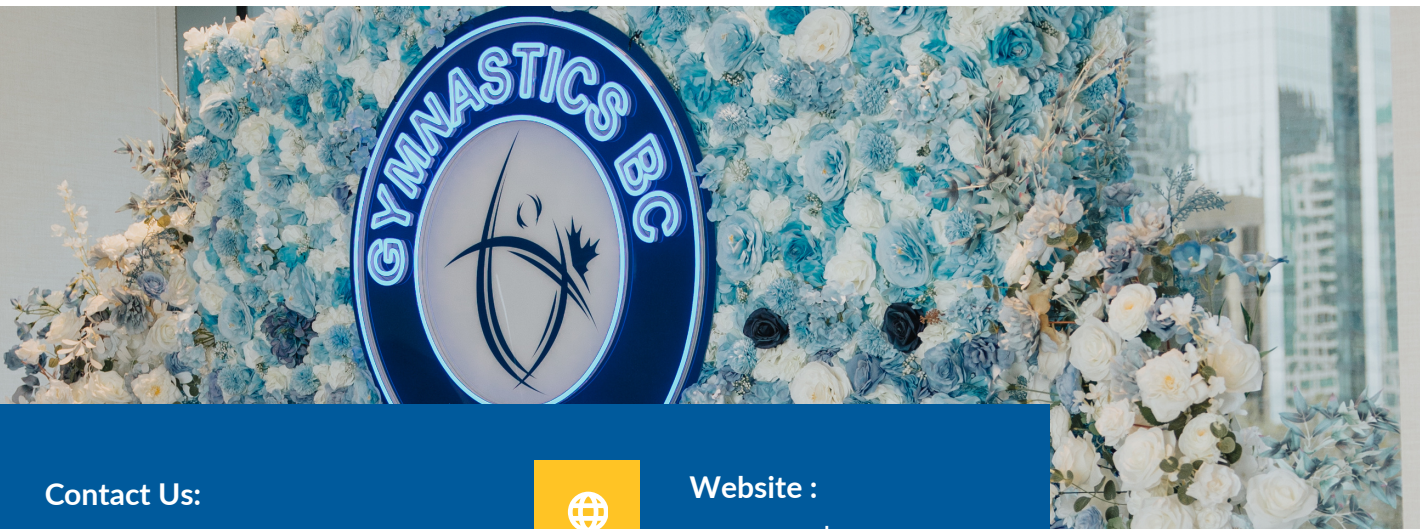
RELATED CANADIAN RESEARCH CITED WITHIN THE STUDY

Gurgis, J. J., Kerr, G., & Darnell, S. (2022). Safe sport is not for everyone: Equity-deserving athletes' perspectives of, experiences, and recommendations for safe sport. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 1–14.

Owusu-Sekyere, F., Rhind, D. J., & Hills, L. (2022). Safeguarding culture: Towards a new approach to preventing child maltreatment in sport. *Sport Management Review*, 25(2), 300–322.

Willson, E., Kerr, G., Battaglia, A., & Stirling, A. (2022). Listening to athletes' voices: National team athletes' perspectives on advancing safe sport in Canada. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 4, 1–13.

Willson, E., Kerr, G., Stirling, A., & Buono, S. (2022). Prevalence of maltreatment among Canadian national team athletes. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(21–22), NP19857–NP19879.



Contact Us:

604-333-3490 | safety@gymbc.org



Website :

www.gymbc.org