



A FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE: HOW TO ACHIEVE A CULTURE SHIFT FOR GYMNASTICS IN CANADA

A brief to
The Standing Committee on the Status of Women
And
The Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage
House of Commons
Parliament of Canada

27 January 2023

By Richard H. McLaren, O.C., Bob Copeland, and Janie Soublière

Introduction

We write to you as international experts in sport policy, sport governance and law. Professor Richard H. McLaren, O.C., CEO of McLaren Global Sport Solutions Inc. ('MGSS') is a globally recognised figure who has led many high-profile reviews and investigations into sport integrity matters including being the World Anti-Doping Agency ('WADA') appointed Independent Person who led the investigation into Russian state-sponsored doping at the Sochi Olympics. Professor McLaren and his team have been entrusted by many sports governing bodies and organisations including Gymnastics Canada, Canada Soccer, Own the Podium, Table Tennis Canada, Alpine Canada, USPORTS, the Canadian Football League, Fédération Internationale de Basketball ('FIBA'), International Boxing Association ('IBA'), International Weightlifting Federation ('IWF'), among others. Professor McLaren is the appointed Independent Integrity Officer for FIBA and works in a similar capacity for the IBA and Table Tennis Canada.

The authors are highly experienced in conducting research and investigations related to sport corruption, maltreatment and anti-doping. For example, the MGSS team led a highly complex investigation¹ into the maltreatment and abuse of young women on the National Women's U-18/19 yrs. basketball team in the Republic of Mali, Africa following an investigative report by the New York Times and allegations of abuse made by the international organisation *Human Rights Watch*. Our team includes highly experienced investigators with trauma-informed experience in interviewing and victim safeguarding.

This brief provides an executive summary of a comprehensive 277-page Independent Report that was published by MGSS on 25 January 2023 entitled ***A Framework for Change: How to Achieve a Culture Shift for Gymnastics in Canada*** (the 'Report'). MGSS was selected by the Board of Directors of Gymnastics Canada ('GymCan') to complete this work following a public Request for Proposal ('RFP') process initiated by GymCan.

Terms of Reference

The complete Terms of Reference are posted for full transparency on the MGSS website. The two key deliverables included for MGSS to conduct a review of GymCan's Safe Sport policies and to develop a framework or 'roadmap' to set forth if and how a Gymnastics Culture Review should be conducted. The Terms of Reference included that "*Gymnastics Canada agrees that MGSS shall publicly issue the final report for full transparency.*"

MGSS fulfilled its obligations and published its Report on 25 January 2023. The complete Report is available at the following link: [McLaren Independent Gymnastics Report](#).

¹ McLaren Global Sport Solutions, "*McLaren Independent Mali Basketball Abuse Investigation, Integrity Officer Report to the International Basketball Federation (FIBA)*," Online: [FibaReport-09-2021.pdf](#) ([mclarenglobalsportsolutions.com](#))

The Report Summary

The Report provides a framework and methodology to address the tsunami of negative criticism and egregious allegations of abuse that have been leveled at the governance of gymnastics in Canada – referred to as the ‘Culture Review Framework’. These allegations are well documented and are discussed in the Report as the impetus for this work. The Report also provides a comprehensive review of GymCan’s Safe Sport and related policies.

Although the Report is authored by McLaren Global Sport Solutions and its Independent Review Team (‘IRT’), the findings presented reflect the collective voice and impassioned pleas for change amongst more than 1,000 members of the gymnastics community in Canada who participated in the Independent Review. This includes highly descriptive, personal accounts from gymnasts, parents, coaches, judges, staff and the leaders of provincial and national governing bodies.

The Report provides GymCan and Provincial and Territorial Organisations (‘PTOs’) with the insights, findings and recommendations needed to begin the critical and necessary work of changing the culture of the sport. This Report is not a culture review; it identifies the systemic areas of concern that Gymnastics Canada, PTOs and those government agencies who fund gymnastics should focus on in order to truly drive change. The Culture Review Framework is a bespoke process that is unique from international culture reviews that have been undertaken thus far because the methodology and recommendations are built upon the feedback of a broad cross-section of the gymnastics community in Canada. The Culture Review Framework also takes into consideration strengths and limitations of several international gymnastics reviews completed between 2017-2022 in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the United States.

The work to undertake a Gymnastics Culture Review will be challenging. But this work is long overdue to address the myriad of issues that continue to plague the sport in Canada. The investment of time and resources in the Culture Review Framework will ensure that the concerns, priorities and solutions expressed by the gymnastics community are finally acted upon.

Report Caveat: ‘Facts’ versus ‘Opinions’

The Report is not an investigation report. It does not provide findings of fact. The plethora of comments and statements received from the gymnastics community (numbering in the thousands) were not individually corroborated or fact-checked by MGSS. That material reflects the views and opinions of the persons interviewed or surveyed. Some individual claims may give

Report Highlights

- More than 1,000 voices representing the Gymnastics Community (‘GC’) in Canada provided feedback;
- The GC demands change and strongly supports a rigorous Independent Culture Review be undertaken;
- Most gymnasts in the sport report positive experiences, however, toxic examples of abuse and maltreatment persist at all levels; coaches, judges and staff have also reported maltreatment;
- Abuse & maltreatment of gymnasts appears most pronounced in Women’s Artistic Gymnastics and Women’s Rhythmic Gymnastics;
- The Gymnastics Culture Review should be led by an interdisciplinary team and take a Human Rights based approach – included as a key feature of the proposed Culture Review Framework;
- Every level of the sport and its stakeholders demands attention, from recreational to high-performance clubs to GymCan itself and how the sport is governed in Canada.

rise to further investigation or fact-checking if deemed necessary by any governing organisation identified in the Report. The IRT uses the material to develop several compelling themes regarding the views and assumptions of the community. The idiom ‘Where there is smoke, there is fire’ metaphorically describes this approach. Although individual accounts were not corroborated, the similarity and alignment of comments around specific consistent themes suggest that these issues are of significant concern to the Canadian gymnastics community and should be given further attention in the pending Gymnastics Culture Review Framework proposed in the Report.

This approach is important and by design. MGSS is keenly aware of the gymnastics community’s discontent about voices (athletes or others) not being heard. Consequently, individuals are quoted verbatim in the Report so as not to perpetuate the expressed discontent.

Primary Research Undertaken

Extensive primary research involved more than 1,000 individuals within the Canadian gymnastics community. A total of 58 personal interviews were conducted with gymnasts (past and present), parents, coaches, judges, staff, and executive leadership of the national, provincial and territorial governing bodies for gymnastics. This included conversations with many gymnasts and others who openly and voluntarily shared their experiences of maltreatment and abuse. Sport policy experts were consulted as were executives of Sport Canada, Own the Podium (‘OTP’), the Canadian Olympic Committee (‘COC’) and the Coaching Association of Canada (‘CAC’).

Two surveys were developed and implemented. One was a survey of the executives of Provincial and Territorial Gymnastics Organisations (‘PTOs’). The other was an open-access public survey of the gymnastics community in Canada. Together, a total of 974 individuals responded to these surveys (full survey results provided in Appendix A and Appendix B of the Report). Many respondents indicated their appreciation for the opportunity to be heard and share their experiences.

Several key findings emerged from the research and are summarised as follows:

- Data provided by PTOs indicate approximately 266,077 registered gymnastics participants in Canada, suggesting a post-pandemic decline of as many as 45,980 participants or 17% of total participants over the past 3 years;
- Approximately 83% of participants are at the grassroots recreational level of the sport;
- Women’s Artistic Gymnastics (‘WAG’) represents the largest cohort of the competitive disciplines (60% of all competitive gymnasts are WAG);
- More than 83% of gymnasts who were surveyed indicated their overall gymnastics experience as either “*Extremely Positive*” or “*Somewhat Positive*”;
- Amongst competitive disciplines, WAG is described as being the most negative and subject to abuse;
- Significant concerns are expressed about factors that can impact an athlete’s mental or physical health including (in order of concern): 1) Body image, 2) High demand for results, 3) Authoritative coaching, 4) Parental influence/pressure, 5) Heavy training loads, 6) Pressure from a gymnastics organisation/staff and 7) Pressure to engage in early specialisation;
- Other factors of concern are noted, including lack of accountability, lack of Safe Sport education, poor communication, insufficient resources and a culture of fear.

MGSS heard from individuals who expressed grave concerns about the media narrative portraying the entirety of Canadian gymnastics as being “toxic.” The fact that more than 83% of gymnasts described their experience as positive validates these concerns and suggests that the vast majority of gymnasts are satisfied with their experience. However, this finding does not — and should not — excuse, diminish, or ‘sugar-coat’ the egregious maltreatment and abuse experienced by a minority of gymnasts in Canada. For example, the 7% of gymnasts who reported their overall gymnastics experience as either “*Extremely Negative*” or “*Somewhat Negative*” suggests that more than 18,625 gymnasts across Canada have had a negative experience²; this number of gymnasts arguably includes those who allege acts of maltreatment and abuse. The positive experiences of the majority of gymnasts does little to placate those who have had a negative, and potentially abusive, experience. These statistics also portend the continued maltreatment of gymnasts in Canada until the systemic issues identified in this Report are rectified. This also speaks to the urgent need for accountability within the system, which is one of the most consistent and troubling themes that emerged. To this end, MGSS has included specific recommendations concerning accountability as it relates to the outcomes of the Gymnastics Culture Review.

Themes Related to Culture and a Culture Review Framework

Below is a brief summary of each of the 12 themes that emerged from the IRT’s primary research. These themes, based on the input of the gymnastics community, were used to inform the Culture Review Framework provided in the Report.

1) Club Level Analysis

There is strong consensus that the Gymnastics Culture Review must focus on all levels of the sport, including attention to club-level factors. The notion of abuse being largely confined to high-performance competitive gymnastics is misleading and not generally supported by the Canadian gymnastics community. Maltreatment can and does occur at every level of the sport, thus the grassroots of the sport cannot be overlooked. A common refrain repeated from the gymnastics community as it pertains to the Culture Review Framework is: “*don’t forget about the ones (gymnasts) at the lower levels.*”

2) Sub-Cultures by Competitive Discipline

The research confirms that there is no singular culture within the sport of gymnastics in Canada. Many agree with the sentiments of one gymnast who stated, “*Within gymnastics there are different silos and major cultural differences between disciplines.*” It is incontrovertible that certain disciplines including WAG and Rhythmic Gymnastics (‘RG’) are, and have been, consistently beset by toxic environments for some athletes. This appears to be particularly true at the pinnacle of the sport where performance demands are most acute. A consistent theme that emerged is that WAG and RG continue to be plagued by negative cultures, including high-performance contexts and formative competitive pathways.

² Note: 7% of gymnasts who completed the survey and rated their experience as negative, multiplied by the total number of gymnasts in Canada suggests that more than 18,625 gymnasts have had a negative experience.

3) Governance, Jurisdiction and Accountability

The governance of gymnastics, including issues related to jurisdiction and accountability, appears as a significant red flag as it relates to culture and Safe Sport. There is a chasm between GymCan and PTOs concerning jurisdiction which has resulted in the emergence of siloed PTO operating structures reflected in the following quote by a GymCan staff member: *“There is no direct oversight (of PTOs). Because PTOs feel like they oversee GymCan and not the other way around. Provinces feel like they control everything and feel that they have the power of oversight over GymCan.”* As a result, there is a lack of national oversight, coordination and support of grassroots gymnastics. Many ‘accountability gaps’ are identified by the IRT including ineffective performance management of coaches and others in leadership positions within the sport. In effect, GymCan has been rendered impotent as it concerns their ability to enact and monitor consistent national standards for local clubs, including Safe Sport standards.

4) Gymnastics Canada Organisational Structure and Leadership

The IRT received considerable negative feedback about GymCan’s organisational structure and leadership including one provincial gymnastics administrator who referred to GymCan’s structure as *“organisational disarray”* encompassing ineffective communications and staff turnover. There is a lack of capacity, transparency and support for staff within the current structure. Many individuals expressed concern about the impact of the dual roles of the GymCan CEO who also is the High-Performance Director, including some who have lost confidence and trust in the CEO. The organisation is described as being *“stretched thin”* and ineffective in its current form.

5) Communication, Transparency and the Athletes’ Voice

Another consistent theme that emerged, particularly from athletes, is poor communication and a lack of transparency related to decisions that impact athletes. According to one athlete, *“there is no transparency in the hiring of coaches and poor consultation with athletes.”* Many athletes do not feel that their voice is heard which has been described as a negative part of the gymnastics culture in Canada. Issues involving communication and transparency between gymnastics organisations and athletes is a function of multiple factors discussed in the Report including governance, leadership, values and an unhealthy power imbalance between coaches, administrators and the athletes they serve. The IRT provides a detailed example of the convoluted hiring process for the National WAG Head Coach that validates these concerns.

6) Performance Incentives — Win-at-all-costs?

The phrase ‘win at all costs’ has been used extensively in Canada and internationally to describe gymnastics culture. According to one gymnastics administrator, *“It sometimes feels like winning at any cost is acceptable.”* The IRT’s research confirms that many within the gymnastics community believe that such a philosophy is endemic to gymnastics at high-performance levels, without consideration for an athlete’s physical and psychological well-being. Moreover, concerns about early specialisation, overtraining and high-pressure tactics to succeed are born at the nascent competitive pathways at the club level and can become more pronounced as athletes progress within the system. The win-at-all-costs philosophy is a product of many factors including how athletes, coaches and programs are funded and supported within Canada’s high-performance system. These factors are explored in greater depth in Chapter 2 including recent changes to include more robust performance indicators associated with the health and well-being of athletes. For example, Own the Podium has developed a pioneering tool called the

‘Culture of Excellence Assessment and Audit Tool’ (‘CAAT’). The CAAT tool holds much promise and is recommended to be included as part of the Culture Review Framework.

7) Reporting

The gymnastics community is dissatisfied, confused and frustrated with current reporting mechanisms associated with maltreatment. This includes a lack of familiarity with the recently introduced Universal Code of Conduct to Prevent and Address Maltreatment in Sport (‘UCCMS’), as well as the ‘Abuse Free Sport’ website and the Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner. The IRT’s research (Appendix B) supports this finding. Much of the confusion with reporting is a function of issues related to jurisdiction and policies that govern reporting at various levels. For example, there appears to be consensus with the statement that *“There is a bottleneck happening at the provincial and club level with reporting and complaints”*, as expressed by one administrator. The confusion and misunderstanding of reporting processes have caused many individuals to distrust both the process and those who are responsible for implementing the various reporting processes. Many individuals also agree that *“There needs to be a clear black and white outline of processes to report depending on your level.”*

8) Coaching Practices and Impacts

A thorough overview of coaching practices and impacts is provided in Chapter 2. This includes coaches who abuse their power to achieve performance outcomes through tactics that constitute maltreatment. Many individuals who were interviewed described the hiring of *“Eastern European coaches”*³ in Canada as a partial explanation for abusive coaching practices that have been left unchecked. Tactics including body shaming, overtraining, training through injuries and autocratic leadership are examples of maltreatment characteristic of high-performance gymnastics coaches in the former Soviet Union. Other coaches abuse their power imbalance to prey on gymnasts for their sexual gratification, described as ‘sextortion’ by some sport ethicists.

The IRT also heard impassioned pleas from positive coaches who feel maligned, vilified and on the defensive. For example, many coaches believe *“the (Safe Sport) pendulum has swung too far the other way,”* and *“good coaches are being painted with the same brush as coaches who bring disrepute to the sport.”* The IRT spoke to and received survey responses from athletes who described their coaches as *“mentors”* and *“father figures”* who are supportive and encouraging in healthy ways. Coaches do not feel supported within the Canadian gymnastics system and are at risk of leaving the sport. The dichotomy of coaching styles prevalent across the sport is reflected in the following comment expressed by one gymnast: *“Most coaches are positive and willing to work, others just want to tear athletes down and provide no solutions or positive reinforcement.”*

9) Judging Environment

The IRT sought input about the perceptions of culture within the judging ranks and the impact of judging on the athletes’ experience. Judging culture appears to be discipline-specific, as it is for athletes. This includes a negative judging culture within WAG described by a judge as

³ The term *“Eastern European”* has been used by people to describe coaches largely from the former Soviet Union who used abusive coaching practices in the pursuit of podium success. MGSS has chosen to use the term *“International”* in its Report other than direct verbatim quotes.

“competitive, I might use the word toxic [...] and not competitive in a positive way.” Moreover, judges across the Olympic gymnastics disciplines are subject to different governance and accountability requirements that demand attention.

10) Parental Influences

The role and influence of parents on cultural dynamics and on their child’s experience is an important theme that emerged. Most parents provide healthy forms of support for their children. However, the IRT heard accounts of parents who push their children beyond healthy limits, sometimes unwittingly siding with an abusive coach without comprehending that the actions of the coach constitute maltreatment. Some parents have been conditioned to believe that the coach is an infallible expert who knows what is best for the athlete to achieve success. The IRT heard about parents being blinded to the damage that negative coaching practices can cause through overtraining and other demands. The clouding of a parent’s judgment can also occur *“when some parents realise that a child has a perceived talent for national and international competition they often support the child in different ways.”* Some parents, like their children, are victimized by the power imbalance used by unscrupulous coaches. This suggests the need for more targeted education for parents.

11) Safe Sport Education

The need for more robust and coordinated education and training programs focused on Safe Sport emerged as an important theme. Only a minority of gymnasts were knowledgeable about the Safe Sport policies of governing organisations including clubs, PTOs and GymCan. Specific concerns raised by athletes, coaches and others include the content, frequency and method of delivery of Safe Sport training programs. Specific concerns were raised about Safe Sport training requirements for coaches, described as insufficient by most. This includes inadequate Safe Sport *“onboarding”* requirements for international coaches who come to Canada, as well as a lack of mandated Safe Sport education requirements to maintain a coach’s National Coaching Certification Program (‘NCCP’) credentials in good standing. Current online training programs for coaches were described by several individuals, including coaches themselves, as a *“box-ticking exercise.”* Feedback also included the need to develop Safe Sport training that is specifically targeted to different gymnastics roles and contexts (e.g. coach, athlete, parent) as well as demographic characteristics (e.g. adults versus children). Clearly, a ‘one size fits all’ approach is neither desirable nor effective based on the IRT’s research.

12) Safe Sport Policies

Interviews with the gymnastics community suggest that the comprehension of Safe Sport policies is generally poor (especially reporting processes) although a majority of survey respondents indicated good knowledge of such policies. A GymCan Board member described the NSO’s Safe Sport policies as *“sterile, cold, legal, and not implementable.”* Moreover, the interrelationship between local, PTO and GymCan policies is confusing and inaccessible to many, especially as this concerns reporting allegations of abuse. MGSS notes that from a legal standpoint, GymCan’s policies are well drafted and were recently updated to be in compliance with the Office of the Sport Integrity Commissioner.

Culture Review Framework

Chapter 3 of the Report describes the Culture Review Framework. The contents of the Chapter rely heavily on the feedback received from the Canadian gymnastics community as well as an assessment of gymnastics culture reviews completed in other countries. The IRT wanted to understand from the community if a Gymnastics Culture Review was needed and, if so, what it should entail. Every single gymnastics administrator in Canada who provided input agreed that a Gymnastics Culture Review is necessary and urgent. This includes Board members and staff of Gymnastics Canada and the Executive Directors/CEO of gymnastics governing bodies in every Canadian province. Moreover, almost 90% of survey respondents agreed that a culture review of gymnastics in Canada is important.

The Culture Review Framework includes a total of 46 recommendations, each with supporting rationale and a discussion of key methodological considerations. The Culture Review Framework begins with the IRT's recommendations as to who should lead this process – referred to as the Culture Review Leadership Team ('CRLT'). This is envisioned as an independent, multi-disciplinary team with expertise in law, organisational behavior/change management, trauma-informed interviewing techniques and child protection. The CRLT also must include athlete representation.

Guiding principles and key operating components are provided. This includes taking a Human Rights Based Approach based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This was a hallmark approach of the Whyte Review ('WR'), an independent investigation commissioned by Sport England and UK Sport focused on British Gymnastics. The Culture Review Framework also calls for a 'safeguarding statement and protocol' to be developed by the CRLT to establish how victims of maltreatment and abuse who come forward will be supported. This includes the need for clearly established protocols to triage and refer/report allegations of abuse that may arise through the Gymnastics Culture Review.

The functional areas of inquiry for the Gymnastics Culture Review include:

- Governance and Leadership of Gymnastics in Canada;
- Jurisdiction, Reporting and Accountability;
- GymCan Organisational Structure and Leadership;
- Safe Sport Education and Training;
- Club Environments;
- Competitive and High-Performance Environments.

The experiences of gymnasts within club environments as well as within competitive and high-performance programs are of paramount importance. The Gymnastics Culture Review must also reflect the insights and experiences of other gymnastics stakeholders including coaches, judges, staff, executive leadership, parents and the government agencies who direct and support gymnastics programs across Canada. A summary of the 46 recommendations is provided in the Report.

Concluding Remarks

Professor McLaren welcomes any comments or questions from members of the Standing Committee on the Status of Women and the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage as it concerns this Brief or the challenges currently facing pan-Canadian amateur sport.

About McLaren Global Sport Solutions Inc.

MGSS is a highly specialised sport consulting firm focused on mitigating risks related to ethics and governance within organisations. Our mission is to help sports organisations protect and enhance their brand, navigate difficult organisational issues related to ethics, governance and integrity, and inform strategic business decisions.

Website: <https://www.mclarenglobalsportsolutions.com>