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## **Sexual Assault of United States Olympic Athletes: Gymnastics, Taekwondo, and Swimming**

Chloe Meenan

*Abstract: The distribution of power in American Olympic sports has made room for the development of a culture of sexual assault. This culture has continued to grow and the organizations in authority have not done enough to put a stop to the abuse. First, I will address the troubles that victims have when sharing their stories, due to the distribution of power within the organizations, namely in gymnastics, taekwondo, and swimming. I focus on the Me Too Movement and the influence that social media has had in making strides towards raising awareness about sexual assault. I will explore the specifics of the abuse within each sport and the women who shared their stories to prevent similar things from happening to others. I also focus on how each coach abused his power and used their position to manipulate the athletes, while using the rules of each sport to their advantage. I spend some time discussing the corruption and neglect of the organizations to put a stop to the abuse immediately. My aim is to educate the reader on both the severity of the culture of sexual assault and the importance of taking a stand against the abusers and the organizations that let it happen.*

Keywords: Sexual assault, Olympic sports, gymnastics, taekwondo, swimming.

Olympic athletes are some of the strongest athletes in the world, not only for their physical ability but also for their mental fortitude. Many athletes have been sexually abused by their coaches or physicians, the people who they put the most trust in. In gymnastics, taekwondo, and swimming, there were many cases of coach-inflicted sexual assault on United States Olympic athletes. And in many cases, the organizations themselves allowed the abuse to occur.

In 2017, the Me Too movement was sparked by a tweet from an actress, Alyssa Milano, who aimed to give victims of sexual abuse a voice. This opened the gates to women all over the world sharing their stories about sexual abuse and these individuals became known as “The Silence Breakers.” Some United States Olympians were among the many women who shared their own stories of sexual abuse. Most famously, the women of the USA’s Gymnastics Teams from 2012 and 2016 spoke out about their teams’ osteopathic physician Larry Nassar, who had been sexually abusing the athletes for years, even after athletes brought the issues to USA Gymnastics. The Me Too Movement was powerful enough to bring about changes in the legal system, developing laws to protect victims and put their attackers behind bars. The distribution of power in American Olympic sports has

allowed a culture of sexual assault to arise without proper measures taken to protect our athletes and bring their attackers to justice.

### **The Problems that Victims Face**

Victims of sexual assault usually do not come forward for years, even decades, after the abuse. Victims may feel ashamed or doubtful that their stories will be believed. They often feel powerless and do not think that their situation will get any better, so they fight against the trauma in silence. Victims are even less likely to report, when the attacker has a position of power, which is why many jurisdictions are seeking to extend the statute of limitations for such cases, especially those involving minors (Fuchs 74). The system seems more designed to protect the sport and the people in power than in protecting victims or dispensing with justice (Fuchs 47). Nancy Hogshead-Makar, a gold medalist in swimming said, “there’s this implicit understanding that coaches can find their romantic or sexual partner from within the athletes they coach” (Starr). These relationships have been prohibited since 2013, but the U.S Olympic Committee had to pressure USA swimming to adopt this rule (Starr). This is an example of how USA Swimming made little to no effort to stop or prevent the abuse within their organization.

### **The Me Too Movement and Women’s Empowerment**

The Me Too Movement spread like wildfire after Alyssa Milano tweeted, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (@Alyssa\_Milano). Within 24 hours, the post received thousands of replies and inspired women and men around the world to share their personal stories. The movement provided victims with a way to break the silence and take back some of the power that was stolen from them by their attackers. “In the weeks after Milano’s tweet, the “MeToo movement—which the activist Tarana Burke created more than a decade earlier—became a widespread battle cry for those seeking to show that sexual harassment is not an isolated incident, and nor is sexual assault rare,” journalist Mary Pflum wrote. “The results are far-reaching—dozens of powerful men accused, many of them toppled, a handful criminally charged” (Pflum). This movement made it possible to put a stop to these predators and bring awareness to a problem that has been going on for way too long.

Another way that the media played an important role in raising awareness was through music. Maroon 5’s song, “Girls like you ft. Cardi B” featured the Olympians Chloe Kim, Alex Morgan, and Aly Raisman, a powerful force in the Me Too movement. The video came out during a time where the world was ready for powerful female role models and features women who are making a stand for female empowerment (Maroon 5). This revival of the women’s rights movement is exactly what the world needed, especially at a time where sexual assault was growing.

## **Gymnastics**

Over 150 victims directly addressed Lawrence G. Nassar in court, with Nassar telling the judge from the Ingham County courtroom that it was difficult for him to hear their statements. The women included gymnasts, dancers, rowers, runners, softball players, soccer players, volleyball players, a swimmer, and a skater. Most of his accusers were minors when the assaults occurred.

As the hearing progressed, more and more women decided to tell their stories. There was a pattern of abuse for over 20 years (Hauser). Gymnasts from the USA Olympic Gymnastics teams of 2012 and 2016 were included in the 150 survivors that testified against Nassar. Simone Biles, McKayla Maroney, Gabby Douglas, Aly Raisman, Madison Kocian, Kyla Ross, Jordyn Wieber, and Jamie Dantzscher are among Nassar's accusers. Jordan Wieber, an Olympic medalist, explained: "I thought that training for the Olympics would be the hardest thing I would ever have to do. But, in fact, the hardest thing I would ever do is process that 'I am a victim of Larry Nassar.'" McKayla Maroney, a two-time Olympic medalist said, "I had a dream to go to the Olympics, and the things that I had to endure to get there were unnecessary and disgusting." One of the most powerful testimonies came from Aly Raisman, a six-time Olympic medalist who said "Let this sentence strike fear in anyone who thinks it is O.K. to hurt another person. Abusers, your time is up. The survivors are here, standing tall, and we are not going anywhere."

Nassar used his title and the respect he gained for treating the athletes to hide the abuse. Some claimed that Nassar abused them at the Karolyi Ranch, which is located outside of Houston. They also have said that he abused them at international competitions and around the globe, even at the Olympics. There were many instances where parents had been in the room with their children while they were being assaulted, but they did not realize. They trusted that Nassar was helping their daughters and never thought he would abuse them. Not all of Nassar's abuse stemmed from a doctor-patient power imbalance, but he was a shockingly brazen public predator, who ended up getting sentenced 40 to 175 years for his crimes.

## **Taekwondo**

Taekwondo focuses on jumping and spinning kicks and features strict discipline and a regimented hierarchy; athletes address their coach as "master" or "sir." Questioning any instruction is not done. According to the 1999 book, *Taekwondo: The State of the Art*: "It does not matter whether what the instructor asks is possible, or whether a student feels like doing that particular drill or not. In response to a command, the only proper response is 'Yes, sir' or 'Yes, ma'am'...Absolute respect takes on the form of something deeper—a willingness to obey" (Fuchs 70). This distribution clearly makes room for the abuse of the

trust and respect that the athletes give their coaches, without hesitation. Steven and Jean Lopez severely abused their power as some of the best taekwondo coaches in assaulting many of the athletes they worked with. As Jeremy Fuchs and Lauren Green put it in their *Sports Illustrated* article: “Jean’s and Steven’s winning image hid a dark truth: They used their power and influence—enhanced by the sport’s code of obedience—to systematically rape and abuse women and underage girls” (Fuchs and Green 71). The brothers left the women so hurt that they were forced to leave their sport that they once had loved so much.

Gaby Joslin and Heidi Gilbert were USA Taekwondo Olympians that were abused by the brothers and broke the silence by telling their stories. Before the German Open, Jean told Joslin to lose 20 pounds, so she could compete as a bantam weight of 122 pounds. She didn’t question him, following the codes of the sport. He informed her that he would not be traveling to Germany and instead, Steven was going to go. Joslin greeted him in an elevator and, “Then, according to a complaint filed later in federal court, Joslin says that Steven didn’t answer but grabbed her hips, pushed her against the wall and told her, ‘You feel great as a bantam.’” Joslin felt alarmed, but she felt that she could not confront him if she wanted him to help her make the United States’ Olympic team. She left the elevator and did not tell anybody about the incident for 12 years.

Joslin wrote Steven a letter explaining her concerns and wanted to build a constructive athlete-coach relationship. After she handed Steven the letter, he came into her room and as she alleges in a lawsuit, he put on a pornographic movie and raped her. After the incident, Joslin went home and decided not to return to taekwondo. There were other such instances of the two men using their positions as coaches to take advantage of women and taking away from them the sport that they loved.

## **Swimming**

Olympic swimmer Ariana Kukors accused Sean Hutchinson of sexually assaulting her when she was 16-years old. Hutchinson gained power with his position as assistant coach on the 2008 Olympic swim team in Beijing. He was also the head coach of the 2009 U.S. team at the world championships. Hutchinson resigned after allegations that he was in an improper sexual relationship with one of his swimmers were raised. “In a news release, Bob Allard, Kukors’ attorney and an outspoken critic of Olympic sports organizations’ handling of sex abuse prevention, accused USA Swimming of failing to act on suspicions of abuse” (Hobson). Kukors expressed that Hutchinson started grooming her for a sexual relationship when she was just 13-years old.

Sarah Ehekircher accused her swim coach, Scott McFarland, of sexual misconduct over two decades ago. She claims that he first assaulted her when she was 17-years old on a trip to California, while he claims they had a consensual relationship when she was 18-years old. USA Swimming did not discipline him after a hearing in 2010. Hutchinson used

his position of power to manipulate a little girl, but that little girl grew into a strong woman who would no longer stand to be abused.

### **Corruption and Cover-Ups**

McKayla Maroney reached a \$1.25 million confidential statement with USA Gymnastics around 2016 to remain silent about Larry Nassar sexually assaulting her (Marquez). USA Gymnastics is responsible for setting the rules, policies, organizing clubs, promoting the sport, developing athletes, training coaches, and running as many as 4,000 events every year all over the country.

Before the 2020 Olympics in Tokyo, USA Gymnastics needs to elect an entirely new board, find a training center, get new sponsors, select national teams that will qualify to compete, and comply with any investigations related to Nassar. Recently, USA Gymnastics filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy to ensure their survival. John Manly, an attorney that is representing more than 150 women who accused Nassar of sexual misconduct, explained that: “We have depositions and request for other discovery and subpoenas lined up to get at the meat of what they knew and when they knew it [about the sexual abuse]. Bankruptcy stops that because there is an automatic stay on litigation” (Park). In filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, USA Gymnastics is delaying the U.S. Olympic Committee from revoking their status as the governing body for gymnastics at the Olympic level.

After multiple sexual assault allegations in Olympic Sports, Safe Sport was created by the U.S. Olympic Committee. The Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act was passed to “improve policies to protect athletes from sexual abuse, make reporting safer and easier for victims, and extend the statute of limitations for these abused children” (Urie). At first it seemed like it was serving its purpose because: “Since its establishment, SafeSport has levied 345 sanctions to people across 50 organizations. Some sports have had no suspensions or bans. Taekwondo has had 12; gymnastics, which has had 57 coaches or athletes disciplined, has the most of any sport. Track and field has had 43, swimming 31 and hockey 30” (Fuchs 74). Jean’s name was removed from the list and his accusers were furious. Gilbert expressed how the system had failed her and the other women who spoke out about the abuse by their coach, even though a permanent ban had been placed on him.

In 2010, USA Swimming became aware of the rumored relationship between Hutchinson and Ariana. They took no action to protect her or any of the other swimmers. The worst part of this lack of urgency in protecting the female athletes is that the organizations were so quick to hire lawyers to protect themselves and their image. Time and time again these organizations were filled with corruption and overrun by cover-ups.

### Steps to Take to Correct the Issues

Aly Raisman shared her reaction to some of the organizations attempts at reforming the organization tweeting: “My teammates & I reported Nassar’s abuse to USAG in 2015. We now know USOC & lawyers at Faegre Baker Daniels (Mary Bono’s firm) were also told then, yet Nassar continued to abuse children for 13 months!?! Why hire someone associated with the firm that helped cover up our abuse?” (@Aly\_Raisman).

Although USA Gymnastics has taken steps to ratify the problems, it may be beneficial if an entirely new organization oversees them. Additionally, the sponsors for these sports should not support any of the organizations until they replace any employee that did not actively work to stop the abuse.

The question of whether having more women in the coaching ranks would help prevent sexual assault of athletes has also been raised. There are not many female swim coaches at the elite level. There are a relatively equal amount of women coaches, but they work disproportionately with the younger players (Starr). It is clear that the organizations must adopt a new and comprehensive strategy. But they first need to admit that these women had in fact been assaulted, and they did nothing to stop it.

### Conclusion

Instead of focusing on image and winning, organized sports should be worried about protecting athletes. The corruption runs deep within USA Gymnastics, USA Taekwondo, and USA Swimming. It has taken way too long for the abuse to even be recognized, but social media has helped to make drastic improvements in how the culture is viewed.

It is evident that there are some glaring issues that the United States Olympic Committee needs to fix immediately. Especially with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics quickly approaching, the organization needs to consider a fresh start.

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