



Athletes: the new safeguarding leadership!

On March 11-12. 2021, SafeSport International held its second global conference titled 'Athlete Voice: Placing the athlete experience at the centre of sport safeguarding'.

Much has changed since our first global conference in Madrid in 2017 . Prof. Celia Brackenridge was still alive and able to provide opening comments. We miss her mightily. In 2017, we could host a conference and invite all the key researchers in the world to bring a sense of coherence to safeguarding. That proved impossible then and now, SSI is focussed differently.

Our 2021 conference theme came directly out of athlete focus group consultations for a project

SSI was doing with support from the Oak Foundation in late 2020. In the focus groups, athletes some of whom had been involved with the VOICE project in Europe, talked about being disregarded in safeguarding planning and research. They wanted not only to share their stories but to be part of the solutions to violence in sport. They wanted to be at the centre of safeguarding work from that point forward. SSI took all that to heart and completely refocused the conference planning. To the conference organizing group of Anne Tlivas, Yetsa Tuakli-Wosornu, Sandi Kirby, Mike Hartill and Nicola Bellas, we added 2 athletes, Karen Leach and Colin Harris. Together, we structured each session so that the focus was on the athlete perspective and athletes had speaking roles (as moderators, presenters and/or respondents), We organized one of the 6 workshop sessions specifically on “Lived experience and safeguarding in sport: perspectives from the front line”. Athletes’ feedback to the final plenary structured the work that SSI will now do going forward. It was a wonderful conference. It worked marvellously.

From the opening plenary, moderated by Stephanie Dixon, Canadian Paralympian and closed by Maximillian Klein, German athlete and advocate, Rachel Denhollander spoke on the neurobiology of trauma, the physical burden that athletes with lived experience of violence carry through their lives. It was an incredibly powerful presentation about trauma memories and coping strategies. This was followed by presentations by Joanna Maranhao, Kathryn Leslie, Gretchen Kerr and Mary Harvey. Together they covered an athlete’s perspective, policy and planning (FIFA), research and human rights respectively. Maximillian Klein closed the session with his thoughts on how to drive structural and cultural change. This was the broad base on information upon which the workshops of the following day rested.

The workshops were stellar. They covered coach-athlete relationships, athlete and coach communication, adult and child rights. athletes with lived experience, athlete-centred justice systems and the need for independent clearing agencies for intervention. The information from these will be posted on the SSI website in the near future. However, what is lasting is the impression made by the participating athletes. From them we learned that we want to re-

engage all the athletes involved to ask them to be part of the SSI work in the future. Many of them had not moderated or presented before and were “super keen” on the experience. Many were speaking in a second or even third language. They are a terrifically talented group. They came from around the world to participate online. It was magical.

In conclusion, perhaps it best to leave you with the conference safeguarding outcomes from the perspective of athletes: include all forms of violence; focus on ‘normalized’ violence; increase accountability and alignment plus improve reporting procedures and support for athletes; increase education and awareness for all stakeholders; come from the perspective of athletes’ human rights; and invest in independent third-party places to raise concerns.

The conference concluded with Dr. Yetsa Tuakli-Wosornu’s moving presentation of the SSI Call to Action:

- **See** athletes as human beings first and foremost. To that end, respect athletes’ rights, their voices, and their perspectives, and co-design safeguarding strategies in sport with them.
- **Start** with those who are not yet visible, not yet included, and don’t yet have a voice in this space. In this way, design from those margins in.
- **Create** an athlete caucus, formal or informal, to help you reach for a higher level of conduct and performance in sport and in life, every day.

Dr. Sandra Kirby, OC

Canada (one of the very tired and very happy conference organizers).