

## Safe Sport

Cases of abuse in sporting contexts have been reported from community through to high performance sport in physical and online environments, with abuse now recognized to be a systemic and global issue. Alongside such findings there is an urgency to create and promote “Safe Sport” practices and spaces. As Gurgis et al. (2023) contend, critics of competitive organized sport cite a multitude of issues, including abuse, corruption, the commodification of athletes, and cheating, all of which may compromise the welfare of athletes and threaten their human rights. Academic research and independent reports have shown that abuse in sports organizations is a multi-level issue. While individual experiences of abuse occur at the micro level, the broader environments of these organizations play a significant role. These macro-level environments can either perpetuate, suppress, or ignore the harm, impacting the extent and nature of abuse. Abuse or integrity violations, therefore, are not confined to individual acts and are intricately linked to systemic practices within organizations and institutions (Kavanagh et al., 2019). With increased awareness of abuse in sport, sport organizations have faced increased pressures to combat unsafe practices (Willson et al., 2022) resulting in an intensity of efforts to advance what has been termed Safe Sport. While this term is widely being adopted, often it has been poorly defined.

Gurgis et al. (2022) suggest that several philosophical conceptions of Safe Sport are currently adopted, all of which are grounded in interpretations related to abuse prevention. While some definitions focus more on athletes and athlete safety, Athlete365 (2021), an athlete engagement initiative by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), states that “Safe Sport is an environment where athletes can train and compete in healthy and supportive surroundings; an environment which is respectful, equitable, and free from all forms of harassment and abuse” (para. 1). Safe Sport International (2021), an international advocacy body, refers to protecting the welfare, safety and rights of all athletes. Others adopt a broader view that extends beyond athletes to encompass Safe Sport for all. For example, Mountjoy et al. (2020) interpreted Safe Sport as physical and environmental safety (e.g., injury-free), fair play, and drug-free sport extending beyond the athlete to further include those in their entourage. While Kerr et al. (2020) noted that the term Safe Sport emerged to encompass approaches that aimed to promote the holistic health and wellbeing of (all) sport participants. In summary, although different definitions are used across the world, all refer to the aspiration of achieving and creating harm-free sport environments.

Although the term Safe Sport has been used across North America and internationally (e.g., Sport Singapore, IOC Safe Sport Unit and Safe Sport Africa), other regions and

organisations at present adopt the term ‘safeguarding.’ Whereby safeguarding refers the measures put in place to ‘assure athletes’ safety and human rights’ (Kerr et al. 2019, p. 372). The concept of Safe Sport is therefore an extension of and or potential outcome of safeguarding practices. To extend this idea, Gurgis et al. (2022) presented three dimensions of the term Safe Sport: environmental and physical safety, relational safety, and optimising sport. Environmental and physical safety capture the prevention of harm through the importance of addressing issues of physical danger that may stem from issues such as faulty equipment, participating in an unsafe environment, and doping. Relational safety is the prevention of and intervention against harmful behaviours experienced and/or witnessed in sport within interpersonal relationships, including sexual abuse, physical abuse, and emotional/psychological abuse (prevention of abuse). Finally, optimising sport refers to the participation experiences for all stakeholders informed by positive development, rights of inclusion, accessibility, fairness, and safety through making sport more inclusive, accessible, and growth-enhancing.

The discourse surrounding Safe Sport is evolving, with ongoing debates on terminology and a growing recognition that addressing abuse requires a multifaceted approach. As the sport community grapples with these complexities, the overarching goal remains clear: the creation of both physical and online sport environments that prioritize safety, inclusion, fairness, and positive development for all participants. The adoption of the term Safe Sport is an important first step in raising awareness of harmful practices in sport and toward achieving widespread cultural change. Safe Sport is the responsibility of all those involved in sport across its levels therefore there is need for greater education on the topic.

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