



GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES AND ATHLETE VULNERABILITY

Accountability Gaps in Global and U.S. Sport Institutions



ELON
UNIVERSITY

Phoenix
Policy Institute

SAVANNAH GINDA



Phoniex Policy Institute

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Executive Summary



The Problem: Athlete Harm in Modern Sport



Athlete harm within organized sport is often framed as isolated misconduct, but recurring scandals across doping enforcement, institutional abuse, and recruitment systems reveal deeper structural issues. Across these cases, similar governance patterns emerge, including internal investigations, fragmented oversight, and limited athlete participation in decision-making.

Modern sport governance relies heavily on institutional self-regulation, where organizations oversee both rule-making and enforcement. This structure creates conflicts of interest, particularly when institutions investigate misconduct that may threaten their own reputation.

This memo argues that athlete harm reflects structural weaknesses in governance design rather than isolated failures of individual actors. Strengthening independent oversight, athlete representation, and reporting protections can improve accountability across sport governance systems.



Rule-making + enforcement occur within the same institutions



Sports Governance System

Sport governance operates through a layered system of institutions that regulate competition, athlete eligibility, and disciplinary procedures. At the international level, organizations such as the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) establish global standards, while national governing bodies and leagues implement these rules domestically.

Unlike traditional regulatory systems, sport organizations often operate through self-governing institutional models in which governing bodies oversee both regulation and enforcement. This structure creates accountability challenges, including limited transparency, conflicts of interest, and restricted athlete participation in governance processes.

As a result, institutions may face competing incentives between protecting athlete welfare and protecting organizational reputation.



Reoccurring Government Failures



Cases of athlete harm often appear unrelated at first glance, but similar institutional patterns emerge across sport systems.

Across doping enforcement, abuse scandals, and recruitment practices, governance systems frequently rely on internal investigations, delayed responses, and reforms that occur only after public exposure.

These reoccurring patterns suggest that athlete harm is linked to institutional structures rather than isolated misconduct.

COMMON PATTERNS INCLUDE...

Athlete Harm

**Reform
Announced**

**Internal
Investigation**

**Media
Exposure**

**Delayed
Institutional
Response**





Case Examples

These cases demonstrate how governance failures occur across different areas of sport but reflect similar institutional patterns

01

Anti-Doping Systems

- Fragmented enforcement across institutions
- Inconsistent accountability across contexts
- Focus on individual athletes over systemic factors



02

Recruitment Exploitation

- Cross-border recruitment systems
- Reliance on unregulated intermediaries
- Limited legal protections for athletes



03

Institutional Abuse

- Failures in reporting systems
- Athlete complaints ignored or mishandled
- Delayed institutional responses





Policy Solutions



Independent Oversight

- External review of governance systems
- Independent investigations of misconduct
- Reduced conflicts of interest



Athlete Representation

- Athlete voting seats on governing boards
- Advisory councils with real influence
- Participation in policy decisions



Whistleblower Protection

- Confidential reporting systems
- Anti-retaliation protections
- Independent investigative authority



Key Takeaways

Athlete harm in sport is often linked to structural governance failures rather than isolated misconduct. Governance reforms that increase independent oversight, athlete representation, and reporting protections can strengthen accountability and better protect athletes.

Implication → Strengthening governance systems is essential for protecting athlete welfare and maintaining integrity in sport.

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