

## Cheerleading Sexual Abuse Concerns Remain

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The USA Gymnastics sexual abuse crisis has been news for several years now. So many claims were filed against USA Gymnastics for its mishandling of abuse claims by Larry Nassar and others that it drove USA Gymnastics into bankruptcy, forcing USA Gymnastics to fundamentally re-invent itself. Congress passed the SafeSport Law that became effective in 2018 and established the U.S. Center for SafeSport. Virtually every sport in the United States has adopted a SafeSport policy, and now takes steps prevent sexual and other abuse. Unfortunately, it appears there is still work to do — this time with the sport of Cheerleading.

Cheerleading is a big sport. It has nearly 4 million participants annually – from the age of 5 through the collegiate level. It is team-based and involves strenuous stunting, pyramids, baskets, tumbling, jumps and dance to music. Teams are highly competitive on the local, regional, and national level. It is also the topic of the recent Emmy-winning Netflix series “Cheer,” from which one of principal cheerleaders, Jerry Harris, was recently arrested and charged with producing child pornography.

A [recent USA Today investigation](#) revealed that US All Star Federal Cheer (“USASF”) and USA Cheer, the two top national cheerleading associations, may not be taking sufficient steps to prevent individuals (including coaches and choreographers), who have been charged and/or convicted of sexual misconduct involving minors, to continue to be directly involved in the sport. The USA Today investigation identified 180 such individuals, seventy-four of which were convicted and/or are registered sex offenders.

In response to the USA TODAY article, USA Cheer confirmed that none of the individuals identified are registered as active members of USA Cheer. Further, according to Lauri Harris, USA Cheer’s Executive Director, a background check is necessary to secure a USA Cheer membership. USASF has a similar requirement. In addition, both national cheerleading associations have written SafeSport policies and codes of responsibility requiring gym owners to perform background checks for individuals working with athletes.

Even so, these policies have significant potential to be strengthened. For example, The USA TODAY article highlighted one Ohio gym owner who was a registered as a sex offender, though the gym was registered under her sister’s name. This registered sex offender supervised daily workouts with minor cheerleaders, and could event attend regional and national competitions. The only apparent

limitation on her participation in the sport was that she was not allowed to backstage with the gym's team during warmups for competition.

A lot of lessons have been learned from the USA Gymnastics crisis. From it flowed national legislation in 2018, entitled the "Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act." This law, as well as many state laws, mandate reporting of instances of sexual or other child abuse, as well as mandated reporting of abuse conduct toward minor children to U.S. Center for Safe Sport. This center was established to set national standards for the protection of athletes and to investigate and discipline instances of abuse in US Olympic and now para-Olympic sports. However, cheerleading is not an USA Olympic sport.

Cheerleading is, nevertheless, very susceptible to the same types of abuse as gymnastics. All cheerleading gyms and organizations need to take steps now to ensure the safety of the cheerleaders and to prevent any form of abuse. That starts with mandating that SafeSport guidelines from the US Center for SafeSport and from the national cheerleading organizations be implemented and enforced at all levels of cheerleading. It means enforcing rules that require background checks on all staff and anyone else working with minor children so that no one with history of abuse can participate in the training of or interact with cheerleading athletes. It means setting up the training for all staff on SafeSport and developing policies to encourage reporting of any alleged incidents of child or sexual abuse.

There are many facets of this challenging topic to consider, and some of the governing laws can be confusing. The good news is that when businesses take the steps to navigate these laws and safeguard their athletes, they also take steps to promote their own growth and protection.

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