Safe Sport International

Safeguarding in Sport: Online Abuse of Athletes

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Executive Summary

Online abuse in sports is not a new problem, but it is seemingly growing with every sporting event that passes. Athletes at every level, from emerging talent to elite professionals, increasingly face a barrage of harmful content simply for participating in sport. Many athletes describe feeling unprepared for this reality: *"There is no textbook for how to live your life on social media as an athlete."* For those entering professional pathways, online abuse may not be something they are warned about, yet it can become a daily presence with significant consequences.

> ***"It's not something I ever thought about when I started my career. I hope it doesn't put younger athletes off from professional sport."***

Research shows that online abuse affects athletes psychologically, physically, socially, and professionally. The impact can be acute when messages arrive immediately following defeat or disappointment, when emotions are most raw. It can also have a long-lasting and profound impact on individuals after the experience. Much of the online abuse goes unseen or unheard, with athletes forced to suffer in silence. The scale of the problem, however, is becoming more apparent, with athletes increasingly publicly highlighting the abuse they receive online and detailing the impact on their mental health.

Online abuse rarely targets athletes alone — staff, officials, and volunteers are also affected, often unseen.

Tackling the root causes and triggers of online abuse is a complex challenge, and sport alone is not equipped to address the wider societal, legal and structural issues that underpin it. However, there are solutions, driven by innovative technologies, trauma-informed practices, and real-time monitoring, that can shield athletes from harm before it occurs, thus having the potential to protect them from the direct impacts of abuse. There are also appropriate and scalable responses to demonstrate that there are real-world consequences for the perpetrators of online abuse.

While numerous challenges remain to tackling online abuse, including jurisdictional issues, reporting to social media platforms, technical limitations, athlete reluctance, and evidentiary burdens, there are immediate remedies available to sports federations, organisations and teams that identify threats, hide harmful content, and protect athletes from harm.

This discussion paper will highlight to sports policymakers and practitioners the scale and impact of online abuse, the lived experiences of athletes, current evidence from traditional and esports environments, and the practical, athlete-centred solutions available now.

Scale and Impact of Online Abuse in Sport

The full scale of online abuse across sports is difficult, if not impossible, to assess, with current research focused on individual leagues, competitions and sub-sections of athletes. However, research across the board highlights this as a significant societal issue, often exacerbated by sport.

Online abuse takes many forms, spanning behaviours such as abusive comments, the creation or sharing of deepfakes, image-based violations, stalking, doxxing and coordinated 'pile-on' attacks.[1] When this abuse is shaped by intersecting identities, such as race, gender, disability, or sexuality, the resulting harm can be intensified and compounded. Types of abuse and the realities of the experience are ever-changing and rapidly evolving. To date, much of our understanding of online abuse has been based on monitoring and surveillance of content and commentary on social media platforms such as X, Instagram, and TikTok. Findings show that abuse can be multifaceted, with discriminatory comments, spreading of misinformation and disinformation, and threats of physical and sexual violence being just some of the types of content that athletes need to manage or triage while being social media-facing.[2/3/4]

Understanding of the scale of this form of abuse comes mostly from the reports of technology providers in place to reduce the threat posed by online abuse. For example, monitoring during the 2024 Paris Olympic Games verified over 10,200 posts and comments as potentially abusive using Artificial Intelligence (AI) models and human assessment. An analysis of the 2022 FIFA World Cup identified 19,636 posts or comments as containing abusive, discriminatory or threatening language.[5/6]

Online abuse in eSports may be exacerbated due to the nature of gaming platforms, real-time chat, and para-social relationships with fans. A 2024 study by Trudgett-Klose and McLinton revealed 96% of 145 videogame players said they had been cyberbullied in the previous 12 months. Almost half of the bullying (49%) came from co-workers (other players), and the other half from the public.

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[1] IOC Safe Sport Unit (in press). Online abuse and sport: context, definition, manifestations, impact and response. Olympics.com

[2] Fenton, A., Ahmed, W., Hardey, M., Boardman, R. & **Kavanagh, E.** (2023). Women's Football Subculture of Misogyny: The Escalation to Online Gender-Based Violence. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 1-23.

[3] Kearns, C., Sinclair, G., Black, J., Doidge, M., Fletcher, T., Kilvington, D., Liston, K., Lynn, T., & Rosati, P. (2022). A Scoping Review of Research on Online Hate and Sport. Communication & Sport, 11(2), 402-430. https://doi.org/10.1177/21674795221132728 (Original work published 2023)

[4] Burch, L., Hayday, E. J., Geurin, A. N., SMith. A. C. & Hushon, B. (2024). Discriminatroy virtual maltreatment and online abuse in digital sporting spaces: An examination of the experiences of six Olympic athletes. The International Journal of Sport and Society, 15 (3), 69

[5] https://www.olympics.com/ioc/news/world-mental-health-day-how-the-ioc-ran-the-largest-online-abuse-prevention-programme-ever-conducted-in-sport-at-paris-2024

[6] https://inside.fifa.com/campaigns/no-discrimination/fifa-social-media-protection-service/fifa-world-cup-qatar-2022

Women players were more likely to be subject to sexual harassment in eSports:*"the more professional a player becomes, the more they are exposed to hostile behaviour"*.[7]

Sportradar's first year of work protecting the players of the ATP Tour scanned over 3.1 million social media comments, flagging over 162,000 (5.2%) as abusive, targeting 245 players. The data further showed that abuse is not an isolated issue, but a societal one, with more than 70,000 abusive users identified.[8]

Online abuse is a problem that is only growing in severity. United Against Online Abuse's (UAOA) 2025 Barometer Report, covering 18 international federations, noted that 44% of respondents assessed that online abuse had increased slightly or significantly in the last year, with 50% stating it had remained broadly the same. It was also considered that 50% of the abuse could be categorised as either being misogynistic or racist.

The UAOA 2025 Barometer Report also indicated that the reporting may fail to reflect the true scale of abuse, with likely underreporting due to the focus on English-language comments, as well as a lack of consideration for abuse directed at staff, officials, and volunteers involved in sport.[9]

Impacts

While the scale may be hard to truly assess, the impact is clear. Athletes have openly spoken about the effect of abuse on their mental health. Online abuse inflicts multifaceted harms on athletes, impacting their well-being, performance and enthusiasm for sport.

- *"There is no textbook for how to live your life on social media as an athlete."*
- *"It's not something I ever thought about when I started my career. I hope it doesn't put younger athletes off from professional sport."*

Abusive messages can cause significant mental and emotional distress. Athletes report heightened anxiety, loss of confidence, depression, and even symptoms of post-traumatic stress from what can be continual online abuse. Online abuse has also been demonstrated to trigger physical and physiological responses that affect an athlete's health.

- *"The word '_____' hits me every time. It's my personal trigger."*
- *"People think it's harmless, but these words stay with you."*

[7] https://unisa.edu.au/media-centre/Releases/2024/cyberbullying-and-sexual-harassment-rampant-in-esports/
[8] https://www.atptour.com/en/news/atp-safe-sport-august-2025-release
[9] https://unitedagainstonlineabuse.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/uaoa-barometer-survey-report-2025_10D.pdf

These effects will inevitably have an impact on performance, as well as longer-term effects on career longevity. Social and economic consequences are also evident, with athletes opting, or being advised, to withdraw from social media, which affects their relationships with fans and the media. The impact of online abuse can be profound and long-lasting.

- *"Mental state is so important, and being shielded from online abuse can be game-changing. It can mean nailing your performance, resulting in personal and national pride, meeting funding targets and inspiring the next generation. The knock-on effects are huge."*

Given the increasing commercial necessity for some athletes to have an online presence – to secure sponsorships, funding, and opportunities, particularly in less high-profile sports – it is no longer a realistic solution to tell athletes to simply get off social media altogether.

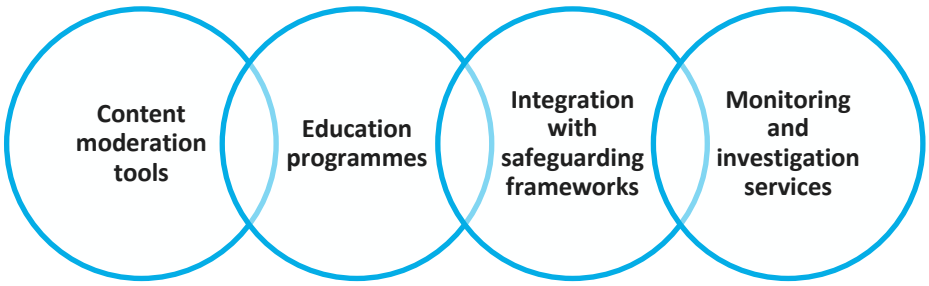
- *"You can't just not be online – you fall behind with sponsorship. Being told to stay offline isn't an option for most athletes."*

Athlete-centred Solutions

Sport alone cannot tackle the causes and triggers of online abuse. Nor can it seek to solve wider societal issues, such as political polarisation, the influence of social media platforms, and the jurisdictional and legal complexities surrounding online abuse.

However, there are opportunities for further coordination and accountability across sports organisations and event providers to provide safe, equitable, and supportive environments that uphold people's rights and foster a culture in which everyone can enjoy and thrive through sport.

Solutions to safeguard athletes from abuse before it causes harm already exist and are being successfully implemented by sporting organisations. These include advanced content moderation tools, education programmes, integration with safeguarding frameworks, and monitoring and investigation services.



Content Moderation Tools

Several AI-driven technology companies are already working directly with athletes, teams, and federations to protect athletes and officials. A growing ecosystem of tools supports automated and hybrid moderation. These include:

- Real-time AI moderation that hides abusive content before athletes see it.
- Keyword and trigger detection, customised to athlete needs.
- Threat-escalation engines that flag content for investigators and security teams.
- Sentiment-tracking systems that identify patterns, spikes and emerging risks.
- Deepfake detection for image-based violations.

Solutions exist to monitor and report on the scale of the problem, providing key insights and analysis into the types, frequency and triggers of abuse, while also identifying potential threats for escalation.

Other platforms utilise AI and automation to moderate social media comments directly. These platforms are configured to detect and remove abusive or toxic comments instantly, providing direct protection to the athletes from abuse. While the capability also exists to monitor and report the problem on a large scale, protecting the athlete from immediate harm should be at the forefront of solutions.

The ability to instantly hide comments flagged as potentially causing harm, across a diverse and ever-adapting range of abuse types, is of paramount importance to an athlete-centred solution. Even a slight delay in identifying or moderating abuse has the potential to inflict unnecessary harm to the athlete and or others exposed to the content.

Technology companies offer various solutions to different problems, and rapid technological advancements mean that sporting organisations must critically assess their capabilities to ensure they meet their specific needs. Considering the scope of the challenge, it may be wise in some cases to collaborate with multiple providers to provide comprehensive protection for those at risk.

Education Programmes

Education is a core component of a holistic solution to address the problem of online abuse and is explicitly referenced in Safeguards 3 and 6 of the International Safeguards for Children / Adults in Sport and eSport. Education programmes should work directly with athletes, coaches, and others in their entourage on the topic of social media best practices and threats, through in-person

workshops, online webinars, and custom education videos and platforms. Player-focused apps can also be used to incorporate educational and support features to proactively bolster athletes' resilience and knowledge.

Programme topics may include:

- Recognising the early signs of online harm.
- Understanding and managing privacy settings, blocking/reporting tools, and platform safety features.
- Identifying grooming, catfishing, impersonation, doxxing, and other forms of cybercrime.
- Knowing how to report concerns, block or report users, and where support is available.
- Building and maintaining personal boundaries around digital engagement, including recognising when messages or interactions cross the line.

Athletes should be informed of the resources available to them, either through their teams and sporting federations or through public support channels. This could include crisis support, wellbeing and mental health support, counselling, legal aid, and the appropriate channels for escalating and reporting issues. Services can also be utilised to help manage and potentially reduce the significant impact of being a recipient of or witness to online abuse.

Integration with Safeguarding Frameworks

Online abuse should be an integral feature of any sport or event-level safeguarding strategy and must be reflected in active processes. As such, online abuse must be recognised and addressed as part of an organisation's broader safeguarding work aligned with the 5R's framework:[10]

Readiness: Ensuring the knowledge, systems and skills are in place to address online harassment or abuse.

Recognition: Understanding risk indicators and signs that online abuse or harmful behaviours may be occurring.

Reporting: Providing age-appropriate trusted pathways for people to raise concerns or make a disclosure.

Response: Responding to a concern in a timely, fair, and transparent way that supports the person harmed.

Remedy: Reaching a resolution, restoring trust, and ensuring that people and systems learn so that the same harm is not repeated.

[10] Tuakli-Wosornu YA, Kirby SL, Tiivas A and Rhind D (2023) The journey to reporting child protection violations in sport: Stakeholder perspectives. *Front. Psychol*. 13:907247

The eight International Safeguards for Children / Adults in Sport and eSport are guides for what should be in place for any organisation providing sporting activities to children or adults. Online safety should be directly integrated into safeguarding arrangements, rather than being deemed separate. It should therefore be a part of:[11]

01 — Your safeguarding policy and commitment

02 — Procedures for responding to safeguarding concerns

03 — Provision of age-appropriate advice and support

04 — Assessing and minimising risks

05 — Guidelines for behaviour

06 — Recruiting, training and communicating

07 — Working with partners

08 — On-going monitoring and evaluating

Monitoring and Investigation Services

Specialist integrity and security services, with trained intelligence and investigation professionals, form the final component of a comprehensive solution. Utilising advanced Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) tools and techniques, and rapid threat intelligence analysis, sporting federations can implement active detection of risk and harm, while creating a real-world deterrent and consequence to online abuse.

Moderation platforms are equipped to detect and escalate serious threats in real time. When high-risk content is identified – such as indications of violence, self-harm, or targeted abuse – the system immediately flags it for review. This enables analysts and investigators to swiftly assess the credibility and severity of the threat. This information can be quickly escalated to on-site security and event teams, while also being referred to law enforcement as necessary.

In the background, investigators can work to identify prolific and persistent abusers and investigate comments that meet a serious or criminal threshold. By implementing a proportionate and scalable response, sporting federations can then take actions, including:

- Online moderation and banning
- Reporting profiles to social media platforms for suspension
- Sporting sanctions such as removal of season tickets, coaching/officiating licenses and implementing stadium/event bans
- Civil interventions
- Criminal referral to law enforcement

Case study

In June 2025, social media moderation detected abusive comments directed at an athlete. The abuse contained a death threat and was hidden on the platform instantly, protecting the player from immediate harm.

Investigators immediately notified security personnel within the sporting federation of the threat.

OSINT was used to acquire the identity of the perpetrator of the abuse, with further research identifying likely attendance at an upcoming sporting event featuring the athlete. Social media monitoring of the individual confirmed their presence at the event.

On-site security staff and local law enforcement were immediately informed. The individual was identified and removed from the event for questioning.

The perpetrator was issued a warning by law enforcement and banned from future events by the sporting federation.

[11] https://www.safesportinternational.com/standards/

The benefits of a holistic and athlete-centred approach include:

- Athletes being protected from the immediate harm and impacts of online abuse
- Stakeholders are fully educated on how to utilise social media and identify potential threats
- Safeguarding frameworks set clear guidelines for reporting, response mechanisms, and the support of athletes
- There are direct consequences and real-world accountability for those sending online abuse and threats

Challenges

Many of the solutions outlined in this report are already being implemented by a number of forward-thinking sporting organisations. Sadly, no matter how strong proactive measures are, online abuse still proliferates, and therefore, the potential to cause harm to athletes remains. Even in a holistic solution, challenges and barriers to implementation exist, including legal, technical, and cultural obstacles that must be overcome.

Cross-Jurisdictional and Legal Obstacles

The issue of online abuse is a global concern. Athletes in one country are readily abused by individuals across the globe, and taking action across borders poses a significant challenge. Many jurisdictions lack specific laws against online harassment, or laws have not kept pace with the digital world. What constitutes a criminal threat versus just offensive speech can be subjective and varies from one legal system to another, hampering efforts to escalate online abuse to law enforcement.

When civil or criminal action is pursued, the process can be burdensome and time-consuming, and meeting the evidentiary standard may be challenging. Abusers also often delete or hide their posts once there is a hint of consequences. If an athlete does not screenshot the abusive comment or if the platform does not log the content, key evidence can be lost.

Athlete Concerns

When athletes do pursue remedies for online abuse, it's critical to ensure the process itself does not inflict secondary harm. All recognition, reporting, and response activities must be grounded in trauma- and violence-informed approaches. Many civil or criminal actions require the involvement of the affected person in the process, and there is a danger of exposing the athlete to the very abuse that was hidden from them in the first place.

Not every difficult event is traumatising, and people will respond to incidents of online abuse in their own way, with different impacts,

different ways of managing feelings, and over different lengths of time. Individual routes to recovery from online abuse must be supported so that athletes and other affected persons can heal from any trauma and participate in sport if and when they wish.

Sporting federations may also encounter reluctance from athletes to engage in the moderation, education, and investigative processes. There is a danger that online abuse has been normalised in sport, seen as part of the game, and for athletes to simply accept it and brush it off as part of the cost of competing.

Similarly, there may be a fear of backlash or escalation for speaking out on the topic of online abuse, as well as a direct lack of awareness and trust in the authorities to provide the necessary support, including sporting governing bodies, law enforcement agencies, and social media platforms.

Younger athletes, including those on elite or talent pathways into adult sporting environments, may experience online abuse in ways that are acute, less visible, and uniquely harmful. Their developmental stage, reliance on adults for protection, and evolving sense of identity mean that safeguarding approaches must recognise children as a distinct group with different needs and rights to protection.

Technological and Implementation Limitations

Technology will always have its limitations and unintended effects that present challenges. AI moderation tools and filtering algorithms are not foolproof, and false positives and false negatives will consistently be an issue, necessitating human oversight to address these errors.

Sophisticated actors will continue to find new ways to evade detection and moderation, adapting their patterns while also migrating to niche and emerging platforms where coverage for moderation technology may not be as established. The language and expression of abusive content is also constantly evolving, often in tandem with broader global political and social developments.

Technological and investigative solutions can be considered costly, often deterring smaller sporting organisations from embracing tech-focused solutions. The ownership of implementation is also a challenge. Between athletes, teams/clubs, player representative bodies, leagues, and national or international federations, there may be a lack of accountability regarding ownership of the problem and implementation of potential solutions.

Conclusion

There is a lot of work still to be done to tackle online abuse in sports and society as a whole. Long-term solutions to address and reduce online abusive behaviours require a concerted and holistic effort involving engagement across sporting bodies, national governments, social media companies, law enforcement agencies, and the wider public.

Working with and listening to athletes about their experiences will undoubtedly expand understanding surrounding the rapidly changing landscape of online abuse. We recognise the need to build trust and foster safe relationships with athletes to enable them to access support without a feeling of judgment or consequence. Online abuse can be a deeply personal experience that requires a trauma-informed lens across response, remedy and ongoing protection. In the meantime, solutions should prioritise athlete wellbeing and protection:

- Online abuse can be integrated as part of all aspects of an organisation's safeguarding work – readiness, recognition, reporting, response and remedy – and aligned to the International Safeguards for All in Sport.
- Technology can be leveraged to provide monitoring, moderation, and escalation that instantly removes online abuse at its source, reducing its harmful impact on athletes.
- Education can arm athletes with the tools needed to identify and mitigate risks.
- Threat assessment and investigative action can uncover the identities of abusers and seek reasonable consequences for offenders.

In addition, wrap-around support for those who are affected is critical in buffering the significant negative impacts that can arise from experiencing and/or witnessing online abuse.

While continually addressing the long-term systemic issues that contribute to online abuse, sporting organisations need to prioritise the present, protecting the athletes at the heart of sport. It is the responsibility of sports governing bodies to create safe, secure, and harm-free environments, not just on the field, but also online.

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Suggested citation:

Safe Sport International, *"Safeguarding in Sport: Online Abuse of Athletes"*, 2026. Available at http://www.safesportinternational.com/guidance on [insert date]