

**Maximizing the potential of gifted young athletes:
International Perspectives on Youth Safety in Elite Sports Systems:**

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Over the past few years there has been increasing international recognition that young people cannot successfully achieve in sport and reap the well-documented benefits of sports participation unless they are protected from harm. The Coach is in a key position to monitor the maintenance of a safe sporting environment for athletes and to be an advocate for athletes well-being, so that they can optimise their athletic giftedness in safety. ‘Safety’ refers to both psychologically and physically healthy environments. Lack of psychological safety can occur where the sporting environment is marked by abusive, threatening, or humiliating coaching styles. This not only significantly increases the immediate stress on athletes, but has also been found to be associated with long-term psychological harm. Lack of physical safety can occur where extreme physical activities are used as a punishment for errors or failure to perform. And the sexual abuse of young athletes is a documented reality in many of our countries. At the highest level of elite sport the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has recently issued a Consensus Statement regarding sexual harassment and abuse in sport. The IOC has stated its aim is “to improve health and protection of athletes through the promotion of effective preventative policy as well as to increase awareness of these problems among the people in the entourage of the athletes (IOC, 2007). As the central person in the athletes entourage, the Coach is often the first point of contact for athletes in distress and needs to be aware of the potential for these forms of harm, and the relevant social policy and procedures for reporting and referring. In this presentation I will overview some of the research in this area and discuss the implications for Coach education programmes with a view to empowering and enabling Coaches to be effective gate-keepers protecting young athletes from harm and to be effective advocates for appropriate child and youth protection policies within the sports system.