Understanding Media Portrayals of Child Athlete Abuse: A Media Content Analysis

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Introduction

The global sports community is facing a reckoning. Recent high-profile cases of sexual abuse in the USA Gymnastics team have drawn attention to the collective failure of sports institutions and governing bodies to effectively prevent and respond to child athlete abuse. It reflects a growing recognition that young athletes need specific kinds of services, supports, and safeguards in order to compete successfully, develop well, and stay free from harm.

These changes require not only institutional will but also public support. As prior FrameWorks research has shown, the public has some awareness of child athlete abuse but tends to think about it as rare, sensational, and hard to prevent[1]. These ways of thinking may complicate efforts to communicate about child athletes, their needs, and the institutional changes needed to support them.

News media and social media coverage has an important role to play in shaping how people think about child athletes. The media are information gatekeepers, amplifying certain kinds of messages and muting others.[2] [3] By repeating certain stories and frames, the news media shape people's beliefs, attitudes, and even policy preferences—a phenomenon referred to as the "drip, drip" effect.[4] Moreover, news media interact with other forms of media, such as social media, that together shape public thinking.[5] Understanding patterns in media framing will enable advocates and communicators to develop strategies to talk about child athlete abuse and wellbeing that can, over time, shift coverage in more productive directions.

Our analysis of media frames shows that coverage of child athlete abuse centers around a set of distinct narratives or story types. These portray the issue as playing out in courtroom dramas with survivors cast as resilient heroes and abusers as monstrous villains. This "Law & Order" style of talking about child athlete abuse individualizes the issue by focusing on individual retribution and punishment, such as harsher sentences for offenders and resignation of top sports officials rather than broader systemic change. While the media does talk about the failings of elite sports institutions and sports culture in protecting child athletes from abuse, there is little discussion about the ways that systems can prevent abuse of child athletes in the first place. These narratives within the media reflect and reinforce the public's existing ways of thinking.

This report, sponsored by the Oak Foundation, documents the frames and storytelling strategies employed by the media and identifies their strategic implications. It provides advocates and communicators with a detailed understanding of the discursive environment in which they operate and offers preliminary recommendations for how to move public thinking about child athlete abuse in more productive directions. This report is part of a larger body of research to develop framing strategies and tools to deepen people's thinking about child athlete wellbeing and build public will for solutions that address their needs.

Research Goals and Approach

This research was designed to explore the following questions:

1. What stories and framing strategies do the media (both news media and social media) use to communicate about child athlete abuse?
2. What are the implications of these stories for public thinking?

The media sample includes 80 articles taken from a diverse set of US-based news sources, including national and regional newspapers and news websites. The sources include *Chicago Tribune*, *Daily News* (New York), *Los Angeles Times*, *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis), *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The Arizona Republic, The Boston Globe, The Dallas Morning News, The Denver Post, The Detroit News, The Houston Chronicle, The Philadelphia Inquirer, The San Francisco Chronicle, The Star-Ledger* (Newark), *The New York Post, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal,* and *The Washington Post*. We selected these sources based on their high levels of circulation and readership and to ensure geographical and ideological variation in the sample. FrameWorks researchers searched and downloaded articles from these sources using a search query designed to capture stories related to child athlete abuse.[6] Searches were limited to articles that appeared in these news sources between January 1, 2018 and December 31, 2019.[7]

To supplement the news media sample, we also analyzed content on Twitter that discussed topics related to child athlete abuse. The Twitter sample includes 273 tweets and retweets made in October and November 2020.[8] FrameWorks researchers searched and downloaded tweets using search queries designed to capture tweets related to child athlete abuse and/or the Netflix film *Athlete A* about the Larry Nassar case (released in June 2020).[9]

The analysis proceeded in two stages. First, researchers identified themes, trends, and patterns of meaning in the data and identified codes of interest for qualitative analysis of how child athlete abuse was portrayed. This analysis discerned patterns in what was said (documents' explicit language or content) and what was implied (ideas derived via interpretation and inference).

Next, the findings were interpreted against the backdrop of the public's deep assumptions and implicit understandings about child athlete abuse and wellbeing identified in prior stages of research. This analysis explores how media frames (1) cue and reinforce existing ways of thinking among members of the public, (2) conflict with or challenge existing ways of thinking, or (3) fail to address a topic, leaving people to fill in the blanks with existing patterns of thinking. This analysis enables us to identify how frames embedded within materials are likely to affect public understanding of child athlete abuse.

Findings: Three Dominant Stories about Child Athlete Abuse

This section of the report identifies the dominant framing strategies used by the media to speak about issues related to child athlete abuse. Following each finding is a discussion of the implications these frames have on public thinking.

Our analysis shows that media coverage of child athlete abuse is dominated by episodic storytelling;[10] that is, the media largely ignore discussions of the issue at the population level. Instead, the media often zoom in on the trials and tribulations of individual people rather than focusing on the environments and systems in which individuals are embedded. And while the media portray systems as ignoring or overlooking abuse, which can potentially expand public understanding, it doesn't offer systemic *solutions* to prevent abuse. This can get in the way of building public understanding of child athlete abuse as a preventable issue.

The analysis revealed that coverage of child athlete abuse often centers around three distinct narratives. These surfaced time and time again in the media, often co-occurring within the same article. Each has different implications for public thinking.

The Sick Perpetrator Narrative

One dominant narrative focuses on the behaviors and traits of individual perpetrators as "bad apples" who are depicted as sociopaths lacking basic moral sensibilities. Almost all of these articles focused on acts of child sexual abuse committed by a male offender.

Coverage of Larry Nassar and the USA Gymnastics scandal featured prominently in media coverage about child athlete abuse—this particular case was discussed in 73% of the articles in the dataset. These stories portray perpetrators such as Nassar as "monstrous" and "sick." As indicated by the following quotes, articles often cite direct quotes of survivors calling their abusers "monsters" who "ruined the lives and careers of many people."[11]

> "'Come hell or high water, we will find a way to take every last one of you down that could have stopped this monster,' said Amy Labadie, a former gymnast who testified Friday morning."[12]

> "When Judge Rosemarie Aquilina handed down her sentence on Larry Nassar last week, she spoke to and of him as a kind of monster we rarely see. She was wrong. I know this because I remember Penn State, where an assistant football coach named Jerry Sandusky worked his way through boy after boy across year after year."[13]

The media also focus on the particular "grooming" behaviors of perpetrators to develop relationships with their victims, such as complimenting and giving special attention to child athletes and sneaking them food and treats that were prohibited during training sessions.

> "Dr. Nassar would also pay her compliments on Facebook, and tell her how beautiful she was, Ms. Nichols said. At the time, she thought 'he was trying to be nice to me.' Now, she said, 'I believe this was part of the grooming process I recently learned about.'"[14]

When articles employ the *Sick Perpetrator* narrative, they portray offenders such as Nassar as incorrigibly "sick" and unable to be rehabilitated. Articles that employ this narrative therefore focus on retribution and punishment of individual offenders as the main way to address child athlete abuse, since they are believed to be permanently "dangerous" people who should be kept away from society for the rest of their lives. For example:

> "'It is my honor and privilege to sentence you, because, sir, you do not deserve to walk outside of a prison ever again,' the judge said. 'Anywhere you walk, destruction will occur to those most vulnerable. I find that you don't get it. That you're a danger. You remain a danger.'"[15]

Implications

This narrative reinforces the idea that offenders can be easily recognized as "sick" or "monstrous," which can lead to blaming survivors or their families if they don't report or recognize signs of abuse, when in reality offenders are often well-respected and revered in their communities, which makes reporting abuse (and being believed) difficult for survivors. Portraying perpetrators as "monsters" who will always be "sick" can also reinforce the commonly held belief among the public that child sexual abuse is inevitable and unavoidable[16] rather than something that can be addressed, prevented, and treated. Moreover, by individualizing the problem of child athlete abuse, this narrative lets systems off the hook and backgrounds thinking about systemic changes that need to occur to address and prevent abuse, such as changing hiring standards and implementing more rigorous child protection regulations in sports institutions and governing bodies.

The Superhuman Survivor Narrative

A second narrative portrays individual survivors of child athlete abuse as superhumanly strong, brave, and resilient. These stories describe the drive and determination of young people to overcome traumas they have faced. This narrative tends to portray external factors (e.g., social supports and resources) as less important than bravery and willpower. Framed this way, the effects of trauma are understood to be overcome through effort, not as a disruption to the developmental process or harm that requires specific services or supports.

These types of stories tend to present accounts of survivors standing up to their abusers, often in a courtroom setting. A large proportion of articles focus on victims of sexual abuse at the hands of Larry Nassar. These stories tend to have the feel of a courtroom drama, with victims cast as heroes and perpetrators as villains (in this way, the *Superhuman Survivor* narrative and the *Sick Perpetrator* narrative are closely connected, often co-occurring within the same article).

Through the use of direct quotes, media articles present testimonials of survivors that encourage perpetrators to be held accountable and brought to justice and encourage survivors to "speak out" and serve as a "beacon for [other] survivors"[17] to come forward. Yet these articles frequently do not explain *how* survivors became "brave" and resilient or what their healing process looks like on a daily basis.

> "The judge praised the victims who appeared in her court, calling them 'sister survivors.' The women included Olympians Aly Raisman, Jordyn Wieber and McKayla Maroney."[18]

> "Recently, while speaking to Brandon Crawford's wife, Jalynne, about her sister Jamie, she told me, 'The Dantzscher girls are strong.' Those words from the wife of the Giants shortstop hit home. Jamie Dantzscher is a strong woman and was strong as a girl. If only the adults at USA Gymnastics had been as strong and brave, how many victims could have been spared?"[19]

> Now 17, the Neuqua Valley High School senior said in an interview with the *Naperville Sun* last week that she has promised herself she will not be another victim of Nassar's but rather a "brave girl" who inspires others to come forward when they are sexually abused."[20]

Child athlete abuse on Twitter

As with the news media sample, tweets on the topic of child athlete abuse tended to focus on Larry Nassar and the USA Gymnastics scandal. These were often in response to the Netflix documentary "Athlete A." As shown below, these tweets tend to echo frames used in news media, such as the *Superhuman Survivor* narrative:

Implications

This narrative has mixed implications. On the one hand, portraying survivors as resilient can help overcome the idea that child abuse inevitably causes irreparable and lifelong damage to victims. As prior FrameWorks research has shown, this assumption that "damage done is damage done" is heavily fatalistic and stigmatizing which represents a major communications challenge.[21] This resilient narrative in coverage of child athlete abuse is promising, and especially when paired with direct quotes from survivors, helps highlight survivors' own voices on the issue.

On the other hand, framing survivors as superhuman may further ingrain the public's perspective that individual willpower and determination are what drives resilience. Stories about "overcoming the odds" make it easy to laud individuals but hard to appreciate *how* survivors came to be resilient, including the external supports they need to survive and thrive (especially from sports institutions). Additionally, narratives that highlight the "perfect"

survivor place those who have come forward under extreme pressure and can discourage other survivors from coming forward if they don't feel they match the media's ideal portrayal.[22] Moreover, this type of individualistic storytelling places the burden of addressing abuse on individual survivors' shoulders rather than talking about the systemic changes that are necessary to prevent and address child athlete abuse.

The Broken System Narrative

A third narrative focuses on the widespread failure of sports institutions in preventing, identifying, and responding to cases of child athlete abuse. These articles depict sports institutions as a "broken system"[23] plagued by negligence and ineffectiveness. This kind of narrative portrays institutions as facing insurmountable problems. Unlike other narratives identified in this analysis, these stories extend beyond sexual abuse to also talk about physical and emotional abuse.

These articles often criticize a "culture of abuse" within competitive sports that makes adults in positions of responsibility complicit in, or indifferent to, the mistreatment of children. These stories hold sports institutions' staff and leaders accountable for failing to report abuse or change the culture of abuse, with the effect of making abuse more commonplace and making child athletes less willing to disclose it.

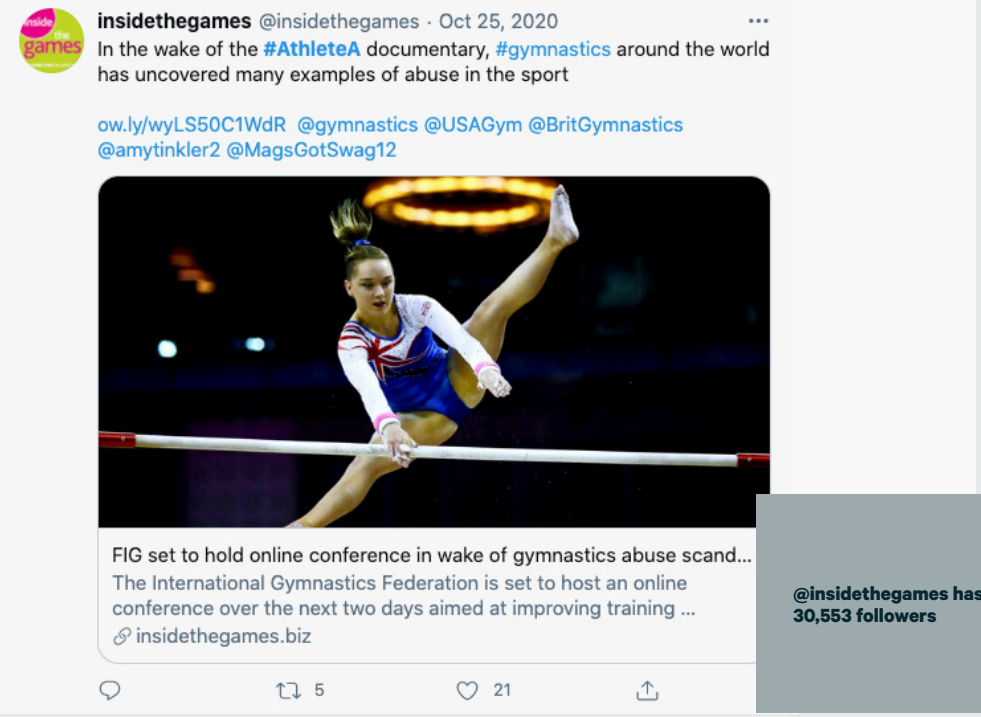
> "In it she detailed the abusive culture the Karolyis had constructed, where girls were encouraged to compete with injuries, told they were fat, rewarded for starving themselves, isolated from their parents, constantly criticized and verbally abused. Their growth was stunted, puberty delayed, normal life sacrificed at the altar of gymnastics. Though sexual abuse was not part of Ryan's investigation, the Karolyis fostered a textbook example of the kind of environment where sexual abuse can occur. Girls were kept in isolation, their self-esteem brutalized, told to deny their feelings and reality."[24]

> "The accusers, many of whom were children, said they trusted Nassar to care for them properly, were in denial about what was happening or were afraid to speak up. He sometimes used a sheet or his body to block the view of any parent in the room. 'I'd been told during my entire gymnastics career to not question authority,' a former elite gymnast, Isabell Hutchins, said Tuesday."[25]

Child athlete abuse on Twitter

As with the news media, discussion of this topic on social media also evokes the *Broken System* narrative, especially in reference to the failures of sports governing bodies and sports culture in responding to abuse within USA Gymnastics:

@InsideGym has 57,581 followers



@insidethegames has 30,553 followers

By highlighting how systems have failed to protect child athletes from abuse, these stories recognize how systems have not fulfilled their responsibilities to child athletes. However, when talking about solutions, this narrative falls short by narrowly focusing on holding individual sports institution leaders accountable through their resignation, firing, or (infrequently) their arrest.

> "Two top U.S.A. Swimming officials, including one whose job was specifically to protect athletes, have resigned after a series of scathing reports alleging that the organization had ignored sexual abuse by coaches for years while athletes suffered. The officials, Susan Woessner—the organization's Safe Sport senior director—and Pat Hogan, its club development managing director, announced their departures on Thursday in letters posted online."[26]

> "Mr. Manly called for the resignation of the current U.S.O.P.C. leadership, including Sarah Hirshland, Mr. Blackmun's successor as chief executive, and Ms. Lyons, the board chairman. 'They need to go,' Mr. Manly said, adding, 'This is behavior you expect from the Catholic bishops, not the governing body for America's athletes.'"[27]

Implications

Depicting sports systems and cultures as failing to protect children can help people understand the scope of the problem of child athlete abuse since people currently tend to think that occurrences of abuse are uncommon.[28] However, by not providing clear and consistent explanations of systemic *solutions* to the problem (and focusing on individual solutions instead), this narrative can undermine people's sense that child athlete abuse is preventable through systemic change. In this way, this narrative potentially can get in the way of thinking about how to create a safe organizational culture, where child athlete safety and wellbeing are prioritized within systems and processes; for example, passing legislation to hold sports institutions accountable for safeguarding children and sports institutions implementing more rigorous standards for hiring, training, and oversight of sports professionals.[29]

Preliminary Recommendations

The three types of stories about child athlete abuse in the media present unique challenges and opportunities for talking about child athlete abuse and wellbeing. Below we offer some preliminary recommendations for shifting communications practice, informed by findings from this research and from earlier phases of this project. In later stages of the project, FrameWorks will develop a more robust set of narrative strategies to help advocates, experts, and media communicators advance the public discourse, improve public understanding, and build support for the actions necessary to improve child athlete wellbeing.

Recommendation #1: Explain what it takes to prevent child athlete abuse, often and in detail.

The media almost never speak about how child athlete abuse can be prevented, instead focusing on after-the-fact measures designed to prosecute offenders and hold individual leaders of sports institutions accountable. To counter this, we recommend that communicators and advocates talk consistently and frequently about prevention and describe what prevention measures would look like in detail. For example, communicators could forefront systemic changes to prevent child athlete abuse, such as changing hiring standards and practices in sports associations and governing bodies and implementing child protection laws and regulations that apply to child athletes. Talking about prevention, often and in detail, will likely help expand people's understanding of child athlete abuse and how it can be prevented from occurring in the first place.

Recommendation #2: Talk about what survivors need to survive and thrive from a survivor-centric perspective.

Media stories that talk about survivors as superhuman offer little explanation about *how* survivors become resilient and what they need to recover and heal from abuse. And while the media includes direct quotes from survivors, survivor-centric narratives are not present in media coverage of abuse. Communicators and advocates can fill this gap by focusing on survivor-centric narratives, especially by having advocates who are themselves survivors of abuse feature in communications about abuse, what it looks like, and what survivors need from sports institutions. Advocates can explain in detail the systemic supports that survivors need, such as disclosure mechanisms at the sports institution level that make reporting abuse easier and safer for survivors, sports institutions connecting survivors to organizations that support survivors in their area, and a network of external supports, including parents, sports staff, peers, and sports institutions that believe survivors from the outset. Advocates who talk frequently with the media can describe what resilience looks like for survivors of child athlete abuse in all its forms (physical, emotional, and sexual abuse) and talk about it as a process to counter public thinking about victims as either being "forever damaged" or able to easily "get over it" (which we have found in our research on child sexual abuse).[30]

Recommendation #3: Explain what institutions can and must do to prevent abuse and foster child athlete wellbeing.

Media portrayals of the broken system and culture of abuse in sports recognize the problem but don't offer explanation for how this came to be or provide effective systemic solutions. Communicators and advocates can leverage this opening to talk about sports culture in greater detail and provide context for how abuse has been facilitated and how culture is embedded and reproduced within institutional processes and systems. These explanations can, in turn, provide space for communicators to talk about systemic solutions to change the failed system and culture of sports. These conversations could include, for example, talking about policy changes (such as legislation) to hold sports institutions and staff accountable for safeguarding children; implementing more rigorous hiring standards for hiring, training, and oversight of sports professional; implementing safeguarding measures such as hiring safeguarding officers and explaining what they do to ensure the wellbeing of child athletes (checking in on

athletes periodically and prioritizing wellbeing over winning at all costs); and implementing safeguarding policies that prohibit one-on-one time between child athletes and coaches, trainers, or medical staff. Talking about various ways to effect systemic change will likely help counter any potential fatalism or apathy around what can be done to change sports culture and systems to prevent abuse and better support child athlete wellbeing.

Conclusion

To bring about lasting reforms that improve child athlete wellbeing, advocates need to build the public's understanding of the issue. Shifting public opinion requires first understanding the communications landscape in which advocates operate. In documenting media storytelling practices, this report takes an important step toward that goal.

This analysis of media coverage reveals a consistent and identifiable media script about the challenges facing child athletes. This media script tells the story of child sexual abuse in highly dramatized ways—as courtroom dramas with abusers cast as monstrous villains and survivors as perfectly resilient heroes. This script also focuses on the ways in which sports institutions have failed to protect young people in their charge but does not provide appropriate solutions for how these institutions can be fixed. These framing choices individualize the issue, making it difficult for people to think how sports institutions and governance bodies can and should prevent abuse and provide the systemic changes needed to support child athlete wellbeing.

This view of the discursive environment highlights the need for new frames that can reshape the public's dominant ways of thinking about child athletes and their needs. In future research, FrameWorks researchers will test and identify more specific framing strategies for communicators and advocates to use to talk effectively about child athlete abuse and wellbeing. These will make it possible to produce a more favorable climate for systems reform and culture change that can give young athletes what they need to thrive.

Endnotes

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7 Due to the significant disruption to sporting activities and organizations caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, we omitted news media from 2020 in this sample.

8 Twitter's policy only allows researchers to compile and download tweets from the previous seven days from date of download; therefore, this sample was limited to the dates we were conducting the research in October-November 2020.

9 The Twitter sample includes 273 tweets and retweets collected using the following search queries: "child AND athlete AND abuse" (31 tweets) and #AthleteA (242 tweets) and made on the following dates: 10/13/20-10/20/20; 10/21/20-10/28/20; 11/3/20-11/10/20; 11/12/20-11/19/20. Researchers downloaded tweets and retweets with these search queries and carefully reviewed them. Those that did not deal substantively with child athlete abuse were removed. The remaining tweets were reviewed in terms of traction (demonstrated by at least 5 retweets), consensus or agreement (demonstrated by at least 15 likes), and reach of audience (demonstrated by at least 900 followers). Tweets that were categorized as having traction, consensus, and audience were then coded and analyzed.

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