



Australian Government
Sport Integrity Australia



SPORT INTEGRITY
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CEO statement

This statement was submitted by the CEO of Sport Integrity Australia, David Sharpe, to the Senate Estimates Committee on Wednesday, 16 February 2022.

Chair and Committee members,

I sit before you as Australian sport undergoes a transformation we have never witnessed before.

More than ever athletes are coming forward to detail abuse and mistreatment stemming back decades.

Athletes have expressed feelings of helplessness; feeling there was no independent system or guidance, and that nobody was prepared to take their concerns seriously. There is now a system in place giving them a voice to ensure mistakes, abuse, misconduct and victimisation are called out and never repeated.

Sport Integrity Australia's emerging role in handling these complaints, independent of sporting bodies, has resulted in the agency securing the trust and confidence of athletes who have told their stories, in many cases for the first time.

Of course, Sport Integrity Australia's role is not confined to handling complaints. The threat to the integrity of sport is as diverse as sport itself.

The world has become accustomed to news of corruption scandals in global sports and witnessed the impact of the Russian doping saga. The vision to implement a world-first sport integrity agency in Australia was timely, yet could never have predicted what was to follow. The sporting landscape changed dramatically.

The COVID pandemic swept the world, impacting sport. Then in September 2020, the sporting world watched in disbelief as the 'Athlete A' documentary aired on TV, detailing the harrowing abuse of gymnasts under the care of USA Gymnastics.

What followed was a watershed moment for sport in Australia, and internationally.

Around the world, athletes spoke up about their own experiences.

The time for change had arrived.

Australia has seen a Royal Commission into institutional abuse along with reviews of sport by federal/state government bodies and National Sporting Organisations. Many of these reviews

highlighted issues of abuse and misconduct and recommended change. Many sports responded. Yet change has not come fast enough.

The release of the 'Athlete A' documentary has seen the flood gates open for athletes. Since Sport Integrity Australia began we have received 800 referrals across 68 sports.

For too long, athletes feared coming forward for threat of reprisal, or a belief they would be ignored, or that nothing would change.

For too long, parents felt their concerns were unfounded and misguided.

For too long, unacceptable behaviour was ignored, or worse, condoned, and athletes were harmed.

For too long, we prioritised the end result of winning medals and creating champions over their journey along the way.

For too long, sufferers stayed silent.

As important as it is to hear the voice of athletes, support persons or other officials, it is also crucial to handle these issues sensitively and appropriately before forming conclusions. COVID has made the fast resolution of complaints enormously challenging.

Sport is at the heart of Australian culture. Sport promotes inclusion, provides discipline, structure, an opportunity to participate and to ensure better health. It provides an opportunity to witness amazing achievements, moments of unity and to be proud of our culture.

A strong integrity framework and a desire to protect sport will ensure a safe and positive environment is created.

Sport Integrity Australia has adapted and evolved significantly. We have strengthened partnerships with sporting bodies, welfare and support agencies, law enforcement, intelligence agencies and the Australian Human Rights Commission to address integrity threats and provide wellbeing support.

Reports received by the agency have led to criminal prosecutions relating to abuse, formal reviews of allegations of misconduct in sport, investigations of specific misconduct cases and assisted the dismantling of a global match fixing ring operating from Australia.

We shared intelligence with law enforcement and intelligence bodies and assisted in governance reform within sports integrity frameworks. Every single matter reported to Sport Integrity Australia has shaped our response, informed strategy and guided change.

An example of the impact of the agency is when, for the first time in 35 years, a former elite athlete felt enough trust in the people of the agency to tell their story of alleged abuse as a young teenager at the hands of a trusted official.

Notably, for the first time in 35 years this person was able to start the process of healing and removing a burden they carried alone for their entire adult life. With the right frameworks and support networks in place it is never too late to tell your story.

Critically, there is a heightened need to ensure integrity in sport in the lead up to the 2032 Games in Brisbane. A sports integrity ecosystem developed by government bodies, that includes Sport Integrity Australia, the National Sports Tribunal, the Australian Sports Commission, the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Criminal Intelligence Commission, has become a powerful partnership to protect sport and its participants, and to coordinate a national approach to ongoing capability development.

A large majority of National Sporting Organisations have also taken up the cause to reform the sporting world when it comes to strengthening the integrity response.

The future of sports integrity in Australia relies on a partnership model. Experiences of the past 18 months have informed a new and sustainable operating model. Support from the government to provide sustainable funding will ensure integrity is front and centre in the Australian sporting landscape.

Significantly, the development of the National Integrity Framework by Sport Integrity Australia delivers a suite of consistent policies across all sport and ensures sports have access to an independent, transparent complaints system to manage integrity issues from elite to grassroots levels. Education and awareness play a critical role in the success of the framework.

We are all responsible for integrity in sport. Everyone has a role to play.

I would like to close by thanking all those athletes and sporting bodies who we have worked with to date, who have trusted us with their stories and experiences. Their courage and bravery cannot be understated and has driven change. I would also like to acknowledge the staff of Sport Integrity Australia who work tirelessly to apply objectivity and independence diligently to every single matter that crosses our desks.

We have a lot to learn and a lot to deliver, but importantly, we all have a lot to gain.

If I may Senators, I will end on a quote from one athlete in a Sport Integrity Australia review who had never spoken about their experience prior to the Review:

'Today you gave me the opportunity that many of my cohort have waited over 20 years for. For that I can't say thank you enough.'

Thank you.