

January 15th, 2021

RE: Safe Sport Community Survey & Follow-up

Dear Ontario Artistic Swimming Community,

There are so many reasons why we all love artistic swimming - the friendships formed through the sport, the growth and development we see in ourselves and our young athletes, the beauty and athleticism of the sport as a whole. Across the board it truly is an incredible sport and an incredible community. Unfortunately, while the sport and community on the whole is wonderful, over the years the lived experience for some of our athletes, coaches, parents, officials and board members hasn't matched this ideal experience and hasn't aligned with the values of our sport.

In the wake of the #MeToo movement and following a number of allegations and convictions in the sport community, Sport Canada called upon the Canadian sport community to take action immediately, stating, "**The safety and security of athletes, coaches and officials is our top priority. We must all play a role in protecting our young people and our athletes.**"

To dig in and understand this better, in October we took on an anonymous survey of our community to try and get a better understanding of those experiences and to be honest the results were in many cases heartbreaking. While there is so much goodness in our sport and in our community, there is also a need to address the places where people's behaviours are not ok and not aligned with the community we strive to build. Within the survey results there were some key themes that together we need to focus on. For simplicity we have grouped the issues around our key values to make it clear how our words have impacted behaviour around the province.

1. **Excellence:** In some areas in our sport, this has been interpreted as getting on the podium at all cost, and with a specific body type/image.
2. **Empowerment:** Unfortunately this has in some cases shown up as an imbalance of power between athletes, coaches, parents, board members at different levels within our sport. This imbalance has led to cases of inequitable treatment - especially in the higher performance areas of the sport.
3. **Health & Wellbeing:** Has focused too heavily on specific health attributes including weight vs. the wellbeing of our athletes.

The survey told us that as a result of these behaviours athletes and coaches have left the sport they love; sometimes they return years later as masters swimmers, but more often than not they leave saddened and hurt by the sport. To be honest, we don't think this is ok in any way, and it's something we need to change; it's also something the OAS board has committed to work towards changing over the next year.

We know change is going to take time, and it will be a process, but we need to start. We also know that especially here we can not be reckless in our changes; we need to ensure that the changes we make create a safe and engaging space for all community members. So we will start with some smaller steps that help us better understand the challenges in front of us and use that to drive change - in a safe and engaging way.

What are we doing?

While the survey results were anonymous they gave us the insights necessary to understand a few quick steps we can take now and the direction we need to dig in further. Our first steps are to:

1. **Define our values:** make sure everyone knows what they mean and then use them as the guide for how we make decisions as we go through this process. We view this as a foundational step for building the community we seek.
2. **Third Party Engagement:** to take an outside in look at our sport as a whole and how we ensure it is safe and engaging for all our community members. This includes building out a framework within our community including policy priorities, and the training and enablement necessary to make real change.

On the surface this may not seem like a lot, but getting these foundations right is critical to our success.

Defining our Values

One of the things that came through in our survey results was that people were interpreting our values to mean different things. If we don't all agree on the definitions of our values, but we use those values to make decisions we very quickly end up in a place where behaviours, expectations and decisions are not aligned. Therefore we have taken a step back and put some definition to the words we say in our values; we know these definitions are not perfect and we will continue to iterate on them in the coming months, but we feel they provide enough direction to use them as a guide:

- **Excellence:** In all aspects of sport and life.
While excellence on the podium is important, it's equally important that we all show up as and are excellent to each other in all our interactions. Here we recognize we strive for excellence and not perfection.
- **Empowerment:** Strong community leaders doing the right thing
Athletes, coaches and officials all have context, mentoring and empathy; they feel empowered and they know how to stand up and to do the right thing.
- **Health & Wellbeing:** Of mind and of body
Long term health and well-being is valued over short term measures of success. This includes all aspects of health ranging from mental health and self-image to nutrition and a healthy sustainable diet.
- **Sport for Life:** Developing healthy habits for life
Building habits and passion that keep athletes active through sport through all stages of life. This may or may not mean artistic swimming as a sport, but more generally the passion for an active lifestyle.

Values are critical, but they are only the starting point. We know that much more needs to be done. We also know that it's not something we can do alone - we can learn from others who have been through this journey before us.

Third Party Engagement

Our anonymous survey was a good step, and now we need to make meaningful progress in creating a safe environment in our community. We've engaged Sport Law to guide us in the creation of a Safe Sport strategy for our province. A critical factor in developing our Safe Sport Framework is to ensure that all perspectives are reflected in the final plan. It requires meaningful involvement from all stakeholders. We believe this also creates an opportunity to enhance a culture of trust and transparency within the community.

To drive the development of the of the Safe Sport strategy, through Sport Law we will engage in the following activities:

- **Workshop:** Starting in January we will engage the larger community in a multi-day workshop focused on providing the key inputs into our Safe Sport Strategy. Invitations will come out early in the new year, and we will be looking for approximately 30 representatives from across at least 20 clubs. Representatives will include athletes, coaches, officials, club administrators and members from our University League. Our

goal is to create a diverse group - with a variety of experience and backgrounds to help us understand as many perspectives as possible.

- **Working Group:** From the workshop participants we will look to build a working group that uses the input and works with Sport Law in the development of the strategy, framework and policies. The goal from the working group is to develop the necessary club level policies and training to support safe sport - effectively a club in a box.
- **Training:** The development of the appropriate training materials - with a focus on helping our community be stronger. Some of this is done in partnership with Canada Artistic Swimming which as many of you know is going through a similar process currently. Our belief is that the training can be developed in a way where it is not a barrier for our community, but instead is a tool that helps create empowered leaders both inside our community and in their own communities and working environments.

We need to be transparent - this is going to be a process and change will take time. While we will be putting out invitations to join the workshop in January, we don't expect them to actually run until February. From there the working groups will still have work in front of them before our members see real change. Even once we have the framework and training in place, these changes will take time to percolate through our community. We know there is demand for change now, but we also need to acknowledge that lasting meaningful change takes time, but it is that lasting change that we need to make our community stronger.

If you have any questions about this process, why we desire change, or anything here, please feel free to contact:

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