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### *Creating a Safe Sport Culture in Canadian High Performance Sport: Phase 1 – The Athlete Voices*

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With the goal of informing a shift to a safer sport culture in high performance sport in Canada, our overall research program aims to understand both safe and unsafe aspects of the high performance sport culture by (a) prioritizing the athlete voices and (b) understanding the coaching and administration side of creating and managing sport culture.

We examine culture as a system of values, beliefs and assumptions that represent a pattern of behaviour among individuals in a shared context (cf. Schein, 2017). Individuals understand the culture of sport by observing the actions and behaviours of those around them. The behaviours that are accepted, tolerated, and even rewarded and celebrated, reflect underlying values, beliefs and assumptions about “how things are done around here” (MacIntosh & Doherty, 2005). We further consider the concepts of values which can become entrenched in practice (Bell-Laroche et al., 2014; Di Stefano et al., 2019) – consistent with national sport organization efforts to promote positive values and a move towards a safer sport culture.

The first phase of this three phase project focuses on the athlete voices. Adopting a trauma-informed approach (Newman, Risch, & Kassam-Adams, 2006) we have completed 28 one-on-one semi-structured recorded interviews with high performance sport athletes. We engaged in open and inductive coding to classify athletes’ perspectives of manifestations of safe and unsafe culture, and the feelings those engender.

The athletes shared what safe and unsafe sport looks like (behaviours, practices) to them, and we further interpreted what appear to be the values underlying those behaviours and practices. Specifically, participants indicated they feel safe when rules are followed, coaches are supportive and have their best interest at heart, and there is a sense of community in their team or training group. These practices create conditions where the athletes trust others, feel they fit in or belong, and feel respected. Valuing responsiveness, attention, respect, and inclusion appear to frame these positive aspects of safe sport culture.

Conversely, the athletes indicated they feel unsafe when coaches overstep boundaries, are overly aggressive and isolating, when teammates are exclusionary, when there is a lack of accountability in the system, and when there is a lack of resources. These practices create conditions where participants feel vulnerable, fearful or intimidated, devalued, distrustful and

isolated. These practices, and the feelings they engender, appear to be linked to values of domination, favouritism, and aggression.

The athlete voices heard in this phase of our project provide important insights to inform the shift from one set of values and related (unsafe) practices to a safer sport culture. The next phase of the project involves similar interviews with coaches and administrators to gain their perspectives on safe and unsafe aspects of high performance sport culture, and contrast those with the athletes, for a more complete understanding of this phenomenon.