

Testimony

Senators, thank you for the opportunity to testify this morning.

My name is Dominique Moceanu. I am an Olympic gymnast and member of the first women's gymnastics team to bring home gold for the United States.

I'm here today to discuss the urgent need for change in the sport I love.

In the last several months, hundreds of victims of sexual abuse have come forward to identify crimes that have occurred under the watch, or lack thereof, of USA Gymnastics. As of today, there is no effective system of checks and balances to protect these athletes – usually young girls – from abuse – to the extent that when sexual abuse has been reported, the resulting action of USAG has been inaction.

I applaud and support the brave gymnasts who have come forward to share their painful stories of sexual abuse at the hands of the US national team physician, Dr. Lawrence Nassar. Their courage will hopefully bring change to an egregiously flawed and dangerous system that has failed to protect its young athletes.

I personally was not sexually abused by Dr. Nassar. However, after years of suffering physical, mental and emotional abuse while training under my personal coaches, Marta & Bela Karolyi, the most powerful people in US gymnastics for many years, I have first-hand knowledge of how the culture set the stage for other atrocities to occur. Improvements to the system, and efficient safety measures for all young American child athletes are long

overdue.

I'd like to share a little background about the system that has made it possible for predators like Dr. Nassar to thrive, unchecked, for decades. It is a culture of fear, intimidation and humiliation, established by Marta and Bela Karolyi, when they took over US gymnastics after defecting from Romania in the early 1980s. Their methodologies from a communist, centralized system were swiftly embraced and implemented into the women's Elite program in the United States. The Karolyis were granted total control with little to no oversight from any governing body.

Public complaints of any kind of abuse over the years have been few and far between because USAG openly frowned upon, ostracized and punished those who dared to speak out about anything that could be construed as critical of the program, even physical injury. It was due to these unhealthy standards that I myself, at the age of 14, while training for the Olympics, was told to ignore severe pain in my leg and continue repetitive routines over and over until I literally collapsed on the floor in the gym. It was only then that they were forced to look closer and discover that I had been training on a broken leg.

The fact that, in 1999, the National Team Training Center was moved to the Karolyi Ranch, a Houston-based property personally owned and operated by Bela and Marta Karolyi, only increased the lack of oversight. With child athletes required to reside at the ranch for days and even weeks at a time without the supervision of parents or other adults not employed by USAG, it's my opinion that an atmosphere was created where verbal and emotional abuse was the norm. This, coupled with fear of retribution

for speaking out, opened the door for sexual abuse to occur.

Regrettably, the National Team Training Center is still located on the grounds of the Karolyi Ranch where hundreds of young athletes train each year.

Each of Dr. Nassar's sexual assault victims who has come forward states that fear prevented them from speaking out sooner. Two of those women, Jamie Dantzcher and Jessica Howard, are sharing their experiences with you this morning. Prior to going public, these women shared their stories with me, knowing I had for years publicly called for greater oversight and have spoken out repeatedly about the neglect and mistreatment of athletes by USAG.

I strongly encouraged them to report the incident to law enforcement, and I immediately put them in contact with a third party expert in the field of child abuse in sports.

But today's discussion is not just about Dr. Nassar and his victims – it is also about a desperate need for a reordering of priorities to put the safety and welfare of young athletes first.

While the president of USA Gymnastics—Steve Penny—resigned this month after increased public awareness of these issues and Dr. Nassar is finally behind bars awaiting trial, our sport is still stuck with a board of directors who have continuously put the organization's reputation above the wellbeing and safety of young girls. After all, it was the USAG's board of directors who voted to award Steve Penny with financial bonuses – even

after knowing about the sexual abuse allegations. It's also telling that nobody from USAG has apologized or expressed any empathy of concern for the survivors who have come forward.

It is encouraging to me that this bill will benefit all youth sports—not solely gymnastics; and it is aimed at preventing behavior that leads to all forms of child abuse. Participation in youth sports should be a joyful part of our childhood. I know first-hand what it takes to reach the pinnacle of a sport, and I'm proud to have represented our great country at the Olympic Games, where I remain the youngest gold medalist in US gymnastics history. I believe the culture of abuse in our sport undermines its greatness and is simply un-American. This bill will be a substantial step in allowing us to experience success in a safe and properly supervised manner.

Gymnastics is beautiful. My children enjoy the sport, and I want them and others – at all levels – to be safe and protected.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my testimony.