

# USA Swimming's Response to the Problem of Sexual Abuse in Sport: A Cautionary Tale

*By Jon Blank*

We as Masters Swimmers experience several privileges uncommon in sport. Like many athletes, we are afforded the opportunity to maintain/improve fitness and vigor in a positive environment with teammates, colleagues, and coaches. In addition, due to the unique cooperative efforts between USA Swimming (USAS) and US Masters Swimming (USMS), we often have that same ability to compete and train with younger athletes. Furthermore, many USMS athletes volunteer their time as on-deck coaches or as mentors for younger swimmers. Swimming is a lifetime sport, and for that reason there are multiple occasions for interactions between the generations.



Unfortunately, not all interactions between older and younger athletes are positive. Sexual abuse and pedophile predation take place in almost all sports. The Sandusky scandal at Penn State football is perhaps the most noteworthy instance. Many sports now have policies to limit opportunistic predators from having the chance to commit sexual abuse. Under Executive Director Chuck Wielgus, USAS has even instituted a list of lifetime-banned coaches and administrators. (It is noteworthy that of the approximately 100 USAS-banned pedophiles, two are from North Carolina. Former national level coaches such as Mitch Ivey and Rick Curl are also on that list, as is at least one USMS national record holder [who was banned from USAS in 2000 yet who is still allowed to compete in USMS]). Although USA swimming's actions are laudable, the unfortunate fact is that these sanctions have come too late for too many victims.

A stark reminder of this terrible fact is the situation recently faced by Mr. Wielgus. The induction ceremony for the International Swimming Hall of Fame (ISHOF) induction would normally be a joyous affair, and the pinnacle of an inductee's career. However, this year's induction will be marked by controversy. Here's why: Chuck Wielgus had been nominated and voted for induction to ISHOF on the strength of his effective leadership in USAS since 1997. Yet, on June 2nd, he was forced to withdraw his induction. The Women's Sports Foundation (WSF), headed by Olympic gold medalist (and Duke alumna) Nancy Hogshead-Makar, circulated a very effective challenge to Mr. Wielgus' ISHOF induction. The WSF represents a coalition of swimmers who were victims of sexual abuse and high-profile supporters of those victims. The sheer moral force summoned by the WSF led to the withdrawal.

This is a sad turn of events on several levels. Chuck Wielgus served a solid leadership duty for USA swimming for many years. This is a fact supported by a counter-petition from every President of USA Swimming since 1998. Despite his leadership efforts (or more likely because of them), Mr. Wielgus became a lightning rod to the problem of sexual abuse in USAS. His actions the "Safe Sport" initiative, and the lifetime ban policy (among others) were too little and too late to protect athletes, according to his critics.

I believe that as USMS athletes, we have a special duty to be held to a higher standard. We should act as resources and as role models for our younger compatriots in the great sport of

swimming. We need to ensure vigilance against even a hint of impropriety towards our youth, and report any actual or potential opportunities for sexual abuse.

In summation, then, I ask our newsletter readers to learn more about the issue of sexual abuse in our sport, and in our society as a whole. Should we applaud the Women's Sports Foundation's efforts to remove Wielgus' ISHOF induction, or was Mr. Wielgus merely a scapegoat? (Remember that never, ever, have there been insinuations that he himself was a predator, only that his actions in response to allegations were less than some would have wanted). By most accounts, Chuck Wielgus has been an effective leader for USAS, enough so that he was deemed worthy of election to ISHOF. What about the actions of the ISHOF and/or USAS Board of Directors? Should they be held accountable as well for shortcomings in response to allegations or actual proven sexual abuse cases?

Contact me at [chair@ncmasters.org](mailto:chair@ncmasters.org) to voice your opinions on this matter. We will print your responses in the next "Across the Lanes" newsletter. It's an important enough issue that we need to do what we can to publicize the fact that our sport is trying to end the problem of sexual abuse. Wielgus' legacy, if nothing else, might serve as a warning to those who do not deal effectively with this tragedy.