

Sarah Ehekircher

My swim coach raped me when I was 17. USA Swimming made it disappear

5 My mother never got to see me swim fast. I had only started swimming competitively in
September, my 13th birthday was in December and by March she was dead. My family life was
turned upside down as my father's drinking became more than just a couple scotches each night,
which was the beginning of the disconnect between the two of us. He barely noticed as I
10 progressed rapidly through the levels of the team, putting me in the same group with swimmers
who had been in the pool since they were five or six years old. As early as my freshman year in
high school, it was clear that I had the talent and work ethic to earn a scholarship to a major
Division I university.

15 All I could think about was going to the Olympics. That's the fairytale that coaches dangle before
every starry-eyed kid that becomes a swimmer. A dream that coaches with bad intentions
absolutely wield to their advantage, grooming them with the promise of becoming a big-time
swimmer as they break you down and tease out performances you didn't know you were capable
of. The coaches use predatory behaviors to get kids to do anything they ask. I know because it
happened to me.

20 As laid out in a lawsuit filed in the Central District of California last week, my swim coach Scott
MacFarland began grooming me for a sexual relationship when I was 16. I was young and
motherless, which made me an easy target.

25 The trouble at home only made it easier. Shortly after my father married my stepmother, told me:
"Sarah, you're going to have your life, your father and I are going to have ours." When my father
found out my grades were low because I'd been skipping more and more classes, he demanded I
quit the team. That was never going to happen. Swimming was something I loved to do and I was
going to the Olympics. It was the only positive thing in my life at that point. One day my father
30 came to the pool and pulled me out of practice, telling me that if I went back the next day to not
come home again. I went the next morning and when I got back to my house, all my stuff was on
the front lawn.

I stayed at a girlfriend's house for three weeks after my father and stepmother kicked me out.
35 Apparently my friend's mother thought my dad would eventually give in, but he wasn't the giving-
in type. With nowhere else to go, Coach MacFarland asked me – a junior in high school who was
barely 17 years old – to move into his one-bedroom apartment. Everyone knew I was living with a
man in his mid-30s, but no one ever asked me if I was OK or if anything bad was happening to me.
The other kids were all focused on winning the coach's approval and their parents were too
40 preoccupied with how their kids would perform.

It was a difficult situation, but there were so many different ways he could have handled it, like calling child protective services. But that's not the choice he made.

45 At first the arrangement was only emotionally abusive. He kept a scale in the kitchen and would have me weigh myself before I ate. He would put his hands around my arms to measure them and tell me how weak I was and would call me "pooey". After practice, he would then make me ride the stationary bike in the house for at least two hours. This was a common technique: to put you down and make you feel worthless so you want to do something, anything to get something
50 positive out of his mouth. The point was to break down any self-confidence I had: It made it easier for him to sexually abuse me later.

Not long after I'd moved in, Coach McFarland raped me while at a swim meet in Irvine, California. I did not give consent.

55 I've been asked countless times why I never reported it when it happened and it took years before the answer became clear to me: because I was scared and I had nowhere else to go. He paid for the roof over my head. He paid for my food and for my clothes. He paid for me to travel to do something that I loved to do, which was the most important part of my life. I knew it wasn't
60 normal even back in 1986, but it was like I had Stockholm syndrome. Besides, what choice did I have?

After accepting a swimming scholarship to the University of Arkansas, he told me I could not come home for Thanksgiving break if I weighed over 125lbs. I barely made it through my freshman
65 season, in part because I became pregnant with his child. During Christmas training camp, I was forced to tell my college coach, who flew me back to Colorado so I could have an abortion. Within eight months, I would end a second pregnancy by him.

70 Over the next decade, the mounting emotional toll of this utterly dysfunctional, on-again-off-again sexual "relationship" sent my life into a downward spiral. The abortions were a painful and traumatic part of my life, which became a tumbleweed that just kept getting bigger and bigger. In 1999, I was hospitalized in Virginia after my first serious suicide attempt.

75 A horrible and appalling story, right? But when it first began around 1986, and as it continued into the 1990s, my relationship with Coach McFarland was no secret. There was no reason to hide it: it was considered normal. USA Swimming did nothing to discourage coaches from having sex with their athletes. They barely stopped short of encouraging the behavior. Many coaches just saw the unfettered access to barely clad pre-pubescent and adolescent girls as a perk of the job.

80 But by the early 2000s, I began to understand that it wasn't normal – and national governing bodies like USA Swimming began to realize they might have a problem.

In 2004, I first explicitly communicated my rapes to John Leonard, a member of USA Swimming's sexual abuse task force. But instead of helping me, or reporting my abuse to law enforcement, or
85 even forwarding my report to the active task force on which he sat, I was told that I was not "unique", that it happens all the time, that I should simply get over it. He then pointed to

prominent coaches Mitch Ivey and Rick Curl, both of whom would be banned by the sport in the next few years, and telling me I needed to move on.

90 I had all but given up hope of seeing my abuser face consequences for what he put me through. Then in 2010, I came across a story on ABC's 20/20 about sexual abuse in elite swimming that motivated me to report my abuse to USA Swimming, which convened a hearing before a review board where McFarland admitted to having a sexual relationship with me, but insisted I was 18 the first time he had sex with me. But since there wouldn't be a rule prohibiting coach-swimmer
95 relationships until 2013 – and since my designated “advocate” worked for USA Swimming's law firm at the time – it came as no surprise my allegations were found not credible and it was far too late to seek redress in the civil courts.

100 My swim coach had exploited, abused and betrayed me, and now, so had USA Swimming – not once but twice.

Most recently, California has amended its statute of limitations for sex abuse cases: starting this year, victims of sexual abuse in California will have three years to bring claims that were previously time-barred. Further, the new California law allows for treble damages when the victim proves
105 they were victimized as the result of a cover up of past abuse.

Finally, after all these years, justice may be within reach.

110 Last week my attorney Jon Little and I filed a lawsuit in Orange County for the rapes I suffered as a 17-year-old girl by my USA Swimming-registered coach at a USA Swimming-sanctioned meet, as well as various other locations across the United States. And in addition, that USA Swimming knew of previous, and subsequent, victims of McFarland and covered them up, rather than take action to stop him and protect me and other swimmers.

115 Sadly, my story is one of many. The vast majority of abused athletes are not at the Olympic level, which means their stories don't generate the critical mass of media coverage necessary to force these organizations into the public reckonings that effect meaningful change. But as predatory coaches and the institutions that protect them are coming to learn, we will not be silenced forever.

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