



# Safety in Volleyball in BC

An Executive Summary  
of learnings from a  
Volleyball BC membership  
survey and focus groups

July 2021



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## INTRODUCTION AND INTENTIONS

Safety in sport is a high priority. There is more awareness and public attention than ever before to wellbeing and the importance of providing a sport experience that is physically, emotionally, and psychologically safe. In June 2021, a Safe Sport Working Group was established with 10 representatives that include club directors, coaches, referees, parents and players, and a mix of male and female from different areas of British Columbia. The main task for the group is to establish a Safe Sport Action Plan that will direct our efforts over the next 3 years.

As a starting point, we wanted to take a deeper dive into what our members mean and feel when they talk about safety in volleyball. Our intention behind the research and consultation of our membership was to ask the key questions outlined on the left.

The findings of this research will be used to inform and develop the Safe Sport Action Plan to take our efforts forward.

- *Do our members feel safe when they are participating in volleyball?*
- *What are the main safety issues in volleyball in BC?*
- *Do the perceptions and issues change by the role that a member plays in the sport (eg. coach versus player versus referee) or by gender?*
- *Are our members aware of resources available?*
- *What role can Volleyball BC play in creating a safer environment?*

## METHODOLOGY

### ANNUAL MEMBER SURVEY

We incorporated questions on safety into our Annual Member Survey. This year's survey will develop benchmark measures on safety and wellbeing that can then be repeated annually to improve our services and assess progress. The survey was open from July 1-31, 2021. Promotion of the survey to members and participants took place by email, newsletter, social media, and at VBC beach events. Several prizes were promoted as an incentive to complete the survey.

- We received a total of 443 completed surveys. Volleyball BC's current membership number is approximately 6000 which means that we received a response rate of approximately 7%.
- 86% of our respondents played recreational youth, High School and Club volleyball which reflects the typical pathway in volleyball.
- We received decent representation from all regions in BC. However, the geographic spread of respondents was reflective of our spread of membership around BC with the vast majority coming from the Lower Mainland and Fraser Valley.
- The gender breakdown of respondents was almost equally male and female with a very small percentage identifying as non-binary or declining to answer.

The findings from the survey were primarily analysed by respondents' roles in volleyball (Club Director, Coach, Referee, Player). We also analyse responses along gender lines for certain questions.

### SAFE SPORT SESSIONS WITH TEAM BC ATHLETES

In July 2021, we held two 2-week training camps with our Team BC Select athletes. Team BC Select is our top Team BC athletes, comprised of 16-18U players who have been selected through an evaluation process and invited to attend a provincial training camp. We took the opportunity of having these athletes together to run a Safe Sport Session during each of the camps. The sessions were facilitated by Dr. Shaunna Taylor, a leading expert in the field of mental health in sport. The intentions behind the sessions were:

- To encourage athletes to become self-advocates for their own safety and feel confident and empowered to voice their own needs.
- To educate the athletes on the different aspects of safety in sport – physical injury and concussion, abuse and maltreatment, and mental health – and to provide resources where they could access further support if needed.
- To understand their priorities for safety in volleyball.
- To gain input and ideas from the athletes about resources, information or tools they wish they had known as they were youth players moving through the volleyball system in BC.

We surveyed the athletes in advance of the session so that we were able to tailor the content to address their priorities and needs. 36 male athletes and 36 female athletes attended the two sessions.

## 10 KEY FINDINGS

### 1. Wellbeing and safety are essential for meeting our members' needs in participating in volleyball

- The top 3 reasons that our members participate in volleyball are:
  1. **Having fun**
  2. **Social connection**
  3. **Achieving my goals for personal development**

*"In my experience, coaches and players are always so supportive and encouraging."*

This aligns with our findings from the Strategic Plan survey in January 2020 in which **"having fun"** and **"Being part of a team"** were the top two reasons why both adults and youth participants enjoyed playing volleyball. These results confirm that the fun and social aspects are key elements that should be fostered and encouraged as part of the volleyball experience. Feeling safe and is an essential factor in meeting these needs.

### 2. The presence of volleyball in our members' lives was important to their physical and emotional wellbeing during COVID-19

*"Coaches and teammates are all so encouraging ... and always positively motivate me to get better as a player and as a person."*

- Approximately 88% of survey respondents participated in volleyball during COVID-19. Around **65-80%** of every group of participants rated volleyball as **very high or high in importance for their physical wellbeing the pandemic**. For Youth Players, Adult Players, and Coaches, the percentages of those rating volleyball as very high or high in importance for their mental/emotional wellbeing was at least as high, if not higher, than the ratings given for physical wellbeing. This was also the same when we looked at the results for Males and Females. Across all groups, therefore, the **importance of volleyball to mental/emotional wellbeing was at least as high as for physical wellbeing during COVID-19**.
- **Referees and Adult Players demonstrated lower ratings** for the importance of volleyball to their wellbeing. This likely reflects that these groups were less able to participate in volleyball due to restrictions on adult sport and game play which, in turn, means that volleyball was less important to their physical and emotional wellbeing over this period.

### 3. Physical and mental factors impact our members' performance and wellbeing

- The top factors affecting Players' performances in volleyball were **lack of sleep** and **general life stress**. Youth players also highlighted **fear of failure** while Adult players were impacted by their **professional life**. Coaches and Referees also ranked **general life stress, lack of sleep** and **professional life** as the top 3 factors affecting their participation in volleyball. Female respondents were more likely to cite concern about **body appearance** and **team culture** than Male respondents.
- The top factors listed as being experienced during a volleyball season were **physical fatigue** and **mental exhaustion**. Youth players also listed **increased anxiety** and **negative feelings about their body**. Coaches and referees listed **mental exhaustion, physical fatigue, and irritability** as the top 3 factors that they experienced. The responses of Males and Females followed very similar patterns with the notable exception of **Negative feelings about my body** which was experienced vastly more by Females.

*"Mistakes don't define you - Being able to deal with failures."*

*"Refocusing after making a mistake – not being so hard on yourself or tearing yourself down."*

*"Knowing how to deal with stress and anxiety on the court."*

*"I do not feel that I as an individual coach have any power over my athletes in advising them against overtraining. They are so competitive with each other, and the fear of falling behind others is so strong, that athletes will keep overtraining in the quest for excellence."*

*"Kids are playing volleyball all year round, and not necessarily building the strength, flexibility, agility needed to support that level of play, resulting in serious injuries. There are very few clubs that run integrated programs that support the overall physical development of youth athletes."*

#### 4. Our members generally feel (very) safe participating in volleyball

*"For myself, as an adult participating only in recreational volleyball, I feel safe. I also feel that I create a safe environment for my athletes to train in."*

*"I don't think it's easy to get hurt. It can be avoided with a little care".*

*"Every sport has some risk, but volleyball is quite safe compared with others."*

*"I feel safe with staff and organizers with volleyball BC."*

Across all respondent groups, there was **positive agreement to the statement "I feel safe participating in volleyball"** with a ranking of 4 or 5.

Youth and Adult Players were most positive with 90-91% agreeing/strongly agreeing with the statement (ranking 4 or 5). This speaks very positively to the player experience.

Club Directors were noticeably less positive with a larger number disagreeing/strongly disagreeing or neutral (ranking 1 to 3). This may be related to their role of authority, governance, and organisation of the sport which would bring them into contact with a larger number of safety-related issues or incidents.

*"In my experience, coaches and players are always so supportive and encouraging. I always feel safe when playing volleyball and look forward to it"*

*"I have solid relationships with my teammates and coaches, so when I play volleyball, I feel like I am in a safe environment."*

*"I think there's always a small risk while playing volleyball, because there's a chance I could get hurt. But, I rarely worry about it."*

28% of female players said that they felt volleyball is very safe and did not feel that there were risks to their safety

Coaches, Referees & Club Directors felt they had resources, support and knowledge in most safety areas.

A number of participants to our survey expressed their appreciation that we were taking the time to ask about safety in volleyball.

*"Wow - thanks for surveying. It's good to know how committed VBC is to supporting participants and upholding high standards for the integrity of the sport"*

During the Team BC Safe Sport sessions, athletes recognised the hard work of coaches, organisers and clubs in meeting athlete needs in areas of safety:

*"Coaches and adults within the sport scene are very good."*

*"I think they're meeting our needs well when it comes to athlete recovery".*

*"I would say that the community and sportsmanship to help athletes grow has grow been quite successful in the sport of volleyball."*

*I think overall in general coaches do a great job of covering all areas, between club school and Team BC I have learned a lot."*

## 5. But our sport has safety issues, particularly in the 5 different behaviours linked to abuse and maltreatment...

63% said psychologically or emotionally harming behaviour were a problem

Overall 50% said negative focus on body weight or image is a problem

49% of all respondents said bullying is an issue & 44% of all respondents said discriminatory remarks or behaviour are an issue

Overall 43% said behaviour that is physically harming is a problem

Coaches, Referees & Club Directors were more likely to say this was an issue than with Players (76-79% v 52-58%)

Males were slightly more likely to say this was a problem than Females.

*“Volleyball should be a welcoming sport for all people, with skills or not...I've heard from newcomers that they have a hard time getting involve unless they already establish connections.”*

*“There's a difference between belittling and motivation /encouragement – “tough love” can exist but needs to be managed.”*

65% of club directors felt that negative focus on body weight/image was an issue, albeit a small one.

Nearly 50% of female respondents said that negative focus on body image was not a problem at all in volleyball compared with only 39% of males. This is encouraging as a predominantly female sport, however we need further exploration of why male respondents more more likely to see this as an issue.

*“A small favouring towards people who “look” like a volleyball player- (tall, spandex, knee pads, good shoes, etc.)”*

*“Male coaches... Body shaming their athletes... simply has to stop!”*

Positively, both these issues were only identified by 43-53% of Adult and Youth Players.

However this rises to 51-66% of Club Directors, Coaches and Referees who identified them both as a problem.

Male respondents were slightly more likely to say these were issues compared with females.

Referees overwhelmingly selected verbal abuse, bullying and harassment as the biggest risk to their safety in volleyball.

*“Discrimination/Preference for white, tall players”*

*“Feeling unwanted and pushed away by peers.”*

*“Pressure coming from teammates that are negative on and off the court.”*

41-44% of Adult and Youth Players stated that physically harming behaviour is an issue. This compares with 58-59% of Coaches and Club Directors, suggesting a growing consciousness of over-training and excessive physical exercise.

Male respondents were much more likely to identify physically harming behaviour as an issue than female respondents (58% v. 40%).

*“Playing through injuries does not mean you are tough.”*

*“You should never feel pressure to play if you are hurt or injured.”*

Members were asked to identify who was responsible if they had experienced one of the 5 behaviours. Coaches and Officials were most likely to have experienced one of these behaviours from **Parents or other Coaches/Assistant Coaches**. This contrasts with Players who overwhelmingly indicated that they are most likely to have experienced it from a **Peer or Team mate**. Education, awareness, and training around appropriate/inappropriate behaviours must focus on different audiences depending on the target of the behaviour.

**Males ranked all 5 areas more highly of a problem than female respondents.** This flips the assumption that female participants are more vulnerable to behaviour that is damaging and unsafe. Care and support must address our male participants as much as female.

## 6. Physical injury is perceived as the biggest risk to individual safety by all members (apart from referees)...

- **Physical injury** was listed as the top risk perceived to individual safety by Coaches, Club Directors and Players. Interestingly this does not correlate with the ranking of safety issues in volleyball in which the same groups listed behaviour that is psychologically or emotionally harming, bullying, and negative self image and did not significantly rate behaviour that is physically harming.
- This suggests that our members feel that psychological and mental health concerns are a big issue in our sport but that, on a day to day basis, they are most concerned about being physically hurt while participating.

Over **80% Players** in the survey have experienced an injury during participation in volleyball.

The most common injuries are to the **ankle, shoulder or arm.**

Over **60% Coaches** in the survey have experienced an injury during participation in volleyball.

Although Referees were least likely to be injured, **25%** of them sustained an injury.

Only **4-6%** of respondents said they had received a concussion or head injury.

**57%** of male players identified physical injury and concussion/ brain injury as the top risk which was about 10% higher than female players.

- Between **32-40%** injuries self-resolved or were treated by the individual themselves.
- Around **one-third of Players and Referees had to temporarily stop participating** volleyball after they experienced a physical injury.
- Coaches were overwhelmingly most likely to have experienced an injury where they had to seek medical advice. They were also **most likely to have experienced an injury that meant they had to permanently stop volleyball.** This potentially reflects the transition from being a Player to a Coach.

- In our Safe Sport sessions with Team BC, male and female athletes identified **physical injury prevention and recovery** as the most pressing area for youth volleyball. They also identified this topic as one they would like to learn more about in order to have the safest and most fulfilling quality sport experience.

*"I wish I knew a lot about injuries because I found it was never talked about – I eventually got patella tendinopathy and I didn't know what that was and how to treat it until recently."*

*"More education and awareness so that you know when you have an injury (you may not know that you have one)."*

- Positively, the Team BC athletes listed physical injury prevention as one of the sport safety areas where they feel volleyball is meeting athlete needs relatively well, even though they would still like to receive more support and education.

*"I think they're meeting our needs well when it comes to athlete recovery."*

*"Recovery and injury prevention tips, proper warmup tools for the athletes."*

*"I feel that recovering properly is something that is lacking, which can lead to physical injury (Athletes needing enough sleep, stretching, water...etc)"*

## 7. Mental health and wellbeing is a growing area of concern.

General life stress & fear of failure were top factors identified by youth players' as affecting their performance.

Coaches, Players and Referees listed **mental exhaustion** as one of the top factors experienced during a season.

The complexity of mental health considerations and concerns was illustrated in the discussions taking place during the Team BC safe sport sessions:

*How to focus on positive thoughts (staying positive, being positive, finishing positive)*

*Getting frustrated and being hard on yourself whenever you make a mistake as a youth volleyball athlete is a huge concern and is an area that needs to be dealt with since the mental component in volleyball is so huge.*

*Confidence and self worth: you are you, and no one else is*



*Knowing what is too much for your body and mental health – understanding your limits and what is reasonable.*

*Managing anxiety and stress on the court*

*Most athletes haven't learned much about mental health or how to weed out negative thoughts.*

*How to deal with the coach-athlete disagreements and team dynamics*

- In our Safe Sport sessions with Team BC, male and female athletes identified **mental health** as the second most pressing area for youth volleyball.
- Female Team BC athletes also identified mental health topic as the top safety area they would like to learn more about in order to have the safest and most fulfilling quality sport experience. Male athletes listed it second to physical injury.

Feedback from **Coaches, Referees and Club Directors** in our survey highlight the growing awareness of mental health and of behaviours that can negatively impact mental wellbeing.

- Across all 5 behaviours linked to abuse and maltreatment, **Coaches, Referees and Club Directors consistently rated the behaviours as more of a problem in volleyball than Players.** The difference in response is perhaps because of the nature of the roles of these groups: Coaches, Referees, and Club Directors are more immersed in the organisation of the sport and may be more aware or involved in situations or behaviour where these issues arises.
- This also puts a different lens on the priority that has been given to player/athlete mental health and suggests that we should also emphasise support and education for these key positions of authority in sport.

*“Volleyball is a culture of high achievements. A lot of players are constantly comparing themselves with each other instead of focusing on their own goals.”*

*“Coaching U14-16 girls' volleyball - there is quite a mental aspect which is often difficult to deal with.”*

## 8. There are gaps in support and an inconsistent awareness of the safety resources and tools among our members.

One size does not fit all.... different positions in our sport feel under-supported in different areas of safety:

- Club Directors generally feel that they have most resources, support and knowledge in all 4 areas of safety - concussion and head injury, physical injury, abuse and maltreatment, and mental health. They feel most well-resourced in the areas of **abuse and maltreatment** and **mental health**.
- Club Directors rank **physical injury** as the area where they have the least resources, support, and knowledge.
- Coaches and Referees who feel that they have the most amount of resources, support and knowledge around **physical injury**, closely followed by **concussion and head injury**
- Coaches and Referees both indicate that **mental health** and **abuse and maltreatment** are the areas where they have the least resources, support and knowledge.



- Most awareness across all members of **Volleyball BC's Code of Conduct and Ethics**, closely followed by our **Screening Policy**. Levels of awareness dip slightly for Youth and Adult Players.



- Club Directors, Coaches and Referees were more likely to be aware than not of the **Rule of Two** and the **Volleyball BC Safe Sport webpage**. A significant number of Youth and Adult Players said they were not aware of these two.



- Least awareness across all members of the **National Sport Helpline** or **Independent Third Party for reporting safe sport incidences**, particularly among the Adult and Youth Player groups. This has only recently been part of the resources that Volleyball BC has promoted which likely explains the low response.

### AN ATHLETES PERSPECTIVE

#### WHAT DO YOU WISH YOU HAD KNOWN?

*Learning about recovery: cool down, warm up, food, sleep, active recovery, rest.*

*Knowing more about concussions and their symptoms as well as treatment.*

*The importance of fully recovering from an injury – knowing when to start and stop*

*It is ok to sit out and let your body recover if you are hurt.*

*More resources and support available to turn to – there is no talk on mental health.*

*Having someone else to talk to other than a coach who is confidential.*

*Having clear guidelines for abuse: physical mental, verbal, sexual abuse.*

*Speaking out if something a player says goes too far, for example I say a lot of stuff and sometimes it can get out of hand and if a player doesn't like that then sometimes its difficult especially if it's like a joke the whole team laughs at to say like hey that actually wasn't funny please don't joke about that.*

*Knowing what is too much for your body and mental health – understanding your limits and what is reasonable.*

*Understanding you can have good and bad days, not either/or.*

*How to deal with the coach-athlete disagreements and team dynamics.*

*(A selection from Team BC Safe Sport sessions)*

## 9. Improving safety in volleyball is complex and multi-faceted... but we have some ideas of where we need to go.

### TRAINING AND EDUCATION

Training and education that is tailored to the needs of each role in volleyball and supports members where they feel they are under-resourced.

*"I think part of the coaching ed requirements should include some level of first aid certification. Our club is going to move towards this as a club standard, but if VBC hosted some clinics it may help with cost/scheduling."*

*"CAC Safe Sport course – should make all VBC members take it."*

*"A seminar for clubs regarding bullying and harassment could be beneficial."*

### RAISING THE PROFILE OF SAFETY

Keep talking about and promoting the importance of safety. Promote the safety resources and tools that are in place so that all our members know about them and how to identify safety issues.

*"More awareness so that you know when you have an injury (you may not know that you have)"*

*"Knowing more about concussions and their symptoms as well as treatment."*

### CLEAR PROCEDURES AND PRACTICES

Creating clear and practical procedures and guidelines that can be implemented easily in all settings.

*"Clearly outline and post expectations for behaviour for all participants"*

*"Current practice does not have a meaningful or appropriate means of managing unsafe aspects of the sport should they arise."*

*"(Knowing) how to handle mistreatment generally."*

### BEING DEFINITE ABOUT BOUNDARIES

Understanding appropriate boundaries between all the different roles in our sport.  
Being clear about what is acceptable and what is not.

*"Knowing coach word choice and being able to differentiate when it is abuse – where is the line?"*

*"Power imbalances between coach and younger athletes and not knowing what constitutes inappropriate behaviour."*

*"Mandatory session for girls where someone talks to them about what is appropriate in sport and what is not. Your "policy of 2" and "open and observable spaces" are spot on in terms of content, but it's not something I knew about when I was 16. I think having former athletes or a professional talk to them in real time is much more valuable and relatable."*

### ACCOUNTABILITY WHEN SAFETY IS NOT MET

Creation of standards for our sport.  
Enforcement of standards and appropriate consequences for when standards are not met.

*"There needs to be consequences for those who disregard such necessary education possess troubling behaviours. I know this is a difficult and sensitive topic but there are people in the community who are active participants that suffer no consequences for consistent troubling behaviours."*

*"Tournament director/Head should be able remove unruly parents/coaches who do not follow guidelines."*

*"I feel there should be standards that club teams/coaches need to meet in order to practice since some things can encourage injury eg. hard floor."*

### REVIEW OUR PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Continuously scan our physical environment and maintain equipment.  
Ensure that we have first aid supplies, training, and resources to prevent injury.

*"There are times when there isn't proper safety equipment like padding for posts available, and also I find there's a high risk for ankle injuries and not enough proper warm up before playing."*

*Some drills are not designed in ways which mitigate the chances of players landing on a ball after jumping. Eg. serving warmup from both sides without passers to deflect incoming balls."*

*Having prevention tools available (eg tape)."*

### EFFECTIVE SUPPORT FOR THOSE WHO NEED IT

Providing a variety of tools and resources for all our members. Signposting to support services outside of our sport when necessary.

*"Having resources to talk to and report that are readily available."*

*"Providing mental support and knowing how to access these resources."*

*"Having someone else to talk to other than a coach who is confidential."*

### PROMOTING SELF-ADVOCACY

Ensuring that all participants feel able to speak up, speak out and ask for what they need.

*"Let coaches know your body needs a break."*

*"Having open communication with your team and being able to talk about what encourages you versus what does not."*

*"Knowing what is too much for your body and mental health – understanding your limits and what is reasonable."*

## 10. Volleyball BC has an important role to play – but so does everyone.

### TOP 3 WAYS VOLLEYBALL BC CAN SUPPORT A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

#### CLUB DIRECTORS

1. downloadable resources/guides
2. webinars and talks on key areas
3. clear safety procedures and steps

#### COACHES

1. clear safety procedures and steps
2. downloadable resources/guides
3. advice and support in person

#### REFEREES

1. clear safety procedures and steps
2. downloadable resources/guides
3. raising awareness of safety

#### PLAYERS

1. raising awareness of safety
2. clear safety procedures and steps
3. advice and support in-person

Our members also highlighted that Volleyball BC has an important role to play in **setting and upholding safety standards:**

*“There needs to be more of an emphasis on the physical development to support the level of training many clubs are expecting their athletes to engage in, and unless Volleyball BC introduces requirements on clubs to integrate it, the elite clubs will continue to be the only ones who focus on it at all.”*

*“There needs to be consequences for those who disregard such necessary education as a waste of time or possess troubling behaviours.”*

*“Allow through with reprimanding coaches who are breaking code of conduct. Stop turning a blind eye.”*

*“CAC Safe Sport course – should make all VBC members take it.”*

### CULTURAL CHANGE

A key theme from the survey and consultation was seeing the bigger picture, that unsafe behaviour and actions are not isolated but part of our culture that needs to change.

**We need to challenge norms in volleyball that uphold and accept unsafe behaviour from participants.**

*“Difference between belittling and motivation/encouragement – “tough love” can exist but needs to be managed.*

*“Definitely a lot of favoring behavior and focus on win without supporting the players (or developing them)”*



**Like many sports, there has been a culture of acceptance that blurs the boundaries of appropriate behaviour and actions.**

*“Underhanded recruiting, intimidating athletes - if you want to play a high level you can't be in that club.”*

*“There was no cohesive training or support to avoid shoulder and ankle injury at the high performance youth level. It was considered a “given”.*



**We need to create new norms, expectations, and standards that prioritises physical, emotional, and psychological safety. These should empower all participants to self advocate and speak up.**

*“The narratives need to change and the change needs to be bold”*

*“You should never feel pressure to play if you are hurt or injured.”*

*Having open communication with your team and being able to talk about what “encourages you versus what does not.”*



**This kind of culture change is hard and takes time. There needs to be commitment and involvement of all participants. No one organisation or position can do it alone.**

*“Mutual respect: referees, coaches and players – recognising each others’ roles.”*

*“EVERYONE needs to focus on gym safety coaches, refs, admin etc”*

We would like to gratefully acknowledge the financial support that we received through a Safe Sport Community Activation grant from the Sport Information Resource Centre (SIRC). This support allowed us to undertake the research of our membership enclosed in this report.

Thank you to all of our members who took the time to complete the survey and provide their thoughts about safety in our sport. Thank you to Dr. Shaunna Taylor for skilfully facilitating the safe sport sessions and group discussion. And finally, a special thank you to the Team BC Select athletes who shared their feelings and suggestions for how we can create a safer environment for youth athletes.

Written and interpreted by Emma Gibbons, Chief Executive Officer, Volleyball BC  
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