

# HDFS Research Team Develops Programs to Measure Abuse in College Sport

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Professor Travis Dorsch with Kat Adams and Katie Alexander

Travis Dorsch, associate professor in Human Development and Family Studies at USU, is passionate about the research he and his doctoral students, Kat Adams and Katie Alexander, have been conducting for a contract they were awarded from Lasso Safe, a non-profit global coalition working towards the proactive assurance of athlete safety and wellness. Housed within the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, the research team is currently developing a platform to report and understand abuse in sports at the collegiate level, extramural and intramural athletics, and in recreational play in young adult sports programs.

“When Lasso Safe reached out to me about working on some projects, my first thought was to connect with Kat and Katie to find out if they had the bandwidth to work on this project,” recalls Dorsch. “The three of us had previously worked on a similar project, and the project is in Kat and Katie’s skillset—working on defining the safeguarding space.” Safeguarding in sports entails creating measures that protect the best interests of coaches with their athletes.

Lasso Safe creates metrics-based systems for coaches and athletes that are designed to reduce emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and promote safer athletes, happier participants, higher profitability, and expanded athletic careers. Sport leaders across the country and world, including psychologists, industry executives, athletic champions, sport medicine doctors, and state directors,

have embraced the programs from Lasso Safe. “The contract awarded to USU will facilitate the establishment of reliability and validity in data collection for Lasso Safe. This ultimately, will help them remain at the forefront of the safeguarding space in the U.S. and across the world,” explains Dorsch.

“Kat and I were interested in doing our PhDs in youth sports with an emphasis on safeguarding in abuse and sports,” explains Alexander. This research is personal for both Adams and Alexander. Both doctoral students were involved in competitive sports at a higher level when they were children and into adulthood.

Alexander played soccer at the college level. She shares being so poorly treated that she made a conscious choice to leave the sport. “I experienced abuse in sport for the majority of my childhood,” shared Alexander. “When I made the college soccer team, my coach was emotionally abusive to the point where I saw my fellow athletes suffer with mental health issues. I decided to say something. I spoke to the sports office and was told that this is the way college athletic programs are handled.”

Adams shares a similar experience of being involved in competitive gymnastics as an athlete and a coach. “Gymnastics was my sport. When I graduated high school, I was practicing gymnastics 20 hours a week. Then in college, I became a coach at the high school level, and after graduation I was coaching full time. I knew that people had bad experiences and that there were coaches who were abusive. I felt that so much of my identity was that I was a gymnast and that I could do hard things.”

The turning point came for Adams when she started noticing her own behavior changes when she was surrounded by other abusive coaches. “I noticed that when I was working with my group of child athletes that I was gleeful when I was so tough on them that they cried,” says Adams. “I realized that I was part of the verbal abuse in gymnastics. I was mortified for being so tough on these athletes, and I left competitive sports behind.”

“There’s basically no research being done on abuse in sports in the United States. Sociologists have done some related work around systemic exploitation of NCAA (National College Athletes Association) athletes, particularly black athletes in football and basketball. There was a recent group of scholars who found that 57.8% of elite athletes in the United States reported experiencing at least one form of harm.”

One of the reasons Dorsch, Adams, and Alexander opted to research college-aged athletes is because the

NCAA provides more information than any other sports organization in the country. "We know a lot more about NCAA athletes than any other athlete association in the United States," explains Alexander. "The NCAA has money. They are invested in healthy outcomes, and they provide easy access to research populations. We are focusing on young adults at the collegiate level. There is more known data on NCAA athletes," says Alexander. "The NCAA is easier to study because there are more consistencies in universal protocols and policies."

The first phase of the grant began in November 2024 and consisted of logistics, project development, proposal writing, budgets, timelines, data collection strategy, and data analysis. The second phase began just this week.

For phase two, the team is conducting surveys online to examine the psychosocial sporting environment across a variety of sample data groups including NCAA athletes, extramural and intramural athletes, and recreational athletes who are aged 18-28 years. Similar research projects with this population of athletes have been conducted in the past. "We want accurate science. Since this project is going to be used in a public forum, the questions in the platform need to be straightforward and easy to understand. The metrics used in this phase will also complement the Lasso Safe instrument for data collection and other empirically balanced scientific measures. The current standard for best measurement practices for the experiences of athlete abuse is VTAQ (Violence Towards Athletes Questionnaire).

"When trying to study abuse in sports, we chose to study adults for the contract because if adults don't understand the questions, then how would we ask these questions to children and teens?" says Adams. "NCAA is also useful to study because there are clear rules for monitoring and compliance. This organization also provides consistency for the study."

A few sample questions from the survey include: Has anyone asked you to limit or restrict your contact with your social circle (friendships, romantic relationships or family) in order to better commit to your sport? Another question is: Has someone in the sporting environment, such as coach, authority figure, or teammate, hit you with a hard object (examples: sports equipment, chairs)?

The data will also look at risk management. "The Lasso Safe platform could be a way for sports organizations to use these metrics to self-assess. They may ask what action is needed to be reported to the proper authority, but what is being done to promote the good aspects of safe sport?" says Alexander. "There is a spectrum out there that

is also positive and good about sports. From our human development background, we know that individuals benefit from these positive relationships."

The research team shares that defining safeguarding in sports is tricky. "There is ambiguity in the sports world about defining words and terms. In a sports context, the further up the ranks an athlete gets, we want to know what is the level at which an athlete will tolerate some type of mistreatment," says Dorsch.

"What coaches are incentivized for ... is winning," explains Adams. "It becomes about life skills taking the backseat. It also becomes about money. If a coach is fired, the contract is still paid out. It's difficult to fire a coach who is winning but behaving poorly to the athletes."

Now, Adams and Alexander channel these experiences as they conduct this research on abuse in sports. They will finish up their research with Lasso Safe, Adams will graduate in Spring 2025 and Alexander in Spring 2026. What's next? Dorsch says, "These two researchers will continue this work and collaborate together in the future. This project has helped me understand the positive *and* the darker side of sport and coaching. The most rewarding part for me is not recruiting students who come work with me who are 'mini me's.' Instead, I hope to work with students who will help me learn and grow. That is valuable for our research to continue to evolve."