

**HUSCH BLACKWELL**

# INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION REPORT

Women's Gymnastics Program Culture

The University of Utah

September 2023

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Executive Summary.....1**

**Introduction.....4**

**Standards of Review .....5**

**Facts and Analysis.....9**

**Findings.....33**

**Recommendations.....34**

**Conclusion.....36**

## **Executive Summary**

The University of Utah (“University”) retained Husch Blackwell to conduct a review of the Women’s Gymnastics Program (“Women’s Gymnastics Program” or “Program”) following internal reports to the University’s Student-Athlete Advocate<sup>1</sup> and University administrators that Women’s Gymnastics head coach, Tom Farden (“Coach Farden” or “Farden”) was engaging in emotional and verbal abuse, disregarding injuries and athletics trainer recommendations, and inappropriately managing scholarships, including by pressuring student-athletes to medically retire.

Husch Blackwell interviewed 45 total individuals, including all 12 student-athletes from the 2022-23 team, 7 former student-athletes, 5 parents of student-athletes, 6 members of the current coaching staff, 11 athletics department staff members and administrators, and 4 former staff members. We gathered information about student-athletes’ experiences generally, and about specific alleged comments and actions by Coach Farden. Overall, we placed allegations and complaints into the following areas for our analysis:

- Coaching Style and Communications with Student-Athletes
- Physical Conduct
- Injuries
- Nutrition
- Scholarships

With the exception of Coach Farden, we have not included the names of individuals or attributed particular statements to individuals within this report in order to respect the confidentiality of the interviewees. The report summarizes the totality of information evaluated during this review with respect to the initial broad set of allegations. Although there were some student-athletes who participated in the review who felt targeted by Coach Farden and who shared information about their personal experiences within the Program, we did not find sufficient corroborating evidence to conclude that Coach Farden engaged in actions that violated U.S. Center for SafeSport Code (“SafeSport Code”)<sup>2</sup> or NCAA rules. However, in at least one circumstance related to Coach Farden’s communications with a student-athlete, Coach Farden violated the Student-Athlete Health, Safety and Well Being Program of the University’s Athletics Department (the “Athletics’ Well Being Policy” or the “Policy”).

---

<sup>1</sup> The University has a designated Student-Athlete Advocate housed in the Office of Student Affairs who is available as a resource to address potential issues of health and well-being that student-athletes in any sport may have and wish to share with individuals in the athletics department. This dedicated position is unique among NCAA Division I institutions.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Center for SafeSport is an independent nonprofit committed to building a sport community where participants can work and learn together free of emotional, physical and sexual abuse and misconduct. The Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017 codified the U.S. Center for SafeSport as the nation’s safe sport organization. It gave us the scope and authority to resolve abuse and misconduct reports for more than 11 million individuals throughout the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement – from whom it is fully independent. See [SafeSport Code](#).

Specifically, we found:

1. Coach Farden did not engage in any severe, pervasive or egregious acts of emotional or verbal abuse of student-athletes.
2. Coach Farden did not engage in any acts of physical abuse, emotional abuse or harassment as defined by SafeSport Code.
3. Coach Farden made a derogatory comment to a student-athlete that if she was not at the University she would be a “nobody working at a gas station” in her hometown. We find this comment was personally degrading and, although isolated, violates the Athletics’ Well Being Policy which prohibits the use of degrading language.
4. A few student-athletes alleged that Coach Farden made comments to student-athletes that, if corroborated, would have likely resulted in a finding that they violated the Athletics’ Well Being Policy’s prohibition on degrading language. The comments as alleged were isolated occurrences that could not be independently corroborated and were denied by Coach Farden. Because these alleged statements could not be independently corroborated, we found insufficient evidence of a violation of the Athletics’ Well Being Policy and no violation (even if true) of the SafeSport Code.
5. Some former student-athletes stated that interactions with Coach Farden and involvement on the Women’s Gymnastics Team negatively impacted them personally. They also shared information related to perceptions that they were targeted for negative treatment by Coach Farden. Coach Farden denied targeting student-athletes for negative treatment, and the majority of current student-athletes and staff members denied observing Coach Farden target particular student-athletes with negative treatment. As such, we did not make a finding that Coach Farden violated the Athletics’ Well Being Policy 7.6 because we did not find sufficient evidence to conclude that Coach Farden singled out or isolated student-athletes.
6. Coach Farden more likely than not threw a stopwatch and a cellular telephone in frustration in the presence of student-athletes. These individual acts were not repeated or severe and therefore did not violate SafeSport Code for Physical Acts of Emotional Misconduct which requires repeated or severe physically aggressive behaviors. Further, the acts did not involve inappropriate contact with a student-athlete and did not violate the Athletics’ Well Being Policy 7.5, Physical Abuse or Inappropriate Touch.
7. The review did not find that Coach Farden disregarded injuries, or independently had the ability to medically retire student-athletes. However, Coach Farden questioned the recommendations of a former athletics trainer based on concerns related to the accuracy of diagnosis and information provided to the coaching staff. The additional gymnastics coaching staff also had concerns about the accuracy of diagnoses provided by the former athletics trainer.

8. Coach Farden's management of most athletics scholarships on a year-to-year basis (which is consistent with industry practice) resulted in some student-athletes experiencing an increased fear of failure and perceived or actual pressure from Coach Farden to learn specific challenging skills in order to retain an athletics scholarship.

Despite these findings, we note that a majority of student-athletes interviewed, two-thirds of the student-athletes who participated on the 2022-23 Women's Gymnastics Team, and all but one current or former staff member affiliated with the Women's Gymnastics Program described Coach Farden as a caring, passionate coach and did not report any concerns related to the treatment of student-athletes.

Our review included interviews of former student athletes, including student-athletes who recently transferred from the team, who recounted personally difficult situations related to personal issues, athletic performance and involvement with the team. Women's Gymnastics coaches observed that some of the student-athletes' athletic performance may have caused them frustration and resulted in their decision to transfer. While we acknowledge the significance of the range of experiences that these student-athletes had participating on the Women's Gymnastics Team, we did not find that these experiences included specific conduct by Coach Farden that amounted to a violation of NCAA rules, or U.S. Center for SafeSport Code. However, at least one statement made to a student-athlete by Coach Farden was insensitive, unprofessional and violated the Athletics' Well Being policy which prohibits the use of degrading language.

Overall, several of the reported issues included individual perceptions of Coach Farden's motives by some student-athletes that could not be objectively verified (e.g., that Farden allegedly paid less attention to some student-athletes during practice or targeted individuals for negative treatment). Some of the circumstances appeared to us to be consistent with student-athletes engaging in a highly competitive sport, within the context of a highly competitive and successful team, led by a highly competitive coach, all of which can contribute to some of the issues identified—including frustration around lineups, dealing with injuries, scholarship designation issues and pressure to perform athletically at the highest levels. This does not, nor should it, diminish the individual and personally difficult experiences shared by some student-athletes. Collegiate athletics—including at the most elite level—requires all coaches to consistently demonstrate professionalism and an appropriate level of sensitivity to material student-athlete concerns. While our review did not result in evidence supporting allegations that Coach Farden targeted or isolated these student-athletes, we acknowledge this was a perception shared by some student-athletes and recommend the University monitor student-athlete satisfaction and reports of concerns in the future to determine if perceptions related to negative treatment persist.

Given the issues that were raised during the review by some student-athletes, our report includes recommendations to be considered by the University. These recommendations include the following:

1. Consider a performance improvement plan for Coach Farden that addresses appropriate communication with student-athletes, leadership training and emotional intelligence as it pertains to interactions with student-athletes and team culture.

2. This review was brought forward, in part, by student-athletes utilizing the Student-Athlete Advocate in Student Affairs to report concerns related to the Women's Gymnastics Program. Continue to support the role of the Student-Athlete Advocate, including regular monitoring of team practices and competitions, and educate student-athletes about the role of the Student-Athlete Advocate so that she can be an independent resource to address student-athlete concerns.
3. One assistant coach discussed the tension that can result from parents feeling excluded from the Program and their student-athlete's experience. Consider ways to address this tension, while adhering to Program and athletics department expectations for student-athletes' developing independence and always in accordance with FERPA and HIPAA.
4. With respect to athletics scholarships, ensure that all prospective and enrolled student-athletes understand the terms of their athletics scholarships. Further, consider whether the use of a multi-year award that only guarantees one-year of an athletics scholarship is a best practice.
5. Consider additional attendance by athletics administrators at practice and regular independent documented meetings with Women's Gymnastics student-athletes throughout the year specific to the issues outlined in this report.

## **I. Introduction**

On June 20, 2023, the University engaged Husch Blackwell to conduct an external review of the Women's Gymnastics Program related to the health and well-being of student-athletes. In the spring of 2023, the University's Student-Athlete Advocate met with several student athletes related to reported concerns regarding Coach Farden. This review related, in part, to the fact that three student-athletes entered the transfer portal in spring 2023. In addition to concerns reported by student-athletes, parents of student-athletes entering the transfer portal and former student-athletes reported concerns to the University.

Our review included interviews with current and former student-athletes,<sup>3</sup> staff affiliated with the Program, including the head coach and assistant coaches, and former staff members. The review commenced with the following scope:

- Alleged mental and verbal abuse of student-athletes by Coach Farden; and
- Alleged failure of Coach Farden to adhere to recommendations from the athletic training staff and allegedly pressuring student-athletes to medically retire.

During the course of interviews, we learned of issues related to scholarship designation which is also discussed in Section V of this report.

---

<sup>3</sup> We interviewed all members of the 2022-23 team and former student-athletes who had reported concerns to the department or otherwise contacted the department about participating in the review. Three former student-athletes who were identified as potential interviewees declined to participate.

We collected information from interviews and also requested various documents from the University. Of note, the University provided us with the Student-Athlete Handbook, the Sports Medicine Manual and the Policy related to Student-Athlete Health, Safety and Well-Being Program. In addition to analyzing the information collected during the investigation under these governing documents, we also relied on SafeSport Code Definitions that are accepted as national standards on athlete health and well-being to evaluate the information.<sup>4</sup>

## **II. Standards of Review**

The Athletics' Well Being Policy includes an introduction section that references the department's commitment to the health, safety, and well-being of the student-athletes who participate in its programs and represent the University in competitive athletics.

The Policy states, "it is the Department's desire to educate student-athletes and staff about the impact and long-term effects of abuse and inappropriate coaching techniques, as well as how to appropriately address issues, which are inconsistent with the University's mission."

The Policy prohibits staff members from advising student-athletes to tolerate an unsafe environment, and, under the Policy, staff members are obligated to report any situation, activity, or behavior that endangers the health, safety, and/or well-being of student-athletes, employees, volunteers, or other spectators/attendees of University athletics events to the Athletics Director and act to immediately stop the activity until a safe environment can be restored. Affirmatively put, the Policy states it is the "responsibility of each coach, volunteer, and staff member associated with the University to act in positive and respectful ways to enhance the health, safety, and well-being of student-athletes while also working to increase the sport performance skills of all student-athletes participating in our program." Each head coach is required to create a safe training environment for student-athletes free of abuse.

Specific sections of the Policy include:

- 7.3 Adherence to Physician's Instructions and Proper Actions in the Case of Injury. Coaches are obligated to follow the instructions of a medical physician with regard to return to competition or practice following injury, including any restrictions related to training limitations of injured student-athletes.
- 7.4 Acceptable Physical Activities. Coaches may only require that athletes take part in instructional and conditioning physical activities during practices or contests that are relevant to the sport and meet conditioning and safety guidelines established by sports medicine authorities...Drills that may pose a risk to certain student-athletes because of specific medical conditions will require a comprehensive student-athlete evaluation with training and medical staff before drills can be performed.

---

<sup>4</sup> The U.S. Center for SafeSport is an independent nonprofit committed to building a sport community where participants can work and learn together free of emotional, physical and sexual abuse and misconduct. The SafeSport Code defines more nuanced inappropriate or abusive conduct such as "emotional misconduct" and "harassment" in the context of coaching a sport. While the individuals in this situation do not come under the jurisdiction of the SafeSport Code, the definitions contained in the Code provide a useful framework for evaluating the alleged inappropriate conduct in this matter.

- 7.5 Physical Abuse or Inappropriate Touching During Instruction. Physical abuse of athletes is expressly prohibited. Coaches should be aware that physical abuse can take many forms including inappropriate or frequent unnecessary touching. Some of the more common forms of physical abuse include when a coach: requires or suggests that a student-athlete perform a physical act that has no relevance to the sport and that is intended to cause embarrassment or be degrading; forces a student-athlete into training and/or competition that exceeds the capacity of his/her immature and growing body; requires or suggests that a student-athlete continue to perform a physical act, whether it is relevant to the sport or not, that compromises established conditioning and safety guidelines; places a student-athlete in drills where they are intentionally mismatched physically with an opposing athlete, causing the possibility of physical harm, or the athlete is clearly unable to perform a physical activity safely or effectively without harm; fails to stop an activity where a student-athlete is clearly being subjected to physical harm; or roughly pulls a student-athlete into a position on the court, field, pool, mountain, track, gym, course, etc.
- 7.6 Emotional or Verbal Abuse. Coaches and student-athletes constantly engage in verbal interactions. It is the coach's responsibility to use such interactions for instructional and motivational purposes. Emotional or verbal abuse of student-athletes is expressly prohibited and can take many forms, such as when a coach: (1) excessively, in comparison to treatment of other student-athletes, singles out a student-athlete through negative interactions (i.e., personal attacks); (2) uses degrading language; (3) devalues a person; and (4) when a coach isolates a student-athlete by ignoring them.
- 7.7 Responsibility to Act. Whenever a coach or supervising staff member observes a potentially unsafe situation, it is the coach's or staff member's responsibility to immediately discontinue the activity and restore a safe environment. Situations involving discriminatory harassment, hazing, bullying, abuse, or other activities defined under this Policy must be immediately addressed and reported to the Athletics Director and, when appropriate, to the OEO/AA. All criminal activity observed by an individual shall be immediately reported to law enforcement.
- 7.8 Control and Dependence. Participation on a sports team demands a certain amount of inter-team dependence and discipline. It is the coaches' responsibility to establish a team environment and ethos that maximizes cooperative effort and performance without compromising basic individual rights. There must be appropriate times in which athletes are free to question and discuss and the coach to respond with explanations...Care must be taken to avoid creating an atmosphere based on fear, intimidation, and total compliance. Such systems of control are antithetical to the learning environment. Team environments should be positive, nurturing, and supportive without sacrificing organization, efficiency, and appropriate discipline.

The SafeSport Code for the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Movement (*Effective April 1, 2023*) also includes relevant definitions of emotional and physical misconduct within the context of sport.

- Emotional Misconduct - Emotional Misconduct includes: (a) Verbal Acts; (b) Physical Acts, (c) Acts that Deny Attention or Support, (d) Criminal Conduct, or (e) Stalking.
  - Verbal Acts - Repeatedly and excessively verbally assaulting or attacking someone personally in a manner that serves no productive training or motivational purpose.

- Physical Acts - Repeated or severe physically aggressive behaviors, including but not limited to, throwing sport equipment, water bottles or chairs at or in the presence of others, punching walls, windows or other objects.
- Acts that Deny Attention or Support - Ignoring or isolating a person for extended periods of time, including routinely or arbitrarily excluding a Participant from participation.
- Physical Misconduct - Physical Misconduct is any intentional contact or non-contact behavior that causes, or reasonably threatens to cause, physical harm to another person. Examples of physical misconduct may include, without limitation
  - Contact violations - Punching, beating, biting, striking, strangling or slapping another; intentionally hitting another with objects, such as sporting equipment; encouraging or knowingly permitting an Athlete to return to play prematurely following a serious injury (e.g., a concussion) and without the clearance of a medical professional.
  - Non-contact violations - Isolating a person in a confined space, such as locking an Athlete in a small space; forcing an Athlete to assume a painful stance or position for no athletic purpose (e.g., requiring an athlete to kneel on a harmful surface); withholding, recommending against, or denying adequate hydration, nutrition, medical attention or sleep; providing alcohol to a person under the legal drinking age; providing illegal drugs or nonprescribed medications to another.
- Harassment - Repeated or severe conduct that (a) causes fear, humiliation or annoyance, (b) offends or degrades, (c) creates a hostile environment (as defined above), or (d) reflects discriminatory bias in an attempt to establish dominance, superiority or power over an individual or group based on age, race, ethnicity, culture, religion, national origin, or mental or physical disability; or (e) any act or conduct described as harassment under federal or state law. Whether conduct is harassing depends on the totality of the circumstances, including the nature, frequency, intensity, location, context, and duration of the behavior.
- Conduct may not rise to the level of Harassment if it is merely rude (inadvertently saying or doing something hurtful), mean (purposefully saying or doing something hurtful, but not as part of a pattern of behavior), or arising from conflict or struggle between persons who perceive they have incompatible views or positions. Harassment does not include professionally accepted coaching methods of skill enhancement, physical conditioning, team building, appropriate discipline, or improved Athlete performance.

Applicable NCAA rules and interpretations related to athletics scholarships include the following:

- **NCAA Division I Bylaw 15.02.8 Period of Award.** The period of award begins when the student-athlete receives any benefits as a part of the student's grant-in-aid on the first day of classes for a particular academic term, or the first day of practice, whichever is earlier, and continues until the conclusion of the period set forth in the financial aid agreement. The period of award of a multiyear grant-in-aid awarded to an individual other than an undergraduate four-year transfer who receives or is issued athletically related financial aid in the academic year of initial, full-time enrollment at the certifying institution may include one or more academic years of no athletically related financial aid after the first academic year in which athletically related aid is provided, including the final year of the award (e.g.,

50 percent in year one, zero percent in year two, 50 percent in year three; 50 percent in year one, zero percent in year two, zero percent in year three). An athletics grant-in-aid shall not be awarded in excess of the student-athlete's five-year period of eligibility. (Revised: 10/27/11, 9/29/15, 11/14/22, 1/11/23)

- **NCAA Official Interpretation**

**Title:** Multiyear Aid Agreements May Include One or More Years of No Athletically Related Financial Aid (I)

**Date Published:** July 23, 2015

The committee determined that a multiyear financial aid agreement may stipulate that no athletically related financial aid will be provided in one or more academic years after the first academic year in which athletically related aid is provided, including the final year of the award (e.g., 50 percent in year one, zero percent in year two, 50 percent in year three; 50 percent in year one, zero percent in year two, zero percent in year three).

- **NCAA Division I Bylaw 15.3.6 Increase Permitted.** [A] Institutional financial aid may be increased for any reason at any time. (Adopted: 1/11/94, Revised: 2/26/03, 4/23/08, 10/27/11 effective 8/1/12 awards may be executed before 8/1/12, 8/7/14, 1/17/15 effective 8/1/15)

- **NCAA Division I Bylaw 15.5.2.1 Maximum Limits.** An institution shall be limited in any academic year to the total number of counters (head count) in each of the following sports: (Revised: 1/10/91 effective 8/1/92, 1/9/96 effective 8/1/96)  
Women's Gymnastics 12      Women's Tennis 8  
Women's Volleyball 12

- **NCAA Division I Bylaw 15.3.5.1. 15.3.5.1 Reduction, Cancellation or Nonrenewal Permitted.** [A] Institutional financial aid based in any degree on athletics ability awarded to an individual other than an undergraduate four-year transfer who receives or is issued athletically related financial aid in the academic year of initial, full-time enrollment at the certifying institution may be reduced or canceled during the period of the award or reduced or not renewed for the following academic year or years of the student-athlete's five-year period of eligibility if the recipient: (Revised: 1/10/92, 1/11/94, 1/10/95, 1/9/96, 12/13/05, 9/11/07, 8/7/14, 1/17/15 effective 8/1/15, 6/19/18 effective 10/15/18, 11/14/22, 1/11/23)

(a) Is rendered ineligible for intercollegiate competition based on the recipient's action or inaction;

(b) Fraudulently misrepresents any information on an application, letter of intent or financial aid agreement (see Bylaw 15.3.5.1.3);

(c) Engages in serious misconduct warranting substantial disciplinary penalty, as determined by the institution's regular student disciplinary authority;

(d) Voluntarily (on the recipient's own initiative) withdraws from a sport at any time for personal reasons; however, the recipient's financial aid may not be awarded to another student-athlete in the academic term in which the aid is reduced or canceled;

(e) Violates a non-athletically related condition outlined in the financial aid agreement or violates a documented institutional rule or policy (e.g., academics policies or standards, athletics department or team rules or policies); or

(f) Provides written notification of transfer (see Bylaw 13.1.1.3) to the institution; however, the student-athlete's financial aid may not be reduced or canceled until the end of the regular academic term in which written notification of transfer is received. If a student-athlete provides written notification of transfer to the institution between regular academic terms (winter break, summer break) the institution may reduce or cancel the financial aid immediately.

- **NCAA Division I Bylaw 15.5.1.3 Counter Who Becomes Injured or Ill.** A counter who becomes injured or ill to the point that the individual apparently never again will be able to participate in intercollegiate athletics shall not be considered a counter beginning with the academic year following the incapacitating injury or illness.

### **III. Facts and Analysis**

#### **a. Summary of Prior Reviews**

The University's Women's Gymnastics Program has a history of competitive success and has advanced to an NCAA-record 47 consecutive national championships. Coach Farden started coaching at Utah in 2011, and he was an assistant coach for Women's Gymnastics from 2011 to 2015. From 2016 to 2019 he was the co-head coach, and since 2020, he has been the head coach of the Women's Gymnastics Team.

We asked the University to provide us with prior internal complaints or reviews related to Coach Farden to review and consider them in the context of our review. The University provided information related to a climate assessment performed in the fall of 2020, and a review of certain complaints conducted in the spring of 2023 (which led to this external review). In addition, the University provided information about prior directives to Coach Farden related to interactions with student-athletes.

In the fall of 2020, the University's Student-Athlete Advocate conducted an "assessment of the WGY environment."<sup>5</sup> The summary from the review, which included interviewing twelve (12) members of the then-current team, was as follows: "The feedback I received was positive overall, but there are a few areas where continued improvements can be made. All returning student-athletes stated that this year, the team has seen improvements in terms of individual relationships

---

<sup>5</sup> Prior to 2020, the team was led by Coach Farden with a co-head coach. While we had information related to the allegations that were included in the 2020 review, the information we were provided did not distinguish between reported concerns related to Coach Farden or his co-head coach or both.

with coaches, communication with coaches, and overall environment.” Some of the main points from the review are as follows:

- A majority of student-athletes feel the coaching staff are diligent about checking-in with student-athletes and are largely approachable. A few student-athletes shared that Coach Farden could be “more understanding and compassionate in his communication with individuals and that he needs to work on acknowledging his mistakes.”
- Student-athletes reported that the team chemistry is great and that they are operating in a safe and respectful environment. “On occasion,” Coach Farden can “erupt,” act “irrationally,” and be “explosive,” and at times his “passion and intensity can ‘come off scary.’” One student-athlete said the team can tell if the coaches are having a bad day based on “their temperament and body language,” and that this can result in more serious or intense practices. The review summary stated: “Improvements can be made with regard to yelling in the gym and expressing care and concern for individuals as people as well as athletes.”
- Student-athletes reported that coaches are very cautious about injuries and supportive of student athletes taking time to heal. Three student athletes shared that Coach Farden could have been more emotionally supportive and inclusive during injuries.

The recommendations were as follows: “Coaches should continue to regularly check-in with student-athletes and express genuine concern through compassionate communication for each individual; Coaches make additional efforts to support a positive, productive, and respectful environment; Coaches be mindful of the impact their verbal and non-verbal communication can have on the team and their ability to focus and contribute...Efforts should be made to better support and include student-athletes during rehabilitation.”

Shortly after March 2021, Coach Farden started reporting to a new supervisor. His supervisor, an athletics administrator, said Farden’s prior supervisor continued to supervise Coach Farden through that season, and the administrator started to gather information to understand the Program and its operations. The athletics administrator said there were prior concerns expressed related to Coach Farden’s management of scholarships, and the administrator became aware of communication issues on the part of Coach Farden (i.e., a lack of transparency and communication, being up front with students about where they stood) and issues that Coach Farden was having with athletic trainers. Beyond addressing some of these issues through evaluation communications, the athletics administrator said the administrator has never personally observed any concerning behavior from Coach Farden towards a student-athlete. The athletics administrator said there was one instance about a year and half ago when Coach Farden had a verbal altercation with a conference staff member and department leadership had to tell him to conduct himself more professionally because he was being aggressive in his approach. The athletics administrator said, though, the administrator has never witnessed him say or do anything that would be inappropriate or cross the line with respect to interactions with student-athletes. The athletics administrator said he is a “hard coach” who knows what is right and wrong.

In the spring of 2023, some student-athletes raised concerns with the Student-Athlete Advocate which resulted in an internal review, and culminated in the present external review. The internal review included communications with student-athletes on the 2022-23 team, as well as some

parents of student-athletes, and culminated with a summary of the reported allegations that was provided to the department in April 2023.

The following allegations related to abusive practices, language and personal attacks by Coach Farden against student-athletes were communicated to the Student-Athlete Advocate:

- Alleged use of phrases directed at student-athletes such as: “*waste of space*,” “*you’re a lost cause*,” and “*I already gave up on you*.”
- Alleged throwing of objects (i.e. gymnastics equipment) by Coach Farden to demonstrate his frustration.
- Alleged critiques/attacks of student-athletes’ character by Coach Farden.
- Alleged actions by Coach Farden to pressure injured student-athletes to return to competition “too quickly.”
- Alleged actions by Coach Farden to challenge the recommended training limitations of injured student-athletes.
- Alleged actions by Coach Farden to pressure injured student-athletes to end their athletic careers and medically disqualify when not medically necessary.
- During periods of injury, the “elite” group is perceived to be well-supported and included in the team by coaches, while the “Junior Olympic” group reported feeling ignored and isolated from the team by the coaches.
- Alleged actions by Coach Farden intended to influence student-athletes’ weight loss, including: Threatening scholarship cancelation for non-compliance; proposing diet/nutrition plans to individuals; singling out individuals to engage in conditioning beyond what is required of all team members; verbal comments made about student-athletes’ physical appearance such as not appearing to be in “gymnastics shape.”

The summary report also included a list of allegations related to unhealthy team culture and disparate treatment of student-athletes, such as the following:

- Alleged different treatment towards “*Elite*” gymnasts who possess superior name recognition, high-profile reputations, athletic accolades, and those whose families may have a pre-established relationship with Coach Farden and “*Junior Olympic*” gymnasts considered to be less decorated, less respected, and less influential. Allegations of different treatment included allegations that the “*Junior Olympic*” group is not allowed to make mistakes and that they are subjected to disproportionate consequences from the coaching staff (e.g., yelling, verbally criticizing in public, rescinding athletic opportunities to train in certain events and/or participate in lineups, threatening scholarships, silent treatment).<sup>6</sup>
- Alleged pattern in which Farden selects one “*vulnerable*” student-athlete (someone who is already struggling) each year to pick on and/or punish. The perceived motivation for this behavior is either to make an example of this person for the rest of the team or to influence that person to quit or forfeit their scholarship.

---

<sup>6</sup> Based on information received during our review, “Elite” and “Junior Olympic” refer to a student-athlete’s experience with gymnastics before college. Elite gymnasts are those who can compete internationally and are eligible to compete in the Olympics. One way for gymnasts to become Elite is to complete the Junior Olympic levels 1-10. Junior Olympic gymnasts are those who have only completed up to level 10.

The summary also described anonymous reports related to the impact of a “pattern of abuse” by Coach Farden, and a second alleging that Coach Farden only concerns himself with the mental health of student-athletes to the extent it affects their athletic performance,” and that Coach Farden “created an environment based on fear and punishment and that gymnastics student-athletes are treated like assets to use or discard at Farden’s disposal.”

As for improvements, the summary also stated the following: “Many current student-athletes reported that over the past 1-2 years Head Coach Tom Farden has made noticeable efforts to improve in the following areas: responding to feedback, reacting less defensively to feedback, communicating with student-athletes, supporting [student-athlete] mental health needs, showing personal interest in and care for individuals apart from athletic ability, fewer intense mood swings, increased levels of trust with leadership council members, and the decreased use of harsh language when communicating with student-athletes.”

## **b. Treatment of Student-Athletes**

Based on the allegations summarized above from 2023, our review included four main categories related to the treatment of student-athletes. In the sections below, we summarize the information collected through our review and we provide an analysis of the information under the Health, Safety and Well Being Policy and SafeSport Definitions.<sup>7</sup>

### **i. Coaching Style and Communications**

#### **1. Verbal Communications to Student-Athletes**

Several current student-athletes described the 2022-23 season being a better year than the past few years related to team culture. Student-athletes noted that Women’s Gymnastics is a “hard dynamic” because student-athletes are transitioning from an individual to team dynamic and there are tensions related to being selected for lineups.

Many of the current student-athletes described the coaching staff as supportive of student-athletes—one student-athlete described the coaches as treating the student-athletes like family and genuinely caring about them as people. Others described a “win at all costs” culture, including a high intensity competitive environment, in which winning is the priority.

We asked coaches and administrators whether there is a culture of student-athlete reporting within the Program, and coaches and administrators described various reporting options. The Women’s Gymnastics sports supervisor described Real Response as a reporting system student-athletes can use to report concerns. Another department staff member shared that student-athletes receive a reporting link reminder each month. Based on a review of Real Response data, other than the

---

<sup>7</sup> In addition to staff and student-athlete interviews, we also conducted interviews with five parents of student-athletes who were identified as having communicated concerns to the University. We have not included summaries of the information provided by parents to protect confidentiality. For the most part, the information provided by parents was consistent with information provided by their student-athlete, and we interviewed the student-athlete children of each of the parents directly.

reports initiating the reviews by the Student-Athlete Advocate, there have not been other reported concerns by student-athletes related to Coach Farden.

An assistant coach said the communication between student-athletes and staff has been open and honest from the assistant coach's perspective in the last two years; the assistant coach said Coach Farden was encouraged by department leadership to meet with student-athletes and get to know them. The Assistant Director and Coordinator of Mental Performance meets with the team every other week for about 15 minutes, and Coach Farden's sport supervisor said this was initiated by Farden in the fall of 2022 so that student-athletes would have greater access to psychology and wellness resources. The Assistant Director and Coordinator of Mental Performance said there is good communication between the sports psychologist and the program's coaches, and the Assistant Director said, from the Assistant Director's perspective, the staff and administration are committed to providing care and resources to the student-athletes.

Given the allegations included in the internal reviews, a significant portion of this review included gathering information about Coach Farden's interactions with and communications toward student-athletes. Information was gathered related to the following specific instances:

- Several student athletes recalled an instance in 2019 when Coach Farden yelled across the gym when a particular student-athlete could have gotten hurt and said something along the lines of, "This is the University of f\*\*\*ing Utah, if you want to do that, go somewhere else." Several student-athletes said Farden said this because the person was on the verge of being injured and could have been hurt. One student-athlete said Farden has acknowledged he would never yell something like that towards a student-athlete now. Another student-athlete said that if Farden is frustrated because a student-athlete is in danger of hurting themselves, he might say "You're being ridiculous" or "Get it together, you're done with that event," but the student-athlete said he would never attack a student-athlete personally. An assistant coach said he/she has seen Farden get upset, but that when Farden has gotten upset, it is because the student-athletes are not focused and there is a chance of them getting hurt. The assistant coach said when this happens, Farden brings the whole team to the floor and addresses the issue. In these instances, he does raise his voice and is loud, but the assistant coach has only ever seen him get mad at the whole group. The assistant coach said he/she has never seen Farden engage in a personal attack against a student-athlete. One student-athlete referred to Farden making a student-athlete do additional repetitions of a skill in front of the team following a mistake, but no one else referred to an instance like this.
- Several student-athletes and coaches also recalled two post-meet instances, in 2022 and 2023, when Farden was upset with the team's performance and yelled at the team. Individuals recalled that Farden said things along the lines of "what the f\*\*\* was that," referring to the team's performance. Only one student-athlete said this went further than yelling at the team for losing, and they said Farden was cursing and telling the team it was a horrible effort and that Farden pointed student-athletes out and said it was their fault the team lost. All other interviewees who commented on this instance said Farden spoke to the team as a group and was upset about their poor performance overall. One assistant coach said these were the only two instances that have caused the coach pause related to Farden's communications to student-athletes, and the assistant coach said that Farden said

the performance was unacceptable and out of character for the team. Farden was “angry loud,” but the assistant coach said the words being used were not “harsh or hostile.” Another assistant coach described instances like this occurring two to three times in the past two years but did not characterize these instances as Farden being aggressive towards the student-athletes.

- A student-athlete said that at practice this past fall, Coach Farden told her that if she was not at the University of Utah, she would be a “nobody working at a gas station” in her home state. She said he said this during a conversation in which she was trying to tell him she cannot do gymnastics when he yells at her. Farden said he did communicate with the student-athlete, and he did not deny making the comment as reported by the student-athlete. He said the comment was meant to encourage and motivate her to work hard and take full advantage of the opportunity she had and to not waste the opportunity; he said his comment was not intended to degrade her.
- A former student-athlete (who graduated more than three years ago) said that during her time with the team Farden was often angry, and she said she perceived his yelling to be an intimidation tactic. Similar to some of the statements above, she said Farden would say things like “what the hell do you think you’re doing, get your shit together; I don’t give a fuck what else is going on; get your heads out of your a\*\*es.” She said she felt Farden would attack her character, too, and she gave an example of Farden yelling at her after a grade check and telling her that she was being lazy and wasting the University’s money and that if she couldn’t handle expectations, she could go somewhere else. This former student-athlete said she dealt with some personal issues (unrelated to the Program) and was physically injured during each competition year. She said that Farden told her she was a failure and was not living up to expectations.
- Another former student-athlete said that she was replaced in a lineup, and that when Farden told her about the change, he called her a “lost cause.” She said she didn’t know what that meant, and once she understood what it meant, she believed this was an unfair statement. Farden denied that he has ever called a student-athlete a “lost cause” or “waste of space.” Other student-athletes and parents reported hearing that Farden had used the term “lost cause” towards a student-athlete, but several others had not heard of this occurring. The former student-athlete said she could not speak to Farden because of how often he yelled at her during her last year in the Program. She said he would yell at her one to two times a week, and, over a span of a few months, he would yell corrections constantly about her floor routine. The former student-athlete said she has had tough coaches and was in competitive environments growing up, but she became upset when it got the point that Coach Farden’s critiques felt personal. She said Coach Farden pointed her out personally in lineup (which occurs at the start of practice) five to six times this year. She said Coach Farden has told her that her “communication is terrible,” that she wouldn’t have gotten injured if she’d listened to his advice, and that she needed to “quit bitching.” This student-athlete said Farden would sometimes take music away at practice and would yell at student-athletes at practice, but she said his yelling did not include personal attacks.
- One student-athlete said that Coach Farden used the term “waste of space” towards another student-athlete. The student-athlete alleged involved, however, did not acknowledge that the term was ever used towards her.
- A former student-athlete described a situation when she made a mistake and forgot her grips and Farden made an example of her and embarrassed her. The student-athlete said

that after the meet, Farden yelled about the situation and asked student-athletes to raise their hands if they knew about her grips. Farden recalled this issue and said it is not good practice to use someone else's grips and he mentioned this issue as a general reminder to the team to always be prepared. He said he was not yelling or being aggressive. An assistant coach recalled this circumstance and categorized the interaction as a point of instruction and not alarming or meant to embarrass the former student-athlete.

- Another former student-athlete said Farden would make negative comments to her related to gymnastics such as, "the only thing you will ever be is a specialist," and that "specialists are walk-ons," that she had "horrible form," that she was "flopping on the beam," and that she needed to "get her act together." She said Farden's behavior was confusing and manipulative; she said she did not know what mood she was going to get from him, and it caused her to dread practice and fear making mistakes. The former student athlete said Coach Farden did not make comments to her that were personal and unrelated to gymnastics, except for telling her she was not confident and was not a good communicator. There was one particular instance related to the former student-athlete, in which an assistant coach perceived Coach Farden as being "less tolerant" of this student-athlete making a mistake and pulling her from a lineup; but, the student-athlete earned her lineup spot back after one meet, and even this student-athlete said that Coach Farden did not engage in personal attacks unrelated to gymnastics. And, the Assistant Coach said the decisions were due to her skill level and to avoid injury and the staff member did not observe Farden cross the line into abusive behavior or personal attacks related to this student-athlete.

When asked how he motivates student-athletes, Farden said he is a vocal and energetic coach; he said he is also highly technical. He does not believe he has ever gone too far in being a vocal coach. He said if he does get upset, it is because the team is doing something that could cause them harm. He said he will get upset if he can see injuries coming, but getting "mad" at athletes happens infrequently, and he said he has never been overly aggressive in his response. In terms of yelling or cursing at athletes, Farden said he has yelled to the group that there are "too many people with their heads up their a\*\*es" when he is concerned the team is not focusing and someone is going to get hurt. He said he has made comments to motivate student-athletes and encourage them to refocus, but he said he does not personally target student-athletes. He said some of the student-athletes are mentally and emotionally fragile and said they may interpret certain things as him targeting them personally but that it is never his intention to target them personally.

When asked how he provides feedback to student-athletes who are not performing as expected, he said that feedback often comes "naturally." Outside judges begin coming to practice in October, November and December and depth charts are created based on judge scores and deductions. He said the student-athletes are constantly getting feedback from coaches—coaches provide drills for areas in need of improvement. Farden said he tracks progress through practice notes and reviews notes to ensure that things are moving in a progressive manner for student-athletes.

As for prior reviews and communications from the department, Farden stated there was a prior review in 2020, when some of the student-athletes said he could have a "softer approach." He said he has worked to be better since that time, and he believes he does have a softer approach to coaching now. Farden also said that in 2022, his sport supervisor talked to him about nurturing

the student-athletes and demonstrating a caring attitude towards them to avoid a perception that winning in the gym is all that matters.

Coach Farden said that he provides a “10 Minutes with Tom” meeting opportunity, through which student-athletes can seek additional assistance or discuss issues.

For each of the student-athletes transferring from the team, Farden said he could see their personal perspective and frustration as it related to their own injuries or performance, but he believes he supported them, was there for them, and helped them with numerous personal issues over the years. Coach Farden provided several text messages that he said show support for the former student-athletes. Assistant coaches provided reasons they believe contributed to each of the individual transfer student’s decision to leave the Program—these factors included issues related to injuries and opportunities to compete, and none of the coaches observed treatment by Farden towards the student-athletes that was verbally abusive or crossed a line from technical coaching into personal attacks. An assistant coach said the assistant coach has never heard Farden belittle a student-athlete or say anything out of line that was too intense or harsh. An assistant coach said Farden can appear to be disingenuous because of competitiveness and a focus on winning, but from the assistant coach’s perspective Farden does care deeply about the people in the Program.

None of the assistant coaches said that they had received any complaints from student-athletes about treatment by Farden. One assistant coach commented that some of the student-athletes require more positive encouragement and respond more favorably to less direct corrections regarding their performance. The assistant coach said, though, while there may be differences in the type of communication that student-athletes respond best to, he/she has never observed Farden engage in personal attacks towards a student-athlete. The assistant coach said he/she would not still be at Utah if it was not a safe place where the student-athletes were supported. The assistant coach said he/she has high-standards in that regard and there are good supports for the student-athletes, and the student-athletes are taken care of.

Importantly, assistant coaches confirmed that trainings are conducted jointly, and, although each coach focuses on training for particular events, assistant coaches are routinely present for practices with Coach Farden and the student-athletes. One assistant coach said the assistant coach has not observed anything that the assistant coach would need to call attention to related to Farden’s interactions with student-athletes. The assistant coach said the assistant coach has been around coaches whose interactions were not positive, and around coaches who always point out the negative aspects and are not about trying to help improve the athletes. The assistant coach said Farden is not that and is “quite the opposite.” The assistant coach said from the assistant coach’s experience, Farden is always trying to help. The assistant coach has never heard him lose his temper, and the assistant coach has not heard him communicate to a student-athlete in a way that crossed the line into what they would consider abusive coaching. The assistant coach has not seen him single a student-athlete out or heard him make comments directed toward a student-athlete as a person as opposed to about their performance. The assistant coach said he/she does not want to minimize other’s experience if they allege to have experienced certain treatment, but the assistant coach has not observed Farden engage in personal attacks towards student-athletes.

When asked what can be improved upon, an assistant coach described this as an era of parent involvement; the assistant coach said parents want to be involved, but Farden has put them at arms-length in an effort to promote independence. The assistant coach said some parents perceive the distance they feel from the Program as negative, and they feel the Program is trying to isolate their student-athlete from them. The assistant coach thinks this can be improved upon by “inviting them in.”

Staff members described Farden as “intense” and “animated,” but did not report observing anything concerning related to Farden’s communications to student-athletes. One former staff member said that staff and student-athletes tiptoed and walked on eggshells around Coach Farden because of the expectations placed on everyone to be the best at all times. The staff member said that if someone was below expectations, Coach Farden would verbalize it to them directly, but the staff member never heard Farden give feedback in a way that appeared to be an attack on a person’s character.

For student-athletes who have been on the Women’s Gymnastics Team for multiple years, the consensus was generally that Coach Farden was “harder” on them two or three years ago, but he has “settled down” and become “calmer” now. One student-athlete said that a few years ago Farden “boiled over pretty fast” when student-athletes did not perform well. She said he would “get a little mad and maybe raise his voice,” but was more “mellow” now. Current student-athletes used terms like “direct...intense...passionate...blunt...detailed...and thorough” to describe Farden. One student-athlete said he is “stern” but in the sense that he “wants you to be your best self.” One student-athlete described Farden’s style as “joking around” and “having fun,” but toward the end of the season, when he starts to feel stress or pressure, he is less playful, and you can sense the “tension” if he is stressed or upset.

## **2. Alleged Negative Treatment Towards Particular Student-Athletes**

A former student-athlete said that, during her time on the team, Coach Farden identified a student-athlete who was struggling each year and targeted that student-athlete with negative treatment—as for the rationale for this treatment, the student-athlete speculated it was either to show his authority over the student-athletes or to be able to take the student-athlete’s scholarship, the latter of which is discussed in more detail in the scholarship section of this report. This issue was described in the internal summary of allegations as Farden identifying a “vulnerable” student-athlete and “picking on” or “punishing” them. One current student-athlete and four former student-athletes reported experiencing negative treatment from Coach Farden that they perceived to be targeted towards them when they were struggling athletically. Other than these five student-athletes, no other student-athletes reported observing Coach Farden target particular student-athletes with negative treatment. Among the current and former staff members, only one former staff member commented on observing some situations in which the coaching staff would ignore or not coach student-athletes, and, in the former staff member’s opinion, this typically related to instances when student-athletes were unable to participate due to injuries.

One former student-athlete, who was with the program for two years and left over four years ago, said that she felt Farden did not have any intent to coach her once there were freshman students who came in that were better than her. She said other student-athletes got “higher priority” and

she was “left in the dust” and did not receive instruction or correction. She said she received the “silent treatment,” and Farden was focusing on those who were competing, and she was ignored. This student-athlete said she felt Coach Farden stopped engaging with her because of a decline in her skills, but also because of personal issues she was experiencing. She said that Coach Farden and the other head coach at the time required her to tell the team about personal issues she was experiencing, to explain that she was being affected by issues outside of gymnastics.

Several student-athletes who communicated concerns about treatment they experienced from Coach Farden shared personal, sensitive information related to challenges they experienced during their time with the Program, the details of which are intentionally not included in this report to protect confidentiality. Some of these student-athletes commented that personal challenges occurred during their participation in the Program and some attributed these challenges, in part, to treatment they received from Farden.

Several student-athletes said they have not seen Farden ignore or target individuals with negative treatment. Multiple student-athletes commented that a student-athlete’s relationship with the coaches depends on the student-athlete’s willingness to communicate with the coaches. One student-athlete said that some student-athletes are not willing to have conversations with the coaches about what they need to do to be in the lineup, and instead view not making lineups as the coaches not liking them. One student-athlete said it was a “learning experience” her freshman year about how to communicate with Farden, but since then, Farden has been “very sweet,” “respectful,” and “caring.” Another student-athlete said she observed that some student-athletes thought Farden was mad at them or ignoring them last year, but she felt this was due to the student-athlete being unwilling to communicate with Farden, rather than Farden ignoring them.

Farden said student-athletes come to the program having performed at a very high level and when they struggle performance-wise that can be very frustrating for them. Farden said that the perception of student-athletes who are struggling performance-wise and who are injured and those who do not get to compete is naturally different from those who are not struggling and who are competing. As for whether he may have provided less opportunity to be coached to former student-athletes, he said he believes in opportunity and believes it is his job to push the student-athletes to develop and reach their potential. It helps the program and the individual student-athlete to continue to give every student-athlete the opportunity to improve. Farden denied that former student-athletes who left the Program did not continue to get opportunities to be coached and to improve.

### **3. Different Treatment Towards Groups of Athletes**

Consistent with the allegations summarized during the internal review, some former student-athletes and two former staff members described Farden treating “Elite” and “Junior Olympic” athletes differently. Two former staff members said certain student-athletes were held to a higher standard, and that coaches allowed more leniency toward the Olympic athletes. A former staff member said that the general demeanor of Coach Farden was more positive to those who were performing well and coaches were more lenient with well-performing athletes. One former student-athlete described a culture in which the elite student-athletes get most of the attention and coaches are “standoffish” towards junior Olympic athletes. One former student-athlete said the

student-athletes who are not frontrunners are left behind, and another described there being a “team of two halves.”

A former student-athlete said she perceived Farden was “overly hard on her.” If she made a “tiny” mistake, he would ask what she was doing in a rude voice. She gave an example, saying she was “kicked off bars” when she safely fell on her back, in contrast to another student-athlete who was coddled after falling on bars more times. Another former student-athlete said some people were more prone to being yelled at by Farden or him being mad at them but there were some student-athletes who were never yelled at in four years. In addition, a current student-athlete said she was treated differently by Coach Farden, and that he had “favorites” who he coddled, and another current student-athlete said she thought Coach Farden treated a particular former student-athlete differently than others.

With the exception of these two student-athletes, however, no other student-athlete from the 2022-23 Team said they perceived a difference in treatment that was not a difference based on skill level. For example, one student-athlete said some Elite gymnasts are not given as many corrections as others, but she attributed this to the student-athletes having their skills honed and not requiring as many corrections. Also, two current student-athletes said individuals can perceive that there are “favorites” when there are lineup changes, but, in describing one particular lineup change, one student-athlete said it was the best decision for the team.

#### **4. Analysis of Coaching Style and Communications**

With respect to treatment by Coach Farden, student-athletes provided various perspectives about Farden’s coaching style and particular conduct related to communicating with student-athletes about athletic performance.

##### *Verbal Communications to Student-Athletes*

As identified in the Athletics’ Well Being Policy, coaches and student-athletes constantly engage in verbal interactions, and the Policy states that it is the coach’s responsibility to use interactions for “instructional and motivational” purposes. The forms of emotional and verbal abuse under the policy include: excessively...singling out a student-athlete through negative interactions, using degrading language, devaluing a person, and isolating a student-athlete by ignoring them. As for the SafeSport Code definitions, verbal acts of emotional misconduct include “repeatedly and excessively verbally assaulting or attacking someone personally in a manner that serves no productive training or motivational purpose.” The definitions also included harassment as prohibited conduct.

Many student-athletes described Coach Farden as a “yeller” and passionate, and several student-athletes and assistant coaches provided information about two post-meet instances in which Coach Farden yelled at the team related to their performance. While one student-athlete said student-athletes were identified as contributing to the team’s loss in one of these instances, we did not receive other reports related to this instance sufficient to make a finding related to Coach Farden’s actions under the Policy. Other yelling referred to by Coach Farden at practice was generally described as directed towards the whole team—and done in reaction to concern about student-

athlete focus and potential injuries—and student-athletes and coaches did not state that these instances included personal attacks towards student-athletes.

There were also allegations that Coach Farden made negative comments to certain student-athletes. These comments included comments that were alleged to be degrading in the language used and having the effect of devaluing a particular student-athlete, which would violate the Athletics' Well Being Policy. The Athletics' Well Being Policy sets a standard for coaches, and pursuant to Policy 7.6, Emotional or Verbal Abuse, and even a single incident could be determined to violate the Athletics' Well Being Policy, whereas the SafeSport Code defines verbal acts of emotional misconduct as "repeatedly and excessively verbally assaulting or attacking someone personally" and defines harassment as conduct that is "repeated or severe." One of the statements, that a student-athlete would be a "nobody working at a gas station" in her home state, was admitted to by Coach Farden. This was an isolated statement to this student-athlete and therefore did not violate SafeSport Code. However, we find that this did violate the Athletics' Well Being Policy 7.6, based on the fact that it was degrading language toward a student-athlete. With respect to other alleged comments by Coach Farden, the investigation did not find sufficient evidence to conclude that Coach Farden called a student-athlete a lost cause or a waste of space. We note that if these statements had been sufficiently corroborated, they could have also been determined to be violations of the Athletics' Well Being Policy. With respect to the SafeSport Code definitions, the investigation did not result in evidence to conclude that Coach Farden "repeatedly and excessively" verbally attacked individual student-athletes.

#### *Alleged Negative Treatment Towards Particular Student-Athletes and Different Treatment Towards Groups of Athletes*

While most student-athletes were favorable in their assessment of Farden as coach, some described him as being intentionally distant from them. It is difficult to analyze individual statements about feelings of isolation without explicit actions directly tied to exclusions (such as removing or excluding individual student-athletes from practice). And, some of the student-athletes who articulated this belief were facing individual challenges that could have affected their perceptions and overall satisfaction related to the team (e.g., injuries, personal circumstances). While we did not make particular findings about instances of treatment that rose to the level of a Policy violation related to negative, targeted treatment or isolation of student-athletes, at a minimum, the review included statements from former student-athletes that reflected a perception that they were ignored by Farden and not coached by him.

Some former student-athletes and some current student-athletes stated that Farden had "favorite" student-athletes from year to year, and that Farden would coach these student-athletes differently, for example, providing them more leeway to make mistakes. The majority of student-athletes who participated on the 2022-23 team agreed that it is an appropriate function for the coach to pay more attention to high-performing athletes who have more competition opportunities. However, the information shared by some student-athletes about "feeling" isolated, is concerning and should be monitored by the University. That said, other than the individual student-athletes' impressions, there were not objective reports or corroboration by coaches or staff that specific student-athletes were intentionally excluded by Coach Farden without a legitimate athletics purpose. As such, we do not find the assertions by some individual student-athletes meet the SafeSport definition of

Emotional Misconduct related to Acts that deny Attention or Support, nor is there objective evidence to indicate that a student-athlete was isolated by Coach Farden in violation of Athletics' Well Being Policy 7.6.

## **ii. Physical Conduct**

There were no allegations that Coach Farden physically abused any student-athletes.

There were three specific incidents that were communicated by student-athletes and are set forth below related to Coach Farden throwing objects in anger. First, it should be noted that members of the coaching staff are present at most training sessions with Coach Farden, and no one on the current coaching staff, and no former coach or staff member, reported seeing Farden throw anything at a student-athlete. One assistant coach noted that if Farden had thrown something at a student-athlete, the assistant coach would have reported it immediately. One former staff member recalled that Farden threw chalk out of frustration.

For his part, Farden said he has never thrown any object at or towards a student-athlete and that he has never thrown anything in anger.

### **1. Throwing a Stopwatch and Clipboard**

Four student-athletes reported that Farden threw a stopwatch because he was frustrated that a student-athlete climbing the rope was not meeting the expectation related to timing to complete the rope climb. Three of the student-athletes believed the watch was thrown in the student-athlete's direction, but not directly at the student-athlete, and one student-athlete stated that the stopwatch was not thrown near the student-athlete. Two of the four student-athletes also reported that a clipboard was thrown by Coach Farden in the direction of the same student-athlete out of frustration. The student-athlete allegedly involved in the incident declined to participate in the review.

Farden denied ever throwing a stopwatch, clipboard or any other object.

### **2. Throwing a Phone**

Seven student-athletes reported that Farden took a student-athlete's phone, which was plugged into a speaker playing music, and threw it on the ground because he wanted to turn the music off. The majority of student-athletes noted that if they are having a bad practice, or not focused, Farden would turn the music off during the practice.

Farden denied unplugging a phone and throwing it on the ground.

### **3. Throwing a Bar Scraper**

While multiple witnesses recalled an instance in which a student-athlete and Coach Farden were assisting with bar scraping and Coach Farden threw the bar scraper, there were varying and inconsistent statements about the particulars of the situation.

The involved student-athlete said the team was having a practice day for an upcoming meet, and her job was to scrape the bars with the bar scraper, which is a toilet brush taped to a stick of wood. She said Farden grabbed the bar from her and threw it at her and she had to turn her head to keep it from hitting her head.

Another student-athlete said Farden asked the involved student-athlete for the scraper (because it was taking too long). She said that “out of stress,” Farden scraped the bar, said thank you, and then “chucked the scraper into oblivion,” which hit the student-athlete. She said the scraper was catchable, but the other student-athlete was not paying attention. The student-athlete said the involved student-athlete was right where the bar scraper normally sits and was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Yet another student-athlete, who witnessed the event, said Coach Farden tossed the scraper back to the involved student-athlete, but the student-athlete was not paying attention. She said Farden did not throw it to hurt the student-athlete, but rather it was “panic mode,” like here is the scraper if anyone needs it. Another student-athlete who also witnessed the event, said the involved student-athlete went to catch the bar scraper when Coach Farden threw it back to her but did not do so.

Those who did not witness the incident, but heard about it second-hand, similarly described a personal belief that Coach Farden did not have any ill intent in throwing or tossing the bar scraper.

Farden acknowledged this circumstance and said this story has “ballooned”—he recalled scraping the bar and underhand tossing the bar scraper to the student-athlete. He said this occurred at an event where there were many people in the audience who would have observed if he had thrown something at a student-athlete. He said the student-athlete was laughing about the incident afterwards.

### **4. Analysis of Physical Conduct**

The University’s Well-Being Policy, Section 7.5 prohibits physical abuse of athletes. The Policy contemplates serious acts of inappropriate or frequent unnecessary touching. The examples of common forms of physical abuse included in the Policy are much more serious than what is alleged here. Notably, no one we interviewed alleged, witnessed, or heard that Coach Farden physically abused a student-athlete.

Likewise, the SafeSport Code defines physical misconduct as “any intentional contact or non-contact behavior that causes, or reasonably threatens to cause, physical harm to another person.” It defines emotional misconduct to include physical acts that are “repeated or severe physically aggressive behaviors” such as “throwing sport equipment, water bottles or chairs at or in the

presence of others.” Emotional misconduct is determined by the objective behaviors, not whether harm is intended or results from the behavior.

These three isolated incidents do not rise to the level of physical or emotional misconduct as defined by the Athletics’ Well Being Policy or SafeSport Code. With respect to the stopwatch/clipboard and phone incidents we find based on multiple independent statements by student-athletes that the incidents more likely than not occurred as reported, and that such actions do not appear on their face in these isolated circumstances to threaten the safety and well-being of the student-athletes. With respect to the bar scraper incident, we do not find that Coach Farden engaged in any conduct that was contrary to the Athletics’ Well Being Policy or SafeSport Code.

### **iii. Injuries**

#### **1. Handling of Injuries**

*General treatment/Pushing athletes to return v. being conservative with injuries.*

During the course of the review, information was provided about three student-athletes who were potentially pressured to return from injuries:

- One student athlete stated that when she had an injury Coach Farden did not believe she had an injury and yelled at her in his office. With respect to coming back from this injury, however, she said that she did not feel pressure from the coaching staff to return, but she put pressure on herself to return to competition. Staff provided background information related to this incident, including concerns from staff about the accuracy of the diagnosis related to the student. Staff said Farden questioned the diagnosis, but that the student-athlete did not go back until she was ready. The involved student-athlete also said that while Coach Farden did not at first believe that the injury had occurred, she did not return to practice or competition until she was ready to do so.
- Student-athletes also referred to another student-athlete who appeared to be in pain following a return, speculating that she may have been pressured to return. But, for her own part, she said when she was injured, the coaches were supportive and told her to return when she felt comfortable. She said that she did not feel pressured to return, but rather, was pushing herself to get back to compete.
- Another former student-athlete shared that she felt pressured to return after she had surgery. She said that the athletic trainer had to make a written plan for her to make sure that she did not do too much. She said that Coach Farden would ask her how long it was going to take until she could tumble. The student-athlete said that this was written on the paper, and Coach Farden asking about it made her feel like she was going too slow and that she was going to miss her chance to be in the lineup if she did not “hurry” to get back. This student-athlete’s parent was also concerned that Coach Farden made her daughter compete before she was ready after she had surgery. She said that in another instance, when her daughter was coming back from an injury, Coach Farden told her that her teammates did not have confidence in her being in the lineup and “when you’re done feeling sorry for yourself, go support your teammates.”

Generally, staff and former coaches were not aware of and had not heard about Farden allegedly pressuring student-athletes to return from injuries before they were ready. One former student-athlete reported that how coaches react when a student-athlete is injured depends on the student-athlete, but no former student-athletes expressed concerns with pushing student-athletes to return from injuries.

Current student-athletes described Farden as being cautious or conservative with injuries and some commented specifically that Farden is good with injury management; this was consistent with information previously collected during the 2020 assessment, in which student-athletes reported that coaches are very cautious about injuries and supportive of student-athletes taking time to heal. Another student-athlete said Farden does a good job listening to the student-athletes; she said that she had not seen coaches push student-athletes to compete before they were ready. Eight of the twelve student-athletes explicitly said that they were not aware of coaches pressuring student-athletes to return from an injury and if they were injured they did not feel pressure from coaching staff to return.

A former athletic trainer said that she believed that Coach Farden pushed one student-athlete to get back to an event after she had surgery. She said that it took getting a doctor involved to tell Coach Farden that the student-athlete was not cleared for the event, and she had to medically retire the event for Coach Farden to accept it.

The former trainer's perspective is contradictory to the current coaching staff who described Coach Farden as being "cautious" and not letting student-athletes come back sooner than they should. One staff member noted that Coach Farden can be "urgent" once a student-athlete is cleared, but Coach Farden would never push a training before a student-athlete was cleared.

Those interviewed also commented on how student-athletes are treated when they are injured. One student-athlete stated that if a student-athlete is out with a season-ending injury, the coaches are not as focused on that student-athlete during the season. While some decreased level of interaction related to training would be expected, it was viewed as problematic by one student-athlete. One former student-athlete stated that the coaches treat Elite gymnasts and Junior Olympic gymnasts differently when they are injured. She stated that while she was injured during her sophomore year, Coach Farden did not talk to her until she was able to do a little bit of gymnastics.

A former athletic trainer described a situation with a student-athlete who had a lot of "little injuries." She said that the student-athlete was terrified for Coach Farden to find out about her injuries. She also observed that Coach Farden was more "lenient" with Elite gymnasts returning from injuries and more willing to give them more time to get back than he was with Junior Olympic gymnasts.

Coach Farden said that when student-athletes are injured, he tries to protect them as much as possible. Coach Farden said that no one on his staff has pressured student-athletes to return to practice or competition when injured.

### *Relationship/communications with medical or training staff*

Individuals interviewed also commented on Coach Farden's relationship with the athletic training staff and his interactions with them related to student-athlete injuries. Student-athletes generally felt as though Coach Farden listened to recommendations from the athletic trainer.

Student-athletes shared that the athletic trainer has a say in everything, including at what pace student-athletes should come back. One staff member noted that this past year, there was some discrepancy between what the trainer said and what the coaches thought, but ultimately, the coaches deferred to the trainer. Student-athletes described a negative professional relationship between Coach Farden and a former athletic trainer. Coaching staff shared that Coach Farden did not trust the trainer, resulting in tension between the two. Coach Farden reported three examples of misdiagnosis from a former athletic trainer. He said that the coaching staff felt like the athletic trainer was not working together with them. However, Coach Farden stated he listens to the medical staff's advice on how to bring the student-athletes back from injuries.

A former athletic trainer also confirmed that Coach Farden did not interfere with her judgments related to student-athletes. She said that Coach Farden would sometimes question whether injuries were legitimate or not, but he never went against her recommendations. The former athletic trainer said that coaches did not push student-athletes to do things that she said they could not do.

## **2. Medical Retirements**

During the internal review, it was reported that Coach Farden pressured injured student-athletes to end their athletic careers and medically disqualify when not medically necessary. Supervisors have also communicated to Farden that the culture of the team is impacted by the perception that Coach Farden has an influence on medical issues. We gathered information related to student-athletes medically retiring or allegedly being pressured to do so by Coach Farden.

Ultimately, no one reported that there were any student-athletes who medically retired against their will. No current gymnastics coaches or other current staff said that Coach Farden pressured student-athletes to medically retire from gymnastics.

With respect to pressuring student-athletes to medically retire, one current and three former student-athletes shared that Coach Farden wanted them to medically retire, from gymnastics or from a specific event, after they were injured.<sup>8</sup> In these situations the student-athletes felt as if they were being pressured to medically retire so that Coach Farden could take their scholarship and give it to another student-athlete.

One student-athlete said she was out for a year with an injury, and Coach Farden told her she could have a student manager position, medically retire or transfer. The student-athlete said her parents became involved and that she ultimately kept her scholarship.

---

<sup>8</sup> Note, the concept of medically retiring from an event is not codified in the NCAA rules but rather appears to be a gymnastics specific method for athletes to be healthy to compete in a certain event. To be clear, NCAA rules do not prohibit an individual from "medically retiring" from an event but rather the concept of medical retirement defined by the NCAA relates to the total medical inability to compete in a sport.

A former student-athlete said that the athletic trainer told her that Coach Farden wanted her to medically retire from an event, but the athletic trainer did not think she needed that. The student-athlete said that the next day, she was told she could not train on that event.

Another former student-athlete who transferred from the team said that after Coach Farden discussed medical retirement with her, he made her sign a contract outlining specific performance expectations. She said her understanding was that if she did not hit her progressions, her scholarship would be in jeopardy.

Another former student-athlete, who was injured during her freshman year but still competed, stated that Coach Farden raised the issue of medical retirement before medical staff did, but that she ultimately medically retired the following year. The student-athlete, however, said that she had no concerns with how her injuries were treated and the medical treatment staff had her best interest at heart and supported her through the process. This student-athlete's parent shared that Coach Farden wanted her daughter to medically retire, and as parents, they felt like they were never asked what should happen with respect to their daughter's injury; rather, they were just told what was happening and went along with it.

A former athletic trainer said that Coach Farden presented the idea to her for a student-athlete to medically retire, but that is not his job or his call; it is up to the student-athlete and the doctor. She said that a lot of student-athletes were worried that if they got injured, they would lose their scholarship.

The former athletic trainer said that Coach Farden was quick to discuss medical retirement with student athletes. She provided numerous examples of Coach Farden wanting student-athletes to medically retire.

- A student-athlete was not progressing the way they wanted, and Coach Farden jumped to wanting to the student-athlete to medically retire. The former athletic trainer said that Coach Farden told the student-athlete and her family that if she did not make progress, he would not have a scholarship for her the following year, or she could choose to medically retire.
- A student-athlete had multiple injuries, and after each one, Coach Farden talked to her about considering medical retirement. Coach Farden told her he would medically retire her after an injury and said, "get your shit together, or you're out." Coach Farden did the same thing with another student-athlete after an injury—he told her they needed to get her back to the skills she had before, or there was no reason for her to be there.
- A student-athlete ended up medically retiring on her own, but the threat was there before that—if she could not get back to the level they had recruited her at, then she would not have her scholarship renewed.

Coach Farden stated that an involved student-athlete who retired and then remained on athletics scholarship for a period of time was not forced to medically retire, and it does not benefit the team to have someone medically retire. He said that if there are overfilled scholarships, then it becomes a benefit, but that situation has never happened.

### **3. Analysis of Handling of Injuries and Medical Retirements**

Some student-athletes said that they felt pressured to return from injuries, while others said that Coach Farden was conservative with injuries and concerned about the student-athletes' well-being. A former staff member felt that Coach Farden needed a doctor to tell him the student-athlete was not cleared for Coach Farden to accept the student-athlete was not ready to return from her injury; however, the former staff member did not allege Coach Farden disagreed with or did not follow the physician's instructions. Coach Farden said that he listens to the medical staff's advice on how to bring student-athletes back from injuries and has not pressured student-athletes to return when injured. It is clear from the evidence that the coaching staff questioned the accuracy of the former athletic trainer's advice. However, we did not find objective evidence that Coach Farden pressured a student-athlete to return from an injury against medical advice or interfered with a student-athlete's return from injury.

The University's Well-Being Policy, Section 7.3, obliges coaches to follow the instructions of a medical physician with regard to an athlete's return to competition or practice following an injury. The SafeSport Code prohibits physical misconduct, which includes "encouraging or knowingly permitting an Athlete to return to play prematurely following a serious injury (e.g., concussion) and without the clearance of a medical professional." We do not find that Farden violated the Athletics' Well Being Policy or SafeSport Code related to student-athletes' injuries.

The anecdotal evidence regarding how some student-athletes "felt" about returning from an injury—while important to overall student-athlete experience—is not sufficient to support a finding that Coach Farden inappropriately pressured student-athletes to return from injuries or disregarded medical advice.

The Athletics' Well Being Policy and SafeSport Code address pressuring athletes to return to competition in contradiction to medical advice, but do not address communications and decisions related to medical retirements. The decision to medically retire can be a complicated one but does ultimately require determinations from medical professionals about student-athletes' medical limitations. The investigation included evidence that, in one instance, Coach Farden's discussions with a student-athlete about medical retirement were elevated to administration in order to reach a resolution and the issue did not result in the student-athlete medically retiring. Other than this instance, while individuals reported information about Coach Farden discussing medical retirements with student-athletes, no current coaching or other staff provided information about Coach Farden pressuring student-athletes to medically retire. We did not find sufficient corroborating evidence to conclude that Coach Farden pressured student-athletes to medically retire.

#### **iv. Nutrition**

During the Student-Athlete Advocate's review of the Women's Gymnastics Program, current student-athletes, former student-athletes, and parents raised concerns regarding nutrition. Four student-athletes discussed Farden not allowing the team to eat mashed potatoes during a road trip in 2023. One student-athlete said that Farden removes complimentary bread from the table at restaurants. One parent of a former-student athlete noted that Farden would not allow student-

athletes to use sides or dressings at team dinners. Two current and one former student-athlete shared that Farden made comments about student-athletes' body image or not being in shape.

### **1. Body Image/Conditioning**

Some former student-athletes said that Coach Farden made comments about student-athletes' bodies and required student-athletes to engage in extra conditioning. None of the current student-athletes reported hearing coaches negatively comment on body image, weight, or food choices.

One former student-athlete shared that during the 2022-23 season, when the team had visitors in the gym, Farden told the visitors that the student-athletes were gaining weight and "didn't look fit."<sup>9</sup> She also said that there were times when student-athletes had to go on cardio plans, indirectly from the coaches, and referred to two specific student-athletes. When we spoke to these student-athletes, however, they did not report being on plans. Another student-athlete who was purportedly told she needed to lose weight said she never heard of the coaches proposing a diet or suggesting extra conditioning.

One former student-athlete said that Farden told her she was out-of-shape, resulting in her pushing herself in workouts to the point where she felt like she was going to throw up.

Ten of the twelve current student-athletes specifically said that they did not hear any comments related to body image, weight, or food choices. One student-athlete said that Farden brags about how fit the team is compared to other teams.

No current or former staff members reported hearing Coach Farden or another coach make comments about student-athlete body image or weight. One gymnastics staff member said that for freshmen who "don't know how to adjust," they will refer them to the nutritionist, but it is not about "shaming their body."

Coach Farden stated that neither he nor a member of the coaching staff has proposed a diet or nutrition to a student-athlete.

### **2. Food Issues**

During the Student-Athlete Advocate's 2023 review, multiple student-athletes identified one particular instance where potatoes were withheld from student-athletes while eating out at a restaurant while at the Arizona State University meet, and one parent brought up that Coach Farden withheld bread from student-athletes.

During our interviews, we asked individuals whether coaches withheld food from student-athletes. No former student-athletes, former staff, or current non-gymnastics staff members were aware of any instances when food was withheld from student-athletes by the coaching staff. One student-athlete said that Farden withholding food or not ensuring the student-athletes had a carb at a meal occurred multiple times.

---

<sup>9</sup> None of the current student-athletes recalled this instance.

The Executive Director of Nutrition said that coaches make sure there is food in the locker room post-meets when the facility is closed. She has never heard coaches say that student-athletes should not eat certain things.

From the information provided by the student-athletes, coaching staff, and the Executive Director of Nutrition, we understand that the team typically gets a preset menu to fill out before a meet indicating their meal selections for restaurants. The Executive Director of Nutrition said that the menu selection options are designed to supply healthy nutrients that student-athletes need.

With respect to the incident that occurred at the restaurant at the Arizona State University meet, student-athletes shared that the waiter told them that the side was supposed to be potatoes, but that potatoes were “withheld.” It is unclear whether the waiter told the student-athletes that the coaches told the restaurant they could not have potatoes with their meal.

Members of the Women’s Gymnastics Leadership Council brought up this incident to the coaches, and the issue did not come up again. One student-athlete said that the team brought it up to the nutritionist, who spoke with the coaches to tell them that they cannot switch out what student-athletes order for meals. The Executive Director of Nutrition shared that she heard about the incident with potatoes being withheld at the Arizona State University meet after it occurred, and they made adjustments as a result. The Executive Director of Nutrition did not know whether the directive to withhold potatoes came from Coach Farden, but she believes it was a “lapse.” The Executive Director of Nutrition said that she instructed the Women’s Gymnastics Director of Operations that variety was needed, and it was never an issue again.

No other staff members were aware of student-athletes being deprived of or complaining about food choices.

We requested information from the athletics department regarding past reports of issues from Women’s Gymnastics student-athletes. We reviewed the reports provided, and none of the reports related to concerns about nutrition services provided to student-athletes or coaches comments or interference with student-athlete nutrition.

### **3. Analysis of Nutrition Issues**

The University’s Well-Being Policy, Section 7.4, states that “coaches may only require that athletes take part in instructional and conditioning physical activities during practices or contests that are relevant to the sport and meet conditioning and safety guidelines established by sports medicine authorities.” The SafeSport Code prohibits physical misconduct, which includes “withholding, recommending against, or denying adequate hydration, nutrition, medical attention, or sleep.”

Student-athletes alleged that Coach Farden commented on student-athletes’ body image or not being in shape and required student-athletes to go on cardio plans. On the other hand, one student-athlete said Coach Farden brags about the fitness of the team. No current or former staff members witnessed Coach Farden comment on a student-athlete’s body image or food choices or require extra conditioning. Coach Farden said that he has not proposed a diet or nutrition to student-

athletes or required student-athletes to do extra conditioning. Based on the information provided, there is insufficient evidence to find that Coach Farden violated the Athletics' Well Being Policy or the SafeSport Code related to nutritional issues.

As noted above, several student-athletes talked about one incident that occurred during the 2023 season, where student-athletes were not given potatoes with their meal while at a restaurant during an away meet. We gathered information about team meals and the processes for ensuring student-athletes have adequate nutrition and snacks while traveling. Based on the information gathered, the University's practice appears to be in line with other institutions with respect to having a dedicated person for nutrition and working with the Director of Operations to ensure that student-athletes' nutritional needs are met. Our review did not find anything concerning with respect to team meals provided to student-athletes.

### **c. Scholarships**

#### **i. NCAA and Pac-12 Rules**

NCAA Division I rules permit, but do not require, institutions to award multi-year scholarships to student-athletes. An institution cannot award a scholarship for less than one year, or for a period that would exceed the student-athlete's five-years of eligibility (a student-athlete must complete four seasons of competition within a five-year period, commonly known as the five-year clock). With respect to multi-year athletics scholarships, it is also consistent with NCAA rules to award a four-year scholarship where an athlete receives aid in only one of the four years or a combination of one or two years.<sup>10</sup> In addition, multi-year athletics scholarships can be increased at any time during the period of award even for athletics reasons.<sup>11</sup> Oftentimes such staggered awards are utilized in "equivalency" sports where the program can divide portions of full scholarships to multiple athletes. Women's Gymnastics, however, is a "head count" sport meaning that it must award full scholarships and not portions of scholarships to its student-athletes. NCAA rules permit institutions to award twelve (12) Women's Gymnastics scholarships annually.

On October 27, 2014, the Pac-12 issued press releases that among other items related to student-athlete well-being and stated that Pac-12 schools agreed to Conference rules that "guaranteed four-

---

<sup>10</sup> NCAA rules allow multi-year agreements; and, it is permissible for a multiyear financial aid agreement to "stipulate that no athletically related financial aid will be provided in one or more academic years after the first academic year in which athletically related aid is provided, including the final year of the award (e.g., 50 percent in year one, zero percent in year two, 50 percent in year three; 50 percent in year one, zero percent in year two, zero percent in year three)." See July 23, 2015, Interpretation, Multiyear Aid Agreements May Include One or More Years of No Athletically Related Financial Aid (I).

<sup>11</sup> Per a January 24, 2012, NCAA educational column related to multi-year agreements, an athletics grant-in-aid may be increased after it is awarded at any time and for any reason, including an athletics reason. An institution is not, however, permitted to include athletically related conditions in the financial aid agreement that would allow the institution to increase the student-athlete's aid during the period of the award, as such conditions are inconsistent with the collegiate model. However, if a student-athlete performs well during a given year (or throughout the period of the award) and athletics aid is available, an institution may increase a student-athlete's award, provided the student-athlete has not exceeded his or her individual limit and such an increase does not cause the institution to exceed its team limits in the applicable sport. See NCAA Bylaw 15.3.6 Increase Permitted; p. 1 of January 24, 2012, Educational Column, Proposal No. 2011-97 Financial Aid – Eligibility for Institutional Financial Aid – Former Student-Athletes; Period of Institutional Financial Aid Award – Multiyear Grants-in-Aid (I).

year athletics scholarships.”<sup>12</sup> Specifically, the press release went on to state, “The Conference’s new rules apply to Pac-12 student-athletes across all sports, and include: ...Athletic scholarships will be guaranteed for four years for student-athletes in all sports...” While the press release suggested that student-athletes at Pac-12 institutions would receive full scholarships for four-years, the practice and interpretation from the Pac-12, was instead consistent with NCAA rules related to multi-year agreements discussed above. Recent communication from the Pac-12 Conference Office to the University’s athletics compliance administrator confirmed as follows:

Years ago, the conference office set a rule saying that in order to provide a multi-year agreement, a school had to provide aid in the first year and last year, at a minimum. This was more onerous than NCAA legislation. We lived with it for a couple of years but our schools voted to get rid of it and simply defer to NCAA legislation for multi-year aid agreements.

Therefore, the practice over the past four-years in women’s Gymnastics, and other sports at the University, is to award athletics scholarship consistent with NCAA rules. Many student-athletes therefore are not guaranteed four-year scholarships, including most Women’s Gymnastics student-athletes.

## **ii. Women’s Gymnastics Athletes Scholarship Practices**

The Women’s Gymnastics Team has averaged approximately fourteen (14) student-athletes over the past four (2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23) academic years. Therefore, inherently there will be at least two student-athletes who will not be permitted pursuant to NCAA rules to receive athletics scholarships. During the 2022-23 academic year, only four of the twelve permissible scholarship student-athletes received multi-year awards for four years. The majority of the other student-athletes had agreed to a multi-year scholarship that was 100% in the first year only, or a combination of years with some years being agreed to be 0%. Because an institution can increase athletics aid awards at any time, the practice has been for athletics scholarships to be awarded, i.e., increased from 0% to 100% in subsequent years at the head coach’s discretion. This is not an uncommon practice in NCAA Division I Women’s Gymnastics or other sports.

Coach Farden reported that athletics scholarship offers depend upon the individual prospective student-athlete and could be one, two or four-year scholarships. Student-athletes with multi-year agreements that are 100% for four-consecutive years are typically Olympic-level athletes. Some student-athletes will receive a multi-year athletics scholarship that is for one-year, e.g., 100% - 0% - 0% - 0%. In these situations, a student-athlete’s athletics scholarship is increased each subsequent season at Farden’s discretion to an additional full or 100% athletics scholarship. Farden, like many other sports coaches, may permissibly take athletics performance or other factors into account because the athletes have initially agreed to 0%.

Farden reported that he has only “taken away” one scholarship in the past six years, meaning that he did not provide a student-athlete who remained on the team with a subsequent increased 100% award after she originally agreed to 0%. He also stated that student-athletes were aware of their

---

<sup>12</sup> [\*See Pac-12 Conference, “Pac-12 universities adopt sweeping reforms for student-athletes guaranteeing scholarships, improving health care, and more,” October 27, 2014.\*](#)

athletics scholarship situations. He noted the unique issue that has occurred recently is student-athletes who have remaining eligibility as a result of a so-called Covid extra-year of eligibility. This has resulted in Farden having to think creatively about how returning athletes may receive funding while honoring commitments that he has made to prospective student-athletes.

A University athletics administrator reported that consistent with NCAA rules and University expectations, head coaches are given autonomy regarding initially awarding scholarships and roster management. However, there is an expectation that coaches do not “strip” scholarships. Further, NCAA prohibits the reduction, cancellation or nonrenewal of athletics scholarships during the period of an athletics award unless certain requirements set forth in NCAA Bylaw 15.3.5.1 are met. However, again, this would not apply to a situation where a student-athlete has already agreed to an athletics award of 0%.

### **iii. Student-Athletes’ Understanding of Athletics Scholarships and Possible Effects**

Many student-athletes who did not receive a four-year athletics scholarship funded at 100% for each year reported that they understood that their scholarships would be “renewed” annually. One student-athlete indicated that Farden said that “[I] have four-years guaranteed for me if I perform and do my job.” However, some student-athletes reported that they did not understand that the scholarship was not guaranteed for four-years, despite the fact that one student-athlete stated that the student-athlete’s scholarship agreement had one year at 100% and the other three years blank. Another student-athlete and their family recalls being directed to the Pac-12 public press release or something similar that incorrectly stated all scholarships at Pac-12 schools are guaranteed for four-years. The executed written scholarship agreements with all of these student-athletes appeared to clearly identify the terms of the scholarship agreement, and whether any given scholarship was funded at 100% for one year or 100% for multiple years.

With respect to Utah’s practice of “renewing” scholarships on a year-to-year basis, several student-athletes described being concerned about the “renewal” of their scholarship from year-to-year and stated that this had a few specific consequences for them personally that included an increased fear of failure and perceived or actual pressure from Farden to learn specific challenging skills in order to retain an athletics scholarship. One student-athlete reported entering into a written agreement with Farden such that if she completed the necessary skills then she would receive an athletics scholarship. Farden denied ever entering into a written agreement with such requirements. The involved student-athlete produced what appeared to be notes from a discussion with Farden outlining athletics expectations for the following year. In short, these notes do not appear to be an agreement related to an athletics scholarship, nor do they constitute an NCAA violation.

Some student-athletes also reported feeling targeted and isolated by Farden or being removed from the lineup so that he could “take” their athletics scholarship and award it to another student-athlete. There was no objective evidence of this occurring, and with respect to line-ups coaches reported that while Farden had the final decision there were a series of independent judges that were used as well. Farden specifically denied ever utilizing athletics scholarships as a tool to motivate student-athletes’ performance.

The final issue related to athletics scholarship involved “medical retirement” and the perception by some student-athletes that Farden was pressuring them to medically retire in order to utilize their scholarships. Per NCAA rules, gymnastics coaches are not required to count against their total limit of twelve scholarships athletics aid awarded to a student-athlete that suffers an incapacitating injury or illness. Farden denies that he used “medical retirement” as a tool for scholarship management but explained specific examples where student-athletes were not able to participate in certain events because of physical limitations and therefore conceptually were “retired” from that particular event. The only way to meet the requirements of the NCAA rule such that you would not have to count a student-athlete’s scholarship is for a physician to document that the student-athlete can no longer compete as a result of an injury.

#### **iv. Analysis of Athletics Scholarship Issues**

The manner in which Farden manages athletics scholarships does not violate NCAA rules or the Athletics’ Well Being Policy. Further, management of multi-year athletics scholarships by providing some student-athletes with 100% - 0% - 0% - 0% is consistent with what occurs at other Division I institutions. However, some student-athletes believed that Farden had made verbal commitments that he would renew their scholarship for each of the four years of their participation on the team. Further, whether actual or perceived, some student-athletes felt pressure to perform in order to receive a scholarship award in subsequent years. Some level of pressure to perform in an elite level Division I athletics program occurs in every sport. That said, a level of pressure combined with pushing to perform specific skills that may be outside of a student-athlete’s capability could potentially be dangerous. Further, the uncertainty related to athletics scholarship whether intentional or unintentional may have contributed to some student-athletes issues with mental health, psychological safety and even physical safety.

#### **IV. Findings**

The following summarizes the overarching findings related to the original allegations involving Coach Farden engaging in emotional and verbal abuse, disregarding injuries and athletics trainer recommendations, and inappropriate scholarship management, including pressuring student-athletes to medically retire.

1. Coach Farden did not engage in any severe, pervasive or egregious acts of emotional or verbal abuse of student-athletes.
2. Coach Farden did not engage in any acts of physical abuse, emotional abuse or harassment as defined by SafeSport Code.
3. Coach Farden made a derogatory comment to a student-athlete that if she was not at the University she would be a “nobody working at a gas station” in her hometown. We find this comment was personally degrading and, although isolated, violates the Athletics’ Well Being Policy which prohibits the use of degrading language.
4. A few student-athletes alleged that Coach Farden made comments to student-athletes that, if corroborated, would have likely resulted in a finding that they violated the Athletics’

Well Being Policy's prohibition on degrading language. The comments as alleged were isolated occurrences that could not be independently corroborated and were denied by Coach Farden. Because these alleged statements could not be independently corroborated, we found insufficient evidence of a violation of the Athletics' Well Being Policy and no violation (even if true) of the SafeSport Code.

5. Some former student-athletes stated that interactions with Coach Farden and involvement on the Women's Gymnastics Team negatively impacted them personally. They also shared information related to perceptions that they were targeted for negative treatment by Coach Farden. Coach Farden denied targeting student-athletes for negative treatment, and the majority of current student-athletes and staff members denied observing Coach Farden target particular student-athletes with negative treatment. As such, we did not make a finding that Coach Farden violated the Athletics' Well Being Policy 7.6 because we did not find sufficient evidence to conclude that Coach Farden singled out or isolated student-athletes.
6. Coach Farden more likely than not threw a stopwatch and a cellular telephone in frustration in the presence of student-athletes. These individual acts were not repeated or severe and therefore did not violate SafeSport Code for Physical Acts of Emotional Misconduct which requires repeated or severe physically aggressive behaviors. Further, the acts did not involve inappropriate contact with a student-athlete and did not violate the Athletics' Well Being Policy 7.5, Physical Abuse or Inappropriate Touch.
7. The review did not find that Coach Farden disregarded injuries, or independently had the ability to medically retire student-athletes. However, Coach Farden questioned the recommendations of a former athletics trainer based on concerns related to the accuracy of diagnosis and information provided to the coaching staff. The additional gymnastics coaching staff also had concerns about the accuracy of diagnoses provided by the former athletics trainer.
8. Coach Farden's management of most athletics scholarships on a year-to-year basis (which is consistent with industry practice) resulted in some student-athletes experiencing an increased fear of failure and perceived or actual pressure from Coach Farden to learn specific challenging skills in order to retain an athletics scholarship.

## **V. Recommendations**

The University requested that we make recommendations related to the Women's Gymnastics Program and Coach Farden's leadership of the Program based on our experience with student-athlete well-being concerns at other NCAA Division I institutions and the information collected during our review. Our recommendations for consideration are as follows:

1. Consider a performance improvement plan for Coach Farden, that may include the following elements:
  - Mandatory communication and leadership training.

- Coach Farden developing and implementing a strategy to maintain meaningful and consistent interactions with all student-athletes within the Program.
  - Coach Farden developing an action plan to enhance the culture of the Women's Gymnastics Program to be reviewed by the sport supervisor on a specific date.
  - Develop a system for regular monitoring of progress related to Coach Farden's interactions with student-athletes and the team culture.
  - Meet with Athletics Mental Health Services staff at minimum monthly to discuss ways to support the mental health of student-athletes.
  - Coach Farden will encourage student-athletes to utilize Real Response, in addition to the Student-Athlete Advocate, for any suggestions and concerns related to the Women's Gymnastics Program that student-athletes wish to elevate to athletics administration.
  - Coach Farden will ensure NCAA Compliance in all program activities and will regularly communicate with the athletics compliance office, at a minimum monthly regarding recruiting, scholarships, playing and practice activities and any other relevant compliance topic.
  - Coach Farden's progress in these areas will be reviewed annually by a University entity outside of athletics.
2. This review was brought forward, in part, by student-athletes utilizing the Student-Athlete Advocate in Student Affairs to report concerns related to the Women's Gymnastics Program. Continue to support the role of the Student-Athlete Advocate, including regular monitoring of team practices and competitions, and educate student-athletes about the role of the Student-Athlete Advocate so that she can be an independent resource to address student-athlete concerns.
  3. One assistant coach discussed the tension that can result from parents feeling excluded from the Program and their student-athlete's experience. Consider ways to address this tension while adhering to Program and athletics department expectations for student-athletes' developing independence and always in accordance with FERPA and HIPAA. In addition to training for coaches, this may include parent training or education about the legal realities of what their role can be.
  4. With respect to athletics scholarships, ensure that all prospective and enrolled student-athletes understand the terms of their athletics scholarships. Further, consider whether the use of a multi-year award that only guarantees one-year of an athletics scholarship is a best practice.
  5. Consider additional attendance by athletics administrators at practice and regular independent documented meetings with Women's Gymnastics student-athletes throughout the year specific to the issues outlined in this report.

## **VI. Conclusion**

In the context of gathering information from a highly competitive and successful program, related to a highly competitive athletic environment, our review did elicit statements and concerns related to Coach Farden and his coaching; we note that this is the second review related to concerns regarding coaching issues in the past four years. With respect to verifying particular instances of treatment, however, with the exception of one statement to a student-athlete, corroborated by Farden, we did not find sufficient evidence that Coach Farden violated SafeSport Code, the Athletics' Well Being Policy or NCAA rules. With respect to allegations that Coach Farden targeted specific student-athletes, these allegations were not supported by information from other student-athletes or staff members such that we did not make a finding regarding emotional or verbal abuse towards these student-athletes. Nevertheless, there is a perception among some student-athletes that Coach Farden dismisses or ignores lower performing student-athletes. Our findings related to policy and rule violations do not minimize the legitimate individual experiences of some former student-athletes who attribute personal concerns to their participation on the Women's Gymnastics Team at the University. While a variety of factors can influence a student-athlete's decision to transfer, if a trend towards transfers from the Program continue the University may consider further review and modification to any recommendations that are implemented. The University currently provides significant resources for student-athletes related to health and well-being, and that continued commitment has been communicated by coaches, staff and administrators.

# Appendix

---

**From:** Kyle Brennan <kbrennan@huntsman.utah.edu>  
**Sent:** Thursday, October 8, 2020 2:16 PM  
**To:** Leila Ames; Liz Prince  
**Cc:** Jason Ramirez  
**Subject:** RE: WGY Team Climate Assessment

Thank you Leila. We will review with Mark and let you know if he wants to discuss further.

I appreciate you doing this!

Kyle Brennan  
Deputy Athletic Director  
University of Utah Athletics  
801-587-7629 (o)  
801-557-9845 (c)  
[kbrennan@huntsman.utah.edu](mailto:kbrennan@huntsman.utah.edu)

---

**From:** Leila Ames <lames@sa.utah.edu>  
**Sent:** Thursday, October 8, 2020 12:58 PM  
**To:** Kyle Brennan <kbrennan@huntsman.utah.edu>; Liz Prince <lprince@huntsman.utah.edu>  
**Cc:** Jason Ramirez <JasonRamirez@sa.utah.edu>  
**Subject:** WGY Team Climate Assessment

Good Morning All,

In an effort to assess the environment within Utah Gymnastics, I reached out to the team's 14 current student-athletes. I was able to connect with and collect information from 12 members of the team. The feedback I received was positive overall, but there are a few areas where continued improvements can be made.

All returning student-athletes stated that this year, the team has seen improvements in terms of individual relationships with coaches, communication with coaches, and overall environment.

### **Communication**

The majority of SAs stated that they feel the coaching staff is communicating effectively this year, they are diligent about updating and checking-in with individuals, and are largely approachable and receptive to feedback from SAs. A few SAs shared that Tom could be more understanding and compassionate in his communication with individuals and that he needs to work on acknowledging his mistakes. It was reported by one SA that Tom often relies on his assistant coaches to handle "softer" issues.

### **Environment**

SAs reported that the team chemistry is great, the coaches work well together, that it feels "lighter" than last year, their overall mindset is in a good place, they feel there are operating in a safe and respectful environment, and that it has been a positive experience thus far. On occasion, Tom can "erupt", act "irrationally" and be "explosive", and at times his passion and intensity can "come off scary". Additionally, one

SA shared that the team can tell if the coaches are having a bad day based on their temperament and body language; this can sometimes result in more serious and/or intense practices. Improvements can be made with regard to yelling in the gym and expressing care and concern for individuals as people as well as athletes.

### **Concern for Health and Safety**

All SAs reported that the coaches are very cautious about injuries and supportive of taking sufficient time to heal. Three SAs shared that Tom could have been more emotionally supportive and inclusive during injuries.

Given this information, I would recommend that:

- Coaches should continue to regularly check-in with student-athletes and express genuine concern through compassionate communication for each individual;
- Coaches make additional efforts to support a positive, productive, and respectful environment;
- Coaches be mindful of the impact their verbal and non-verbal communication can have on the team and their ability to focus and contribute;
- Efforts should be made to better support and include student-athletes during rehabilitation.

Please let me know if you have any questions, concerns, or recommendations for follow-up.

**Leila S. Ames, M.L.S.**

Student-Athlete Advocate

Office of the Dean of Students

University of Utah

200 South Central Campus Dr., Rm. 270

Salt Lake City, UT 84112

(801)587-9143

[lames@sa.utah.edu](mailto:lames@sa.utah.edu)

---

**From:** Leila Ames <lames@sa.utah.edu>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, April 25, 2023 5:40 PM  
**To:** Charmelle Green; Mark Harlan  
**Cc:** Liz Prince; Jason Burrow-Sanchez; Robert Payne (OGC); Jason Ramirez  
**Subject:** RE: Athlete Advocacy Concerns  
**Attachments:** Student Athlete Concerns Summary Report.pdf  
  
**Importance:** High

All,

As you know, I have been gathering information to explore the nature and extent of reported concerns related to the Utah Gymnastics program. There have been multiple reports alleging mistreatment, and unequal treatment of student-athletes under Coach Tom Farden. The attached document serves to summarize the reported allegations and identify potential areas for improvement.

In light of these reports, I recommend that we organize a group meeting to discuss how these concerns can be addressed or may have already been addressed. I understand that Robert is currently away from the office, but will return Thursday, 4/27.

Thank you,

**Leila S. Ames, MLS**

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR \$TUDENT ATHLETE ADVOCATE  
OFFICE OF THE DEAN OF STUDENTS | THE UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

address: 200 S. CENTRAL CAMPUS DR., STE 250  
contact: 801-587-9143  
email: [lames@sa.utah.edu](mailto:lames@sa.utah.edu)  
website/online reporting: [www.deanofstudents.utah.edu](http://www.deanofstudents.utah.edu)



---

**From:** Jason Ramirez  
**Sent:** Monday, April 17, 2023 12:27 PM  
**To:** Charmelle Green <cgreen@utah.edu>  
**Cc:** Liz Prince <lprince@huntsman.utah.edu>; Leila Ames <lames@sa.utah.edu>; Jason Burrow-Sanchez <Jason.Burrow-Sanchez@utah.edu>  
**Subject:** Athlete Advocacy Concerns

Charmelle,

We hope this email finds you well and off to a good start from the weekend. As you may remember from a conversation a long time ago, we discussed a flowchart when it comes to athlete reporting (attached). Leila has been receiving enough reports that we believe there are significant concerns and complaints to warrant a “yellow” response. As Leila begins her process to begin interviewing and exploring the claims, we wanted to be good partners and communicate some of the baseline issues that are being reported.

First, athletes from Gymnastics are reporting significant concerns with Coach Tom Farden and practices within Gymnastics operations. The areas of concern are:

1. Reports of abusive practices, language, and personal attacks against athletes
2. Denying athlete rights during travel
3. Toxic/Unhealthy team culture (disparate treatment of athletes)

While we are just in the beginning stages of our process, we wanted to make sure you were aware that we are exploring and interviewing students as we receive names. Per our outlined procedures, we are hoping to begin this exploration to create a more detailed report to share with you and your team by early next week. From there, we would hope to work together to determine next steps and outline processes if anything further needs to occur. Per these same procedures, I am carbon copying the Associate AD for Sport Administration and Student Athlete Well-Being as well as the FAR. Please feel free to share with Athletic Director Harlan or Director Ravarino as you deem appropriate. We are more than happy to meet to discuss further, but would encourage patience as Leila works through the reports we are receiving and continues to interview the student athletes. We also request this information to be kept confidential until we all have an opportunity to review and discuss the report. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Jason

Jason Ramirez  
Associate Vice President for Student Affairs  
& Dean of Students  
University of Utah  
200 S. Central Campus Drive, Ste 270  
Salt Lake City, UT 84112  
801-581-7066 (o)  
[jasonramirez@sa.utah.edu](mailto:jasonramirez@sa.utah.edu)  
Pronouns: he/him/his



The following information was gathered from 19 individuals associated with the Utah Gymnastics program including current and former student-athletes, staff members, parents of student-athletes, and anonymous reporters.

### **Summary of Allegations**

#### **1. Alleged abusive practices, language, and personal attacks against student-athletes**

- a. Alleged use of phrases directed at student-athletes such as: *“waste of space,” “you’re a lost cause,” and “I already gave up on you.”*
- b. Alleged actions by Coach Farden to pressure injured student-athletes to return to competition *“too quickly.”*
- c. Alleged actions by Coach Farden to challenge the recommended training limitations of injured student-athletes.
- d. Alleged actions by Coach Farden to pressure injured student-athletes to end their athletic careers and medically disqualify when not medically necessary.
- e. Alleged throwing of objects (i.e. gymnastics equipment) by Coach Farden to demonstrate his frustration.
- f. Alleged critiques/attacks of student-athletes’ character by Coach Farden.
- g. Alleged actions by Coach Farden intended to influence student-athletes’ weight loss, including:
  - i. Threatening scholarship cancellation for non-compliance;
  - ii. Proposing diet/nutrition plans to individuals;
  - iii. Singling out individuals to engage in conditioning above and beyond what is required of all team members;
  - iv. Verbal comments made about student-athletes’ physical appearance such as not appearing to be in *“gymnastics shape.”*

#### **2. Alleged denial of student-athlete rights during team travel**

- a. Alleged limited access to food, specifically bread and other carbohydrates.
  - i. On one occasion, Coach Farden allegedly instructed restaurant staff to withhold servings of mashed potatoes which were included with the pre-ordered meals.
  - ii. On multiple occasions, complimentary bread was allegedly prevented from being served with meals.

#### **3. Alleged unhealthy team culture and disparate treatment of student-athletes**

- a. Alleged separation of SAs into subgroups within the larger team: (1) *“Elite”* gymnasts who possess superior name recognition, high-profile reputations, athletic accolades, and those whose families may have a pre-established relationship with Coach Farden; and, (2) *“Junior Olympic”* gymnasts considered to be less decorated, less respected, and less influential. The different treatment of these groups reportedly affects how teammates perceive and interact with one another which can cause feelings of resentment among teammates.
- b. *“Some people get more chances than others.”* The perception of the *“Junior Olympic”* group is that they are not allowed to make any mistakes without being subjected to disproportionate consequences from the coaching staff (e.g. yelling, verbally criticizing in public, rescinding athletic opportunities to train in certain events and/or participate in lineups, threatening scholarships, silent treatment,

etc.), whereas the “*elite*” group is reportedly granted more leeway (e.g. continued verbal and emotional support from the coaches despite making multiple mistakes, allowing one SA to take time off for personal travel during the season, allowing another SA to be consistently late to practices, etc.).

- c. During periods of injury, the “*elite*” group is perceived to be well-supported and included in the team by coaches, while the “*Junior Olympic*” group reported feeling ignored and isolated from the team by the coaches.
- d. Farden allegedly selects one “*vulnerable*” student-athlete, someone who is already struggling, each year to pick on and/or punish. The perceived motivation for this behavior is either to make an example of this person for the rest of the team or to influence that person to quit or forfeit their scholarship.
- e. The coaches are reportedly not approachable or trustworthy.

The Office of the Dean of Students has also received two anonymous reports from individuals associated with Utah Gymnastics. The first report alleges that Coach Farden’s actions are indicative of a pattern of abuse, that at least one student-athlete has engaged in suicide ideation as a result of her perceived treatment in the program, and that they are considering legal action if the University does not act. The second report alleges that Coach Farden only concerns himself with the mental health of his student-athletes to the extent that it affects their athletic performance, that Farden created an environment based on fear and punishment, and that gymnastics student-athletes are treated like assets to use or discard at Farden’s disposal. While we are unable to substantiate these allegations, we felt this information was important to share with Athletics Administration.

Many current student-athletes reported that over the past 1-2 years Head Coach Tom Farden has made noticeable efforts to improve in the following areas: responding to feedback, reacting less defensively to feedback, communicating with student-athletes, supporting SA mental health needs, showing personal interest in and care for individuals apart from athletic ability, fewer intense mood swings, increased levels of trust with leadership council members, and the decreased use of harsh language when communicating with student-athletes.