



Press release, 28 April 2021

Recognition and apologies for victims, lessons learned for the future

First response from KNGU (Royal Dutch Gymnastics Federation) to the Verinorm report 'Unequal bars'

Signs about transgressive behavior in gymnastics have been ignored for too long. As a result of this, the KNGU has failed in its duty to former athletes. Malpractices have been reported by former elite female gymnasts on several occasions, but were neither sufficiently investigated by the KNGU in the past nor provided with an answer. "The report does not only show that the federation has made mistakes in this respect, but also that important lessons shall be learned for the future. The KNGU has not always done what should have been expected. This is a bitter conclusion. Young athletes did not feel heard and they felt neglected. We express our sincere apologies," Monique Kempff says, who is the chair of the KNGU board in a first response to the report 'Unequal bars' which was published today, written by Verinorm, Agency Beke and Vrije Universiteit (VU University) Amsterdam.

Investigation

Mid-2020, the KNGU requested agency Verinorm to carry out an investigation into the nature and scale of transgressive behavior in all disciplines and at all levels of gymnastics and its approach throughout the years. This was the result of the continuous (worldwide) messages about malpractices by former elite female athletes and the debate which started that summer after the release of the Netflix-documentary 'Athlete A'. According to the report, gymnastics has particular features which makes the sports vulnerable to undesirable behavior: it concerns a sport where selection for elite sport takes place at an early age and where many training hours and a strong dependency relationship with trainers-coaches are particularly a fact at the higher levels.

The investigation among 662 adults and 2061 minors shows that the nature and scale in which transgressive behavior takes place can be ascribed to several factors. For instance, transgressive behavior is more often reported when the training intensity increases. Adult athletes report more transgressive behavior than minor athletes. The issues are predominantly present with (elite) ladies' gymnastics among the groups which have been investigated, but also with acrobatic and rhythmic gymnastics. Male athletes are confronted with transgressive behavior to a considerably lesser extent. The types of transgressive behavior which have been mentioned most are the continuation of practices with injuries, the refusal to allow an individual to share one's own opinion, and being neglected/ humiliated by the trainer. Sexually transgressive behavior is least frequent of all.

Especially the shocking experiences from former athletes are intrusive. An image is presented from the interviews with the selected former athletes who had been active prior to 2014 of a culture in which (serious) transgressive behavior took place on a structural and long-term basis, which consisted of humiliating, insulting, yelling, force, blackmail, threatening and sometimes physical violence as well. The report shows that there are indications that the 'transgressive gymnastics culture' is less present now, after having terminated with the tough (Eastern European) training practices from the eighties and nineties of the past century. However, the investigators warn that malpractices sometimes do not come to light until the athletes have finished their career.



The investigators are critical of the role by KNGU. Attention was primarily drawn to combatting sexual intimidation for a long time in the (entire) sport. Other forms of transgressive behavior were mostly addressed informally. Further investigations were not handled and processed in a sufficiently diligent and transparent manner, as a result of which sanctioning actions towards trainers and aftercare for the former female gymnasts involved did not take place. In view of the investigators, the effects from the many initiatives and measures over the past years cannot be measured yet.

What's next?

The KNGU is thankful to the investigators for their sound and thorough work. “No matter how painful the findings and conclusions are, it is good that this entire story is finally shared in full transparency. Only this way, we are able to acknowledge the past and learn lessons for the future”, Monique Kempff says.

Apart from expressing sincere apologies to former athletes, the KNGU would like to be in (further) contact with them as regards a sound follow-up process. This is also in line with the findings from the Verinorm report. To this end, it is important to consider the specific needs from former athletes. It turns out from the report, but also from current dialogues which are already conducted between former athletes and the KNGU, that the desires differ from one person to another. Some former athletes and their parents feel a need for contact between fellow-victims, whilst others desire perspective and restorative mediation. Furthermore, questions are raised about a career in or outside the sport. In case former athletes need specific care, the KNGU closely cooperates with Victims Assistance the Netherlands (*Slachtofferhulp Nederland*) and MIND Korrelatie, for instance as regards a proper transfer to more specialized forms of care and mental support, among whom (also) sport psychologists. Center Safe Sports the Netherlands (*Centrum Veilige Sport Nederland*) is involved in this.

Just as important are the concrete suggestions which are included in the report so as to continue developing a safe and positive sports environment. Monique Kempff: “The culture change aimed to achieve so much has been in progress for a number of years already, but this report shows that it is of eminent importance to put in extra effort. Thus, we incorporate the recommendations from the report. For instance, we introduce a joint strategy in order to achieve a reassessment of the talent development and elite sports program. In this approach, the dreams, ambitions, fun and the needs of athletes are pivotal. In this respect, the KNGU commits itself to gymnastics where the wellbeing of the athlete is a precondition to performance. Of course, it is a joint effort between clubs, parents, coaches, municipalities, volunteers and, of course, the current and former athletes.”

As regards monitoring the progress of the recommendations, an independent follow-up commission will be set up with a broad range of expertise. This commission will periodically report on the progress the KNGU has made as regards the follow-up from the recommendations in the Verinorm report.