



SAFE SPORT ZONES AT MAJOR SPORTS EVENTS

FACTSHEET

INTRODUCTION

For many athletes, competing at the elite level reflects years of dedication to refining both physical and mental skills. While rewarding, the intense pressures of elite competition—managing expectations, rigorous training, and public scrutiny—may heighten mental health challenges.

The IOC prioritises safe sport (safeguarding and mental health) through key strategic initiatives such as Recommendation 5 of Olympic Agenda 2020+5, the 2023 Mental Health Action Plan and the Safe Sport Action Plan 2020-2024, which call for increased safeguarding and mental health support for athletes and their entourages. This led to the creation of the Athlete365 Mind Zone, piloted at the Paris 2024 Games; a first-of-its-kind initiative offering a calm, stigma-free environment to normalise help-seeking and set a new standard in how to address safeguarding and mental health challenges at major sporting events.

This document aims to give pragmatic guidance to Olympic Movement stakeholders on planning, delivering, and adapting similar spaces (adjustable to scale and available resources) at competitions, and other events, whether part of the Organising Committee or a Participating Delegation.

Definitions

Safe Sport is about “fostering physically and psychologically safe and supportive athletic environments where participants can thrive and experience the full benefits of sport participation.”

Safeguarding is defined as “all proactive measures to both prevent and appropriately respond to concerns related to harassment and abuse (interpersonal violence) in sport as well as the promotion of holistic approaches to participant’s welfare.”

The IOC’s definition of **mental health** is “...a dynamic state of well-being in which athletes can realise their potential, see a purpose and meaning in sport and life, experience trusting personal relationships, cope with common life stressors and the specific stressors in elite sport, and are able to act autonomously according to their values.”

We define **Major Sporting Events (MSE)** as “a large-scale athletic competition or tournament organised by a specific “authority” that produces significant social, economic, and environmental impacts for the host community, yields a large volume of media coverage, and is marked by complex planning, execution, and stakeholder involvement.”

Safe Sport Zone is an “inviting space for athletes to relax, recharge and prepare mentally for competition that should include a private space to have confidential conversations, seek mental health support or report safeguarding concerns during a sports event.”

An innovative approach to mental health care and safeguarding

During competition, many athletes avoid seeking mental health or safeguarding support due to cultural norms, stigma, and/or limited awareness of what constitutes harmful behaviors. Barriers, like a culture of self-reliance and unequal access to care, can escalate these issues.

Creating trusted, supportive spaces with appropriately trained staff who can provide timely, understanding support as part of a proactive well-being approach can encourage athletes to seek help early for safeguarding or mental health concerns. This is aided by shifting the messaging around mental (ill) health towards ‘performance’ and ‘well-being.’ Further, by offering a wider range of multidisciplinary services and accessible options across the mental health spectrum (like mental health first response), athletes can address issues sooner and transition to specialised care only when needed. Ensuring that these services are communicated clearly and delivered in welcoming, non-clinical spaces by trained staff builds trust, lowers barriers, and creates an environment where athletes feel comfortable seeking support.

PRIOR TO COMPETITION

A. Level of Service

- Define the level of service to be offered based on available space, budget, personnel and other miscellaneous resources

B. Roles

- Define responsibilities and reporting lines for your Safe Sport Zone personnel, including volunteers, and potential roles for ambassadors or experts



Zone is occupied by your safeguarding team and relevant experts



Zone is occupied by appropriately trained staff or volunteers



Zone offers self service activities monitored by staff or volunteers

C. Training

- Ensure those with roles in the space have the appropriate training for the services being offered, for example, safeguarding certification, mental health first aid, and crisis intervention training tailored to event or sport-specific challenges



Staff are qualified Safeguarding Officers, with mental health first aid or mental health qualifications and experience in elite sport



Staff have event or sport-specific training and education including basic safeguarding concepts, definitions, and principles



Zone offers only self service activities

D. Collaboration

- Map the overlapping functional areas (e.g., safeguarding, medical, local organising committee (LOC) operations, volunteers, etc.) and clarify processes for referrals, reporting, and coordination

E. Sponsors & Funding (if applicable)

- Utilise sponsorships from brands interested in athlete welfare to co-deliver the space



Offer co-naming rights and partnership through digital communication campaigns



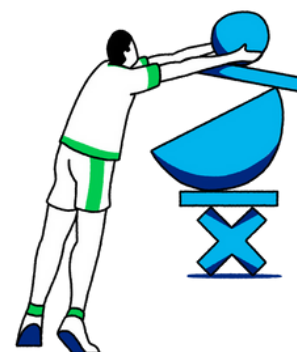
Obtain sponsor specific equipment or get 'in-kind' donations (e.g. access to a mindfulness app)



Zone offers self funded activities

F. Cultural Adaptions

- Translate resources, adapt messaging, and design activities to reflect cultural sensitivities for athletes in attendance (especially as it relates to language)



The levels: explained



Elite: Advanced guidance demanding significant commitment, specialised resources, and expertise.



Enhanced: Builds on Essentials, adding moderate resource investment and strategic planning



Essentials: Foundational recommendations requiring minimal resources for baseline implementation

G. Location

- Map the overlapping functional areas (e.g., safeguarding, medical, local organising committee (LOC) operations, volunteers, etc.) and clarify processes for referrals, reporting, and coordination.

H. Services & Activities

- Ensure spaces are welcoming, stigma-free zones. Natural and artificial light, gentle sounds, and a minimalist layout should be used to create an environment where athletes feel comfortable and relaxed. Soft, reclined seating is optimal and if possible, provide an area for stretching. In addition, decide which evidence-based activities to offer. For example:



Mental Health promotion

- Provide guided mindfulness programs, (e.g., through Virtual Reality (VR)), to enhance focus and reduce stress.
- Provide exercises to promote gratitude and creativity: Encourage athletes to engage in evidence-based art therapy activities (e.g., participating in collaborative art projects or doodling).
- Promote breathing exercises: Offer self service areas and encourage guided breathing exercises to help athletes regulate stress and improve concentration.

Access to care

- Offer safeguarding support services and first response mental health care as a walk-in service.
- Provide a discreet room where you can have confidential conversations with participants seeking help and support



Obtain sponsor specific equipment or get 'in-kind' donations (e.g. access to a mindfulness app)

Mental Health promotion

- Provide guided mindfulness programs, (e.g., using easily available mindfulness tools including apps such as Calm, Headspace or open resources on YouTube).
- Provide exercises to promote gratitude and creativity: Encourage athletes to engage in evidence-based art therapy activities (e.g., participating in collaborative art projects or doodling)
- Promote breathing exercises: Offer self service areas and encourage guided breathing exercises to help athletes regulate stress and improve concentration

Access to care

- Clear signposting of how to seek help e.g. contact details for safeguarding support services and mental health care



Mental Health promotion

- Promote mindful exercises: Offer self service areas and encourage, e.g., guided breathing exercises to help athletes regulate stress and improve concentration

Access to care

- Offer referral to safeguarding support services and mental health care



I. Communication

- Include details of the space in event information shared in advance to teams, athletes, entourage, etc.
- Use culturally appropriate, multilingual signposting across all venue and athlete spaces
- Support on-site signposting with digital awareness campaigns.

L. (If incorporating) Access to first response mental health care

- Coordinate with medical teams or safeguarding experts to refer to clinical mental health services with on-call psychiatrists for urgent or after-hours needs

M. Confidentiality

- Protect all sensitive information and ensure only necessary personnel have access
- Respect local data protection laws and organisational confidentiality rules

DURING COMPETITION

J. Help seeking environment

- Volunteers should not handle consultations or make recommendations on sensitive issues
- Encourage athletes to use the space while also respecting their need for privacy - be mindful that athletes may want to focus on their performance

K. (If incorporating a Safeguarding Officer) Managing concerns

- Follow clear procedures for reporting and addressing safeguarding issues including escalation pathways and data protection in collaboration with other functional areas in your organisation (e.g., ethics, legal, etc.)
- Use secure messaging tools and ensure emergency contacts are pre-loaded for immediate action
- Collaborate with other safeguarding stakeholders involved in the event, (e.g, welfare officers in participating delegations)

POST COMPETITION

N. Evaluation

- Assess policies, services, and interventions to identify successes and areas for improvement
- Use insights to update safeguarding protocols, mental health support plans, and training programs

O. Follow-Up

- Identify ongoing support needs for staff or volunteers affected by traumatic situations



AN INVITING SPACE FOR ATHLETES TO RELAX, RECHARGE AND PREPARE MENTALLY FOR COMPETITION





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