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Athlete Maltreatment as a Wicked Problem and Contested Terrain

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Abstract: Athlete maltreatment in organized sport has attracted considerable attention from governing bodies, stakeholders and the general public. Despite numerous studies and policy proposals from various countries, the problem remains unresolved due to its inherent complexity. Drawing upon the concept of ‘a wicked problem’ widely utilized in policy analysis, this study first identifies the wicked features of maltreatment, focusing on: (1) the difficulty of establishing a definition of maltreatment; (2) the challenges of identifying its causes; and (3) the impediments to identifying solutions in a context of embedded stakeholders and unintended consequences. To provide further analysis, we compare athlete maltreatment with other issues in sport such as doping and match-fixing, to suggest that lessons can be drawn from other wicked problems in the same contested terrain. Overall, given the complex interplay between maltreatment and the maintenance/legitimization of sport systems, this paper calls for continuing attention and evaluation of existing research/policies and advocates for a more multidimensional view that acknowledges maltreatment as a wicked problem.

Keywords: athlete maltreatment; wicked problems; contested terrain; sport; policy



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1. Introduction

The issue of athlete maltreatment in sport has garnered significant attention from governing bodies, stakeholders and the public worldwide (Kerr et al. 2019a; Park et al. 2024a, 2024b). In light of the escalating public concerns regarding athlete maltreatment across various tiers, ranging from grassroots to national and professional levels, there has been a burgeoning demand for targeted research (Bisgaard and Støckel 2019; Johnson et al. 2020; Mountjoy 2020; Vella 2019). Moreover, the issue transcends countries, sports and levels, while also involving a number of stakeholders such as athletes, coaches, team doctors, administrators and national and international sport organization officials. Compounding the issue is that maltreatment is often overlooked due to “fear of reputational damage, silence or collusion, and ignorance” (Mountjoy et al. 2016, p. 1019). In decades past, this reticence to acknowledge the problem by sport organizations yielded minimal sport policy development and implementation to manage maltreatment (Brackenridge 2001). Yet even in countries like Canada and South Korea, that have had policies in place for over a decade, it appears that the issue is no closer to being resolved (see Canadian Heritage 2019; Park et al. 2024b). Thus, in many ways, athlete maltreatment in sport resembles ‘a wicked problem’ (Rittel and Webber 1973), similar to other seemingly intractable policy issues such as unemployment, poverty and affordable housing.

From this viewpoint, athlete maltreatment can be conceptualized as a wicked problem. Adopting a wicked problem approach to the issue extends our understanding beyond the current literature by: (1) highlighting why it is difficult to define and delineate; and (2) outlining why it is difficult to diagnose its causes across different levels of sport. Although some scholars have proposed solutions or policies to prevent maltreatment in

organized sport, a wicked problem approach suggests that solutions are invariably problematic because any particular solution may create new or unanticipated issues. As such, while labelling an issue like ‘athlete maltreatment’ as a ‘wicked problem’ does not yield resolutions (and indeed this would be the antithesis of the perspective), the approach might provide a wider understanding for managing its chaotic and complex nature (Head 2022).

Thus, we draw upon the work of Rittel and Webber (1973) who use the term ‘wicked problem’ to broadly characterize issues that are resistant to planning interventions. In this view, wicked problems are social problems which interrupt current thinking, are challenging to define and are difficult to resolve. Within the context of maltreatment in sport, a perspective on wicked problems permits the inclusion of a range of issues within broader complex relations, by including motivations and interests of its numerous stakeholders (Westberg et al. 2017). As a result, the purpose of this research is to explore athlete maltreatment as a ‘wicked problem’ in society—that is, a problem that defies definition and planned efforts to solve it. Accordingly, this research uses the wicked problems approach widely used in policy analysis to identify the complexity of athlete maltreatment, including the divergent interests of stakeholders. The preference for a wicked problem approach is that it has the potential to provide new insights regarding why numerous programs and policies trigger controversy, fail to carry out their stated aims, cause unforeseen results or are impossibly difficult to monitor and coordinate. Furthermore, given the inherent characteristics of wicked problems it is nearly certain that the debate over the definitions, causes and solutions for athlete maltreatment constitute a *contested terrain*. Jackson and Scherer (2013) conceptualize a contested terrain as:

... a site of struggle not unlike a battlefield, involving key interest groups with varying resources and material interests, and competing ideas and beliefs... contested terrains are about power struggles over resources (financial, material and human) and ideological and moral/ethical beliefs sometimes they are minor philosophical disagreements, but sometimes the result is major conflict. Stated another way, contested terrains involve competing claims over national common sense as various groups seek to continually endeavour to refashion their way(s) of life and interests as legitimate and apolitical. (pp. 888–89)

To date, the concept of a contested terrain has been widely utilized to critically analyze various areas of debate such as: (1) sport diplomacy (Jackson 2013); (2) alcohol sponsorship (Cody and Jackson 2016); (3) health and wellbeing (Jackson et al. 2022); and (4) sport mega-events (Jackson and Kobayashi 2023). Building on this framework, we can scrutinize athlete maltreatment as a wicked problem. This research is structured into three sections. First, it discusses the general concept of wicked problems, including its origins as an alternative to theories of rational planning. This section also outlines the key elements that characterize wicked problems. Second, it looks at why athlete maltreatment may be considered a wicked problem and specifically in relation to: (1) its ambiguous definitions; (2) its multiple causes; and (3) its links to vested interests and the creation of new problems. Additionally, this section explains why understanding maltreatment as a wicked problem is important for a comprehensive analysis. Lastly, athlete maltreatment is compared to the wicked problems of doping and match-fixing in order to understand the similarities but also the challenges of definition with respect to laws, policies and rules.

2. Conceptualizing Wicked Problems and Their General Characteristics

The concept of wicked problems was first introduced by Rittel and Webber (1973) to explain emerging policy issues in the social and environmental planning literature. Within academia, the concept of wicked problems has since been used to point to a wide variety of social constructs across different disciplines including: (1) policy (e.g., Head and Alford 2015; Peters 2017); (2) education (e.g., Ramley 2014; Wegner 2008); (3) climate change (e.g., Lazarus 2008; Levin et al. 2012); and (4) sport (e.g., Byers et al. 2020; Sam 2009; Westberg et al. 2017).

Notably, [Rittel and Webber's \(1973\)](#) fundamental aim was to discredit two existing theoretical approaches and paradigms. The first was “a systems-based, rational-scientific, grand theory of planning” and the second was “the classical paradigm of science and engineering” as a basis for planning in “modern professionalism” and “social science” ([Crowley and Head 2017](#), p. 541). Their original motive for redefining the capacity of planning and modern professionalism was the social dissent, protest movements and upheavals that radically disturbed the USA in the 1960s and 1970s ([Crowley and Head 2017](#)). In this view, a poor understanding of wicked problems was conceptualized as a general obstacle to effective implementation and design as much as it was identified as a special group of problems ([Peters 2017](#)). [Rittel and Webber's \(1973\)](#) approach was intended to help policymakers become attuned to problems which have alternative policy structures and various causes.

To this end, the two fields of planning and policy could be appropriately linked. While the planning approach has a powerful design element in relation to policy ([Peters 2021](#)), it tends to be negative about the role of politics in reducing the capacity to solve issues. In contrast, members of the policy and practice analytic camp are likely to accept politics as an essential element of the policymaking process ([Peters 2017](#)). The acknowledgment of politics in planning thus became an implicit cornerstone in understanding wicked problems. Underpinned by these two elements, [Rittel and Webber \(1973\)](#) described 10 characteristics to differentiate wicked problems from the wieldy issues that the government had previously dealt with and managed successfully (e.g., infrastructure building).

However, subsequent researchers have collapsed [Rittel and Webber's \(1973\)](#) original 10 characteristics of wicked problems into three or four categories. For example, [Roberts \(2000\)](#) indicates that wicked problems can be condensed into four elements in that they display: broad disagreement, open-ended solutions, complexity and constraints (see also [Head and Alford 2015](#)).¹ Others similarly synthesize, three common features of wicked problems from the literature ([Ansell and Bartenberger 2016](#); [DeFries and Nagendra 2017](#); [Rittel and Webber 1973](#); [Sam 2009](#)). According to [Sam \(2009\)](#), these are mainly involved with: “(1) the difficulties with problem definition; (2) the uncertainties relating to causal chains and mechanisms; and (3) the propensity for remedies to result in new or unintended problems or to exacerbate existing challenges” (p. 502). [Peters and Tarpey \(2019\)](#) also suggest that [Rittel and Webber's \(1973\)](#) 10 characteristics include three common features:

First, they emphasize that many problems we now face are poorly defined, and linked to other problems. In addition, solutions for those problems also are not readily apparent and are linked with the very actors who are the cause of the problems. And finally, it appears impossible to know, *ex ante*, what would constitute a good solution. (p. 220)

Based on this framework, this paper considers athlete maltreatment to be a contested, intractable issue owing to its ‘wickedness’ in relation to three features: (1) its ambiguous definitions; (2) its multiple causes; and (3) its links to vested interests and the creation of new problems. Through a synthesis of various policy documents and scholarly resources, the next section outlines three characteristics of wicked problems and how they are related to athlete maltreatment.

3. How Can Maltreatment Be Regarded as a Wicked Problem?

3.1. The Difficulty of Definition: Various Perspectives on Maltreatment

While wicked problems share some similarities, they are essentially unique ([Ansell and Bartenberger 2016](#); [Rittel and Webber 1973](#)). Hence, the first feature of wicked problems is that they are either difficult to define or are poorly defined ([Peters 2017](#); [Peters and Tarpey 2019](#)). Reflecting this point, the term maltreatment has been used inconsistently by researchers, including the use of a range of different definitions. For instance, the definitions of maltreatment in society vary widely due to a diverse array of factors, such as: (1) relational and non-relational maltreatment by the nature in which the behavior occurs ([Stirling 2009](#)); (2) its detailed characteristics—negligence, neglect and commercial or other

exploitation, including physical and sexual abuse, emotional ill-treatment (World Health Organization 2016); and (3) a new definition of non-accidental violence (Mountjoy et al. 2016). As a result, Fortier et al. (2020) state that “such a broad definition of physical maltreatment contributes to a substantial risk of confusion in classifying physical maltreatment and psychological maltreatment” (pp. 4–5).

Moreover, definitions of maltreatment are shaped by the various perspectives of stakeholders. For example, the media appear to interpret maltreatment only in relation to its most serious form—sexual abuse. News regarding sexual abuse produced by the media may be used to deliberately invoke social interest, generate revenue and enable media to seek comment from both government and sport organizations thus further elevating its public profile. Sexual abuse in the sport community has rather exclusively gained more attention, disregarding other sorts of abuse (Kerr et al. 2020; Ohlert et al. 2018; Stirling 2009). Indeed, the Safe Sport Summits in Canada were framed by the consistent argument that sexual abuses are “the most egregious behaviors” (Kerr et al. 2020, p. 8), focusing much less on the wide range of research on children highlighting that their health and wellbeing are affected by many types of maltreatment (Kerr et al. 2020; McCoy and Keen 2022). Athletes, in contrast, view maltreatment to include an extensive range of abuses. For instance, Kerr et al. (2019b) note that 1001 current and retired Canadian national team athletes reported experiencing maltreatment within the following categories: psychological abuse, neglect, sexual abuse and physical abuse. Overall, these findings reveal that definitions of maltreatment in sport may vary across media, academics and athletes.

The point above also demonstrates that while certain types of abuse that breach athletes’ rights might be categorized as crimes (Mountjoy et al. 2016), the vast majority of cases of maltreatment involve non-criminal behavior such as emotional abuse, bullying, hazing and neglect. The fact that each of these behaviors holds a range of definitions also renders the interpretation of maltreatment difficult to achieve consensus. Emotional abuse in sport, for example, is defined by deliberate, repeated and sustained patterns of non-contact behaviors between athletes and caregivers within a critical relationship role (Stirling and Kerr 2008, 2013) and resulting in the potential harm of athletes. One element lacking clarity in research surrounds whether intent and frequency of behaviors are more or less constitutive of maltreatment (Kerr et al. 2019b). Importantly, and as will be discussed below, a wicked problem approach should not be read as a demand for ‘air-tight’ definitions. Rather, it serves to highlight that problems are not easily classified or disambiguated as they tend to be connected to other problems that may be nested within one another.

3.2. *The Challenges of Identifying the Causes of Maltreatment*

A second characteristic of wicked problems is that they have complex causal chains that relate to interacting systems (Rittel and Webber 1973). Any definitive conceptualization of a wicked problem’s cause is elusive because each cause is often connected with other issues (Ansell and Bartenberger 2016; Peters and Tarpey 2019). Putting it another way, Van Bueren et al. (2003) note that “causal relations [around wicked problems] are numerous, interrelated and difficult to identify” (p. 193). As it relates to maltreatment, this strand of discussion deals specifically with four different causal interpretations: (1) the misdeeds of a few bad individuals; (2) the power/authority of stakeholders imbued by the sport environments; (3) the sport system itself (culture, practices and self-regulation); and (4) the primacy of maintaining ‘image’ or reputation in sport organizations.

Immoral behavior by ‘a few evil individuals’ can be regarded as one of the critical causes of athlete maltreatment. Likewise, by and large, maltreatment is viewed as caused by ‘the moral failures of individuals’ rather than by wider structures. For instance, in Canada, an investigation by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) reported that almost ‘222 coaches’ in amateur sports were charged with sexual offences against children, involving over 600 victims over the previous 20 years (Ward and Strashin 2019). Most victims, the investigation reported, were athletes training with coaches who looked for points of access to prey on children left in the clubhouse. In turn, the perpetrators commit-

ted various types of sexual violence such as sexual exploitation, rape and possession or production of child pornography (Ward and Strashin 2019). The investigation showed that 36 different amateur sports coaches were charged and convicted because of their individual sex crimes but there was little discussion about the wider structure and system of sport that may have contributed to the problem.

It is also important to consider that the problem may be caused by the power/authority of stakeholders imbued by the sport environment. In this view, both media and scholarly works have recognized one potential cause that is related to the power of stakeholders towards their athletes. As Kavanagh et al. (2020) state, the cause of maltreatment by perpetrators is all placed upon the “individuals who had misused their positions of power” (p. 1). More particularly, the power/authority of stakeholders is the dominant ‘causal storyline’ (Stone 1989) and is often expressed in the following way:

In this kind of story, problems or harms are understood as direct consequences of willful human action. Either someone acted in order to bring about the consequences, or someone acted with full knowledge of what the consequences would be. . . But when the consequences of purposeful human action are bad, we have stories of oppressors and victims. (Stone 2012, p. 209)

For example, the South Korean media recently connected the suicide of a Korean national triathlete with the abuse of a coach, a team physiotherapist and peers. As the media reported, their wrongdoings were reinforced by their power/authority in a sport environment where success was rewarded regardless of the harmful methods used to achieve it (Kim and Lee 2020; Lee et al. 2022). As Park et al. (2024a) note, power differentials between coaches and athletes are reinforced by vertical stratification rooted in South Korea’s strict hierarchical sporting culture, which facilitates maltreatment in elite sport. By extension, the negative impact of the power/authority of coaches in elite sport is exacerbated by two main factors: (1) the increased professionalization of coaching as an area of technical and scientific expertise (Gilbert et al. 2006; Kim and Dawson 2022); and (2) the support from organizations to maintain the position and legitimacy of coaches (Abraham et al. 2006). Hence, behaviors that would normally be defined as maltreatment are accepted and normalized because they appear successful in terms of winning at national and professional levels.

Furthermore, it is widely known that athlete maltreatment is linked to other sources, such as the ‘culture, practices and self-regulation’ within particular sports and/or the sport system more generally. Indeed, systemic practices in sport may enable maltreatment to occur, highlighting that the problem is more complex than just individual acts perpetrated towards athletes (Kavanagh et al. 2020). In particular, the culture and practices in the sport field shaped by Korean Confucian culture, seniority, a military-service culture and meritocracy may create conditions conducive to athlete maltreatment and help maintain dangerous sporting environments (Park et al. 2024a). According to Young (2019), for example, hazing is “one of the worst kept secrets in all of sports” with neophyte athletes sometimes experiencing traumatic initiation rituals within new team settings (p. 75). Further, and related to culture, sports coaching conduct and methods have sometimes been identified as part of a punitive ‘culture’ of control (Burak et al. 2013; Sullivan and Kent 2003). This issue was highlighted in the Universal Code of Conduct to prevent and address Maltreatment in Sport (UCCMS) which was developed at the 2019 Safe Sport Summit in Canada. However, some participants of the Summit were concerned that the code would have a negative impact on coaches’ ability to perform their job, and thus requested that the following clause be added:

Conduct and coaching methods that are acceptable to Canadian standards for skill enhancement, physical conditioning, team building, rule enforcement, or improved athletic performance [would be exempt from descriptions of maltreatment]. (Kerr et al. 2020, p. 10)

Those advocating for changes to current sports coaching conduct and methods perceived this clause as expressive of efforts to sustain a punitive ‘culture’ of control (Kerr et al. 2020).

Another acknowledged discourse associated with the causes of athlete maltreatment is that “coaches create a culture of retribution” (Jacobs et al. 2017, p. 132) and thus behave inappropriately to control their young athletes. The culture of control and retribution is reflected in quotes from two of their interviewees:

If parents complain then the next morning at practice their daughter will be told, ‘You do not tell your parents those kinds of things. What we do and say, stays here and you do not share that with your mother.’ She gets yelled at and is shamed in front of the others and/or is isolated during practice. You know that this girl will never say anything at home anymore. That is what I call total control.

If a coach knows someone is coming [from the board or NGA] all he has to do is say to an athlete: ‘Be careful . . . You know that competition you want to go to next month?’. (Jacobs et al. 2017, p. 132)

From the perspective of athletes, identifying the cause of maltreatment can be a problem because they may be socialized by the sport culture and have known nothing other than training within a hierarchical sport system. Consequently, athletes learn strict obedience towards coaches and team doctors, which itself becomes a major barrier to the problem that athlete welfare advocates are trying to resolve (Park et al. 2012, 2024a). It is important to acknowledge that just because a problem is identified in a particular place in which athletes might be socialized (e.g., the collective training camp, Olympic Training venue) (Park et al. 2024b), this does not necessarily mean that this is where the problem lies or that it (in itself) is the cause (Best 1995). In this sense, causal explanations are inherently political, where different interests will attempt to strategically portray causes that support their preferred solutions (Stone 1989).

A suite of research studies on the influence of commercial incentives with regard to athletes have emphasized ‘win at all costs’ behavioral outcomes, including the ruthless pursuit of profitable sponsorships, excessive testing with training technologies and recovery modalities (Belk 1996; Gems 1999; Van Bottenburg 2003; Westberg et al. 2017). From this perspective, Roberts et al. (2020) argue that “a winner-take-all reward system may induce coaches and athletes to use whatever means necessary, including abusive methods, to achieve results” (p. 11). For example, during the Larry Nassar trial, victims’ testimonies disclosed that ‘win at all costs’ mentality of the U.S. Olympic Committee and USA Gymnastics’ reinforced a culture in which athletes were conditioned to tolerate physical, emotional and sexual abuse (Kerr et al. 2019a). Likewise, within the South Korean elite sport system, the Specialist Athlete System for developing student-athletes has served as the cornerstone of its rapid growth for over 50 years, leading to a ‘win at all costs’ attitude that prioritizes achieving medals and competition success, often at the expense of athlete wellbeing (Park et al. 2024b).

Notably, sport organizations in many countries have operated a system of ‘self-regulation’ to protect athletes, but such systems tend to lack the necessary mechanisms required to monitor the health and safety of athletes. As Kerr et al. (2020) note, sport activities occur within a somewhat distinct realm, often detached from rules and regulations governing broader societal norms. In contrast, other areas where children are involved, such as educational settings and day care centers, have sufficient sanctions in place for individuals in positions of trust and authority (Kerr et al. 2020). From these perspectives, the overall sport environment, including its culture, practices and self-regulation are difficult to target as the cause of the problem because in many ways they have emerged as a response to previous problems.

Exemplifying the mix of causal mechanisms for athlete maltreatment at the extreme level is the case of Larry Nassar, who committed serious sexual transgressions as the USA gymnastics team doctor from 1996 to 2014. There were reports of concerning behavior as early as the 1990s, but what was eventually recognized as criminal behavior was hidden by

stakeholders who tried to protect the ‘image’ of USA Gymnastics (McPhee and Dowden 2018). This is because USA Gymnastics earned revenue by utilizing the wholesome image to attract sponsorships and advertisements. Hence, in this view, the cause of athlete maltreatment is not only the individual but the collection of interests who are incentivized to ignore or defend it.

3.3. The Challenges of Identifying Solutions: Links to Vested Interests and the Creation of New Problems

A third characteristic of wicked problems is that solutions are not readily apparent (Peters and Tarpey 2019). This essentially means that it is hard to qualify the effectiveness of remedies. Although planners and sport organizations have tried to implement various policies, programs and recommendations to solve the problem, solutions are inevitably elusive. Notably, maltreatment is an important consideration for stakeholders marked by the ‘efforts’ of agencies, schools and organizations which are in charge of providing solutions or remedies. Romano et al. (2015) refer to the *Helping Traumatized Children Learn* report (Cole et al. 2005) which identified multiple recommendations, including “school-wide infrastructure, culture, and policies; staff training; cross-sectoral links; academic and non-academic strategies” to promote educational success (p. 434). While educational programs for the prevention of maltreatment in sport for coaches and parents have amplified internationally for more than 25 years, empirical evaluations in relation to the effectiveness and success of such programs remain absent (Kerr et al. 2014; Kerr and Kerr 2020). In this sense, as a serious social problem, athlete maltreatment generally relies as much on political judgments as it does on (social) scientific certitudes in its search for remedies; that is, the problem is inherently resistant to an agreed solution (see Head and Alford 2015).

Indeed, the solutions to maltreatment for sport participants are far from clear. While the lack of solutions lies partly with the definitional ambiguity of the problem itself, the wickedness of solutions is also because they are connected to the individuals and organizations that are the cause of the issues (Head and Alford 2015). For that reason, athlete maltreatment may be resistant to simple remedies (e.g., Codes of Conduct) and solutions may need to be applied across different sectors and domains. Therefore, solutions to safeguard athletes from the problem of maltreatment may invariably have positive or negative impacts on stakeholders such as athletes, parents, coaches and managers. In South Korea, for example, a new regulation to advocate for the victims of sexual abuse in sport has led to an unanticipated result that they now have to prove in court that they were sexually assaulted as a direct result of the power and authority of perpetrators (Kim and Kim 2019). That is, despite a system of law established to protect the victims, its implementation may create new issues such as re-victimizing those who were abused and/or shielding the system from blame.

In this regard, solutions to resolve athlete maltreatment can create new problems or unintended consequences (Sam 2009; Weber and Khademian 2008). This is because wicked problems require decision making within uncertain conditions in that, “the further one develops causal chains of consequences into the future, the more the effects of uncertainty will come into effect” (Rittel 1977, p. 392). For example, in 2019, following several high-profile scandals and growing concerns regarding athlete maltreatment, the South Korean government appointed a Sport Reform Committee² to comprehensively review the sporting system and investigate the underlying causes of the problem, resulting in seven recommendations (Hong 2020; Park et al. 2024b). One of the significant risks identified surrounded the Collective Sports Training Camps (CSTCs) to youth and adult athletes residing in villas or flats, that could expose them to various types of maltreatment. To address this problem, the Committee advocated for the complete abolition of the CSTCs (operated from elementary to high school, including unconventional off-school camps) and suggested permitting limited dormitory operations exclusively for long-distance students (Kim and Jang 2022). However, despite efforts to eradicate the CSTCs, focusing solely on this aspect of the sport system inadvertently led to new problems such as the emergence

of ‘illegal’ training camps near schools and private sport clubs (Park et al. 2024b). This example demonstrates that solutions or remedies will invariably give rise to new issues or unintended consequences, highlighting the characteristic complexity of wicked problems.

To sum up, maltreatment in sport is difficult to accurately define because the problem can be linked to multiple, overlapping *causes*. It is further ‘wicked’ because solutions are not readily apparent, and these are often politically connected with stakeholders and organizations. Finally, maltreatment is wicked because the mix of incomplete causal interpretations and isolated solutions invariably create unanticipated issues. As shown in Table 1 below, the relationship between the concepts and characteristics of wicked problems and maltreatment in sport has been identified through a diverse range of features of sport.

Table 1. The relationship between characteristics of wicked problems and maltreatment.

Characteristics of Wicked Problems	Maltreatment in Sport
It is difficult to define the problem (Peters 2017; Peters and Tarpey 2019)	1. Definitions of maltreatment are broad or ambiguous 2. Definitions of maltreatment differ according to different stakeholders 3. Definitions of maltreatment are institutionally prescribed as criminal and non-criminal behavior
It is difficult to establish the cause of problems (Ansell and Bartenberger 2016); Problems are linked to other problems (Peters and Tarpey 2019)	1. Maltreatment is viewed as the result of ‘a few bad individuals’ 2. Maltreatment is caused by the peer power/authority of coaches, support professionals, institutionally imbued by the sport environment (Stirling and Kerr 2016) 3. Maltreatment is related to other problems in the sport system such as institutionalized practice and self-regulation because sometimes maltreatment is integral or part of culture 4. Maltreatment persists because it is hidden from stakeholders to sustain the ‘image’ of sport organizations (McPhee and Dowden 2018)
Solutions are not readily apparent (Peters and Tarpey 2019); Solutions are linked with the people/organizations who are the cause of the problem; Solutions create new and possibly unforeseen problems (Sam 2009; Weber and Khademian 2008)	1. Maltreatment may be resistant to simple remedies with a narrow behavioral scope (e.g., Codes of Conduct) 2. Solutions are difficult to apply across different sectors and institutional domains 3. Solutions may have both positive and negative effects on stakeholders (e.g., athletes, parents, coaches and managers), such as when victims are ‘revictimized’ by investigative processes, or when undesired practices are propagated outside of the system

3.4. Why Maltreatment as a Wicked Problem Is Important to Understand

It is widely known that wicked problems are important for stakeholders in order for them to understand the implications and challenges of policymaking. As described in the previous section, the concept of wicked problems tends to be characterized as any difficult issue, but sometimes with “seeming disregard for the components of the concept as originally articulated” (Peters and Tarpey 2019, p. 222). Although the characteristics of wicked problems are significant, the common underlying factor is that a rising number of issues facing governments and organizations, cannot be solved effectively or cannot be solved through the existing processes that they use (Peters and Tarpey 2019). Nonetheless, it is necessary to understand several forms of social problems with the various attributions of wicked problems since they are overwhelmingly perceived to explain a large number of policy issues.

Approaching maltreatment in sport as a wicked problem is a potentially important task for stakeholders who might show disagreement regarding the cause of the problems. For example, scholars and policymakers in other sectors such as planning, economics and education have leveraged the theory of wicked problems to identify more fine-grained causes of the problem as well as novel/effective solutions. Some advance the need for dialogue-based approaches for goal setting, planning and strategizing (Head and Alford 2015; Healey 2020; Innes and Booher 1999). Others, including officials and administrators,

prefer not to use the theory because they favor solutions that reduce conflict with other stakeholders while also diminishing the complexity of administration.

Although various remedies have been proposed and trialed, wicked problems, by their very nature and composition, cannot be completely resolved. This does not imply a sense of fatality and inevitability but rather encourages scholars and policymakers to understand and acknowledge the limits and potential unintended consequences of these issues. Consequently, the way in which policy literature defines wicked problems and the normative concepts within the proposed sport system predispose the way the problems of maltreatment are framed. The next section briefly outlines the cases of doping and match-fixing as other examples of sport-related wicked problems and how they are related to maltreatment in sport. Also, it includes a brief description of laws and policies related to child maltreatment and athlete maltreatment.

4. Other Wicked Problems in Sport: Doping and Match-Fixing

The relationship between the features of wicked problems and maltreatment discussed in the previous section can be compared to other wicked problems such as doping and match-fixing in sport by identifying and explaining potential similarities. These problems are relevant in that they are perceived as serious issues in sport that have resulted in the creation of new policies and institutional regimes. More importantly, there is a long-held worldwide recognition that maltreatment, doping and match-fixing in sport have threatened the value and integrity of sport and have been understood as difficult problems to address because they have the features of wicked problems (Sam et al. 2023).

Let us briefly compare the similarities. Here, we can think about the challenge of defining the problem of doping as a wicked problem. For example, some athletes might not regard the social use of prohibited substances such as alcohol, cocaine and marijuana as ‘doping’ as they are not generally taken to enhance performance. However, the anti-doping rules regulate these substances as rule violations when traces of them are discovered in an athlete’s urine during the competition (De Hon et al. 2015). Meanwhile, the issue of doping is not a strictly pharmaceutical problem; rather, it is characterized as cheating (Kräkel 2007), and as one of the most serious threats to the integrity of sport (Engelberg et al. 2015; Gurgis et al. 2023). Match-fixing likewise undermines the fundamental feature of sports competition which is the uncertainty of process and consequence (Hosmer-Henner 2010; McNamee 2013; Tak et al. 2018). It has a long history in all types of sport going back to the earliest times, but mostly in terms of ‘cheating to win’ rather than gambling (Preston and Szymanski 2003, p. 618). Definitions of match-fixing often refer to terms like ‘improper alteration’ but rarely specify exactly what is meant by ‘improper alteration’ (Chappelet 2015, p. 1261).

In part, this highlights the issue of how language is used to define/redefine particular problems which, in turn, influences how they are framed and understood by the public. In particular, maltreatment, doping and match-fixing are very often regarded as cultural practices. Many researchers indicate that “doping practices” are facilitated by coaches, medical and managerial staff because doping is used to enhance sport performance (Kerr and Kerr 2020, p. 100). Moreover, match-fixing is sometimes framed as a corrupted betting/gambling-related practice with “the intentional manipulation of competitions, results or aspects of a match”, which directly impacts on the integrity of sport (Moriconi and De Cima 2020, p. 162). Maltreatment in professional and amateur sport is also recognized “as part of a culture facilitated by management who either turn a blind eye or believe it to be in the athletes’ interests” (Kerr and Kerr 2020, p. 100).

Another similarity between maltreatment, doping and match-fixing is that many preferred explanations for solutions can be invoked as an argument amongst stakeholders. For example, a range of efforts to solve these issues (even very short-term and intensive plans such as: laws, regulations, penalties, policies, education) are often challenged by the combined views of experts and the government. Nevertheless, to solve these problems, carefully designed remedies may not be readily obvious because the remedies are associated

with the “very actors who are the cause of the problems” (Peters and Tarpey 2019, p. 220). As the Russian case of state-sanctioned doping illustrates, it is not necessarily in the best interests of elite sport agencies to eradicate doping, if incentives are overwhelmingly in favor of winning medals. In a similar vein, sports betting is undeniably an important source of revenue for sport and while there are monitoring systems targeting irregular betting patterns and suspicious sporting outcomes, it is impossible to identify the precise effectiveness of the countermeasure (Kalb 2011).

In sum, despite all of the efforts to eradicate maltreatment, doping and match-fixing, these problems persist in sport because there are no complete remedies available to resolve ongoing threats to the integrity of sport. Thus, it is useful to understand the characteristics of problems in sport with respect to particular features of wicked problems which are perceived to explain various policy issues. This understanding is particularly underscored by the fact that doping and match-fixing regulations have been in place for decades and consequently these offer opportunities for policy learning on the part of stakeholders wishing to tackle maltreatment.

Laws, Policies and Rules Regarding Maltreatment

Research on maltreatment is important for enhancing the quality of policy that may control this serious social problem. For example, intervention and prevention strategies for the maltreatment of children are widely used. Laws and conventions to prevent child maltreatment were originally enacted in many countries (e.g., South Korea, Australia and the United States) in the 1960s and 1970s. In particular, the enactment of laws associated with child maltreatment seems to vary for historical, cultural, religious and economic reasons but what is clear is that all laws should be maintained by balancing societal tolerance with reasonable enforcement (Mathews and Bross 2013).³ The concern of child protection in sport has been enhanced by the establishment of children’s rights policy. Rights for athletes and children in sport stem from their legal and moral roots emerging from pre-existing human rights law (Kerr and Stirling 2008). First, “the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) was established by the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the National Olympic Committees and the International Sport Federations in 1983” (Kidd and Donnelly 2000, p. 140). Second, policies and organizations for athletes’ rights in Canada were implemented by “the Canadian Olympic Association Athletes’ Advisory Council, AthletesCAN, the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada, and inclusion of ethical conduct and athletes’ rights in the Canadian Sport Policy” (Kerr and Stirling 2008, p. 310). Lastly, the issues besetting sport were recognized by Sport England in partnership with the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) as well as initiated by the Child Protection in Sport Unit (CPSU) in 1999 (Turner and McCrory 2004).

To sum up, maltreatment is recognized as a major issue in society as evidenced by the implementation of numerous laws, policies, institutions and organizations to protect athletes and children (Park et al. 2024a; Stirling 2009). Moreover, a number of legal frameworks and avenues can be combined to provide preventive mechanisms and an extensive repertoire of remedies for societies and experts working with child protection, policy and justice (Mathews and Bross 2013). However, despite these multiple strategies, initiatives and increased attention, scholars observe that current policies have failed to prevent maltreatment in sport (Donnelly and Kerr 2018; Kerr and Kerr 2020; Park et al. 2024b). While the reasons for this are not clear, it is likely that within both highly commercialized and hypercompetitive national sport systems, athletes may be the victims of maltreatment by coaches, managers and colleagues who are all under pressure to succeed. Additionally, stakeholders such as agencies, schools and sport organizations have allowed the perpetrators of maltreatment to offend. It is thus difficult to isolate the causation of wicked problems because of the complex nature of sport mechanisms and systems.

5. Conclusions

Despite attracting attention from numerous stakeholders and relevant organizations, resolving athlete maltreatment is hindered by its inherent intractable or unmanageable features. This study examined the contested terrain of athlete maltreatment in sport, which faces challenges in both defining and addressing the problem. Using the concept of a wicked problem, we suggest maltreatment in sport remains intractable because: (a) definitions of the problem vary according to the various perspectives of stakeholders including the media, researchers, the sport community and athletes; and (b) conceptions of the problem vary along legal-societal interpretations of criminal or non-criminal behavior. Secondly, establishing the cause of athlete maltreatment is challenging due to its connections with other issues (that may be both 'real' and perceived). More specifically, there are four distinct causal interpretations: (a) the misconduct of a few individuals; (b) the power/authority granted to stakeholders by the sport environments; (c) the sport system itself (culture, practices and self-regulation); and (d) the priority given to maintaining the 'image' or reputation of sport organizations. Lastly, solutions for addressing athlete maltreatment are inherently elusive as they are closely intertwined with individuals and organizations responsible for the problem (Head and Alford 2015). Consequently, the problem may resist simple remedies such as Codes of Conduct, and solutions will often create new problems and unintended consequences over time (Sam 2009; Weber and Khademian 2008). Solutions to protect athletes from maltreatment may inevitably produce both positive and negative impacts on stakeholders (e.g., athletes, parents, coaches and managers). Hence, based on our analysis, maltreatment is "vicious or tricky" (cf. Jackson et al. 2022, p. 5), due to the inherent complexity of its key attributes.

Ultimately, viewing issues (e.g., maltreatment, doping, match-fixing) through the lens of a wicked problem contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in organized sport, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of opposing stakeholders and the interconnected challenges these present. As previously mentioned, most studies of maltreatment in sport have analyzed similar aspects of the problem, yet without acknowledging that the definitions, proposed causes and any associated implemented solutions have multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations. Indeed, the contexts of wicked problems are rarely challenged. Therefore, since discussions about maltreatment are often restricted at the level of key stakeholders, sport organizations tend to nominate themselves as the ones most capable of analyzing the problem and identifying solutions. This self-nomination can be problematic due to potential biases and conflicts of interest, hence why some countries (like Australia and New Zealand) have established independent statutory entities to address the problem (see Sam et al. 2023). In this lies the hope that maltreatment in sport can be more broadly constructed within various perceptions of both the victims and perpetrators, reflecting the diverse and conflicting interpretations inherent in wicked problems. Yet, even so, to mitigate maltreatment in sport will require a wider scope than most remedies can provide. This exploration would thus suggest attending to the contested terrain more broadly as a means of developing coordinated responses among stakeholders. While such responses may only achieve partial and temporary successes, this approach will nevertheless invite ongoing attention and effort, perhaps amenable to continuous adaptation and change.

It is thus important to consider that the definitions, causes and resolution regarding athlete maltreatment are intertwined in a complex manner with the maintenance and legitimization of sport systems (see Figure 1 below). In light of these findings, future studies may consider advocating for periodic reassessment of the enduring institutional factors that contribute to athlete maltreatment in organized sport, along with corresponding endeavors aimed at mitigation. We hope that our critical evaluation, encompassing the suggested research agenda, will stimulate other scholars to explore the issue of athlete maltreatment.

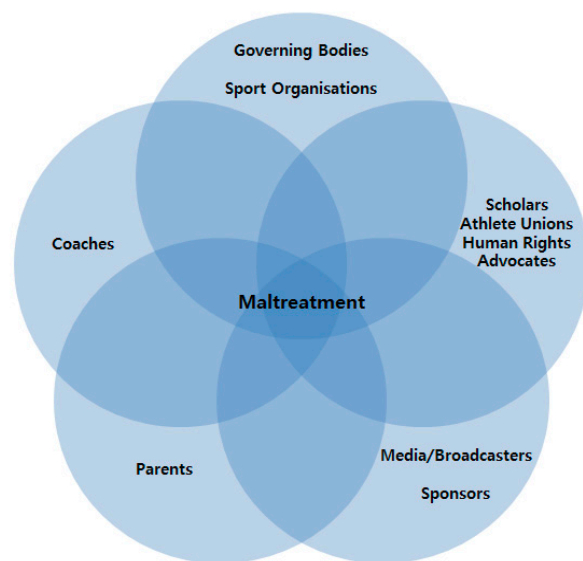


Figure 1. ‘Wicked’ nature of maltreatment in sport by highlighting the complex and contradictory positions of stakeholders.

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Notes

- ¹ Rittel and Webber’s (1973) original 10 characteristics can be conceptually integrated into three main elements. Characteristics 1 and 7, for example, are related to defining the problem; Characteristics 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 are essentially definitions in relation to solutions; Characteristics 8 and 9 indicate the possibility of another problem that links with numerous points of view; Characteristic 10 describes the liability of the planner or person ultimately responsible for developing and implementing a solution (Ansell and Bartenberger 2016; Head and Alford 2015; Peters 2017).
- ² The committee members consisted of five Vice-Ministers (the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MCST), the Ministry of Education (MoE), the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (MOGEF), the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MOEF) and the National Human Rights Commission of Korea and 15 civilian experts (sport, human rights, gender, disability, law and civil society) from February 2019 to January 2020 (Hong 2020).
- ³ The first English laws regarding maltreatment, such as the Poor Law 1868, were aimed at intervening in cases of severe neglect but were poorly implemented. Prosecutions for severe maltreatment were rare (Mathews and Bross 2013, p. 481). In 1974, the enactment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) delineated state obligations for safeguarding children and bolstered the fulfillment of these duties with new federal funding for state initiatives and nationwide studies. CAPTA has undergone multiple reauthorizations, most recently in 2010 (National Research Council et al. 2014).

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