ATHLEX SPORTS JOURNAL

Safeguarding in Sport: The Italian Model and International Experience

By *Giacomo Beraldi*

1. Introduction

Sport is first and foremost a means of education, inclusion and personal development. Yet the sporting environment is not immune to violence, abuse of power and discrimination that exploit the vulnerability of children.

It is in this context that *Safeguarding* takes centre stage, understood as a set of preventive, organisational and oversight measures designed to ensure a safe, inclusive sporting environment respectful of human dignity. The scale of the problem is documented by the European CASES project (*Child Abuse in Sport: European Statistics*). Based on retrospective accounts from young adults in six European countries, the study found that 65% of respondents had experienced psychological violence in childhood sport, 44% physical violence, 37% neglect, 35% non-contact sexual violence[1] and 20% contact sexual violence. These figures demonstrate that abuse cannot be confined to acts of sexual or physical violence.

The Italian legal system confirms this development: athlete protection has gradually evolved from a primarily ethical concern into a genuine legal obligation.

2. Safeguarding in the Italian Sports Legal System

On the legislative front, the national framework is mainly established by two measures of the Sports Reform: Legislative Decree No. 36 of 2021 and Legislative Decree No. 39 of 2021. Article 33(6) of Legislative Decree No. 36/2021 provides for the appointment of a child protection officer, while Article 16 of Legislative Decree No. 39/2021 governs the drafting and adoption of organisational and supervisory models for sporting activities and codes of

[1]CASES, *General Report: The Prevalence and Characteristics of Interpersonal Violence Against Children (IVAC) Inside and Outside Sport in Six European Countries*, Edge Hill University, Ormskirk, 2021, available at: https://childhub.org/sites/default/files/library/attachments/CASES_ProjectReport%20%281%29.pdf.

conduct aimed at preventing harassment, violence and discrimination. The most significant innovation is therefore the decision to impose on sports organisations not only duties to refrain from unlawful conduct but also positive duties of organisation, supervision and prevention. The legislation was implemented within the Italian sports system through CONI National Board Resolution No. 255 [2]of 25 July 2023, which approved model regulations for preventing and combating abuse, violence and discrimination, giving rise to a three-tier system:

I. At the highest level stands CONI, responsible for establishing the fundamental principles and providing overall guidance.
II. At the intermediate level are the National Sports Federations, Associated Sports Disciplines, Sports Promotion Bodies and Meritorious Associations, tasked with adopting guidelines for their affiliates and appointing a *Safeguarding* policy officer.
III. Finally, individual sports associations and clubs must translate those guidelines into organizational measures that can actually be applied to their activities.

3. Organisational Models, Codes of Conduct and Affiliates' Responsibilities

The principal preventive instrument under the Italian sports system is the Organisational and Control Model for Sporting Activities (MOC), together with the Code of Conduct. The former must identify risks specific to the organisation, establish preventive measures, regulate reporting systems and provide for monitoring. The latter sets out the behavioural rules binding managers, coaches, staff and registered members. The rules therefore require an advance risk assessment that cannot be identical for every organisation: a club running youth programmes involving travel and overnight stays faces different needs from an association devoted solely to adult sport. The model cannot consequently be reduced to a standardised document. According to the
principles outlined in the guide by Bastianon and Colucci[3], pioneers in academic research into national and European *Safeguarding* policies,

[2] CONI, National Council Resolution No. 255 of 25 July 2023 and subsequent implementing provisions.
[3] S. Bastianon, M. Colucci, *Il safeguarding in ambito sportivo. Nozioni di base, schemi concettuali, riferimenti normativi*, XVI edizione, Sports Law and Policy Centre, 15 settembre 2026. Particularly pp. 10-30, 35-53.

models must be updated at least every four years, without prejudice to earlier revisions when new risks arise or activities change. Sanctions are also relevant. Article 16(3) of Legislative Decree No. 39/2021 leaves it to individual federations to regulate the consequences of failing to adopt the prescribed instruments. The Italian system therefore recognises that athlete safety cannot depend solely on disciplinary action after abuse has occurred. It must be pursued through an organisational structure capable of detecting and reducing risks.

4. Safeguarding Officers and the Challenge of Effectiveness

A central role is assigned to '*Safeguarding* Officers', whose functions must be distinguished according to the organisational level at which they operate. Within federations, the '*Safeguarding* Policy Officer' provides guidance, supervision and management of reports under the relevant rules. Sports associations and clubs, by contrast, have an 'Officer for the Prevention of Abuse, Violence and Discrimination'. This officer is not necessarily tasked with establishing disciplinary liability, which remains the responsibility of the competent bodies, but with overseeing preventive measures, receiving and handling reports under established procedures, and activating appropriate protection channels. The practical effectiveness of this role depends on adequate training and genuine operational independence:

i. First, the role requires not only legal expertise but also organisational, psychological and interpersonal skills. Recognising abuse, listening to a child and taking appropriate action without exposing them to further harm all require specific training.
ii. As regards independence, the possibility that the officer may be permanently integrated into the club's structure raises potential conflicts of interest, especially where a report concerns particularly influential managers or coaches;

5. From Regulatory Requirements to Case Law

To understand more fully how regulatory *Safeguarding* requirements are applied in practice within the sports system, it is useful to consider the relevant Italian case law. Given the variety of cases and the continuing evolution of judicial approaches, reference is made, for reasons of systematic treatment, methodological clarity and currency, to the *Collection of Italian Sports Case Law on Safeguarding*, edited by Stefano Bastianon and Michele Colucci. Now in its sixteenth edition and updated to 15

September 2026[4], the work collects, organises and analyses decisions of sports justice bodies, arranged by federation, adjudicating body and date.

According to information cited in the latest edition of the *Collection*, the report of the CONI General Sports Prosecutor for 2014–2023 shows that 24 federations were involved in proceedings concerning sexual abuse, sexual harassment or paedophilia. FIGC, FISE and FIPAV were among those recording the highest numbers of cases. Taken alone, these figures cannot establish which sports carry the greatest risk: case numbers also depend on membership levels, willingness to report, access to reporting channels and the activities of investigative bodies. In football, the FIGC *Safeguarding* Commission handled 173 reports in 2025, forwarding 79 incidents considered worthy of further disciplinary investigation to the Federal Prosecutor. During the same period, 49 measures were adopted. These figures indicate a functioning and effective system, although substantial scope remains for development, broader adoption and consolidation. A rigorous assessment of Italian policies will require increasingly consistent data, published regularly and accompanied by information on case outcomes, preventive measures and response times.

6. Safeguarding – International experience

6.1. A Brief Comparison with the US Model

The analysis of the Italian legal system can be complemented by examining the rules and practices developed at the top of another sports system: that of the United States. In the United States, the model is centralised, notably through the *U.S. Center for SafeSport*, which handles reports and protection procedures within the US Olympic and Paralympic movement, in accordance with the powers assigned by law and the relevant federation. The model thus differs from the Italian structure by concentrating major responsibilities for handling and assessing misconduct in a body independent of individual federations. One reason for this approach is to mitigate risks arising from conflicts of interest and the internal handling of complaints, particularly when influential figures within sports organisations are involved. The Center's 2025 annual report illustrates the system's operational scale. During the year, it received 9,683 reports, an increase of 19.6% over 2024, or approximately 186 per week. The model's chief strength is therefore the separation between those

[4] S. Bastianon, M. Colucci (edited by), *Raccolta della Giurisprudenza Sportiva Italiana sul Safeguarding*, As updated on 15 September 2026, available at: https://www.rdes.it/Giurisprudenza%20Sportiva%20Italiana%20%20in%20Materia%20di%20Safeguarding.pdf.

who govern sporting disciplines and those charged with examining certain abusive conduct. The challenge lies in ensuring appropriate processing times, sufficient resources and procedural safeguards both for reporting persons and for those implicated.

6.2. IOC

The volume *Protecting the Beauty of the Game: Towards a Safeguarding Culture*[5] documents how *Safeguarding* has become an essential component of international governance, even though no uniform binding rules apply to all federations. The International Olympic Committee has itself developed a protection framework linking athlete safety to the Olympic movement's ethical principles. The *Framework for Safeguarding Athletes and Other Participants from Harassment and Abuse in Sport* and the *Safeguarding Toolkit*[6] translate that approach into operational guidance: definitions of prohibited conduct, policies and procedures, confidential reporting channels, training for those concerned and dedicated protection officers. The IOC also promotes training initiatives and specific tools for sporting events. Compared with Italian rules, the importance of this model lies in its shared preventive approach: prohibiting abuse is not enough; a recognisable and accessible institutional response must be organised. Nevertheless, it is essential to distinguish the guidance and regulatory value of Olympic movement instruments from obligations imposed on Italian sports associations and clubs by state and federation rules. The distinction is primarily one level: international bodies guide policies for their disciplines and events, while affiliated organisations must translate the rules into everyday practice, including grassroots sport.

6.3. International Federations

The same volume offers FIBA as a first example. In his contribution on the *Safe Courts* programme, Jaime Lamboy[7] describes a system combining *Safeguarding* policies, dedicated internal bodies, training, risk assessment and mechanisms for reporting and managing cases. Particular emphasis is placed on implementing measures during competitions and providing ongoing training, rather than merely adopting a

[5] S. Bastianon, M. Colucci (edited by), *Protecting the Beauty of the Game*, cit., ed. SLPC, pp. 41–184.

[6] IOC, *Safeguarding athletes from harassment and abuse in sport IOC Toolkit for IFs and NOCs*, available at: https://stillmed.olympics.com/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/IOC/What-We-Do/Promote-Olympism/Women-And-Sport/Boxes%20CTA/IOC_Safeguarding_Toolkit_ENG_Screen_Full1.pdf#_ga=2.220159961.1574737385.1681213189-594927581.1678187184.

[7] S. Bastianon, M. Colucci (a cura di), *Protecting the Beauty of the Game*, cit., ed. SLPC, pp. 77-98.

written code.

A second model is found in international gymnastics. Carola Carrannante's contribution examines the policies of the International Gymnastics Federation and the role of the *Gymnastics Ethics Foundation*,[8] particularly significant in distinguishing the governance of a discipline from integrity and protection functions. In a sport involving minors and relationships of strong technical dependence, organisational separation aims to make the receipt of reports and assessment of conduct more credible. The volume also examines, among other examples, the FIFA Foundation's *Safe Football Support Unit*.[9]

This diversity of sources presents a structural limitation: standards, regulations and recommendations do not all carry the same legal force, nor do they alone ensure uniform application. As Bastianon and Colucci observe in their international and European survey, the spread of *Safeguarding* initiatives makes coordination particularly important, without confusing general principles of personal protection with directly enforceable sporting obligations. The international perspective therefore provides not one model to import but criteria for testing the effectiveness of the Italian system: who receives reports, how independent are they, what expertise do they possess, how are those concerned protected, and which indicators measure the effectiveness of preventive measures?

7. Conclusions

The foregoing analysis shows that *Safeguarding* is now an integral part of sports governance, both nationally and internationally. The Italian legislature has embraced this development by introducing organisational and preventive obligations that move beyond an exclusively punitive approach.

Despite differences in the instruments adopted and their legal force, the experiences of the IOC and international federations reveal a common limitation: establishing rules and safeguarding bodies does not, in itself, ensure their effectiveness. The independence of safeguarding officers, specialist training, adequate procedures and the monitoring of outcomes are therefore the main criteria for assessing the practical implementation of the rules. From this perspective, the challenge facing the Italian sports system appears to lie less in introducing further obligations than in strengthening those already in place, through substantive oversight and measures proportionate to the particular characteristics of sports

[8] Ibid., pp. 107-118

[9] Ibid., pp. 99-106

organisations.