

# BREAKING THE SPECTACLE: EXPLOITATION AND EMPOWERMENT IN THE NWSL

Jessica Luther and Kathryn Hartzell

**The professional women's** soccer league in the United States faced a reckoning in 2021. Over a two month period, investigative journalists exposed the abuses of two head coaches in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), [Paul Riley](#) and [Richie Burke](#), and in doing so, illuminated the larger institutional apparatus that protects abusive men at the expense of [women athletes, coaching staff, and club employees](#). These revelations shattered the popular perception of women's soccer as a progressive and empowering sport. Alongside the pandemic disruption, wider changes in labor relations for athletes, and shifting attitudes toward women's sports, these stories have forced a reexamination of the power dynamics around women athletes.

Women's sports have long been held up by the media, fans, and even women's sports organizations themselves as necessary because they inspire and empower young girls. At the same time, women's sports are chronically [underfunded, under-resourced, and sparsely covered in the media](#). [Rachel Allison](#) and [Jennifer McClearn](#) argue that these contradictions lead to exploitative labor practices where women are expected to devalue their own labor in order to ensure the larger goal of promoting women's sports which are often treated as in danger of disappearing. This combination of factors means that people who care about and participate in women's sports are often hesitant to expose the underbelly because it could damage these ideas of inspiration and empowerment and weaken what little support already exists.

In recent years, women's soccer in the U.S. has become a spectacle of equality and empowerment. Media outlets positioned the 2019 World Cup Champion [USWNT](#) as brave symbols of a progressive future. [Megan Rapinoe's public war of words with President Trump](#) represented to many fans the



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Paul Riley, former NWSL head coach fired for sexual misconduct.

new power of women's sports and a repudiation of sexist and homophobic attitudes. [The team sued US Soccer](#), demanding a more equal pay structure and became a symbol of gender equity. This fervor around the USWNT inevitably spilled over onto the NWSL, even though the league has an identity beyond the USWNT.

Richie Burke's sexist and racist abuse of Washington Spirit players and Paul Riley's manipulation of young players into sleeping with him, especially during his time with the Portland Thorns, though, was the underbelly on full display. The subsequent revelations that [two other NWSL clubs had quietly terminated their head coaches](#) for harassment in the last year, and the further exposure of [Chicago Red Stars' Rory Dames abusive practices](#), demonstrated the league's commitment to protecting known abusers. The differential treatment of [NWSL players who on average subsist on \\$30,000 a year or less](#) without the ability to control their image rights, and repeated retention and rehiring of men with public histories of inappropriate behavior, laid bare

The USWNT in 2019, including stars Megan Rapinoe and Alex Morgan.



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the realities of working in a field where men continue to dominate ownership and leadership roles. The goals of club owners, many of whom represent hedge funds and other investment-related firms, and the players who create the product, allowed for [toxic cultures](#) to thrive and encouraged players to remain silent.

[For Sonal Jha](#), sport as spectacle reduces sport to an object of viewer pleasure that erases the labor of athletes. In that sense, the spectacle of women's soccer started to splinter even before stories of abuse rocked the league. The global pandemic forced leagues and the press to contend with issues of player health and wellness that extended beyond the playing field to where players lived, where they trained, where they socialized. It reminded everyone that players, first and foremost, are people and they are laborers. For example, when the NWSL became the first U.S. professional sports league to return to play after the initial rise of COVID cases, press coverage for the event, the She Believes Cup, [centered on the creation of a safe "bubble,"](#) a holistic and enclosed environment that included not only games but training and living facilities. While the bubble existed ostensibly to protect players, lurking within it were other dangers. After the tournament, one NWSL team [quietly fired](#) an assistant coach for inappropriate sexual comments to players while another [fired a head coach](#) for similar reasons.

While the NWSL leadership did not link player health and wellbeing with harassment, the Players Association did. The [NWSLPA](#), which was officially recognized as a union in 2018, lobbied the league to adopt an anti-harassment policy, which it did in early 2021. It was under this [Anti-Harassment Policy for a Safe Work Environment](#) that clubs dismissed four head coaches in the summer and fall of 2021.

The NWSLPA is the latest players association to challenge power dynamics in professional women's sports through unionization and collective bargaining. Following the successful lead of the WNBA, [whose latest CBA](#) was announced in early 2020, the [NWSLPA hopes to secure its first CBA](#) to redress issues such as salary structures, image rights, and health insurance. The NWSLPA's attempt to challenge this structure aligns professional women soccer players not only with the WNBA but also with the [AFL-CIO](#).

In the wake of the reporting about Burke and Riley, [NWSL players protested on the field](#) during matches and vocalized their displeasure with the harmful choices made by league leadership. There is now a new commissioner, a push for a CBA, and players more willing to speak out than ever before. The spectacle of inspiration and empowerment has been shattered but the NWSL now has a chance to build a better, safer league for its players. ■

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