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‘They swept it under the rug’: Prominent cheerleading gym disregards sex abuse allegations

Marisa Kwiatkowski and Tricia L. Nadolny, USA TODAY

Published 5:30 AM EDT Jul. 23, 2021 | Updated 3:19 PM EDT Jul. 25, 2021

In late 2019, North Carolina gym owner Julie O'Brien called a competitor to warn that one of her former cheerleading coaches, Darius "DJ" Williams, had been arrested amid accusations he sexually assaulted a young athlete.

old boy, including at a sleepover with athletes, according to law enforcement and court records.

"They were concerned," she said. "They *acted* like they were concerned."

Yet over the next year and a half, Williams practiced alongside fellow athletes, taught lessons and posed in Cheer Extreme team photos, according to a dozen social media posts, including some from team accounts. The 26-year-old, whose criminal case is pending and who denies the allegations, told USA TODAY gym officials have been well aware of his charges since 2019.



Darius "DJ" Williams
LANCASTER COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

"They didn't believe it," Williams said. "They knew who I am."

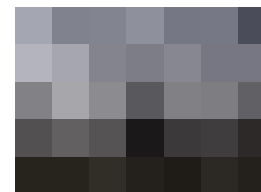
than a thousand titles, according to its website.

A USA TODAY investigation found those accolades belie a troubling record on child protection. Owners and officials at several Cheer Extreme locations have disregarded allegations of sexual misconduct against athletes and coaches, in some cases allowing those accused to move from one gym to another, where new accusations emerged.

Last year, USA TODAY revealed pervasive failures across the sport of competitive cheerleading, including how the governing body, the U.S. All Star Federation (USASF), delayed investigations and failed to prevent those accused or convicted of crimes from working in member gyms. The news organization detailed sexual misconduct allegations against celebrity cheerleader Jerry Harris, who has been arrested and pleaded not guilty to federal charges. USASF has since hired a consulting firm to strengthen its policies and enforcement.

Problems persist. USA TODAY found individuals USASF suspended or banned continued to participate in the sport. And this week, twin cheerleaders sued USASF and another powerhouse cheer company, Cheer Athletics, accusing the organizations of failing to act when the women anonymously reported allegations against an owner. Cheer Athletics initially denied wrongdoing but deleted the statement, apologizing for the tone. USASF said it does not comment on litigation.

Members of the cheerleading community who spoke with USA TODAY said they were frustrated by the gaps in athlete protection. Several of them cited Cheer Extreme as an example of how the desire to win, coupled with USASF's weak policies, can put the sport's children at risk.



'A huge slap in the face': Frustrations grow over cheerleading's mishandled sexual misconduct cases

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stopped him from being at Cheer Extreme.

USASF Vice President of Membership Amy Clark, who declined to be interviewed, previously told USA TODAY a suspension or ban means that an individual can't take part in any USASF-sanctioned event. Outside that, she said, she expects gym owners would check the list of flagged individuals and "make the decision to not allow that person to interact with minors."

W. Scott Lewis, managing partner at TNG, the company that USASF hired to conduct investigations and review its child protection policies, declined to speak about specific cases but said the sport faces "a culture change." In a departure from Clark's comments, Lewis said he would recommend that USASF no longer permit its gyms to be affiliated with suspended or banned coaches and that it sanction individuals who fail to comply.

"I can tell you what we're doing moving forward, which is that's a violation and we would investigate and sanction accordingly or recommend sanctions [to USASF]," Lewis said.

Help USA TODAY investigate misconduct in cheerleading

If you are an athlete, parent, coach, gym owner or someone else with a connection to cheer, we want to hear your story.

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Cheer Extreme said in a statement that it has "zero tolerance for any kind of inappropriate or illegal behavior."

"We meet all requirements of the USASF, and in addition, we do extensive background checks, continual training on the signs of grooming and abuse for all of our staff, and have strict rules for communications between coaches and athletes," the company said.

Three of Cheer Extreme's locations are owned by sisters Courtney Smith-Pope and Kelly Helton, members of the family that founded the company. The other eight locations are under separate ownership and pay a licensing fee to use the Cheer Extreme brand.

Charlotte gym. That location closed this year. Smith-Pope said Cheer Extreme has never hired or paid Williams and any coaching Williams did was individual lessons booked by parents "with no Cheer Extreme knowledge or involvement."

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Williams appears in at least half a dozen Instagram photos that official Cheer Extreme team accounts posted after his arrest. Williams told USA TODAY that Charlotte gym director Tez Parker is a close friend who asked him for input during practices. Williams said Parker connected him with families seeking cheer lessons after Williams lost his job teaching middle school, when he was charged with two counts of felony criminal sexual conduct with a minor.

Williams insisted he is not a coach.

"What you're seeing from the outside is like, 'Oh, you're a coach,'" he said. "But no, I'm just a glorified spectator, I guess, if you want to call it that."

In two photos taken this spring during a cheer competition in Florida, Williams posed beside Cheer Extreme athletes while wearing a Cheer Extreme team outfit, the word "Coach" emblazoned on his shorts.

there." He said he was allowed to practice with a Cheer Extreme team because "we were hoping" that the charges would be dropped before the competition season began.

Two days after USA TODAY told Cheer Extreme officials how Williams described his involvement at the gym, the company provided a statement from Parker in which he said Williams was "immediately removed" from the program when officials learned of the allegations.

Soon after, Williams sought to change his story in a brief text message to USA TODAY.

"I was told I couldn't be at the gym by the Charlotte staff," Williams wrote. "[Staff] communicated this to me when I showed up at the gym."

'I wish they would have removed him'

For cheerleaders who want a chance at a title, Cheer Extreme is a good bet.

Since the company was founded in 1992, it has expanded to locations in North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland, Virginia and Illinois. Spots are coveted on the gym's marquee teams and at its flagship location in Kernersville, North Carolina. It isn't uncommon for parents to drive two hours or more to practice. Athletes who live farther away stay with host families or relocate for the season.

USA TODAY spoke with nearly two dozen former Cheer Extreme athletes, parents and employees, most from the North Carolina locations owned by the family that founded the company. Many described a win-at-all-costs culture inside their Cheer Extreme gym, where the pursuit of perfection was prioritized over an athlete's well-being. Though some athletes thrive under Cheer Extreme's exacting standards, other families said the gym was a toxic and dangerous place.

Under the company's code of conduct, families with concerns must first contact the designated "team mom," then the gym director, then a head coach before calling an owner – and there are no exceptions for situations concerning child welfare. The code of conduct cautions: "Anonymous emails/ letters/texts, etc. will be ignored."

the gym's position on anonymous reports, can create an environment in which predators flourish.

"Making the podium doesn't necessarily mean that you have to sacrifice your own values, your intentions, your integrity, your athlete's joy and well-being along the way," she said.



Since Cheer Extreme was founded in 1992, it has expanded to locations including Raleigh, N.C.
SANDY HOOPER/USA TODAY

In 2018, Sabrina Miller followed the rules laid out in Cheer Extreme's code of conduct and went first to a team mom in Raleigh to report that a male athlete, Nore Simmons, 19, sent her daughter Kiara Cox sexually charged messages that made her uncomfortable. In one message reviewed by USA TODAY, Cox attempted to rebuff passes from a man she said was Simmons by reminding him that she was a minor, 16 years old. "It's the age of consent," the man replied.

Miller said the team mom she talked to about Simmons replied, "Oh no, not again." She said the gym had had problems with Simmons messaging underage athletes and promised to take care of the matter.

Cox said she continued to hear from Simmons, a dozen times over three weeks in late 2018, even though she largely ignored him, messages show.

could kick him out, as if it wasn't bad enough from the start."



I wish they would have removed him from the gym right then and not waited for it to happen again to somebody else. They were just waiting for it to be bad enough that they could kick him out, as if it wasn't bad enough from the start.

Kiara Cox

TWEET



FACEBOOK



EMAIL



Simmons moved to the company's Maryland gym, where he occasionally coached. He continued messaging underage athletes, according to interviews, social media posts and screenshots of messages provided to USA TODAY.

Cheerleader Alexa Ryan Amendola said Simmons reached out to her on social media when she was 13 and continued for years, even after he moved to the Maryland location. Amendola, who is not a Cheer Extreme athlete, shared screenshots of messages with USA TODAY that show an individual she said was Simmons telling her, "Even tho ur 13 ur really cute," "I wish u were older" and "U are hot asf."

Amendola and Cox are two of at least four athletes who posted accusations of misconduct against Simmons on social media last September. An official from Cheer Extreme's Waldorf, Maryland, location responded on Twitter to the allegations, saying Simmons had only cheered there for a season and was no longer with the program. Amendola said she found his comment dismissive.

"It's not the program's fault for the incident happening," Amendola said. "It's the program's fault for not doing anything about it."



CHEER EMPIRE: A for-profit company built competitive cheer, pays people who make its rules

Cheer Extreme Raleigh owner Kelly Helton declined to be interviewed for this article. In a statement, she said she removed Simmons from her gym when she learned he was "sending girls unwelcome messages." She said she hadn't realized he moved to another Cheer Extreme location until she saw him onstage at a competition months later. At that point, she said, she notified the Maryland gym's owners and coaches. Helton said those owners removed Simmons when the additional allegations surfaced on social media last September.

Officials from the Maryland location did not respond to requests for comment.

Simmons could not be reached for comment. Last September, in response to the allegations against him on social media, Simmons posted a statement on Twitter: "I truly apologize if I made anyone feel uncomfortable." He said he had requested that he be permanently banned from the sport.

It is unclear whether he is still involved in cheerleading, but he is not on USASF's list of banned individuals.

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Cheer Extreme failed to keep someone with a lengthy criminal record from coaching its athletes.



Joshua Caudill
THE VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS

obstructing a law enforcement officer and resisting arrest after he fought with officers responding to a call about him trying to break into a woman's home, court records show. In Virginia, he attacked a stranger outside a coffee shop with no provocation and was convicted of assault, according to an interview and court records. In Arizona, he pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct after yelling profanities at customers outside a taco restaurant and walking shirtless through the drive-thru before getting in a physical fight with several patrons, court and police records state.

Six months after joining Cheer Extreme, Caudill was charged with rape.

The woman was not associated with cheerleading. The prosecutor handling the case in Bedford County, Virginia, told USA TODAY his office found troubling messages on Caudill's cellphone that showed he was "very aggressive" about developing close relationships with underage athletes.

Survivors speak out against former Cheer Extreme coach who was convicted of felony rape (4:19)



SANDY HOOPER AND MICHELLE HANKS, USA TODAY

side of his character," Bedford County Commonwealth Attorney Wes Nance said. "Dealing with Josh Caudill took a lot of vigilance. You had to see behind the false face that he had."

Becky Fleitz, who owned Cheer Extreme Roanoke before it closed, said in a statement that she relied on Caudill's USA Gymnastics membership and background check when he was hired. She said "an additional baseline background check" revealed nothing "that alerted us to any potential issue."

Caudill, who prison officials said declined to be interviewed, pleaded guilty to felony rape and is serving a 7½-year prison sentence while facing prosecution in another rape case.



Joshua Caudill was found guilty in the Bedford County Courthouse of raping Kayla Cotten. In 2018, Cheer Extreme brought Caudill on staff at its Roanoke, Va., location despite his 11 criminal convictions. Six months after joining Cheer Extreme, Caudill was charged with raping Cotten.

SANDY HOOPER/USA TODAY

Kayla Cotten, the survivor in the first rape case, said she pursued charges in part because she knew Caudill was a coach and worried about him being around young athletes.

responsible for every person that they put at risk because they enabled him."

'I felt very duped'

In two cases investigated by USA TODAY, some of the accused's fiercest defenders were members of the Cheer Extreme community.

Gidget Medford said she faced skepticism from the moment she called Cheer Extreme Charlotte in August 2018 to report that one of the gym's coaches had sexually assaulted her 16-year-old daughter, Gabriela. The teen was not a cheerleader but had met the coach, Curtis Rucker, 34, through a Cheer Extreme athlete she knew from high school. Gabriela told USA TODAY she was at a sleepover at the friend's home when Rucker rubbed her leg and forced his hand into her underwear.

Medford said she told the gym official police were investigating. She said the woman asked her to let the gym know if Rucker was arrested.

"She was definitely giving me the vibe that if he had not been arrested, or I didn't have concrete proof, then it pretty much wasn't their place to take any action," she said.



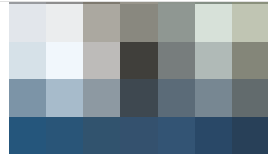
Gabriela Medford, 19, says she was at the house of a cheerleader friend during high school when she was sexually assaulted by Curtis Rucker, a Cheer Extreme coach. Gabriela went to the police, and Rucker was charged in 2018 with felony second-degree forcible sexual offense and misdemeanor sexual battery. He pleaded to a lesser charge of felony crime against nature. Gabriela's mother said that after the assault, she called the owner of Cheer Extreme and told them what Curtis had done, but they dismissed her concerns because he had not yet been arrested.

TRAVIS DOVE FOR USA TODAY

Within weeks, Rucker was charged with felony second-degree forced sexual offense and misdemeanor sexual battery.

In a statement to USA TODAY, Smith-Pope said the gym fired Rucker "as soon as we learned of the charges." Four months after Rucker was arrested, Smith-Pope's husband paid Rucker for "work on the gym," according to a receipt from Venmo, an online payment app. Smith-Pope said Rucker helped clean out the gym when the building was vacated.

Rumors about Rucker had circulated among North Carolina's tumbling community for years. After his arrest, a mother from a different gym wrote on Facebook that it should be "a wake up call to all those parents and coaches that KNEW something wasn't right with that guy, but did nothing." Another woman filed a report with police in North Carolina saying she heard Rucker had been flirtatious with a young athlete at a gym years earlier, records show. Police closed the case after a brief investigation without contacting the athlete.



banned from the sport. It was missing 74 convicted sex offenders

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USA TODAY spoke to the athlete referenced in that police report as well as to a second athlete who said Rucker acted inappropriately toward her when she was a minor. The news organization agreed not to name them because they allege misconduct at the time they were minors.

The woman referenced in the police report told USA TODAY Rucker began sending her sexual text messages and calling her his girlfriend when she was 14 and at times touched between her legs while helping her stretch at the gym.

The second woman, a former Cheer Extreme athlete, said she met Rucker in middle school. Unlike other Cheer Extreme coaches who were stern and distant, Rucker was affable, she said, and asked about her personal life. More than once over the years he coached her, Rucker flirted and told her he would date her if she were older, she recalled. In one screenshot shared with USA TODAY, Rucker sent the woman a photo on Snapchat in which he pointed to his cheek and beckoned her to kiss him.

The woman said though Rucker had coached her on and off for years, no one from Cheer Extreme approached her after his arrest to ask how he had treated her. And she never brought it up, fearing Cheer Extreme's coaches and owners would look at her differently as an athlete if they knew what had happened.

Former Cheer Extreme athlete shares story of sexual misconduct by former coach Mike Harmon (3:30)



SANDY HOOPER AND MICHELLE HANKS, USA TODAY

"We're a very big gym, and we have a very big name. And to have something this big happen and get out in public and people are talking about it, it just puts a bad label on our name," she said. "I think that's why they swept it under the rug."

Rucker could not be reached for comment.

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Last year, he pleaded guilty to a lesser felony charge of crime against nature. Under the agreement with prosecutors, Rucker maintained that he was innocent but was sentenced to up to 15 months in jail, a term suspended if he does not reoffend while on probation.

Gabriela Medford, now 19, said she went to police because she feared Rucker would harm someone else. That made it all the more disheartening when the gym brushed off her mother's call.

Later, she scrolled through Facebook comments on an article about Rucker's arrest in which parents from Cheer Extreme rushed to his defense, calling it "an isolated incident" not connected to the gym and decrying that the allegations "could possibly destroy an innocent man's life."

"Walking down the hallway, people were staring at me, whispering," she said. "Everything you see in the movies actually happened."

Of all the hurtful things said about her during that time, Medford said, one piece of gossip stung the most: that she had made it all up.

"I just didn't like everyone saying that I lied about it," she said.

In 2017, at another Cheer Extreme location 800 miles away, a young cheerleader felt similarly unsupported when she sought a civil no-contact order against her former coach.



Caitlin Calip, a former cheerleader at Cheer Extreme's Illinois gym, brought allegations of sexual misconduct against coach Michael Harmon. Her mother, Christine Calip, sought a civil no-contact order but was denied by a judge. Local police also deemed the allegations "unfounded."

SANDY HOOPER, USA TODAY

Caitlin Calip, then 16, said she fought back tears as she watched parents, coaches and Cheer Extreme Chicago owner Natalie Shapiro file past her in an Illinois courtroom to huddle

The first, a photo of his penis, arrived on her cellphone with no warning in the middle of the school day, Calip told USA TODAY. Her mother, Christine, said she learned of the messages and quickly filed a report with police and petitioned for a no-contact order.

“

I was just super angry that I trusted someone with my children, and I thought he was a good guy. I thought Mike was like that one coach that really just believes in kids. So I felt very duped.

Christine Calip

TWEET



FACEBOOK



EMAIL



"I was just super angry that I trusted someone with my children, and I thought he was a good guy," Christine said. "I thought Mike was like that one coach that really just believes in kids. So I felt very duped."

USA TODAY found at least four other people have accused Harmon of inappropriate conduct, such as sending explicit photos and messages to them when they were minors, according to interviews and police records. Two of the accusations came from Harmon's time as a coach at Cheer Extreme Raleigh, where he worked before joining the company's Illinois gym. One of those allegations was reported to Raleigh police in February by an individual who accused Harmon of "Sex Offense/Indecent Exposure" starting in late 2015, records show.

Harmon, who has not faced criminal charges, denied Calip's allegations, telling USA TODAY "that got dropped because it was all B.S." He did not respond to requests for comment on the other allegations made against him.

Helton, the Raleigh gym owner, said in a statement that she received an allegation in 2015 that Harmon had sent a message "that made one of my athletes uncomfortable." She said she spoke with Harmon, the athlete and her mother, and they said it was a misunderstanding and they didn't want Harmon removed from the gym.



Caitlin Calip says her cheerleading coach Mike Harmon sent her inappropriate messages. Harmon denies the allegations.

PROVIDED BY THE CALIP FAMILY

"Just recently, the athlete shared with me that there was more to the story than I knew at the time," Helton said. "I am heartbroken by this revelation because the safety of my athletes is always my number one priority."

USASF requires all members to report allegations of sexual misconduct within their programs to the governing body and, when required by law, to law enforcement. Helton did not respond to USA TODAY's questions about whether she reported Harmon to police or USASF.

It does not appear Helton disclosed the allegations to Cheer Extreme officials in Illinois when Harmon moved there in 2016. Shapiro, the owner of that location, told USA TODAY she was unaware of any allegations beyond Caitlin Calip's.

At the hearing in 2017 on the Calips' petition for a no-contact order, Harmon admitted FaceTiming Caitlin about cheerleading and exchanging messages with her on Snapchat, but he denied wrongdoing. The Calip family was not represented by an attorney, and transcripts from the hearing indicate the judge was frustrated by the mother's lack of legal knowledge. The family did not have copies of the photos they said Harmon sent on Snapchat, an application on which messages disappear after being opened.

The judge ruled in Harmon's favor, citing "no credible evidence to support the allegations of the sending of the inappropriate photographs through SnapChat." Police in Schaumburg, Illinois, deemed the allegations "unfounded."

Harmon coached at Cheer Extreme for at least a year and a half after the court hearing, social media posts show.

"Since we did not know of any further allegations, we saw no reason to end his employment with us," said Shapiro, the Illinois gym owner.



The owner of Cheer Extreme in Illinois says there was no reason to fire a coach after police determined the allegations against him were unfounded.

SANDY HOOPER/USA TODAY

Caitlin Calip said being doubted by members of a gym she loved was a devastating experience, leaving her numb and feeling alone.

When she learned that Helton acknowledged receiving an allegation against Harmon before he moved to the Illinois gym, Calip said it offended her that the gym had prioritized Harmon over athlete safety.

"You put pretty much every single child in that program at that gym in harm's way and didn't let anyone know about it – knowing that you had these allegations and it happened already once before," Calip said.

Her mother said Harmon should never have coached her daughter.

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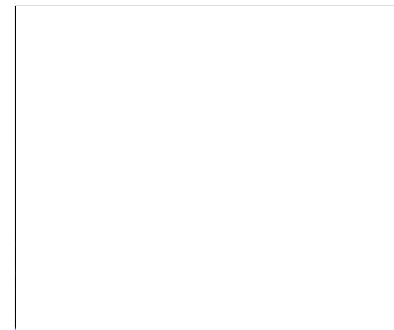
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Published 5:30 AM EDT Jul. 23, 2021 | Updated 3:19 PM EDT Jul. 25, 2021

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Cheerleading has a list of people banned from the sport. It was missing 74 convicted sex offenders

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Marisa Kwiatkowski and Tricia L. Nadolny, USA TODAY

Published 10:29 am UTC Sep. 18, 2020 | Updated 7:06 pm UTC Feb. 8, 2021



One after another, a dozen young cheerleaders raced across a springy blue mat and flung themselves into a series of roundoffs and backflips, the thump of their hands and feet reverberating through the open Ohio gym. Mishelle Robinson, the gym owner and coach, called out instructions across the cavernous warehouse.

"Arms up!"

U.S. All Star Federation, the national organization that oversees the high-stakes world of competitive cheerleading. USASF's extensive rules cover everything from stunt safety to hair bows, which "should not be excessive in size."

But its rules didn't stop someone with Robinson's criminal record from owning a member gym.

The 44-year-old is a convicted felon – who opened a gym sanctioned by USASF while she was on Ohio's sex offender registry.

A USA TODAY investigation found others who continued working in cheerleading despite charges or convictions for sexual misconduct involving minors.



Mishelle Robinson, owner of Empire All Stars, coaches cheer practice Aug. 19 in Ravenna, Ohio. Robinson registered her gym with the U.S. All Star Federation, which controls a fast-paced segment of cheerleading that focuses solely on competing.

SANDY HOOPER, USA TODAY

Patrick Avarad was convicted in 2003 of two misdemeanors for exchanging explicit photos with a teenage girl, but he remains one of the sport's most sought-after music producers.

And Ricky Despain remained in cheerleading even after his conviction in 2008 for abusing two girls at his Virginia gym landed him on the sex offender registry. Until this year, Despain owned a gym that has been sanctioned by USASF, despite a [Houston Press](#) article in 2015 that highlighted his past and a complaint in January 2019 provided to USASF.

Karrah Pope, whom Despain was convicted of inappropriately touching when she was 14, said she stopped cheering competitively because she worried about seeing him at events. Because he kept the sport, she lost it.

"I would think that they would want to put their athletes' safety obviously as a top priority," said Pope, 28. "And that clearly was not happening when a registered sex offender was allowed to be there and own a cheerleading organization still."

USA TODAY identified nearly 180 individuals affiliated with cheerleading who have faced charges relating to sexual misconduct involving minors but were not banned by the sport's two governing bodies, USASF and USA Cheer. More than 140 of them – a group that includes coaches, choreographers and others directly tied to the activity – have been convicted, and 74 are registered sex offenders.

Amy Clark, USASF's vice president of membership, said her organization has robust child protection policies and "leads the way" on athlete safety.

Dozens of cheer coaches convicted of sex crimes not banned from sport by USASF, USA Cheer (7:04)



SANDY HOOPER AND ALEXIS ARNOLD, USA TODAY

"I think you would be hard-pressed to find another youth sports organization that has dedicated the time and the effort that we have to these nonsporting resources," she said.

As of mid-July, the governing bodies had suspended or banned just 21 individuals, according to public-facing lists meant to warn parents and gym owners about potential threats to children. The lists have since grown to 118 names, and nearly all of the new additions came in the past four weeks from the names provided by USA TODAY.

While some of the individuals USA TODAY identified are serving lengthy prison sentences, many others could walk into a gym and, under USASF's policies, start coaching kids.

USASF requires only coaches who go backstage or in the warmup area at competitions to be members and background checked through its system. Though it mandates gym owners conduct their own screenings and background checks for anyone who interacts with a minor, what businesses do with that information is up to them.

Help USA TODAY investigate misconduct in cheerleading

If you are an athlete, parent, coach, gym owner or someone else with a connection to cheer, we want to hear your story.

Tell us your story

"We don't get into the hiring at each of those member clubs," Clark said. "So each of them have their process. Hopefully, each of them have legal counsel that would work with them."

Pop Warner games to collegiate athletes to members of private gyms. At the highest levels, cheerleaders perform athletic, aerial stunts in nationally televised competitions. Cheerleading reached a broader audience in January, when Netflix released "Cheer," a docuseries that chronicled the journey of Navarro College's cheerleaders as they sought a national title.

Thursday, one of the stars of "Cheer," Jerry Harris, was [arrested by the FBI](#) and charged with production of child pornography. According to federal court records, Harris admitted to agents that he solicited and received explicit messages on Snapchat from 10 to 15 individuals he knew were minors, had sex with a 15-year-old at a cheerleading competition in 2019 and paid a 17-year-old money in exchange for nude photos. Harris has not responded to requests for comment.

Kristen, a mother in Texas whose 14-year-old sons accused Harris of abuse, [told USA TODAY](#) she reported the allegations involving her sons to USASF in May and July. USA TODAY withheld Kristen's last name because her sons are minors and alleging abuse. She said she was frustrated the organization didn't do more.

In an email to its members Wednesday, USASF defended its handling of Kristen's reports and provided a timeline. It says that after receiving the first report in May, Clark asked Kristen if she had reported to police, then confirmed a gym owner had reported the allegations. "Based on this information – the mandated reporting requirements had been followed and the USASF would follow the process in place, and let the investigation proceed," the timeline reads.

The organization's timeline indicates it did not contact Kristen again until after she sent a second report to USASF, eight weeks after her first. USASF suspended Harris on Sept. 14, the same day USA TODAY reported the allegations against him. Harris was in a USASF-member gym as recently as June, according to that gym's social media account.

VERONICA BRAVO, USA TODAY

Clark spoke with USA TODAY for about 30 minutes in late August, then declined further interview requests. USASF President Jim Chadwick declined to be interviewed. Neither would discuss specific individuals, including Harris and Robinson, the Ohio gym owner.

Clark and USA Cheer Executive Director Lauri Harris (no relation to Jerry Harris) said their organizations adopted policies and implemented training courses to prevent and identify sexual abuse in the sport.

USASF and USA Cheer made changes to their websites as USA TODAY conducted its investigation. USA Cheer dropped the word "preferred" from its roster of music vendors and added a disclaimer that it is not responsible for the actions of any company in the directory. Avard's company remains on the vendor list.

USA Cheer's banned list has more than quintupled in size since Aug. 25, when USA TODAY shared the findings of its investigation with cheer officials. USASF says any coach banned from another sport is ineligible for USASF membership.

Olympic swimmer Nancy Hogshead-Makar, founder and CEO of the advocacy group Champion Women, said the incomplete banned lists represent a stunning abdication of responsibility, particularly in the wake of a [sex abuse scandal](#) that consumed gymnastics.

Nancy Hogshead-Makar is CEO of the advocacy group Champion Women.

PHELAN EBENHACK FOR USA TODAY

"If it's going to be a tool, you just made it into a toothpick instead of an ice pick," Hogshead-Makar said. "You essentially made it meaningless by only having 21 people on there."

USA Cheer banned Robinson in early September, but she still can coach in and own her USASF-member gym in Ravenna, Ohio.

In an interview with USA TODAY, Robinson was open in describing how she started a member gym while on the sex offender registry.

Robinson said her sister is the registered owner with USASF because Robinson knows her conviction in 2006 for sexual battery of a high school boy would show up on a background check. She said she buys a spectator ticket and does not go backstage or in the warmup area of competitions.

She said she assumes USASF knows about her criminal record. Her uncle has been involved with USASF as a member, gym owner and credentialing instructor. Robinson, who was on Ohio's sex offender registry until March, said USASF has never questioned her involvement in the sport.

forgive. Never. But the fact is, I didn't."

'That just boggles my mind'

USASF and USA Cheer's abuse prevention policies appear to lie in those organizations' own hands. But both entities were founded by and retain strong ties to Varsity Spirit, a for-profit company that dominates the sport.

Varsity – whose empire extends into cheer clothing, camps and competitions – provided the startup capital for USASF in 2003. Four years later, the company created USA Cheer, the

national teams.

USA Cheer has no employees of its own. All six of its staff members are Varsity employees contracted to work for the nonprofit group. The same goes for USASF's president and vice president of events and corporate alliances. Varsity-owned companies hold a permanent majority of seats on USASF's board of directors.

Cheer empire: A for-profit company built competitive cheer, pays people who make its rules

John Patterson, a former staff member of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center who has consulted with nonprofit groups on youth safety issues, said he's never heard of an arrangement quite like the one between Varsity and the governing bodies. He said the company's control of the USASF board means "whatever Varsity wants, Varsity can get."

"With that kind of influence, it seems to me that the company should have an influence over the measures that they take to protect kids," Patterson said.

Nicole Lauchaire, a senior vice president at Varsity Spirit, said Varsity helped create both organizations because it believed "oversight and rules and regulations were needed."

"Both those organizations are very much focused on the safety of athletes and athlete protection," she said. "And we share in that mission."

USA Cheer and USASF have increased their focus on child protection.

Clark said that in the past three years, USASF has implemented a sexual abuse prevention policy, adopted the policies of the U.S. Center for SafeSport and created housing and travel policies designed to minimize the risk of abuse while athletes are on the road.

During a phone call July 10 with the mother whose boys accused Jerry Harris of abuse, Clark acknowledged that not all gyms follow USASF's sexual abuse prevention policy. "I am certain that people don't do it," Clark said, according to an audio recording the mother provided to USA TODAY.

VERONICA BRAVO, USA TODAY

Lauri Harris said USA Cheer has trained more than 20,000 coaches through its safety certification program, offers a course on identifying the maltreatment of children and launched an online reporting form for abuse allegations.

In an interview with USA TODAY, Harris and USA Cheer Director of Education and Programs Jim Lord said the organization's banned list is one of many tools used to keep athletes safe. Lord said he visits search engines once a week, using terms such as "cheer coach," "athlete abuse" and "sexual assault," to find people to ban. He said he looks for

"One of my weekly things that I do on my checklist is to go do another search, to see if anything has shown up," he said.

Lord's searching resulted in five names since the list was created in June. The others on USA Cheer's initial list were individuals already banned by USASF.

We're a voluntary-membership organization. Not a gatekeeper for participation in the sport.

Clark, who oversees membership for USASF's more than 2,300 clubs, said her organization is open to banning nonmembers. When provided with USA TODAY's findings, she stressed that the majority had never been affiliated with USASF.

"We're a voluntary-membership organization," she said via email, "not a gatekeeper for participation in the sport."

Among the nearly 180 people USA TODAY found by searching Google, news archives and public records are former USASF members and some whom the governing bodies were aware of but had not banned.

Arkansas cheerleading coach and gym owner Matthew Tinkle was charged in 2013 with raping a 13-year-old girl. At the time, USASF said it would not make major changes to Tinkle's membership status unless there was a conviction, according to a [KATV report](#). Tinkle pleaded to a felony charge of rape in 2014 and was sentenced to 10 years in prison, court records show.

Teacher and cheerleading coach Shelley Duncan kissed and groped a 14-year-old boy and exchanged 7,425 text messages with him in 2016, according to Oklahoma court records. She is serving a six-year prison sentence for committing a lewd act with a child. She is one of three people whom USA Cheer revoked or suspended safety certification for but did not ban.

on 10 counts of taking indecent liberties with a child and one count of aggravated sexual battery. Jerralds is in prison in Virginia and listed on the sex offender registry.

Shelley Duncan is serving a six-year prison sentence for a sex offense.
TISHOMINGO POLICE

TOP: Sexual assault survivor and activist, Fatima Smith, 32, alleges her cheer coach sexually



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worked as a cheer coach.
SANDY HOOPER, USA TODAY

Nancy Oglesby, one of the prosecutors who handled Jerrals' case, laughed in disbelief last month when she learned Jerrals had not been banned.

"He's a violent, registered sex offender," she said. "He got a 20-year sentence to serve. I don't know what more you would need to determine that he needs to be banned. I mean, that just boggles my mind."

Tinkle, Duncan and Jerrals were all banned by USA Cheer after USA TODAY provided their names.

Leaving it up to the gyms

Kale Dunlap's case illustrates what can happen when individual gyms are left to decide who is safe to coach kids.

In 2018, Dunlap worked at the Flip House Cheer and Tumble in Abilene, Texas. Gym owner Karen Perricone knew the 19-year-old faced sexual assault charges but employed him anyway.

"We live in a country that people are INNOCENT UNTIL PROVEN GUILTY, which he has not been," she wrote in [December 2018 in an email](#) to a woman who warned her about Dunlap's charges.

"I happen to believe Kale," she continued, "and the story of his accusations is bull [----]."

Seven months later, Dunlap was seeking work in other Texas gyms – and facing additional accusations of misconduct.

In July 2019, Texas gym owner Lori Schlunt-Thomas posted a warning about Dunlap in the All-Star Gym Owners Association's private Facebook group. She wrote that Dunlap had applied for jobs in the area and sent some of her underage athletes graphic sexual messages. Schlunt-Thomas said she

In 2018, Kale Dunlap worked at the Flip House Cheer and Tumble in Abilene, Texas, though he faced sexual assault charges.
COLLIN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE



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He was indicted two months later in a second case for felony online solicitation of a minor, according to court records. Dunlap pleaded guilty to that charge in January and was sentenced to four years in prison. In June, he was indicted in a third case after police said he sent sexually explicit messages to two girls, ages 13 and 14. Dunlap declined to be interviewed for this article.

In January, Schlunt-Thomas wrote on Facebook that Dunlap had been convicted in the second case. A few days later, she noticed his name had finally been added to USASF's list – nearly two years after he was first indicted – and posted on Facebook that "between myself and the mom of the child we were on their butt constantly."

Perricone told USA TODAY that when she wrote the email defending Dunlap, she believed he was innocent.

He was never left alone at my gym and to my knowledge he never had any misconduct with any of our students.

"He was never left alone at my gym and to my knowledge he never had any misconduct with any of our students," Perricone said in an email.

Taylor Hamilton, the woman who tried to warn Perricone about Dunlap in 2018, told USA TODAY the fact that Dunlap continued to coach while facing serious charges highlights a problem in the sport.

"There's a lot of holes that gyms will go through to make their programs better sometimes," Hamilton said. "And it's not always for the safety of the athletes. It's more of just how they can win."

'Very suspect incidents'


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The custom mixes created by Patrick Avard's company – one that has energized minutes layered with lyrics, drums and sound effects that punctuate the moments cheerleaders are flung into the air – have been the soundtrack to 168 medal-winning routines.

They have turned Avard, 43, owner of New Level Music, into one of the most sought-after producers in cheerleading. In January, Avard stood backstage at "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," where the stars of Netflix's breakout docuseries performed to his music. This summer, his music has been broadcast into millions of U.S. homes as the Wildcats, an All Star cheer team, competed on "America's Got Talent."

VERONICA BRAVO, USA TODAY

In 2015, USA Cheer named Avard's company the exclusive music producer of its national teams, and his business is one of about a hundred on the organization's list of approved vendors.

Harris, USA Cheer's executive director, said companies get on the approved list once owners agree to follow copyright law. They are not subject to background checks. Harris said the organization found out about Avard's record in July, the


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Court documents show Avard was convicted in 2003 of misdemeanor counts of furnishing harmful materials to minors and sexual exploitation of children.

Avard declined to be interviewed for this article. In a statement, he wrote, "I was charged with two misdemeanors, took full responsibility for my actions and have lived every day since working to prove that one serious lapse in judgment does not define a person's worth. I am truly committed to my community, my family and my business, and will continue to make positive contributions to the cheer industry."

In his statement, Avard misstated his own age and the victim's at the time of the incident, making himself a year younger and her a year older. Police records show the girl was 16 and Avard 25.

Read more: [Patrick Avard's police records \(Warning: These documents contain explicit language.\)](#)

She told police in Fayetteville, Georgia, that she barely knew Avard, a coach at the gym where she worked, when he wrote her on instant messaging. Soon into their conversation, Avard asked what she was wearing and initiated a game of Truth or Dare.

She picked Truth, according to police records that describe their conversation, and Avard asked how far she had been with a boy. She wrote back, "made out."

Avard picked Dare.

As she thought of a challenge, he emailed her two photos of his penis, according to police.



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when they signed off, police said, Avard told her the conversation would “be our secret.”

Avard pleaded guilty and served three months in jail, according to court documents.

In response to questions from USA TODAY, Harris said USA Cheer encourages teams to thoroughly screen anyone who has direct contact with athletes but pointed out that music producers “have really no interaction with athletes.”

Avard attended a practice of USA Cheer’s teams in Atlanta without being background checked. (Harris said the athletes on that team are all 18 or older and are never unsupervised at practices.) Avard’s social media accounts – which he turned private after USA TODAY informed him through a representative that the newspaper would report on his record – show him regularly attending competitions, including as recently as March.

A second vendor on USA Cheer’s music provider list has been convicted of sexual misconduct involving minors.

Kevin Heath, owner of Utah-based Fusion Sound, has been mixing music since 1973. Law enforcement records detail an extensive list of accusations against him involving minors.

Police say Kevin Heath told a detective he couldn't be alone with children.

SALT LAKE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

In 1986, a police report indicates that Heath told a detective from the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Office that he couldn't be alone with children as a condition of his probation for a conviction of attempted distribution of obscene material to a minor. Records from that conviction could not be located.

Over the next five years, at least five girls or their parents reported concerns about Heath to law enforcement. All of the incidents allegedly happened at his home, where he worked.

In April 1986, two girls who knew Heath because he worked at their high school as a drill and cheerleading coach said he shared his sexual fantasies with them and asked them to share their own, according to Salt Lake County sheriff's records. Two months later, a mother told investigators she worried Heath had taken nude photos of her daughter while the girl changed during a modeling session. Police said they found two peepholes had been drilled into the wall of a room in his home used for changing. A few years later, the sheriff's office investigated Heath for potentially dealing in child pornography, records show.

At this point in the investigation, the detective who investigated Heath wrote in 1991, "I was unable to identify an actual incident of criminal activity other than the many, very suspect incidents of suspicious behavior."

Later that year, prosecutors charged Heath with forcible sexual abuse and gross lewdness after two girls said he fondled their breasts while they were at his home, records show. Dana Hussey, the girls' high school drill instructor, told USA TODAY they had gone there to help him write labels on mix tapes.

They were hysterically crying. They fell into my arms. It took minutes and minutes before they could calm down enough to even talk.

"They were hysterically crying," she said. "They fell into my arms. It took minutes and minutes before they could calm down enough to even talk."

Heath pleaded guilty in 1992 to a downgraded felony charge of attempted forcible sexual abuse relating to one of the girls. Though he served no jail time, Heath was ordered to register as a sex offender.

Heath, who was removed from the registry in 2005, declined to comment for this article. His attorney, Jerome Mooney, said Heath has never possessed child pornography and denies wrongdoing in the cases for which he was not charged. Mooney said Heath "wasn't as sensitive as he should have been to dealing with younger people" and his actions were misconstrued.

"He does admit that he gave into a temptation and did engage in improper touching with respect to a single individual," Mooney said of Heath's conviction in 1992.

Heath's conviction is no secret. A 2001 news article about his criminal record and work in the music industry is one of the first results in a Google search of his name and company.


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shown by this screen grab on from Sept. 15, 2020. BOTTOM: USA Cheer's website lists Lauri Harris as the executive director, shown on this screen grab from Sept. 15, 2020.

USA TODAY

Harris said she had no idea about Heath's past until USA TODAY told her.

Around the time that Heath was removed from the sex offender registry in 2005, a woman went to the sheriff's office to report he had abused her years earlier. The 39-year-old woman, who asked to remain unnamed, told USA TODAY she had been abused by Heath at age 10 and again at age 19. Prosecutors declined to file charges.

The woman, who works as a dance teacher, said it's frustrating to see others support his business despite knowing about his past. She did not know he was an approved USA Cheer vendor.

"He shouldn't have any affiliation with them at all. He should have been paying for what he's done to not just me but so many other girls," she said. "It sickens me."

'There's no secrets'

Robinson said she tells every family that comes to her Ohio gym about her conviction for sexual battery. She said she's lost some students because of it. But most stay.

"There's no secrets," she told USA TODAY in August while a team of young girls practiced outside her office window. "There's no closed doors."

About two weeks later, after her name appeared on USA Cheer's banned list, Robinson posted a Facebook update announcing a change at her gym: Her son would take ownership of the gym's All Star cheerleading program.

Robinson said she'd remain involved in the gym's dance program as coach and owner. A few days later, she posted the gym's cheer schedule on her Facebook page.


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Mishelle Robinson, owner of Empire All Stars in Ohio, says she tells every family who comes to her gym about her criminal record. Most families, she says, stay.

SANDY HOOPER, USAT

Clark wouldn't speak with USA TODAY about Robinson's affiliation with USASF. In an email, she offered a general observation: "It goes without saying that the question of how a registered sex offender can work in a gym is a pressing and important one."

She did not give an answer.

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Published 10:29 am UTC Sep. 18, 2020 | **Updated 7:06 pm UTC Feb. 8, 2021**



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