



**UNITED STATES  
OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC  
COMMITTEE**

# **USOPC COLLEGE SPORTS SUSTAINABILITY THINK TANK REPORT**

**Recommendations and Implementation**

***September 2021***

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	2-5
<b>USOPC Think Tank Leadership</b> .....	6-7
<b>Sport Sustainability</b> .....	8-12
<b>Sport Structure</b> .....	13-17
<b>Vertical Partnerships</b> .....	18-22
<b>Paralympic Inclusion</b> .....	23-25
<b>Next Steps</b> .....	26
<b>Special Thanks</b> .....	27-28

More information about the USOPC Think Tank can be found online at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank).

In the fall of 2020, the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee created the USOPC College Sports Sustainability Think Tank to address the loss of collegiate Olympic and Paralympic sport opportunities in the wake of COVID-19. As an early result of the pandemic, more than 100 Division I programs were dropped<sup>1</sup>, exposing the need for creative and collaborative management within the Olympic and Paralympic sport ecosystem. Led by University of Florida Athletic Director Scott Stricklin and USOPC CEO Sarah Hirshland, this wide-reaching effort included Division I athletics leaders, Team USA athletes and coaches, National Governing Body and USOPC executives, NCAA leaders, and sport industry experts. The yearlong effort included large-group sessions and project-area working groups; it culminated in September 2021, following the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo.

## PURPOSE

The USOPC Think Tank convened leaders from the collegiate Olympic and Paralympic landscapes to identify solutions and build actionable recommendations to help sustain Olympic and Paralympic varsity programming on campus, ensuring a strong competitive pathway for athletes in the future.

## OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC COLLEGIATE FOOTPRINT

The intercollegiate athletics system is an important sport pathway in our American culture. When college sports are strong, youth sport participation flourishes and builds a strong ecosystem for the sport to stay healthy, further propelling Team USA's success on the international stage. At the Tokyo Games, more than 75% of the U.S. Olympic Team competed across 171 schools<sup>2</sup>, and more than 50% of the U.S. Paralympic Team competed across 76 schools. On the winter side, more than one-third of the 2018 U.S. Olympic Team competed across 48 schools, while 25% of the 2018 U.S. Paralympic Team competed collegiately across 14 schools. International student-athletes also thrive in our country's athletic system, as it provides a worldwide training ground for personal and athletic development. At the 2020 Olympic Games, more than 640 international college athletes represented 117 countries.

## USOPC THINK TANK OVERVIEW

The USOPC Think Tank is a first-of-its-kind effort to move ideas into action by recommending sport-specific flexibility and customization pilots to streamline operations and spur growth opportunities. Should these tests be successful, such pilots could be scaled across other men's and women's sports. The USOPC Think Tank was organized into four working groups focused on sport sustainability, sport structure, vertical partnerships and Paralympic inclusion. Each working group developed its own set of recommendations.

<sup>1</sup> Kumar, A. (2020, November 6). *The heartbreaking reality -- and staggering numbers -- of NCAA teams cut during the pandemic*. ESPN. Retrieved September 14, 2021, from [https://www.espn.com/olympics/story/\\_/id/30116720/the-heartbreaking-reality-staggering-numbers-ncaa-teams-cut-pandemic](https://www.espn.com/olympics/story/_/id/30116720/the-heartbreaking-reality-staggering-numbers-ncaa-teams-cut-pandemic).

<sup>2</sup> Corns, K. (2021, July 23). *School Ties: More than 75% of Team USA's Olympic roster competed collegiately*. Team USA. Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://www.teamusa.org/Tokyo-College-Resource-Hub/News/2021/July/23/College-Footprint>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Sport sustainability

The sport sustainability working group was charged with crafting recommendations to NCAA legislation to provide flexibility to Olympic sports to manage their operations in a customized, efficient and creative manner. Typically, Olympic sports are managed by NCAA rules originating from football and basketball issues, often having unintended consequences for Olympic-sport athletes and coaches. The sport sustainability group, in collaboration with relevant coaches' associations, developed two recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1: Develop a customized recruiting plan for swimming and diving.** The recommendation includes a swimming and diving recruiting model that initiates the recruiting process during a prospect's senior year of high school. By delaying initial contact, limiting visits and implementing a contained recruiting calendar, the adjustments will alleviate pressures on prospects, ease the time burden on athletes and coaches, and increase operational efficiencies.
- **Recommendation 2: Enact flexible prospect and elite engagement in men's gymnastics.** The recommendation seeks to deregulate men's gymnastics recruiting rules around clubs, tryouts, camps/clinics and national team access to ease operations, improve athlete engagement and leverage collective resources. These changes would allow varsity programs to partner with youth programs and USA Gymnastics to share facilities, streamline expenses and generate revenue through expanded camps/clinics. Such efforts would also allow for implementing a USAG regional development program, which – if conducted in partnership with varsity programs – could aid in creative training arrangements, event opportunities and coaching development.

*“Developing these sustainability recommendations required unprecedented collaboration across schools, conferences, athletes, coaches, NGBs, the NCAA and the USOPC, which speaks to the deep conviction we share to protect broad-based varsity sports in our country.”*

—Sarah Hirshland  
United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee CEO

## Sport structure

The sport structure working group's goal was to construct policy recommendations to protect broad-based varsity sport offerings and reimagine the NCAA sport structure through flexible sport management strategies and partnerships. The group sought to connect the college community to the broader USOPC sport ecosystem to open opportunities to increase efficiencies, align policies and strengthen the holistic sport pathway. The sport structure group, in collaboration with relevant coaches' associations, developed two recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1: Pilot Olympic Sustainability Membership Category.** The new membership category may include regulatory flexibility (multidivisional membership, nimble conference affiliation, etc.) for low-sponsored sports. These adjustments will ease scheduling burdens, strengthen regional partnerships and ultimately grow the sport, which would be piloted with men's gymnastics and men's volleyball; both communities are eager to engage in the pilot as early as 2022.
- **Recommendation 2: Build USOPC and NCAA alignment through formalized collaboration.** Expand the existing USOPC/NCAA cooperation agreement to include greater alignment across leadership levels and sport-specific stakeholders to facilitate sport sustainability and growth strategies. The agreement adjustments may include terms to mechanize leadership-level connections, sport-level partnerships, communications collaboration and project-specific engagement.

## Vertical partnerships

The vertical partnerships working group sought to connect sport-specific stakeholders to create resource efficiencies, explore increased exposure options and test revenue-partnering opportunities. The project challenges the current model where most Olympic and Paralympic sports rights are bundled with football and basketball agreements, limiting exposure, commercial opportunities and broader stakeholder engagement. The vertical partnerships group, in collaboration with relevant coaches' associations, developed two recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1: Establish partnerships to achieve greater efficiencies within NCAA championships.** Facilitate NGB/USOPC collaboration around NCAA championships by creating opportunities for (1) hosting partnerships, (2) efficiency partnerships and/or (3) auxiliary partnerships. Pilot concepts have been crafted with select NGBs and college stakeholders, and these adjustments are intended to increase operational efficiencies, open revenue opportunities and increase exposure while enhancing the student-athlete experience.
- **Recommendation 2: Pilot content sharing to facilitate Olympic and Paralympic sport coverage.** The recommendation includes resource sharing during the Olympic and Paralympic Games, as well as constructing a recognition program to honor schools for their contributions to Team USA. These efforts will increase storytelling, elevate national awareness and leverage wider stakeholder collaboration, which over time may strengthen commercial interest in the collegiate Olympic and Paralympic marketplace.

## Paralympic inclusion

The Paralympic inclusion working group was charged with exploring avenues to elevate and expand collegiate Paralympic sport opportunities in partnership with the USOPC. Many NCAA schools already offer Paralympic sport opportunities on campus, but school programs lack structural connections to collaborate and grow. The Paralympic inclusion working group, in collaboration with leaders from the USOPC Paralympic Advisory Council, developed one multifaceted recommendation:

- **Recommendation: Bring stakeholders together to launch the Para-College Inclusion Project.** Engage USOPC, NCAA and collegiate Paralympic sport stakeholders to activate a shared plan to:
  - (1) conduct Paralympic/collegiate research on national adaptive sport programming,
  - (2) collectively promote adaptive sports, and
  - (3) connect school leaders that have adaptive programs with U.S. Paralympic leaders to strengthen sport structures.

NCAA member schools with adaptive programs share a desire to amplify their programming efforts through stronger alignment. Connecting NCAA schools that have an interest in adaptive programming with the NCAA Office of Inclusion and the USOPC will allow for productive conversations to encourage growth opportunities. This collaborative effort will elevate adaptive inclusion nationally and amplify the shared desire for wider inclusion, awareness and long-term growth of Paralympic sports in our country.

## USOPC COLLEGIATE PARTNERSHIPS HISTORY

The USOPC launched its collegiate partnerships department in the summer of 2016 to bridge the gap between Team USA and the collegiate landscape. By the fall of 2017, the USOPC Collegiate Advisory Council was formed. Chaired by Kevin White (USOPC board member/Duke University), the USOPC CAC is a 10-member group comprised of power five athletics leaders that guide the USOPC's collegiate efforts. Out of the gates, its two priority initiatives were pathway and messaging.

- The pathway project serves to identify and remove impediments faced by student-athletes who simultaneously compete in both the collegiate and Team USA sport systems. In January 2020, the USOPC CAC shepherded NCAA legislation to provide these shared student-athletes with more flexibility to train and access resources while chasing their Olympic and Paralympic dreams.
- The messaging project serves to elevate awareness of the important role Olympic and Paralympic programming plays on campus. Through the effort, the USOPC launched its Olympians Made Here and Paralympians Made Here campaigns, which for the first time provided a co-branding platform between the USOPC and schools/conferences to enrich storytelling opportunities.

In the fall of 2020, as COVID-19's devastating effects were being felt across the collegiate landscape, the USOPC CAC formed its USOPC Think Tank.

## LEADERSHIP

The USOPC Think Tank included a cross-section of leaders from the commercial, collegiate and Olympic and Paralympic landscapes. The 40-member roster included athletes and coaches, Division I athletics leaders, NGB chief executives, USOPC executives, NCAA leaders and sport industry experts.

### CO-CHAIR

Scott Stricklin  
*University of Florida*  
*Athletic Director*

### CO-CHAIR

Sarah Hirshland  
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### SPORT SUSTAINABILITY MEMBERS

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### SPORT STRUCTURE MEMBERS

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*Women's Wheelchair Basketball Coach and Paralympian (Wheelchair Basketball)*

\*athlete representative



## VERTICAL PARTNERSHIPS MEMBERS

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*Professor and Faculty Athletics Representative*

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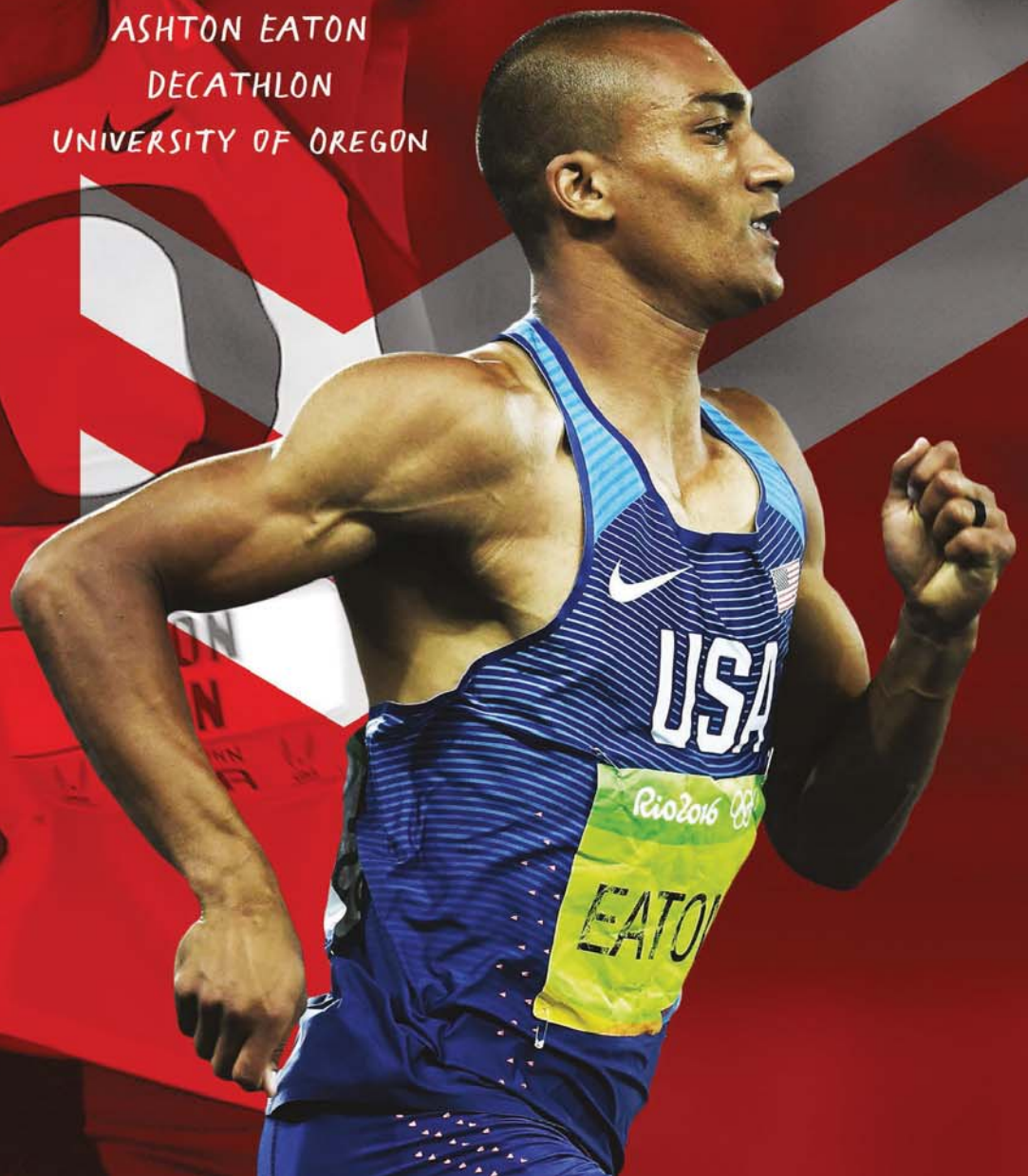
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\*athlete representative



# SPORT SUSTAINABILITY

ASHTON EATON  
DECATHLON  
UNIVERSITY OF OREGON



## SPORT SUSTAINABILITY

The sport sustainability group collaborated across a variety of stakeholders to explore targeted approaches around sustainability. Through its conversations, the group focused its recommendations on recruiting policies, as schools were already recalibrating recruiting efforts to accommodate COVID-19 safety measures. The COVID-19 adjustments exposed significant inefficiencies within the current recruiting process for Olympic sports and revealed the lack of college connections to the youth and elite levels; if rules were more flexible, there could be opportunities for resource sharing and sport growth.

### Sport sustainability collaborative stakeholders

The sport sustainability group leaned on expertise of many stakeholders as it explored potential sustainability remedies, including individuals from:

- College Swimming & Diving Coaches Association of America (CSCAA)
- College Gymnastics Association
- Men's Gymnastics Sustainability Committee<sup>3</sup>
- USA Gymnastics
- University of Colorado – Colorado Springs

The CSCAA compiled survey data and feedback from current college coaches, which guided the recommendations. Additionally, the CGA collaborated with UCCS to conduct an economic analysis of the men's gymnastics economic and performance landscape to inform its recommendations.

### Recommendation 1: Develop a customized recruiting plan for swimming and diving.

Amend existing NCAA swimming and diving recruiting practices to develop a customized, efficient and sustainable recruiting plan to better serve athletes, coaches and prospective student-athletes. The recommendation includes a swimming and diving recruiting proposal that:

- Delays start dates for communication and in-person recruiting to the PSA's senior year of high school.
- Limits the number of official visits provided by the school.
- Establishes a swimming and diving recruiting calendar to provide a healthier and more sustainable recruiting model that allows PSAs and school leaders to make more informed decisions.

**Rationale:** This recommendation seeks to reverse negative consequences resulting from NCAA Proposal 2018-93<sup>4</sup>, which was intended to curtail early recruiting but accelerated the recruiting process and nearly doubled the annual recruiting cohort size. The proposed changes allow coaches, student-athletes and prospects to focus on the academic school year and competitive season rather than being distracted by early recruiting pressures.

<sup>3</sup> See Collegiate Men's Gymnastics Sustainability Committee overview at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank) for the committee's stated purpose, roster composition and areas of discussion.

<sup>4</sup> See Division I Proposal – 2018-93 (<https://web3.ncaa.org/lstdbi/search/proposalView?id=103278>) National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2020). NCAA Division I manual. Indianapolis, IN.

This delayed recruiting approach benefits the sport given the later athletic maturation of swimmers and divers, and it would help alleviate the following concerns:

- **Premature commitments:** College coaches commit to PSAs and PSAs commit to schools before adequately assessing their academic and athletic fit. This results in coaches securing talent before athletes have reached their physical and psychological maturity for college-level competition, which typically occurs during the PSA's senior year of high school.
- **Admissions gap:** The early recruiting process occurs prior to PSAs receiving admissions decisions.
- **Transfers:** Swimming and diving coaches have noticed increased transfer discussions due to poor fit.
- **Youth pressures:** Youth coaches report an increase in pressure from parents to elevate training for younger swimmers, which may cause early sport specialization that can lead to injury or burnout.
- **Inefficiencies:** Coaches are casting a wider net, which increases the volume of official visits and recruiting activities. This also impacts current student-athletes that host PSA activities. For example, student-athletes previously hosted recruits two to three weekends each fall, but are now expected to entertain recruits throughout the year.

#### Potential recommendation impact

- **Budgetary impact:** The fiscal impact of these efforts will vary given disparities in recruiting budgets across Division I programs. It is reasonable to expect that a program would annually save 10-30% of its operating costs by reducing campus visits, and an additional 20-40% of its operating costs by containing the footprint to one recruiting class instead of two<sup>5</sup>.
- **Student-athlete impact:** The minimized recruiting period will allow current student-athletes more access to their coaches, as well as more time to focus on their academics and training, rather than hosting PSAs.
- **PSA impact:** A later recruiting timeline will enable PSAs more time to make informed college decisions and allow for increased academic, physical and emotional preparedness.

<sup>5</sup> See CSCAA Components of Recruiting Reform at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank) for an overview of the proposed changes, survey feedback from coaches and complete impact.

## Recommendation 2: Enact flexible prospect and elite engagement in men's gymnastics.

Provide recruiting flexibility to ease coach access to PSAs, and allow PSAs to train with and learn from elite male gymnasts. This would facilitate increased cooperation across the entire gymnastics community, from youth to college to Team USA athletes, to help sustain and grow the sport. Given the significantly low sport sponsorship in men's gymnastics, now is the time to test the following deregulation efforts:

- **Tryout exceptions:**
  - Remove the 50-mile radius limitation for youth to participate in school-related clubs, camps and clinics<sup>6</sup>, and permit a school/booster group to sponsor a local sports club regardless of the club's participant and/or coaching involvement. This will allow more creative management and partnerships to support local sports clubs and spur sport growth.
  - Permit men's gymnastics staff/athletes to provide private lessons to earn revenue to offset their program's operational costs and aid in youth development for the sport.
- **Sport camps and clinics exception:** Permit men's gymnastics to have customized engagement levels (discipline-specific camps, etc.), which provide schools with more flexible approaches to managing their camps and clinics.
- **National team exceptions:** Relax opportunities for national team athletes to train/engage with any college team to aid in athlete development. National team athletes would benefit from training with the college team and could provide additional coaching support to help the institution. **NOTE:** USAG is exploring a collegiate regional development program to aid varsity programs in supporting youth/elite development, expanding coaching expertise and increasing national team engagement through training and events.

**Rationale:** Currently, NCAA recruiting and engagement rules are widely applied to maintain competitive equity across all sports. During the 2020-21 academic year, the USOPC, USAG, CGA and UCCS conducted an economic/performance study in men's gymnastics and found a statistically moderate (0.40) impact of recruiting expenses on team performance, versus an assumed strong relationship<sup>7</sup>. Further, the study found many varsity programs leverage their club/camp structures to support operational costs. Thus, the men's gymnastics coaches and researchers believe these findings support the recommendation to relax recruiting rules as the restrictions are burdensome and hinder sustainability.

<sup>6</sup> See 13.11 Tryouts and 13.12 Sports Camps and Clinics (<https://web3.ncaa.org/lstdbi/search/bylawView?id=8761#result> and <https://web3.ncaa.org/lstdbi/search/bylawView?id=8764#result>) National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2020). NCAA Division I manual. Indianapolis, IN.

<sup>7</sup> Harris, S. (2021, May 25). Collegiate Men's Gymnastics Financial Analysis . University of Colorado – Colorado Springs.



### Potential recommendation impact

The recommended changes would allow for programs to be more creative and may help the sport grow by permitting youth to engage earlier in the men's college and national team gymnastics pathways.

- **Estimated budget impact:** The fiscal impact of these efforts will vary given disparities across camp/clinic and local sports club operations (camp revenues range from \$0-\$279,000 annually and club revenue ranges from \$0-\$266,760 annually); however, deregulation can help men's gymnastics coaches and administrators operate within their campus structures and construct meaningful partnerships within their communities<sup>7</sup>.
- **Student-athlete impact:** These proposed changes would enhance the student-athlete experience by easing and elevating engagement between youth and elite athletes for the sake of saving and advancing the sport. Additionally, more interaction may increase the program's fanbase.
- **PSA impact:** PSAs would have more opportunities to advance their skills by training alongside college and/or elite athletes. Additionally, they would gain exposure to college programs and may remain in the sport longer by understanding their personal and athletic development pathway through intercollegiate athletics.

*“These sport-specific sustainability ideas certainly push the envelope in thinking, but this is the type of flexibility needed during these unprecedented times.”*

—Scott Stricklin  
University of Florida Athletic Director

<sup>7</sup> Harris, S. (2021, May 25). Collegiate Men's Gymnastics Financial Analysis. University of Colorado – Colorado Springs.

# SPORT STRUCTURE

YUL MOLDAUER  
GYMNASTICS  
UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA



## SPORT STRUCTURE

The sport structure group affirmed the need to uphold current NCAA Division I broad-based sport sponsorship standards, while recognizing more flexibility in membership standards for niche sports can be achieved through formalized infrastructure ties into NGBs. Since 1997, Olympic sports have been exempted from NCAA minimum sponsorship requirements, and there are currently 11 sports in need of the exemption: men's and women's gymnastics, men's volleyball, men's and women's water polo, fencing, rifle, skiing, women's beach volleyball, women's bowling and women's ice hockey<sup>8</sup>. The following recommendations are designed to help protect broad-based sports offerings.

### Sport sustainability collaborative stakeholders

The sport structure group leaned on the expertise of many stakeholders as it explored remedies, including individuals from:

- Collegiate Men's Volleyball Sustainability Committee<sup>9</sup>
- American Volleyball Coaches Association
- Men's Gymnastics Sustainability Committee
- College Gymnastics Association

These stakeholders drafted and vetted proposal concepts for the USOPC Think Tank while examining avenues for sport stability and growth. The group also lent support and insight on behalf of the USOPC Think Tank by writing statements in response to the NCAA Division I Presidential Forum Sustainability Survey<sup>10</sup> and the NCAA Gender Equity Review<sup>11</sup>. Both statements advocated for broad-based sport sponsorship policies, increased sport-specific flexibility and customization at the sport level to help both men's and women's teams thrive as one sport (similar to how NGBs treat men's and women's teams as a collective sport).

### Recommendation 1: Pilot Olympic Sustainability Membership Category.

Develop and pilot an Olympic Sustainability Membership Category to provide low-sponsored sports more flexibility through relaxed membership requirements. Inclusive of nimble conference affiliation, modified scheduling and customized sport rules, this membership category approach is modeled after the NCAA Emerging Sports for Women program, which adjusted thresholds for new women's sports entering and exiting membership. This concept would allow schools increased collaboration with peers that are also navigating the sport-specific ecosystem and may aid in regionalized growth.

<sup>8</sup> See 18.2.10.1 Exception – Olympic Sports (<https://web3.ncaa.org/lscdbi/search/bylawView?id=13239#result>) National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2020). NCAA Division I manual. Indianapolis, IN.

<sup>9</sup> See Collegiate Men's Volleyball Sustainability Committee overview at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank) for the committee's stated purpose, roster composition and areas of discussion.

<sup>10</sup> See USOPC Think Tank feedback on NCAA Division I Presidential Forum Sustainability Survey at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank) for the group's response to questions posed in the areas of membership requirements, finances and governance.

<sup>11</sup> See USOPC Think Tank feedback on NCAA Gender Equity & Championships Review Survey at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank) for the group's insights advocating for increased collaboration between the USOPC/NGBs and collegiate athletic ecosystem.



The OSMC would be rooted in the following flexibility principles and qualification criteria:

OLYMPIC SUSTAINABILITY MEMBERSHIP CATEGORY	
<p><b>Philosophy:</b> <i>The OSMC seeks sport-specific flexibility in a manner that upholds Division I values with a shared commitment to the broad-based model of scholastic sport participation.</i></p>	
<p><b>Flexibility Principles</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Enhance student-athlete opportunities/experiences.</li> <li>- Ease operational efficiencies for sport sustainability.</li> <li>- Foster a healthy and growing sport pathway.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Sport Qualification Criteria</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meet national collegiate championship status per Bylaw 18.3.1.</li> <li>- Meet the Olympic sport exception per Bylaw 18.2.10.1.</li> <li>- Acquire a letter of support from a majority of schools that sponsor the sport.</li> </ul>

Managing the membership category would include:

- **Oversight:** The NCAA Division I Board of Directors would identify a Division I entity to oversee the program and measure the impact, in cooperation with NCAA/USOPC staff.
- **Legislation:** The OSMC would be legislated within NCAA Bylaw 20.02<sup>12</sup> with other definitions and applications of Division I membership.
- **Request process:** Sports seeking OSMC status would collaborate with coaches' associations, NGBs, the USOPC and sponsoring schools to formalize a request that outlines the desired legislative flexibility. The request would be reviewed and managed by the oversight group based on adopted principles and qualification criteria. Supported sport requests would proceed through the normal NCAA legislation cycle.
- **Evaluation process:** After a 10-year period, sports operating within the OSMC would be evaluated to determine if flexibility should continue. The evaluation may include analysis of collegiate sport sponsorship trends, conference and regional cohesion, financial sustainability, the student-athlete experience, elite-level sport performance, youth sport participation trends, national team contributions and coach/college leadership feedback.

**Rationale:** The OSMC would be piloted to test sustainability and growth for one individual sport (men's gymnastics) and one team sport (men's volleyball). These sports were chosen due to their low sponsorship numbers and unique regional footprints. Current membership challenges can fracture sport communities, alienating schools and threatening sport survival. In men's gymnastics and men's volleyball, the membership category could test the benefits of flexible scheduling, relaxed conference affiliation and a customized postseason structure.

<sup>12</sup> See NCAA Bylaw 20.02 (<https://web3.ncaa.org/lsdbi/search/bylawView?id=11795#result>) National Collegiate Athletic Association. (2020). NCAA Division I manual. Indianapolis, IN.

**Potential recommendation impact**

- **Men's volleyball:** Flexibility through the OSMC could ease scheduling efforts by aligning schools into competition regions. The multidivisional status could attract new schools to sponsor the sport, strengthening regional growth in the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (six new HBCUs added the sport<sup>13</sup>) and aiding programs in isolated areas, such as Hawaii.
- **Men's gymnastics:** Flexibility through the OSMC could significantly contribute to sport stability and potential growth. In 2021, two Division III schools announced plans to add men's gymnastics programs, showing growth for the first time in 40 years<sup>14</sup>. As new programs are added, membership flexibility will help sport administrators collectively manage schedules, conference affiliations and postseason structures – which will accommodate growth and encourage expansion.

*“It’s time to connect college sports leaders and NGBs to drive a sustainable direction for each sport’s ecosystem to ensure these opportunities not only survive, but also thrive.”*

— Max Siegel  
USA Track & Field CEO

<sup>13</sup> \$1 million grant helps 6 SIAC schools start varsity men's volleyball programs. NCAA.org. (n.d.). Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://www.ncaa.org/champion/1-million-grant-helps-6-siac-schools-start-varsity-men-s-volleyball-programs>.

<sup>14</sup> Men's NCAA Gymnastics; Back in Growth Mode. College Gymnastics Association. (2021, August 27). Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://collegegym.org/news/2021/8/26/mens-ncaa-gymnastics-back-in-growth-mode> and Simpson college Adds Men's NCAA Gymnastics. College Gymnastics Association. (2021, September 1). Retrieved September 14, 2021, from <https://collegegym.org/news/2021/9/1/simpson-college-adds-mens-ncaa-gymnastics>.

## Recommendation 2: Build USOPC and NCAA alignment through formalized collaboration.

Increase USOPC/NCAA collaboration to ensure the broad-based college sports model remains strong as the landscape evolves. This recommendation involves creating a bridge between the USOPC and NCAA at the leadership and sport-specific levels to support Olympic and Paralympic sport opportunities and to implement the USOPC Think Tank recommendations. This alignment can be achieved by expanding the existing USOPC/NCAA cooperation agreement by including terms to mechanize leadership-level connections, sport-level partnerships, communication collaboration and project-specific engagement.

- **Leadership alignment:** Establish channels to connect Division I decision-makers and USOPC leadership, as collaboration is needed to advance sport sustainability efforts – including the USOPC Think Tank initiatives. Given the challenges facing the Division I landscape and the significant number of Team USA athletes developing at Division I schools, the USOPC Think Tank efforts have focused on Division I sustainability. Further, the USOPC Think Tank believes cross-committee collaboration is also needed to ensure Olympic and Paralympic issues, which often impact multiple groups, have a broad and diverse vetting process.
- **Sport-specific alignment:** Establish pilot plans for select men's and women's sport partnerships to test liaison roles, communication efforts and sport-specific initiatives (playing rules, officiating, post-season, etc.) involving NCAA sport committees and the USOPC/NGBs.

**Rationale:** The sport structure group recognizes the current NCAA and USOPC structures are not built for formalized collaboration between the collegiate landscape and the Olympic and Paralympic movements. The alignment recommendation seeks to mechanize avenues for both umbrella organizations to contribute staff, resources and infrastructure to support broad-based sport sustainability through leadership- and sport-level alignment:

**Potential recommendation impact:** Formalized alignment could result in operational efficiencies, resource sharing and an elevated student-athlete experience through a smoother sport pathway. The USOPC and NCAA have already begun implementing the cooperation agreement, which outlined commitments to information sharing, communication engagements and cross-promotion of college ties to Team USA at NCAA championships and 2020 team trials. This recommendation to align leadership levels and sport levels through an expanded cooperation agreement will help our shared stakeholders (schools and athletes) navigate and strengthen the Olympic and Paralympic sport ecosystems.





HALEIGH WASHINGTON  
VOLLEYBALL  
PENN STATE UNIVERSITY

**VERTICAL  
PARTNERSHIPS**

## VERTICAL PARTNERSHIPS

The vertical partnerships group recognized the importance of engaging stakeholders across the youth, college and elite landscapes to elevate sustainability efforts. The group found consensus on recommendations to test stronger asset sharing and pilot partnership efforts to lift sport awareness nationally. These efforts are intended to ultimately boost sport participation and increase revenue opportunities to perpetuate collegiate Olympic and Paralympic sport growth.

### Vertical partnerships collaborative stakeholders

The vertical partnerships group leaned on the expertise of many stakeholders as it explored remedies, including individuals from:

- Evolution Media Capital
- Learfield IMG College
- Big 12 Conference and Pac-12 Conference
- USA Track & Field, USA Field Hockey, USA Volleyball and USA Gymnastics
- U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Properties / LA28

As part of the effort, the USOPC surveyed 15 college-centric NGBs and found unanimous interest to partner with the NCAA and/or college leaders on NCAA championships and broader sport management<sup>15</sup>.

### Recommendation 1: Establish partnerships to achieve greater efficiencies within NCAA championships.

Explore NGB/NCAA partnership opportunities to preserve and enrich the NCAA championship experience for student-athletes by paving the way for new revenue streams, exploring operational efficiencies and broadening awareness. This can be achieved through any combination of the following partnership areas that engage youth, college and elite levels to vertically elevate the sport. The vertical partnerships group identified postseason collaboration opportunities that could include: (1) hosting partnerships, (2) efficiency partnerships and/or (3) auxiliary partnerships.

*"I deeply cherish my NCAA student-athlete experience and I am 100% sure that I would never have been an Olympic athlete without it."*

— Chaunte Lowe  
Olympian (Track & Field), Georgia Institute of Technology

<sup>15</sup> See NGB College Support Survey Findings at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank) for the summarized feedback from NGB leaders on their willingness to partner with NCAA and/or college leaders. Collected January 2021.



The below chart explores potential partnership areas in three different categories; it also includes specific examples wherein NGBs are eager to collaborate.

AUXILIARY PARTNERSHIPS	EFFICIENCY PARTNERSHIPS	HOSTING PARTNERSHIPS
<p>Auxiliary partnerships are avenues for NGBs to help amplify and enhance NCAA championships by aiding in events and activities surrounding the event. Involvement could involve providing promotional support, creating broadcast opportunities and hosting youth/national team/coaching events alongside the championship. These auxiliary efforts may also increase sport awareness and create new sponsorship inventory.</p>	<p>Efficiency partnerships are opportunities for NGBs to provide operational and logistical support for NCAA championships. These partnerships could share staffing, venue use and collective sponsorship arrangements. Efficiency arrangements often require flexibility (format, dates, event scheduling, etc.), but can yield mutually beneficial saving and enhancements.</p>	<p>Hosting partnerships combine NGB, city and NCAA resources to host an NCAA championship. These events may be conducted at a national team facility, while the NCAA maintains event oversight. A signed contract with the NGB/city detailing financial and operational terms can allow for shared costs and revenues across all involved stakeholders.</p>
<p><b>Examples:</b> USA Track &amp; Field is proposing a festival-style event that brings a major youth event to the NCAA Division I outdoor championships<sup>16</sup>. This may boost exposure, grassroots engagement and ticket sales, while creating new revenue streams. Further, a Team USA wheelchair racing event could be included within the NCAA Division I outdoor championships, bringing awareness to adaptive athletics<sup>17</sup>.</p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> USA Gymnastics is proposing an NCAA men's gymnastics regional event in conjunction with an existing USAG event and is advocating for a men's and women's combined site championship model<sup>18</sup>. Both ideas are intended to provide significant efficiencies to aid in sport sustainability. USA Volleyball is also exploring ideas to combine/partner on event efficiencies related to the NCAA men's volleyball championship.</p>	<p><b>Examples:</b> USA Field Hockey aims to host Division I, II and III championships at its performance center in 2024, offering a free venue, free staff support and auxiliary youth and coach programs<sup>19</sup>.</p>

<sup>16</sup> See Track and Field Championship Concept at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank) for the background, short-term opportunities and long-term vision for collaboration around the event.

<sup>17</sup> See U.S. Paralympic Track & Field Event Concept at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank) for the background and short-term opportunities for collaboration around the event.

<sup>18</sup> See Men's Gymnastics Championship Concept at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank) for the background, short-term opportunities and long-term vision for collaboration around the event.

<sup>19</sup> See Field Hockey Championship Concept at [TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank](https://TeamUSA.org/ThinkTank) for the background, short-term opportunities and long-term vision for collaboration around the event.

The group also encourages NGBs and cities to engage in the hosting partnership process, which has been demonstrated in sports like softball (Oklahoma City), baseball (Omaha) and tennis (Orlando). Year-over-year championships in designated cities create a passionate fanbase and elevate community commitment and investment in the sport.

**Rationale:** The vertical partnerships group believes championship-based partnerships across NGBs, the NCAA and the USOPC may streamline resources, increase efficiencies and elevate engagement across the youth, college and elite landscapes. One-hundred percent of college-centric NGB leaders conveyed interest in short- and long-term collaboration on NCAA championships in the areas of:

- event staffing and logistical support,
- securing venues,
- event promotions,
- combining college events with NGB national team/youth events.

**Potential recommendation impact:** The USOPC Think Tank believes these NGB/NCAA championship collaborations may directly enhance the athlete experience while increasing national interest in each sport. While the forecasted impacts are still unknown, a study with the Haslam College of Business at the University of Tennessee is underway to assess the financial impact of these core concepts.

## Recommendation 2: Pilot mechanism for content sharing to facilitate Olympic and Paralympic sport coverage.

Focus efforts on increased, national-level storytelling to boost local and national support of Olympic and Paralympic sport programs. This includes content sharing and cross-promotional efforts across stakeholders to celebrate collegiate contributions to Team USA. The group recognized the immediate opportunity to bolster national awareness around school ties to the Olympic and Paralympic movements during the 2020 Tokyo Games, which ran in July, August and September of 2021. The following pilot efforts and partnerships were constructed and executed in the leadup to and during the 2020 Games:

- **Image sharing:** The NCAA piloted an imagery share to provide professional photography to schools so they could editorially and socially cover and celebrate their student-athlete performances in Tokyo. This first-of-its-kind pilot included real-time request/fulfillment of both U.S. and international athletes.
- **Journalism collaboration:** The USOPC, in conjunction with Arizona State University's Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication, piloted a content-sharing program whereby journalism and graduate students covered the Olympic Games; all written content produced by Cronkite student journalists was sent directly to schools to use editorially and natively on their channels.
- **Information sharing:** Schools and conferences were provided with college footprint data, storylines, team announcement information, post-competition results and a school medal leaderboard to aid in their Games coverage.



- **National storytelling:** Short public service announcements were made regarding the USOPC's Olympians Made Here and Paralympians Made Here campaigns, which were shared with NBC.

**Rationale:** The 2020 Tokyo Games provided schools the opportunity to celebrate their U.S. and international athletes competing in Japan, bringing notoriety to their school communities and athletics programs that support Olympian and Paralympian development.

**Recommendation impact:** The content sharing effort surrounding the Tokyo Games was successful and positively received by schools and conferences, as demonstrated through post-Games surveys. Social media efforts to promote the Olympians Made Here and Paralympians Made Here campaigns garnered strong participation from schools, conferences, NGBs, fans, Team USA athletes, athletics directors, commissioners and school presidents. Additionally, the Tokyo Games provided an opportunity to forge new partnerships to facilitate greater coverage and push the boundaries of what's been done in the past.

## Ongoing vertical partnerships efforts

The vertical partnerships group recognized the need to establish a long-term approach to strengthening the market value of collegiate Olympic and Paralympic sports. Additional areas of long-term focus include:

- **Team USA collegiate recognition program:** The USOPC is working with USOPP/LA28 to launch a recognition program in the summer of 2022. This effort seeks to build annual and quadrennial celebrations that honor (1) school participation footprints, (2) school Olympic and Paralympic Games medal contributions, (3) Team USA athletes currently competing collegiately and (4) passionate campus communities.
- **USOPC/NCAA quad planning:** The USOPC and NCAA will be engaging in strategic public relations planning to elevate mainstream awareness of the value of Olympic and Paralympic sport opportunities at the college level. The planning will also focus on the role our country's athletics system plays in developing Olympians and Paralympians.
- **Broadcasting partners:** Continued discussions with college and USOPC broadcast partners on shared messaging opportunities may lead to new revenue streams and expanded sport exposure. Further, the USOPC will continue its work with NBC to increase the notoriety of schools and programs during Games and trials broadcasts.

# PARALYMPIC INCLUSION

AHALYA LETTENBERGER  
SWIMMING  
RICE UNIVERSITY



## PARALYMPIC INCLUSION

The Paralympic inclusion group recognized school alliances are needed now more than ever, given campus resource limitations and the organic adaptive programming occurring on campus. Although there is not a broad-based, Paralympic-specific sport structure recognized at the college level, there is a strong collegiate footprint within the U.S. Paralympic Movement. In 2016, 40% of the U.S. Paralympic Team competed collegiately. In 2020, the U.S. Paralympic Team collegiate footprint grew to 50% and represented 76 different schools.

### Paralympic inclusion collaborative stakeholders

The Paralympic inclusion group leaned on the expertise of many stakeholders as it explored collaboration opportunities, including individuals from:

- USOPC Paralympic Advisory Council
- NCAA Office of Inclusion
- National Wheelchair Basketball Association

The Paralympic inclusion group believes true collaboration requires structured and ongoing engagement with school leaders and adaptive sport leaders. More coordination is needed across stakeholders to successfully advance the shared goal to increase inclusive awareness and grow adaptive sport opportunities.

### Recommendation: Bring stakeholders together to launch the Para-College Inclusion Project.

Through the USOPC and NCAA, formalize a collaborative Para-College Inclusion Project to (1) understand the adaptive sport landscape at the college level, (2) increase adaptive sport awareness and (3) connect school and adaptive sport stakeholders to grow programming opportunities on campus. The project would include the following elements:

- **Enhanced understanding:** The USOPC and NCAA Office of Inclusion will partner to research the current collegiate adaptive sport programming landscape. The information will be publicly available to aid schools in regional sport partnerships and to help athletes identify academic and athletic opportunities at the college level.
- **Awareness partnering:** Cross-promote shared research, messaging and pilot initiatives within the Para-College Inclusion Project across multiple stakeholder channels (USOPC, NCAA, schools, etc.). The promotional efforts will include cross-branding ties (U.S. Paralympics, NCAA Office of Inclusion and participating schools) and shared messaging to emphasize the college contributions to Team USA.
- **Connection building:** Engage with NCAA Committee on Women's Athletics and NCAA Minority Opportunity and Interest Committee, USOPC Think Tank members and Paralympic Advisory Council leaders to ideate, test and assess initiatives that strengthen the adaptive sport structure. Volunteer schools will aid in constructing a pilot to connect NCAA schools that offer Paralympic sport opportunities to explore stabilization and/or growth strategies (adaptive/able-bodied events partnering, sport structure strengthening, rules coordination, etc.).



**Rationale:** Many NCAA member schools provide Paralympic sport opportunities, and there is potential for growth in this area. NCAA member schools with adaptive programs have voiced the need to understand national adaptive sport trends and to share best practices on approaches to build and facilitate adaptive sport operations on campus. Aggregating and sharing this information across stakeholders could generate sport growth from grassroots through the elite level. As Paralympic sport awareness continues to grow across our country, the college system will see more interest from young athletes aspiring to further their educational and athletic pursuits through higher education. This may also benefit schools looking to increase their enrollment and/or expand their inclusive offerings on campus.

**Potential recommendation impact:** Increased collaboration in the Paralympic space will provide schools with a better understanding of adaptive sport sponsorship trends, allowing them to make informed decisions about future programming on campus. As Paralympic awareness grows, schools may increase programming and/or may offer more sport participation opportunities. This growth will also benefit adaptive sport student-athletes looking for college participation opportunities. Further, the NCAA Office of Inclusion and USOPC will both be able to advance their shared goal of promoting inclusive sport opportunities through this collaborative project.

*“It is an honor and a privilege to represent my country and my school in the sport that I love. This is an opportunity I believe we need to expand for more current and future Paralympic athletes at the college level.”*

—Jessica Heims

Paralympian (Track & Field), University of Northern Iowa

## NEXT STEPS

The USOPC CAC will partner with the NCAA to further vet, implement and assess the USOPC Think Tank recommendations. The following implementation steps will begin in the fall of 2021 and will evolve through 2024.

- **Policy actions:** Share all legislative recommendations with the NCAA Division I Council and initiate the committee-level proposal vetting process.
- **Sport partnership pilots:** Initiate the pilot effort to engage the NCAA men's and women's gymnastics sport committees and the USOPC/USAG on shared sustainability efforts (sport rules, postseason, etc.) in 2022 and expand pilot efforts with field hockey, track and field and men's volleyball through 2024.
- **Paralympic project:** Present project scope to the NCAA Committee to Promote Cultural Diversity and Equity, the NCAA Committee on Women's Athletics and NCAA Minority Opportunity and Interest Committee and secure school stakeholders to initiate the project (research, awareness and connection initiatives).
- **Alignment strategy:** Construct the expanded USOPC and NCAA cooperation agreement through 2024 to outline formalized engagement avenues for leadership and sport levels, shared communication efforts and project collaborations.

Should the pilot approaches with men's gymnastics, men's volleyball and swimming and diving yield positive results, the concepts could expand to more sports and pave a pathway for additional collaboration efforts.

The USOPC Think Tank members believe shared action is the key to sustaining the Olympic and Paralympic sport pathways in the intercollegiate system. The broad-based collegiate sport structure, where academic and athletic ambitions coexist and serve as an anchor for our American character and culture, is a treasure worth protecting.

*“Olympism advocates for broad-based athletic education accessible to all... serving as an engine for national life and as a basis for civic life.”*

— Pierre de Coubertin (1886)  
Modern Olympic Games Founder

## SPECIAL THANKS

The USOPC Think Tank members would like to sincerely thank each of the sport-specific groups that lent their experience and passion for sustaining Olympic and Paralympic sport opportunities at the collegiate level.

### Men's Gymnastics Sustainability Committee

Brad Brown, *U.S. Military Academy*  
 Mike Burns, *Collegiate Gymnastics Association*  
 Dr. Bob Emery, *Pennsylvania State University*  
 Brian Favat, *Stanford University*  
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 Jason Woodnick, *USA Gymnastics*

### Track and Field Collegiate Sustainability Roundtable

Blake Boldon, *Drake University*  
 Leroy Burrell, *University of Houston*  
 Robert Chapman, *USA Track & Field*  
 Joe Karlgaard, *Rice University*  
 Kimberly Keenan-Kirkpatrick, *Syracuse University*  
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### College Wrestling COVID-19 Sustainability Planning Committee

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### College Men's Volleyball Sustainability Committee

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 Kawika Shoji\*, *Olympian/Stanford University*  
 John Speraw, *USA Volleyball/University of California, Los Angeles*  
 Joe Worsley\*, *National Team Member/University of Hawaii*

\*athlete representative

Note: rosters reflect organizational affiliations from Fall 2020

## Paralympic Inclusion Committee

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 Will Waller, *National Wheelchair Basketball Association*  
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## USA Field Hockey Sustain and Grow Project

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 Dave Mingey, *U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Properties*  
 Tom Mitchell, *Purdue University*  
 Jessica Pare, *University of Alabama*  
 Lisa Peterson/Jimmy Stanton, *University of Oregon*  
 Miriam Segar, *Louisiana State University*

\*athlete representative

Note: rosters reflect organizational affiliations from Fall 2020





**UNITED STATES  
OLYMPIC & PARALYMPIC  
COMMITTEE**

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