

USOC Should Have Selected Ethics Expert As New CEO

By **Ronald Katz** (July 17, 2018)

Last week, the United States Olympic Committee, which is in the midst of an ethical crisis because of the sexual molestation of teenagers and young adults, chose as its new CEO an expert in marketing. Not surprisingly, the new CEO offered no specific solutions to this crisis, nor could she because of her lack of relevant expertise. Assuming that this recent CEO selection is not going to be undone by the USOC board, it is critical that the new CEO appoint someone with the ethical gravitas and credibility to help resolve this major moral malfeasance. A good example for the USOC to follow would be that set by Major League Baseball when, in 2006, it appointed retired U.S. Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell to investigate MLB's steroid problems.



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The moral and ethical problems dogging the USOC have been extensively chronicled in the press. The doctor for USA Gymnastics, Larry Nassar, has been convicted of molesting dozens of children and young adults. It has been reported that the previous CEO of the USOC, Scott Blackmun, failed to act on claims that Nassar had committed sexual abuse. This problem was exacerbated during the well-publicized, emotional sentencing hearing of Nassar, at which numerous young women testified; Blackmun did not attend nor did he send anyone from the USOC to attend.

Blackmun was pressured to resign, which led to the search for his successor. When Blackmun resigned, the chairman of the USOC board of directors, Larry Probst — who formerly headed a video game company — was quoted as saying, "We think he [Blackmun] did what he was supposed to do, and did the right thing."

The board, headed by Probst, whose biographical information reveals no experience resolving public ethical issues, chose as the USOC's new CEO Sarah Hirshland, whose biographical information has a similar gap. She has been the chief commercial officer of the U.S. Golfing Association, in charge of merchandising, communication and marketing.

Prior to that she worked at Wasserman Media Group, a talent agency and sports marketing company headed by Casey Wasserman, who is chairman of the group that will run the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics. Hirshland claims to have a "great working relationship" with Wasserman, which may have been a boost to her candidacy for USOC CEO.

Her Golfing Association bio states that "in her role, she oversees many of the Association's revenue-generating functions, optimizing these opportunities to elevate the value to the customer and to the USGA brand." It is questionable whether someone who had those responsibilities can effectively respond to a criticism by Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, at a recent hearing, i.e., that USOC culture "prioritizes winning medals over the health and welfare of the athletes."

Regarding the USOC's ethical problems, Hirshland said, "I recognize the challenges ahead." Of course, under the circumstances, anyone could recognize those challenges, but the question is what to do about them.

Major League Baseball provides a good example of a way forward during an existential ethical crisis. In the midst of a major steroid crisis in 2006, MLB retained George Mitchell to

oversee a report on that fraught subject. Mitchell had impeccable credentials. Not only had he been the majority U.S. Senate leader, but also he had been U.S special envoy who brought peace to Northern Ireland and he had been the vice chair of the 9/11 Commission.

Mitchell's 409-page report was thorough and pulled no punches. He identified more than 85 former and then-current baseball players associated with steroid use, including some of the biggest stars in the game. Mitchell's report, for example, mentioned Roger Clemens 82 times and Barry Bonds 103 times.

Because of Mitchell's experience and credibility, the report was well received across all levels of society. Then-President George W. Bush, a former owner of the Texas Rangers, said that "my hope is that this report is a part of putting the steroid era of baseball behind us ... steroids have sullied the game." The then-MLB commissioner, Bud Selig, said that Mitchell's "report is a call to action, and I will act." Mitchell's report was downloaded 1.8 million times in the first three hours after it was released.

To put it mildly, the new USOC CEO does not have the background, experience or credibility to put together a report like Mitchell's. Added to these shortcomings, she has been selected by a board that was in place when the current problems occurred. That board should, as the board of the USA Gymnastics did, step down.

The new CEO should then select someone like George Mitchell to oversee an investigation that reveals every fact, however embarrassing or harmful to those who bear responsibility for this widespread and long-lasting sexual molestation.

Only then can the new USOC CEO truly clean house and create the new beginning that is sorely needed for the USOC. Our young and vulnerable athletes must know that they can compete without risking their well-being.

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