

Canadian bobsled, skeleton athletes calling for resignations amid toxic culture

By: **Lori Ewing** On: 07/03/2022 17:34

Some of Canada's top bobsled and skeleton athletes say their success in the sport hasn't come because of their national governing body -- but in spite of it.

More than 60 current and former national team athletes signed a letter Monday calling for the resignation of Bobsleigh Canada Skeleton (BCS) president Sarah Storey and high performance director Chris Le Bihan.

The athletes painted a picture of a fear-based culture where arbitrary decisions were made about team selection, there was little concern about safety, and issues were compounded by a lack of communication.

"Operating under fear is detrimental to mental health and performance. And fear is the predominant energy that we have in BCS," said Catherine Medeiros, a member of Canada's bobsled team. "And obviously, trust and fear cannot coexist . . . constantly living in fear of losing your job, fear of talking, because it's going to be used against you."

The letter, presented to the organization's board of directors, comes two weeks after the closure of the Beijing Olympics, where Justin Kripps piloted Canada's four-man sled to a bronze medal and fellow Canadian Christine de Bruin claimed bronze in monobob.

"We have been made aware of the letter that has been circulated and we appreciate the athletes bringing their concerns forward to Bobsleigh Canada Skeleton's Board of Directors," the national organization said in a statement. "We take the concerns of our athletes seriously."

"As we do at the completion of every Olympic quadrennial, we plan to meet with our athlete community directly as soon as possible to review and address their concerns. The process of scheduling meetings has already begun with our national skeleton program."

The national program attempted a culture shift after the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics, where Kaillie Humphries captured her third Olympic medal but then filed a harassment complaint against a former coach. Competing for the U.S. in Beijing, Humphries won monobob gold.

But the athletes who signed Monday's letter claim the culture shift didn't extend to them.

"We've come together in spite of the administration to try and see some change brought about, because it's ridiculous," said bobsled pilot Cynthia Appiah. "There's so many concerns, but for me, it's the treatment of athletes, how certain athletes are treated better than others."

Appiah counts herself as being one of the better-treated athletes this season. After climbing the podium in monobob four times, she was a medal favourite at the Beijing Olympics. She finished eighth in both monobob and two-woman, but as a relatively new pilot, hopes for a podium finish at the Milan Olympics four years from now.

But last season, Appiah spent seven weeks training and racing at Whistler, B.C., and because she was only a member of Canada's development team, she wasn't eligible for any medical treatment. Several members of the Canadian team confirmed that was the case.

"And that's a huge issue because as devo athletes, we're more than likely to crash. And so, several athletes, myself included, were crashing and were denied medical care from the physios who were on hand. They weren't even allowed to give us an assessment."

"And it was very arbitrary, because there are guys on (bobsled pilot Chris) Spring's team, and Spring was World Cup that year, . . . , but half of his team was allowed to see the physio, half of his team wasn't. So, there was no rhyme or reason."

Appiah figures she crashed at least eight times during that camp.

"A lot of bruises, bumps . . . Each of those eight times, I wasn't allowed to get physiotherapy," she said.

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One development athlete, Appiah said, was ejected from the sled, and was left "battered and bruised" but was unable to access physiotherapy. He eventually shut down his season.

Canada's skeleton team competed at the Beijing Olympic test event this past fall without a coach present, which led to numerous bumps and bruises on the unfamiliar track. Elisabeth Vathje, who was the top Canadian finisher at the event in 13th, posted a selfie of her badly bruised arm. Storey told The Canadian Press last month that because of the cost of the trip, BCS sent two additional athletes instead of a coach.

Several skeleton athletes recently told The Canadian Press that they were almost completely self-funded. Mirela Rahneva, who was fifth in women's skeleton in Beijing, estimated her Olympic season cost her about \$30,000. She receives about \$14,000 a year through Sport Canada's Athletes Assistance Program.

Athletes on both the skeleton and bobsled teams decried the organization's lack of communication and transparency, saying arbitrary decisions are made on team selection. There are rarely explanations. Athletes are often given only a few days notice about travel for required competition and training. Often, they're told they have to foot the bill to get there.

"This isn't something new," said Spring, a four-time Olympian who was seventh in the two-man bobsled in Beijing. "The feedback every single year -- not just every year, every week, every other day -- it's hey, we need better communication, because when the communication lines are open, then we understand why decisions are made, we understand why things are difficult to plan, we understand why certain decisions are made."

Spring also considers himself one of the lucky ones.

"But I like to think that things are done right, and sometimes I see how other athletes on the team, how their experience within the sport is, compared to mine," Spring said.

"We saw it a lot this year with a lot of people, a lot of teams moving around different circuits, athletes moving around different teams, things like that. And without any indication to give context to why this is happening. Athletes are left wondering: why was I not chosen? Was it because of this that happened years ago? Or was it because of that? It comes down to communication."

Alysia Rissling, who was sixth in the two-man at the 2018 Olympics, said she saw the writing on the wall for her season when she was given five days notice to make a push standard. She missed the time by 0.02 seconds. When she asked the federation how to properly go about retiring, she was told to stick around in case she was needed. But she'd have to pay her own way.

"Athletes are so frustrated because they feel like they're being set up on purpose to not be successful so that the system can be manipulated that the powers, like the president, can have an excuse to choose athletes," she said.

She also had high hopes after the attempts at a culture reset in 2018, and praised the way the athletes came together.

"But BCS did nothing," she said. "They literally said 'Yeah, we're gonna do this and that.' And they didn't do one thing, not one promise that they gave to us."

Monday's letter said "systemic issues within BCS have adversely impacted both the sports of bobsleigh and skeleton and have become increasingly problematic. Many athletes have suffered physically, mentally, emotionally and financially as a result of the organization failing to address these systemic issues, and the future of both sports are in jeopardy under the current administrative regime.

"The athletes believe that the immediate resignation . . . is required to shift the culture of this organization into a safe, supportive, functional athlete-centric model from which to build future world and Olympic champions."

The 60-plus signees included both current and retired athletes who competed since 2014.

While Spring said, at age 38, he's not sure whether he has another Olympics in him and plans to take it a year at a time, he signed it for the betterment of the sport going forward.

Medeiros doesn't think she'll return next season, and so wants to be a voice for those who are fearful to speak up.

"I was in a position where I felt so burnt out at the end of the season, and just like the accumulation of all the years where I was like, 'You know what? I'm just gonna leave and do something else.' But, after all these years and everything that we've been through . . . if I can have an impact for future generations, it's not going to be easy, but I'm feeling confident that we can do something."

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