

Gymnastics Canada and provincial bodies face class-action lawsuit over alleged abuse

By: **Lori Ewing** On: 11/05/2022 17:07

When Amelia Cline was 12 years old, she alleges her coach Vladimir Lashin stretched her leg to the point that her hamstring muscle tore away from the bone.

The former competitive gymnast is the named plaintive in a proposed class-action lawsuit against Gymnastics Canada and six provincial gymnastics federations. The proposed class of plaintiffs claim physical, sexual and/or psychological abuse while participating in programs delivered by those organizations dating back to 1978.

"The defendants caused or contributed to the abuse of gymnasts by creating a culture and an environment where the abuse could occur, and failing to take appropriate steps to protect the athletes in their care and control, many of whom were children when the abuse took place," said the statement of claim.

Cline, who's now 32, claimed she suffered three years of verbal and physical abuse from Lashin and his wife Svetlana at Omega Gymnastics Sports Centre in Coquitlam, B.C.

Legal documents allege that Cline, as a result of the abuse she was subjected to during training, continues to suffer from numerous physical and psychological harm and injuries. Her hamstring injury, through forcible stretching -- a common practice in the sport that "would have us in tears and in so much pain," she said -- was the most significant event in her claim.

Her hamstring was already sore that day, she told The Canadian Press.

"(Lashin) said something to the effect 'Oh, you're just faking.' He would often do this partnered stretch where I would be standing in front of him, he would grab my leg from behind and pull it up so I'm in a standing split," Cline said.

"He grabbed my leg and more forcibly than he would have normally just yanked my leg back behind my ear. And when he did that, it snapped my hamstring and took part of my pelvis with it."

Cline said she was diagnosed with an avulsion fracture, where a small chunk of bone tears away, in her pelvis.

According to the lawsuit filed Wednesday in the Supreme Court of B.C., she experienced a training-induced seizure, ongoing back and neck injuries and chronic pain, a hamstring avulsion fracture, fractures in a hand, wrist, fingers and toes, chronic knee pain, disordered eating, stunted growth, anxiety, insomnia and nightmares.

Cline said there are as many as 20 class members so far.

Defendants have 21 days to respond.

The action seeks unspecified punitive and aggravated damages, past and future costs of health care services, and an order directing Gymnastics Canada and the provincial bodies to implement, apply and follow appropriate governance procedures to prioritize the physical and psychological health of gymnasts.

"It's not about money," said one class member, who asked to remain anonymous. "It's about how do we make sure that we protect other athletes and actually have change at the end of the day? Because right now, nobody who has been through any sort of disciplinary process or anything, there's no reason to hope or believe that without some sort of firm follow-through, that there's going to be any sort of change."

Cassidy Janzen, another class member, trained at Omega between the age of six and 11, when she left the sport after breaking her leg in a fall from the balance beam. Janzen claimed she was forced to do a skill she hadn't been landing, and her pleas for more padding on the beam went unheeded. She suffered two spiral fractures in her tibia and one in her fibula when she fell.

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"From the second you walk in (the gym) they tell you to trust them blindly, basically, and they say 'If I can say you can do something, that means you can do it,'" Janzen said. "They ran their gym through fear."

The 26-year-old recently began therapy for emotional issues she claims stemmed from that "blind trust" in a coach.

"The formative years that I was there, I learned not to stand up for myself, not to say anything that might rock the boat," she said. "I'm a very non-confrontational person now."

None of the allegations have been proven in court.

Neither Gymnastics Canada nor the Omega club immediately responded to requests for comment.

The physical abuse was linked to a culture of psychological abuse, the lawsuit claims. There were public weekly weigh-ins which, according to the lawsuit, were often accompanied by humiliating statements such as: "Too many cookies this week?"

Cline said it left her body image in tatters.

"I can never weigh myself, I just knew very quickly after I quit gymnastics that I was starting to slip into anorexia," she said. "It's not feeling comfortable in my own skin and feeling uncomfortable if I'm in summer clothes, there's always comparisons. You're at the absolute peak of physical fitness when you're a gymnast, so for someone to tell you in that state that you're fat sets a bar that is going to be so damaging the rest of your life."

An estimated 40 to 60 gymnasts were enrolled in the Omega program when Cline was there. Daily abuse perpetrated on the athletes, according to allegations in the legal documents, included routine hyperextension of athletes' knees by coaches sitting on them, and inappropriate physical contact, including have athletes run into Vladimir Lashin's arms and straddle his waist.

Lashin was named head coach of Canada's national team for the 2004 Athens Olympics. Gymnastics Canada appointed him national coach and high-performance director of the women's artistic program in 2009. He resigned in 2010.

The lawsuit comes after dozens of current and retired gymnasts penned an open letter to Sport Canada about the toxic culture in their sport and asking for a third-party investigation.

The letter, which has grown to over 400 signatories, earned the support of U.S. Judge Rosemarie Aquilina, who famously presided over the Larry Nassar sexual abuse case in gymnastics.

Judge Aquilina, who sent Nassar, a U.S. gymnastics doctor, to jail for life after accusations of sexual assault from hundreds of women, recorded a video of support to the Canadians, saying: "I hear you, I see you, I support you, I'm listening, I stand with you." She urged Sport Canada and Minister Pascale St-Onge to "yield to the call of athletes" and instigate a third-party investigation.

While it's alarming in any sport, emotional and physical abuse in gymnastics usually involves minors. It's common practice to keep parents from watching practice.

St-Onge said there's a safe sport "crisis" in Canada, and in her first five months on the job heard complaints about eight different national teams. Last week, dozens of Canadian boxers penned an open letter to Sport Canada about a toxic culture in their sport, and asked for the resignation of high-performance director Daniel Trepanier. He resigned four days later.

In March, dozens of athletes wrote a similar letter calling for a third-party investigation and the resignation of Bobsleigh Canada Skeleton (BCS) president Sarah Storey and high-performance director Chris LeBihan, citing issues with culture, safety, transparency and governance. Both remain in their positions, although St-Onge has ordered a financial audit of the organization.

Former artistic swimmer Sarah-Eve Pelletier has been appointed Canada's first sport integrity commissioner. She'll oversee the central hub of Canada's new safe sport program through the Sport Dispute Resolution Centre of Canada, which is expected to be operational by the end of spring.

It will receive complaints about alleged maltreatment in sport, launch independent investigations and recommend sanctions against individuals who are found to have committed violations.

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