

ATHLETE EXPERIENCE INTELLIGENCE

SportsCARE

Intervention Guide

Strengthening Safety, Trust, Recovery,
and Support in High-Need Team Systems

A guided implementation resource for high school athletic teams.

**Built around the athlete,
for the athlete.**

<https://sportscarelab.org/>

How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed for athletic teams experiencing significant or persistent gaps in safety, recovery, trust, communication, or athlete support. Complete it over approximately four to six weeks in structured sessions. It is most effective when facilitated by a trained adult — not completed independently by athletes alone.

Recommended Participants

- Athletes (all team members, not only captains)
- Head coach and assistant coaches
- Athletic trainer or school nurse
- School counselor or designated support professional
- Athletic director or administrator, as appropriate

The Seven-Step Process

1	Assess the current system Complete the Team Systems Baseline Assessment to understand where gaps exist.
2	Identify priority risks Review results together and agree on the most urgent areas for improvement.
3	Establish shared definitions Define safe, concerning, and unsafe behavior so the team shares a common language.
4	Build reporting pathways Map a clear, confidential process for raising concerns and receiving support.
5	Rebuild trust Use structured activities to address breakdowns in coach-athlete communication.
6	Create an action plan Develop a 30-, 60-, and 90-day implementation plan with responsible adults named.
7	Reassess progress Repeat the baseline assessment and measure change at the 90-day mark.

Facilitation note: This guide should never be used to pressure athletes into public disclosure. Every activity is designed with confidentiality and dignity as a priority. When sensitive concerns arise, they should be directed to a qualified adult outside of a group setting.

Safety & Support Disclaimer

This guide helps teams identify system-level gaps and provides structured activities for building trust and communication. It **cannot** replace medical diagnosis or treatment, licensed mental-health care, school safeguarding obligations, or legal advice.

Escalate immediately when:

- Any disclosure of physical or sexual abuse - contact the safeguarding officer immediately
- An athlete expresses thoughts of self-harm - contact a counselor or emergency services
- A physical injury requires urgent medical attention
- A retaliation threat creates an immediate safety risk - contact the athletic director
- A concern is beyond the scope of coaches or peer support - escalate to a licensed professional

Confidentiality limits: Adults who work with minors may have legal reporting obligations. Confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed when safety is involved. Facilitators must clarify this with athletes at the outset of each session.

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Team Systems Baseline Assessment

Complete the following assessment before beginning the intervention. Rate each statement honestly on a scale of 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). There are no right or wrong answers — this tool is for understanding, not judgment. Aggregate scores will help identify your team's highest-priority areas.

#	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	I know how to report a physical injury on this team.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2	I believe adults on this team will take my concerns seriously.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3	Athletes on this team can ask for rest without feeling embarrassed.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4	Team leaders model healthy recovery behavior.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5	I know which adult I can approach privately with a concern.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
6	Athletes are treated with respect regardless of their performance level or status.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
7	Concerns raised by athletes are followed up consistently.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
8	Female athletes' health and support needs are taken seriously on this team.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
9	Athletes can respectfully disagree with a coach's decision.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
10	Reporting a concern does not lead to punishment, exclusion, or reduced playing time.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
11	I feel psychologically safe to speak honestly on this team.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
12	Athletes of all backgrounds receive equal access to support and resources.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
13	There is a clear process for handling harassment or misconduct.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
14	Adults respond to athlete concerns in a timely and consistent manner.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
15	I understand what would happen if I raised a serious concern right now.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
16	Recovery time is respected as part of the athletic process.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
17	My teammates would support me if I reported a concern.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
18	Adults on this team follow through on what they say they will do.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

#	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
19	The team climate supports early reporting rather than silence.	■	■	■	■	■
20	I feel confident that my personal concerns would remain private when appropriate.	■	■	■	■	■

Scoring guide: 80–100: Strong baseline — focus on sustaining and monitoring. 55–79: Moderate gaps — prioritize 2–3 areas for immediate attention. Below 55: Significant gaps — adult oversight and structured support are recommended.

Understanding Your Scores

BAND	SCORE	WHAT IT MEANS	NEXT STEP
STABILIZE	Below 55	Significant gaps — immediate adult oversight needed	Prioritize safety & reporting pathways first
STRENGTHEN	55–79	Some systems exist but are inconsistent or unclear	Work through units sequentially, trust first
SUSTAIN	80–100	Core systems functioning — monitor & formalize	Build structures that outlast any single season

Priority Matrix — Categorize Your Findings

Category	Definition	Recommended Action
Immediate Safety Concern	Risk to physical or psychological safety is present now	Escalate to adult leadership immediately; do not wait
High-Priority Systems Gap	A critical system (reporting, trust, communication) is unclear or absent	Address within the first 30 days
Moderate Improvement Area	A system exists but is inconsistent or underutilized	Address days 31–60; build structure around existing practice
Existing Protective Factor	A strength that reduces risk and supports athlete wellbeing	Identify, document, and protect; use as a foundation

UNIT 1

Athlete Safety is a System

Why It Matters

Most preventable harm in sport is shaped long before the moment of injury — by whether athletes feel able to report early symptoms, whether adults respond consistently, and whether the team environment treats silence as normal. Performance pressure is one of the most consistent factors driving athletes to hide pain. That silence is not toughness. It is a system failure.

LESSON 1

Understanding the Environment, Not Just the Event

When people think about athlete safety, they often focus on the moment of injury. But the environment around an athlete — culture, communication norms, adult responsiveness, and institutional structures — shapes outcomes long before any single event occurs.

What this looks like in practice:

What athletes experience	What the system produces
"I didn't want to say anything during tryouts."	Delayed reporting; minor injuries become serious
"I told someone but nothing happened."	Loss of trust; athletes stop reporting
"Everyone else just pushes through it."	Normalized risk; cultural silence
"I didn't know who to talk to."	Pathway failure; athletes feel unsupported
"I was afraid they'd think I was weak."	Stigma barrier; wellbeing is deprioritized

Discussion Questions:

- When have you or someone you know stayed silent about a concern? What made that feel like the safer choice?
- How do adults on this team currently respond when an athlete raises a concern? What messages does that send?
- What would need to change for early reporting to feel genuinely safe on this team?

"High school sports are often built for performance, but not always for athlete sustainability. SportsCARE helps schools build systems around the athlete, for the athlete."

ACTIVITY 1

Risk-Factor Identification

As a team, review the risk categories below. For each one, discuss honestly what you have observed or experienced. The goal is not to assign blame — it is to name the gaps clearly so they can be addressed.

Risk Area	How it appears on our team	Who may be affected	Required improvement
Injury reporting			
Return-to-play pressure			
Coach communication			
Teammate behavior			
Harassment or exclusion			
Recovery practices			
Adult responsiveness			
Confidentiality			
Retaliation risk			

Access to support			
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After completing the table, identify your top three priority risk areas:

Priority Risk Area #1:

Priority Risk Area #2:

Priority Risk Area #3:

OUTPUT → Team Risk-Factor Summary

UNIT 2

Shared Language

Why It Matters

Without a shared vocabulary for describing behavior, people either minimize serious problems or feel uncertain about whether something is worth raising. Establishing clear definitions of safe, concerning, and unsafe behavior gives every member of the team a common framework for action.

LESSON 2

Safe, Concerning, and Unsafe Behavior

One of the most important things a team can do is establish a shared vocabulary. The three categories below provide a practical framework. Context matters, but it does not excuse harm. 'This is just how sports are' is never a sufficient reason to minimize something that creates risk for an athlete.

SAFE	Supports athlete dignity, health, open communication, and appropriate boundaries. • A coach privately checks in with an athlete after a difficult practice • A trainer sets a clear and consistent return-to-play process • Athletes can ask for rest without public embarrassment or punishment
CONCERNING	May create risk, confusion, pressure, or inconsistent support. • A coach jokes that 'everyone hurts during the season — deal with it' • Injury reports are handled differently depending on athlete value • A concern is raised but receives no visible follow-up from adults
UNSAFE	Creates immediate or serious risk. Requires adult intervention. • An athlete is told not to report a symptom before a major competition • A teammate or coach makes repeated gender-based or racial comments • An adult pressures an athlete to explain a concern in front of the team

ACTIVITY 2

Behavior Classification Lab

For each scenario below, classify it as Safe, Concerning, or Unsafe. Then answer the follow-up questions as a team. Disagreements often reveal important differences in how team norms are understood — lean into them.

#	Scenario Description	Safe / Concerning / Unsafe?	Who Should Be Involved?
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A	An athlete tells a coach about persistent knee pain. The coach says, 'Walk it off — we can't afford to lose you.'		
B	A trainer meets privately with an athlete after practice and connects them with the team physician.		
C	Teammates laugh and call someone 'soft' for taking a mental-health day.		
D	A team captain notices a younger athlete struggling and walks them to the counselor's office.		
E	An athlete reports a harassment incident and is removed from the starting lineup the following week.		
F	A coach asks an athlete to explain a personal concern in front of the full team during a meeting.		
G	A trainer establishes a written three-step return-to-play protocol shared with all athletes and coaches.		
H	A player repeatedly makes comments about a female teammate's body during practice.		
I	An athlete hides recurring symptoms because they fear losing their scholarship opportunity.		
J	A concern is reported to the athletic director, who documents it and responds within 48 hours.		

After reviewing all scenarios, write three behavioral standards your team agrees to uphold:

Standard 1:

Standard 2:

Standard 3:

OUTPUT → Shared Team Behavior Framework

UNIT 3

Why Athletes Don't Ask for Help

Why It Matters

When athletes do not report concerns, it is rarely because they do not care about their health. More often, they have made a calculated decision based on what they believe will happen if they speak up. Help-seeking increases when systems are clear, private, consistent, and respectful. It is not an athlete's responsibility to overcome a broken system.

LESSON 3

Understanding Real Barriers to Help-Seeking

Understanding these calculations is essential for building systems that actually work. Review the eight common barriers below and identify which are most present on your team.

Barrier	Why it prevents help-seeking
Fear of losing playing time	Athletes weigh physical risk against the perceived cost of reporting. When silence seems safer for their position, they choose silence.
Fear of disappointing coaches	Raising a concern can feel like a betrayal of team loyalty or coach confidence.
Uncertainty about severity	Without clear guidance, athletes default to waiting until the problem is undeniable.
Lack of privacy	When reporting requires a public conversation — during practice or in front of a group — athletes will avoid it.
Previous negative responses	A single instance of minimization or dismissal can permanently shut down an athlete's willingness to report.
Gender expectations	Cultural norms frame pain tolerance as virtue. Athletes of all genders may feel pressure to perform toughness.
Fear of retaliation	Retaliation does not have to be explicit. A shift in tone or reduced communication sends a clear message.
Not knowing where to go	Confusion is a barrier as powerful as fear. If the pathway is unclear, athletes will not use it.

As a team, identify the two most significant barriers right now:

ACTIVITY 3

Designing a Confidential Concerns Process

A confidential concerns process allows athletes to raise issues without fear of public exposure. Complete each step below with your school's specific resources and adults.

1	Choose a qualified adult reviewer Identify the adult(s) responsible for receiving and reviewing submitted concerns. This person must have appropriate training and school authorization.
2	Explain confidentiality limits Before any submission is collected, all participants must understand when confidentiality cannot be maintained (e.g., mandatory reporting obligations).
3	Allow anonymous or private submission Provide a mechanism that does not require the athlete to identify themselves. Examples: sealed written form, secure digital form, private meeting.
4	Categorize concerns on receipt The reviewing adult classifies each concern: immediate safety risk, systems concern, interpersonal concern, or general feedback.
5	Identify urgent issues Any concern indicating immediate physical or psychological risk is escalated to school leadership or emergency services without delay.
6	Determine escalation steps For non-urgent concerns, the reviewer determines which additional adults (trainer, counselor, AD) should be involved.
7	Communicate what actions will follow Athletes who submitted a concern receive a response within a defined timeframe explaining what was heard and what happens next.
8	Set a follow-up timeline Set a specific date by which the reviewing adult will provide an update. Silence after reporting is one of the most damaging system responses.

OUTPUT → Confidential Concerns Protocol

UNIT 4

Reporting Pathways

Why It Matters

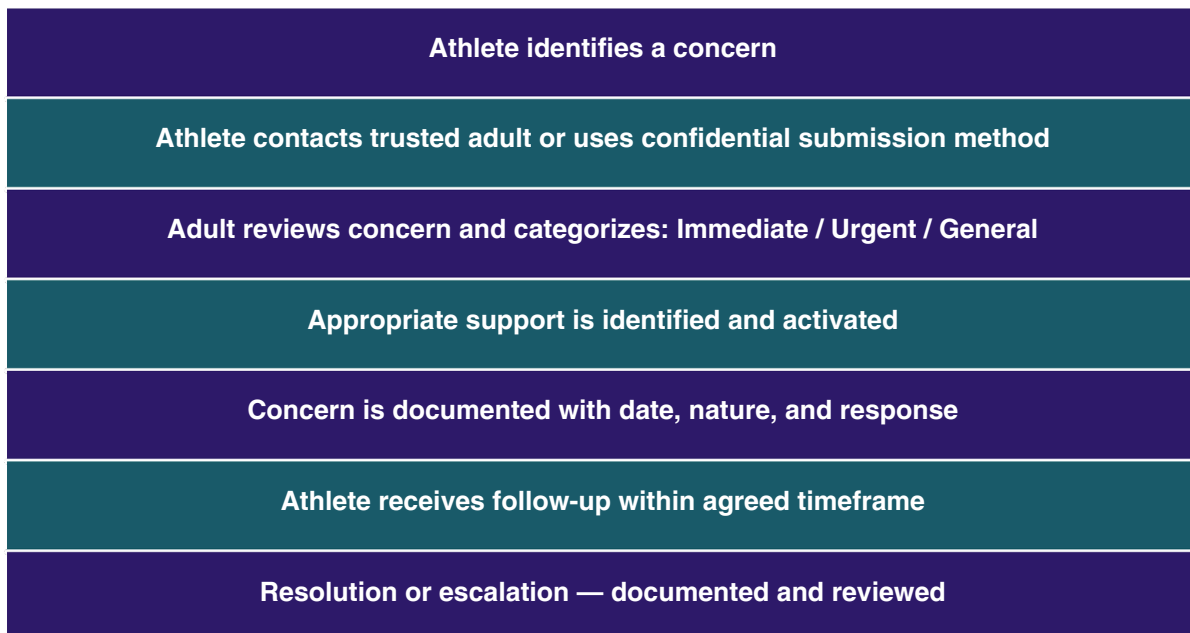
A reporting system that athletes cannot navigate is not a reporting system — it is a document. For reporting to reduce harm, athletes must know who to contact, what will happen next, and that using the pathway will not make their situation worse. Every pathway must also include an explicit prohibition on retaliation.

LESSON 4

Reporting Should Be a Pathway, Not a Guess

A functional reporting pathway clarifies where receives the concern, what happens in the first 24 hours, how privacy is handled, when parents or administrators will be notified, and how retaliation is explicitly prohibited.

The SportsCARE Reporting Pathway:



Important: Retaliation after reporting is a serious system failure. Every pathway must include an explicit prohibition on retaliation and a process for addressing it when it occurs.

ACTIVITY 4

Building Your Support and Escalation Map

Complete the table below with your school's specific adults, contact methods, and escalation steps. This map should be shared with all athletes and posted in accessible locations. Review it at the start of each season.

Concern Type	First Point of Contact	Secondary Contact	Emergency Escalation	Follow-Up Method
Physical injury				
Mental-health concern				
Harassment or discrimination				
Coach-athlete conflict				
Teammate conflict				
Immediate safety concern				
Retaliation after reporting				

After completing the map, answer the following as a team:

Which pathway do most athletes currently know about?

Which pathway is least understood or most likely to be unused?

What one change would most immediately improve access to support?

OUTPUT → SportsCARE Support Pathway Map

UNIT 5

Trust Through Response

Why It Matters

Trust in a team system is not created by slogans or one-time conversations. It is built — or destroyed — in the specific moments after an athlete raises a concern. Athletes learn very quickly whether speaking up leads to support or consequences. That learning shapes everything that follows.

LESSON 5

What Adults Do After an Athlete Speaks Up

A defensive response from an adult after an athlete speaks up can permanently shut down that athlete's willingness to raise future concerns — and send a message to every other athlete watching.

Trust-Building Response ✓	Trust-Damaging Response ✗
Listen without interrupting and without minimizing what the athlete is sharing	Interrupt, dismiss, or immediately offer reasons why the concern might not be valid
Thank the athlete for speaking up — explicitly and sincerely	Make the athlete feel that raising the concern was an inconvenience
Explain clearly what will happen next and when	Provide a vague response or promise to 'look into it' without specifics
Avoid disclosing personal details to others unnecessarily	Share the athlete's concern with teammates or parents without consent
Follow through within the agreed timeframe	Fail to follow up, or address the concern only after the athlete raises it again
Acknowledge when a mistake was made and describe specific changes	Become defensive, minimize the concern, or make the athlete feel at fault

What is one specific way our team's adult leadership could improve their response?

ACTIVITY 5

Trust-Restoration Workshop

This activity should be facilitated by a neutral adult when trust between athletes and coaches is significantly damaged. Do not rush — each question should generate real discussion. Silence, disagreement, and uncertainty are all valid responses.

1. What currently makes it difficult to raise concerns on this team?

2. What responses from adults build trust? What responses damage it?

3. What should happen — in specific terms — after an athlete speaks up?

4. What communication expectations should apply to everyone, regardless of status or performance?

5. How should mistakes — by athletes or adults — be acknowledged and repaired?

6. What would it feel like if this team had strong trust in its support systems?

Team Trust-Restoration Agreement

Athletes commit to:	Coaches commit to:	School leadership commits to:

OUTPUT → Team Trust-Restoration Agreement

UNIT 6

Inclusive & Gender-Responsive Support

Why It Matters

Athlete experiences are not uniform. The same team environment can feel entirely different depending on who an athlete is, what role they hold, and what history they bring. Building effective systems requires understanding that difference — not assuming one approach fits everyone.

LESSON 6

Meeting Athletes Where They Are

Review the factors below that shape how athletes experience the same team environment differently. Watch for: female-specific health needs that go unaddressed; gender-based comments treated as team humor; athletes who are not starters being excluded from communication or resources.

Factor	How it shapes athlete experience
Gender and gender identity	Female, non-binary, and male athletes may experience different pressures, health needs, and barriers to reporting.
Age and experience level	Younger or newer athletes are often more vulnerable to peer pressure and may have less confidence in their right to raise a concern.
Team status and playing time	Athletes with less secure positions — those not starting or on scholarship — often feel they have more to lose by speaking up.
Race and cultural background	Cultural norms around authority, silence, and resilience vary. Systems must not inadvertently penalize athletes for navigating those norms.
Disability and health history	Athletes managing chronic conditions or previous injuries may face additional barriers to equal access and fair treatment.
Financial access	Athletes from lower-income families may be more dependent on team resources and feel less able to challenge authority.
Language	Athletes for whom English is not a first language may experience additional barriers in high-stress situations.

Which athletes on our team may currently be receiving less access to support, and why?

ACTIVITY 6

Equity and Access Review

Review each area below as a team. For each one, identify who currently has reliable access, who may be overlooked, and what the team or school can change. Be specific — vague commitments do not produce change.

Area	Who has reliable access?	Who may be overlooked?	Immediate change possible?
Access to athletic trainers and medical support			
Adequate recovery time after training or competition			
Equipment that is appropriate, safe, and well-maintained			
Private space for reporting concerns or receiving support			
Clear and consistent communication from adult leadership			
Leadership and captain opportunities			
Reporting options that feel genuinely available and safe			

Fair and dignified treatment of injured athletes			
Equitable treatment regardless of playing time or position			

Priority improvements we can begin this week:

1.
2.
3.

OUTPUT → Equity & Access Improvement List

Reporting & Accountability Protocol

This protocol provides a framework your team can customize. Every field should be completed with specific adults, contact methods, timelines, and procedures from your school.

1	How concerns are received Concerns may be submitted in writing, by private conversation, or through a designated confidential form. Multiple methods should be available.
2	Who reviews concerns The designated reviewer is a trained adult with appropriate school authorization. A backup reviewer should also be named.
3	How urgent risks are identified Upon receiving a concern, the reviewer assesses whether it involves immediate safety risk. If yes, escalation occurs within hours — not days.
4	How documentation is handled All concerns are logged with date received, nature of concern, actions taken, and resolution or referral. Stored securely.
5	How privacy is protected Identifying information is shared only on a need-to-know basis. The athlete's privacy is explained at the time of submission.
6	When escalation occurs Escalation occurs when: immediate safety is at risk, a mandatory reporting threshold is met, or a concern cannot be addressed at the team level.
7	How athletes receive updates Athletes who submitted a concern receive an update within ___ business days explaining what was heard and what the next step is.

8	How retaliation is prohibited Retaliation — including changes in playing time, exclusion, or negative communication — is prohibited and subject to immediate review.
9	How unresolved concerns are reviewed If an athlete feels their concern was not adequately addressed, they may escalate to the athletic director or school administration.
10	How patterns are monitored Aggregated, anonymized data on concern categories is reviewed at the end of each season by adult leadership to identify systemic trends.

30-, 60-, and 90-Day Intervention Plan

Lasting improvement requires phased implementation. Use the table below to assign responsibility, set deadlines, and track completion. Update it at each monthly review.

DAYS 1–30: STABILIZE	Responsible Adult	Deadline	Evidence of Completion
1. Clarify and communicate reporting pathways to all athletes			
2. Address any urgent safety concerns identified in the assessment			
3. Identify and confirm all trusted adult contacts			
4. Establish confidential submission method for concerns			
5. Communicate retaliation prohibition explicitly			
6. Begin weekly check-ins between coaches and team captains			
DAYS 31–60: STRENGTHEN	Responsible Adult	Deadline	Evidence of Completion

1. Conduct trust-restoration workshop with adult facilitation			
2. Train team captains on their role in the reporting pathway			
3. Review and improve follow-up systems after concern submission			
4. Close access gaps identified in the equity review			
5. Collect mid-point athlete feedback (anonymous)			
6. Document all concerns received and actions taken to date			

DAYS 61–90: SUSTAIN	Responsible Adult	Deadline	Evidence of Completion
1. Repeat baseline assessment and compare with initial scores			
2. Review any unresolved concerns from the first two phases			
3. Establish ongoing accountability structures for next season			
4. Present improvement summary to athletic director or administrator			
5. Identify one system improvement to formalize for the following year			
6. Complete the team commitment page and file with athletic office			

Coach & Adult Leader Reflection

"The responsibility for safer systems cannot be placed solely on athletes. Adult leadership creates the conditions in which athletes either thrive or endure."

Complete the following individually. Use it as the basis for a facilitated conversation with your fellow adult leaders.

How do athletes currently experience this team?

No how you intend it to feel—how do athletes describe it when you are not in the room?

Are concerns addressed consistently?

Or does your response depend on the athlete's status, the timing, or whether the concern is convenient?

Does performance pressure affect your decision-making?

Have there been moments when you minimized a concern because of an upcoming competition?

Is privacy genuinely protected?

Have you shared athlete information beyond what was necessary? Have others?

Do all athletes receive equal treatment?

Or do starters, high-performers, or certain demographic groups receive more support or benefit of the doubt?

Are follow-throughs consistent?

When you said you would do something after an athlete raised a concern, did you do it?

Do athletes know their options?

Can every athlete on the team name the adults they can approach and what the process is?

What must change immediately?

Name one thing you will do differently within the next 14 days.

CLOSE

Post-Program Reassessment

Repeat the assessment below at the 90-day mark. Use the same 1–5 scale as the baseline. Compare your scores to understand where progress has been made and where gaps remain.

#	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	Athletes on this team now know how to report a physical injury.	■	■	■	■	■
2	I believe adults on this team take concerns seriously and respond consistently.	■	■	■	■	■
3	Athletes can ask for rest without embarrassment or penalty.	■	■	■	■	■
4	Trust between athletes and coaches has improved since beginning this process.	■	■	■	■	■
5	The confidential concerns process has been clearly communicated and is accessible.	■	■	■	■	■
6	Athletes of all backgrounds and status levels receive equitable support.	■	■	■	■	■
7	There is a clear process for handling harassment or misconduct.	■	■	■	■	■
8	Adults follow through on commitments made to athletes.	■	■	■	■	■
9	The team climate now actively supports early reporting.	■	■	■	■	■
10	Athletes understand their options when something goes wrong.	■	■	■	■	■

Before-and-After Comparison

Category	Baseline Score (Start)	Post-Program Score (90 Days)	Change (+/-)
Safety			
Trust			
Communication			

Recovery			
Access to Support			
TOTAL			

Strongest area of improvement:

Most persistent gap requiring continued attention:

Highest-priority action for next season:

System that now requires ongoing adult oversight:

Final SportsCARE Team Commitment

This commitment is not a symbolic gesture — it is a working document. Sign it, post it, and return to it at the beginning of every season and after every serious concern is raised. It belongs to everyone on this team.

Commitment	What We Agree To
Athlete Dignity	Every athlete on this team will be treated with respect, regardless of their performance level, background, or status.
Early Reporting	We will remove barriers to early reporting and ensure that speaking up is always safe, private, and followed by a real response.
Respectful Communication	Adults and athletes will communicate honestly, directly, and with the understanding that tone and follow-through matter.
Recovery First	Rest and recovery are part of performance. No athlete will be pressured to return before they are medically ready.
Confidentiality	Personal concerns will be shared only on a need-to-know basis, protected to the extent permitted by law and school policy.

Inclusion	All athletes — regardless of identity, background, or experience level — will have equal access to support and opportunity.
Adult Responsibility	Adults on this team accept responsibility for creating and maintaining the systems that allow athletes to thrive.
Follow-Through	When a commitment is made, it will be kept. When a mistake is made, it will be acknowledged and corrected — not minimized.
Freedom from Retaliation	No athlete will face penalty, exclusion, or hostility for raising a concern in good faith.
Continuous Improvement	We will reassess our systems each season and make specific, named improvements — not vague promises.

Team Representative

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Head Coach

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Athletic Trainer / Counselor

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Athletic Director / Administrator

Signature: _____

Date of Completion

Date: _____

