



## PROVIDER TRAINING

# Safety in Tennis

For every tennis provider, the Safe Play program is essential for keeping players safe and preventing misconduct.

BY **KIM BASTABLE**

**A**re you aware there is a federal law which creates a duty that anyone working with minor or amateur athletes must report suspected child abuse within 24 hours? And, if you do not report, you could be charged with criminal penalties?

The power and responsibility to prevent youth abuse belongs to each one of us in the racquet sports world. Every professional, club owner,

program director and all others who have ongoing contact with minor athletes must understand the risk of *not* reducing the risk—to ourselves and our businesses.

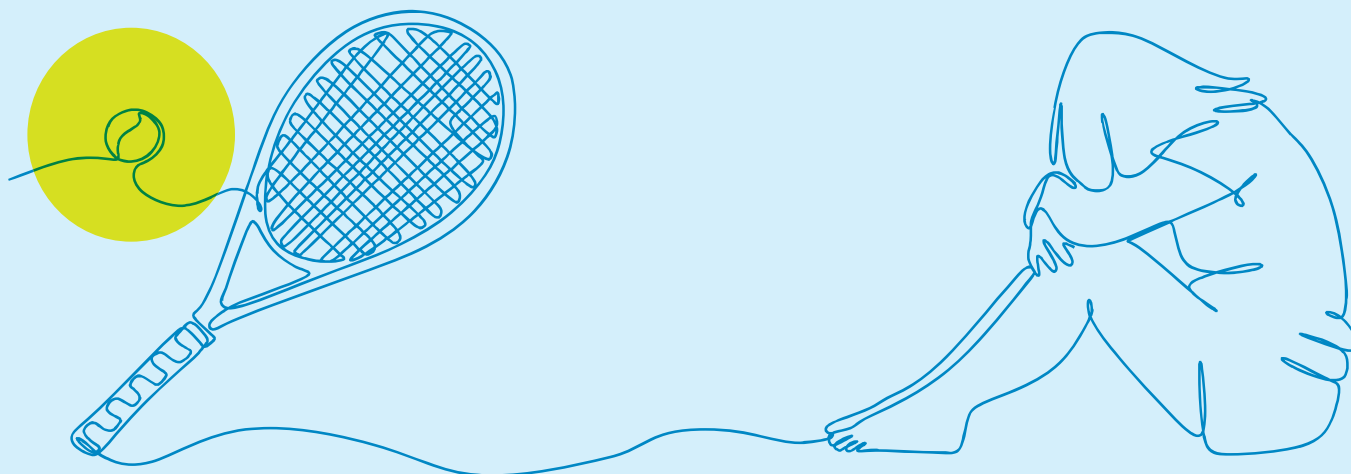
The “Protecting Young Victims from Sexual Abuse and Safe Sport Authorization Act of 2017,” passed in 2018, codified the nonprofit U.S. Center for SafeSport as the nation’s safe sport organization, with the authority in all related matters. The USTA, as the national governing body of tennis,

is required by the mandate and the U.S. Olympic Committee’s mandates to implement measures to attempt to prevent abuse. Therefore, every professional and volunteer involved in tennis and racquets programming that remotely involves minors has a responsibility to be educated on how to recognize and report abuse and be background-screened for criminal offenses.

Education and screening are “not a silver bullet,” according to Lauren Tracy, director of Strategic Initiatives for the USTA, but they provide a framework by which the risk is reduced. All USTA national and section employees and volunteers working with minors are required to complete education and pass a background check.

The PTR, according to COO Brian Parkkonen, requires Safe Play Approval for continued certification and membership. Similarly, the USPTA’s statement is: “All active USPTA members will continue to be required to be fully Safe Play Approved.”

For clarification, the Safe Play Approval process requires an initial two-hour online, free training provided by the U.S. Center for SafeSport plus a background check authorization, followed by a series of annual renewals of training and additional background checks.





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Since 2017, the U.S. Center for SafeSport, which covers over 50 youth sports, has received more than 10,000 reports of abuse or misconduct. When tennis coaches neglect the training, it can affect the status of tennis within the Olympic movement, put our businesses at risk, put our young players at risk, and send parents looking for other sports that might embrace the safety issue more deeply.

### Recognizing Policy Violations

Tennis providers should act as a “mandatory reporter” when situations don’t seem right, or when a player opens up about something disconcerting to them regarding a coach or peer. Did you know that coaches—working within any NGB—can no longer have meetings with athletes alone behind closed doors, or drive one athlete to a tournament or game without written consent from the athlete’s parent or guardian? Both of those simple actions, done for years by coaches, would be a violation of the U.S. Center for SafeSport’s “Minor Athletes Abuse Prevention Policies.”

The average age of a certified tennis professional in the U.S. is over 50 years old, which means they experienced junior tennis in the 1970s and 1980s. That was well before Larry Nassar (Michigan/USA Gymnastics) and

Jerry Sandusky (Penn State) became known to the world for their sexual exploitation of young athletes. Few in the 1980s even thought about coach abuse; it simply wasn’t discussed. But clearly it was going on.

“There were a lot of blurred relationships,” former WTA pro Pam Shriver said.

Sadly, Shriver knows about this firsthand. In the 1980s, she was dominating women’s professional tennis as a teen, reaching as high as No. 3 in the world. Her mother had hired coach Don Candy to coach her and “chaperone” her on tour. Recently, though, Shriver revealed that the relationship was not “appropriate” or “safe.”

The coaching relationship became sexual and very emotionally and physically “unsafe” when Shriver was 17 years old. She said she was too young to even realize the dysfunction of what was happening to her. Although Candy (who died in 2020) was married and 33 years older than her, he was comforting and, she thought, out to “protect” her—but that was far from what happened. Shriver said the years of emotional trauma, jealousy and physical abuse confused her. She was unable to find a way to remove herself from it for more than five years, worrying that people would find out or that her tennis would

suffer if Candy wasn’t her coach.

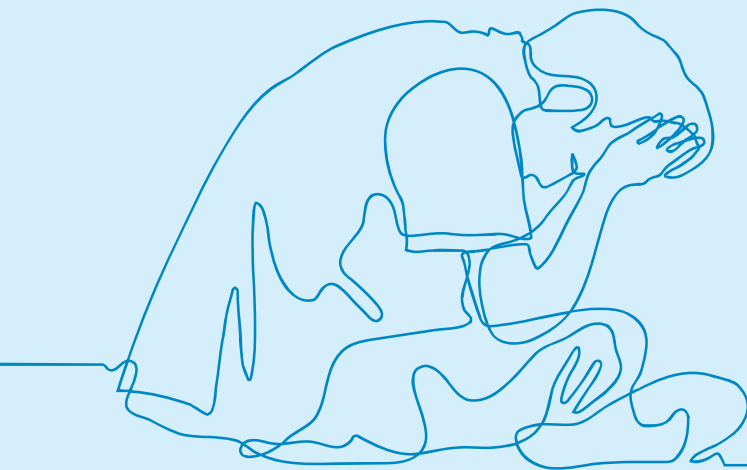
What inspired Shriver to tell her story was completing safeguarding training, which she was required to take to coach a middle school program. Only through education did she even realize the horrible reality of the harm of what Candy allowed to happen to her.

“The adult in the room needed to be able to stop the situation,” Shriver said on The Tennis Podcast of April 20, 2022.

### Minimizing Risk for Everyone

I direct the University of Florida’s Director of Racquet Sports Certificate Course and master’s degree specialization program that trains tennis/racquets pros to succeed in the leadership role of Director of Racquet Sports. It’s well known that, in the industry, directors across the country are struggling to find pros. There is a tendency to get anyone to coach—certified or not. That situation is challenging, and it may be tempting to hire someone not fully vetted, but that puts youngsters, the club and the sport at huge risk.

Should a person be allowed to work with a junior unless they are Safe Play Approved? The training cannot prevent anyone from future misconduct, but it can and does ensure that all





persons are educated and informed, so they can take their responsibility seriously to create a safe environment for all juniors.

“Being Safe Play Approved is one of the most important things you can do as a tennis professional,” said Craig Morris, chief executive of Community Tennis for the USTA. “By going through the process—in particular, completing the U.S. Center for SafeSport’s online training—an individual is learning how to prevent misconduct before it starts, recognize subtle behaviors that signal misconduct may be happening, and learn how to report it. Having a community of tennis professionals who are informed elevates our sport and helps promote an environment for all players, especially our youngest, to thrive.”

A significant added challenge is that most abusers are not obvious. They are sneaky and they “groom” both parents and players before taking advantage. They are the “friend next door” and rarely stand out as “creepy” or “different,” according to the training.

And, as Shriver outlines, the situation isn’t always about the coach initiating an inappropriate relationship. Players adore their coaches and feel strong dedication and trust, which can lead, especially in immature teens,

to the teen wanting a relationship, as Shriver admitted.

#### Thorough, Educational—and Necessary

The U.S. Center for SafeSport’s training, which is a part of the Safe Play Approval process, is free, online and takes about two hours to complete. And it’s thorough and educational.

Before writing this, although I had already taken it once, I retook the training—and I was struck by how much of it I didn’t remember from just two years ago. For instance, I needed a refresher on the details of what to report and what not to report, and who to report to. I wasn’t alone in my response to the training, either. Post-training surveys have shown that 92 percent of those trained “felt better prepared” and 88 percent of the learners were “satisfied with the course.”

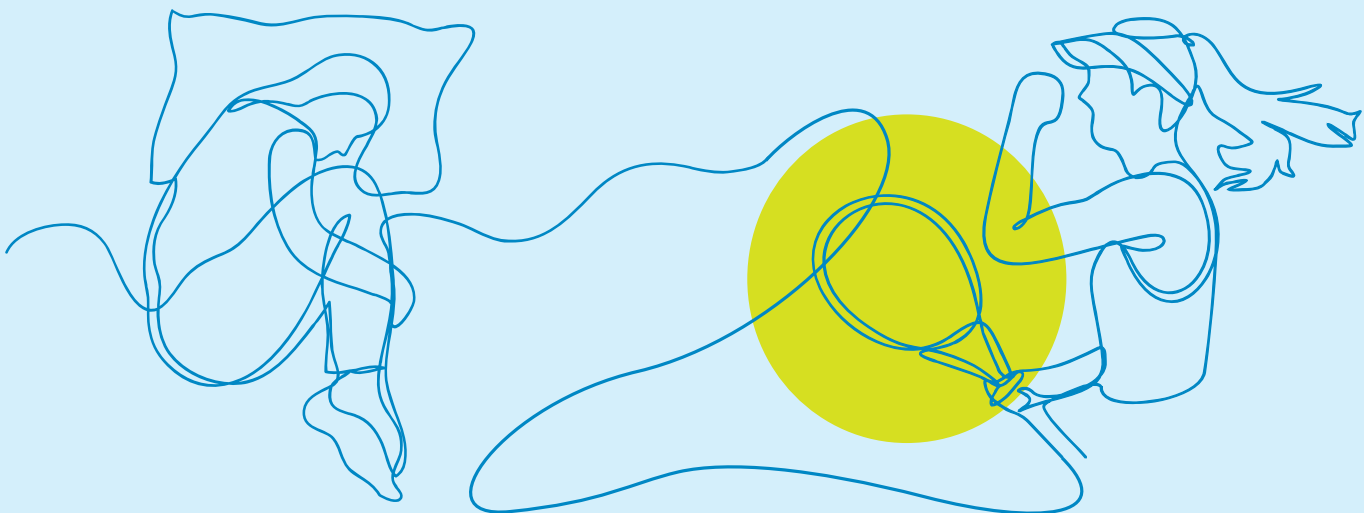
None of us wants to admit that we would ever need the information the course provides. We want to think we “don’t work with juniors” or “I won’t need that information, so why waste the two hours?”

But it’s vital for everyone to know the tools provided—even as a leader who might not be on court with juniors—because someone in the facility who *is* on court with juniors might need your support to deal with an issue, and all leaders need to be the first

to step up and get trained.

Some eye-opening pieces of information I learned in the training:

- 1 in 10 American youth will be abused before they are 18—not necessarily by a coach, but by someone. And a coach might be just the perfect confidante for that youth to share the information. The result: *You* must report it. Think about the possible ramifications here: If you have 100 juniors in your youth programs, chances are 10 will suffer abuse before they’re 18—again, maybe not in your program or with your coaches, but clearly, with the right training, you and your staff are in positions to recognize and report this.
- False reporting by youth is extremely rare. If they say it happened, it likely did.
- Hugging a player is not a problem if that hug is in the open and done appropriate to the purpose and does not involve lingering, making it suspicious.
- There is a difference between “illegal” behavior and “inappropriate” behavior. It’s not “illegal” to drive one youth athlete in your car without written parent/guardian consent but





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it's against the Minor Athlete Abuse Prevention Policies, which should be discussed at every facility/program.

- You do not have to be a member of the USTA to complete the Safe Play Approval process.
- All adults should assume the responsibilities of a mandatory reporter.

#### Set the Tone at Your Facility

Understandably, since this is a new coaching certification requirement, there is a learning curve. While some are hesitant due to the background check that's involved, others have expressed trouble finding two hours to do the initial training, according to the PTR and USPTA.

As an industry, however, we must be beyond these hindrances. Pros should realize that, although the background check does seek to identify criminal history, the first communication regarding findings will be back to them, via email, for further clarification and additional information. If an offense is found, the pro's name does not immediately get publicized. The pro can provide additional information or context to anything that is found as part of an appeal process to the USTA. There is detailed information on the background check procedures on the "Safe Play FAQs" document found at [www.USTA.com/safeplay](http://www.USTA.com/safeplay).

Directors of Racquet Sports, general managers and club owners must set the tone for expectations within their

environment for all employees. The USTA has done this for all of its junior programming, junior tournaments and events. According to Mary Buschmann, executive director of USTA Missouri Valley, their volunteers see the need and have embraced the Safe Play process. The PTR's Parkkonen said his members are starting to consider the Safe Play Approval process as a habit, after PTR initially had to explain what Safe Play was to members. So, positive progress is happening.

Our job is to use tennis to help youth players grow into the strongest, best version of themselves, where they feel safe, supported and strengthened. High levels of commitment to Safe Play will show that intention is real. ■

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