

Broken Trust in Olympic Sport: An Autoethnography of Coach Authority, Consent and Islamic Accountability

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Abstract

Coach-athlete relationships combine expertise, care and dependency, and safeguarding research shows that harm often arises through normalised practices rather than exceptional individuals. This article uses critical analytic autoethnography to examine coach authority through two narrative sources written twenty years apart: a doctoral autoethnography (2006) and an autoethnographic book (2026). Both revisit a distance-running career that led to two Olympic Games for a small Islamic Island state. Sociological accounts of discipline, the sport ethic and misrecognition explain how national honour, scarce opportunity, injury concealment and dependency made compliance appear voluntary when refusal carried sporting and relational costs. The Islamic concepts of amanah (trust), 'adl (justice), la darar wa la dirar (non-harm), shura (consultation) and hisab (accountability) are then used as sensitising concepts to evaluate that authority. The article argues that sporting authority is a conditional trust in which greater control creates greater responsibility, and that answerability should not depend on an athlete's willingness to complain. The historical office of hisbah is examined as a disciplined precedent for preventative oversight, not as a template for regulation. The analysis contributes a culturally situated ethical vocabulary to safeguarding scholarship on small-state and Muslim-majority sport systems.

Keywords: Safeguarding, Athlete Maltreatment, Coach-Athlete Relationship, Sport Ethic, Amanah, Hisbah, Maldives

Introduction

The coach-athlete relationship is one of elite sport's most consequential social relationships. Coaches influence training, selection, injury decisions, travel, funding and an athlete's future within the performance system. Such authority can be constructive when exercised through expertise, care and mutual respect. Yet the same intimacy and asymmetry can make harmful practices difficult to recognise or resist. Athletes may depend on the person whose decisions

they need to question, while coaches are rewarded primarily for competitive outcomes (Roberts et al., 2020).

Safeguarding scholarship has accordingly moved beyond explanations centred on a few harmful individuals. Interpersonal violence is now framed as an ecological problem shaped by relationships, organisations and performance cultures (Mountjoy et al., 2016; Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024). A systematic review of 43 qualitative studies identified organisational tolerance, conformity to dominant sporting values, power imbalance and winner-take-all rewards as conditions that enable or motivate abuse (Roberts et al., 2020). National-team athletes describe fear of repercussions, normalised suffering and limited trust in internal reporting as barriers to safety (Willson et al., 2022). The problem is therefore not only what prohibited conduct looks like, but how sporting environments teach athletes to interpret obedience, toughness, pain, loyalty and complaint.

Demanding training is not inherently harmful. Elite athletes accept discomfort, uncertainty and sacrifice, and the ethical difficulty lies in determining when legitimate demands become coercive, disproportionate or unsafe. Conduct may first be accepted as demanding but normal and only later be understood differently (Marsollier & Hauw, 2022). Consent can therefore coexist with dependency: an athlete may want an opportunity while lacking meaningful freedom to reject a particular demand when refusal threatens selection, status or identity.

Formal policy alone does not resolve this problem. Safe sport systems may remain inaccessible or untrusted where policies exist (Gurgis et al., 2022; Kerr et al., 2025). International federations have also been shown to favour visible, easily communicated safeguarding measures, a pattern described as performative compliance (Gomez & Schoch, 2026). Athletes interpret authority through cultures of loyalty, shame, family obligation, religion and national duty, and rights-based policy is filtered through those relational norms rather than replacing them (Tak et al., 2025). Safeguarding therefore requires attention to the moral languages through which authority becomes legitimate and through which athletes decide what they are entitled to question.

This article examines that problem through critical analytic autoethnography situated in the Maldives, a small Islamic island state in which all citizens are Muslim and which first competed at the Olympic Games in 1988. It draws on two connected narrative sources written twenty years apart, a doctoral autoethnography and an autoethnographic book (Haleem, 2006, 2026). Together they revisit the author's development as a distance runner and his selection for the Maldives' inaugural Olympic team at Seoul 1988, where he served as captain and flag bearer. They also cover his preparation for a second Games at Barcelona 1992. They are offered not as representative of Maldivian athletes or coaches but as a situated case for analysing authority, bodily harm, silence, national honour, scarcity and accountability.

Research on South Korean elite sport shows that reforms accommodating existing practices and narratives tend to resist substantial change (Park et al., 2025). If imported norms are absorbed in this way, critique may need to be made in the setting's own moral terms. Whether an ethical vocabulary internal to a Muslim-majority setting can evaluate coach authority from within has received little direct attention. Amanah (trust), 'adl (justice), la darar wa la dirar (non-harm), shura (consultation) and hisab (accountability) are used here as

sensitising concepts. They direct attention to duties created by power, proportionality of burden, preventable harm, athlete voice and answerability. They do not replace human-rights or safeguarding frameworks, and religion is treated as neither an automatic solution nor a cultural excuse.

The aim of this article is to examine how coach authority was normalised and experienced as constrained consent across a small-state Olympic career, and to evaluate that authority through Islamic ethics of accountability. The article makes three contributions. It links a longitudinal autoethnographic account with sociological explanations of normalised authority. It uses Islamic ethics to evaluate power rather than confining religion to motivation, coping or participation. It also foregrounds a small-state setting, where scarce expertise, overlapping roles and limited exit intensify relational power. The central claim is that trust is broken when authority is exercised without corresponding responsibility, when compliance is treated as sufficient evidence of consent, and when harmful decisions cannot credibly be questioned.

Conceptual Framework

Authority, normalisation and constrained consent

Elite sport is organised through unequal but often necessary relationships. Coaches possess specialist knowledge and make judgements that athletes cannot always make independently, so unequal authority is not synonymous with abuse. Its legitimacy depends on whether risk is proportionate, injury concerns are taken seriously, decisions are explainable and disagreement is possible without disproportionate consequences. Contemporary safeguarding models accordingly locate prevention across interconnected levels of the sport environment rather than only in individual conduct (Khomutova et al., 2025; Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

Foucault's account of disciplinary power explains how such authority becomes ordinary rather than overtly coercive. Discipline operates through routines, observation, comparison and normalising judgement, producing subjects who regulate themselves against expected standards (Foucault, 1977). Training makes particular bodies, behaviours and forms of self-surveillance appear natural (Markula & Pringle, 2006). High-performance endurance running coaches exercise near-total control over training space, time and organisation in ways that limit their athletes' development without the coaches recognising it (Mills & Denison, 2018). A coach's reflection on one cross-country runner shows how readily poor performance is attributed to an athlete's supposed lack of mental toughness rather than to taken-for-granted coaching practice (Denison, 2007). Elite sport depends on repetition, correction and technical authority, so discipline is not itself abusive. The sociological question is how those practices narrow the range of responses that remain thinkable for the athlete.

The sport ethic adds a normative dimension. Athletes are expected to sacrifice for the game, strive for distinction, accept risk, play through pain and refuse limits. Because overconformity to these norms is rewarded rather than sanctioned, harmful excess can be read as commitment rather than deviance (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). Studies of playing hurt show how injured athletes manage stigma and doubts about whether their pain is genuine within networks of coaches, medical staff and teammates (Roderick, 2006; Roderick et al., 2000). Silence therefore cannot be read as agreement. Disclosure research describes a staged and

contingent process rather than a single clear complaint (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2023; Woessner et al., 2024).

Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence identifies a related mechanism. Domination is reproduced when unequal arrangements are misrecognised as legitimate or self-evident, so that those subject to them help sustain the hierarchy that constrains them (Bourdieu, 1977). In professional youth football, authoritarian coaching was reproduced and misrecognised as legitimate by coaches and players alike (Cushion & Jones, 2006). Not every demanding coach-athlete relation is domination; Bourdieu explains one mechanism through which dependence, aspiration and accepted norms make asymmetry difficult to name.

The term constrained consent is used here to hold agency and dependency together. In combat sports, consent is mostly communicated subtly, assumed by others or deferred rather than stated outright, a pattern that weakens its power to make risk legitimate (Channon & Matthews, 2022). Consent and resistance can also coexist within the same coach-athlete relationship (Purdy et al., 2008). Constrained consent names a narrower condition. An athlete actively desires demanding training while depending on the person who controls access to the goal he or she values. Refusal therefore carries costs such as deselection, lost funding, reputational damage or exclusion from a scarce national opportunity. In elite youth sport, where dependency is deepest, consent has been reconceived as authority to be cared for by a trustworthy coach (Bloodworth et al., 2017). This formulation shifts the ethical weight from the athlete's assent to the coach's conduct. Peak vulnerability to sexual abuse has been located at a stage of imminent achievement just before elite success (Brackenridge & Kirby, 1997). The concept was developed for a different harm, but its logic, that dependency is greatest when a prized opportunity is closest, applies to selection for a first national Olympic team. The safeguarding question is therefore not simply whether an athlete said yes. It is whether credible alternatives existed, relevant information was available and disagreement could occur without retaliation.

Islamic ethics as an evaluative vocabulary of power

The Islam-and-sport literature has largely asked different questions from those pursued here. Major work has examined participation, gender and embodiment, and the ways Muslim women and young people negotiate sporting institutions (Benn et al., 2011; Toffoletti & Palmer, 2017). A scoping review of 157 studies found the field concentrated on Muslim women's participation in Western contexts (Hussain & Cunningham, 2024). Explicitly Islamic ethical approaches have more often focused on the competitor, addressing fair play, doping, bodily stewardship and character (Al-Dafrawi, 2020; Mohammed Insaf & Shehu, 2025). Far less attention has been given to the ethics of authority exercised over athletes: what makes coaching power legitimate, how dependency changes consent, and what duties arise when exit or complaint is costly. The contribution claimed is therefore narrow. Safeguarding and authority are read through an Islamic moral vocabulary, with Qur'anic and prophetic sources interpreted through established scholarship rather than unmediated scriptural assertion (Fakhry, 1991; Hallaq, 2009; Izutsu, 2002; Kamali, 2003).

Amanah names entrusted responsibility. Qur'an 4:58 links trust with just judgement. The prophetic teaching that each person is a shepherd answerable for those in his or her charge places leadership within obligation rather than entitlement (Sahih al-Bukhari, no. 7138; Sahih

Muslim, no. 1829). Classical governance literature similarly treated office as a responsibility bounded by duties (al-Mawardi, 1996; Hallaq, 2009). Applied to coaching, expertise creates additional obligations because the athlete entrusts substantial influence over body, time, aspiration and opportunity. Greater dependence therefore increases rather than reduces the duty of restraint, and a successful outcome cannot retrospectively make every process just. Amanah also reverses the direction in which loyalty is often assumed to flow in honour-based sport cultures. The athlete's obligation to the coach is matched, and exceeded, by the coach's obligation to the person entrusted to him.

'Adl concerns justice, while mizan adds balance and proportionality. Within the wider Qur'anic ethical vocabulary, these concepts direct attention to how burdens and risks are distributed rather than merely whether rules were technically followed (Fakhry, 1991; Izutsu, 2002). Sacrifice can be meaningful when genuinely chosen and proportionate to a legitimate goal, but becomes ethically suspect when unequal authority obscures alternatives or treats future health as expendable. Shura provides a procedural counterpart. Qur'an 3:159 and 42:38 situate consultation within collective decision-making, and its institutional significance has been emphasised in modern scholarship (al-Raysuni, 2011). In sport, shura does not abolish professional judgement; it requires explanation, listening and a credible opportunity for the less powerful party to influence decisions affecting welfare.

La darar wa la dirar, the prohibition on causing and reciprocating harm, shifts attention from intention to foreseeable effects and prevention (Sunan Ibn Majah, no. 2340). The principle is embedded in jurisprudential reasoning and legal maxims rather than resting on an isolated report (Kamali, 2003). Islamic bioethics provides an interdisciplinary precedent because it applies these concepts, including the purposive reasoning of maqasid, to bodily risk under conditions of unequal expertise and dependency (Sachedina, 2009; Saifuddeen et al., 2014). The analogy supports, but does not prove, extension to high-performance sport.

Hisab adds answerability: responsibility does not disappear because harm is undetected, no complaint is filed, or authority is distributed across offices. Hisbah is related but distinct. Historically it referred to practices and offices of public supervision associated with commanding right and forbidding wrong, exercised by the muhtasib over markets and public conduct (Cook, 2000; Stilt, 2011). Classical treatments framed the function as preventative rather than remedial, so the muhtasib sought to stop transgressions before any court proceedings and referred persistent cases to a judge (Gleave, 2004). These treatises often describe an ideal rather than actual practice (Gleave, 2004). The muhtasib should not be recast as a modern independent regulator, since the office took direction from rulers and combined doctrine with political discretion (Stilt, 2011). Its relevance is narrower: Islamic governance contains a precedent for oversight that sits outside the relationship being supervised and is preventative in design rather than triggered by a complaint. In the framework used here, amanah names the duty, 'adl the standard, non-harm the limit, shura the participatory procedure, hisab the answerability and hisbah an institutional precedent for visible oversight.

Methodology

Research design and sources

The study uses critical analytic autoethnography to connect personal experience with the social organisation of elite sport. It is analytic in the sense that the author is a full member of the setting under study and remains visible in the account (Anderson, 2006). Lived experience is used to pursue theoretical understanding rather than affective resonance alone. The study also draws on autoethnographic scholarship that treats self-narrative as culturally situated inquiry requiring systematic reflexivity, relational ethics and movement between self and social world (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008). Autoethnography has an established place in the sociology of sport for examining coaching power and injury from inside the coach-athlete relationship, including its long-term effects (Kavanagh, 2025; Kuhlin et al., 2020; Purdy et al., 2008).

Two narrative sources are analysed. The first is a doctoral autoethnography written closer to the competitive career, foregrounding power, pain, injury and obedience (Haleem, 2006). The second is an autoethnographic book written twenty years later, revisiting childhood, distance running, national representation and Olympic selection from the standpoint of a former athlete, coach, administrator and scholar (Haleem, 2026). Reading them together permits examination of continuity and reinterpretation across time. This matters because abuse narratives in sport move from normalisation to embodiment and, for some, to a later interruption in which experience is recognised differently (Kuhlin & Barker-Ruchti, 2025). The focal events span the mid-1980s to 1992, covering preparation for the Seoul and Barcelona Games.

Two earlier manuscripts by the author, one of which examines textual ethics, disclosure and concealment in the same two sources, are not yet published and are therefore not cited. The present article is analytically distinct: it is limited to relational and institutional authority, constrained consent, bodily harm, athlete voice and safeguarding. The boundary prevents the same material serving as interchangeable evidence for different arguments.

Analytical procedure, reflexivity and ethics

Analysis proceeded in four stages. First, both sources were read for passages concerning authority, pain, injury, obedience, loyalty, selection, medical support, national honour and institutional response. Second, passages were grouped into preliminary themes: honour and obligation; bodily harm; silence and constrained voice; dependency and scarce opportunity; and dispersed responsibility. Third, these themes were interpreted alongside sociological and safeguarding research on normalisation, the sport ethic, disclosure and ecological risk. This stage was deliberately non-diagnostic: contemporary concepts were used to clarify social processes, not to declare retrospectively that every difficult experience constituted abuse. Fourth, *amanah*, *'adl*, *la darar wa la dirar*, *shura* and *hisab* were applied as sensitising questions about responsibility, proportionality, prevention, consultation and answerability. The study is reported in accordance with the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research, and the completed checklist is provided as supplementary material (O'Brien et al., 2014).

The sequence matters. The narratives generate the themes, the sociological and safeguarding literature situates them, and Islamic ethics is applied last. This order reduces the risk of forcing experience into a predetermined religious explanation: Islamic concepts do not establish

what happened; they assess the moral legitimacy of power once relational and organisational conditions have been described.

The author is former athlete, narrator, researcher, Muslim, coach and sport administrator, and his later governance roles place him on the institutional side of the authority relation that this article first examines from below. That dual location is analytically valuable but creates interests and blind spots. A former captain and administrator may have reasons to describe past coaches, institutions and his younger self in ways that protect current identity or rationalise later decisions. Reflexivity therefore involved comparing earlier and later accounts and distinguishing remembered experience from documented fact where possible. It also involved avoiding claims about the private intentions of others and allowing relationships to contain care, opportunity, commitment and harm at the same time.

Autoethnography also creates relational obligations because personal stories implicate people who did not choose to become research participants, and procedural approval does not exhaust that responsibility (Ellis, 2007; Sparkes, 2024; Tolich, 2010). Satr, an Islamic ethic of restraint against unnecessary exposure that damages dignity, points in the same direction while allowing that concealment cannot be absolute where protection from harm is at stake (Osman, 2023). Because the author, country and Games are named, members of a small national team and its support staff remain potentially identifiable to informed readers even when names are withheld. The article therefore quotes only passages necessary to the argument, replaces pseudonyms with generic descriptors, and focuses on structures and experienced effects rather than assigning private motives or making accusations against identifiable individuals.

The study offers analytic rather than statistical generalisation. A single life history cannot establish prevalence in Maldivian sport or represent all Muslim athletes, and there are no interviews with coaches, administrators or medical personnel against which to compare the author's interpretation. Temporal distance also matters: the focal events occurred between the mid-1980s and 1992, while the later source was published in 2026. The claim is therefore about a configuration rather than a frozen historical period, namely concentrated authority, dispersed responsibility, limited independent reporting and scarcity that makes exit costly. Recent research describes recognisable versions of these mechanisms in contemporary systems (Chroni et al., 2026; Gurgis et al., 2022; Kerr et al., 2025). Memory is reorganised by later knowledge and faith, but that reinterpretation is treated as part of the data rather than hidden as a defect. Its influence may run in two directions: the later moral vocabulary may sharpen criticism of past coaching, whereas later administrative roles may soften criticism of institutions.

Analysis

National honour and constrained consent

Selection for the Maldives' inaugural Olympic team carried meaning beyond individual achievement. Olympic participation was both a rare personal opportunity and a national milestone. Being selected, and then carrying the flag, transformed sporting ambition into public responsibility. That honour strengthened motivation but also raised the moral cost of refusal: a training decision could feel like a decision about whether to disappoint a coach, an institution and a country.

The later narrative captures this internalisation during the Seoul opening ceremony. Halfway around the stadium, the athlete makes a series of silent promises that end: "I will stand. I will endure. I will carry the flag, even if my body collapses beneath it" (Haleem, 2026, p. 229). Reaching the infield, he writes that the flag "no longer felt like fabric. It felt like responsibility. Like trust" (Haleem, 2026, p. 230). No official is shown issuing these vows. National obligation has become part of the athlete's own identity, and its first stated price is the body.

National pride is not treated here as false consciousness. The narrative's own word for the flag, trust, is the ordinary sense of amanah. The ethical question is what duties accompany such symbolic elevation. Through amanah, investing national meaning in an athlete's performance should increase the responsibility of those guiding him. Through 'adl, the athlete bears physical cost more directly than those who share the achievement symbolically.

Constrained consent captures this tension. The author wanted the Olympic opportunity and actively accepted hardship, yet refusal was not costless. On the first day of Ramadan in April 1988, after a fasting time trial in the heat, the coach ordered it repeated with twenty minutes' recovery. The athlete refused: "I said no. Calmly at first. Then firmly. [...] He said that if I wanted any chance of the Olympic Games, even though I had already qualified in January, he could cut me from the team. Just like that" (Haleem, 2026, p. 142). A few lines later the narrative records compliance: "I had no choice" (Haleem, 2026, p. 142). Refusal was possible, but it was met with the one sanction that mattered most, and agency narrowed exactly where selection was at stake.

Pain, injury and the breach of trust

The narratives describe a performance culture in which pain and perseverance were closely linked to character. Endurance running necessarily teaches athletes to tolerate discomfort, so pain itself is not the ethical boundary. The question is how warning signs are interpreted, who has authority to define them, and what happens when the athlete's embodied knowledge conflicts with coaching judgement.

The earlier thesis records a moment when that hierarchy became explicit. An extract dated February 1992, during preparation for the Barcelona Games, describes the coach's reaction to an incomplete session; the thesis presents it as reconstructed from ideas recorded in a training diary rather than transcribed:

This afternoon [the coach] exploded when I couldn't complete a session. 'If I were you and couldn't do that, I would have killed myself by now!' he yelled. [...] I have lost trust in this man, my mentor, my trainer for several years, the person I thought was the greatest human being I had ever met. (Haleem, 2006, p. 11)

The utterance resembles the degrading non-contact behaviours described in emotional-abuse research (Stirling & Kerr, 2008). A single reconstructed episode is not, however, used here to diagnose a person or an entire relationship. The central datum is the reported collapse of trust, together with the frame in which an unfinished session becomes a question of worth. As in the cross-country case discussed earlier, the incomplete session is read as a deficit of will rather than as information about the athlete's body (Denison, 2007). The extract records trust ending, but it does not record dependence ending; reliance on those who hold clinical and institutional authority can persist after trust has gone (Waśkiewicz, 2026).

Amanah helps name why that collapse matters. Coaching expertise creates a duty to protect rather than a right to override, and the athlete's body is entrusted, not surrendered. La darar wa la dirar similarly moves attention from intention to foreseeable harm. The relevant questions are whether bodily warning was investigated, alternatives were considered, medical advice was available, and the athlete could participate meaningfully in the decision to continue.

Historical context requires restraint. Sport science, medical access and safeguarding expectations of that period were not those of today. Yet historical difference does not erase the distinction between uncertainty and dismissal. Where expertise is limited, the case for humility and listening becomes stronger: uncertainty about injury should reduce confidence in coercive decision-making, not increase it.

Silence, loyalty and athlete voice

Silence in the narratives arose not only from explicit threat but from hierarchy, gratitude, shame, scarce opportunity and fear of appearing weak or uncommitted. Because the Olympic opportunity was rare and coaching authority central to preparation, speaking could appear more dangerous than continuing. Contemporary athletes likewise anticipate disbelief, deselection, reputational consequences and relational rupture even where complaint mechanisms formally exist (Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2023; Willson et al., 2022).

Two passages illustrate the mechanism. The first describes concealment of injury: "Still, I said nothing. I was more afraid of embarrassment than injury. I also believed, in my teenage ignorance, that this must be normal for 'serious' athletes. Perhaps suffering in silence was part of the job" (Haleem, 2026, p. 127). The second concerns a serious medical condition: "Around this time, my coach saw something was wrong. I was slower. Weaker. Pale. He scolded me for not training hard enough. I could not tell him the truth. The absurdity was this: afraid he would think I was lying, I lied instead. Afraid he would say I was making excuses; I hid the one thing that was not an excuse" (Haleem, 2026, p. 128).

Neither passage requires an explicit threat to demonstrate constrained voice. The first reproduces the sport ethic in its purest form, with silence understood as proof of seriousness (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The second shows the athlete anticipating doubt about whether his illness was genuine and pre-empting that doubt by concealment (Roderick, 2006). Conformity to the sport ethic and psychological maltreatment reinforce one another, with the wish to please at the centre of that cycle (McGee et al., 2025). Elite athletes also report lower psychological safety and weaker intentions to report harm than recreational athletes (Hurst et al., 2025). A complaint route therefore offers limited protection if the people around it are perceived as connected to selection or performance judgement.

Islamic ethics changes the moral interpretation of this silence. Loyalty is not unconditional obedience, and respect does not require concealment of harm. 'Adl requires that the less powerful person can be heard, while shura requires consultation that is more than asking for agreement after a decision has effectively been made. The burden cannot rest solely on the athlete to become courageous enough to speak.

Institutional absence, small-state scarcity and dispersed responsibility

A central theme is institutional absence. The early sporting environment offered limited specialist knowledge, equipment, medical support and alternative pathways. Describing his first race, the 1987 Malé Marathon, the later narrative states: “I had no proper running shoes. That fact alone captures the level at which we were operating. There were no sponsors, no sports science, no specialised gear, and no borrowed confidence” (Haleem, 2026, p. 151). The absence of expertise affected not only performance support but where an athlete could turn for independent judgement.

An earlier episode makes the mechanism clearer: “I had no mentor, no sports science, no older athlete to guide me. My idea of ‘strength’ came from fantasies carried inside an inexperienced mind. [...] One of my rules was simple: do not drink water during training” (Haleem, 2026, p. 125). No authority figure imposed this rule. It is overconformity to the sport ethic generated in an explanatory vacuum (Hughes & Coakley, 1991). The harm was produced not by an order but by an athlete's attempt to prove commitment where no one was positioned to correct him. A system may therefore fail athletes not only through what it commands, but through what it leaves them to invent.

Small-state conditions intensify this problem. Small-state sport systems have limited administrative capacity, rely on few individuals and operate through close networks in which people hold several roles at once (Houlihan & Zheng, 2015; Sam & Jackson, 2015). The later narrative describes a chain of deference in which each level trusted the one below: “Who was there to protect us? The athletics association gave him full power. They rarely came to training. They never monitored. The President of the National Olympic Committee trusted the association blindly. Power sat entirely with the coach” (Haleem, 2026, p. 142). The vocabulary is retrospective, but the structure it describes is the small-state pattern. Interviews with system-level actors in six Mediterranean countries, including the small states of Malta and Cyprus, likewise identified cultures of blindness and silence that overlook, minimise or contain harm (Chroni et al., 2026). Where personal trust substitutes for procedure, the failure of one relationship may leave no institutional remainder.

Scarcity also strengthens gatekeeping because exit is difficult. Larger systems may offer another coach, an independent medical opinion or a safeguarding officer; smaller systems often cannot. Even in well-resourced systems, sports doctors report competing loyalties to athletes, coaches and management that compromise their independence (Anderson & Jackson, 2013). The problem is therefore not smallness itself but concentrated power without proportionate safeguards.

Hisab asks responsibility to follow actual function: coaches answer for training decisions, clinicians need independence to protect health, administrators must ensure credible procedures, and selectors must not penalise welfare concerns. Responsibility shared must not become responsibility dispersed: if everyone is nominally involved but no one is clearly answerable, organisational complexity becomes a mechanism of evasion.

From endurance to critique: an Islamic reinterpretation

The religious dimension is not straightforwardly protective. During the early career, faith supported endurance without supplying a language for challenging authority. Recalling the

start line in Seoul, the later narrative states: “I prayed in my own broken way. I asked Allah (ﷻ) for strength. [...] Fear makes you remember Allah (ﷻ). Comfort makes you forget” (Haleem, 2026, p. 238). In this memory, religion helps the athlete bear the demand; it does not yet ask whether every demand is legitimate.

The same narrative later reinterprets the Ramadan time trial: “That was not toughness. That was trauma dressed as discipline” (Haleem, 2026, p. 144). It calls the day “a battlefield between a stopwatch and a conscience, between obedience to a coach and loyalty to belief” (Haleem, 2026, p. 144). Looking back on his first race, it names the distinction the younger athlete lacked, between “endurance as discipline and endurance as self-erasure” (Haleem, 2026, p. 151). These passages mark a shift from religious endurance to religious critique. It also answers a wider problem: appeals to be patient, when made by those with power to those under their authority, can turn a virtue into an instrument of control (Jeffrey & Pawl, 2025). Detached from justice, non-harm and accountability, patience, or sabr, can sanctify compliance; read alongside amanah, it does not require the absorption of preventable harm.

This distinction avoids two errors: treating Islamic culture as the cause of silence, and treating Islamic ethics as an automatic safeguard because a setting is Muslim-majority. In Türkiye, a Muslim-majority country, a survey across 58 national federations found psychological abuse reported by about four in five athletes, and incidents were most often not taken seriously (Öztürk et al., 2026). The issue is how moral resources are interpreted and institutionalised. A sport culture may publicly value trust, justice and accountability while rarely using those concepts to evaluate coaching authority, injury decisions, selection or governance.

Discussion

The historical case is useful not because the Maldivian system of the late 1980s and early 1990s is unchanged or representative, but because it reveals a configuration that recurs. Four elements matter: authority concentrated in those controlling training or selection; responsibility dispersed across people or offices; no review route independent of the performance hierarchy; and scarcity that makes exit costly. Contemporary research documents each element, including harm-normalising performance cultures, delayed disclosure and policy that leaves existing hierarchies intact (Roberts et al., 2020; Tak et al., 2025; Willson et al., 2022). In contemporary Sri Lankan athletics, athletes still rely on coaches and physiotherapists to track their injuries, and no structured injury surveillance exists (Weerasinghe et al., 2026).

Safeguarding as accountable authority

Safeguarding should be understood not only as a catalogue of prohibited behaviours but as the governance of authority. Coach education should therefore include ethical judgement, responses to disclosure and the practical conditions under which an athlete can say no, consistent with ecological models of prevention (Khomutova et al., 2025; Tuakli-Wosornu et al., 2024).

A federation can possess a code of conduct while athletes remain afraid to report, unable to obtain an independent medical opinion or unsure whether disagreement will affect selection. Symbolic adoption of policy can substitute for that harder work (Gomez & Schoch, 2026). La darar wa la dirar asks what a system actually prevents; hisab asks whether decisions can be

reviewed and duties enforced. Relational safety is visible in whether athletes understand major decisions, can seek another opinion, can raise concerns confidentially and believe welfare concerns will not be punished.

Small-state governance and culturally literate safeguarding

For national Olympic committees and federations in small states, the task is to take scarcity seriously without accepting it as an excuse. Where complete institutional independence is difficult, functional independence is still possible through external medical second opinions, review beyond the athlete's federation, separation of safeguarding from selection where practicable, and regional partnerships. The design principle is proportionality: the more concentrated the sporting power, the stronger the safeguards needed around it.

Safe sport policies use universal language, but athletes interpret authority through local norms of respect, loyalty, family reputation, religion and national obligation, which reshape how policy is used (Tak et al., 2025). Cultural literacy must not, however, become relativism. Respect for elders or coaches cannot justify unquestionable authority when the moral tradition itself imposes duties of justice and non-harm. Islamic concepts are one route to shared commitments, not lower standards for Muslim contexts. Nor does amanah make written procedure unnecessary. Where personal proximity makes complaint costly, transparent processes, conflict-of-interest rules and protected athlete representation matter more, so that systems can survive relational failure.

Hisbah and preventative oversight

For this case, the most relevant feature of hisbah is where it places the burden of initiating oversight. Most safe sport architecture is triggered by a report, which places that burden on the athlete whose voice the analysis has shown to be most constrained (Solstad, 2019). Because hisbah was conceived as preventative, oversight began before any claim reached a judge, which points to a different allocation of that burden (Gleave, 2004). The problem is not confined to sport: health ombudsmen in England, New Zealand and Australia mostly lack independent power to initiate systemic inquiries (Healy & Walton, 2016). The analogy must remain disciplined because the muhtasib derived authority from rulers and was not an independent regulator (Stilt, 2011). This article does not propose recreating a medieval office.

Its value lies in the principle that accountability need neither remain inside the relationship in which power is exercised nor wait for the weaker party to complain. A contemporary sport accountability function consistent with this principle would have standing to receive athlete concerns and authority to initiate routine review without a complaint. It would also be separate from selection, draw on independent expertise and be able to require a documented response or corrective action. In Muslim-majority systems, articulating such oversight through the language of hisbah may show that external review is not a foreign import; whether that framing improves trust, reporting or accountability requires testing.

Contribution and limits

The Foucauldian, Bourdieusian and sport-ethic accounts explain how authority is produced and reproduced but do not supply a normative test of its legitimacy. The Islamic vocabulary supplies such a test in three ways that generic safeguarding language does not easily reproduce. It permits an internal critique of religiously framed endurance, which carries

authority that external critique lacks when *sabr* is invoked to sanctify harm. It reverses the direction of obligation assumed in honour-based loyalty, making the coach's duty grow with the athlete's dependence. Through *hisab* and *hisbah*, it detaches answerability from the athlete's willingness to complain. Each payoff has a limit. Care can itself operate as a gentler form of domination that conceals dependency (Gearity et al., 2023). *Amanah* is therefore useful only when paired with answerability and external review, not as a warmer name for coaching control. Maqasid-based reasoning has likewise been judged too underdeveloped for case-level clinical decisions (Padela, 2022). The concepts are therefore used here to evaluate authority rather than as a decision procedure.

The framework is not a validated safeguarding instrument, and religious language can equally be used to demand patience, loyalty or obedience. Its value is heuristic: it exposes tensions between professed commitments and the practices through which athletes are governed. A multi-site interview study with Muslim athletes, coaches, clinicians and safeguarding staff in small-state and larger systems could test whether this framing improves reporting, medical autonomy and accountability.

Across the two sources, the earlier account foregrounded injury, coercion and relational power. The later one adds the moral vocabulary of an older athlete, coach, administrator and Muslim, tracing a movement from endurance as proof of worth to a distinction between endurance as discipline and endurance as self-erasure. This is the kind of later interruption that abuse narratives in sport do not always reach (Kuhlin & Barker-Ruchti, 2025). Acknowledging unsafe dimensions of preparation does not cancel the Olympic achievement examined here; it asks what future athletes should not have to endure to reproduce it.

Conclusion

Across two Olympic cycles, national honour, scarce opportunity, unequal authority, normalised injury, constrained voice and weak oversight shaped this athlete's preparation. The problem was a configuration rather than a single harmful coach: authority was concentrated while responsibility was dispersed, so compliance was easily mistaken for consent. Read through *amanah*, *la darar wa la dirar* and *hisab*, greater control brings greater responsibility, preventable harm is not noble sacrifice, and answerability should not depend on a complaint. For national Olympic committees and federations in small states, this means review routes that sit outside selection and can act before an athlete speaks. The evidence is one retrospective life history, so the framework now needs testing in other Muslim-majority and small-state sport systems. Elite sport will always demand discipline, risk and sacrifice. It should not demand silence as the price of belonging, or accept personal trust in place of accountability.

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Conflict of interest

The author wrote both texts analysed in this article and has held administrative roles in Maldivian sport. These non-financial interests, and their possible influence on interpretation, are discussed in Section 3.2. The author declares no financial conflict of interest.

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Ethics statement

Ethical approval was not required. The study analyses two texts written and previously made public by the author, and it involves no new participants, interviews or data collection. No third party is named, and the single pseudonym used in the original thesis has been replaced with a generic descriptor.

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Generative AI tools (Claude by Anthropic, model Opus 5.5) were used for literature searching, reference verification, language refinement and structural editing under the author's supervision. The author reviewed every source and revision, conducted the analysis and accepts responsibility for the final manuscript.

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