

**Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security of the
Committee on Commerce, Science and Technology**

**Testimony of Kathryn McLaughlin for hearing titled: “WADA Shame: Swimming in
Denial Over Chinese Doping”**

Tuesday, June 17, 2025 at Russell Senate Office Building

Wow. I’m so honored to be here and to share my story with such an accomplished group.

When preparing this, I kept telling my mom how surreal it felt—because I still feel like I’m just a girl that had a big dream. But that’s exactly why I do feel like I belong here. I am just a girl who dreamed of swimming for Team USA. And now, it matters deeply to me that the next version of me—the next generation who has a dream of doing the same—gets to compete on a level playing field.

Like many swimmers, I grew up glued to the Olympics on TV. In 2008, when I was 11, I watched Natalie Coughlin, Michael Phelps, and the Team USA relays dominate. I felt this overwhelming pride to be American, and I knew I would do anything to be in their shoes one day. No matter how much time, work, and sacrifice it would take to get there, I would do it.

And as one could imagine, being an elite athlete/Olympian takes a ton of hard work and sacrifice. We show up to the pool 10 times a week, 11.5 months out of the year and hope at the end of it all, we are tenths or hundredths of a second better than we were the year prior. We spend that much time training, looking for an edge and something to set ourselves apart. And again, as a clean athlete, that was the only way and the only option to lead me to achieve my dreams.

At 15, I made the national team for the first time—and was entered into the anti-doping testing program. That meant I had to let officials know where I would be, 24/7, every day of the year. They could show up at my house, school, or practice—any time—for random drug testing.

And they did. Over the next 10 years, I was tested more than I can count. I never once questioned it. Because I believed that’s what we all did. I believed in the system. I believed in fair play. I never even considered that anyone might not feel the same.

To me, competing clean wasn’t just a rule—it was a responsibility. I was representing my

country, my teammates, my family. And when I stood on the blocks, I wanted to know I earned that place honestly.

When my relay team swam under the world record time in Tokyo, we asked to be tested—even though we hadn't won gold (which is standard practice – gold or world record = testing). We wanted it documented: we were proud to race clean. That's how much we believed in the principle.

So when I learned later that some competitors may not have had that same lead-up—that the rules did not apply to these athletes—it broke my heart.

Because clean athletes carry the weight of sacrifice, discipline, and transparency. And when that's not honored, it undermines the whole point of what we're fighting for. What is particularly disheartening as well is to learn that the powers at be, WADA – who is supposed to be the ones holding everyone to the same standard, are not holding everyone accountable. It is really hard to understand how the fundamentals of sport and pride for hard work and pride for representing one's country has been tainted by such actions.

In 2016, I was hoping to make my first Olympic team. But five months before trials, I fractured a vertebra in my neck. I tried to come back in time, but I didn't make the team. It was devastating—but it lit a fire in me. I knew I'd be back. And I was. In 2021, I finally made the Olympic team.

Winning a silver medal in the 4x200 relay was an absolute dream. My teammates and I left everything in that pool. We believed in the work. We believed in doing it the right way and we were so proud to have earned that medal for the USA because we knew we had done everything we could to be at our best that day.

In 2016, my personal heartbreak was out of my control, a complete accident that inspired me to be back. But in 2021, when learning about the scandal with the Chinese swimmers and how that could have been prevented had the correct policies been applied, that one had a different sting.

At the end of the day, we can only control ourselves. That gave me peace as I stepped away from the sport—knowing I gave it everything, and that my family, coaches, and supporters sacrificed so much to help me chase my dreams.

But what about the next young athlete who steps up on the blocks and does not have a

shot at fairness? Who gets one chance to achieve their dream and must do so on an uneven playing field? That's what drives me to speak up today.

I don't want to stay quiet knowing another young girl like me is out there, working just as hard—and she might not get a fair shot.

We Olympians are individuals with individual stories. But what unites us is that we fight for honest, clean, fair competition.

At the end of the day, it's about the people. It's about pride, sacrifice, and integrity. And it should never have to be about whether the playing field was level. I care about the future of my sport and that everyone dreaming of being in my shoes gets a fair shot at achieving their dreams.

Thank you for listening—and for helping protect the future of sport.