



## SBJ IN PARIS

# In six years as CEO, Sarah Hirshland has transformed the USOPC, led it through a major crisis and now has the organization poised for a summer of success in Paris

BY RACHEL AXON

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**O**n the outside of her Hewlett Packard laptop, **Sarah Hirshland** affixed a navy and white sticker, one distributed by a group of athletes shortly after she started as CEO of the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee six years ago. Its message has provided a daily reminder for **Hirshland**: Athletes First.

That ethos has guided her decision-making during what has already been a landmark tenure. **Hirshland** has brought the organization out of a crisis that engulfed the movement, won over a broad and diverse group of stakeholders, and positioned the USOPC for long-term success.

“She’s had to rebuild an organization without the heritage of having been at it for many years,” said USOPC board Chairman Gene Sykes. “She’s had to bring people in who understood the organization, understood the movement, but make them part of her team. And she’s had to build trust with all sorts of people, many of whom were inclined to distrust the USOPC. That’s an impressive set of things to accomplish.”

All of which has earned **Hirshland**, 49, both a five-year contract extension through 2029 and a chance to guide the USOPC through what promises to be an era of rare opportunity. The Paris Olympics open July 26, offering a return to normal after multiple pandemic-affected Olympics, and in which Team USA has an excellent chance to win the medal count for the eighth consecutive Summer Games. Up next are likely two domestic Games, with Los Angeles hosting the Summer Games in 2028 and a vote on July 24 that is all but certain to award a Winter Games to Salt Lake City in 2034, the first time the U.S. has hosted multiple Games so close together since Atlanta in 1996 and Salt Lake City in 2002.

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After that? Well, that’s where **Hirshland** can dream about what the USOPC can be and how it can harness a commercial structure and philanthropic giving to support the organizations and athletes in the movement.

“The first years were hard. It’s hard to come into this movement. It’s hard to be a first-time CEO. It’s hard to be in a pandemic,” she said. “All of those things, the litigation and the scandals, we were not beloved by anybody when I walked in the door. I’m not going to say this is an easy job. It is not an easy job, but it is a much more fun job today than it used to be, and I’m better at it — which also makes it more fun.”



The USOPC hired **Hirshland**, a Colorado native, in July 2018 following the departure of Scott Blackmun, who had resigned five months earlier. By then, the movement had been engulfed for two years by sexual abuse crises in which athletes in several sports — particularly gymnastics — said their national governing bodies and the USOPC had failed to protect them.

Hundreds of victims abused by Larry Nassar were suing USA Gymnastics and the USOPC, which also faced pressure from Congress to change policies to remove abusers and do more to protect athletes.

“Yes, it was a burning house, but it was a burning house that I felt super confident that running into it was both meaningful and important,” **Hirshland** said. “But also a house that we can put out this fire.”

**Hirshland**’s confidence was one of the hallmarks in a career that has featured an emphasis on talent development, organizational design and strategy. “She was a born leader,” said former USGA CEO Mike Davis.

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**Hirshland** graduated from Duke in 1997 and started her career at Total Sports — a digital media company she helped start while she was still a student — before becoming one of the first employees at the consulting firm OnSport. She stayed at Wasserman after it acquired OnSport in 2007, taking the lead on Nationwide and helping it sign as the title sponsor of NASCAR’s No. 2 series and assisting in the development of the USTA’s U.S. Open Series.

“She’s really smart. She catches on to things really quickly, can see the big picture and connect a lot of dots,” said Katie Bynum Aznavorian, who worked with **Hirshland** at Wasserman and is now the chief strategy and growth officer at the USOPC. “She’s got just a knack for making the complex simple in a way that solves problems or creates opportunities.”

After Wasserman, **Hirshland** spent six years at the USGA, including a stint as chief commercial officer. In her time there, she helped develop the association’s corporate partner program, negotiated a 12-year media deal with Fox and turned around a flagging handicapping system.

# Sarah Hirshland

**Education: Duke University, B.S. Biology, 1997**

## Career

**Total Sports (general manager), 1997-2001**

**OnSport (senior vice president), 2001-2007**

**Wasserman Media Group (SVP), 2007-2011**

**USGA (senior managing director of business affairs and CCO), 2011-2018**

**USOPC (CEO), 2018-present**

**Family: Husband, Keith Hirshland (author and former Golf Channel and ESPN producer); three grown stepchildren**

“With her background and her qualifications, there’s a lot of jobs she could have,” said Gary Stevenson, founder of OnSport and now MLS deputy commissioner. “It’s more like she’s committed to doing the right thing and the cause.”

That’s part of what made the USOPC consider her. LA28 Chairman Casey Wasserman had worked with her at his agency and was part of the search committee, recommending that **Hirshland** be considered for the CEO job.

“She clearly has the intellectual capacity and the [emotional intelligence] to deal with those things and the willingness to really just dive in,” Wasserman said. “Not that she knows the answers, but she’s willing to work incredibly diligently to get to the right place in the right way.”

That would prove crucial once she took over in Colorado Springs. Getting buy-in and support from the various stakeholders — including the International Olympic Committee, more than 50 national governing bodies and thousands of Team USA athletes — would be challenging in normal times.

It became more so because **Hirshland** needed to make changes quickly. Some, like adding “Paralympics” to the organization’s name in 2019 to reflect the USOPC’s role in that movement, were straightforward.

Others aimed to address the scandal she had inherited. An investigation by the USOPC-initiated Borders Commission in July 2019 called for an expansion of the organization’s role in supporting, protecting and lifting up the voice of the athlete, while taking greater oversight of NGBs.

Congressional laws passed in 2017 and 2020 required instituting more policies to protect athletes and greater support for the U.S. Center for SafeSport, which was created in 2017 to handle abuse cases in the movement.

During **Hirshland**'s tenure, the USOPC has increased mental health support services for athletes, with 110 sports psychologists on staff, more than 300 approved providers around the country and a 24/7 hotline; increased athletes' share of boards and committees to 33% and required NGBs to have their own athlete advisory council; added professional staff for its Athlete Advisory Council; and expanded its health insurance to cover athletes during and after pregnancy.

Some of **Hirshland**'s other changes drew criticism within the movement.

Starting in 2021, the USOPC instituted an audit process for national governing bodies to ensure their compliance with good governance and athlete protection policies. Several NGB leaders balked at the rollout of the in-depth review process of their policies, governance and financials.

NGBs similarly expressed frustration with the 2021 rollout of the Athlete Marketing Platform — which the USOPC created with LA28 to help athletes earn sponsorship dollars — and the next year when USOPC restructuring included Rick Adams, who had overseen high-performance support for Team USA athletes and handled logistics around Games operations.

**Hirshland** also ruffled feathers at the IOC with a decision to support greater leeway for athletes to protest from the medal podium in the wake of the George Floyd protests.

“She had to make radical change very, very rapidly, so people had to move with uncomfortable speed and they took that out on **Sarah**, because that's what she was brought into do,” said Susanne Lyons, who was USOPC board chair from 2019 to 2022.

Where **Hirshland** admits she faltered — and where other movement leaders note her growth — was not bringing stakeholders along in the decision-making process.

“I'm probably going to err on the side of being more decisive more quickly, than paralyzed with not making decisions,” she said.

Almost by default, the crisis **Hirshland** took on required her to make change and then form relationships later, helped by extending “a ton of olive branches everywhere,” said Rocky Harris, the USOPC's chief of sport and athlete services.

Several NGB leaders said she has done so, accepting requests to visit with their staffs or join board meetings. It's in part driven by **Hirshland**'s desire to be comfortable in any room and her interest in learning about sports in the movement.

“She's a strong leader who is tough. That's how she's wired. I do think that that had a part to play in her acceptance in our community,” said Harris. “People now respect her for the work she did, and now they're gaining trust in her because of who she is.”

Everyone from NGB leaders to athletes point to progress, if not perfection, during her tenure, and **Hirshland** herself agrees more work needs to be done.

The USOPC and USA Gymnastics settled their lawsuit with Nassar survivors for \$380 million in late 2021. A congressional commission earlier this year called for further USOPC governance changes, including greater independence for its athlete advisory council. Sykes, the USOPC board chair, said the organization needs to continue to develop a relationship with athletes, take their feedback and provide more resources.

But the USOPC today looks drastically different than the organization **Hirshland** took over, and many in the movement credit her for that.

“**Sarah** came on, did a phenomenal job in her first year of really getting the movement back on track,” said USA Fencing CEO Phil Andrews. “She’s had probably the single most challenging tenure of any USOPC CEO in history, and I think she’s done a pretty remarkable job, all things considered.”



In emerging from the daily crises of her early years, **Hirshland** is finding more balance and more fun in the job.

After flying around 190,000 miles her first year, she tries to be home in Colorado Springs for a full week each month, though it rarely happens.

On her best days, she starts with yoga. Screens go away at 9 p.m. each night, and **Hirshland** buries herself in a book, usually one featuring a detective assassin, like Gregg Hurwitz’s “Orphan X,” whose jobs are “massively more stressful” than her own.

A self-described introvert, she often finds escape in a round of golf with her husband of 17 years, Keith, who was a longtime golf producer for the Golf Channel and ESPN; or time with her two dogs, Mac, a Great Pyrenees/Poodle mix, and Maggie, a Bernese mountain dog.

Though her job is still filled with challenges, **Hirshland** is now able to move from defense to offense.

Part of that is shifting the narrative, **Hirshland** says, to being givers in the movement rather than takers. She has established a five-year strategic plan of growing community, fostering a positive sport culture and promoting athlete performance and well-being.

“I want every individual in this country who has the talent to be the best in the world on that stage to choose to do this,” she said, “and I don’t ever want us to take that for granted.”

The USOPC is prioritizing the future. One focus is on working with the NCAA to shore up the programs that train Team USA athletes but are threatened by rapid changes in Division I. Through its Collegiate Advisory Council, which includes athletic directors from Power Four programs, the USOPC is focusing on collaboration that can support the pipeline of Team USA athletes trained in collegiate programs.

With its foundation, the USOPC is focused on philanthropic giving, setting a \$500 million goal by 2028 to help fund the movement.

And right in **Hirshland's** wheelhouse is figuring out the USOPC's commercial structure. The USOPC is in a joint venture with LA28 through those Games, with the organizing committee in charge of commercial deals and cutting the USOPC a \$488 million check. USOPC will enter a joint marketing plan agreement with Salt Lake City, as required by the IOC, though the exact nature of that relationship hasn't been determined.

Where **Hirshland** focuses now is what commercial structure the USOPC takes for the domestic movement more broadly to ensure its financial success in 2035 and beyond.

"She is one of the best people we could possibly have for thinking about a 10-year strategy for [growing the] top line," said USOPC board member Dexter Paine. "That's going to be where she really is going to shine."

Part of that might be a commercial structure that builds around the U.S. movement, where rights are not pooled in one place, and not just the USOPC specifically. As it is, NGB rights are not packaged with those Team USA sells for the Games, creating a fragmented market for sponsors to figure out.

"We make it so hard for a buyer to buy, and we've got to fix that," **Hirshland** said. "If you start with who has what job and we leave it as fragmented as it is today, we're going to leave massive amounts of money on the table, and we just can't afford to do it."

While the USOPC has yet to sort out its commercial structure for the 2030s, **Hirshland** said it could look for ways to create an infrastructure that NGBs could utilize. The key for those in the movement will be demonstrating value to sponsors in making long-term commitments and supporting Team USA in years without the Games, said Lyons, the former USOPC board chair.

"She's really smart about, how do you package and brand the magic, the magic that is Team USA?" Lyons added. "And now she's got the permission to do it."

She also has the team in place for it. Hiring Harris from USA Triathlon in 2022 completed her executive team. That leadership group has been in place for two years, giving **Hirshland** some stability as it pursues the USOPC's longer-term goals.

“She’s one of the best strategic leaders I’ve ever worked with,” Harris said. “I look right around the corner, [but] she’s looking way beyond the corner.”

Part of that vision includes focusing on the athletes who are **Hirshland’s** reason for doing the job. Having brought the USOPC out of crisis, she’s now looking for how the movement can better serve them going forward.

In that, Lyons thinks back to what she did at the beginning. After the USOPC hired **Hirshland**, Lyons was giving her a tour of the Olympic training center in Colorado Springs, where the men’s artistic gymnastics team was training at the time.

Lyons recalls **Hirshland** pausing in the gym and becoming emotional. She couldn’t believe she got to work with and for athletes like that.

Six years later, that might be one of the few things that hasn’t changed for **Hirshland**.

“It is truly the honor of my lifetime to do this job,” she said. “It is hard. It’s demanding, all those things. But there has never been a more meaningful moment in my life than being part of this.”



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