

The USBA–USSS Alliance: When the Partner’s Interests Conflict with Biathlon’s

Today, September 9, 2026, the Board of Directors of US Biathlon are scheduled to vote on the terms of a merger with US Ski and Snowboard. In recent days Marc Sheppard and Jon Schafer received an anonymous audio tape from a US Ski and Snowboard staff meeting that calls into question why the USSS wants to form and partnership with US Biathlon. They further allege that USBA CEO Jack Gierhart pressured athlete representatives to accept terms they believed were not in the organization's best interests.

As the vote looms today, the critical question facing USBA members is no longer whether U.S. Ski & Snowboard can provide administrative services more efficiently. It is whether USSS can be trusted with responsibility of working with the Biathlon Board and Staff to develop biathlons whose interest conflict with those of the US Cross Country program.

The internal comments that Jon and Mark received anonymously, attributed to senior USSS leadership and cross-country staff, raise serious questions about that premise. Taken at face value, they suggest that USSS sees biathlon simultaneously as a potential source of revenue and as a competitor for elite skiing talent. If these statement are an accurate reflection of USSS thinking, the proposed alliance contains an inherent structural conflict of interest that negates any value of the “service agreement”.

The proposed integration has repeatedly been presented as athlete-centered and as an opportunity to create synergies between two closely related sports. In researching an article that was published on Faster Skier in May, I asked a question of US Ski and Snowboard. The questions were straightforward:

Why is the USOPC driving this discussion?

What does the USOPC believe the benefit of this move would be?

Is the push in any way related to USA Biathlon’s previously reported cultural and athlete protection failures?

If these discussions are connected to systemic governance failures, why were the corrective mechanisms outlined in the Sports Act not pursued first, including mandated reforms, leadership changes, sanctions, or ultimately decertification of the NGB?

The response from USSS as with the USBA and the USOPC were strikingly similar and carefully worded.

“U.S. Ski & Snowboard and U.S. Biathlon are exploring a potential integration aimed at growing the sport and strengthening long-term performance. Discussions are ongoing, and both organizations are committed to a thoughtful, athlete-first approach.”

Those statement deserve scrutiny in light of allegations from USBA athlete representatives concerning the contract negotiations. Marc Sheppard and Jon Schafer allege that USBA CEO Jack Gierhart pressured athlete representatives to accept terms they believed were not in the organization's best interests. If these facts are true, this should be grounds for the USOPC to launch a review of athlete representation and governance review of both USBA but also USSS.

Whether every characterization in their account is ultimately substantiated is less important than the governance question it raises: What role did athlete representatives actually have in shaping this agreement? If athletes were included primarily to secure their approval rather than to help shape the agreement,

“athlete-centered” becomes a slogan rather than a governing principle.

This may be the most important quotation in Jon and Marks letter to the biathlon community. When the concern was reportedly raised that cross-country could potentially lose talented athletes to biathlon, Sophie Goldschmidt is quoted as stating:

“We certainly don’t want to be losing any future identified stars or current stars to another sport; I’m totally in agreement there.”

That statement goes directly against an early pillar of the proposed alliance. One of the stated benefits of bringing the organizations together is the opportunity to create collaboration with athlete development. Cross-country skiing is the athletic foundation of biathlon. In the US there is a larger development pipeline through the club system, which is unsupported by USSS, than exists in the USBA system.

The United States has a far larger cross-country development system than does the biathlon development system. Logically, one of the great potential advantages of an alliance would therefore be creating pathways through which talented skiers can discover and transition into biathlon. Yet the USSS CEO’s reported statement suggests precisely the opposite incentive.

“If USSS identifies an exceptional 17-year-old skier, which organization gets first claim on that athlete? If USSS believes the athlete has World Cup potential in cross-country, why would it encourage that athlete to try biathlon?”

If USSS controls or substantially influences development pathways for both sports, who advocates for biathlon when the interests of the two sports diverge? That is not a hypothetical governance issue. It goes to the fundamental structure of the proposed relationship.

The reported comments from USSS cross-country staff make the problem even clearer: “It doesn’t even come across as a neutral; it comes across as a pretty serious threat to me...” “We don’t want to have a tap into it where at each of our development camps they have an opportunity to shoot and to potentially push athletes out.” Those are remarkable statements in the context of an alliance supposedly built around athlete first concept and cooperation and collaboration.

But from the perspective of a cross-country coach, they are also entirely understandable. Their job is to produce successful cross-country skiers. Why would they willingly direct their best athletes toward another sport? The problem therefore isn’t necessarily the coaches. The problem is the structure of two different sports under one NGB with conflicting objectives.

Goldschmidt reportedly made the hierarchy explicit: “Cross country is going to be our priority. Our core sports are our priority.” US Biathlon members should take that statement seriously!

Why should US Biathlon transfer substantial operational responsibility for its sport to an organization whose CEO reportedly tells her own staff that cross country will remain the priority? This is the significant contradiction in the proposed alliance and represent a significant ethical breach in the role of biathlon under USSS.

The comments attributed to USSS Chief of Sport, Anouk Patty introduce another concern:

“These guys are very well funded....it does allow us to bring some funds in to support the cross-country program.” Also “...better commercializing Biathlon...can bring in more revenue that can have a halo effect for

our entire organization.” The stated objective of USSS is clear, to generate revenue to support the organizations’ cross country and other programs.

The US Biathlon's Board has a different responsibility. Its fiduciary obligation is to US Biathlon. USBA members therefore deserve to know whether biathlon resources will be used exclusively to advance biathlon or whether some portion of those resources will effectively subsidize USSS programs. This makes the financial structure of the agreement critically important.

How will shared costs allocated? Where does sponsorship revenue generated by biathlon go? Who owns new commercial relationships? How are administrative overhead charges calculated? Can biathlon-generated revenue to support cross-country or other USSS sports? Those questions should be answered before, not after the membership approves the arrangement.

Perhaps the most revealing reported statement is this one:

“They may not know everything behind the scenes as far as how it’s going to be structured and how we know we’re going to be benefiting, because sometimes you have to position things the right way.” If the context of this statement is accurate, this deserves a direct explanation from USSS leadership.

An athlete and sport altering merger or partnership between two National Governing Bodies should not depend upon “positioning things the right way.” Members should understand the actual structure, incentives, costs, risks and benefits. That requires publication of the Scope of Services, financial arrangements, performance standards and decision-making authority. Transparency is important when members are being asked to transfer operation authority to another NGB.

These question should provide a larger philosophical discussion. The best possible development system for U.S. biathlon may occasionally require something that is bad for U.S. cross-country skiing. That is a fact given the two different sports unique development needs. A gifted junior skier might become a better biathlete than cross-country skier. A sponsor might choose biathlon rather than cross-country. A donor might direct money toward building a shooting range rather than supporting a cross-country program. A coach might move from cross-country into biathlon. Those outcomes could be excellent for US Biathlon while being undesirable for USSS cross-country.

A true biathlon NGB must be willing to choose biathlon when those interests conflict.

An additional concern involves a statement attributed to Goldschmidt that a particular legal requirement was something “we can work around.” Without complete context, it is not possible to conclude that USSS intended to violate federal law. But given the statutory responsibilities of National Governing Bodies under the Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act, the statement deserves clarification before members vote.

Prior to concluding a merger the answer that must be addressed is, should US Biathlon and USSS should collaborate? They might share sports science were desirable. They could coordinate international logistics where efficiencies are obvious. There may be potential for joint sponsorship opportunities. They might cooperate on coaching education and perhaps create opportunities for cross-country athletes to experience biathlon.

But none of those things require US Biathlon to outsource most of its operations to USSS. Indeed, these reported statements strengthen the argument for a limited, contractual partnership rather than operational integration.

The question before USA Biathlon members should be: When the interests of cross-country skiing and biathlon inevitably diverge, who will choose biathlon?

The statements attributed to USSS leadership and coaches provide an uncomfortable answer. USSS leadership reportedly views cross-country as its priority. Its coaches understandably do not want to lose their best athletes to biathlon. Its leadership sees financial and commercial benefits that biathlon could bring to the larger USSS organization.

They are also compelling reasons for US Biathlon to remain operationally independent. Collaboration does not require surrendering control. Before US Biathlon gives another National Governing Body substantial authority over its athletes, development system, finances and future, its members should be absolutely certain that when the interests of the two sports conflict, someone at the table has an unequivocal responsibility to choose biathlon.

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