

ATTORNEY OF THE YEAR:  
WINNER

SALLY YATES  
KING & SPALDING

By Thomas Spigolon




The 15-lawyer team "gave every single ounce of themselves" to get the report done and done right. — Sally Yates

It was clear from the opening sentences that a 2022 report produced from a yearlong investigation Sally Yates led into sexual abuse in U.S. women's pro soccer would pull no punches.

"On April 21, 2021, the head coach of Racing Louisville, Christy Holly, requested that a player, Erin Simon, attend a game film session with him alone. She knew

what to expect. ... He told her he was going to touch her 'for every pass [she] f---d up.' He did," the report stated.

Yates, a partner with King & Spalding and former U.S. deputy attorney general, led an investigation for



the firm into allegations of systemic abuse of female players over a decade by coaches at all the teams in the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL).

What resulted was a report Yates says is likely “unprecedented” in sports in its breadth and scope because of the number of players and the time frame involved.

However, Yates says she does not want to take sole credit for any awards because the investigation and report were a “team effort” by 15 King & Spalding lawyers who “gave every single ounce of themselves” to complete it.

“What I hope the impact has been is when the truth was spoken about what these players had experienced, and we attempted to do it in a way that would name names and state the facts in a way that you couldn't look away from it or sweep it under the rug—because that's what these players had endured for decades—it had spurred change,” Yates says.

Yates worked for 27 years with the U.S. Department of Justice—rising to become the first woman to serve as U.S. attorney for the Northern District of Georgia. After leaving the attorney general's office, she joined King & Spalding in 2018 and leads its crisis management practice and is a partner in its special matters and government investigations practice.

After media reports surfaced in 2021 about an alleged pattern of abuse of female players, the U.S. Soccer Federation (USSF)—the official governing body of U.S. soccer—hired Yates and King & Spalding

and gave it “free rein” to conduct an independent investigation into the allegations.

Yates then led an all-woman team of King & Spalding lawyers in 2022 that did 200 interviews, reviewed nearly 100,000 documents and secured the cooperation of dozens of third-party witnesses despite not having subpoena power.

She says it was important to have an all-female team because investigators would be asking players about intimate, personal details. She notes most NWSL team owners and most coaches—some named as abusers in the report—were men.

The 172-page “Report of the Independent Investigation to the U.S. Soccer Federation Concerning Allegations of Abusive Behavior and Sexual Misconduct in Women's Professional Soccer” was released in early October 2022.

The USSF took recommendations made in the report and established a task force for implementation led by Mana Shim, a player whose courage to come forward to reporters at The Athletic in 2021 led to the investigation. Shim now leads a new Participant Safety Taskforce at U.S. Soccer.

“One of the things that is most gratifying is that change is taking place right now at the U.S. Soccer Federation with Mana Shim, who was one of the two players who came forward and spawned this whole investigation,” Yates says. ■