

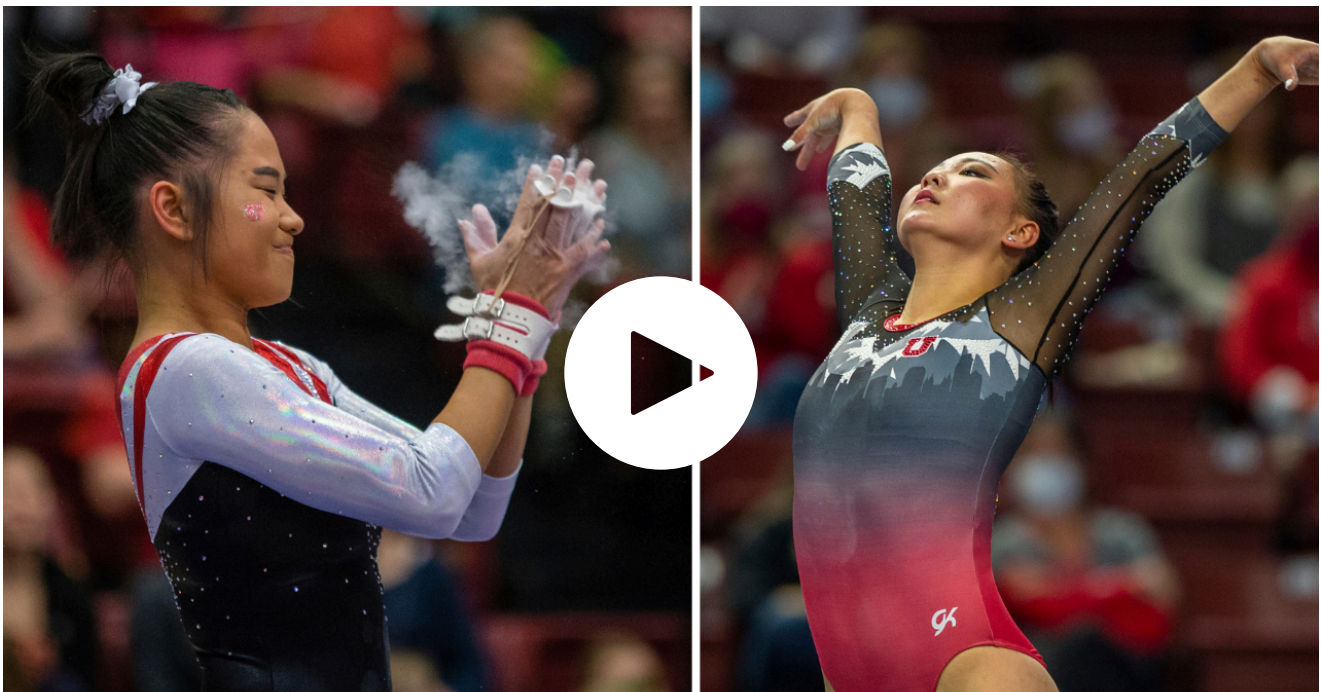
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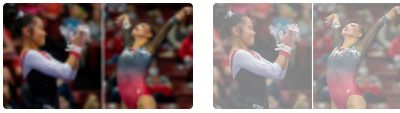


# Former Red Rocks gymnasts share stories of abuse in hopes of change



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By: Darienne DeBrule

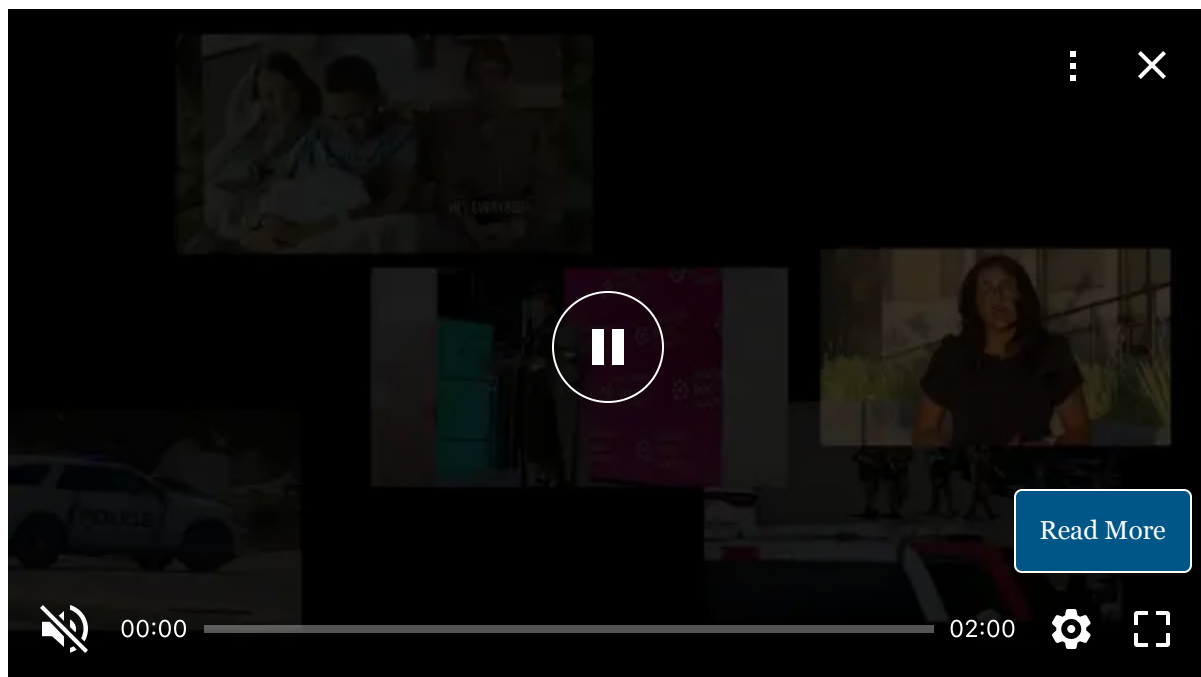
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**SALT LAKE CITY** — Two former University of Utah gymnasts who spoke out about the "emotional and verbal abuse" they say they experienced under a former Red Rocks coach, hope what they went through can be a catalyst for change.

Kara Eaker and Kim Tessen both say it was hard not to fall in love with gymnastics at a young age.

"The thrill of competing and standing up on a podium afterwards to receive the ribbons or a medal, that was just that was so exhilarating," Eaker told FOX 13 News.

"It just came naturally to me and it was so fun for me to learn new skills," Tessen added.



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Both women say their love for the sport started to change when they experienced abusive coaching at multiple levels of competition. When they got the chance to continue their careers at the University of Utah, they were hoping things would be different.

"I expected the college atmosphere to be more of a loving atmosphere, more of a team mindset, more of a family," explained Eaker.

Instead Eaker and Tessen claim they were victims of verbal and emotional abuse by former coach, Tom Farden, during their time at the school.

"He would call me worthless," said Eaker. "He told me if I wasn't at the University of Utah I would be a nobody living on the side of the road working at a gas station in Missouri."

The abuse wasn't limited to insults.

"I felt like I was treated as some sort of commodity or object that was there to bring in viewership and bring the program money instead of being an individual," Tessen said.

A review completed in Sept. 2023 by the Husch Blackwell law firm found Farden did not engage in abusive or harassing behavior, but did find some athletes had negative experiences while on the team, including being the targets of derogatory comments.

Farden left the program in November.

In a statement shared with FOX 13 News, Tessen and Eaker's attorney, Carla DiMare wrote, "the report erroneously exonerated coach Farden and therefore the university. The report is unreliable, tainted, untrustworthy, and incompetent."

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The two women are now sharing their experiences hoping to be catalysts for change. Last week, Eaker and Tessen spoke in favor of an abusive coaching resolution at the state legislature that would call for better conduct for coaches.

"That resolution on a state level has the power to start change and that's the only thing I'm really pushing for is for change because we can't keep letting coaches out there be abusive and verbally abusive," said Eaker, "and we can't keep letting them throw things at gymnasts or discriminate because you're a woman."

They also want institutions and administrations to be held accountable when athletes share their experiences with abuse.

"Once you recognize that there is that problem, the next step is being willing to believe and listen to survivors of abuse and being willing to do something about it," Tessen said.

As Eaker and Tessen continue to work through the impacts of the abuse they say they endured, they want other athletes to not be afraid to speak up.

"If you don't say anything, if you don't speak out, the same things that are happening to you are happening to another gymnast," pleaded Eaker.

"It is not your fault," added Tessen, "and if you are afraid to speak directly to your abuser there are so many resources out there for victims of abuse, and if possible and if you feel safe, utilize some of those resources."

Attorneys working with Eaker, Tessen and other gymnasts say they are working with the university to compensate the athletes.

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