

Strengthening Athlete Power in Sport

A guide to opening new ways in sports governance



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Photo: Minas Panagiotakis / Getty Images

Introduction: Empowering the athlete voice in sport

Athletes are the beating heart of sport. Without athletes, sports organisations would lose the legitimacy they draw from the multitudes engaging in elite and grassroots sports. Stadia would remain empty, tv and tablet screens turn blank, and sport would stop generating large revenues from public and private sources. One of the world's fastest growing industries would cease to exist. Millions of employees would lose their job, and hundreds of thousands of investors would go bankrupt.

Despite their importance, athletes rarely have a say. They are often excluded from the meeting rooms where important decisions are made. They are deprived from influencing decisions that affect their sport, their daily lives, and their future careers.

How can we strengthen the athlete voice?

Over the past three years, athlete groups and academic researchers have worked to produce facts and find case stories to answer that question.

With support from the European Union, the project 'Strengthening Athlete Power in Sport' (SAPIS):

- creates an overview of existing practices of athlete representation
- develops opportunities for athletes to participate in decision-making in their federation

- points to new ways of preparing athletes for a role in the governance of sport.

These goals are best achieved when all stakeholders engage: Sports leaders, public officials, representatives of sponsors and the media, and of course athletes and their representatives.

This good practice guide aims at enabling all stakeholders to empower athletes and involve them in the way their sport is governed.

The guide highlights three types of democratic involvement. It identifies some of the most important benefits that comes from involving athletes and the competences needed to achieve them. It describes four specific cases that illustrate best practices. And it lays out important findings of our scientific research.

The boxes labelled with a big question mark are designed to inspire debate at four regional seminars or wherever this guide is used in a group. If you study this guide on your own, the questions may also serve your personal reflection.

We firmly believe that all parties will benefit from integrating the unique perspective that athletes can add when decisions are made, and we hope this guide will serve as an inspiration to that end.

Why is athlete representation important?

Freedom of association and freedom of speech are basic human rights that apply equally to athletes and sports leaders. Both parties have a lot to gain by working together towards jointly defined goals:

- Athlete representation gives a voice to sport's most important stakeholders in decision-making, thereby improving sports governance and meeting international standards of good practice.
- Dialogue between sports governing bodies and athlete representatives can lead to better understanding and acceptance of new decisions.
- Inclusion of athletes in decision-making will ensure that athletes and administrators work for the same goal, thus enhancing quality and efficacy when policies are carried out in practice.
- Good faith negotiations can reduce conflicts so legal proceedings between athletes and sport organisations will be less likely.
- As athlete representatives become responsible for the management of their sport, the environment can become less vulnerable to integrity threats such as match-fixing or doping.
- Sport can meet its legal and ethical obligation to provide an environment that is free from discrimination and unequal treatment.
- Athlete unions can help improve athletes' welfare, e.g. through better employment conditions, player development of athletes and career transition post-sport life.
- Athlete representation helps sport contribute to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions.



Questions

Which of these benefits seem most important to you?

Have you experienced some of these effects through your work?

Are there other important benefits of involving athletes in decision-making?



Photo: Tara Moore / Getty Images



Photo: Alain Grosclaude / Agence Zoom / Getty Images

Ways to organise athlete representation

Athlete associations and athletes' commissions constitute the most typical forms of athlete representation – each with benefits and challenges. A third group of actors, athlete advocacy groups, use their voices to raise concerns about issues relevant to athletes and society.

Athlete associations (unions)

Athlete associations are independent, member-based organisations owned and led by athletes with their own democratic structures. In this way, they are analogous to unions in other sectors of the economy.

Athlete associations can offer an independent collective voice for athletes and engage in collective bargaining and negotiations on terms and conditions of employment.

Athlete associations can provide members with relevant benefits such as legal advice, education opportunities, and post-sport career development, and also promote athlete rights, anti-discrimination, and inclusion in sport.

Athlete associations can offer collective voices that sports authorities can trust to best represent the views of athletes given their independence and democratic structures.

Athlete associations depend on fees from members, but will typically not cover enough members to secure financial sustainability. Athlete associations therefore often obtain funds from other sources including European project finance, support from governing bodies, and national funding.

Athletes' commissions

Athletes' commissions (or athletes' committees) are advisory bodies within sports federations and Olympic committees established to represent athletes' voices and interests in decision-making. Some have a share in decision-making power through representation on the executive body of

their federation, others act in a consultative role within the sports governing bodies.

Athletes' commissions are internal bodies of sports governing bodies and are therefore not as independent as athlete associations. Also, their funding depends entirely on the organisation they are part of.

Research in the SAPIS project highlights that athletes' commissions become more effective in representing athletes if they pursue a high degree of independence in the sports governing bodies.

Athlete advocacy groups

Athlete advocacy groups range from more informal groups with no member base to more formal groups with legal structures.

These groups are created to achieve certain goals specific to sport or the surrounding society such as influencing policymaking or providing a platform for voicing concern or addressing misbehaviour.

Advocacy groups can influence decision-making via social and mass media or by using athlete members' network to spread messages. Their legitimacy depends on their ability to display good governance with qualities like transparency, democracy, and accountability.

Advocacy groups will often depend on a strong engagement from individuals and can be vulnerable if they do not secure lasting commitment from members, sustainable financing, and good governance.

Three types of athlete democracy

The SAPIS researchers have identified three dimensions of democracy as central in forming the bedrock for sports organisations. Taken together, these principles offer a solid and legitimate grounding upon which to establish athlete representation in sport:

1. **Representative** – those who govern should be accountable to the governed, usually achieved through free, fair, and open elections.
2. **Participatory** – people should be able to contribute to collective decision-making.
3. **Deliberative** – systems and processes should be established to enable the exchange of ideas and perspectives to promote reflection and better-informed decision-making.

These three types of democracy apply not only to sports governing bodies, but also to athlete representative bodies such as athlete associations and athletes' commissions, as well as to the interactions between sports governing bodies and athlete representatives.

They might be thought of as an overarching framework that will help to ensure that sports institutions operate with a high degree of legitimacy and widespread support for the actions they take.

The case stories in this guide exemplify how these principles are translated into practice.

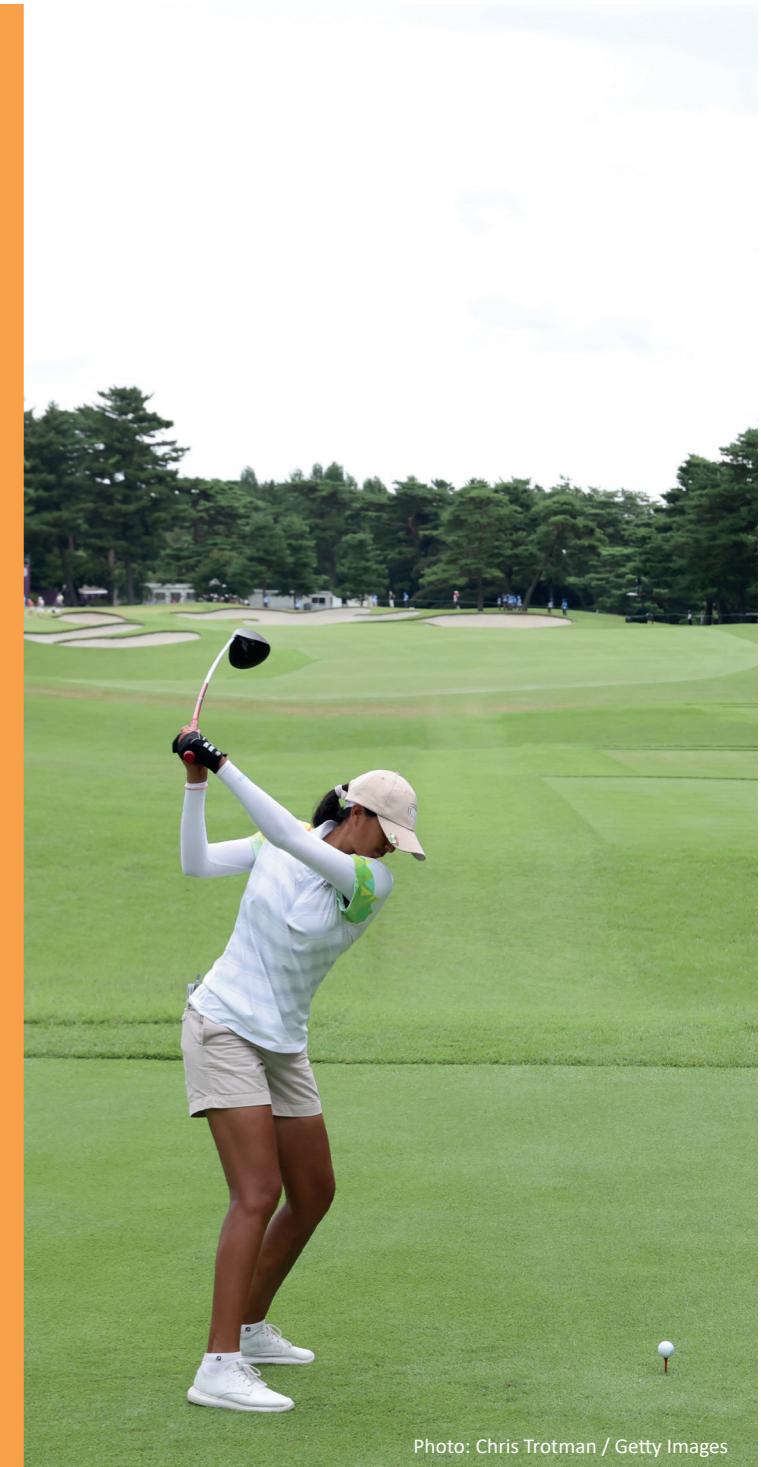


Photo: Chris Trotman / Getty Images

Almost all Olympic sports have athletes' commissions – but not always composed freely

A central objective of the SAPIS project is to assess how athletes are formally represented in international sports organisations. We set out to make an overview of the presence of athletes' commissions in 35 international sports federations and the IOC and WADA – as well as how these commissions are organised. Here are some of our main findings: Overall, athletes' commissions are present in 36 out of 37 international organisations – with FIFA being the only exception – but significant differences exist in how these commissions are constructed.

Selection of members to the athletes' commissions

One difference is visible in how members of the athletes' commissions are selected in each federation. In 13 of the 37 federations, athletes' commission members are solely elected by active athletes. Two of the 37 federations allow their board of directors appoint the members of the athletes' commissions. Finally, 19 of the 37 federations use athlete elections to appoint a fixed number of members, while the federation's decision-makers appoint the remaining members. The results are shown in figure 1.

The graph shows that a majority of federations exert influence on how their athletes' commission is composed. Such influence takes the form of either appointing commission members or appointing the chair of the athletes' commission. However, a considerable number of the federations entrust the athletes to select their representatives by organising elections for the active athletes.

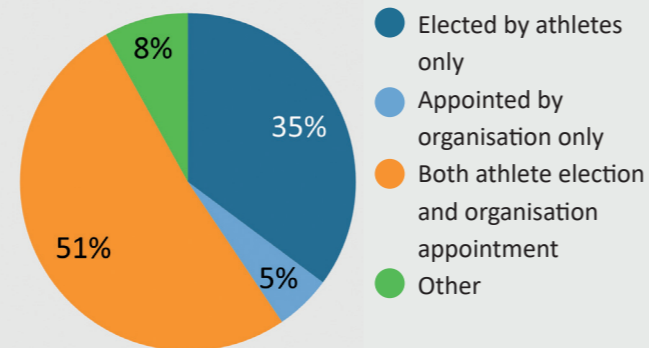
Looking into these athlete elections, many federations establish criteria for candidates' eligibility. In several international federations, the respective national federations are

FIFA's formal cooperation with FIFPRO

FIFA signed a six-year cooperation agreement with the international football players' union, FIFPRO, in 2017 to strengthen relationships between the two organisations and improve governance. The agreement grants FIFPRO seats in FIFA's development committee and recognises FIFPRO as an official player's union.

responsible for nominating athletes as candidates. These nominations are then approved by the international federations to ensure that candidates fulfil election criteria, such as being active athletes. While such criteria are necessary to facilitate the elections, it remains unclear whether mechanisms are in place to ensure that nominated athletes are not prevented from standing for elections. Furthermore, the choice of the athletes may be limited because of the federations' power to determine eligible candidates.

Figure 1: How are members selected for the organisation's athletes' commissions



Presence of athletes in decision-making bodies

A second difference is seen in whether athletes' commission members are represented in the international federations' executive committees. Executive committees consist of a narrow group of a sports organisation's elected and top administrative officials with a powerful role in all strategic decisions. 23 out of the 37 federations have an athletes' commission representative placed in their executive committee – with a right to vote in all but one federation (World Curling Federation). In 13 of the 37 federations, athletes' commissions are not represented in their executive committee.

In this sizable minority of federations, the voices of athletes are therefore not represented at the highest level of decision-making, even if being represented in an athletes' commission (see figure 2).

Figure 2: Is the athletes' commission represented in the organisation's executive committee?

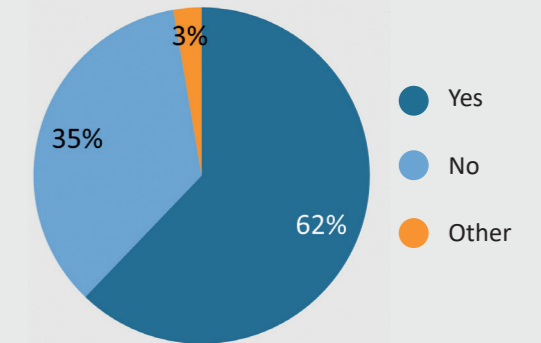


Photo: Stuart Franklin / FIFA / Getty Images

SAPIS survey: Athlete representatives are satisfied, but challenges remain

One of the first steps of the SAPIS project was to ask athlete representatives about their own view of their situation: Did they feel marginalised or included in decision-making?

One way of asking was through an online survey distributed to athlete representatives in athlete associations and sports governing bodies. In total, 146 athlete representatives responded by filling in the survey. They represent athletes in 122 different organisations.

The survey shows that progress has been made in athlete representation over the past decade. Athlete representatives are quite positive about the possibilities they have to represent athletes (representative democracy), to involve

athletes in decision making that directly affects them (participatory democracy), and to reach mutual consensus in an open discussion with athletes (deliberative democracy). The vast majority of athlete representatives surveyed believe that they make a meaningful contribution to the needs of athletes.

However, although the election or appointment process is often free and fair, the survey leaves doubt about the competitiveness (i.e. there being more than one candidate standing) of this process, and if the selection or appointment procedure of athlete representatives is based on their knowledge and competences.

The respondents in the survey indicate that they feel free to speak out against decisions, rules, or policies that directly affect athletes. Nevertheless, a substantial percentage (between 15 to 20 percent) of the respondents indicate that they:

- do not formally take part in decision-making processes in the organisation in which they represent athletes
- cannot set their own agenda nor come up with proposals
- do not get information about the decision-making process
- cannot appeal decisions, rules, or policies that directly affect athletes.

Moreover, participation in the decision-making process by athletes does not guarantee that they can impact the policies adopted by a sports organisation. Between a third and a quarter of the respondents state that they are neither involved in policy development before and during policy implementation, nor in the evaluation afterwards.

Improving athlete representation should not only focus on the process of election or appointment or the degree of representation. It should also focus on the extent to which athlete representatives can operate independently, how they interact and communicate with athletes, and how they exert their influence in other (including informal) ways.



Photo: Carmen Mandato / Getty Images



Photo: Juan Carlos Lucas / NurPhoto / Getty Images

Influence beyond the formal paper rights in federations

In sports federations, statutes and by-laws are important for securing athlete influence on governance. But the informal practices in these federations – the way athletes and sports officials interact on a daily basis – can be equally important. In ten interviews made by SAPIS with four executives in international sports federations and six athletes involved in decision-making through athletes' commissions, most agreed on the following:

- A good athlete representative should at least be fluent in both spoken and written English, have general background knowledge and understanding of sport governance, and be able to solve problems in the interests of multiple stakeholders. The latter is especially challenging within federations governing multiple disciplines since the demands of athletes are likely to vary. In this case, the best solution should suit the majority while not harming minorities.
- Not only the interests of top athletes but also the opinions of athletes from lower levels (divisions) should be considered. Collecting the views of actively competing athletes is a challenging task, but it is required for democracy to work. One recommendation is to start by contacting those athletes, who are already active in sharing their views, via social media or during training and competition.
- Combining various communication channels helps to reach out to more athletes and, thus, better represent the collective voice of athletes. Some of the sport organisations' executives use WhatsApp as a less formal way to communicate with the athlete representatives in addition to traditional communication methods such as email, round tables, and official meetings.

- Even when athletes are formally included in the decision-making structures, it is difficult to measure how big a mark the opinion of athletes leaves on decisions. Members of athletes' commissions shared that there could be less evident ways to restrict athletes' involvement, for example, when the meeting agenda is sent so late that it does not allow enough time for analysis and consultation. In turn, including athlete representatives in working groups and sub-committees of federations could facilitate a better exchange of perspectives and ideas, leading to better inclusion of athletes' views in decision-making.
- Having both active and recently retired athletes as members of the athletes' commissions is beneficial. Active athletes serve as a legitimate link between their fellow athletes and the commission, whereas members who have recently retired do not need to focus on their sporting career and can usually contribute more time to the commission's work.

? Questions

Do you have examples of informal practices that have helped athletes gain influence?

Or examples whereby sports officials use informal practices to limit athlete power?

Do you agree that active athletes and recently retired athletes is the best alliance for securing effective athlete representation?

Key lessons in the SAPIS research

The SAPIS project investigated athlete representation and athlete advocacy in many different ways. From surveys, interviews, conferences, and a literature review we took away the following lessons:

Well-functioning athlete associations (unions)

Under the principles of social dialogue and good governance, sports governing bodies and other sports employers should recognise independent athlete associations as a legitimate collective body for athletes.

Relation to athletes

Athlete associations should provide members with services and benefits (e.g. dual career support, welfare and legal advice) to remain relevant to athletes and to achieve a high density of membership.

Athlete associations can strengthen their legitimacy through elections of officers, active engagement with members, and strong and consistent communications with members.

Ways of influence

High density of membership and evidence of collective views and perspectives are essential to athlete associations in negotiations with sports governing bodies and other sports employers.

One of the most important tasks of an athlete association is to negotiate collective bargaining agreements. Where that is not possible, athlete associations can achieve influence through membership of boards, committees, working groups, and other forums where decisions are made.

Well-functioning athletes' commissions

Relation to athletes

Communication between an athletes' commission and the athletes should be regular, clear, concise, and happen in a suitable environment.

Organisational setup

We recommend that athletes' commissions are operationally independent of their federations, with independence established and described in the statutes of the federation.

To create an athlete-centered system of sport, members of the athletes' commission should be included in sub-committees and working groups within the federation.



Photo: Ezra Shaw / Getty Images

Cooperation and partnerships

Both in regional, national, and international contexts it is beneficial to create a recurring forum to which different types of athlete representative bodies are invited. Such forum will build capacity across the different organisations through sharing experiences and exchanging good practices.

EU Athletes and World Players Association can provide athlete associations with intelligence, project opportunities, legal support, and advocacy at regional and global levels with sports authorities and governmental bodies.

When engaging with athlete representatives, sports authorities must acknowledge athletes' right to organise themselves. They must also respect fundamental human rights of athletes including, importantly, the right to freedom of association.

Where the distinctive roles of athlete associations and athletes' commissions are clearly defined and respected, working in partnership can produce positive results for athlete representation. Notwithstanding potential challenges, we recommend that athletes' commissions and associations work to strengthen the impact of collective representation with all relevant stakeholders.

Useful cooperation: Utilising the athlete commission as a meeting forum

The international field of rugby shows how a sports governing body, its athletes' commission and an athlete association can cooperate. World Rugby's athletes' commission is used as a meeting forum for World Rugby officials and representatives from the athlete association, International Rugby Players. The athletes' committee thereby functions as a way of strengthening cooperation between a sports governing body and athlete representatives.

Well-functioning advocacy groups

Relation to athletes

Athlete advocacy groups should be driven and run by athletes – both in their member base and governing body – to ensure legitimacy as a voice of athletes.

Legitimacy among members can be achieved through election of officials, involvement of members in decision-making processes and continuous communication with members.

Organisational setup

Advocacy groups should be based on a professional setup, including a full-time position to manage the organisation, as active athletes have a career to prioritise with limited resources available to advocate.

Advocacy groups should pursue financial independence by detaching external funding and donors from decision-making.

Ways of influence

Given the smaller size of many athlete advocacy groups, advocacy groups should adopt a few clearer goals rather than several different goals to more effectively use their limited resources.

Athlete advocacy groups should use different channels of influence to reach their objectives: Gain attention in media (e.g., through noticeable statements), mobilise athletes and key public actors around messages (e.g., by drawing on member athletes' networks), and maintain close dialogue with decision-makers on objectives (e.g., by presence in processes of policymaking).

A union and athlete commission in partnership – the case of the Dutch NOC and NL Sporter

Thanks to a partnership in the Netherlands between the union NL Sporter and the athlete commission of the Dutch NOC, it has been possible to establish athletes' commissions in an array of sports. It is an example of how the principles of democracy, especially participatory democracy, can help to build a wider infrastructure of athlete representation. The partnerships also help overcome resource limitations.

NL Sporter is a Dutch multi-sport trade union that represents athletes from over 50 sports with an estimated 1,800 individual athletes. The secretariat of the union employs two experienced officers and is steered by a governing body of seven board members. The main work of the union is to assist athletes with individual contracts and legal issues, collective legal work, influencing sports policies and advocacy.

NL Sporter aims to foster productive collaboration with the National Olympic Committee and seeks to work in partnership with sports governing bodies for the benefit of athletes. NL Sporter is a member of the NOC High Performance advisory group and uses that position to advocate on behalf of athletes in respect of sports policy, stipends, integrity, Olympic contracts and other matters. NL Sporter has been helped in this work by a national sports governance code that promotes stakeholder approaches to sports governance.

Also, the union and the athletes' commission have organised joint surveys to discover the views of athletes and have established educational programmes for athletes' commissions. Furthermore, the organisations join forces when needed to strengthen the position of athletes and to influence important policy issues.



Photo: Dean Mouhtaropoulos / Getty Images

As the union is small and with limited resources, it does not always have the capacity to represent all athletes in the many sports within its auspices. Thus, the strategy of NL Sporter is to expand its organisation and improve athlete influence by helping to set up athlete representation within all 76 federations. To date, approximately 15 federations have a working athletes' commission with up to 60 more set to be established in 2023.

In 2021, NL Sporter was part of a working group for the newly established Sports Governance Code which recommends that all federations should have an athletes' representative body. However, as the code is a set of principles rather than being rule-based, NL Sporter, the NOC and its athletes' commissions successfully argued for minimum standards of representation that all federations must fulfil in order to receive funding through the national lottery. These requirements state that by the end of 2023, all federations must have an athletes' representative body with specific rights and with an influential position within the federation.

Critical to this partnership arrangement is an understanding of the spheres of influence of each organisation. NL Sporter is an independent players association while the athletes' commission is an advisory committee of the NOC. This arrangement gives NL Sporter freedom to take whatever action is needed to represent athletes, while the president of the athletes' commission has a place on the board of the NOC with direct access to information and influence on specific issues.

Challenges remain to ensure that athletes' commissions represent the collective view of athletes. But overall, the encouragement of athletes to establish their own commission within the sports' governing bodies helps bring the voice of athletes to decision-making.

Organising athletes, especially in individual sports, can be difficult. NL Sporter is showing that by adopting a partnership approach, using the leverage of the governance code and lottery funding of sports, they can overcome some of their own resource limitations for the benefit of both athletes and sports.



Questions

Do you know of any other partnerships between unions and athletes' commissions?

Could a partnership work in your sport?

What are the main risks and opportunities?



<https://www.nocnsf.nl/en>

<https://www.nlsporter.nl/>

Building a sports union through athlete engagement – the case of the Spanish Women’s Futsal Players Association

The Spanish Women’s Futsal Players Association (AJFSF) shows how a sports union can be developed from small beginnings to a thriving player association. The case especially highlights the importance of involving union members through face-to-face communication and social media engagement. It serves, *inter alia*, as an example of deliberative democracy as players are able to have their voice heard through the union.

Building a union from the ground up is no easy task but has been achieved by the Spanish Women’s Futsal Players Association (AJFSF). The union has grown from less than 50 members to over 400, representing 80 per cent of top division elite women futsal players.

The initial growth of the union was influenced by a highly motivated individual who was able to promote the benefits of the union to other players by word of mouth and to show how joining the union could be of value to all women futsal players. Visits to dressing rooms as part of an EU funded programme to speak to players about integrity issues was used as an entry point to also organise a union.

The most important message was to ensure that players understood that they have power as the sport is dependent on the athletes, but only if they act as a collective. It was

also important to show players that the union has a strategy and a plan to improve their rights and working conditions. Learning from the lessons of other unions that have organised athletes was also considered important.

The union’s way of communicating with players has been critical to its success in building and maintaining itself. Face-to-face meetings in dressing rooms are used by the union to maintain contact with players, ensuring that team visits take place at least every two years. WhatsApp groups help the union stay in touch with players and to understand their issues. These methods of communications are supplemented by surveys and research.

The expansion of membership has enabled the union to obtain a seat on important committees of the Spanish FA that discuss items including competition regulations and professional licenses. Having a significant membership enables the union to be the legitimate voice of players in those decision-making meetings.

Equally important to the success of the union has been to establish a core set of values and principles in terms of collective advocacy combined with transparency and honesty so that members can see that the union is working on behalf of the players as a whole. The union has also ensured that it remains pragmatic and strategic in terms of working for the longer-term benefit of greater professionalisation of players by increasing the resources that flow into the sport.

Remaining relevant to members is critical and to do this the union has developed services such as discounts for shoes, dual career support, legal advice and support in respect of welfare issues. Ensuring that all members can see value in union membership is vital to retain the high density that is needed for collective negotiations with the FA, league and clubs.

Overall, the AJFSF is an example of organising players into a union by communicating the benefits of unionisation in a precarious sport and to use the collective strength of membership to improve the financial position of the sport for the benefit of current and future members. In 2022, the union helped launch an international association that will extend union membership globally.



Questions

What are the challenges and opportunities when an organisation is started through one individual’s commitment?

What does it take to establish and grow a union in sport?

How can you obtain resources to run a union?



<https://www.ajfs.es/>



Photo: Eóin Noonan - Sportsfile / Getty Images

Making an established union more influential – the case of Rugby Players Ireland

A well-established sports union, Rugby Players Ireland, uses its comparative advantage within the governance landscape to attract resources through commercial activities and by providing top class benefits to its members. It uses its strategic positioning as representative body to enhance its influence within the game.

Rugby Players Ireland was established in 2001 and has a membership of approximately 400 players representing women's and men's rugby across the island of Ireland.

As the union for professional and elite players, Rugby Players Ireland has negotiated a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) since 2019 that recognises its position as the collective voice of players. While the CBA does not cover individual wages (in common with CBAs in other sports) it gives the union the right to negotiate all other aspects of the players' contracts – for example, bonuses, insurance, terms of engagement, dress code and grievance procedures.

The union organises its work under three main pillars: Representation, development and engagement. Together, the activities under the pillars enable the union to engage in traditional trade union work of bargaining on behalf of players – both individually and collectively, to provide services to members to assist with personal development, and to work with commercial partners for the benefit of the union and members. Central to the pillar of development is the work of player development managers who are located

within the different provinces and work full-time helping players with activities as diverse as education, welfare, dual career support and more. These managers are financed under a negotiated agreement with the sport's governing body.

However, while Rugby Players Ireland organises its work under three separate pillars, there is a significant degree of crossover between them that enables the union to develop as a representative organisation. For example, because player development managers work closely with players in their day-to-day role they are able to identify issues that may require the representative input of the union to resolve. By acting as the local 'eyes and ears' of the union, the player development managers are able to refer the organising work of the union to the relevant department in the association as well as to provide members with high quality personal development benefits.

Similarly, the corporate engagement work with external partners not only helps to provide the union with useful financial resources but also provides network opportunities for players looking for a post-sport career. In this way the three pillars can be seen as working towards the single objective of building union influence and ensuring that the union stays relevant to members.

Overall, Rugby Players Ireland is a good example of how a mature players union in a professional sport can use its comparative advantages in the governance landscape of professional and elite rugby in Ireland to build and extend its influence for the benefit of players and the sport.

? Questions

How can collective action improve working terms and conditions?

Are there any pitfalls in combining trade union activism with commercial benefits?

Would you like to see your union engage in player development?



<https://www.rugbyplayersireland.ie/>



Photo: Piaras Ó Midheach / Sportsfile / Getty Images

Athlete advocacy for structural changes – the case of Atletas pelo Brasil

The advocacy group, Atletas pelo Brasil (ApB), has been successful in mobilising athletes' voices to contribute to policy reforms of Brazil's sports system. The group has utilised the influence of its member base of elite athletes to reach both politicians and the wider public. Close and frequent communication as well as a supportive secretariat have been key in the work of Atletas pelo Brasil.

Atletas pelo Brasil (ApB) is a Brazilian athlete advocacy group founded in 2006 with an aim of making sports more inclusive and accessible for everyone in Brazil. The advocacy group consists of 60 members, all either active or former elite athletes that have represented Brazil's national sports teams. ApB's secretariat has two full-time employees and is governed by a board of five athletes. Funding comes from donors that support ApB's objectives and is supplemented by a membership fee from all members. A financial report is published annually.

The advocacy group works to influence sports policies to create systemic changes in the Brazilian sports system and divides its activities into three pillars: Lobbying, mobilisation and press, and content creation.

Among its achievements, ApB has contributed to more transparency and democratic governance in sports organisations by influencing a law that establishes criteria for receiving public funding. Such criteria include term limits for the president and formal athlete representation in the organisations. During the last year, ApB has successfully

advocated for an increase in public funding to social sports projects by up to 120M EUR and an increased priority of amateur sports in Brazil's national sports strategy.

Much of ApB's success as an advocacy group revolves around utilising the influence of its member base. Being elite athletes, ApB's members have many followers on social media as well as networks of athletes and public figures. By utilising these members' reach, ApB is able to spread information and messages as well as mobilising significant support to policy proposals among athletes and the wider population. To assist their members, the ApB secretariat therefore puts much effort into creating content with specialists, which the members can share with their followers.

Through the member base's network, ApB also engages in close dialogue with politicians both by travelling to in-person meetings and delivering written inputs and proposals. This dialogue is supported by significant athlete turnout at the Brazilian congress when policy proposals are being discussed to show the athletes' support. Finally, ApB informs the press on the advocacy group's activities to broaden its messages to the wider population.

Communication between secretariat, board, and members functions through different channels. Formally, the secretariat and board meet every other week to discuss current activities and possible issues. Minutes are shared subsequently and a monthly newsletter is distributed to members and partners. A general assembly for all members is held annually where strategic decisions are made, such as the approval of recommendations or board elections.

More informally, WhatsApp communication is an important driver in ApB's work as it allows members and leadership to share issues and opportunities with each other. Two WhatsApp groups – one for the board and secretariat, and one for all members and the secretariat – are used daily as a two-way form of communication between directors and members to share information from the political system, news articles and ApB's activities.

An inherent challenge for ApB is its members' busy schedule as active athletes. Due to competition and training, members are not always able to follow the progress of national policy developments. A large part of the secretariat's role is therefore to inform and keep members up to date on political issues. In this way, the members know when to share information on social media, when to reach out to their networks, or when to attend political hearings.



Questions

How could you mobilise athletes around a common issue?

In what ways would you communicate athletes' messages to the public? To decision-makers? To other athletes?

How can advocacy groups complement athlete associations and athletes' commissions?



<https://www.atletaspelebrasil.org.br/>



Photo: Matthias Hangst / Getty Images

A checklist for representing athletes

Becoming an effective athlete representative requires not only good intentions, but also skills and the ability to learn from experience. Here are our recommendations for your engagement as an athlete representative.

Have the right knowledge

- Know your rights as a representative and the duties of sports governing bodies to negotiate with you or to consult you.
- Know your mandate – who do you represent and how have you become a spokesperson – e.g. through election or similar democratic means?
- Know your constituents – make sure you know the views and interests of those you seek to represent and speak on behalf of.
- Know the issues – make sure you have researched and understand the issues you are speaking about to gain and maintain credibility.
- Know your sports governing body or employer – how are decisions made, who makes them and how can you influence them?
- Know your allies – who else might support your position and how can they help?

Get the right structures

- Ensure that all members can access the association/ commission services on equal terms.
- Create a network of local athlete representatives serving as a contact point between teams and association.

- Ensure that active athletes are a part of the governance of the association or commission and that any elected or appointed officers are accountable to athletes.

Connect with your constituents

- Report back to those you represent and speak on behalf of.
- Keep regular contact with athletes by regular team visits, general assemblies and other meetings as well as informal channels such as social media.
- Work proactively to ensure that all athletes are properly informed about their rights as members of your association.
- Gather athlete views and opinions during in-person meetings, but also via athlete surveys, and use them to define, amend or develop the associations' functioning and work.
- Stimulate discussion on the central issues with your constituents and be open to their criticism.
- Make clever use of social media as a space for dialogue with your constituents and communication about your work



? Questions

Do you find all the recommendations equally important?

Do you find some of the recommendations difficult to tick off?

How can sports governing bodies help create effective athlete representatives?

Photo: Alexander Hassenstein / Getty Images



Photo: Laurent Coust / SOPA Images / Getty Images

About the SAPIS project

As athletes are the foundation of international sports competitions, they should as a matter of justice be entitled to influence the environment in which they spend most of their time and efforts. This is particularly important as most national and international federations in principle are democratic organisations that draw legitimacy from their bases of millions of athlete members.

However, often athletes do not enjoy such rights. In many places, athlete organisations have clearly expressed their experiences of neglect and even exploitation in the processes of sport production in recent years.

Currently, there is no place for athletes and policy makers to look for specific guidance or models of good practice that can be adapted and implemented in pursuit of better athlete representation.

The SAPIS project aims to directly address this deficiency by examining the extent of the 'lack of voice' for athletes, how it is distributed across European sport, and how models of better practices can best be developed. From 2019 until 2023, the SAPIS project set out to:

- comprehensively map the width, depth and quality of athlete representation as well as the power and potential of representation
- produce an overview of effective ways for athletes to communicate and seek influence in the governance of the 35 Olympic sports
- provide new insights for policymakers and governments by showing the benefits of more democratic inclusion of athletes in decision-making processes in sport
- build networks and facilitating dialogue between a wide range of stakeholders including the association-based sports movement, athletes and athlete organisations, public authorities, and other societal actors.

The project is coordinated by Play the Game¹ along with a number of project partners:

- European Elite Athletes Association (Anna Semenova, Paulina Tomczyk)
- JPY - Football Players Association of Finland (Harri Syväsalmi, Panu Autio)
- NOC*NSF - The Dutch Olympic Committee* Dutch Sports Federation (Chiel Warners)
- Pompeu Fabra University, Spain (Alberto Carrio Sampedro)
- Swansea University, United Kingdom (Andy Harvey, Mike McNamee)
- University of Ljubljana, Slovenia (Mojca Doupona, Simona Kustec²)
- Utrecht University, the Netherlands (Arnout Geeraert, Maarten van Bottenburg)

The project is co-funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme with a grant of approximately 250,000 euro.



You can find more information on the project and further resources on the project website www.athletpower.eu

¹ Over the 4-year period, the following staff from Play the Game has contributed temporarily or permanently: Aline Bedaf, Christian Le Coq, Stanis Elsborg, Daniel Hayman, Katja Høiriis, Christina Friis Johansen, Kirsten Sparre, Maria Suurballe, and Jens Sejer Andersen.

² From 2023 University of Primorska.

Strengthening
Athlete Power
in Sport



Prifysgol **Abertawe**
Swansea University



Utrecht University

Univerza *v Ljubljani*



Universitat
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