

# **PURPOSE, PERSPECTIVE & PAYING IT FORWARD**

## **UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION IN CURRENT & RETIRED ELITE ATHLETES – AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

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A collaboration between Victoria University and Athletes for Hope Australia

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# Acknowledgement of Country



Victoria University acknowledges, recognises and respects the Ancestors, Elders and families of the Bunurong/Boonwurrung, Wadawurrung and Wurundjeri/Woiwurrung of the Kulin who are the traditional owners of University land in Victoria, the Gadigal and Guring-gai of the Eora Nation who are the traditional owners of University land in Sydney, and the Yulara/Yugarapul people and Turrbal people living in Meanjin (Brisbane).

## Positionality statement

**Positionality statement by researcher, Adwoah Hammond:** As a PhD student in sport psychology and an athlete who is deeply involved in community contribution, I bring a unique positionality to the analyse, assessment, and interpretation of this project's findings. Some of the insights presented in this report align closely with my own experiences as both an athlete and a researcher, while others differ. I acknowledge that my lived experiences inevitably shape my perspective and have informed the way I understand and interpret the responses shared by the athlete participants.

# Executive summary

This exploratory study investigates the motivations, barriers, enablers and benefits influencing Australian elite athletes' community contribution activities with the Not For Profit (NFP) sector. Conducted collaboratively by Victoria University's Institute for Health and Sport and Athletes for Hope Australia (AFHA), this research seeks to inform strategies that support athletes – both current and retired – to engage meaningfully and sustainably in community contribution.

## Purpose and Method

The project aimed to explore and identify the key factors that influence current and retired elite athlete involvement in community contribution initiatives, and their impact on athletes themselves. A mixed-methods approach was used:

- **Phase 1 (Survey):** 31 elite athletes (20 current, 11 retired) across 16 sports completed an online questionnaire assessing motivations, wellbeing, and perceived barriers and enablers, and
- **Phase 2 (Interviews):** Two semi-structured interviews provided deeper qualitative insights.

## Key Findings

- **Wellbeing and Fulfilment:**

Both current and retired athletes who are involved in community contribution activities reported high life satisfaction and psychological wellbeing. Retired athletes showed particularly high flourishing scores, suggesting lasting personal benefits from continued community involvement.

- **Motivation:**

The strongest motivator was Values – an athletes' desire to express altruism and humanitarian concern for others. This was followed by Understanding, reflecting the wish to gain new experiences and apply different skills.

Less influential factors were Career and Social motives, indicating that community work is more about purpose and personal growth than networking or professional gain.

- **Barriers:**

The main obstacle for current athletes' greater involvement in community contribution activities was balancing sport, life and time commitments.

- **Enablers:**

Strong enablers included alignment with personal values, a desire to give back to the community that supported their athletic careers, and encouragement from teammates, coaches or support staff. Retired athletes valued opportunities

for independent engagement and legacy-building post-career.

- **Dual benefit:**

Athletes' community contribution can benefit both themselves and society by fostering wellbeing, purpose, and social connection. For NFP organisations, partnering with athletes may enhance visibility, credibility and impact. The findings suggest that facilitating meaningful, values-driven opportunities can deepen athlete engagement and strengthen NFP collaborations.

## Recommendations

1. **Embed community contribution** as a structured mechanism to support athlete wellbeing during their elite careers and through the transition to retirement.
2. **Develop educational, athlete-centred programs** highlighting the humanistic, altruistic and personal development benefits of community contribution.
3. **Engage coaching and support staff as key influencers** to actively promote and facilitate athlete participation in community contribution, whilst providing opportunities for teammates to participate in these activities together.
4. **Emphasise altruism and learning**, rather than career advancement, as key engagement drivers.
5. **Tailor individual athlete community contribution activities** by understanding motivational and structural factors to inform personally meaningful community contribution plans.

In summary, elite athletes tend to engage in community and charitable activities because they find them personally meaningful, rather than feeling obliged or seeking public recognition. Practitioners and organisations supporting the holistic development of current and retired elite athletes should actively encourage community contribution as a valuable pathway to wellbeing. By helping athletes identify and engage in opportunities that align with their personal values and interests, practitioners can support positive transitions during and after sporting careers, while also delivering tangible benefits to the charities and communities involved.

# Purpose of the report

Athletes for Hope Australia (AFHA) is a Not For Profit (NFP) organisation that “inspires and empowers athletes at every stage of their pathway to give back to the causes and charities that matter most to them” (Athletes for Hope Australia, 2024). Recognising that athlete contributions to the NFP sector create significant positive impacts for athletes and for the community (Palmer, 2021; Svensson et al., 2014; Babiak, 2012), AFHA implement programs and events to support athletes to contribute to charitable causes and charities with impact (Athletes for Hope Australia, 2024). Many Australian athletes engage in volunteering, advocacy, fundraising and other activities that contribute to the strategic priorities of causes and NFP organisations. Such engagements can be strengthened and positive impacts increased through continuous quality improvement. However, research evidence pertaining to how athletes can best be supported in contributing to their community is scarce.

This report presents new objective data and insights as to the motivations, types of activities and benefits of community contribution to current and retired elite athletes. It highlights the barriers and enablers for athletes to engage with community contribution activities and the NFP sector more broadly. In addition to enhancing our understanding of this purpose and benefits of athletes contributing to community, the outcomes from this study provide important perspectives to support decision-making, investment and advocacy for athletes to purposefully engage in impactful community contribution activities.

## Overview of method

A two-phased, mixed methods study design was adopted to meet the project’s aims. In preparing for data collection, a brief desktop review of contemporary literature was conducted. This review highlighted the scarcity of research investigating and understanding how and why Australian elite athletes contribute to the community. The information gathered from this review informed the survey development (Phase 1) and the question guide for the semi-structured interviews (Phase 2).

Phase 1 comprised of an online survey, obtaining 31 responses (20 current elite athletes and 11 retired elite athletes aged 18 years or older) across 16 sports after distribution to AFHA staff and contacts, as well as personal contacts of the research team. Phase 2 involved semi-structured interviews, where those in the interview were participants of the survey. Two interviews were conducted with male elite athletes, highlighting their unique thoughts and feelings throughout their extensive experience in the community contribution space. The interviews took place via Zoom to allow for greater flexibility of schedules between the research team and athletes. This also allowed for athletes that were in different states or countries (e.g., due to international level competitions) to be involved. This study was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE24-177).

## Background

Individuals who contribute to their communities provide vital support to society, sustaining collective wellbeing from local through to international levels. *Community contribution* encompasses a range of actions that benefit and support others – such as volunteering, advocacy, and fundraising – and offers meaningful experiences to those involved. These activities not only enhance participants' personal and professional lives but also improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisations and individuals they assist (Australian Institute of Welfare, 2023).

In Australia, community contribution is widespread. In 2022, 56.7% of Australians reported volunteering in some capacity: 26.7% contributed formally through organisations within the previous 12 months, while 46.5% contributed informally through unpaid work outside formal organisations (Biddle et al., 2022). A key area of such engagement is the sport and recreation sector, where the value of sport brings unique experiences, responsibilities, and opportunities for volunteers. In 2022, approximately 3.1 million Australians contributed to sport and recreation activities at least once during the year (Clearinghouse for Sport, 2023).

Not-for-profit (NFP) organisations have long recognised that sport can serve as a powerful vehicle for community development and capacity building when supporting strong, strategic, and multi-sector stakeholder partnerships (Rosso & McGrath, 2017; Rosso, 2010). Inclusive sport programs that are tailored to community needs tend to achieve greater engagement and impact, especially among priority groups (Skinner et al, 2008; Fujimoto & Rentschler, 2014). However, much of sport's success at the community level depends on the individuals who contribute their time and expertise, some of whom are athletes themselves.

Over the past two decades, there has been growing demand for professional sporting bodies to engage directly with the communities in which they operate (Armey, 2004). NFP organisations have followed this trend, recognising that high performance athletes can make distinctive and meaningful contributions by representing their sport, team, and personal brand (Babiak et al., 2012). Such partnerships benefit both parties: NFPs gain access to new audiences, diverse perspectives, and leadership, while athletes enhance their social networks, career opportunities, and wellbeing through community engagement (Clearinghouse for Sport, 2025).

Athletes for Hope Australia (AFHA) is one such organisation that recognises the dual impact of athlete involvement in the NFP sector, and whose activities drive positive outcomes for both athletes and communities. Despite such progress, there remains potential to strengthen such engagements and further understand and amplify these benefits.

Engaging athletes in the service of their communities not only enhances the public image of sport but also exemplifies the growing field of sport philanthropy (Sports Philanthropy Project, 2007; Babiak et al., 2012). Sport holds deep cultural significance globally, and particularly in Australia – often celebrated as a 'sporting nation' for its international success, high participation rates, and hosting of major events (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023).

Australians value the discipline, passion and dedication inherent in sport and when these traits are channelled into causes that matter to athletes, the benefits extend across both individual and societal levels (Babiak et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, limited research has examined *why* and *how* Australian athletes engage in community contribution, and what mutual benefits arise for athletes and NFP organisations. While it is known that such engagement can provide athletes with structure, purpose, and wellbeing benefits beyond financial rewards (Fairley & Phillips, 2018; Stronach et al., 2014), empirical evidence specific to current and retired elite Australian athletes is scarce. Existing studies tend to focus on student-athletes within the US collegiate system (e.g., Huml et al., 2014, Huml et al., 2017, McGuire et al., 2023) whose experiences and motivations may differ substantially from those of current or retired elite athletes in Australia.

Research on student-athletes has often centred on functional motives, drawing on the theory of functionalism, which posits that psychological processes should be understood by their purpose rather than their structure (James, 1890). Building on functional attitude theory (Katz, 1960; Smith et al., 1956), Clary et al. (1998) identified six motivational functions for volunteering: values, understanding, social, career, protective, and enhancement. Studies have shown that all six functions influence motivation to contribute, with *values* – the desire to express altruism and concern for others – consistently emerging as most important (Martin et al., 2019). However, given that these findings are drawn primarily from U.S. student-athlete samples, their applicability to Australian current and retired elite athletes remains unclear.

In addition to motivation, understanding the barriers and enablers that shape athletes' community contribution is critical. Previous research highlights challenges such as time demands, managing the athlete-life balance, and transferability of skills (Deal & Camiré, 2016; McGuire et al., 2023). Yet, these insights are again based on student-athlete contexts. A comprehensive understanding of the motivations, barriers, enablers and benefits influencing Australian elite athletes' community contribution is still lacking, representing a significant gap in the current literature.

## The current project

The purpose of this project was to explore and identify the key factors that influence current and retired elite athlete involvement in community contribution initiatives, and their impact on the athletes themselves. Specifically, the project aimed to develop a clearer understanding of how elite athletes interact with the NFP sector through community contribution activities.

The research has two primary objectives. First, to provide insights that could inform 'best practice' recommendations for enhancing Australian athletes' engagement with the NFP sector. Second, to help individuals and organisations in the sport and NFP sectors to better understand how to effectively support athletes in their efforts to give back to the communities and causes that they value most.

While athlete volunteering and community contribution have been examined within the context of U.S. student-athletes, particularly in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) system, there has been little exploration beyond this setting. This project therefore sought to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations, barriers, enablers and benefits influencing community contribution among Australian elite athletes, both current and retired. Recognising that these motivations and experiences can evolve across and beyond a sporting career, the study adopted a mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to achieve a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon than could be obtained through a single method alone (Wasti et al., 2022).

## Key findings: Survey

The survey included questions exploring athlete's motivations, as well as their perceived barriers and enablers to community contribution. Additional items assessed participants' life satisfaction, perceived successes, and demographics characteristics, including details about their sporting careers and prior (or current) community contribution.

To be eligible for the study, participants were required to be at least 18 years of age, an Australian resident, and a current or retired elite athlete, defined as those who had competed at a state level or above. Retired athletes must have retired within the past ten years.

A total of 31 athletes from 16 different sports participated in the survey (Phase 1), comprising 18 females, 11 males, one gender-queer and one non-binary individual. The average age was 32.8 years (ranging from 19 to 64). Of these, 20 participants (64.5%) were current elite athletes (average age 28.2 years), and 11 (35.4%) were retired elite athletes (average age 42.1 years). Retired athletes had been out of elite competitive sport for an average of 4.1 years (ranging from 1 to 8 years). All participants had previously engaged in community contribution, and both cohorts reported being very satisfied with their experiences in this area.

Among current athletes, contributing to the community within the past month was the more frequent response (9 individuals, 29%). Of those who answered, half of the current elite athlete cohort (9 individuals, 50%) engaged in community activities voluntarily, while the remaining half participated through both contractual obligations and personal choice. Most athletes reported that they were most active in community contribution early in their careers (6 individuals, 19.4%) or towards the end (5 individuals, 16.1%). One participant noted that identifying specific career phases was difficult due to the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Regarding time commitment, the most common response was up to 20 hours in the last 12 months devoted to community activities (7 individuals, 22.6%), followed by more than 50 hours (5 individuals, 16.1%), with reported ranges extending from 80 to over 1000 hours.

Among the retired athletes, community contribution within the past month was again the most frequent response (4 individuals, 50%). During their athletic careers, the majority had participated in community activities voluntarily (7 individuals, 77.8%). Engagement was evenly distributed across different stages of their elite careers (4 individuals, 12.9% each stage). Most retired athletes (8 individuals, 88.9%) had continued with contributing to the community since their retirement, typically more than 50 hours per year (3 individuals, 37.5%), and all who remained active did so by choice.

See Tables 1 and 2 for detailed demographic and activity-related data.

**Table 1***Competitive level experienced by the participants*

Demographic variable	Current elite athletes	Retired elite athletes
<b>Competitive level experienced</b>		
Olympics	3	2
Paralympics	2	2
Commonwealth Games	3	1
International league/tournament competition (e.g., ATP tour)	6	3
World Championships/Cups	9	4
National league/tournament competition (e.g., AFL, NRL)	8	6
National Championships	14	4
State Championships	13	3
State league/tournament competition (e.g., VFL)	6	2

\*Note: each athlete could select multiple answers

**Table 2***The type of community contribution and causes that have been supported by the participants*

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLE	CURRENT ELITE ATHLETES	RETIRED ELITE ATHLETES
<b>Community contribution type</b>		
Participating in or attending a charity event or function	13	8
Advocating for a cause, campaign, charity or community organisation	13	5
Fundraising, either individually or as part of a group	11	4
Representing a cause, campaign, charity or community organisation in a formal capacity, e.g. ambassador role	10	5
Volunteering to support a charity or community organisation, in any capacity	13	9
A committee role for a cause, campaign, charity, community	6	2

<b>organisation or sporting club</b>		
<b>Making a charitable donation</b>	14	7
<b>Engaging through social media with charities/causes that I care about</b>	7	6
<b>Other</b>	1	1
<b><i>Causes that have been supported</i></b>		
<b>Medical research and support services</b>	4	3
<b>Animal welfare and conservation</b>	2	1
<b>Mental health and wellbeing</b>	10	4
<b>Poverty alleviation</b>	3	1
<b>Disaster relief</b>	3	1
<b>Emergency services</b>	0	0
<b>Gender equality</b>	7	2
<b>Education and literacy</b>	3	2
<b>Environmental conservation</b>	4	2
<b>Homelessness and housing</b>	2	0
<b>Disability support services</b>	5	3
<b>Aged care</b>	0	1
<b>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities</b>	5	5
<b>Domestic and family violence</b>	3	2
<b>Refugee and asylum seeker assistance</b>	3	0
<b>Youth and children</b>	7	3
<b>Food banks and hunger relief</b>	3	1
<b>LGBTQI+ communities</b>	5	0
<b>Arts and cultural preservation</b>	2	0
<b>Gambling</b>	0	0
<b>Access to sport and recreation</b>	8	3
<b>Legal aid and justice</b>	0	0
<b>International aid and development</b>	1	1
<b>Veteran support</b>	1	0
<b>Addiction recovery</b>	0	0
<b>Human rights advocacy</b>	3	3

Other	0	0
<b>Factors influencing community contribution</b>		
Parent/guardian	7	1
Siblings/other family members	1	2
Friends or teammates	13	5
Sport administrator (e.g., Community Engagement Manager of your club or sport)	8	5
Agent/manager	2	0
Your culture or ethnicity	1	2
Faith	0	1
Other	1	1

\*Note: each athlete could select multiple answers

## Functional motives to community contribution

Understanding the motivations that drive individuals to engage in community contribution provides valuable insight into both the initiation and continuation of such behaviours. These motivations are often functional in nature. Clary and Snyder (1991) proposed six key functional motives that underpin community contribution (specifically, volunteering): values, understanding, enhancement, protective, career and social.

The functional approach highlights that while individuals may engage in the same behaviour, the underlying reasons can differ. For example, one athlete may contribute their community because it benefits their career, while another may do so for the social connections it fosters. Understanding these distinct motivations allows for a deeper appreciation of the athletes' reasons for engaging in community work, beyond purely social or environmental influences (see [barriers and enablers to community contribution](#)).

Results from this project indicate that all six functional motives influence elite athletes' willingness to contribute to their communities, as measured by the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI; Clary et al., 1998).

### Values

The values motive - the desire to express altruistic and humanitarian concern for others - emerged as the strongest driver among both current and retired athletes. This aligns with previous research showing that the values motive consistently scores highest across diverse volunteer groups (Chacón et al., 2017).

The values subscale assessed the extent to which athletes were motivated by compassion for others, concern for those less fortunate, and a commitment to causes they find personally meaningful. These findings suggest that elite athletes place significant importance on

demonstrating care for societal issues through tangible action. In doing so, they not only express personal values of altruism and empathy but also use their platform as role models to make positive difference within their communities.

### **Understanding**

The understanding motive, which reflects a desire to gain new learning experiences and apply different skillsets, was the second strongest motivator, consistent with previous studies (Chacón et al., 2017; McCabe et al., 2007). Both current and retired athletes rated this motive as highly important.

This motivation encompasses openness to new perspectives, learning through direct experience, and engaging with people from diverse backgrounds. Although elite athletes already possess specialised skills, community contribution offers opportunities to explore new strengths and personal growth beyond their athletic identity. Such experiences can not only broaden their worldviews but also enhance their personal knowledge and sense of purpose.

Interestingly, retired athletes scored slightly higher than current athletes on this motive. This may reflect retrospective interpretation - retired athletes perhaps viewing their past contributions through a lens of greater societal concern - or an increased appreciation for learning and connection after their sporting careers concluded.

### **Enhancement**

The enhancement motive relates to personal growth and the improvement of self-esteem through community engagement. While this motive was rated as less important than values and understanding, it still held moderate significance for participants, aligning with findings from McCabe et al. (2007).

The results suggest that elite athletes derive some sense of fulfilment and self-worth from contributing to their communities, but their primary focus lies less in boosting their own self-image and more in improving the wellbeing of others. Nonetheless, the desire to feel useful, valued, and connected remains a meaningful aspect of their engagement.

### **Protective**

The protective motive – reducing negative feelings such as guilt, loneliness, or stress – was of moderate importance in this study. This function typically reflects the use of volunteering as a coping mechanism or a distraction from personal challenges.

For this cohort of current and retired athletes, the findings suggest that community contribution is not primarily used as an escape from difficulties. Instead, elite athletes may rely on other strategies to manage stress or life balance. This pattern aligns with previous research showing that the protective function generally scores lowest among volunteers (Caldarella et al., 2010; Dávila & Díaz-Morales, 2009; Konrath et al., 2012).

## Career

The career motive, which relates to perceived work-related benefits gained from community contribution, was the one of the weakest drivers across the six functions. A notable difference was observed between current and retired athletes.

This may reflect how athletes perceive their sporting careers: those at the state or national level may not view sport as their primary profession and therefore do not strongly associate community contribution with career advancement. Differences between current and retired athletes may also be influenced by retrospective recall, with retired participants viewing career-related benefits differently in hindsight.

## Social

The social motive, which involves engaging in community work to build or strengthen relationships, was the least important function for this cohort. This finding is consistent with some prior research (e.g., Caldarella et al., 2010; Dávila & Díaz-Morales, 2009; Konrath et al., 2012), though not all studies (e.g., Greenslade & White, 2005).

Questions within this domain explored whether athletes were encouraged by peers, teammates, or others to participate in community activities. Given that many elite athletes already operate within rich social environments, surrounded by team or club mates, training partners, coaches, and support staff, their social needs may already be fulfilled. Consequently, community contribution may not serve as a primary means for meeting social or relational goals.

## Personal fulfillment and flourishing

Understanding whether individuals perceive themselves as successful in important life domains – such as relationships, self-esteem, purpose, and optimism – offers valuable insight into the potential benefits of community contribution. The concept, known as flourishing (Deiner et al., 2009), reflects an individual's belief that they lead a meaningful, purposeful, and socially valued life. The *Flourishing Scale* assesses dimensions such as respect from others, moral self-concept, and perceived meaning in life.

In this project, both current and retired elite athletes rated their overall psychological wellbeing as high. Notably, the retired cohort reported higher flourishing scores than current athletes. This may be explained by a variety of personal and environment factors, including not being exposed to the stresses of elite sport, and/or their involvement in community contribution, as most had increased their engagement towards the end of their careers and continued such involvement post-retirement. This pattern suggests a possible link between sustained community contribution and enhanced personal fulfillment.

Community involvement encourages active participation in society, fosters meaningful social connections, and supports critical reflection on one's role in the broader community (Krajňáková et al., 2018). These factors may contribute to a greater sense of purpose and fulfilment among athletes, particularly retired ones. The higher flourishing scores among

retired athletes further indicate that the positive effects of community contribution extend beyond active athletic careers, promoting wellbeing and purpose in later stages of life.

## Satisfaction with life

While related to flourishing, life satisfaction provides a broader, overall assessment of how individuals perceive their life circumstances and direction. Both current and retired athletes reported relatively high levels of life satisfaction on average. Consistent with the flourishing findings, retired athletes again rated their life satisfaction higher than the current athletes.

Community contribution may be a contributing factor to this result, with retired athletes greater involvement in community contribution towards the end of their sporting careers and their continued participation afterward. Engaging in community work allows individuals to apply their unique talents and skills in ways that serve others, reinforcing a sense of purpose and self-worth (Krajňáková et al., 2018). This process likely contributes to a stronger overall satisfaction with life, especially when coupled with the intrinsic rewards of helping others and making a positive societal impact.

## Barriers and enablers to community contribution

While understanding the functional motivations of elite athletes provides insight into *why* they engage in community contribution, exploring the barriers and enablers helps explain *how* these motivations translate into action. This section summarises athletes' perceptions of the factors that facilitate or hinder their participation (see Table 3 for detailed statistics).

### Current athletes

Importantly, the current athlete cohort strongly disagreed with the statement "*I am not interested in community contribution*", confirming genuine engagement and interest in the topic.

When identifying sources of support, teammates not in formal leadership roles were reported as the greatest enablers of participation, followed closely by teammates in leadership roles (e.g., captains) and coaches or sport program staff. The ability to engage in community contribution alongside others was a strong motivating force for this group, suggesting that shared participation reinforces involvement. This aligns with earlier findings where the social motive ranked lowest in importance, indicating that while athletes do not seek new social connections community contribution, they value contributing alongside existing peers and teammates.

A recurring theme among current athletes was the challenge of managing the athlete-life balance while engaging in community activities. However, participants generally disagreed with the statement "*Community contribution will not advance my sporting career, so I chose not to engage community contribution activities*", suggesting that they perceive community involvement as valuable and potentially complementary to their athletic pursuits.

Interestingly, this contrasts with findings from the career motive in the functional analysis, where career benefits were rated lower in importance. This discrepancy may reflect differences in how participants interpreted the response scales – the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) measured *importance* or *accuracy*, whilst the barriers/enablers scale used *agreement* or *disagreement*. Thus, interpretation differences could explain the variation observed across these measures.

### **Retired athletes**

Similar to the current athletes in this project, the retired cohort recognised the personal value of community contribution, agreeing that it helps them become better individuals. However, their responses revealed some distinct trends.

Retired athletes placed greater emphasis on individual autonomy, expressing stronger agreement with the statement "*I am more likely to engage in community contribution activities if I can do it by myself.*" This contrasts with the current athletes' preference for collaborative participation.

Retired athletes also reported lower agreement with items related to external encouragement such as support from teammates (both in and outside leadership roles), coaches, and sport program staff. This may reflect both a shift in personal preferences toward independence and possible changes in sporting culture or policy since their retirement. Over recent years, sporting organisations have placed increasing emphasis on community engagement as a vehicle for fan engagement and social outcomes, which may not have been as prevalent during the careers of the retired athletes.

Additionally, differences in cohort composition and sport type may influence these findings, as the current and retired athlete groups included participants from varied backgrounds and competitive levels. Despite these distinctions, the overall results suggest that while current athletes benefit from structured, peer-supported opportunities, retired athletes value more self-directed forms of community contribution.

**Table 3***Barriers and enablers to community contribution*

Factor	Current athletes		Retired athletes	
	Mean (SD)	Range	Mean (SD)	Range
My teammates in formal leadership roles (e.g., captains) support my community contribution	5.81 (1.33)	3-7	4.75 (1.91)	1-7
My teammates that are not in formal leadership roles support my community contribution.	5.88 (1.03)	4-7	4.50 (1.69)	1-6
Being asked by the NFP or community organisation to take part in community contribution activities enables me to take part.	5.31 (1.54)	1-7	4.88 (1.89)	1-7
My coach and/or sport program staff encourage my community contribution through a direct invitation	5.75 (.775)	4-7	3.50 (1.69)	1-6
My coach and/or sport program staff encourage my community contribution as they make me aware of relevant opportunities	5.44 (.892)	4-7	3.00 (1.51)	1-5
I am more likely to engage in community contribution activities if I can do it with someone else	5.69 (1.35)	3-7	3.37 (2.20)	1-7
I am more likely to engage in community contribution activities if I can do it by myself	3.69 (1.40)	1-6	4.25 (1.75)	1-7
I don't think I have the skillsets and/or knowledge needed for community contribution	2.63 (1.46)	1-6	2.75 (1.28)	1-4
I don't have time for community contribution	2.44 (.727)	2-4	3.37 (1.51)	1-5
I have concerns about fulfilling existing obligations, so this stops me from undertaking community contribution	3.19 (1.22)	2-5	3.75 (1.58)	1-6

I am not interested in community contribution	1.44 (.727)	1-3	2.00 (1.07)	1-4
My life situation limits me from community contribution	2.31 (1.54)	1-5	3.00 (1.60)	1-5
My employment outside of my sporting pursuits restrict my community contribution activities.	3.12 (1.996)	1-7	3.25 (1.75)	1-5
My situation as a care-giver to children, family or others restrict my community contribution activities.	1.88 (1.360)	1-5	2.63 (1.19)	1-4
I can't find enough information about community contribution activities, so this stops me from participating	2.13 (1.36)	1-5	3.00 (1.07)	1-4
Community contribution will not advance my sporting career, so I chose not to engage community contribution activities	1.56 (1.209)	1-5	2.13 (1.64)	1-5
The intensity and frequency of training and competition limits my opportunity for community contribution	3.37 (1.708)	1-7	4.00 (1.69)	1-6
Community contribution will help me become a better athlete, so I engage in community contribution	4.94 (1.652)	1-7	4.13 (2.36)	1-7
Community contribution will help me become a better person, so I engage in community contribution	5.38 (1.544)	1-7	5.38 (1.06)	4-7
I am willing to adjust holidays and leisure time for my community contribution	5.13 (1.204)	2-7	4.75 (1.75)	2-7
I am willing to commit to community contribution for several months at a time	5.31 (1.250)	3-7	4.63 (1.60)	2-7
I am only willing to commit to community contribution if I can decide the extent and timing of my involvement	4.38 (1.455)	2-6	4.50 (1.69)	1-6

## Key findings: Interview

Phase 2 of this mixed-methods study involved semi-structured interviews with current and retired elite athletes to gain a deeper insight into the project's aims. Five elite athletes initially agreed to participate; however, due to scheduling challenges, two interviews were ultimately conducted.

The participants, referred to here by pseudonyms, were Gregory, who had competed at the Olympic/World Championship level, and Jeremy, whose highest level of competition was State Championships. Both were current elite athletes with substantial experience in community contribution – Gregory having been involved for over 10 years, and Jeremy for approximately 3.5 years. Their engagement included both contractual and voluntary activities, ranging from committee work to mental health support roles.

Overall, both athletes reported positive experiences in giving back to the community. A thematic analysis of their interview data revealed several key themes that provide deeper understanding of the motivations, challenges, and impacts associated with athlete community contribution.

### Barriers to community contribution

#### Athlete/life balance

A prominent theme emerging from the interviews was the challenge of balancing the demands of elite sport with everyday life commitments. While both athletes expressed genuine enthusiasm for community involvement, they acknowledged that maintaining this balance was often difficult due to the time pressures associated with training and competition. As Gregory reflected, “...*I guess I like to be involved, and I'm like really happy to find things to be involved with*”. However, he also noted that there are typically periods during the year when his availability to participate in community activities is limited:

“...sometimes, I'm away for whole chunks of the year, I'm not necessarily able to... [be] involved in the committee” – Gregory

“You want to be involved in a lot of things and so sometimes, possibly, I spread myself a little bit too thin or just reach... reach the limit of what I can realistically be involved in with the amount of time there is in a day” – Gregory

“...really the main barrier is just yeah time and energy...” – Gregory

Jeremy also expressed these sentiments:

“...amount of time, I put in at a given period of time could be sort of like, less or more depending on what time of year it is” – Jeremy

“...[requirements to remain as a mental health advocate] that was a tricky thing to maintain... with travelling overseas to play and my schedule” – Jeremy

Furthermore, Jeremy explained that the need to relocate frequently as part of his elite sporting career created additional challenges for maintaining consistent involvement in community contribution:

“I've had to move... from [one state of Australia to another, and then again] to continue playing so every time you go somewhere and you- you lose some of those contacts and it takes a while to get them back up and you don't necessarily know where to look” – Jeremy

Relocating not only disrupts ongoing community involvement but also makes it difficult to identify new opportunities to contribute, largely due to a lack of established local contacts.

### **Perceived impact and self-doubt**

Closely linked to the notion of altruism was a sense of uncertainty about the value and impact of one's contributions to the community. This theme reflected feelings of imposter syndrome and self-doubt, where athletes questioned whether their involvement genuinely benefited others. Gregory articulated this sentiment, stating:

“For example, with trying to be involved in some [redacted type of contribution] sometimes there's that bit of I know like that negative sort of imposter syndrome” – Gregory

“Sort of makes me question, whether I'm having the best impact that I can” – Gregory

“...you know, it's all well and good, um, to be active and involved, but if it ends up not really making much of a difference then I suppose it can be sort of the question of like, well, what was it actually for?” – Gregory

“...kind of like yelling into a hurricane” – Gregory

The metaphor of “*yelling into a hurricane*” powerfully conveys the emotional intensity of uncertainty around being able to have genuine impact. This may reflect an overwhelming sense of a real or perceived deficiency in their own skills or capacity to affect change, which can subsequently manifest as self-doubt, anxiety, or apprehension about being ‘exposed’.

## **Enablers to community contribution**

### **Giving back to the community**

The most prominent theme identified as an enabler of community contribution was the athletes' desire to give back to the communities that supported them throughout their sporting journeys. Community involvement represented a way to acknowledge and reciprocate the support that helped them reach elite levels of performance. As Gregory reflected:

“...want to give back to, uh, support my community and the people that supported me to get, to this level, as an athlete” – Gregory

Both athletes highlighted the influence of role models during their development, expressing a desire to provide similar inspiration for the next generation:

“Like, I can share my story and sort of hopefully inspire them because I let me remember when I was at school, you know, you had like a footy player or a sports star sort of come in and you're like, oh wow, that's cool” – Jeremy

“...I guess sport had always been- been a big thing for me, but trying to find a way where I feel like I can contribute back to the community as well” – Jeremy

A related sub-theme that emerged was the idea of “paying it forward”. Both athletes viewed community contribution not only as a form of gratitude but also as an ongoing commitment to fostering positive change. As Gregory noted:

“...just knowing contributing things ticking over there is I think, for me, um, yeah, a positive” – Gregory

“...personal values of sort of wanting to be involved, and connect with people and sort of give back and hopefully leave my part of the world a better place” – Gregory

Together, these reflections highlight that for elite athletes, giving back is deeply tied to personal values, gratitude, and a sense of responsibility to inspire and uplift others, reinforcing community engagement as a meaningful and identity-affirming experience.

### **Connecting with the community**

Another prominent enabler of community contribution was the athletes’ ability to form meaningful connections with the broader community through their involvement. For these athletes, community engagement provided a tangible sense of belonging and purpose. As Gregory explained:

“...the involvement and stuff locally, it helps me... I mean, get that feeling of connection to my community and people around me” – Gregory

These connections were not only experienced directly but also reinforced indirectly through positive feedback and recognition from others. Gregory described how his outreach work led to ongoing community engagement:

“...getting positive feedback from people being, oh it's really cool that you do this thank you. Or sometimes for example with the [redacted – primary sport revealed] visits, you might have might have someone who's a parent, send a picture a few months later [saying] ‘oh you know, my kid was really inspired and they did this event because you visited’” – Gregory

Similarly, Jeremy shared how his contributions fostered openness and dialogue within his community:

“...[it] sort of opened up a channel for people to either come to me and say, ‘hey, I think what you're doing is really cool’ or, ‘you know, I've struggled with this’, and it sort of made

it a bit more open... able to speak about those things, which was really cool" – Jeremy Gregory also reflected on how community engagement counteracts the isolation that can come with the demanding lifestyle of an elite athlete:

"...like my wife and I, we moved from one part of [location redacted], to the other, and so it's easy when that happens - and you're working and you just kind of sleeping in your house and not much else - that you can feel a bit isolated from your community. So I feel like being involved in things locally, maybe helps with that connection" – Gregory

Together, these reflections illustrate that community contribution offers more than altruistic fulfilment. It also serves as a mechanism for connection, belonging, and identity reinforcement beyond sport. The true value here is within identity reinforcement, as the assertion of an athlete's self-perception can be a vital pathway into, importantly, intertwining their athletic identity and other identity domains in their life (Chun et al., 2023).

it can be asserted that a better understanding of athletes' self-perception through identity work is vital in facilitating multiple role integration and providing guidance in establishing coherence between the athletic identity and other identity domains of their life

### **Personal Values**

Another strong enabler to community contribution was the extent to which athletes felt their involvement aligned with their personal values. This theme, articulated primarily by Gregory, reflected the importance of authenticity and purpose in selecting opportunities for engagement:

"...I suppose probably it's all tied down to or comes back to sort of personal values" – Gregory

"...I've kind of picked the contributions that I do, sort of based on my interests and my values" – Gregory

When the interviewer noted "*So, of course, that's something that's important to you and that would be your reason for engaging in those opportunities,*" Gregory agreed.

Gregory's consistent and self-initiated involvement in community roles – such as committee positions and ongoing voluntary work beyond contractual obligations – suggests that personal values are a key driver of his engagement. In contrast, Jeremy's involvement was primarily through contractually required activities, as his demanding training and competition schedule limited opportunities for additional community giving. Nevertheless, he occasionally supported charitable causes through financial donations, reflecting an ongoing, albeit time-restricted, commitment to giving back.

### **Individuals in Formal Roles**

Both athletes identified organisational staff as significant enablers of their community involvement. Support from individuals in formal roles, such as wellbeing staff and player development managers, was viewed as instrumental in facilitating engagement. These

figures often acted as connectors, helping athletes identify meaningful opportunities and providing guidance on how to integrate community contribution within their sporting commitments.

### **Leaving a Legacy**

A further theme that emerged, particularly from Gregory's reflections, was the desire to leave a legacy. While Jeremy did not yet express this perspective, Gregory – who was nearing the end of his sporting career – spoke about community contribution as a way to redefine his identity beyond sport and make a lasting positive impact:

“...and hopefully leave my part of the world a better place” – Gregory

“...just knowing contributing things ticking over there is I think, for me, um, yeah, a positive” – Gregory.

This theme highlights how community contribution can provide a sense of purpose and continuity during the transition out of elite sport. Retirement can often be accompanied by psychological challenges such as identity loss, emotional distress, or maladaptive coping behaviours (Furie et al., 2023; Mesagno et al., 2024; McCluskey et al., 2025). In this context, community engagement offers a constructive avenue for athletes to maintain fulfilment, stability, and social connection beyond competition.

Creating structured opportunities for athletes to contribute in this way presents dual benefits: it supports athletes' wellbeing and identity development post-career, while simultaneously enriching the communities they serve.

## Interpretation of key findings

Findings from both the survey and interview phases indicate that community contribution serves as an important expression of altruism and humanitarian concern among elite athletes. This aligns with the Values functional motive identified in the survey results, where contributing to the community was seen as a way to support others and demonstrate compassion. In the interviews, Gregory's personal values were a central enabler and primary driver of his involvement, underscoring the intrinsic, value-based nature of his engagement. In contrast, Jeremy's participation was largely contractual, which may explain why personal values did not emerge as a dominant theme in his reflections. Nevertheless, the evidence across both phases suggests that community contribution satisfies athletes' humanistic drives and reinforces their sense of moral purpose by helping those less fortunate.

A consistent theme across both Phase 1 (survey) and Phase 2 (interviews) was the importance of connection with the community. In the survey, this was reflected in the Understanding motive – ranked as the second strongest across both cohorts – capturing the desire to learn about causes, engage with diverse groups, and broaden personal perspectives. This theme was mirrored in the interviews, where both Gregory and Jeremy described how direct interaction with the community, as well as seeing tangible outcomes from their involvement, encouraged them to continue contributing. Such engagement fosters meaningful relationships between athletes and their communities, which in turn enhances athletes' resilience, life satisfaction, and personal fulfillment.

Another key enabler across both phases was the influence of individuals in formal roles, particularly for current athletes. The survey data indicated that coaches and support staff played a significant role in motivating athletes to participate in community initiatives. Similarly, in the interviews, both athletes identified organisational figures – such as wellbeing staff and player development managers – as important facilitators. This alignment across both data sources suggests that support from individuals in positions of authority within sporting organisations may be one of the most powerful enablers of athlete engagement in community contribution, likely due to their ability to provide structure, encouragement, and access to opportunities.

## Limitations and future directions

While the present study offers valuable insights into the motivations, barriers, and enablers influencing elite athletes' community contribution, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, it was not possible to accurately calculate scores for the Protective, Values and Social functional motives in the quantitative analysis. This limitation restricts a full understanding of how these dimensions relate to athlete engagement. Future research should aim to address this through precise data collection and computation to enable a more comprehensive exploration of all six functional motives.

Secondly, only two participants were available for the interview phase. The timing of data collection, coinciding with an international competition period, likely reduced the availability of potential participants. Additionally, elite athletes' demanding schedules present an inherent challenge for research participation, often making interview coordination difficult.

Despite these constraints, the findings provide an important first look at the motivations and experiences underlying Australian elite athletes' engagement with community contribution, as well as its relationship to life satisfaction and personal fulfilment. However, the dynamic between athletes and NFP organisations warrants further investigation. Understanding this relationship more holistically would allow both athletes and NFPs to collaborate more effectively, ensuring mutual benefit and sustained engagement.

Future research could adopt a mixed-methods design, beginning with a survey to capture athletes' and NFP organisations' perspectives on collaboration, followed by semi-structured interviews to explore these dynamics in depth. Additionally, it would be valuable to include a larger sample of retired athletes to compare their current levels of community contribution and underlying motivations with those of active athletes. This could reveal how motivations evolve across different stages of an athletic career.

Two novel themes emerged uniquely from the interviews – imposter syndrome and leaving a legacy – which were not captured in the survey data. Quantitatively examining the prevalence of imposter syndrome among elite athletes could inform strategies to strengthen athlete confidence and engagement in community settings. Likewise, exploring whether legacy-building motivations are more prominent among athletes nearing retirement – or consistent across career stages – could guide NFP organisations in tailoring their engagement strategies. Such research could inform targeted education and support programs that align with athletes' developmental stages and evolving identities, ultimately enhancing both athlete wellbeing and community impact.

# Summary and Recommendations

The aim of this exploratory study was to investigate the motivations, barriers, enablers and benefits influencing Australian elite athletes' community contribution activities with the NFP sector. This was achieved by examining athletes' functional motives, satisfaction with life, and psychological wellbeing.

Overall, all six functional motives for community contribution were found to be relevant to the cohort, with all but one rated as above average in importance. Combined with the high levels of psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction, these findings suggest that community contribution plays a meaningful role in enhancing the overall wellbeing and fulfilment of current and retired elite athletes.

This research provides valuable insight into the mechanisms driving athlete engagement in community work – insights that benefit not only the athlete themselves, but also for support staff seeking to better support their holistic wellbeing, and the NFP organisations who wish to engage with them. By understanding these underlying motivations, organisations can design initiatives that more effectively empower athletes to give back to the charities and communities that matter most to them.

For individuals and organisations aiming to enable and empower athletes in their community contribution efforts, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Embed community contribution** as a structured mechanism to support athlete wellbeing during their elite careers and through the transition to retirement.
2. **Develop educational, athlete-centred programs** highlighting the humanistic, altruistic and personal development benefits of community contribution.
3. **Engage coaching and support staff as key influencers** to actively promote and facilitate athlete participation in community contribution, whilst providing opportunities for teammates to participate in these activities together.
4. **Emphasise altruism and learning**, rather than career advancement, as key engagement drivers.
5. **Tailor individual athlete community contribution activities** by understanding motivational and structural factors to inform personally meaningful community contribution plans.

Given the small sample size of this study, sporting organisations may find it valuable to administer a questionnaire to their athletes to gather information on their motivations, barriers, and enablers for community engagement to tailor support to individual interests, skills and passions.

Such evidence-based insights can also help the NFP sector to engage athletes in targeted, meaningful and sustainable opportunities for community contribution, ultimately benefiting both the athletes and the charities and communities they seek to serve.

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## Supplement

### Questionnaire information

#### Functional motivations to community contribution

The VFI assesses an individual's functional motivations behind volunteering (Clary et al., 1998). There are 30 questions present that cover the six functional motives or factors of volunteering: career, enhancement, social, understanding, protective, values. Career centres around work-related benefits that are seen from engaging in community contribution.

Enhancement is concerned with the ego's relation to mood, whereby a motivational mechanism allows for growth and development of the ego rather than a protective effect.

Social refers to contributing to the community to form relationships with others.

Understanding is characterised by contributing to the community for opportunities for novel learning experiences and having the opportunity to apply an otherwise unutilised skillset.

Protective involves the functioning of the ego, specifically looking at reducing the guilt when comparing oneself to those less fortunate; individuals may contribute to the community to escape negative feelings. Values refers to the altruistic and humanitarian concern an individual has for others, contributing to the community to showcase these.

Responses range from one (not at all important/accurate) to seven (extremely important/accurate). Scoring is completed at the factor level only, where participant scores range from one to seven, with higher scores indicating higher motivation in the specific domain. Any mention of volunteering was modified to relate to community contribution instead to broaden the scope and nature of contributions the athletes may make beyond volunteering. For example, the question "my friends volunteer" was changed to "my friends are involved in community contribution".

Questions 19, 23 and 25 were modified to align with Australian athlete values, as determined by an AFHA representative. Question 11, 19 and 23 of the VFI were missing from data collection due to researcher error, so these averages were calculated with four questions in each subscale instead. Clary et al. (1998) reported good internal consistency for each factor of the VFI ( $\alpha_{\text{career}} = .89$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{enhancement}} = .84$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{social}} = .83$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{understanding}} = .81$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{protective}} = .81$ ,  $\alpha_{\text{values}} = .80$ ).

## **Personal fulfillment and flourishing**

The flourishing scale assesses how an individual perceives their own success in important domains such as their relationships and purpose (Deiner et al., 2009). Responses range from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). Scoring results in a single wellbeing score, where a participant can score between eight and 56, with a higher score indicating an individual possessing many psychological resources and strengths. Questions include “I lead a purposeful and meaningful life” and “people respect me”. Diener et al. (2009) reported good internal consistency for the flourishing scale ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

## **Satisfaction with life**

The SWLS assesses life satisfaction, which is a cognitive component of subjective wellbeing (Deiner et al., 1985). Responses range from one (strongly disagree) to seven (strongly agree). Scoring results in a single score, where a participant can score between five and 35, with higher scores indicating greater life satisfaction. The value can also be compared to percentiles. For example, a score between five and nine equates to the 1st percentile, indicating extreme dissatisfaction with life. Likewise, a score between 31 and 25 equates to the 85th+ percentile, indicating extreme satisfaction with life. Questions include “the conditions of my life are excellent” and “I am satisfied with my life”. Deiner et al. (1985) reported good internal consistency for the SWLS ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

## **Barriers and enablers to community contribution**

Participants were asked to indicate their barriers and enablers to community contribution. These were described as “something that stops you from contributing to the community” and “something that helps you contribute to the community”, respectively. Responses range from one (I strongly disagree) to seven (I strongly agree). Examples included teammates in formal leadership role, their coach, and belief in possessing the necessary skillset to contribute to the community. Each question is scored individually, with a higher score indicating higher agreement with that factor being a barrier or enabler to community contribution. If there were any other barriers or enablers that were not provided, participants were able to provide more information via an open text box.

## **Procedure**

University Human Research Ethics approval was granted. Although this project is largely exploratory in nature, guiding principles were drawn on for the proposed sample sizes. It is recommended that a minimum of 20 participants and up to 150 individuals for the questionnaire is sufficient (Daniel, 2012), and between nine and 17 individuals are recruited for the semi-structured interviews to achieve data saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Individuals were recruited directly or through the AFHA Chief Impact Officer distributing the Qualtrics survey link via email and social media (e.g., LinkedIn) to potential athlete participants. The research team’s personal and professional contacts were also contacted through these means. The Qualtrics survey began with a plain language statement, detailing the purpose of the study, procedures, risks and benefits, confidentiality statement and

contact information of the research team. Following this, participants were asked to provide their consent prior to commencing the survey, where they could choose “Yes I consent” or “No I do not consent”. If the participant did not consent, they were sent to the end of the survey and could not provide their responses. If the participant provided consent, they were first asked whether they were a current or retired athlete before providing their answers to the demographics questionnaire, VFI, flourishing scale, SWLS, barrier and enablers, respectively. Upon completion of the survey, participants were thanked for their contribution, provided with support lines in case psychological distress was experienced, and were given the opportunity to opt into the \$200 charitable donation draw and/or to participate in the interview portion of this project.

The participants that identified their interest in the interview were contacted via email by a member of the research team to schedule the interview. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Zoom, where participants could choose an appropriate and private location for them. Prior to the interview schedule, the purpose of the study and how their data will be used was explained to the participant ahead of gathering consent. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and de-identified.

### **Statistical analysis**

Data collected from Qualtrics was imported and analysed in SPSS v.30 for analysis, specifically descriptive statistics for the demographic variables and means and standard deviations for the analysis of the VFI, SWLS and barriers and enablers. Initially, there were 41 responses to the Qualtrics survey. Through data cleaning, 10 participants were removed due to providing consent but not responding to any other questions. 1 participant provided their demographic information, but did not respond past this, so they are included in the demographics statistics only. No items required reverse scoring. The appropriate scoring methods were calculated for the included scales.

Interviews were analysed through the six stages of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) in order to identify patterns in the data and develop themes reflective of the data.