



# ATHLETE PLAYBOOK

A resource for supporting emerging, elite and retired athletes in community contribution



**Athletes For Hope Australia acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the Land where we live, work and play across Australia. We pay respects to Elders, past and present, and honour their enduring connection to Land, Sea and Sky Country since time immemorial.**

**We extend that respect to First Nations peoples who we've had the privilege to work alongside, and thank them for the generosity with which they have shared their knowledge, stories and leadership.**



Hand woven baskets by AFHA Athletes shown here from the 2024 AFHA Yarning & Weaving Workshop exploring allyship, delivered by proud Yankunyjatjara and Wirangu woman, artist, author and educator, Shelley Ware.

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# INTRODUCTION

The Athletes For Hope Australia (AFHA) Athlete Playbook has been created as a free resource for sport practitioners including coaches, wellbeing managers, player development managers, educators and athlete support staff, all of whom play a critical role in supporting the holistic development of elite athletes.

As AFHA prepares to wind down at the end of February 2026, this Playbook has been designed as part of our Legacy Project, to support and inform your efforts to facilitate athlete community contribution, long after our doors close.

## **This Playbook has been informed by:**

- Discussions and feedback from over 800 emerging, current and retired elite athletes from 25+ sports across Australia
- Evaluation of our programs and workshops in alignment with our Theory of Change, and
- Our 2026 research collaboration with Victoria University titled [Purpose, Perspective & Paying It Forward- Understanding community contribution in current and retired elite athletes - an exploratory study](#)

It brings together what we have learned about why community contribution matters, what enables impactful athlete/charity collaborations, and the tangible ways that practitioners can support and enable athletes to engage in community contribution in meaningful, sustainable ways.

**Community contribution is not just an 'extra' for athletes.**

**When supported well, it can play a powerful role in cultivating purpose, identity, wellbeing and connection, both during and beyond sport - as well as creating meaningful impact for the charities and communities they seek to serve.**

# ABOUT AFHA

AFHA was the first international chapter of the globally recognised Athletes for Hope movement in the United States, founded by sports legends including Andre Agassi, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, Mia Hamm and Muhammad Ali in 2006 and was brought to Australia in 2020 by sports professionals Iain Roy and Laura Johnston, who witnessed first-hand the opportunity to harness athletes' strong desire to give back to Australian charities and communities.

Through our programs, workshops, events and athlete/charity matching, we've inspired and connected athletes, charities and communities to create impact together. We've worked with more than 800 athletes across Australia's regional academies, professional sports clubs, elite school sports programs and national teams, leading to athlete collaborations with 21 charities. From volunteering, fundraising, speaking and ambassador appointments, the AFHA Athlete Community has supported mental health, sustainability, veteran wellbeing, First Nations allyship, cancer research, youth education and many other causes close to their hearts.

**As we reflect on this impact as we close our doors in February 2026, we're proud of the impact the AFHA Community of athletes and charities have created together. We hope this Playbook can support you to continue this work in your own sporting environments.**

**800+**

**Athletes  
Supported**

**21**

**Charities  
Supported**

**25+**

**Sports  
Reached**



Maddy Proud (netball) at the NSW Regional Academy of Sport Leadership Forum with NIAS emerging athletes.



Ella Newbery and Darcy Macauley (para equestrian) join Alexandra Viney PLY (para rowing) at a Variety The Children's Charity Victoria's Young Leaders Forum



Dominique Du Toit (Rugby 7s/NRLW) at an AFHA Workshop with the Illawarra Academy of Sports Women's Rugby 7s team.

# THE CHALLENGE

## Athletes want to give back, but need support to get started

Across workshops, interviews and surveys, we consistently heard the same concerns from athletes, regardless of sport, level or life stage:

"There are thousands of charities.  
How do I know which one to support? "

"I prefer 'doing' over 'talking'. I don't  
want to do anything on social media."

"I'm time poor but want to  
contribute meaningfully."

"I'm not a captain or leader yet. I'm not  
famous. What impact could I have?"

"I can't commit to any regular activity because of my  
schedule and I don't want to let anyone down."

"I'm not in a financial position to  
donate. How else can I help?"

**Athletes don't lack care or motivation.  
They seek clarity, confidence and a clear plan.  
This is where you can play a vital role.**

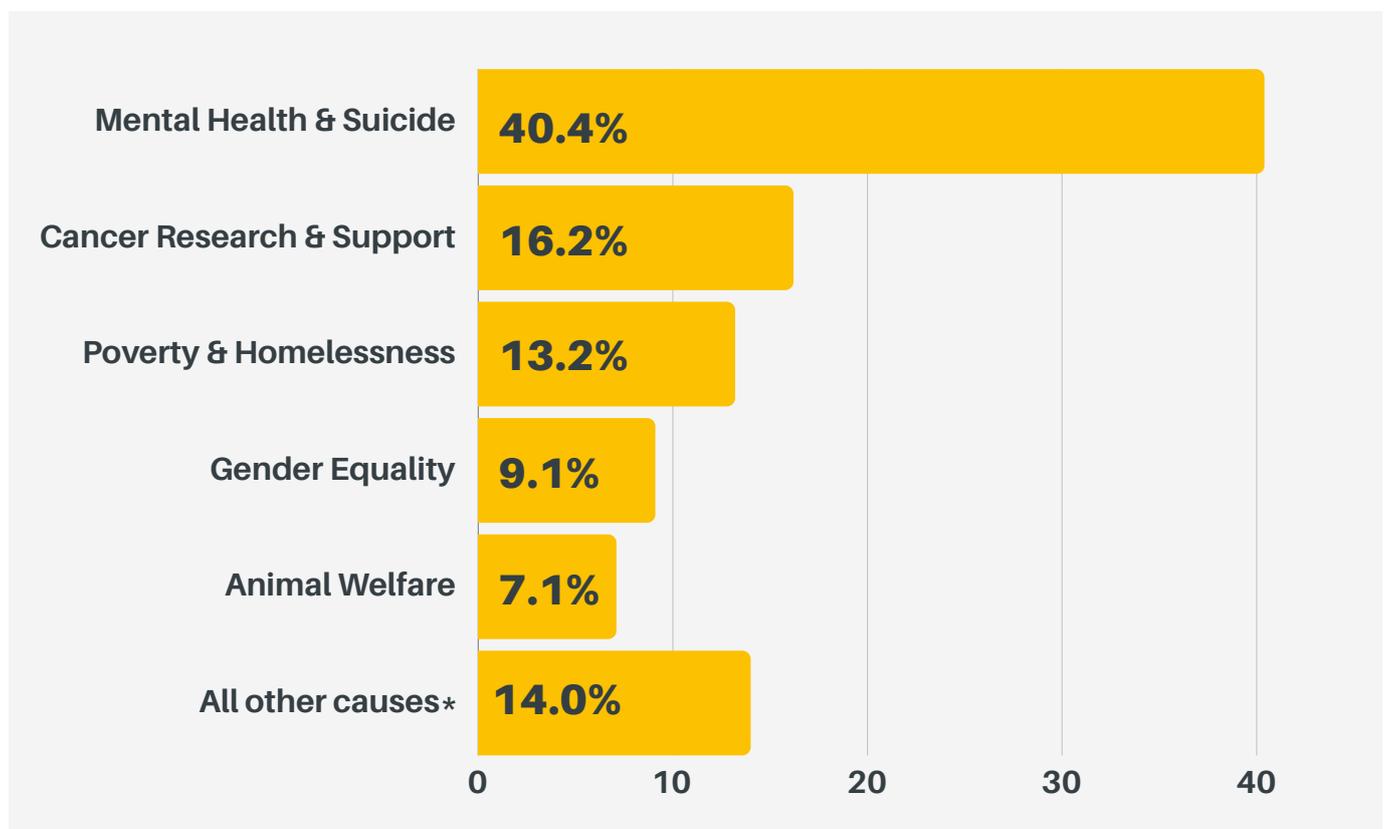
# THE OPPORTUNITY

## Untapped Potential, Dual Benefit

Athletes are among the most trusted figures in society, with 73% of Australians trusting athletes above most other public figures (1). Sport captures massive public attention, generating over 1.17 billion social media engagements annually (2). This creates an important opportunity to channel that influence into connection, contribution and impact.

Engagement in community contribution can enhance an elite athlete's wellbeing and sense of fulfilment, and may take on greater significance in retirement (3), providing an important mechanism through which to support an athlete's holistic wellbeing both during and beyond their sporting career.

And many athletes already know the causes they're passionate about and want to start supporting charities that align with their interests and values. The causes that matter most to surveyed members of the AFHA Athlete Community (n=176) across 2024-2025 were:



(1) The Starting Line research by No Second Place, (2) Digiday.com - Athlete and brand partnerships research  
(3) Purpose, Perspective & Paying It Forward: Understanding community contribution in current and retired elite athletes  
\*Other causes included (but are not limited to) climate change, First Nations allyship, youth issues, sport accessibility, disability inclusion, illness-specific research and support and many others.

# WHAT WE KNOW

## What the Research Tells Us

In an exploratory study conducted collaboratively by Victoria University and AFHA in 2026, engagement in community contribution was found to **enhance elite athletes' wellbeing and sense of fulfilment**, and may take on greater significance in retirement.

'**Purpose, Perspective & Paying It Forward: Understanding community contribution in current and retired elite athletes - An exploratory study**' investigated the motivations, barriers, enablers and benefits influencing Australian elite athletes' community contribution activities with the Not For Profit (NFP) sector.



Alana Parnaby (tennis) joins Peter Bruce, CEO of Variety the Children's Charity Victoria and Hawthorn AFL players at the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary '50 Bikes for 50 Kids' event in 2025.

## Research 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.
- **Motivations:** The strongest motivator was Values – an athlete’s 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 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 sport program staff. Retired athletes valued opportunities for independent engagement and legacy-building post-career.
- **Dual benefit:** 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.

**Current and retired athletes who give back reported high life satisfaction & psychological wellbeing.**



Alexandra Viney PLY (para rowing), far right, with the 2025 Western Bulldogs AFLW squad at an AFHA Workshop.

# FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

Based on this research, we've learnt that practitioners and organisations supporting the holistic development of current and retired elite athletes can 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.

Based on the findings, five recommendations were made for practitioners in the sports sector to support athletes in their community contribution journeys:

- ✓ **Embed community contribution as a structured mechanism** to support athlete wellbeing during their elite careers and through the transition to retirement.
- ✓ **Develop educational, athlete-centred programs** highlighting the humanistic, altruistic and personal development benefits of community contribution.
- ✓ **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.
- ✓ **Emphasise altruism and learning** rather than career advancement, as key engagement drivers.
- ✓ **Tailor individual athlete community contribution activities** by understanding motivational and structural factors to inform personally meaningful community contribution plans.

# GETTING STARTED

## Moving from Interest to Action

When designing strategies and activities to engage athletes in community contribution, consider the following four mechanisms to create a holistic and meaningful approach:

1

### Education & Reflection

Athletes benefit from structured opportunities to:

- Recognise their unique capacity to create impact
- Explore the causes they care about
- Understand that contribution looks different for everyone

2

### Personalised Planning

An individualised approach helps athletes map actions that are:

- Realistic
- Values-aligned
- Flexible across short, medium and long-term horizons

Go to **page 13** to explore the Athlete Impact Plan.

3

### Right-Fit Opportunities

Contribution is most sustainable when opportunities:

- Match an athlete's availability and preferences
- Articulate expectations for both the charity & the athlete
- Respect boundaries and competing demands

4

### Connection with Others

Athletes value learning alongside teammates - as well as athletes outside their own sports - when exploring community contribution. Sharing experiences and causes of interest can normalise contribution as part of a holistic athlete identity.

# TYPES OF CONTRIBUTION

## How Athletes Can Give Back

There is no single 'right' way for athletes to give back. Contribution can take many forms, depending on an athlete's interests, lived experience, skills and life stage. To help frame contribution in a tangible way, we refer to five contribution types (although they often overlap):

### Time

An athlete's time is precious, and often hard to find. Giving their time through hands-on volunteering, mentoring, visiting communities, coaching or turning up to charity events can create a powerful impact for communities and charities in need.

### Voice

How athletes choose to use their voice is very personal and can depend on a number of factors including their age, stage of their sporting journey and public profile. Advocacy, awareness-raising, speaking roles or sharing stories in ways that feel authentic can be a powerful form of contribution.

### Participation

This is about the various ways that athletes can 'show up'. It could be attending events (in person or online), participating in awareness raising challenges, community activities or supporting collective initiatives driven by their teammates, clubs or teams.

**An athlete's contribution does not need to be captured on social media, or large in scale or reach, to be impactful.**

### Knowledge

Athletes can share their skills, lived experience or professional expertise, as well as learning from the communities and charities they seek to serve.

### Resources

Athletes often have resources they don't necessarily recognise can be valuable to others. We often think of financial resources in the form of donations, but this also extends to in-kind support like coaching, material donations like food, clothing or sporting equipment, or sharing information through sporting networks.

# ATHLETE IMPACT PLAN IN ACTION

## Practitioner Guide

Use this guide in conjunction with the Athlete Impact Plan template on **page 15** to guide athletes as they reflect, consider and explore their journey of community contribution, the impact they want to create, and the actions they can take in the short, medium and long term to create impact.

### My Inspiration

Who and what shapes their values and perspective?

#### Questions to ask:

- Think about the people who inspire you to give back. Who are they, and what qualities do you admire about them?
- When have you felt proud of how you supported someone else?
- Which personal values feel most important to you right now?
- What kind of person do you hope to be beyond your sporting career?

### My Causes

What causes matter to this athlete?

#### Questions to ask:

- What causes, issues or communities do you feel naturally drawn to?
- Have any life experiences shaped what you care about?
- When you see challenges in the world, what tends to stay with you?
- Are there any communities you feel connected to or want to support?

The goal of this activity is to **prompt reflection, not to secure commitment**



Maisie Nankivell (netball/AFLW) & Alexandra Viney PLY (para rowing) supporting a Share The Dignity Drive at an AFHA Workshop with Girls Sport Victoria.

## My Contribution

How do they want to give back? Refer to **page 12** to consider the five types of contributions.

The most fundamental aspect of this discussion is focusing on the athletes' strengths. This is not about comparing themselves to others. This is about identifying their own unique contribution journey, and recognising that it will change over time. Starting with small actions and realistic commitments will build confidence to pursue other contributions in the future.

### Questions to ask:

- What are your strengths? What have your teammates, coaches, parents, friends or teachers told you that you're good at?
- What kinds of contribution activities could utilise these strengths?
- When you imagine making a difference, what does that look like?
- Which forms of contribution feel most comfortable?
- Which forms of contribution aren't appealing to you?
- Would you prefer doing something 'visible', or more behind the scenes?

## My Actions

We all need a plan to get started. Even if they seem like relatively small steps, every action is a step forward.

### Questions to ask:

#### Now: Today/In the coming weeks

- Who could you start a conversation with who is interested in similar causes or charities to you?
- How can you start learning more about the causes or charities you've identified?
- What are some small actions you could take on a regular basis to give back?

#### Soon: Within 12 months

- What activities could you explore when this season or campaign ends?
- What support would help you take that step?

#### Later: In the years to come, during and/or beyond your sports career

- When you look at other retired athletes, who has created a meaningful legacy?
- Dream big. What would you like to be remembered for in your community contribution work?
- How might your contribution change after retirement?

Refer to **pages 16, 17 and 18** for inspiration for specific activities to get started.

# TEMPLATE

# ATHLETE IMPACT PLAN

<p><b>My Inspiration</b></p>	<p><b>My Causes</b></p>	<p><b>My Contribution</b></p>
<p><b>My Actions</b></p> <p>Now</p> <p>Soon</p> <p>Later</p>		

# ACTION IDEAS

## FOR EMERGING ATHLETES (UNDER 18 YEARS)

### Time

- Help out at a local charity fun run or fundraising event
- Offer to coach, assist or officiate for a junior team
- Take part in a local clean up event
- Volunteer at a local animal shelter
- Visit a local aged care home to engage with residents

### Voice

- Use your sports team newsletter to promote a charity campaign
- Encourage your team to support a local charity
- Support a teammate's fundraising efforts
- Talk to your coach or club about supporting local community initiatives.

### Participation

- Take part in a fun run for a cause
- Join your school or club's community fundraiser
- Attend a local charity event or festival
- Gather your teammates to run a fundraising sports clinic for young kids
- Sign up for a tree planting event
- Support your club's charity round or awareness day

**Encourage emerging athletes to look for local opportunities to give back, starting with their local sporting clubs.**

### Knowledge

- Offer to run or support training sessions for younger athletes
- Volunteer to teach the rules of your sport to kids new to the game at your club
- Volunteer to be a 'big buddy' to new kids at your club
- Help plan a school or club project to benefit local charities

### Resources

- Donate near-new sports gear
- Run a small fundraiser (bake sale, fun challenge, raffle)
- Collect cans or bottles for recycling cash to give to charity
- Offer a training session or clinic as a prize for a local fundraising raffle
- Collect warm clothing or hygiene products for families in crisis
- Give a percentage of your part-time job income to a charity

# ACTION IDEAS

## FOR ELITE & RETIRED ATHLETES

### Time

- Volunteer at charity events, fundraisers, or community projects
- Volunteer as a coach at sports programs for disadvantaged youth
- Participate in outreach programs to learn about the stories and needs of that NFP's clients
- Take part in a mentoring program
- Dedicate time to visit hospitals or aged care facilities to uplift patients and residents
- Attend documentary screenings about the causes you are passionate about
- Contribute as a volunteer director on the board of directors or advisory committees for a NFP

### Voice

- Investigate ambassador roles with charities aligned to the causes you're passionate about
- Engage with a charity who support a cause you are passionate about & ask about how you can best advocate for their work using your networks and profile
- Engage with your teammates and fellow athletes to find a cause that you all connect with, and then broaden the profile of that cause through your collective reach and activities
- Support campaigns and fundraising initiatives of your teammates



AFHA Athlete Community members at the AFHA Yarning and Weaving Workshop with Shelley Ware, exploring First Nations allyship.



AFHA Athletes Alexandra Viney PLY, Ben Brown and Maisie Nankivell with Tom Boyd on a mental health-themed panel at a Reclink fundraising event.



## Participation

- Coordinate a multi-sport clinic with participant fees going to disaster relief charities, following natural disaster events
- Join charity walks or hikes to support specific causes or organisations
- Participate in charity challenges
- Support the efforts of your league, competition or events to highlight important causes and awareness raising activities
- Participate in charity auctions or gala dinners as guest speakers or attendees
- Attend community events organised by NFPs to show support and develop your knowledge of that cause
- Attend community events in your local area to build connections with the local organisations working on the causes you are engaged with and interested in



## Knowledge

- Offer fun coaching or 'come and try' sessions for staff, families and communities involved with a charity
- Consider sharing knowledge from your qualifications or professional expertise in a pro bono arrangement for a charity
- Broaden your own knowledge of different cultures and religions by attending events held by NFPs that support diverse communities
- Share your story of navigating high performance sport with aspiring athletes and their families
- Share your strategies for sport/ life balance with emerging athletes
- Investigate a reverse mentoring relationship with a charity leader, where you can share your knowledge and strategies for high performance, and they can share their experiences and expertise of the NFP sector



## Resources

- Design your own fundraising activity or challenge, specific to your interests and strengths
- Create a sports equipment drive to collect gear for NFP sporting organisations
- Donate blood or plasma for blood drives, individually or with teammates
- Set up an automatic donation to a charity each payday
- Donate tickets or merchandise to sporting events or experiences for charity auctions or raffles
- Set up a regular food drive or sanitary product collection
- Offer a personal coaching clinic as an auction item for a charity night

# TIPS FOR PRACTITIONERS

## On Supporting Athletes

### 1. Start with identity, not activity

Help athletes explore who they are beyond sport before focusing on what they should do. Community contribution strengthens purpose and identity when it aligns with personal values.

### 2. Leverage peer environments

Athletes often enjoy learning alongside teammates and collaborating with others who share similar interests. Consider team-based experiences to normalise contribution.

### 3. Treat contribution as a wellbeing strategy

Engagement in community activities enhances wellbeing, fulfilment and social connection, particularly during transition into retirement.

### 4. Match opportunities carefully

Effective athlete/charity connections should:

- Start with strong foundations of trust and transparency
- Fit scheduling realities
- Align with preferred contribution type
- Outline expectations for both parties
- Demonstrate meaningful impact

Poorly matched opportunities reduce long-term engagement.

You don't have to have all the answers for your athletes. **Prompting reflection is a fantastic place to start.**

### 5. Protect time and energy

Balancing sport, life and commitments is the most common barrier for current athletes. Encourage athletes to prioritise sustainable contribution actions over ambition.

### 6. Normalise small beginnings

Contribution does not need to be large, public or ongoing to be meaningful. Encourage low pressure, easy activities that build confidence to get started.

### 7. Engage early, and support through transition

Community involvement can take on greater significance in retirement and significant transitions. Start conversations early so athletes build a sense of purpose beyond sport from the start, not at the end of their careers.

# TIPS FOR ATHLETES

## On Getting Started

### 1. Let your values lead

The most meaningful contributions come from causes you genuinely care about, not what others expect or are involved in.

### 2. You don't need to be famous to make a difference

Athletes at all stages of their pathway can create impact in simple but powerful ways. Don't wait for fame or profile to give back.

### 3. Start small

You don't need a long-term commitment to begin exploring what feels right. Start small to build confidence and go from there.

### 4. There is no single 'right way' to contribute

Choose contributions that suit *you* - your interests, passions, experiences, skills, expertise and preferences. Be inspired by others, but don't compare your efforts.

### 5. Align contribution with your capacity

Being time-poor is common for athletes. Meaningful involvement should support your wellbeing, not compete with it.

**Connect with fellow athletes who are interested in the same causes as you. Working together can help to sustain and increase your impact over time.**

### 6. Choose causes that feel personal

Athletes are often motivated by altruism and personal values. Lean into what resonates with you personally and emotionally.

### 7. Ask for support

Coaches, wellbeing staff and teammates can help you explore opportunities safely and realistically. You don't have to figure it out alone.

### 8. Let it evolve over time

Your interests, availability and goals will change across your career, and your community contribution can too. This is a journey, not a fixed plan.



Athletes For Hope Australia  
will close its doors in Australia in February 2026.

To continue following Athletes For Hope in the  
United States , visit [athletesforhope.org](https://athletesforhope.org)