

PURPOSE, PERSPECTIVE & PAYING IT FORWARD

Understanding community contribution in current and retired elite athletes – an exploratory study

A research collaboration between the Institute for Health and Sport (IHES) at Victoria University and Athletes For Hope Australia, prepared by Adwoah Hammond, Camilla Brockett & Julia Symons

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 the 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.
- **Phase 2 (Interviews):** Two semi-structured interviews provided deeper qualitative insights.

KEY FINDINGS

1. **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.
2. **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.

3. **Barriers:** The main obstacle for current athletes' greater involvement in community contribution activities was balancing sport, life, and time commitments.
4. **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.
5. **Dual benefit:** Athletes' community involvement benefits 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 FOR THE SPORTS SECTOR

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.

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.

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