

From Gold Medals to Governance Models:

A Survey & Analysis of Practices for Athlete Inclusion in Sports Governance

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Contents

1. Introduction
 - 1.1. Summary
 - 1.2. Acknowledgments
 - 1.3. Historical Context
 - 1.4. Current Landscape
2. Methodology
3. Glossary
4. Survey of Existing Structures
 - 4.1. Olympic & Paralympic
 - 4.2. Player Unions & Advocacy Groups
5. Results
 - 5.1. NGB-Athlete Relationship
 - 5.2. Broad Representation
 - 5.3. Institutional Support
 - 5.4. Good Governance
6. Analysis
 - 6.1. Challenges & Opportunities
 - 6.2. Possible Uses
 - 6.3. Limitations & Further Research
7. References

1 Introduction

“A massive cultural upending still needs to take place in our Olympic Movement, to put athlete welfare first, well ahead of medals, money, or clout. Cultural change can come from... governance changes.”

– Grace French, Founder and President of the Army of Survivors, commenting on the Senate passage of the Empowering Olympic, Paralympic, and Amateur Athletes Act. August 4, 2020.

1.1 Summary

In the wake of the Larry Nassar sexual assault scandal in American gymnastics, athletes fighting for justice pointed to broad systemic issues that enabled such abuse to persist for so long. Aly Raisman, captain of the 2012 and 2016 U.S. women's Olympic gymnastics teams, said one of the underlying factors was “USA Gymnastics and the U.S. [Olympic and Paralympic Committee]... put[ting] their own interests before those of athletes” (Office of Senator Jerry Moran, 2020). As a result, the survivors’ efforts focused on pushing for governance changes to empower athletes across all sports to prevent similar situations in the future. Their advocacy led to the passage of Senate Bill 2330: the *Empowering Olympic, Paralympic, and Amateur Athletes Act* (SB 2330). Among other changes, SB 2330 amended the *Ted Stevens Olympic and Amateur Sports Act* (Ted Stevens Act), mandating that boards of directors (Boards) for all National Governing Bodies (NGBs) of Olympic sports in the United States increase minimum athlete representation quotas from one fifth (20%) to one third (33.3%) of voting members.

The changes introduced in SB 2330 reflect the growing global momentum for more athlete participation in sports governance. As sports grapple with the implications of increased athlete engagement in governance, there remains a lack of standardized guidance to help organizations and athletes define effective working relationships. This gap often results in well-intentioned but disappointing efforts. Our research helps address this issue: through in-depth interviews and reviews of current models of athlete representation, we identify practical strategies for more effective athlete inclusion. We offer this work as a resource for sport organizations and athletes seeking to build stronger, more inclusive systems that benefit all stakeholders. Here is a summary of the key, high-level findings from our research:

- There are pervasive cultural challenges hindering athlete inclusion in sports governance, and quotas alone are not enough to attract or develop effective athlete Board members.
- Organizations that build positive relationships with their athletes, commit institutional support to good governance practices, and foster a pipeline of athletes who can represent both the elite and grassroots levels will see more successful athlete inclusion outcomes.

1.2 Acknowledgments

We would like to thank every athlete who has helped advocate for greater inclusion in their sport's governing bodies, as well as our research participants for providing their firsthand perspectives of athlete inclusion in practice. We are also grateful to the Harvard Global Sports Initiative, the Harvard Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, and the Academy 4 Social Civics for their institutional support.

1.3 Historical Context

Inclusion of athletes in sports governance globally has largely been reactionary. Over the years, athletes have been brought into decision-making roles in times of distress, namely in response to doping scandals, rules changes, or abuse and harassment. Recognizing the crises facing the Olympics around these issues in the 1960s, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) invited 30 athletes to the X Olympic Congress in 1973 with underwhelming results, likely at least in part due to athletes' roles as "observers without the right to speak... prohibited from commenting on the topics that directly impacted them" (Wassong & Ford-Eriksson, 2021, 17).

In 1978, Congress passed the original *Amateur Sports Act* to establish the U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC), granting it the responsibility to preside over Olympic sports in the United States and standardize governance structures for the NGBs that oversee each Olympic sport in the country (United States, Congress, 1978). Twenty years later, the original law was revised by the Ted Stevens Act to eliminate the amateurism stipulation for competition and add Paralympic sports to the USOC's purview. Crucially, this 1998 update also included provisions to establish formal athlete participation in the governance of the USOC and every NGB by creating a USOC Athletes' Advisory Council (AC) and mandating that a minimum of 20% of the voting membership of the Boards at both the USOC and every NGB be reserved for Athletes, defined as those who are actively or have recently represented the United States in the relevant sport in recognized international competitions within the last ten years (United States Congress, 1998).

These changes alone did not eradicate complaints about the lack of athlete voices in governance after serious instances of athlete abuse in the following decades. In 2020, Congress amended the Ted Stevens Act again in response to various athlete welfare scandals, most notably at USA Gymnastics. The *Empowering Olympic, Paralympic, and Amateur Athletes Act* increased minimum Athlete representation from 20% to 33.3% of voting Board seats at the (renamed) U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USOPC) and its member NGBs. Recognizing that the eligible pools for such athlete representatives are often quite small, the additional seats beyond the original 20% may be made up of Athletes who are beyond the ten-year window of international competition (10+ Year Athlete) (United States, Congress, 2020).

1.4 Current Landscape of Athlete Governance

While all American NGBs and many of their international counterparts now have athlete representation on their Boards or equivalent decision-making bodies, most have crafted their strategies for athlete inclusion in isolation and without external support, to varying degrees of success. Our examination of the current landscape yielded a wide variety of methods of incorporating athletes into governance roles. We consider several existing structures, the choices made by certain NGBs in order to adapt and comply with legal requirements such as the Ted Stevens Act, and the experiences and practices of select global sporting organizations.

Today, there are a number of advocacy groups and projects underway that examine and promote athlete representation and impact. For example, with funding from the European Union, the Danish Institute for Sport Studies and Play the Game launched their Strengthening Athlete Power in Sport (SAPIS) project in 2020 to better understand the landscape of athlete participation and identify ways to improve athletes' effectiveness as decision makers in sport. The goals of the project are to systematically map current sporting governance structures and to demonstrate the benefits of including athletes within them, ultimately offering educational training for all relevant stakeholders to improve outcomes for both athletes and their organizations. As the project unfolds, SAPIS has the potential to establish a new and impactful set of best practices around athlete inclusion in governance. Furthermore, athlete representation remains one of the predominant topics at gatherings of leaders in the sports governance space, such as the 2025 Play the Game Conference in Finland, where we first presented this research.

In the United States, Congress created the Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics and Paralympics following the 2020 amendment of the Ted Stevens Act with a broad mandate to study the current state of Olympic, Paralympic, and grassroots sports in America. The Commission, made up of 14 commissioners spanning a wide range of fields and backgrounds, including lawyers, former Olympians, and advocacy group leaders, published its final report in 2024, titled "Passing the Torch: Modernizing Olympic, Paralympic, & Grassroots Sports in America" (The Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics & Paralympics, 2024).¹ Its recommendations provide valuable context for our project. Together with the Ropes & Gray independent investigation and the concurrent Borders Commission, both chartered by the USOPC Board in the aftermath of Larry Nassar's crimes at USA Gymnastics, the report emphasizes the importance of independent inquiries into how sport organizations can better engage with their athletes. We aim for our research to contribute to the ongoing examination of how to improve sports governance by intentionally and effectively including athletes in organizational leadership.

¹ For the rest of the paper, we refer to this report by an acronym of its short title (PTT) for conciseness.

2 Methodology

Our approach to this research was two-pronged. First, we reviewed the existing landscape of athlete representation, primarily across Olympic and Paralympic sporting bodies in the United States and internationally, to provide the context of various existing practices of athlete involvement in governance. This non-exhaustive analysis covers the Olympic and Paralympic committees, international sport federations, player unions, and athlete advocacy organizations.

In order to provide concrete recommendations based on robust qualitative data, we interviewed athletes and other individuals who provided valuable firsthand perspectives in the realm of athlete representation. The interview stage, conducted over the course of two years, involved **video and in-person interviews ranging from 15 to 75 minutes with 23 individuals across 11 sports in three countries**: cross-country skiing, cycling, figure skating, freestyle skiing, hockey, snowboarding, soccer, softball, swimming, and synchronized swimming, with athletes who have represented the United States, Canada, and Australia in high-level international competitions. Our participants comprise a diverse array of backgrounds, including male and female Olympic and Paralympic athletes, international sport federation representatives, USOPC staff and Athlete representatives, NGB staff and Athlete representatives, and grassroots staff and athletes. All interview data has been de-identified. We complement our own interview data with references to the final report of the Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics & Paralympics, “Passing the Torch” (PTT).

3 Glossary

- **AC**: Athletes’ Council/Commission.
- **Athlete** (capitalized): Defined in the Ted Stevens Act, athletes who have recently represented the U.S. in the relevant sport in recognized international competitions within the last ten years.
- **10+ Year Athlete**: Athletes who once met the Ted Stevens Act definition of an Athlete but have not represented the U.S. in recognized international competitions within 10 years.
- **Board**: Shorthand for Board of Directors, Board of Trustees, or equivalent.
- **The Commission**: Congressional Commission on the State of U.S. Olympics & Paralympics.
- **IOC**: International Olympic Committee.
- **IPC**: International Paralympic Committee.
- **NOC**: National Olympic Committee.
- **NGB/NSO**: National Governing Body, National Sport Organization. NGB used to mean both.
- **PTT**: “Passing the Torch: Modernizing Olympic, Paralympic, & Grassroots Sports in America,” title of the Commission’s final report.
- **Ted Stevens Act**: The *Ted Stevens Olympic & Amateur Sports Act of 1998*.
- **USOC**: U.S. Olympic Committee (until 2020).
- **USOPC**: U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee (since 2020).

4 Survey of Existing Structures

The organizations and countries highlighted in this section represent a non-exhaustive sample of existing approaches to athlete representation in governance, demonstrating a concerted international evolution toward intentional athlete inclusion in decision-making processes.

4.1 Olympic & Paralympic

IOC: The IOC Athletes' Commission (AC) was established in 1981, though it was “largely symbolic” and lacked significant athlete engagement until 1999 (Wensing, 2004, 93). When it granted 15 AC members roles as full, voting IOC Members, the reformed IOC began an ongoing era more committed to the athlete role in the Olympic Movement (Wassong & Ford-Eriksson, 2021, 159). With the stated goals of being a “link between the athletes and the IOC” and representing “athletes within the Olympic Movement, support[ing] them so they can succeed in their sporting and non-sporting careers, and empower[ing] the network of athlete representatives,” today's IOC AC organizes events and activities in the following focus categories: athlete safety, forums and workshops, digital engagement, AC elections, and other awareness projects (International Olympic Committee, 2021). The IOC also offers a guide and funding options for ACs to organize their own projects and events in these areas.

International Paralympic Committee: The IPC AC represents Paralympic athletes and the para community with its own elected members and an appointed member on the IOC AC. AC members are elected as active Paralympic athletes, meaning those currently competing in or who have competed in any of the two previous Summer or Winter Paralympic Games. The IPC's “Athlete Representative Guide” provides flexible standards for ACs at the national level, recognizing the level of competition does not necessarily indicate the strengths of a potential representative.

United States: In service of ensuring more effective athlete inclusion and compliance with federal law, the USOPC and NGBs have recently had to revisit their bylaws and policies.

- USA Swimming (NGB): With its Local Swimming Committees, USA Swimming boasts a robust grassroots athlete engagement structure, giving even young swimmers a voice. However, the Ted Stevens Act prevents many of these athletes from serving as Athlete representatives, no matter how valuable their perspectives.
- U.S. Soccer Federation (NGB): After the amendment to the Ted Stevens Act, U.S. Soccer convened a governance task force with broad representation across different membership categories that determined how to restructure the Board and reapportion voting power to the AC from the Youth, Amateur Adult, Professional, and At Large Councils.

Canada: After pressure from AthletesCAN (Section 4.2) to create a system in which athletes are seen as partners, Canada's Ministry of the Interior announced in 2023 that all National Sport Organizations (NSOs) must have **at least one athlete in a board position** by 2025 (Government of Canada, 2023). To receive general government funding, NSOs must fully comply with precise requirements for Board diversity, independence, and term limits; proper training plans for members; transparency standards; and other governance best practices. The Canadian Olympic Committee updates its Strategic Plan after every Summer Games.

United Kingdom: The UK's *Code for Sports Governance* guides governance structure, Board representation, communication, standards, policies, and conduct in UK amateur sport, although it includes **no explicit requirement that NGBs have an AC or athlete representation on their boards** (UK Sport, 2022). In 2004, the British Athletes Commission was established as an independent membership association to represent athlete interests by working with athletes, performance staff, NGB executives, and administrative staff to ensure that representation models that do exist are sport-specific and athlete-focused.

Germany: Athleten Deutschland is an independent collective of elite German athletes founded in response to poor athlete representation within decision-making in Olympic sports. Six athlete representatives are elected by the General Assembly of athlete representatives to Germany's NOC, while German athletes on the IOC AC and the German NOC AC also work closely with Athleten Deutschland (Government of Germany, 2018). Although its establishment did not come about without conflict and tension, Athleten Deutschland now receives annual funding from the government to cover operational costs and salaries for two staff members, and its presence in the German sports landscape and the accompanying commitment to providing resources for athlete representation has helped shape trends across other countries and NGBs (Seltmann 2021).

Research conducted in 2018 by Athleten Deutschland showed that eight German NGBs and the German Olympic Committee barely attained a 37% satisfaction rating based on an assessment of organizational documents and qualitative interviews with individual governance participants, faring worse than many European peer nations (Geeraert & Danish Institute for Sports Studies, 2018, 122). In its 2023 position paper, Athleten Deutschland notes that there remain many opportunities to significantly improve sports governance. Among other things, the paper highlights the absence or continued shortcomings of monitoring systems to ensure effective implementation of good governance practices and emphasizes a lack of focus on athlete protection, violence and abuse prevention, and human rights policies among sport organizations (Athleten Deutschland, 2023).

4.2 Player Unions & Advocacy Groups

Unions are an example of direct athlete advocacy and engagement, although they are not present in all sports due to differing levels of professionalization. Through collective bargaining agreements, boycotts, grievance resolutions, and other methods, unions can help athletes leverage their collective worth and, according to USOPC AC member Han Xiao, improve the power imbalance that may exist between sport organizations and ACs (Xiao, 2021). Where unions are not feasible, athlete advocacy groups can perform a similar function. The groups mentioned here highlight some of the largest or most robust memberships.

World Players Association (WPA): The WPA brings together 85,000 players across professional sport from 100+ associations in 60+ countries. It emerged at a 2011 gathering of “democratically elected representatives of... top athletes from around the world” in response to “a crisis in governance at world sport organizations that [had] removed the athlete from the center of sport” (World Players Association, 2011). The WPA works to ensure athletes have a say at global sport’s key tables. As a union association, the WPA covers topics such as antidoping, gender equity, children’s rights, abuse prevention, freedom of association, athlete activism, economic rights, remedies and access to justice, and player data protection.

FIFPRO: FIFPRO, the international soccer players’ union, brings together 72 national associations and represents 66,000+ professional athletes (FIFPRO World Players' Union, 2022).

AthletesCAN: Although they do not necessarily recommend all sport organizations establish an AC, this association of Canadian National Team athletes was a major force in securing recent changes to athlete representation in Canada, including requiring at least one athlete on each NSO Board. The government also provides financial support to AthletesCAN “to strengthen its capacity as athlete leaders... and to support governance training so athletes are fully prepared to take on governance roles.” Their “Future of Athlete Representation” report informed our analysis in the following sections (AthletesCAN, 2020).

Women’s National Basketball Players Association: Established in 1998, the WNBPA was the first labor union for pro women athletes (WNBAPA, 2016). Through decades of trailblazing advocacy, the WNBPA redefined what it means to fight for equity in sports, setting a precedent for athlete empowerment, collective bargaining, and gender justice across the industry.

U.S. Women’s National Team Players Association: With its gender discrimination lawsuit against U.S. Soccer, the U.S. Women’s National Team ignited a worldwide movement for better pay for women athletes. As a result of the USWNTPA’s advocacy, U.S. Soccer became the first soccer federation to achieve equal pay for its men’s and women’s teams in 2022 (U.S. Soccer, 2022).

5 Results

Our results are divided into four sections that correspond to themes that emerged from our interviews. While each one highlights key recurring points relevant to that topic, all four themes are inherently interrelated.

5.1 The NGB-Athlete Relationship

Trust: The particular relationship between NGBs and their Athletes in governance exists in the context of the relationship between NGBs and their athletes in general. Unfortunately, multiple participants suggested that **the default relationship between NGBs and athletes often involves a bidirectional lack of trust**. On one hand, there is a broad mistrust among athletes that NGBs, the USOPC, and even the IOC do not make decisions with the athletes' best interests in mind, as well as a pervasive fear of retaliation for ever speaking up against "the people that hold the keys to your castle" (Participants #8 & #20). On the other hand, some NGBs are wary of making decisions that deviate even slightly from the stated preferences of its athletes because they dread the accusation that "if [they're] not with the athletes, [they're] against the athletes," all while some non-Athlete NGB stakeholders who say the recent changes to the Ted Stevens Act came at their expense have also come to resent Athletes themselves (Participant #12).

Establishing trust where it does not exist is not easy, and we found recognition that both sides have work to do. During the Commission's public hearing, former NHLPA Executive Director Donald Fehr said, "You have to empower the athletes, and then you have to trust them... [t]hey can handle it" (PTT 189). At the same time, participant #10 conceded that athletes, as a group, still have to sell the idea that their participation in governance provides a clear benefit. One way to bring both parties closer together is by instituting robust two-way communication channels, whereby NGBs ensure their athletes are knowledgeable of the organization's mission, purview, and operations, while also seeking athlete feedback intentionally, taking care not to hear only from the most engaged athletes (Participant #18). Good governance practices can also go a long way in building a culture of trust (Section 5.4).

Alumni: NGBs tend to underinvest in their relations with former athletes, who comprise a crucial pool of potential AC members but whose default relationships with the organization can often be fraught based on their previous experience as athletes (Participants #4 & #14).

Soft Power: Trust is crucial to the project of athletes in governance because effective advocacy is not inherent in a Board seat but rather comes with the ability to exercise influence in committees and with key leaders like the chair or CEO (Participants #9 & #17). Participant #15 said that the conscious investment they made to attend all in-person meetings and develop personal relationships helped make them more effective and successful in their Board role.

5.2 Broad Representation

Diverse Boards perform better when they include different forms of diversity and foster a positive culture (Creary et al., 2019), and athletes as a class generally possess diverse perspectives across several axes that are otherwise missing from sports governance. However, **no single athlete can claim to represent every athlete** across all competition levels, age groups, or professional and personal backgrounds (Participant #1). And since coalition-building is crucial to effective Board membership, there are multiple reasons why organizations that want to benefit from athlete participation should have more than one athlete on their Board (Participant #19). Thus, our interviewees believe that **a broad range of representation of athletes in governance is good for both athletes and sports organizations**. However, when it comes to successful athlete representatives, possessing a unique perspective is not a substitute for being thoughtful, engaged, and committed to the requisite duties and responsibilities.

Avoiding Extremes: There is a perception that ACs consist mostly of the Athletes who were always the most engaged or those who have a bone to pick with their NGB, missing the perspectives of the many athletes who fall somewhere in between (Participant #20). Similarly, once on the AC or as members of the Board, Athletes must strike a balance between simply rubber-stamping and causing too much friction in order to be effective (Participant #16). One way to reduce the barrier to entry into the world of governance for athletes who do not harbor strong preexisting feelings toward their organization is by encouraging informal athlete participation in advisory groups or other roles that do not themselves require training or orientation beyond a genuine involvement with the sport; that informal participation then serves as training for stepping into a more formal role later on (Participant #1). For example, U.S. Ski & Snowboard uses sport discipline subcommittees (e.g. alpine, moguls, etc.) and other advisory structures that report to its Board to allow for wider involvement from its athletes.

Elite-Grassroots Dichotomy: Participant #13 described a “tension” inherent in representing the interests of elite and grassroots sport through the same organization, and the Commission proposes that both high-performance and grassroots athletes may be better served under separate structures (PTT 14). But within the structures we have today, it’s important to be aware of and account for the disconnect that may exist between the interests of elite and grassroots athletes (Participant #7), as well as the fact that the requirements in the Ted Stevens Act might mean that grassroots athletes with very useful and relevant professional experience are ineligible to serve in formal Athlete roles (Participant #13). Participant #2 said that geographic diversity is a key component of proper grassroots relations, and USA Swimming’s model provides a useful example. The NGB ensures the grassroots are a lively part of its governance by connecting its 13-member AC with Local Swimming Committees (LSCs) that provide an amateur perspective to its elite Athletes (USA Swimming, 2025).

Age Distribution: Some NGBs oversee vastly more youth than adult athletes; U.S. Soccer, for example, registers ~3.5 million youth and ~200,000 adult players, and the majority of its 27 National Teams are youth teams (U.S. Soccer, 2023). Elite athletes also tend to be young, at least in the context of corporate Board governance. Therefore, while minors cannot serve in Athlete roles, having a range of ages and career stages represented on Boards and ACs is helpful in capturing the whole athlete experience. Participants #8 and #14 expressed that recently retired athletes can provide a good balance between fresh experience and less personal bias toward decisions that directly impact current athletes, while participants #3 and #5 said that retired athletes might not be able to capture the voices of active or younger athletes on their own. At one NGB that does involve young athletes into its AC, there are ongoing conversations both about how young people *should* be included and about how incorporating people in their late teens and early twenties with little professional experience presents its own challenges (Participant #19).

“Real-World” Experience: Given the time and effort it takes to excel in a sport at an international level, athletes face a trade-off between pursuing a full professional athletic career and pursuing “real-world” business experience or higher education, which is why it’s relatively rare to find post-career athletes with both (Participants #9 & #11). Sometimes, the strict Athlete requirements in the Ted Stevens Act actually limit organizations that want to include athletes with very relevant professional experience who nevertheless do not meet the criteria to serve on an AC or an NGB Board (Participant #13). The Athlete pool thus skews toward some of the top performers in their sport. However, one of the most widespread sentiments among participants was that the most elite or famous athletes are not always the best representatives (Participants #11, #13, #19 & #21). Beyond being a representation issue, this phenomenon also presents a good governance challenge (Section 5.4). The way around this conundrum is for ACs to recruit people with the right skillsets, “even if it’s hard” (Participant #19). That includes a sport-specific background, intelligence, and interpersonal skills, but also expertise in another field (e.g. financial, legal); above all, though, engagement and consistency are essential (Participant #19).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: As these values come under attack politically, we believe it’s important to clearly articulate their relevance in this setting. **Sport organizations are meant to represent those who play their sport regardless of race, income, gender, disability, age, and ethnicity.** To do so effectively, including a variety of perspectives in governance can serve as a powerful tool, and ACs often bring diversity to an overall membership that may not be very diverse (Participants #11 & #18). At U.S. Soccer, the amended Ted Stevens Act led to a larger AC that included more Athletes from the Extended National Teams, including beach and indoor soccer and several disability disciplines. Typically, these AC members contribute beneficial perspectives because they have held jobs or have continued their education outside of soccer, bringing a wider range of “real-world” experience as described above. The advantages of this broad inclusion raise the question of how other NGBs can adopt flexible Board membership practices when they also oversee non-Olympic disciplines (Participant #21).

5.3 Institutional Support & Investment

The two previous sections outline how challenges in current sport organizational culture hinder athlete inclusion and how merely establishing quotas is not enough to attract or develop effective athlete Board members (PTT 118). The solution to these issues starts with organizations making it an institutional priority to support their athletes and invest in their extra-athletic development, so having highly engaged and knowledgeable athletes in governance roles becomes part of the organization's culture. We share a roadmap below on how NGBs can do that.

Communication: Participants #5, #12, and #15 lamented poor communication practices from their organizations, while the Commission illustrates the issue is prevalent:

“That so many high-performance athletes lack even basic knowledge about the [USOPC] and its governance underscores the communication failures that exist between USOPC and the governing bodies... and the athletes they serve[.] Consequently... fewer than four in ten athletes told us that they feel supported by USOPC and fewer than half indicated feeling supported by their particular NGB.” (PTT 102)

Better and constant communication with athletes about the organization's ongoing activities, as well as frequently seeking out athlete input through surveys or other methods to ensure that communication goes both ways, can thus make athletes feel more supported (Participant #18).

Awareness & Preparation: Partly as a result of poor communication, a common theme we heard across our athlete interviewees was that many of them felt unprepared to step into a governance role when they did. Concerns participants shared include that they were worried they did not grasp “the full picture” and were unaware of the ramifications of their votes and actions (Participant #3); that athletes across the organization did not even know what the AC does (Participant #11); that they were “voluntold” to serve as a representative without any training or experience (Participant #14); that they were uninformed about opportunities to be involved in governance while competing and only learned about them after retiring (Participant #15); and that they got involved without understanding how their organization worked or “even knowing what I was getting into” (Participant #17).

On the other hand, Participants #16 and #21, who had already been indirectly involved in their organization's governance since they were young, reported feeling more prepared when they eventually served in an official capacity. Participants #5 and #6 believe an intervention as simple as educating athletes on how things work at their NGB and clearly explaining the role of the Board and the AC can boost the future effectiveness of athlete representatives. Participant #14 said that their “dream scenario” would be for these information sessions to take place in person for all athletes at regular intervals.

Intentional Recruitment: As described in Section 5.2, finding the right people to serve in athlete representative roles can be difficult. Therefore, NGBs should support their ACs in their recruitment efforts by actively establishing an intentional pipeline for finding and supporting athletes who would make good Board members (Participants #1 & #20). For example, NGBs can lean on coaches and other staff who spend a considerable amount of time with their athletes to help identify those with strong leadership and decision-making abilities who might be well-suited for a governance role. NGBs should ensure that coaches and staff, just like athletes, also understand its organizational structure and the role of athletes within it, so they can adequately perform the duty of identifying athletes with high potential as organizational leaders.

Training & Development: Given how rare it is for athletes entering representative roles to have any previous Board experience, almost every new AC member could benefit from more extensive onboarding or formal training that covers everything from the basics of organizational leadership to a more detailed overview of the specific organization's structure, current strategic plan, ongoing financial reports, active projects, and recent Board priorities and discussions (Participants #1 & #3). Participant #22 said they would even be open to making the completion of more comprehensive training materials a requirement for Board participation. The fact that athlete backgrounds seldom directly prepare them for Board service or rarely mirror those of other Board members can lead to skill and communication gaps with, for instance, CEOs of major companies serving in independent director roles, but thorough onboarding and training can help athletes "rise to the level" (Participant #19). There is widespread interest among athletes for information and guidance that can make them more effective representatives in governance: every athlete we interviewed expressed a desire to be informed of our research outcomes.

A promising opportunity for leadership training available to athletes comes from the USOPC's higher education partnership with the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth (Dartmouth College, 2023). The Impact Academy is a program tailored specifically for members of the Olympic and Paralympic movement that covers topics like Board service and management essentials; its model can help lay the groundwork for the kind of standardized onboarding curriculum that so many athletes are seeking if it can scale more broadly. Furthermore, because the course brings together athletes and staff from different sports, it provides a knowledge sharing network that can serve all NGBs and the USOPC itself. However, as the subject matter encompasses all sports, it's paramount for NGBs to build on top of the USOPC-level collaboration by engaging their own athletes in the development of supplemental, sport-specific materials. Having well-rounded resources for training and developing athletes to be effective representatives will help ensure a strong pipeline of future athlete leaders in governance. Roles on local organizing committees for major events offer another encouraging channel for athlete development that can feel like a lower lift for first-time athlete representatives. Finally, to support the long-term success of athletes in the system, it's important to invest in development that uplifts the whole athlete, as a professional and as a person (Participants #10 & #12).

Mentorship: Before and during their time in governance roles, athletes can benefit tremendously from intentional mentorship coming from both athletes and non-athletes. Surrounding athletes with staff or fellow Board directors who can help them better understand financial statements, ethics rules, the Board member role, and other administrative and governance topics will equip them to serve more effectively (Participant #10). At the same time, when some of this mentorship comes from other athletes who already have experience within the organization, it makes it feel more organic and engaging (Participant #6). The size of the Olympic Movement thus becomes a major asset for athletes, as it offers them a vast network of sport organizations – and athlete representatives within them – from whom they can learn and on whom they can lean for support. Participant #15 stressed that having good relationships with athletes in other sports is key to becoming a better athlete representative. To the extent that it's possible, then, we encourage ACs to coordinate with and invite each other's interested athletes to listen in on their AC meetings or even their NGB's public Board meetings, where allowed. More concretely, we also suggest matching current athlete representatives with athletes from the next generation, so the latter can be more prepared to transition into an AC role.

Funding: Access to funding is crucial to productively incorporating athletes in governance (Participants #7 & #10). However, while Congress sets strict rules for Athlete participation, it does not provide direct funding for NGBs to fulfill those requirements (Participant #6). Additionally, NGBs are “all treated alike by USOPC when it comes to providing assistance as well as enforcing obligations,” regardless of their varying sizes and revenues (PTT 132). Lack of funding is a major barrier for participation, as “volunteer, elected athletes” cannot fulfill their duties to the best of their abilities “without some support from their [NGB]” (Participants #11 & #21). But even providing money that could appear to have strings attached can have a detrimental effect on NGB-Athlete relations: “With its funding still entirely at the mercy of USOPC, the Team USA [AC] cannot fully earn the trust of the athletes it serves” (PTT 105). Given the role Athletes play in governance, NGBs must understand that their budget for meaningful Athlete inclusion reflects an investment in the NGB itself, and how much independence they grant their ACs over those funds can either foster or hinder trust building.

Staff & Logistical Support: Beyond financing the costs of participation, another way NGBs can invest in their athletes is by providing significant staff support. For example, not only should meeting attendance expenses be covered, but staff should also carefully consider athletes' training responsibilities, competition calendars, and geographic locations when scheduling AC and Board meetings (Participant #15). Multiple participants advocated for their ACs to have a full-time staff member like the USOPC provides; one said it was “borderline malpractice” to not offer that kind of “support to 33% of your membership,” arguing gaps will inevitably arise if ACs are left to fend for themselves on a fully volunteer basis (Participants #4 & #19). Staff help with matters as simple as scheduling and note-taking can have an outsize impact in the long-term effectiveness of an AC (Participant #21).

5.4 Good Governance

The effectiveness of athletes in governance in a given sport organization does not depend entirely on the athletes themselves; the quality of the organization's overall governance practices also plays an instrumental role. **When the institutional set-up of an NGB is subpar, it affects the impact that athletes can have** (Participant #3). However, it may also be unrealistic to hold NGBs to the expectation that “every action” they take has to be made according to “whether it helps the athlete” when they serve multiple stakeholders and their first priority is to stay afloat financially (Participant #10). According to participant #18, even NGBs that have recently implemented “good, positive changes” have done so in a “reactionary” way. In order to proactively facilitate productive and meaningful athlete inclusion, organizations must adopt and abide by general good governance practices, so that a commitment to progress and excellence becomes a part of the institutional culture.

Institutionalized Support: Section 5.3 lays out how NGBs can support and invest in their athletes' successful participation in governance, but it's important for such practices to be encoded in the institution's bylaws or policies so they are not subject to arbitrary changes under different organizational leaders. The same principle applies for many of the suggestions below.

The Princeton Model: In its support for youth-led campaigns in higher education, the Academy 4 Social Civics refers to Princeton's Young Alumni Trustee (YAT) program as the gold standard for inclusive Board governance models (Princeton University, 2021). Universities and sport organizations both have complex sets of stakeholders with their students and their athletes at the center, respectively. Therefore, we believe the YAT structure maps well onto the subject of athlete representation in sports governance. On Princeton's Board, YATs are afforded full voting rights, equal term lengths to other elected trustees, and a number of seats equal to the length of their terms in years (4), so that every year there is exactly one new YAT joining and departing the Board. The value of each of these elements was referenced independently by our participants:

- Full Voting Rights (Ted Stevens Act & Participant #10)
- Equal Term Lengths (Participants #15 & #16)
- Multiple Seats (Participant #19)
- Staggered Terms (Participants #8 & #15)

Keeping in mind that the Ted Stevens Act only covers the United States, the Princeton Model can serve as a great reference for NGBs around the world that want to enshrine the inclusion of athletes in governance or even those who want to revisit the strength of their current practices. Additional considerations for each NGB include determining the optimal term length and whether to implement term limits. For the former, we also recommend four years to give athletes time to grow into their roles and to align with the Olympic calendar.

Elections & Appointments: How athletes are chosen to represent their peers matters, in part because *how* athletes are elected can impact *which* athletes are elected. Under the Ted Stevens Act, which requires elections for Athletes on NGB Boards, participants stressed the importance of preventing elections from devolving into “popularity contests,” as the most famous athletes do not always make best representatives (Participants #6 & #9; Section 5.2). Robust elections with more candidates than open seats also reduce the likelihood that the eventual winners will feel beholden to the person who nominated them (Participant #7). To accomplish these goals, it’s vital for NGBs and ACs to work together to make sure that eligible voters are aware of elections, encouraged to participate, and informed of the stakes.

At the same time, some participants said that there may be some advantages to appointments in certain cases where they are available. Participant #12, a female athlete, said she was able to earn a governance role at her organization despite a “good old boys club” culture, specifically because she was appointed rather than elected. In this way, selections can help guarantee greater diversity of perspective, background, and opinion among athlete representatives. Other participants highlighted the virtues of possible hybrid approaches, whereby the elected AC then selects which of its members should serve on the NGB Board, given its deeper understanding of the issues facing the organization and the skillsets needed to address them (Participants #8 & #19).

Eligibility: The Ted Stevens Act’s strict definition of who may serve as an Athlete in governance poses particular challenges for NGBs that have smaller eligible pools to begin with. For example, while U.S. Soccer sent 36 athletes to the 2024 Summer Olympics, ensuring their status as Athletes for the next 10 years and as 10+ Year Athletes for the rest of their lives, USA Archery only sent 4 (Wikipedia, 2024). However, Section 5.2 discusses how the most important characteristic of successful athlete representatives is not their level of athletic achievement, but rather their engagement, consistency, and commitment to giving back to their sport. Therefore, for organizations outside the United States or beyond the scope of the Ted Stevens Act, it may be worth considering broader criteria for athlete representation in order to find the right people.

Succession Planning: Because strong candidates for athlete representative roles can be hard to find, it’s important not only to invest in training athletes to become better organizational leaders broadly, but also to think critically and specifically about which positions they will eventually occupy and on what timeline. Participant #11 noted that their NGB had suffered in recent years due to a lack of succession planning for major positions, including the role of president. They added that ACs should engage in their own proactive succession planning for leadership positions to ensure that the athletes who step into these roles are better prepared to be effective. If an AC succeeds in generating substantial interest in its elections, one promising place to look for future members is among athletes who narrowly missed being elected.

Independence: One of the most salient themes across our interviews and the Commission’s final report is the degree to which **a healthy working relationship between ACs and their NGB hinges on the AC enjoying large measures of independence** in its actions (PTT 15). When athletes feel their participation may be arbitrarily undermined through retaliatory mechanisms, the AC becomes unable to exercise its role effectively. Crucially, Participant #8 extends this principle of independence to individual athletes: ACs should not pressure their members to vote as a bloc in NGB matters solely for the sake of maximizing their influence. Furthermore, legitimate independence requires that grievance and arbitration processes be adjudicated securely and fairly by neutral parties without conflicts of interest and with real power to hold the NGB accountable when it has done wrong (Participant #7).

Collaboration & Transparency: Protected by a high degree of independence, ACs can approach their relationship with NGBs as respectful, mutually beneficial partnerships. Key matters to work on together include clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of the Board, the AC, and their respective members, as well as establishing how information from the NGB and input from athletes should regularly flow between them (Participant #5). As discussed, mutual trust is essential for the partnership to succeed, and transparent communication is imperative. To carry out its duties effectively, the AC will need access to sensitive information, such as financial statements, recent Board and committee minutes and reports, and any other documents it deems relevant to representing athletes’ interests (Participant #7).

Sport Specificity: Different sports have different goals and governing structures, rendering one-size-fits-all approaches alone shortsighted. Instead, NGBs should adopt standard best practices to the extent that it’s beneficial in their circumstances, while collaborating with their AC to identify areas where a more flexible path might better serve their sport’s needs.

Leadership & Culture: Institutions are ultimately made up of people, so leaders who care about the success of their athlete inclusion practices can make a tremendous impact. But just caring is not enough; good leaders must have the “political will” to build a culture that empowers their athletes in their sport and in the boardroom (AthletesCAN, 2020). To keep athletes at the center of an organization’s culture, the Commission suggests adopting hiring practices that ensure qualified athletes are at least considered for open leadership roles (PTT 132).

Feedback & Action: Institutions are not static, so good governance is not an end state but an ongoing process. NGBs should implement systems to consistently solicit feedback from athletes and enact changes based on thoughtful analysis of the results (Participant #18).

6 Analysis of Results

While opinions and experiences regarding athlete representation surely vary, we found it notable that our athlete and non-athlete participants offered largely parallel conclusions despite their different vantage points; thus, we did not deem it necessary to distinguish between athlete and non-athlete participants in most references throughout the paper. Given these similarities, our results found several common themes that help explain how frameworks for athlete inclusion can succeed or fail. As it becomes more prevalent to see meaningful athlete roles in sports governance, sport organizations stand to benefit from more effective athlete representation by proactively addressing the biggest challenges and opportunities identified in our research.

6.1 Challenges

- Mistrust between athletes and NGBs reduces the number of athletes who want to serve in governance roles and the efficacy of those who do.
- No single athlete representative can be an effective voice for all athletes.
- It's hard to attract a representative sample of the athlete population to serve in governance roles.
- Lack of awareness of an NGB's inner workings makes athletes feel unprepared to serve in governance.
- Athletes rarely have previous Board experience, putting them on uneven footing with their Board peers.
- All-volunteer ACs cannot fulfill their duties to the best of their abilities.
- There are systemic challenges in and across sport organizational cultures hindering athlete inclusion.
- Current legal and organizational requirements may not be optimal for representing all athlete interests or incorporating athlete voices.

Opportunities

- NGBs can improve communication practices with their current athletes and invest in building or repairing their relationships with alumni.
- As a group, athletes bring valuable, diverse perspectives to their NGB.
- NGBs and ACs can work together to recruit athletes intentionally to achieve broad representation.
- Educating athletes on their NGB's purview and the Board's role can boost athlete representative success.
- NGBs can invest in training and mentorship programs for their athletes before and while they serve.
- Funding and NGB staff support can help improve an AC's productivity.
- Institutionalizing good governance practices can shape culture toward more effective athlete inclusion.
- Formalizing better systems for NGB-AC relations can be mutually beneficial, even within the current legal and organizational frameworks.

6.2 Possible Uses

Every NGB in the United States and many sport organizations around the world include athlete representatives in their governance structures, and the practice is only growing. Our paper provides a blueprint for sport organizations everywhere and at every level to more critically and systematically evaluate whether they are setting their athletes up for success as leaders. In sharing our research with the global sporting community, we aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse about the crucial value of good governance and athlete representation in sports.

6.3 Limitations & Further Research

While the data we gleaned from our interviews yielded very useful insights, we were limited in our sample size (22 participants), our sampling method (convenience sampling), and our ability to complement our qualitative observations with statistically-powerful quantitative insights. All of these limitations are solvable with additional time and access to funding. We also had a focused scope of research. Importantly, we did not delve into the relationship between athlete representation and SafeSport implementation and reform.

The simplest way to build upon our findings would be to increase the sample size of the interviews of more athletes, organizational leaders and staff, Board members, and other stakeholders, expanding the breadth of the sports, disciplines, and backgrounds represented. Other academic projects on athletes in governance, such as SAPIS, are also assessing the interplay between athlete representation and organizational design, with the aim of strengthening sports governance via meaningful and effective athlete engagement. Moreover, the Congressional Commission advocates for a more intense interrogation of the systems and structures that currently oversee sports in the United States. Its recommendations include reevaluating the unified elite-grassroots model of the USOPC by “creat[ing] a new federal office to coordinate and develop youth and grassroots movement sports,” revisiting the Athlete eligibility criteria in the Ted Stevens Act, bolstering the independence of ACs, and taking into account the variance in size and finances across NGBs when determining what duties to impose on them (PTT 120). We believe all are worth further research and discussion.

As we disseminate our results to athletes, ACs, NGBs, and other entities in the American and international sports ecosystem, their responses will help inform how to prioritize future research topics in this field. With sports confronting the implications of increased athlete participation in governance, there is a pressing need for empirically-based best practices that ensure their inclusion is both effective and beneficial to all parties. We will continue working to meet that need in partnership with any stakeholders that share our goal of improving sports governance at all levels.

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