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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	The role of athletes in creating sports policies - <i>Policy debate</i>

Delegations will find attached a Presidency steering note on the above subject, with a view to the policy debate at the Council (Education, Youth, Culture and Sport) on 13 May 2025.

‘The role of athletes in creating sports policies’**Introduction - background of the debate**

The role of athletes in the sports community is not limited to achieving results in national and international arenas. Athletes are increasingly becoming active participants in public debate, serving as opinion leaders and initiators of systemic changes. However, the extent of their formalised and direct participation in decision-making bodies varies across EU Member States. Given the numerous challenges facing the sport sector and the growing need for transparent and inclusive sports policies, it is becoming necessary to systematically involve athletes in decision-making and strategic processes.

Supporting and facilitating the access of underrepresented groups to decision-making in sport, as well as encouraging their active engagement in that process, is one of the objectives of the European Sport Model. It should be emphasised that the experience, knowledge and professional perspective of athletes contribute to the more effective development of solutions, including sports policies. Thanks to their engagement, they can be better adapted to the real needs of the sports community at all levels. In that context, it is appropriate to initiate a discussion between representatives of the Member States.

The subject of the debate, proposed by the Polish presidency, highlights the need to shift the role of athletes from recipients of sports policies to their co-creators, in line with the principles of openness, participation and good governance.

The importance of athletes as stakeholders in sports policy

Athletes – both active competitors and those who have already ended their sports careers – are key stakeholders in the sports policy system. Their unique perspective, shaped by direct experience within sports structures, enables them to identify the real needs of the sports community, point out systemic barriers and propose solutions that are both specific and realistic. As direct beneficiaries of policies, programmes and strategies, athletes are often aware of what works well and what needs to be improved, such as the quality of coaches' education, or athlete support systems. Their rights should constitute a central element of initiatives dedicated to them.

Both active athletes and former competitors – particularly Olympians and national team members – enjoy not only public recognition but also a level of authority that extends beyond the sports community. As a result, their participation in decision-making processes can significantly enhance the legitimacy of strategic actions, strengthen cooperation with other stakeholders and increase the chances of effective policy implementation.

Athletes often continue their professional careers within the organisational structures of sport at both national and international levels. They serve on the boards of federations, Olympic committees and athletes' associations, and hold expert and advisory roles. However, their influence extends beyond competitive sport – they also play a significant role in the development of grassroots sport through their involvement in the media, education and social initiatives. Through their achievements and public engagement, athletes inspire diverse social groups to engage in physical activity, thereby promoting a healthy lifestyle and encouraging participation in specific sports. Their dedication not only helps to build a positive image of sport, but also indirectly contributes to making society more active. Athletes can play an important role in shaping and implementing grassroots sport development strategies by acting as their ambassadors.

The competences acquired during their sporting careers, combined with a wide range of activities, make athletes natural partners in creating sports policies. Their inclusion in the policy-making process supports the establishment of a more inclusive and effective sports system that addresses the needs of both professional athletes and the broader sports community.

From the perspective of both Member States and the EU administration, it is particularly important to establish lasting and transparent mechanisms for dialogue with the sports community. When properly amplified and formalised, the voice of this community can play a key role in designing sustainable and effective sports development policies across Europe.

Systematic inclusion of athletes in decision-making processes – recommendations and calls for action

The inclusion of athletes – both current and former – in planning processes and implementing actions can take various forms at both national and EU level. These may include:

- establishing advisory councils with athlete representation within national federations, sports ministries and relevant EU institutional bodies;
- ensuring adequate athlete representation in bodies responsible for developing sports policies;
- supporting management education and social leadership for athletes (e.g. through training in public policies, sports management and sports law);
- promoting partnerships between public administrations, sports organisations and the broader sports community.

To steer the policy debate, the Presidency invites Ministers to respond to the following questions:

1. What opportunities and challenges are associated with athletes' participation in decision-making processes regarding sports policy?
2. What are examples of initiatives taken in your country to include athletes in the process of creating sports policies?
3. How can the European Union support Member States in building platforms for dialogue with athletes?