

Witnessing Athletes Powered by Purpose

by Laurence Halsted, Director of the Powered by Purpose programme, The True Athlete Project

In spring of 2022, UK Sport put out a tender asking for proposals for an athlete learning and development programme around enhancing 'athlete citizenship'. The brief itself was not shy about the difference UKS wanted to make in the space of athlete activism and advocacy, and what has followed from there has exceeded all expectations.

I led the successful bid, on behalf of The True Athlete Project (TAP), to work in partnership with UK Sport, and now have the privileged role of leading the programme which we later named - Powered by Purpose.

Being granted this opportunity was a seminal moment for us at TAP. 'The athlete as role model' is a concept that sits at the very heart of our mission and philosophy. In our book published in 2021, *Becoming a True Athlete – a practical philosophy for flourishing through sport*, which details our approach, is included the following passage that speaks directly to this point:

"The Muhammad Ali Center asked Sam (Parfitt - TAP's founder & CEO) to present his pioneering curriculum at their annual Forum on Athletes and Social Change. While listening to the other presenters talking about using sport to build a better world, Sam felt an overwhelming sense of inspiration to be part of the change. But he also noticed that something was missing – the athletes themselves. It was as if the athletes were left to focus entirely on improving their game, while others got on with the business of harnessing sport's power for social good. But those same athletes are the ones who are most passionate, most committed and with the greatest untapped power, stemming from being natural role models with platforms from which to make their voice heard. What Sam recognised back then in 2014 was that striving to be the best possible athlete and wanting to make the world a better place could, and indeed should, go hand in hand – a symbiotic relationship."

Since then, we have been working on how to bring this vision of the athlete as a role model citizen to life through our innovative, mindfulness-based programmes.

In thinking about and creating our proposal to UKS, it became apparent that this represented a truly pioneering initiative in the global elite sport landscape, and one which has the potential to create a powerful ripple effect. We are still not aware of any other elite sport funding body or National Governing Body that purposefully trains their funded athletes to become advocates for causes they care about. This programme represents a significant step towards aligning athletes, their governing bodies, and other key stakeholders, to work collaboratively around unleashing sports power for creating positive societal change.

It was just a few years ago when Colin Kaepernick was ostracized from the NFL for taking a knee, and the prevailing attitude then was that athletes should just stick to sports. But more and more athletes are recognising the power (and responsibility) they have to use their platform for good. An online

tool created by MIT, [Pantheon](#), shows that athletes are the group that has by far the biggest cultural footprint in the world today. Research conducted by UK Sport to lay the groundwork for Powered by Purpose found that 86% of athletes on the World Class Programme want to use their platform for good whilst they are still actively competing.

The programme we designed aimed to address the three main barriers we were hearing from athletes that were holding them back from using their platform for community or social impact:

- Lack of confidence
- Lack of knowledge
- Fear of being misunderstood

Powered by Purpose's mission is to train athletes to become responsible, compassionate and *effective* social changemakers.

The programme comprises 6-months of activities, including live online workshops, guest facilitators, 1-1 mentoring and an online portal of resources, and culminates in a closing event where athletes give presentations on their journey through the programme, the social issue that they have chosen to focus on, and their plan of action.

We have just completed the second cohort of the programme, with two more cohorts planned to start this year. One of the learnings from the first cohort was that 6 months is not long enough for the athletes to be able to just go off and make the impact they want. There was a need to extend the time that they are supported, and especially to maintain the social support they get from the group. So, we created a phase 2 of the programme, which lasts a year and comprises monthly online meetups and continuation of the 1-1 mentoring. As part of phase 2 for the first cohort, we have just organised an in-person meetup where we visited Fulham Reach Boat Club and spent some time with former world champion GB rower, Imogen Walsh, who created the amazing [Boats Not Bars](#) programme – an initiative that brings rowing into prisons to offer personal growth as well as a greater sense of meaning and hope to prisoners.

What stands out most to me from leading these first two cohorts is how much passion and energy these athletes have to be more than just an athlete. There is a desire to be of service to others even as they recognise that pursuing high performance in sport can be inherently self-centred. What has been amazing to witness is the creativity and expansiveness of the projects that these athletes have come up with. Traditionally the role of an athlete in their community has been going into schools to give a talk, but what we are seeing in this programme is that when given free reign and the necessary tools and support, they are innovative, ambitious and driven in an incredibly wide array of directions. Here is a small selection of the issues that athletes have chosen to focus on:

- Fighting bed poverty in the UK
- Mentoring young female athletes in Kenya
- Setting up an accessibility-focussed design/architecture consultancy
- Creating a frame running club from scratch
- Running multi-sport taster events for young people of diverse backgrounds

When you hear the athlete's presentations at the end of the programme, as we earlier this month, you can't help but be struck by the deep-rooted emotion they bring to the cause or issue they have chosen, and you leave with a strong sense that they are going to make a real, positive impact one way or another.

At TAP we recognise that some of the most valuable, lasting experiences in a sporting career are those opportunities to give back and make a difference to someone else. And the beautiful thing is that leaning in to this doesn't detract from performance but much more likely contributes to enhancing it! A number of the athletes have told us explicitly that their performance has benefited on account of their participation in the programme, and this comes as no surprise to us. When you explore other, deeply-valued parts of yourself as well as your wider passions in life, gaining self-insight and enhanced self-worth along the way, it brings with it a sense of peace and calm that filters into how you show up in other areas. That then becomes a remarkable foundation from which you can push yourself, compete with less anxiety and more freedom, and perform to your potential!

But beyond the performance sphere, this type of initiative can be a central part of what is starting to become known as 'meaningful talent development'. This speaks to the idea that the current result-obsessed, marginal-gains focused approach to performance lacks any real depth or indeed humanity, and that in order for elite sport to remain relevant to new generations of athletes and society as a whole, we need to shift the focus much more towards aspects of a sporting career that have true and lasting meaning. The main such aspects are – personal growth and development, building strong relationships, unique life experiences, and the ability to positively contribute to one's community – all things that we know can create real value and fulfilment for the individual, and that will set them up well for life in, and beyond, sport.

We at TAP are thrilled to be able to play our part in this growing movement of bringing more meaning to sport, and I know that goes for the many wonderful contributors to Powered by Purpose – my fellow programme leaders, workshop facilitators, mentors, guest speakers and those supporting the athletes from the wings. When we show what this whole person, socially-conscious approach to performance sport really looks like, on the ground and in a way that really resonates with the athletes, it's not hard to notice that it gets everyone excited to be involved.

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