



International  
**Paralympic**  
Committee

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Paralympic Committee

# Athletes' Council

## Athlete Representative Guidelines



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# Welcome and Introduction

“At the Heart” is the IPC Athletes’ Council four-year strategy which has the aim of actively working to build athlete leaders and increase collaborative opportunities between athletes and their International Federations (IFs), Regional Organisations (ROs) and National Paralympic Committees (NPCs) to create a strong and more effective athlete voice in the decision-making process and governance of the IPC member organisations.



This publication is one of a series of documents, tools and templates that have been produced to assist and guide current and future athlete representatives in creating a framework to support the development of an effective athlete voice within their organisations. The IPC recommends an Athletes’ Council as the most ideal model of athlete representation. Therefore, this document aims to guide individual athlete representatives, as well as those who become part of an Athletes’ Council, and should be considered alongside the IPC Athletes’ Council guidelines for creating an effective Athletes’ Council.

This document uses the IPC Athletes’ Council bylaws as a guideline for IFs, ROs and NPCs to follow (click here to view IPC Athletes’ Council bylaws). We suggest that athletes and organisations consider using them as a guideline. We understand and appreciate the differences that exist among athlete communities within a specific region, nation or sport and each organisation in terms of resources, size, demography, participation at major Championships and culture to mention a few. As a result of the above, we are aware that there is no one size fits all model as far as athlete representation is concerned.

We offer this guide for current and future athlete representatives and encourage you to utilise these tools and templates to help you navigate through your role as a current or prospective athlete representative or member of an Athletes’ Council.

We remain at your disposal if you have any questions or queries throughout the process.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Gotell', written in a cursive style.

**Chelsey Gotell**  
IPC Athletes’ Council Chairperson



## What does it mean to be an athlete representative?

An athlete representative's purpose is to represent fellow athletes in decision-making within their organisation (IF/ RO/NPC). Normally, an athlete representative is elected or appointed by fellow athletes and not appointed by the organisation's leadership. Athlete representatives ensure that the voice of athletes is represented in a collaborative, professional and effective manner and that athletes' viewpoints remain at the centre of the organisation's decision-making process and the broader Paralympic Movement. They play a critical role as a conduit between their fellow athletes and the organisation's leadership.

# Who can be an athlete representative?

An athlete representative can be a retired athlete or a currently competing athlete. You need to define the eligibility of a retired athlete to be an athlete representative within your organisation. As an example, the IPC's bylaw on retired athlete eligibility for election is athletes who have competed in the previous two editions of the Paralympic Games at the time of the election (8-year rule). This means that for example, to be eligible for the 2020 Paralympic Games Athletes' Council elections, a retired athlete must have last competed at the 2012 Paralympic Games or 2016 Paralympic Games. The same applies to Paralympic Winter Games.

For an NPC, an athlete representative must be a national of that NPC. For a RO, an athlete representative must be a national of a country within that region. For an IF, an athlete representative must have competed or be currently competing in that IF's sport.

The IPC recommends that an athlete representative be an athlete who has experience competing within the Paralympic Movement on the international level. However, we do understand that within some developing NPCs, an experienced national level athlete may be best suited for the role.

Below is a comparison of different athlete levels with their advantages and disadvantages. It is up to the athletes who they select to be their athlete representative, but it is important to take note of the advantages and disadvantages of the different athletes' levels when you make your decision through an election. New athletes are encouraged to take time to learn about their organisation and their sport before they are put forward as possible athlete representatives. A strong athlete voice requires more experience and years in the sport and organisation.

| Athlete level   | Advantages  | Disadvantages  |
|---|---|--|
| <b>New, current and less experienced</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enthusiastic and more energy</li> <li>Brings in new perspective not based on previous decisions</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Little knowledge about the organisation, business and how things work</li> <li>May not last long due to the demand of the role</li> <li>May give in if pressure arises from both athletes and leadership</li> <li>May not have the time to balance the demands of competitive sport with the needs of the role</li> </ul> |
| <b>Senior current and more experienced</b>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Knowledge and experience with the organisational and athletes' culture</li> <li>Can mentor new and upcoming athletes</li> <li>Takes an active role within the organisations</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May not have the time to balance the demands of competitive sport with the needs of the role</li> <li>May be afraid to change the status quo even if there is need</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Recently retired athlete (less than two years)</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likely to have more time and energy to fulfil the duties</li> <li>Is in touch with the current issues</li> <li>Knowledgeable about athletes' needs</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May largely rely on communications and relationships within the organisation for information</li> <li>May be slightly removed from current issues if there are many changes in a short space of time</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Retired athlete (less than eight years)</b>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Likely to have more available time to attend to the needs of the role</li> <li>Likely to bring more experience and more mature</li> <li>Knowledgeable about athletes' needs</li> <li>Free to speak out without fear where the subject matter is sensitive</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>May be removed from the current needs of athletes</li> <li>May be outdated in terms of current organisational culture and current topics. This may cause a challenge in that he/she may not be able to represent the athletes effectively.</li> </ul>   |

# Roles and responsibilities of athlete representatives

An athlete representative plays a critical role as the conduit between the athletes and the decision-making within the organisation. The role ensures athletes are included in the decision – making process. The roles and responsibilities for an athlete representative are diverse but typically similar across most organisations.

Some of these may include the following:

- Represent athletes in decision-making
- Represent the rights and interests of athletes
- Engage with their athlete communities on subject matter that affects them
- Establish a system of obtaining athletes' opinions and promote a two-way open dialogue with the athletes. The following are some suggested ways to accomplish this:
  - Organise scheduled meetings
  - Communicate via private group emails
    - create a contact list of the athletes you serve to share updates
    - communicate via online communication platforms for example social media: WhatsApp, Facebook etc.
    - organise athletes' forums or conferences
    - organise regularly scheduled conference calls
- Be a leader and mentor to athletes
- Support and advise the leadership on issues relating to or concerning athletes
- Conduct athlete meetings such as post competition briefs, views on different topics like anti-doping, sport competition rules (IF), athlete agreements, safe sport and classification
- Submit periodic reports to the organisation as required
- Support athletes with issues of concern for the organisation
- Maintain good rapport between the athletes and the leadership







## Desirable attributes and characteristics of a good athlete representative

Just like any leadership role, it is recommended that an athlete representative has the following attributes:

- Passionate about supporting athletes on and off the field of play
- Ability to be objective when bringing athlete feedback to the organisation's leadership, separating themselves from their personal viewpoint for the betterment of their entire athlete community
- If an athlete representative for an NPC or RO, the athlete must be able to represent the voice of all sports – not just the one they come from
- Excellent time management and commitment to following up on items in a timely fashion
- Trustworthy and respected, with the ability to maintain confidentiality about sensitive matters
- Knowledgeable about your organisation's policies, especially those that affect athletes and keeping up to date with current issues

\*Please note that it is not expected that a new athlete representative understands these in their entirety when coming into their role as an athlete representative. Developing an understanding and knowledge of an organisation's governance and policies is extremely important and can be learned once in the role.

- Effective communication, both verbal and written, as well as a good listener
- Good interpersonal skills, understanding the diversity that exists among athletes
- Good analytical skills
- An athlete representative must have the confidence, skill and knowledge to fulfil the role



## Key ingredients for an effective athlete representative



### Communication

- Sharing information and communicating regularly with athletes, organisation's leadership and the administration. Promote a two-way communication to ensure effectiveness of the role
- Understand a topic from all sides to ensure that you have a clear picture
- Speak and listen to athletes so that you represent their views as a whole ahead of your own personal views
- Communicate the interests and rights of athletes in a co-operative manner
- Actively create and maintain a network of athlete representatives within your organisation's membership and beyond



### Participation

- Represent the athletes you represent, within your IF, RO or NPC community and the Paralympic Movement at different events/meetings



### Education

- Learn about your organisation's policies, operations, history etc.
- Enroll in a short leadership course if you have no experience of being in similar leadership roles before
- Learn about your organisation's sports system and how your role fits in



## Selecting athlete representatives

An athlete representative is selected through a democratic election process by athletes. The athlete election voting can take place at various events. For example, at a world Championship for an IF, the Paralympic Games, an Athletes Forum or athletes' meeting for an NPC and at a regional games for a RO. Organisations who are not in a position to bring together a good representation of its athletes in person may consider an online voting system to select its athlete representative or Athletes' Council. The IPC Athletes' Council Elections and Nomination procedure can be used as a guide. You can adapt the IPC Athletes' Council bylaws appendix 2: Athletes' Council nomination and election procedure found here to align with your constitution.

The term of office for an athlete representative must align with the organisation's constitution. The term may vary from two to four years per term.

# Why is it important for the organisation and athletes to have an athlete representative?

## For the Organisation

Leadership who foster a culture that supports the implementation of athlete representation and an athlete voice within the decision making not only benefits the athletes but creates a stronger organisation, leading to greater success on and off of the field of play

Athletes may share their views better with their peers

An athlete representative acts as a conduit between the athletes and the leadership and therefore organisations have direct input from the field of play to the Board room

Provision of a formal and systematic mechanism between the athletes and the organisation's leadership

An athlete representative can identify opportunities and challenges faced by athletes and bring it to the leadership for the greater good of the organisation

Being an active participant in the process that supports and builds strong athlete leaders will set the Paralympic Movement up for leadership success for generations to come as our athlete leaders become future sport governance, business and community leaders

Giving Paralympic athletes experience and a voice at the decision-making table will help break down barriers and the stigma associated with persons with disabilities in leadership positions, leading to the organisation and its athletes contributing and creating a more inclusive society

## For the athletes

An athlete representative may be easily accessible and approachable

A channel to communicate with the leadership with no sense of fear or lack of confidence to do so

Having an athlete representative within an organisation gives all athletes a voice into the decisions that affect them both on and off the field of play

# Benefits of being an athlete representative

## You have the opportunity to:

- Be elected or appointed to other influential roles within your organisation and the wider Paralympic Movement
- Develop professional networks and relationships
- Develop your leadership skills and resume
- Represent your organisation at various events
- Interact with the wider athlete representatives' network and learn about other cultures, sports and organisations
- Be identified as a leader for global programmes
- Represent the athletes and contribute to the decisions that affect them
- Ensure that athletes are put first during decision making within the organisation

## Being an athlete representative:

- Helps build skills that can be beneficial for an athlete's career beyond the field of play
- Gives athletes an inside look into how a sport organisation and the larger Paralympic Movement functions
- Is a great way to give back to the Paralympic Movement, impacting the future of sport in your nation, region or sport



# Interested in becoming an Athlete Representative?

Now that you've learned more about what it takes to be an effective athlete representative, you need to come up with a plan to get there. Just like when training for competition, there needs to be a process in place. So where do you start?

We've put together a step by step guide that should help you get started.

**1** Get buy in and build support throughout your organisation (IF, RO, NPC) for an athlete representative position. This should include getting support from high-level leaders such as the President or other influential key figures, administration and from the athlete community. You may quickly come to realise that other athletes are also keen to get involved in supporting this initiative and building an Athletes' Council as well.

**2** Once you have buy-in from the leadership, the next step is to define the role of the athlete representative aligning it to the constitution of your organisation. This process may take some time as many organisations will require making changes to their constitution to support the athlete representative role or Council. This should also include necessary changes to the seats of the Governing Board of the organisation to give the Chair of the Council a voting seat.

**2.1** Constitution changes are normally made at the organisation's General Meeting, which normally take place annually or bi-annually and requires the membership\* of that organisation to support the changes.

**2.1.1** Membership for ROs consist of the NPCs

**2.1.2** According to the IPC Handbook, NPCs' membership should be National Federations

**2.1.3** Membership for IFs can be a combination of the NFs or NPCs depending on how each organisation is setup

**3** Develop the terms of reference, communication plan and election plan.

**4** Define the mission and strategy, resources required such as administrative support and IT requirements and budgets for athlete representative's activities.

**5** Gain approval from the organisation's leadership.

**6** Plan for and organise an election.

**7** Finalise the athlete representative through an election and/or appointment.

**8** Communicate results of the election publicly.

Step two - seven will involve working alongside your organisation and other athletes. The IPC Athletes Council is available to provide support if needed.

# What are some of the things an athlete representative can discuss and provide feedback on?

An athlete representative can discuss and contribute in the following topics. The list below gives an example of topics, but it is not exhaustive:

- Athletes' elections
- Sports rules and regulations
- Athlete welfare and safe sport
- Athletes rights and responsibilities
- Classification
- Games sports programme
- Athletes agreements and policies
- Games' team selection and operations
- Education and development
- Athlete Career Programmes
- Anti-Doping



# What an athlete representative can expect from the organisation

The IPC recommends that an IF/RO/NPC organises an orientation programme for its athlete representative. The Orientation Programme can cover topics such as the following:

- History and governance structure of the organisation including where the athlete representative fits within etc.
- The “who is who” within the organisation and how they link with the athlete representative
- The organisation’s constitution and strategy
- It may also be beneficial to link the athlete representative to a member of the Governing Board or senior management team who are well aware of the history of any decisions that have been taken so they can better engage in discussion

An athlete representative or full Athletes’ Council is a voluntary position and works closely with the organisation’s administration to support the activities and ensure effectiveness. The administration may support with the following:

- A member of the administration who works as support or liaison for the athlete representative/Council
- Administrative support in organising its elections
- Budget allocation for athletes’ activities facilitated by the athlete representative/Council
- Support in organising athletes’ meetings with the athlete representative/Council
- Supports the athlete representative/Council by executing and implementing their mission and strategy
- Supports the athlete representative/Council members via professional development opportunities
- Support in enabling the athlete representative/Council members to share information on relevant topics
- Identified administrative support and a connection to a member of the senior leadership/ management team
- Ongoing support and offering guidance and advice
- Providing important contact information of other athlete representatives where applicable
- Providing opportunities for the athlete representative/Council to contribute to key decisions.





## Contact us

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