



## Climate change in 2050: How athletes envisage the future of sport

### Key messages:

- **Athletes currently face many—often structural—barriers to taking climate action in order to create a positive future for their sports.** These barriers include constraints over their own behaviours (e.g. travelling for competitions, career stage); limited power to influence high-level climate action in the sector; the fact that it is uncommon for athletes to speak out on climate change; and entrenched financial and commercial pressures.
- **When imagining the future of their sports, athletes anticipate significant changes to travel, training and events as a result of climate change.** These include *where* and *when* sports are played, and *who* is able to compete. Athletes also expect wider social changes as a result of climate change, with extreme weather impacting their sports and increasing risks to health and the environments they train and compete in.
- **When imagining what it's like to be an athlete in the future, athletes foresee improved sport-life balance, with greater emphasis on wellbeing, community, and control.** They also think that climate advocacy and activism by athletes will be normalised.
- **To enable a positive future for sport in a changing climate, athletes highlight the importance of athlete influence, athletes and organisations leading by example, and organisational climate action.** Connection and collaboration between athletes, including across different sports, are also seen as important.



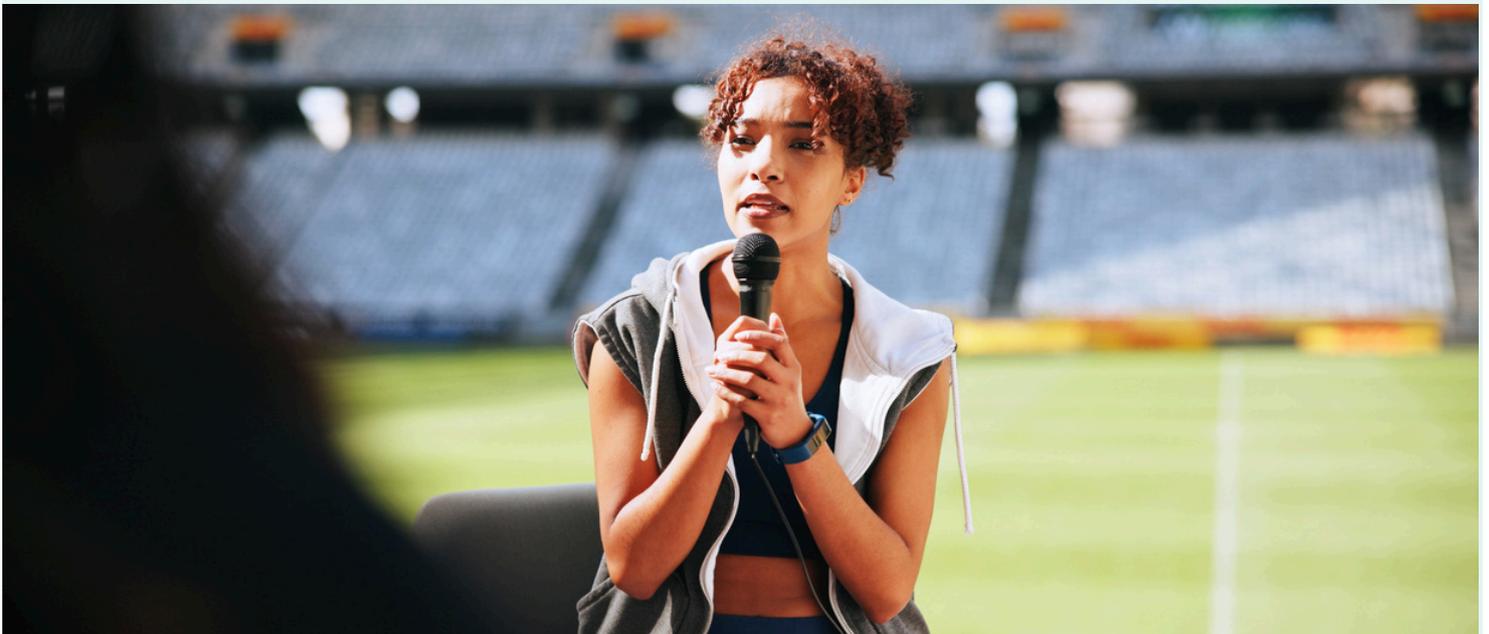
# Background and context

*This briefing is intended as a resource for athletes and those who work with athletes, who are interested in supporting greater climate engagement and action in sport. This includes, but is not limited to, sport governing bodies, clubs, sponsors, networks and other types of sports organisations.*

Sports play an important role across societies globally, yet the industry is both increasingly impacted by climate change and contributing to rising carbon emissions. The sports industry is complex, with organisations, athletes, suppliers, sponsors and fans all able to take and influence climate action in different ways. As the most high-profile and visible part of the sports industry, athletes have an essential role in climate action.

While there is some research about athlete climate advocacy and activism, deeper exploration of how athletes feel about the future of their sports in the context of a changing climate is limited. CAST partnered with sports sustainability charity [Pledgeball](#) to explore this further.

We held future visioning workshops with current and former athletes and people working with athletes from across different countries and sports. These discussions explored how athletes envisage their role and their sport in the future, and identified practical ways to achieve a positive, yet realistic, future for their sports.



# Recommendations

These recommendations are for people and groups who have influence over athletes' roles – for example, sports clubs, governing bodies, sponsors, networks.

## **1) Work with athletes to remove the barriers they face in climate engagement and action**

Athletes face a variety of barriers. These range from practical issues such as how climate action relates to career progression and sponsorship, to less tangible factors such as power, influence, and organisational culture.

While athletes may have power and influence, not all are in the position to use this. Athletes should be supported to speak out and act on climate change without fear of negative consequences. Attention to power dynamics is important, including how these may differ for individual versus team sports, and junior versus established athletes.

## **2) Empower athletes to act**

This goes one step further and relates to actively enabling and supporting athletes to engage in climate action. For example, fostering connection and collaboration between athletes, including across different sports and countries, can help create shared spaces for climate dialogue, learning, and collective action. This can be done both within and outside of existing structures.

## **3) Lead by example and make structural changes that tackle climate change**

Sports organisations have a critical role in decarbonising the sport sector and making it more resilient to climate impacts, including by making changes to travel, competition structures, and operations.

Commitment and action by organisations can create the conditions that allow athletes to more confidently and consistently take climate action. This combined action from athletes and organisations can help work towards a shared goal of creating a positive future for sport in the context of climate change.

## **4) Allow athletes the space to explore the future of their sports**

While there is inevitably a strong focus on performance, allowing athletes time and space to explore the future of their sports in the context of climate change is valuable for progressing climate action. Expanding future visioning approaches could support longer-term thinking, generate further insights, and help align athlete perspectives with organisational decision-making.

Visioning work could involve a wider and more diverse group of athletes from sports with different climate impacts and environments (e.g., snow sports, stadium sports), across multiple countries, and at different career stages.

## Methods

Future visioning workshops provide a space for people to have conversations about how the future is likely to change and how they would like it to change. Imagining what places and people might be like in the future allows for in-depth conversations about what people want from a low-carbon future and how to get there.

CAST and Pledgeball held six two-hour online future visioning workshops between June and September 2025. Fifteen participants took part. They first discussed barriers to taking climate action within their sports. They then took part in a future visioning exercise, imagining their sport in 2050 and creating an athlete living in that future. Finally, participants discussed what would help enable this future.

### About the participants:

- 12 were current or former athletes.
- Nine worked or had worked with athletes in various roles (including coach, health, development, mentor, team leader, and organisational leader).
- Two were involved in para-sports.
- All were already interested or engaged in climate action to varying degrees. They competed at or were involved in national and international competition levels.
- They were based across several different countries, including Argentina, Australia, Fiji, Italy, Norway, and the UK.
- They represented a wide range of different sports, including swimming, basketball, football, Australian football, cycling, sailing, rugby, racewalking, triathlon, canoeing, trail running, ultra-marathon running, hockey, basketball, flag football, and skiing.



# Findings

## 1) Athletes face multiple barriers to climate engagement

Participants felt there is **limited climate engagement** from athletes due to a lack of interest among athletes and the wider teams they work in, a fear of hypocrisy, and issues around the media. Participants spoke about how climate action and speaking out can often fall on a few individuals, possibly because these individuals have more interest and/or power.

As well as *communicating* about climate change, athletes discussed *behaving* sustainably within sport and the ability they have (or don't have) to do this. They described a **lack of power and influence over decisions** related to travel, competitions, and organisational practices. For example, how competitions were not clustered in similar locations at similar times. This lack of power and influence varied by sport, career stage, and platform.

“There's not a choice. You have to do the travel, especially in a team sport.”

“As an athlete, I'm not a decision maker.”

Participants highlighted **links between climate change and athletes' careers**, including how career stage shapes willingness to act, how climate action may affect their career, and how elite sport can mean a higher carbon footprint.

“The expectations in elite sports are of essentially unsustainable behaviours.”

“Retired players [...] can speak out. But in the playing group, absolutely not.”

Entrenched **financial and commercial barriers**, particularly sponsorship restrictions, were also prominent.

## 2) Participants envisage their sport will be changed by climate change in the future

Athletes anticipated significant **changes to travel, events, and training** in 2050 due to climate change, including *where* and *when* sports are played, and *who* can compete. Many expected greater localisation, less (or more sustainable) travel, fewer competitions, and shifts in environments and schedules due to climate impacts.

“It would become quite unbearable to train outside.”

**The impacts of climate change on society and infrastructure** were also discussed. Some of these were positive – for example, stronger community connections. However, several people struggled to imagine a positive future.

“I think sport will bring people together to overcome more climate-based crises.”

“I find it really hard to not think that the future is going to be some level of dystopian.”

**Climate impacts**, including extreme heat, flooding and storms, were seen as **increasing risks across many sports**.

“More people will be questioning whether to compete or not.”

Other anticipated changes included new rules and guidance; altered infrastructure, kit and equipment; changes in sponsorship; and technological and energy related changes.

## 3) Participants envisage that athletes' roles in society will change

Participants felt that athletes would have better **sport-life balance**, with greater emphasis on wellbeing, community, and control.

“It's more geared towards just flourishing as a person.”

“Balance. I think this is the key. [...] Less competition travels, but quality travels.”

“Runners will feel more free in the future, as in they won't feel confined by these systemic issues that are preventing them from doing the things they want to do.”

**Climate engagement and awareness were expected to become normalised** in terms of everyday climate actions and discussion, and participants envisaged athletes being more conscious of their impact.

They also thought there would be increased athlete advocacy and activism, such as discussions with teammates and event organisers. Some thought athletes might be speaking out about how they manage climate challenges (as “coping inspo” for others) or about aspects of a low-carbon society that remain challenging “which probably is flying [...] and also potentially [a] plant-based diet”.

“They would probably use their platforms to raise awareness, because I feel the impacts will be getting worse by then.”

#### 4) Participants feel athletes and sports organisations can help drive a positive future

Athletes and organisations using their **influence** and **leading by example** were seen as important in enabling a positive future for sports in the context of climate change.

“The influence that the top, top athletes have is just going to grow.”

“There are not enough [athletes] who are speaking up.”

“It does require some disruptive actors or actions to really create that change.”

**Climate action by organisations and sponsors** was discussed in relation to how they could support and enable athletes to both act and speak out.

Participants highlighted how **connection and collaboration between athletes** can enable climate action. Some felt there would be value in creating spaces for athletes to connect, and discuss and enable climate action across sports.

“Bringing athletes together to speak about the ideas, I think that's much more powerful than being told what to do.”

“How much of a say do athletes really have unless they all club together?”

Other enablers for a positive future included highlighting co-benefits or non-climate-related arguments, as well as increasing climate awareness and education.

## Further reading

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# CAST is a global hub for understanding the crucial role that people play in fighting climate change.

We are a cross-institutional research centre with world-leading expertise in environmental psychology, behaviour change, public engagement, policy, governance, education, communications and more.

Underpinning CAST's research is a question of immense significance: how can we transform society in order to live better and address climate change?



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