Representing the Athletes’ Voice in the Olympic Movement

By Emma Terho, IOC Athletes’ Commission (AC) Chair, and Kaveh Mehrabi, Director of the IOC Athletes’ Department

“Athletes are at the heart of the Olympic Movement,” said IOC Athletes’ Commission Chair Emma Terho. “Therefore, the top priority is to ensure the protection of clean athletes and to support them both on and off the field of play. The IOC Athletes’ Commission (AC) has been given the mandate to make this a reality.”

Some of the IOC AC’s main priorities include:

- ensuring the athletes’ voice is represented in decision-making processes throughout the Olympic Movement;
- supporting its stakeholders – the athletes – to the best possible extent; and
- listening to the athletes and taking on board their comments on important topics, such as athlete representation, Rule 40 and Rule 50.2.

The following comes from a joint interview with the IOC Athletes’ Commission (AC) Chair, Emma Terho, and the Director of the IOC Athletes’ Department, Kaveh Mehrabi, on the roles and objectives of the Athletes’ Commission, working alongside the newly created Department.

Athletes’ Commission
The IOC AC, chaired by five-time Olympian and Olympic medallist Emma Terho, ensures that the athletes’ viewpoint remains at the heart of all Olympic Movement decisions. The Commission represents elite athletes, and competing and recently retired Olympic athletes. Commission members are elected by athletes at each edition of the Olympic Games. The IOC AC leads the representation of athletes on a global scale by regularly interacting with ACs at national and sport levels, and with athletes directly.
Terho stated: “In 2021, the IOC AC celebrated its 40th anniversary. Thanks to the outstanding work over the years by past Commission members, and especially by my predecessor, Kirsty Coventry, and former Vice-Chair Danka Bartekova, the IOC AC has a very strong foundation to build upon for our future work.”

“The landscape in sport is changing,” said Kaveh Mehrabi, “and the IOC AC is adapting to these changes to ensure effective representation of athletes. For example, switching the format of the International Athletes’ Forum [IAF] from in-person to digital was a great way to illustrate how the IOC AC remained flexible and adaptable during the pandemic. Additionally, as of January 2020, Olympic Solidarity funding of USD 10,000 is now available to every National Olympic Committee [NOC] AC each year, to further help ACs support their athletes during these times.”

The global network of ACs and athlete representatives has grown from strength to strength over recent years, with more and more ACs being created and supported by their respective organisations. The IOC AC brings together and supports the network of ACs so that they in turn can best support their athletes as much as possible. Through regular consultation with other ACs and athlete representatives, the athletes’ viewpoint on the most important topics can be effectively gauged and then fed back to the IOC.

In 2021 alone, the IOC AC led 10 conference calls with the global network of athletes’ commissions. Especially during the pandemic and in the lead-up to the Olympic Games, one of the key focuses was to keep the athlete community engaged and well informed every step of the way, and the same engagement is in place for the upcoming Winter Games in Beijing.

Athletes are represented at decision-making level in the IOC through members of the IOC AC being members of nearly all IOC commissions – ensuring the athletes’ voice is heard in every aspect of the IOC’s work. Terho said: “As Chair of the IOC AC, I am a member of the IOC Executive Board, and IOC AC members are also members of every Coordination Commission for the Olympic and Youth Olympic Games. Ensuring the athlete experience at the Olympic Games is a top priority for Organising Committees remains a key focus of the IOC AC.”

Launched in early 2021, Olympic Agenda 2020+5 is the IOC’s strategic roadmap to 2025 and includes a set of 15 recommendations, many of which are related to athletes. The athlete-focused recommendations will further address the changing landscape through a number of concrete and meaningful actions, such as reinforcing athletes’ rights and responsibilities, further strengthening safe sport and protecting clean athletes. One recommendation that has already been achieved is the creation of an Athletes’ Department within the IOC. The Department, headed by Olympian Mehrabi, who participated in badminton at the Olympic Games Beijing 2008, will further enhance athlete representation in both the IOC and the Olympic Movement.

The global network of ACs and athlete representatives has grown from strength to strength over recent years, with more and more ACs being created and supported by their respective organisations. The IOC AC brings together and supports the network of ACs so that they in turn can best support their athletes as much as possible. Through regular consultation with other ACs and athlete representatives, the athletes’ viewpoint on the most important topics can be effectively gauged and then fed back to the IOC.

In 2021 alone, the IOC AC led 10 conference calls with the global network of athletes’ commissions. Especially during the pandemic and in the lead-up to the Olympic Games, one of the key focuses was to keep the athlete community engaged and well informed every step of the way, and the same engagement is in place for the upcoming Winter Games in Beijing.

Athletes are represented at decision-making level in the IOC through members of the IOC AC being members of nearly all IOC commissions – ensuring the athletes’ voice is heard in every aspect of the IOC’s work. Terho said: “As Chair of the IOC AC, I am a member of the IOC Executive Board, and IOC AC members are also members of every Coordination Commission for the Olympic and Youth Olympic Games. Ensuring the athlete experience at the Olympic Games is a top priority for Organising Committees remains a key focus of the IOC AC.”

Launched in early 2021, Olympic Agenda 2020+5 is the IOC’s strategic roadmap to 2025 and includes a set of 15 recommendations, many of which are related to athletes. The athlete-focused recommendations will further address the changing landscape through a number of concrete and meaningful actions, such as reinforcing athletes’ rights and responsibilities, further strengthening safe sport and protecting clean athletes. One recommendation that has already been achieved is the creation of an Athletes’ Department within the IOC. The Department, headed by Olympian Mehrabi, who participated in badminton at the Olympic Games Beijing 2008, will further enhance athlete representation in both the IOC and the Olympic Movement.

The global network of ACs and athlete representatives has grown from strength to strength over recent years, with more and more ACs being created and supported by their respective organisations. The IOC AC brings together and supports the network of ACs so that they in turn can best support their athletes as much as possible. Through regular consultation with other ACs and athlete representatives, the athletes’ viewpoint on the most important topics can be effectively gauged and then fed back to the IOC.

In 2021 alone, the IOC AC led 10 conference calls with the global network of athletes’ commissions. Especially during the pandemic and in the lead-up to the Olympic Games, one of the key focuses was to keep the athlete community engaged and well informed every step of the way, and the same engagement is in place for the upcoming Winter Games in Beijing.

Athletes are represented at decision-making level in the IOC through members of the IOC AC being members of nearly all IOC commissions – ensuring the athletes’ voice is heard in every aspect of the IOC’s work. Terho said: “As Chair of the IOC AC, I am a member of the IOC Executive Board, and IOC AC members are also members of every Coordination Commission for the Olympic and Youth Olympic Games. Ensuring the athlete experience at the Olympic Games is a top priority for Organising Committees remains a key focus of the IOC AC.”

Launched in early 2021, Olympic Agenda 2020+5 is the IOC’s strategic roadmap to 2025 and includes a set of 15 recommendations, many of which are related to athletes. The athlete-focused recommendations will further address the changing landscape through a number of concrete and meaningful actions, such as reinforcing athletes’ rights and responsibilities, further strengthening safe sport and protecting clean athletes. One recommendation that has already been achieved is the creation of an Athletes’ Department within the IOC. The Department, headed by Olympian Mehrabi, who participated in badminton at the Olympic Games Beijing 2008, will further enhance athlete representation in both the IOC and the Olympic Movement.

The global network of ACs and athlete representatives has grown from strength to strength over recent years, with more and more ACs being created and supported by their respective organisations. The IOC AC brings together and supports the network of ACs so that they in turn can best support their athletes as much as possible. Through regular consultation with other ACs and athlete representatives, the athletes’ viewpoint on the most important topics can be effectively gauged and then fed back to the IOC.

In 2021 alone, the IOC AC led 10 conference calls with the global network of athletes’ commissions. Especially during the pandemic and in the lead-up to the Olympic Games, one of the key focuses was to keep the athlete community engaged and well informed every step of the way, and the same engagement is in place for the upcoming Winter Games in Beijing.

Athletes are represented at decision-making level in the IOC through members of the IOC AC being members of nearly all IOC commissions – ensuring the athletes’ voice is heard in every aspect of the IOC’s work. Terho said: “As Chair of the IOC AC, I am a member of the IOC Executive Board, and IOC AC members are also members of every Coordination Commission for the Olympic and Youth Olympic Games. Ensuring the athlete experience at the Olympic Games is a top priority for Organising Committees remains a key focus of the IOC AC.”

Launched in early 2021, Olympic Agenda 2020+5 is the IOC’s strategic roadmap to 2025 and includes a set of 15 recommendations, many of which are related to athletes. The athlete-focused recommendations will further address the changing landscape through a number of concrete and meaningful actions, such as reinforcing athletes’ rights and responsibilities, further strengthening safe sport and protecting clean athletes. One recommendation that has already been achieved is the creation of an Athletes’ Department within the IOC. The Department, headed by Olympian Mehrabi, who participated in badminton at the Olympic Games Beijing 2008, will further enhance athlete representation in both the IOC and the Olympic Movement.
The International Athletes’ Forum is organised every two years by the IOC AC and is the largest gathering of athlete representatives from every sport and across the world. It provides an opportunity to discuss, in person, the issues that are most important to athletes. In 2019, for the first time, the AC Chairs of all 206 NOCs were invited to the Forum, joining athlete representatives from International Federations (IFs), the World Anti-Doping Agency, Organising Committees for the Olympic Games, Continental Associations, and the International Paralympic Committee, and bringing the total number of participants at the 2019 Forum to 350. In 2021, taking advantage of the digital format of the event due to the pandemic, all members of ACs were invited to the online event, which resulted in almost 2,000 athlete representatives registering for the biggest IAF ever.

On a continental level, and funded through Olympic Solidarity, athletes’ forums also take place every two years. Led by the continental ACs and supported by IOC AC members, these forums allow for the athletes’ voice to be heard at regional level and provide another opportunity to strengthen the network for athlete representation.

IOC athlete programmes and support
Since 1981, the IOC AC has helped shape and drive a number of programmes for athletes. Through its dedicated athlete-facing communication platform, Athlete365, offers, services and resources are available to athletes all year round in multiple languages. As of today, over 125,000 Olympians, elite athletes and athletes’ entourage members are subscribers to Athlete365.

Mehrabi explained further: “Athlete365 Career+ is one of the longest-serving programmes initiated by the IOC AC and offers support and guidance to athletes who are approaching the end of their sporting careers. Since its inception in 2005, over 60,000 athletes from 189 countries have been reached by the programme. A dedicated Athlete365 learning environment provides a platform for athletes, and their entourages, to learn about a variety of topics, from nutrition and injury prevention to coaching advice and event management.”

Athlete365 also hosts content related to the important topics of safeguarding, mental health, prevention of competition manipulation and anti-doping, as well as implementable toolkits designed to help ACs and other organisations share the knowledge with their athletes.

“At the Athlete365 Career+ Power Up workshop, I realised how much sport has set me up for success in my career.”
David Thibodeau, entrepreneur and Power Up participant
The Olympic Movement’s funding model enables the IOC’s funds to go straight back into sport and athletes’ development, through Olympic Solidarity and staging the Olympic Games. Olympic Solidarity’s budget for 2021-2024 is USD 590 million, and a significant portion of the funds are allocated solely for athletes’ development; this amount was increased by 25 per cent compared to the previous four years.

The Olympic Games give athletes a unique platform and connect them to a global audience, creating opportunities to grow their personal brand. At the same time, the universality of the Games is what makes them so special, giving every nation the chance to compete against one another and a chance for smaller sports to be in the spotlight.

Supporting athletes during the pandemic
During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Athlete365 became the hub for athletes and entourage members seeking information about COVID-19 and its impact on both the Olympic qualification events and the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020.

The IOC AC conducted a survey with more than 4,000 elite athletes and their entourages from 135 countries to better understand athletes’ challenges in the wake of the Tokyo 2020 postponement. As a result of the findings, the Athlete365 platform was adapted to focus on providing the most up-to-date and accurate COVID-19-related information, resources and advice on the site, directly addressing the most prominent challenges faced by athletes at the time.

Innovative programmes with The Olympic Partners (TOPs)
“We continuously look to innovate and identify new areas that athletes can benefit from,” said Mehrabi. “A number of exciting offers from various TOPs are a great example of this. In partnership with Intel, Athlete365 hosts exclusive opportunities for athletes, providing well-being, career mentorship and learning services.”

Earlier this year, Airbnb awarded 500 travel grants of USD 2,000 to Olympians and Paralympians, as well as providing over 6,000 athletes competing at the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games USD 500 of credit. The Airbnb Olympian and Paralympian Experiences programme also gives athletes the opportunity to share their passions and connect with people from all over the world whilst earning money. P&G supported important causes backed by athletes who are advancing work in important areas, and Samsung has provided a limited-edition smartphone to athletes at every Olympic Games since 2014.

Olympic Charter Rules 40 and 50
Two important, topical subjects that are being discussed among the athlete community are Rules 40 and 50 of the Olympic Charter. Representing the athletes’ voice on important matters such as these is undoubtedly a major priority, and the IOC AC has taken a number of measures in this respect.

Rule 40 relates to the Olympic Movement’s funding model and the protective guidelines around the commercialisation of athletes, officials and Olympic properties during the period around the Olympic Games. The Rule 40 framework is critical as it safeguards the revenue sources that fund the IOC, and therefore enables the Olympic Movement to fund all Olympic teams worldwide, all Olympic sports and the Olympic Games themselves.
The solidarity funding model ensures that athletes from all Olympic sports and from all NOCs (as well as refugee athletes) are supported financially, not only the most commercially successful athletes. Breaking the solidarity model would significantly hurt athletes from countries with fewer resources or without a professional sports system.

Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter governs the use of advertising, demonstrations and propaganda at the Olympic Games, and specifically prohibits demonstrations or political, religious or racial propaganda at Olympic sites. Racism or any form of discrimination have no place in sport, and the Olympic Games are a powerful symbol of peace and inclusion, by bringing together athletes from 206 NOCs and the Refugee Olympic Team.

The IOC AC consulted with 3,547 athletes from 185 countries, as well as holding a qualitative consultation with athletes’ commissions from NOCs and IFs on the topic, and developed a set of recommendations designed to increase the opportunities for athletes at the Olympic Games, but at the same time preserve the opening ceremony, podium and field of play from becoming places to express individual views. The majority of athletes believe that it is not appropriate to express views in these places – especially on the podium – and that unified anti-discrimination messaging would be a more powerful tool to raise awareness of important issues.

Next steps: Beijing 2022 and beyond

Looking to the future, Terho said: “We have a number of priorities for the period ahead. With the Olympic Winter Games Beijing 2022 taking place so soon after Tokyo, we are engaging with the winter athlete community every step of the way as the final preparations come together. Through regular conference calls and AC-to-AC meetings, the IOC AC are ensuring the athletes have as much clarity as possible on the various countermeasures and other important updates for the Games.”

In November 2017, the Commission released its IOC AC Strategy, which was aligned with the IOC’s previous strategic roadmap, Olympic Agenda 2020. Terho concluded: “Four years later, and following the release of Olympic Agenda 2020+5, we look forward to updating our Strategy in the coming months to align with the current priorities. We will continue to listen to athletes on the issues that matter most to them and remain flexible to adapt to the ever-evolving sporting landscape.”