



THE SHOT PAPERS

THE PEDESTAL.

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN SUPERSTAR AND FAN.

We placed professional athletes in our community spaces with their names switched off. The abuse and the pedestal disappeared together, and the conversations were the best we have seen on any platform. This paper is about what that experiment revealed: fandom compounds in the conversation between events, not the broadcast during them, and the industry built to connect superstar and fan keeps widening the gap instead.

FOR PLAYER AGENTS · ATHLETES · FAN-ENGAGEMENT LEADS

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1 THE MOMENT

Earlier this year we ran an experiment I did not expect to work. We took professional athletes and switched their names off.

We invited a small group of professionals into our community spaces: top-flight footballers and professional boxers, people whose names would change the temperature of any room they walked into. Then we changed one thing. We switched the names off. No badge, no announcement, no profile that gave the game away. Inside the clubhouse they were just another Sport Head with an opinion about the weekend.

Two things disappeared at the same moment, and I have thought about it ever since: the abuse, and the pedestal.

Nobody performed for them, because nobody knew to perform. Nobody hurled anything at them, because there was no target with a famous name attached. And with both of those gone, something happened that I had honestly stopped expecting from the internet. The conversations were the best I have seen on any platform. Real questions and real answers. Fans arguing tactics with a professional who argued back, on the merits, as an equal. A pro asking a grassroots coach how they handle a nervous kid before a game. The everyday talk of sport, the kind you used to get across a clubhouse table, happening between people who by every rule of the modern internet should never have been able to speak to each other like that.

Then came the part that mattered most. When an athlete chose to reveal who they were, and it was always their choice, the tone held. No pile-on, no autograph queue, no sudden change of register. The room had already met the person. The name arrived second, and by then it was just a detail about somebody they already knew.

That is the whole finding, and it took me a while to accept how simple it is. The abuse and the worship are not opposites. They are the same distance, viewed from opposite ends. Put a person on a pedestal and you make them an idol and a target in the same movement; both responses grow from the fact that nobody in the room is treating them as a person. Remove the pedestal and both go with it.

We did not build the experiment to prove a thesis. We built it because athletes told us they wanted somewhere to talk about the sport they love without the consequences of being themselves in public. What they got, and what the fans got, was the thing the entire fan-engagement industry says it is selling and almost never delivers: a genuine conversation between the people who play the game and the people who love it.

2 THE PROBLEM IN NUMBERS

Fandom has never been bigger. The demand is measurable, the growth is real, and the space where fandom actually lives, the conversation between events, has never been worse served.

12bn+

engagements on Olympic social channels around Paris 2024, more than double Tokyo

Deloitte / IOC

\$3bn

women's elite sport revenues in 2026, up 340% since 2022

Deloitte, 2026

~70%

of consumers more likely to buy from brands offering personalised digital experiences

Deloitte Digital, 2022

16-24

the loneliest age group in the UK

ONS

Paris 2024 generated more than 12 billion engagements across Olympic social channels, more than double Tokyo, with around 300 million people using the official app and website (Deloitte and IOC figures). Only a fraction of that activity happened during live competition. The overwhelming majority was the before and after: the reaction, the debate, the sharing. The audience has already voted on where fandom lives, and it is not inside the broadcast window.

Deloitte's 2025 industry outlook makes the same point from the other direction: younger fans are watching fewer live events, and their fandom is built through non-live content, the clips, the conversation, the community around the sport rather than the scheduled consumption of it. The industry mostly reads that as a rights and retention problem. I read it as a relationship signal. The next generation is not less interested in sport; it is less interested in being broadcast at.

Women's elite sport shows what happens when new fandom forms in real time. Revenues are set to reach at least three billion US dollars in 2026, up 340% since 2022 (Deloitte). Those audiences are being built now, largely without the legacy infrastructure of the men's game, and they are being built on closeness: athletes who talk like people, communities that feel joinable.

And the people this matters to most are the ones the current setup serves worst. Around 7% of adults in England, roughly 3.1 million people, feel lonely often or always (Community Life Survey 2023/24), and 16 to 24 year olds are the loneliest age group in the country (ONS; the underlying analysis is 2018 vintage and the pattern has been reconfirmed since). The generation consuming the most sport content has the least belonging attached to it.

One comparator is worth describing for its shape, if not by name. A global charity ride community has grown to around half a million participants across more than 100 countries, raising over 12 million US dollars in a single year, on the organisation's own published figures (to be verified against source before print). There is no broadcast product and no superstar at the top of it. People show up for each other, around a shared thing they love, and the scale followed the belonging. Sport's fandom is bigger than that by orders of magnitude. Its belonging infrastructure is smaller.

3 WHY THE CURRENT ANSWERS FAIL

The industry has three standard answers to the gap between superstar and fan, and each one quietly widens it.

MORE CONTENT IS NOT MORE CONNECTION

The first answer is production. Behind-the-scenes film, tunnel cameras, documentary series, polished social clips. Some of it is genuinely good, and none of it is a relationship. It is broadcast with better lighting. The fan watches, the athlete is watched, and the distance between them stays exactly what it was, now in higher definition. You cannot have a conversation with a highlight reel.

THE FEED MONETISES THE ABUSE

The second answer is the feed: put the athletes on the big social platforms and call the comment section engagement. But those platforms are built to monetise heat, and to the ranking systems that run them, abuse is engagement. It drives replies, replies drive reach, and reach drives revenue. An athlete opening their mentions after a poor performance is not entering a conversation; they are entering a machine that profits from what is about to happen to them. Clubs and governing bodies respond with reporting guides and welfare support, treating the symptom while renting the disease.

THE ATHLETE'S RATIONAL RETREAT

Athletes respond the only sensible way available. They retreat. Media training, management approval on every post, scripted content, comments limited or switched off, and eventually a public self that is entirely produced. I do not blame a single one of them; I would do the same. But every defensive step widens the distance the engagement industry is paid to close, and the fan is left with a persona where a person used to be.

STAGED PROXIMITY CONFIRMS THE PEDESTAL

The third answer is the appearance: meet-and-greets, signings, sponsored question-and-answer sessions. A queue and a selfie is proximity without conversation. Thirty seconds of managed access does not remove the pedestal, it confirms it. The athlete is the exhibit, the fan is the visitor, and everyone goes home with a photograph of the distance between them.

Add it up and the conclusion is uncomfortable. The conversation between events, where our experiment showed fandom at its best, is currently held in the worst-designed rooms sport has: feeds that reward the pile-on and broadcasts where nobody can answer back. That is not a content problem. It is an architecture problem.

4 THE PRINCIPLE

Proximity beats polish. Fandom compounds in the conversation between events, not the broadcast during them. Everything else in this paper follows from those two sentences.

"The abuse and the pedestal are the same distance seen from opposite ends. Remove the distance and both disappear together."

THE FINDING OF THE ANONYMOUS-ATHLETES EXPERIMENT

Here is the method, stated so that anyone could adopt it, whether or not they ever touch anything we build.

1

SMALLER ROOMS BEAT BIGGER REACH

A real conversation with fifty fans builds more durable fandom than a broadcast to five million. Optimise for exchanges, not impressions.

2

PERSONHOOD BEFORE PERSONA

Design entrances where the person arrives before the name. Once a room has met the human, the name is a detail, not a detonation.

3

IDENTITY IS THE ATHLETE'S DIAL

Anonymous by default, revealed by choice, on the athlete's timing. The reveal is a gift they give the room, never a condition of entry.

4

REMOVE THE INCENTIVE TO PERFORM

No virality mechanics, no algorithmic reward for heat, no leaderboard for outrage. If the system pays for conflict, conflict is what it will buy.

5

MODERATION IS ARCHITECTURE, NOT AFTERCARE

Shape the rooms so abuse has nowhere to grow, rather than employing people to sweep it up after it lands on a human being.

6

MEASURE THE CONVERSATION

Count who talked, who answered and who came back, not how many scrolled past. Belonging is the metric fandom actually compounds on.

None of this needs our platform. A club could run most of it in a community hall, and the charity ride community described earlier runs a version of it at global scale with no superstar at the top. The point is the shape of the room, not the badge on the door.

It also scales in both directions. The same design that lets a top-flight footballer talk about the game without consequence lets a fifteen-year-old talk about their nerves without an audience keeping score. Grassroots and elite are usually treated as separate markets with separate products. In our experience they are the same room at different volumes, and a room designed for the quietest person in it turns out to be the one the loudest person actually wants. Any governing body, players' association or agency could pilot this tomorrow: one community, identity optional, heat unrewarded, and measure what the conversation does over a season.

5 THE BUILD

SHOT Clubhouse is our implementation of that method: a digital clubhouse where professionals and fans meet as people first.

CLUBHOUSE SPACES

Communities built around clubs, sports and places, designed for the everyday conversation of sport: the results, the debates, the memories, the questions. The conversation is the product, not the by-product of a fixture list or a broadcast schedule. There is no algorithmic feed deciding who deserves attention, and no mechanic that rewards heat over talk.

IDENTITY OPTIONAL FOR THE ATHLETE

Professionals are verified privately, so we always know who is in the room, but their public identity is theirs to control. An athlete can join as just another Sport Head, talk about the game they love, and reveal themselves if and when they choose. The reveal is a moment they own, not a condition of entry. Our experiment ran on exactly this mechanic, and it is now a permanent part of how the platform works.

SAFEGUARDING AND MODERATION BY ARCHITECTURE

Age-tiered accounts, structural messaging rules and guardian visibility are built into the platform rather than left as settings, so a professional cannot privately message a child and a child cannot be reached by a stranger. Moderation is designed into how rooms work, not bolted on after something goes wrong. The same architecture that protects a nine-year-old also protects a professional from the pile-on, because both problems are the same problem: rooms with no design.

A COMPANION IN THE ROOM

Alex, our Sport Head character, is the fan's buddy in their pocket: keeping the conversation warm between events, surfacing the debate of the day and making sure nobody stands at the edge of the room with no one to talk to.

AN AMBASSADOR MODEL, NOT AN APPEARANCE FEE

Professional athletes are joining the same communities their supporters live in, as members first and names second. We will have more to say about who later this year; the model matters more than the roll call. What we ask of an agent is deliberately small: no announcement, no content schedule, no appearance fees, no approvals process. Membership, not media. An athlete can be in a clubhouse this week without a single obligation attached, and leave whenever they like.



6 THE INVITATION

The best fan experience in sport is a conversation. Come and have one.

If you are a player agent: bring one athlete in anonymously. There is nothing to announce, nothing to approve and nothing to risk. If the room is not the best conversation about their sport they have had online, they walk away and nobody ever knew they were there.

If you are an athlete: come as a person. Keep your name in your pocket until it is yours to give. The game you fell in love with is being talked about right now by people who love it the way you do, and they would rather meet you than your media team.

If you lead fan engagement: audit where your fans' between-events conversation actually happens today, and who owns the room it happens in. Then come and see what it looks like when the room is built for it.

To be clear about what this invitation is not: it is not a media deal, an exclusivity arrangement or a content partnership. Nobody is asked to post, to promote or to perform. The only thing we are offering an athlete is the thing the experiment proved they wanted, a place to be a person who loves their sport, among other people who love it too. Everything the industry calls fan engagement grew somewhere downstream of that, and sport built an entire economy on the broadcast while letting the conversation rot. We think the order should be reversed.

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SOURCES

- Deloitte / IOC, Future of Fan Engagement in Sports: Paris 2024 social engagement and app/website figures; Deloitte Digital consumer research on personalised digital experiences, 2022
- Deloitte, 2025 Sports Industry Outlook: younger fans watching fewer live events; fandom built through non-live content
- Deloitte, 2026 Sports Industry Outlook press release: women's elite sport revenues of at least US\$3bn in 2026, up 340% since 2022
- DCMS, Community Life Survey 2023/24: 7% of adults in England (~3.1m) lonely often or always (2024/25 update published December 2025; check before print)
- ONS, loneliness analysis: 16-24 year olds the loneliest age group (2018 vintage; the pattern has been reconfirmed in later releases, flagged accordingly)
- Participation, country and fundraising figures for the charity ride community are taken from the organisation's own published material and must be verified against source before print; no individual connected to it is named

The anonymous-athletes experiment described in Part One is SHOT's own, reported as observed experience rather than a measured statistic. Participating athletes are anonymous by design, and no athlete, club, competition or partner referred to anywhere in this paper is named.