

Global elite sport and ministry mapping

Eido
RESEARCH



Contents

Executive summary	1
Purpose and Scope of the Research	1
<hr/>	
Introduction	3
Strategic context	3
Challenges and barriers to faith in this context	3
Research questions	4
<hr/>	
Research methodology	5
Stage 1: Definitions	5
Stage 2: Desk research on the global sports landscape	6
Stage 3: Online survey of those in sports ministry	7
Stage 4: Interactive Global Sports Ministry Map	8
<hr/>	
Results	9
Key statistical findings	9
Main challenges and opportunities	18
Interactive map	20
<hr/>	
Conclusion	25
<hr/>	
Annex A: Methodology for selecting the 13 major sports	29
<hr/>	
Annex B: Data Sources	31



Executive Summary

Purpose and Scope of the Research

This study was commissioned by a newly convened group of global sports ministries administered by Christians in Sport and was conducted by Eido Research. It aimed to research and map the global landscape of professional and elite sports, along with associated ministry activities, by country and sport.

Over eight months, this project has pioneered the development of a new platform for mapping ministries in professional and elite sports globally.

Research Outputs

The study was executed in four key stages: firstly, defining professional/elite sports and ministry, secondly, identifying significant global sports, thirdly, surveying ministry organisations, and finally developing an interactive global sports ministry map. The process involved extensive desk research, which identified 13 major sports at a global level, complemented by an online survey that garnered participation from over 200 people working in the professional and elite sports ministry sector. The data collected was presented in an interactive ArcGIS map that can be filtered by country, sport, and ministry activity to provide a detailed visual representation of the ministry landscape.

Key Findings

The research uncovered that Christian sports ministry is only beginning to tap into the vast potential of the mission fields available in professional and elite sports. The study identified 13 significant sports that form the core focus of ministry efforts.

Key insights include:

- Significant alignment between the 13 major sports identified from the desk research and the survey responses, validating the research methodology
- Substantial gaps in ministry activities and untapped potential mission fields, indicating extensive opportunities for ministry growth and impact

Learnings and Strategic Insights

The project highlighted several learnings:

- Data shows that Christian sports ministry is only just scratching the surface of the available mission field to professional/elite sports athletes and coaches; the mission field is vast, and the messengers are few
- The necessity of refining data collection and evidence to better understand and penetrate the mission fields
- There is great potential to use the interactive map as a tool for developing an informed approach to strategic planning, which can be built upon in future years

Next Steps and Recommendations

This research has helped to define the current state of ministry to professional/elite athletes – identifying both needs and areas of strength.

In the short-term, there are likely to be quick wins from addressing the challenges and opportunities that respondents identified, including developing partnerships, resources, training and support to enhance the ministry of people working with professional/elite sportspeople and coaches.

Over the longer term, strategic initiatives will be required to address the identified gaps in ministry activities. Partners will benefit from using and updating this research to monitor growth across the evolving global sports and ministry landscapes.

The concluding chapter presents a summary of five key learnings and outlines recommendations for future steps based on this research.

The research uncovered that Christian sports ministry is only beginning to tap into the vast potential of the mission fields available in professional and elite sports.



Introduction



Strategic context

This research has been commissioned by an informal, newly convened group of partner organisations working in sports ministry (from the competitive amateur level through to professional/elite sports ministry).

The partners met for the first time on the 10th of July 2023 in London to gather and discuss opportunities for greater connectivity and collaboration around shared global outcomes.

As a result, the group agreed on two strategic priorities for the next five years, one of which is to “grow ministry to athletes and coaches in professional/elite sport throughout the world.” Within this priority, the partners committed to **“research the landscape of pro/elite sport by country and sport” and “research what ministry is happening in the landscapes described by country and sport.”**

Eido Research was commissioned from September 2023 to April 2024 to design and deliver this research to meet the above two objectives and thereby enable the partners to:

- Collaborate better in sports ministry
- Identify new mission fields
- Shape context-specific impact strategies and goals
- Improve global impact in elite sport

Based on current understanding, there has been no prior attempt by global sports bodies, federations or ministry organisations to map professional/elite sports categorised by country and sport, marking this study as the first of its kind in this domain.

Challenges and barriers to faith in this context

This project has been ambitious, not only for its methodology but also because the context for delivering professional/elite sports ministry can be challenging. Using their experience of operating in this field, the partners identified several of the following barriers that can limit professional athletes’ engagement with faith and God.

Since elite sports professionals can have a high profile within their nations, the sporting success and role of the athlete can often become their first and foremost identity. Their fixation on success, psychological pressures and/or worry and aversion to failure can reduce their vulnerability and openness to the Gospel.

Furthermore, athletes can develop a lifestyle whereby they become isolated from developing the relationships needed to build faith and Christian community, even if they are publicly known as followers of Jesus in their communities, countries and more widely through digital channels. Those playing at the top of their sport are very likely to have timetables that are filled with training and competitions, and some will also be travelling internationally to compete and train. This is particularly true for athletes in global tour sports such as track and field, golf and tennis. It can therefore be difficult to find opportunities to build trusted relationships in which the good news of the Bible can be shared with athletes that do not yet know Christ. In summary, four core barriers (i.e. identity, time, location and openness to the gospel) were identified.

Contribution to future outcomes

This research was designed to lay a foundation for partners to prioritise strategic actions for supporting Christian professional athletes and effectively introducing the gospel to increasing numbers of professional/elite sports people. Specifically, the partners wanted to:

- Set goals for sustainable ministry
- Highlight best practice in ministering ‘to’, ‘with’ and ‘through’ professional/elite athletes/coaches
- Support professional/elite sports people who travel between different countries with healthy handoffs of relationships and support to trusted partners across different parts of the world.

Research questions

To fulfil the intended purpose of this research, the following research questions were identified:

- What is the current global landscape of professional/elite sport by country and sport?
- What ministry is happening in the landscapes described by country and sport?
- How should the partners prioritise their response?

Research methodology

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There was a four-stage process in this research:

- **Stage 1:** Defining the terminology of “professional/elite sport” and “sports ministry”
- **Stage 2:** Identification of the most significant global sports by country and sport
- **Stage 3:** Launching an online survey of professional/elite sports ministry organisations
- **Stage 4:** Production of an interactive Global Sport Ministry map

Stage 1: Definitions

The following proposed definitions of “professional/elite sport” and “ministry” were developed at an initial definitions workshop with the core partners on Friday 29th September 2023. The primary purpose of having these definitions would be to help the partners work together more effectively. Furthermore, they helped Eido and the partners to build a survey to map the landscape of professional/elite sports around the world, and the landscape of ministry to these sporting contexts.

“**Professional and Elite Athletes**” are defined as having at least one of the following characteristics:

- **Skill:** Are among the best in their sport in their country because of their talent and performance
- **Fame:** Are well-known in their country for their involvement in their sport
- **Representation:** Trial for and/or represent their country in international events
- **Income:** Get paid for training and competing in professional/elite sport, either through salaries or sponsorships

“**Ministry**” to professional/elite athletes and coaches includes:

Relationships: First, ministry involves building a trusting and personal connection with the athlete or coach with the purpose to help them explore or deepen their faith.

Discipleship: Second, ministry entails using the Bible’s teachings to show how sports and faith can work together, to help athletes and coaches grow in their faith and live authentic Christian lives. This can happen in different settings, like group Bible studies, individual sessions, or bigger events.

Stage 2: Desk research on the global sports landscape

To identify the most popular sports by country, searches were conducted to identify publicly available data sources on the “top” sports in each country across a range of different definitions of “top”, but there were limited good quality data sources. Therefore, it was agreed that the Eido would primarily use participation and viewership statistics to identify the top sports which were significant at a global scale. A list of the 13 “most significant” and relevant sports was then selected by the partners as the focus for data collection and mapping in this research, as shown in Figure 1 and explained in Annex A.

Figure 1: Top Global Sports (from the desk research)

Football / soccer
Basketball
Baseball / softball
Tennis
Cricket
American football
Golf
Rugby
Cycling
Volleyball
Swimming
Field Hockey
Track and Field / Athletics

For each sport, Eido then collated the best available datasets from the most reliable sources, such as global sports federations websites and their published reports, to provide an indication of the geographical concentrations of professional/elite sports athletes by country and sport, and subsequently plotted this data geographically using mapping software. Data sources are listed in Annex B.

Whilst, generally helpful, these datasets have limitations. Upon close examination the statistics are sometimes estimated, time-bound (and therefore not up-to-date) and occasionally incomplete, especially in reporting numbers of female and paralympic professional/elite athletes.

Stage 3: Online survey of those in sports ministry

Whilst the desk research was underway, an online survey was designed to gather information about ministry to professional/elite sports athletes and coaches delivered by organisations and freelancers around the world.

It was not known exactly how many organisations operate in this mission field and therefore invitations were distributed to contacts within partners' networks. These contacts were encouraged to circulate the invitations further within their own networks and beyond.

Organisations which responded to the survey were asked about:

- Themselves and their ministry context
- Significant sports in their country/region
- Their ministries (including the number of professional/elite sportspeople with whom they were in relationship)
- Challenges, opportunities and needs

The survey findings were reported to partners in December 2023. At that stage, it was decided that the survey should be extended to capture further additional responses from ministry organisations and freelancers attending partner conferences in early 2024.

Whilst the desk research was underway, an online survey was designed to gather information about ministry to professional/elite sports athletes and coaches delivered by organisations and freelancers around the world.

This report presents the first attempt by Eido and the partners to map the professional/elite global sports landscape and ministry activities taking place within it.

Stage 4: Interactive Global Sports Ministry Map

Data from the primary and secondary research have been used to build an interactive ArcGIS map of professional/elite sport and ministry by country. The map allows users to filter and arrange data by country, sport, and ministry.

This report presents the first attempt by Eido and the partners to map the professional/elite global sports landscape and ministry activities taking place within it. It is crucial to acknowledge that, at this early stage, the dataset is not exhaustive and cannot capture every aspect of the landscape. Therefore, the findings should be read as indicative estimates of the levels of activity taking place.

Further information about the map and what it shows can be found in the next chapter.

It is crucial to acknowledge that, at this early stage, the dataset is not exhaustive and cannot capture every aspect of the landscape. Therefore, the findings should be read as indicative estimates of the levels of activity taking place.

Results



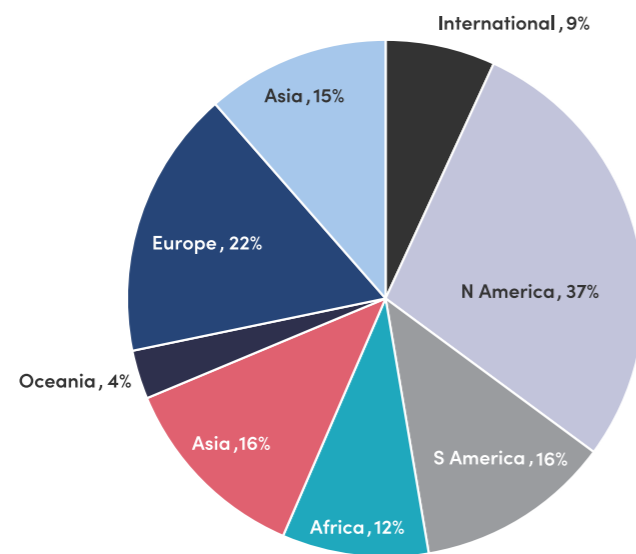
This section presents the combined analysis of the research.

Key statistical findings

The online global sports ministry survey took place between November 2023 and March 2024. In total, 235 people from this Christian ministry sector responded.¹ The majority (88 percent) worked for a ministry organisation.² Many of these organisations were well established; almost half had operated for over 10 years, and around two-thirds had been in ministry for over five years.

The survey achieved broad coverage from respondents located across all major continents, including North America (37 percent), Europe (22 percent), Africa (12 percent), South America (16 percent), and Asia (15 percent).

Figure 2: Chart to show where survey respondents are based³



¹ The survey included 183 complete, or almost fully complete, submitted responses and 52 partial responses in total.

² 175 respondents answered this question about whether they worked for a ministry organisation. Those, of the 175, who did not represent a ministry organisation had freelance ministries (see results for “personal” ministries above).

³ Note: Survey respondents sometimes did not live in the region where they conducted sports ministry.

Global landscape

Survey respondents were asked which sports they considered to be “most significant” in their countries – defined as the sports which had the most viewers, professional athletes, or in which their countries had seen the most success. Table 1 shows how the “top” sports highlighted by survey respondents broadly correlated with the sports identified as “most significant” from globally reported statistics on participation and viewership.^{4,5} These survey findings corroborate the conclusions of the desk research.

Table 1: Most significant sports globally (from the survey and desk research)

Sport	Top global sports (from survey)	Top global sports (from survey)	Top global sports (from survey)	Top global sports (from desk research: participation =1, viewership =2)
	All M&F	Male	Female	All M&F
Football/soccer	1st	1st	1st	Yes (1 and 2)
Basketball	2nd	2nd	4th	Yes (1 and 2)
Track & Field (Athletics)	3rd	3rd	2nd	Yes (1 only)
Volleyball	4th	4th	3rd	Yes (1 and 2)
Swimming	5th	5th	5th	Yes (1 only)
Tennis	6th	9th	6th	Yes (1 and 2)
Cycling	7th	8th	7th	Yes (1 and 2)
Rugby	8th	7th	9th	Yes (1 and 2)
Baseball/softball	9th	6th	12th	Yes (1 and 2)
Cricket	10th	10th	8th	Yes (1 and 2)
Field Hockey	11th	12th	11th	Yes (1 only)
Golf	12th	13th	10th	Yes (1 and 2)
American Football	13th	11th	13th	Yes (1 and 2)

⁴ IPSOS, 2021, Global Views on Sports and Exercise Survey conducted with the World Economic Forum

⁵ Nielsen, 2021, How the world’s biggest sports properties engaged fans in 2020 (Fan base, Digital Impact, TV Audience)

Other significant sports identified through the survey included ice hockey, motorsports, badminton, martial arts, table tennis and boxing.

Respondents delivered their ministries in six main ways:

- **One-on-one spiritual mentoring/life-coaching (discipleship)** – through reading the Bible together, praying, chaplaincy, fellowship, etc. Some delivered this daily or weekly and others more occasionally.
- **Prayer and/or Bible study groups** – meetings ranged from daily to monthly and could be in-person or virtual
- **Chaplaincy/pastoral ministry** – Chaplains working with sports teams, ministering at competitions/events, or offering pastoral counselling. How frequently chaplains worked with these teams varied: some met with them weekly, while others worked only at major events
- **Spiritual development training/conferences** – These included devotions, lectures or retreats that incorporated prayer and reflection. They varied from weekly gatherings to special annual events.
- **Local community outreach** – These were often football/soccer and cricket academies and training programmes ministering to youth. Also, tournaments/events.
- **Ministry operations/coordination** – Overseeing operations, managing relationships, logistics and coordination.

Ministry engagement

Using the partners’ definitions of ministry “relationships” and “discipleship”, respondents were asked how many professional/elite athletes they had engaged:

a) **In relationships** (i.e., “How many professional elite athletes and coaches over 18 years of age are in a personal relationship with ministry staff members, having met [e.g. in-person, online or by phone] at least two times in the past year?”)

b) **In discipleship** (i.e., “how many of these personal relationships with professional elite athletes and coaches over 18 years of age involve engagement in discipleship activities, such as Bible discussions?”)

Some of the initial numbers that respondents provided required follow-up conversations as they appeared implausibly high (relative to other respondents’ answers). Overall, it was found that some of the respondents found it hard to give accurate numbers for how many professional/elite sportspeople they engaged when they also worked with amateur, youth and non-professional athletes. In these cases, the number of professional/elite sportspeople they engaged was estimated in many cases to be around 10 percent of their total engagement.⁶ Therefore, a conservative estimate of 10 percent has been applied to ministry numbers for this group in the survey. Overall, the numbers reported should therefore be treated as “indicative” of the number of professional/elite sportspeople engaged. Table 2 summarises the number of professional/elite athletes “engaged in relationship” and (as a subset of this group) the number “engaged in discipleship”.

Table 2: Total engagement and discipleship

Sport	Total engaged in personal relationships					Total personal relationships that involve discipleship				
	All (rounded)	Male	of which Para M	Female	of which Para F	All (rounded)	Male	of which Para M	Female	of which Para F
Football/soccer	1135	876	27	260	19	925	744	19	179	12
Baseball ⁷	550	489	0	60	0	385	335	0	48	0
American Football	410	407	<5	<5	<5	305	302	0	<5	0
Basketball	345	213	10	132	<5	195	117	8	80	<5
Rugby	160	154	6	<5	<5	140	132	<5	<5	<5
Track and Field	140	96	16	44	6	50	28	9	21	<5
Field Hockey	50	23	<5	27	<5	- ⁸	-	-	-	-
Volleyball	75	29	<5	44	<5	45	20	<5	25	<5
Cricket	20	15	<5	<5	0	15	11	0	>5	<5
Cycling	105	73	0	33	0	40	22	0	17	0
Swimming	15	5	0	9	0	5	<5	0	<5	0
Golf	30	26	<5	<5	<5	20	16	<5	<5	<5
Tennis	10	<5	<5	0	0	10	<5	0	<5	0
Ice Hockey	90	80	5	8	<5	65	38	0	29	0
Other Sports	625	414	73	212	49	300	191	63	109	50
Non-Sport Specific	140	91	<5	47	<5	55	19	<5	34	<5
Total*	3900	3000	150	900	90	2555	1995	105	560	70

*The totals in this table are rounded to the nearest 5 in order to not disclose totals <5, this means that they do not always add up exactly.

⁶ Where concrete numbers were unavailable and sports ministry estimations were included, the dataset may require additional verification and adjustments in the future to increase its precision.

⁷ Softball was not identified additionally to baseball in the survey and is therefore not included in this table.

⁸ There was no available data on field hockey discipleship.

Overall, the highest levels of engagement were in seven major sports: football/soccer, baseball, American football, basketball, rugby, hockey (including both field hockey and ice hockey) and track & field (athletics).

Sports ministry by gender

Figure 3 shows, by gender, the number of professional athletes and coaches that have personal relationships with sports ministry workers (defined as having met either in person, online or by phone at least two times in the past year).

For most sports, people in sports ministry had worked predominantly (and sometimes almost exclusively) with male athletes and coaches, with the exception of volleyball, where engagement with women was slightly higher than it was for men.

Figure 3: Bar graph showing the total number of professional/elite athletes engaged by sport and gender

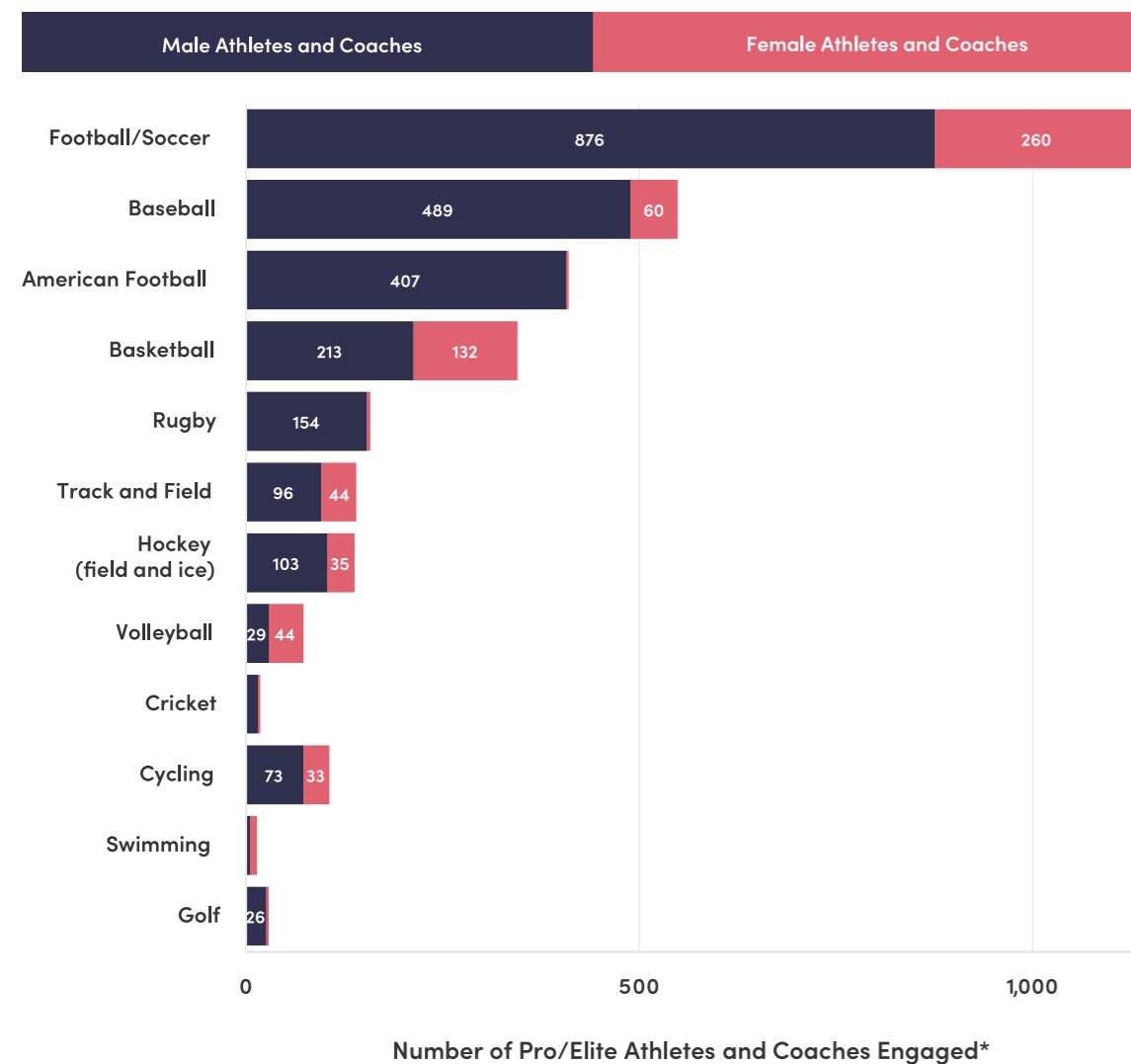
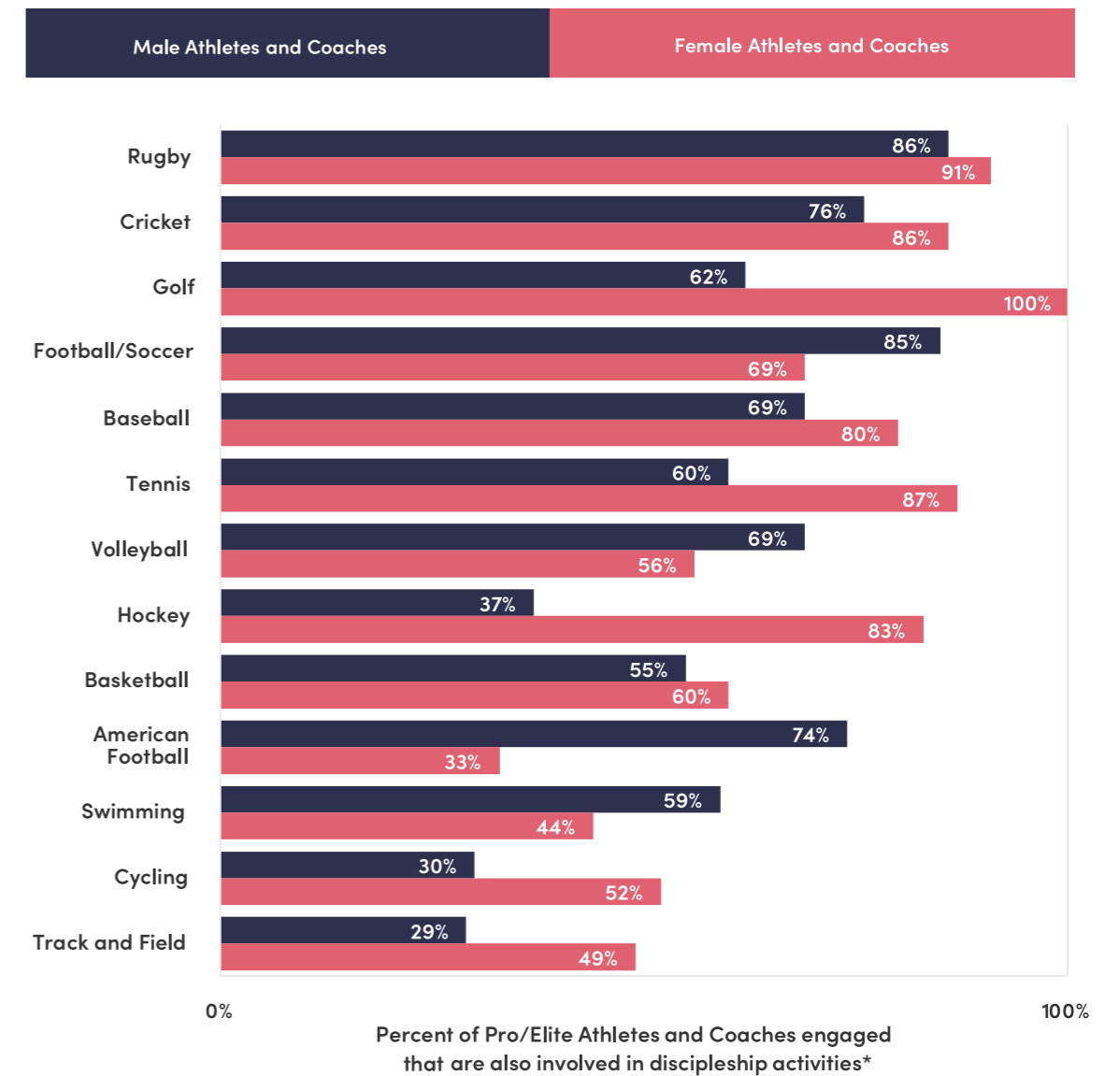


Figure 4 (below) shows the proportion of professional/elite athletes and coaches in personal relationships with ministry staff who had also been engaged in discipleship. For most sports (with the exception of football/soccer and American football), women were more likely to have been engaged in discipleship.⁹

Figure 4: Bar graph showing the proportion of professional/elite athletes engaged in personal relationship who are also being disciplined, by sport and by gender



⁹ This observation of Figure 4 data excludes the gender differences for volleyball and swimming due to the numbers being relatively small and therefore less conclusive.

Sports ministry by sport

As can be seen in Table 3 below, most sports ministry has concentrated on football/soccer, basketball, baseball, rugby, and American football. Unsurprisingly (given the international popularity of these sports), ministry in football/soccer and basketball has been offered in far more countries than ministry in baseball, rugby or American football.

Table 3: Table showing the number of countries where ministry is taking place in sports with the highest levels of engagement of Professional/elite sports athletes and coaches

Sport	Number of Countries	Total Engagement	Total Discipleship
Football/soccer	46	1135	925
Basketball	29	345	195
Baseball	8	550	385
Rugby	8	160	140
American Football	2	410	305

Sports ministry by geography

In total 142 respondents to the survey provided ministry numbers and ministry locations (specified by country, continent or more generally at international level) for their engagement and discipleship of professional/elite athletes and coaches.

Ministry workers are operating across all continents (except Antarctica), sometimes at a region-wide level and other times in specific countries within these regions, as shown in Table 4. The highest concentration of athletes engaged was in North America. Table 4 also shows that the highest concentration of organisations/freelancers in ministry was in Europe, although this may simply reflect the high number of surveys completed at the Sports Movement European conference.

Table 4: Table showing the regions where ministry organisations are operating across the world

Regional geographies	Total survey respondents of organisations/freelancers in ministry	Total professional/elite athletes and coaches engaged (rounded)
North America	37	1420
Europe	41	635
Asia	17	460
Africa	13	305
South America	10	210
Oceania	7	60
International (multiple continents)	17	805
Total	142	3900

Some of the respondents focused on a single country, while others worked more widely across several countries in a region. In total, 63 of the 142¹⁰ respondents were ministering in a single country, together reaching 54 percent of all professional/elite athletes engaged (Table 5 on the next page).

The top 15 countries (by number of athletes engaged) are the United States, United Kingdom, Cameroon, Costa Rica, and Brazil.

Unsurprisingly (given the international popularity of these sports), ministry in football/soccer and basketball has been offered in far more countries than ministry in baseball, rugby or American football.



¹⁰ This is the number of respondents who provided ministry numbers and are counted as actively delivering ministry to pro/elite sportspeople.

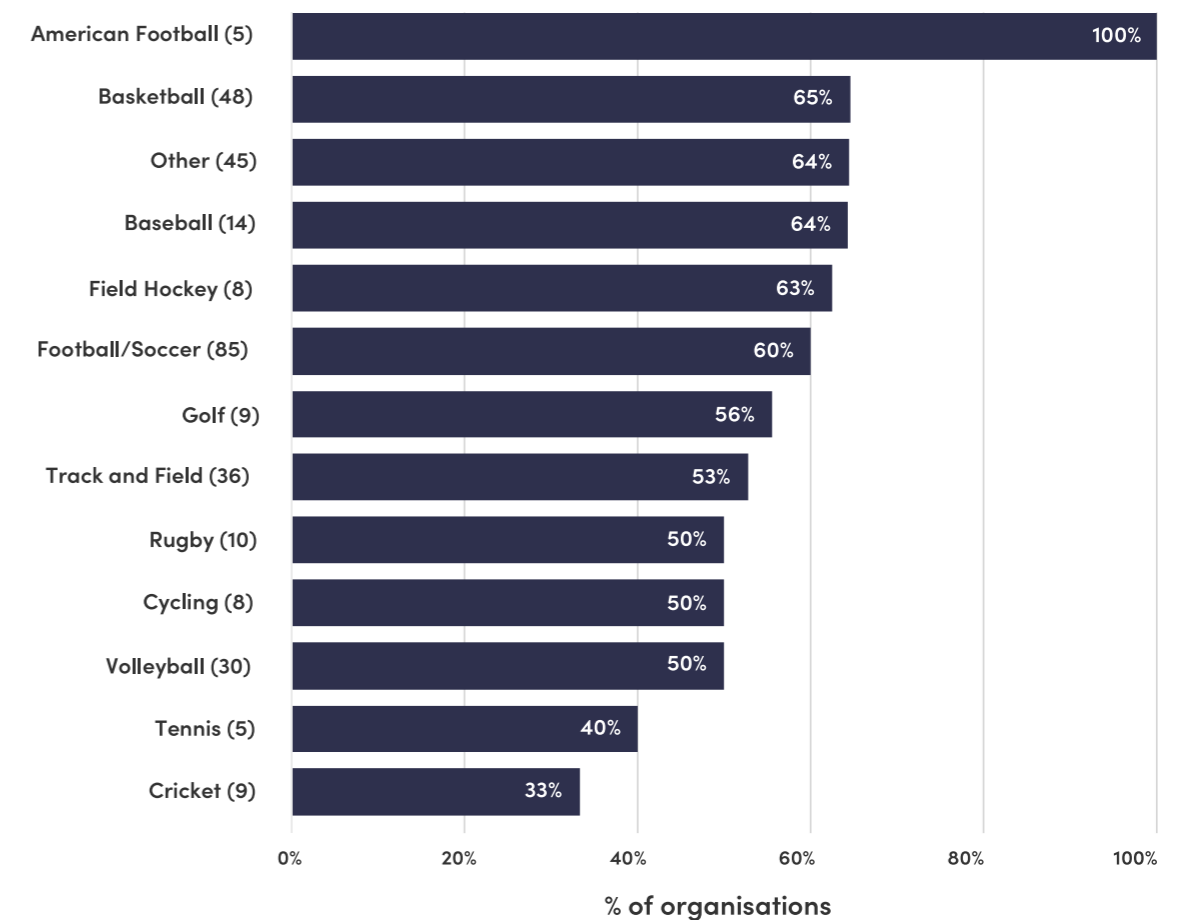
Table 5: Table showing the regions where ministry organisations are operating across the world		
Top 15 countries	Total respondents	Total professional/elite athletes and coaches engaged
United States	11	1180
United Kingdom	3	221
Cameroon	1	92
Costa Rica	9	85
Brazil	16	81
Philippines	2	66
South Africa	2	53
Finland	2	50
Russia	3	46
Kenya	5	45
Azerbaijan	1	43
Venezuela	1	43
Fiji	4	42
Sweden	2	39
Italy	1	36
Total	63	2122

Ministry to partners and spouses

The survey identified that more than 50 percent of ministries (168 ministries out of 312 ministries)¹¹ engaged both athletes and their spouses. More than 60 percent of ministries did so in the five major sports of American football, basketball, baseball, field hockey and football/soccer.

¹¹ Ministry workers answered this question for all sports ministries that they engage. Many organisations have multiple sports ministries across different sports; hence the number is higher than the number of total survey respondents.

Figure 5: Bar graph showing the number (in brackets) and proportion of sports ministries engaging both professional/elite athletes and their spouses partners



Main challenges and opportunities

The last section of the survey asked respondents about challenges and opportunities in ministry and their own personal development needs. A summary of the common themes that were mentioned is presented here.

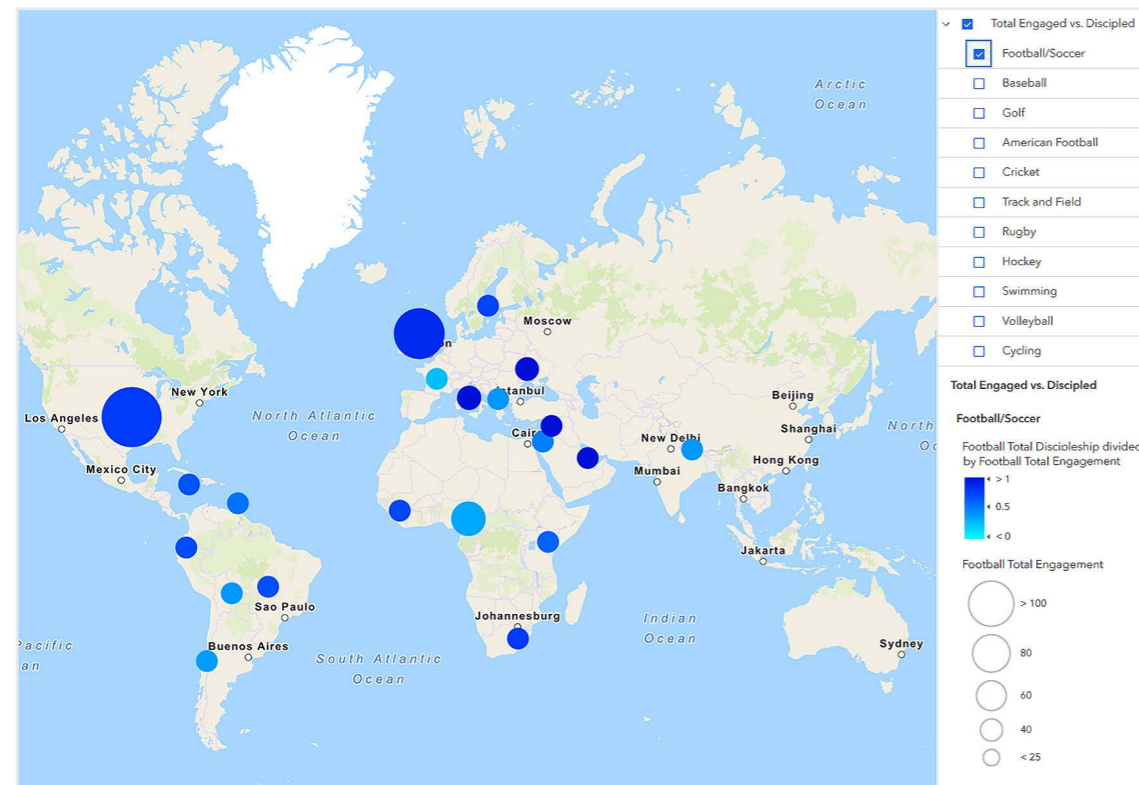
Challenges

The key challenges which were identified substantiate partners' knowledge about the nature of the sports ministry sector. Firstly, respondents said that there were not enough people interested in working in the sports ministry and that they found it difficult to access Christian athletes and coaches. Participants said that coaches and athletes were often unable to commit to meetings and Bible studies due to their busy routines and travelling schedules. They also experienced difficulties accessing elite athletes because they didn't have the right contacts or were limited by being in different geographical locations. Many of the participants mentioned lack of funding as a hindrance to delivering their ministries and running events, and some also said they would like more involvement from local churches.

Concentrations of ministry by sport

On the ArcGIS map, professional/elite sport engagement can also be filtered by sport. This capability is demonstrated in Figure 7. Circle size indicates numbers engaged and darker blue circles indicate that more sportspeople and coaches are engaged in discipleship.

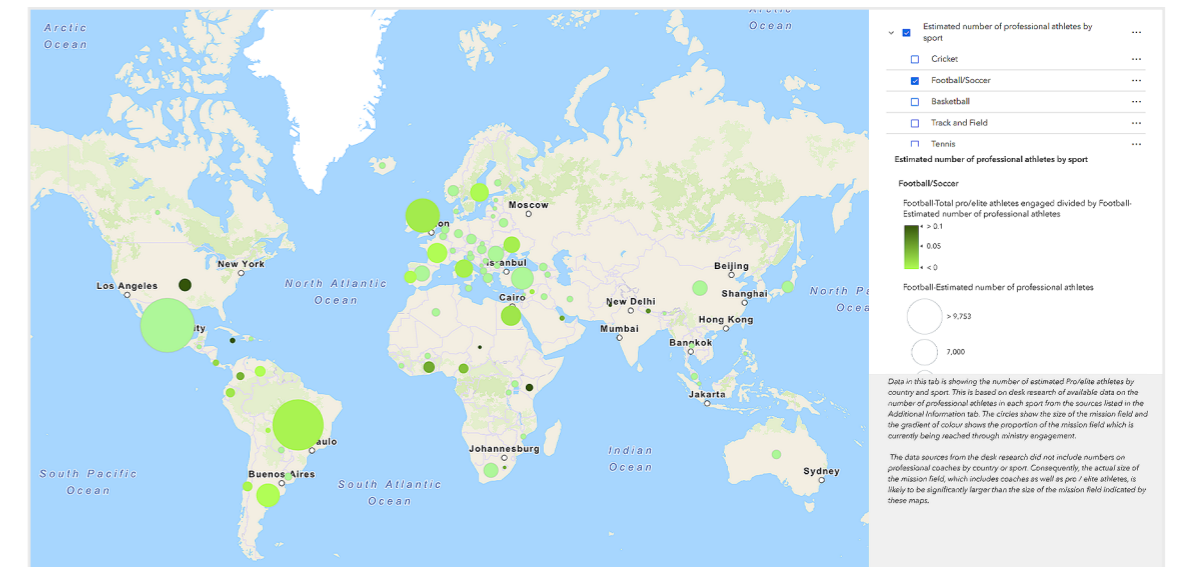
Figure 7: Screenshot of the interactive map to show the total number of professional/elite football/soccer players and coaches engaged and discipled



Estimated numbers of professional/elite athletes by country and sport

The map also gives an estimation of the number of professional/elite athletes by country and sport, based on desk research. The circles show the size of the mission field, and the gradient of colour shows the proportion of the mission field which is currently reached through sports ministry (the darker the colour, the higher proportion are reached).¹² Figure 8 shows the estimated number and locations of all professional and elite football/soccer players internationally.

Figure 8: Screenshot of the interactive map to show the estimated number of professional and elite athletes in the sport of football/soccer by country



¹⁰ NB. The publicly available data sources compiled through the desk research did not include numbers on professional coaches by country or sport. Consequently, the actual size of the mission field, which includes coaches as well as professional/elite athletes, is likely to be significantly larger than the size of the mission field indicated on the global landscape maps.

Synthesised analysis

The following observations are based on comparing survey data with a body of publicly available data sources compiled through desk research (see Annex B for the full list). Both of these primary and secondary data sources have limitations and are likely to be incomplete in their coverage. The smallest sports ministries (those reaching fewer than five athletes or coaches) are also excluded from the map and synthesis analysis below. All commentary here, therefore, is presented as preliminary observations which are likely to require further investigation and confirmation but are presented here to begin a strategic conversation.

At a general level, a number of observations can be made about the mission fields for each of the major global sports:

- **Football/soccer** has both the highest number of professional/elite sportspeople and the largest numbers reached by sports ministries. Much of this ministry is currently concentrated in the United States and the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, some countries with substantial populations of professional/elite athletes (such as Mexico, Argentina, Turkey, Egypt, Spain and Romania) appear to lack any recorded ministry presence in the sport.
- **Basketball** also has a high prevalence of professional/elite sportspeople across countries, with particularly high concentrations in the United States and Europe. However, ministry to these sportspeople and coaches is sparse outside of a handful of European countries (and likely also the United States, although this did not appear in the survey data).
- **Baseball/softball** ministry is concentrated in the Americas, but no available comprehensive lists of international professional athletes were identified for baseball/softball in the desk research. Therefore, it was not possible to calculate what proportion of professional/elite athletes were reached by sports ministries.
- **Tennis** is another sport that is United States and European-centric for professional/elite athletes, with high numbers in France and Italy in particular, but there is almost no professional/elite sports ministry occurring in this sport.
- **Cricket** professionals are predominately clustered in and around India and other International Cricket Council (ICC) membership countries. The map, however, shows an absence of ministry initiatives to professional/elite athletes in India and Pakistan.
- **American football** professional and elite athletes are unsurprisingly located almost exclusively in North America, as is all sports ministry to these athletes. While sports ministries reach a high number of athletes (around 400, which is high for the survey), actual mission field penetration is estimated to amount to approximately 1.5 percent.
- **Golf:** The highest numbers of Golf professionals are to be found in Japan, followed by Australia, Sweden, Thailand, China, India and South Africa. Nevertheless, ministry to professional/elite golf players and coaches remains largely untapped.
- **Rugby** has its highest numbers of professionals in France, but no professional/elite sports ministry there. The survey results suggest some notable engagement is happening in South Africa and Fiji, and also to some extent within the UK.
- **Cycling** professionals are dispersed globally, with concentrations in Europe – particularly in France, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy, and the UK – as well as in the United States. Ministry occurs in several countries but in numbers too small to show on the map.
- **Volleyball** – There were no available comprehensive lists of international professional/elite athletes for volleyball. Therefore, estimates of professional/elite volleyball players could not be included in the interactive map. Small ministries are occurring, largely in equatorial countries around the world, but it is not possible to determine how closely this matches the distribution of professional/elite volleyball players.
- **Swimming** professionals/elites are sparsely distributed across numerous countries worldwide, notably in Europe, in the United States and Europe. This sport represents another largely untapped opportunity for ministry engagement.
- **Field Hockey** has professionals in many countries across the globe but very low rates of sports ministry.
- **Track and Field (Athletics)** has professional/elite athletes representing numerous countries, presenting a significant opportunity for engagement in many locations. Active ministry primarily occurs in African countries and the United States, but low numbers are engaged overall.

Football/soccer has both the highest number of professional/elite sportspeople and the largest numbers reached by sports ministries. Much of this ministry is currently concentrated in the United States and the United Kingdom.



Conclusion



This research process has revealed strategic gaps and key ministry opportunities for the partners, and it has also enabled significant learning about the systems required to monitor and coordinate efforts between global collaborators going forwards. Key lessons with recommendations are outlined below.

Key lessons and recommendations

Learning 1: Opportunities most obviously lie where the mission field is large and currently lacks any sports ministry presence. These opportunities have been identified as follows:

By sport: Many sports (football/soccer, basketball, rugby, American football and athletics/track and field) that have the largest potential mission fields¹³ are also the sports where the majority of ministry is currently happening. By contrast, golf and cricket (two of the larger mission fields) as well as tennis, cycling, swimming and field hockey are relatively unaccessed as mission fields.¹⁴

By geography: The interactive map analysis suggests that most professional/elite sportspeople live in the Americas and Europe. Mission fields also exist in the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, but generally there are fewer professional/elite sportspeople and coaches in these regions. Ministry in some of these contexts can be hindered by legal restrictions on evangelism.

Overall, the data shows that sports ministries are reaching only a minority of professional/elite athletes and coaches, the mission field is vast, and the messengers are few.

¹³ The largest mission fields identified through the desk research were football/soccer, basketball, and American football, then followed by golf, cricket, and rugby. Detailed comparisons should not be made between the numbers of elite/professionals in each sport due to differences in the definitions and methodologies used in the publicly available data sources.

¹⁴ It was not possible to estimate the proportion of professional/elite sportspeople reached by baseball and volleyball sports ministries as there was no publicly available data for the number of professional/elite athletes participating in these two sports.

Learning Recommendation 1: Partners should use the interactive map to identify and assess the numbers of unreached people across different geography and sports ministry areas and can prioritise where to focus their efforts in a phased approach.

Learning 2: In addition to the above, there may be a case for training more people currently working in non-professionals sports ministry in how to access and support professional/elite sportspeople and coaches. While more data collection and analysis would be required to substantiate this approach, some data about non-professionals sports ministries has already unintentionally been collected in the survey where information was given about broader ministry work that is being delivered (such as youth academies for example) and could be more deliberately sought in the future. Such an approach would serve multiple purposes: contextualising professional/elite ministry figures within a broader framework, mitigating the risk of overreporting in this specific sector, and identifying and nurturing a pool of prospective workers who may be ready to enter the professional/elite sports ministry domain.

Learning Recommendation 2: In future surveys, partners could consider including inquiries about the broader non-professional sports ministry engagements of respondents.

Learning 3: Our research has shown that there are differences in sports ministry engagement by gender. However, there is a dearth of publicly available sports data on women's sports and paralympic sports. Even though sports for these groups are growing in participation and viewership internationally, published statistics are not currently keeping up with growing trends. However, increasing popularity and demand could drive change in the coming years. Going forward, the partnership could proactively explore differences in ministry needs according to age, ethnicity, gender, and disability, with the aim of increasing accessibility and the successful engagement of minority groups.

Learning Recommendation 3: Set a priority to identify the specific ministry needs of minority groups of athletes, beginning with female and paralympic athletes.

Learning 4: Survey respondents identified opportunities for partnership working, networking with international sports federations, developing and sharing missional resources and professional development training.

Learning Recommendation 4: Explore how partnership working, missional resources and professional development training could be developed as strategic goals.

⁹ Unfortunately, it was not possible to analyse these differences by specific ethnicities (e.g., Indian or Chinese) given the low number of Asians in the sample.

Learning 5. This study should provide a helpful basis for designing future research and assessing progress against the partnership’s strategic priorities. While this research has shown the present state of sports ministry, repeating the survey periodically (annually or every 2-5 years) would enable partners to maintain a dynamic understanding of the sports ministry landscape.

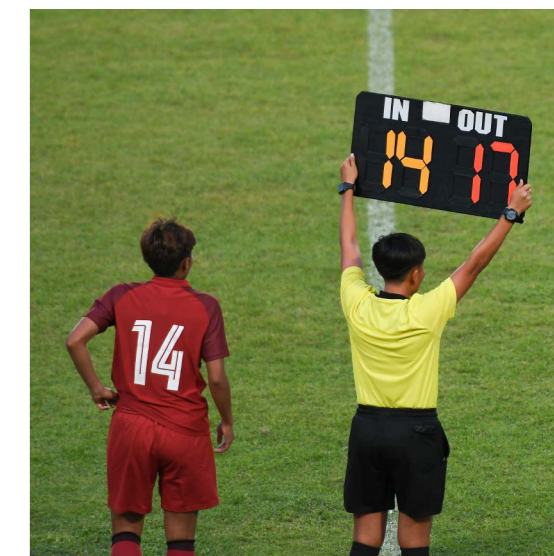
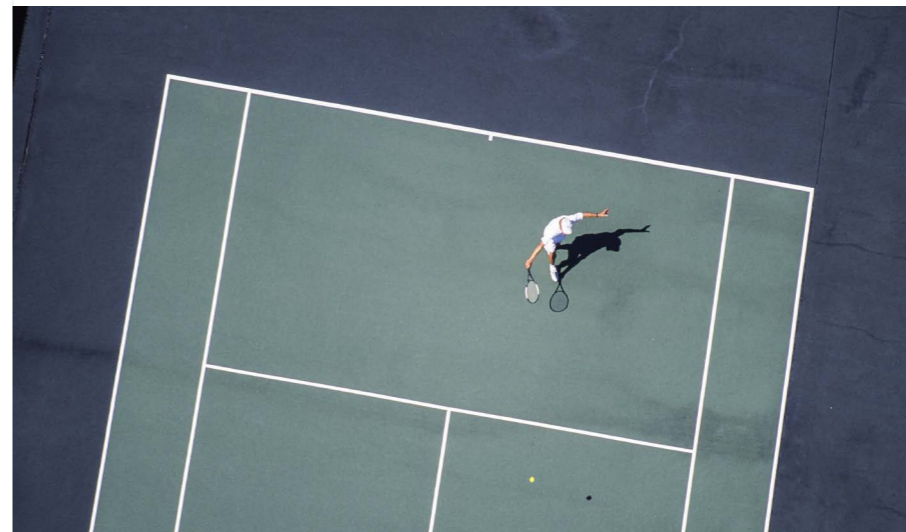
Learning Recommendation 5: Survey data and desk research will require periodic updating to maintain a dynamic understanding of the sports ministry landscape.

Summary

In conclusion, this study presents pioneering research on the current dynamics of ministry to professional/elite athletes – identifying both needs and areas of strength. The analysis provides a foundation of data and evidence which can be built upon in future years. The initial desk research identified 13 significant sports on a global scale, which was confirmed by an online survey of over 200 professionals in the professional/elite sports ministry sector.

Despite these insights, Christian sports ministries to professional/elite sportspeople are still in the early stages of penetrating potential mission fields; there is still much to be done. The evidence gathered and interactive map developed through this research can help to foster informed and ongoing strategic planning, not only to enhance existing ministries of people working with professional/elite sportspeople, but also to create new initiatives aimed at identifying and addressing gaps in particular sports and countries. Crucially, an approach is required that will enable further monitoring and deeper engagement with the evolving global sports mission fields in the coming years.

The analysis provides a foundation of data and evidence which can be built upon in future years. The initial desk research identified 13 significant sports on a global scale, which was confirmed by an online survey of over 200 professionals in the professional/elite sports ministry sector.



Annex A: Methodology for selecting the 13 major sports



Extensive searches failed to identify definitive official sources for country-level data about the popularity of sports. Consequently, it was determined that a new methodology should be developed to facilitate the creation of a shortlist of major sports that could be tested and potentially refined through the global ministry survey.

In the initial stage of the selection process, twelve online secondary data sources were identified.¹⁷ Each sport mentioned in these sources was listed and scored on a scale of twelve, based on the number of sources that had labelled the sport as “popular” or significant, according to their criteria. These sources varied considerably in their definitions of popularity, incorporating factors such as viewership statistics, participation, popularity by online voting, fan base size, player counts, Google search analysis, and top athletes’ salaries. The approach yielded a list of 21 sports that scored above 2, as shown in Table 6.

At the next stage, partners selected a shortlist using two most relevant and reliable data sources on viewership (Neilson report, 2021) and participation (Ipsos report, 2021). This led to the selection of sports that were mentioned in both these sources, with the exception of martial arts and badminton because these were thought to be less active areas for sports ministry globally. A further three sports that just featured as top sports for participation (swimming, hockey and track & field) were also added to the shortlist by the partners for testing through the global ministry survey.

¹⁷ Online secondary data sources: Nielson report, 2021 - How the world’s biggest sports properties engaged fans in 2020; IPSOS 2021 Global Views on Sports and exercise survey conducted with the World Economic Forum; World Population Review, Most Popular Sports by Country, Babbel 2021 (methodology unclear); Bleacher Report 2008 (methodology unclear); Most popular sports (online voting); Worldatlas; Statista Worldwide TV Viewership of Selected Sporting Events (The Economist, 2010); Google search analysis - English speaking - over 4 year period (Top End Sports); Forbes - Salaries of Top Athletes 2023; Statista Highest Paid Female Athletes 2023; World Atlas: Number of fans.

Table 6: Shortlist used to select the 13 major sports for testing through the global survey

Sport	Number of mentions in selected secondary data sources (Score)	Nielson report 2021, World's biggest global sports properties engagement of fans (survey of 35 countries)	IPSOS Participation (Survey of 29 nations)	Selected for testing as a major sport (Y)
Football/soccer	12	1	1	Y
Basketball	12	1	1	Y
Baseball/Softball	10	1	1	Y
Tennis	9	1	1	Y
Cricket	9	1	1	Y
American football	9	1	1	Y
Golf	7	1	1	Y
Rugby	7	1	1	Y
Ice Hockey	6	1		
Cycling	5	1	1	y
Motor Sports	5	1		
Volleyball	4	1	1	Y
Badminton	4	1	1	
Martial Arts	4	1	1	
Table Tennis	3		1	
Swimming	2		1	Y
Hockey	2		1	Y
Athletics / Track and Field	2		1	Y
Wrestling	2			
Skiing	2			
Mongolian Wrestlins	2			

Annex B: Data Sources



The data sources listed below did not include numbers on professional coaches by country or sport. Consequently, the actual size of the mission field, which includes coaches as well as professional / elite athletes, is likely to be significantly larger than the size of the mission field indicated in the interactive map.

American Football: Professional athletes include players on 2023 rosters within male professional teams. Professional athletes were defined as players engaged in leagues identified by the International Federation of American Football. College athletes in D1 schools were also included for the United States due to its high popularity. Data source: <https://www.footballdb.com/>

Athletics: Professionals athletes include those from the top 1000 in Men's and Women's Overall World Athletic Rankings. Data source: <https://worldathletics.org/world-rankings/introduction>

Basketball: Professionals were counted from 2023 male and female rosters. Professional Athletes are defined as individuals aged 18 years or older who are playing within either collegiate level leagues or professional level leagues. (Data source: <https://www.basketball-database.com> and <https://www.eurobasket.com>)

Cricket: Professional players were defined as those who were active on an international team during the 2023 season. ESPN reported all active players in list form of men's and women's combined. Data source (includes players from teams in ICC full member countries but does not include teams in associate member countries): <https://www.espncricinfo.com/cricketers>

Cycling: Professionals included in the count were named on the 2022/2023 rankings for the following cycling categories: Road, Cyclocross, and MountainBiking (Estimates are for male players only.) Data source: <https://firstcycling.com/index.php>

Field Hockey: Professionals were counted from 2023 male and female rosters identified by the International Hockey Federation. Hockey here refers to only Field Hockey (both indoor and outdoor). Data source: <https://www.fih.hockey/datahub>

Football: Professional players are defined by FIFA as: "a player is considered professional if they have a written contract with a club and are paid more for their footballing activity than the expenses they effectively incur." Estimates are for male players only. Source: FIFA 2019 report: <https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/a59132e138824c1c/original/jlr5corccbsef4n4brde.pdf>

Golf: Professionals athletes include those from the 2023 WGR rankings for male professionals (<https://www.owgr.com/current-world-ranking>) and Rolex World Rankings for women (<https://www.rolexrankings.com/rankings>)

Rugby: Professional athletes include players included on 2023/2024 male rosters of internationally recognized teams. Data source: <https://all.rugby/players/>

Swimming: Professional athletes include those on the World Aquatics Top Ranked Swimmers for 2022 and 2023 within Men's, Women's, and Mixed events. Data source: <https://www.worldaquatics.com/>

Tennis: Professional athletes include individuals on the 2023 player rankings for ATP (mens) and WTA (womens). Data source: <https://www.tennis.com/players-rankings/>

Please note: There were no available comprehensive lists of international professional athletes for **volleyball** and **baseball/softball**. Therefore, estimates on the professional/elite landscape for these sports were not included in the interactive map.

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