

Practitioner Sports: A Missing Category

A discussion paper for federation leaders in the IOC-recognised family

Jukka-Pekka Ahonen — 2026

The term that doesn't exist

There is, as far as I can establish, no widely used term in international sport governance for a sport whose events are consumed primarily by the athletes who compete in them. There is no shortage of terms for what surrounds this category — grassroots sport, participation sport, mass sport, sport for all — but none of these names what I mean, and the mismatch is not trivial.

What I mean is this: a large number of the sports inside the IOC-recognised family, particularly across the ARISF and AIMS membership, organise events where the participants *are* the audience. Spectators, to the extent they exist, are former practitioners, family, coaches, or representatives of adjacent organisations. Achieving a 1:1 ratio of participants to uninvolved spectators is often unattainable. The event is not structured for an external audience. The event is structured for the people who enter it.

This is not a deficiency. It is a mode of operation. But because it has no name, the default vocabulary available to these federations' leaders is borrowed wholesale from sports where the opposite is true — where the event exists for a distant audience and the athlete is an input into a broadcast product. And that borrowing, I believe, is doing quiet but serious damage.

I am calling this category **practitioner sports**, and I am writing this paper to propose the term, test whether it holds, and invite federation leaders to work through what it implies — together, because I do not have the answers myself.

A simple diagnostic

The functional test I propose is revenue composition.

If the majority of a federation's revenue comes from media rights and sponsorship deals, it is operating a spectator sport. If the majority comes from athlete licences, club affiliations, and event participation fees, it is operating a practitioner sport.

This is deliberately a *functional* separation, not a hierarchical one. It reports what the market has already decided about where a federation's value sits. It does not rank sports. An

ultra-distance runner completing a 24-hour trail event may substantially exceed, in athletic terms, most elite athletes who receive mainstream media coverage. Nothing about a thin audience diminishes the rigor of the performance.

The diagnostic is also intersectional: most spectator sports, below their elite broadcast tier, are in fact practitioner sports. The club footballer, the regional swimmer, the age-group triathlete — they are practitioners. Their events are consumed by themselves and their stakeholders, not by a viewing public. The spectator logic that governs the elite tier of their sport does not describe the tier they operate in.

Why the existing terms don't work

Grassroots sport assumes a position at the bottom of a hierarchy — the word only makes sense in relation to a tree whose canopy is elite competition. It implies development pathway, not a complete mode of operation.

Participation sport is a volume metric. It counts how many people do the thing. It does not describe the structural logic of the event. It is also framed against spectatorship as the unmarked default — to "participate" implies an alternative of watching — and it is almost always instrumentalised toward non-sport ends: public health policy, social cohesion, youth development. The sport becomes a means to something else.

Practitioner borrows from medicine, law, and craft. It implies ongoing practice and a body of knowledge. It names a person who does something seriously, at whatever level, for intrinsic reasons. And it does not require a hierarchy to make sense. A sport can operate entirely on practitioner logic, at every level of its organisation, and be complete.

Patterns I think I see

I have spent several years building infrastructure for athlete recognition in sports that operate on what I'm now calling practitioner logic. In that work, and in conversation with federation leaders, I have noticed patterns that I want to put on the table — not as conclusions, but as observations I'd like tested.

Borrowed KPIs. Federation communications plans routinely set goals for reach, followers, and engagement benchmarked, implicitly or explicitly, against spectator sports. Communications directors are given modest resources to pursue numbers that are both unachievable and, I suspect, irrelevant to the federation's actual mission. Every hour spent chasing spectator-style reach is an hour not spent building depth of relationship with the practitioner audience the federation actually serves.

The audience confusion. In spectator sports, the audience is a consumer aggregate. In practitioner sports, the audience *is* the athlete population and their immediate stakeholders — family, coaches, clubs, adjacent organisations. These are not consumers to be captured.

They are stakeholders in a shared enterprise. When federations address them with consumer-logic messaging, the result satisfies no one.

The unlikely star. Occasionally a practitioner sport produces an athlete who gains outsized mainstream attention, usually for reasons tangential to the sport itself. Federations try to piggyback. Mainstream coverage typically treats the athlete as a curiosity, barely contextualises their achievement within the sport, and produces a general audience that does not convert to practitioners or durable followers. The federation invests relational capital and gains nothing structural.

The recognition gap. Most practitioner-sport federations handle results publication as an administrative task — a PDF result sheet on a federation website. This is administrative archiving, not athlete recognition. The content is not indexed by search engines, not linked from anywhere meaningful, and not persistent in any digital memory beyond the event weekend. Elite athletes in practitioner sports can win world championships and remain, in practical digital terms, invisible. Where this persists, elite attrition follows.

The extreme-sports mirage. A subset of adventure and extreme sports has generated genuine commercial success through streaming and sponsor investment. This is frequently cited as a model within the practitioner-sport community. On closer inspection, the commercial engine of this segment has been substantially built on a structural conflict of interest between athlete safety and commercial visibility — sponsor structures that systematically incentivise greater risk, documented preferences for younger and cheaper athletes willing to take more extreme risks, and media coverage dynamics that create irreversible pressure against sound safety decisions, quite often surpassing the sport's competitive setup completely. This is not a model that should be imported into federations whose responsibility to their athletes includes safety governance. More broadly: apparent commercial success in a sport category does not always indicate structural soundness. The trade-off that made it possible matters.

I believe these patterns are connected. They share a root cause: the absence of a conceptual frame that would allow federation leaders to recognise that they are operating a fundamentally different kind of sport, with different structural needs, than the spectator-sport model they are being asked to emulate.

But I am not certain. These are patterns observed from one vantage point, and they may look different from inside a federation.

What I don't know

I have convictions about the problem. I have far less certainty about the solution. Here is what I think needs to be worked through, and what I cannot work through alone:

Is the practitioner/spectator distinction the right cut? It is the most useful one I have found, but there may be a better axis — or the distinction may be more of a spectrum, or

more context-dependent, than my current framing allows. I would like to hear from federation leaders whose sports sit uncomfortably on the line.

What does a practitioner-logic communications strategy actually look like in practice?

Not as a theoretical framework, but as a budget allocation, a set of weekly tasks, a reporting structure. What should a communications director in a practitioner-sport federation be doing on a Tuesday morning, and how should they be evaluated?

What does athlete recognition require, structurally, when media coverage cannot be relied on to provide it? I have built infrastructure that I believe addresses part of this, but I do not know if the layers I've prioritised are the right ones, or in the right order, or sufficient. The federations themselves are better positioned to diagnose what is most broken and what would produce the biggest step-change if fixed.

Can the innovation that practitioner sports need be built jointly across federations, or does it have to be built sport by sport? If jointly, what is the governance model? Who owns the standards? Who pays? These are institutional design questions that no single commercial actor should answer alone.

What would success look like — in terms federations themselves would recognise — if the practitioner-sport category were properly understood and properly served? Not spectator-sport success metrics applied with a discount. Something native to the logic.

An invitation

I am organising a series of virtual roundtable discussions with leaders from IOC-recognised federations to work through these questions. The intent is not to present answers but to develop shared vocabulary and, from that vocabulary, to identify the infrastructure needs that follow.

If you lead a federation that recognises some version of the patterns described here, and if you are interested in working through the implications rather than being told about them, I would welcome your participation.

Jukka-Pekka Ahonen is the founder of NxtStride Finland Oy, a sports technology company building digital infrastructure for IOC-recognised federations. He is the author of The Independent Athlete. The views in this paper are his own.

Contact: contact@nxtstride.com