

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a rapidly evolving sports and entertainment landscape, stakeholders within the biathlon family are facing both a challenge and an opportunity when it comes to engaging Generation Z – a digitally native, socially conscious, and highly selective audience. While biathlon has distinctive strengths, including its exciting format, gender equality, and unique combination of endurance and precision, there is more that needs to be done to attract younger fans.

Drawing on over 1,500 survey responses and insights from 100 Gen Z focus group participants across six markets, this whitepaper identifies three strategic imperatives for biathlon to increase its relevance among Gen Z:

### NEW PATHWAYS TO BUILD FANDOM

### BUILD A COMMUNITY TO DRIVE FANDOM

### ELEVATE YOUR ATHLETES

#### 1. NEW PATHWAYS TO BUILD FANDOM

Gen Z fans are no longer discovering sports primarily via traditional TV broadcasts. Instead, social media and gaming are emerging as key entry points. While the latter is unlikely to be a viable channel for the Biathlon Family in the short term, it should consider experimenting with influencer partnerships, lighter, behind-the-scenes content, and relatable storytelling that highlight the sport's unique challenges and entertainment value.

#### 2. BUILD A COMMUNITY TO DRIVE FANDOM

Without peers to share their passion, young fans are unlikely to become core fans. It is essential to establish digital communities through the likes of Reddit, Discord, live streaming platforms, and strategic publisher partnerships. These forums can provide fans with native language environments that foster a sense of belonging and the regular touchpoints required to nurture fandom.

#### 3. ELEVATE YOUR ATHLETES

Gen Z is increasingly drawn to individual athletes over teams or nations. Athletes' stories, emotions, and perspectives are increasingly what younger fans look for on social media. It will be vital to support athletes in this effort, with content planning, training, and production, especially during major events. Identifying and highlighting standout personalities can have transformative effects, as seen with other sports like Formula 1 and darts.

By implementing initiatives that address these imperatives, stakeholders within the biathlon family can position biathlon as an exciting, entertaining and unique sport that resonates with the next generation of fans. This will be essential to secure the future success of the sport and to generate new revenue streams.

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IF BIATHLON WERE MORE VISIBLE, I THINK A LOT OF PEOPLE  
MORE WOULD FOLLOW IT BECAUSE IT IS VERY INTERESTING

ITALIAN GIRL, 17 Y/O

INTRODUCTION

In 2024, fans worldwide consumed more than a trillion hours of sport content, making sports the third largest entertainment industry behind video games and TV. And while the industry as a whole is growing, not all sports are growing equally. Unsurprisingly, sports that are outpacing the market are ones that have put audience growth strategies in place to be relevant with all generations, especially the younger ones. And with 1 in 3 people worldwide now falling within Generation Z, capturing their attention is more important than ever.

We conducted research with Gen Z fans to understand how stakeholders in the biathlon

family need to adapt their strategies to attract more Gen Z fans, and thus secure the future of the sport both from an sporting and commercial perspective. We collected over 1500 survey responses and spoke with 100 Gen Z fans across 6 European markets – ranking from large to small, mature to emerging – to understand what the strengths of biathlon are that we should capitalize on, and what the areas for development are to grow relevance with Gen Z fans in the future.

The findings and recommendations set out in this paper should be used as input to audience growth strategies at a local level to ensure they resonate with Gen Z fans.

STRENGTHS OF BIATHLON

While the research revealed a number of areas where stakeholders in the biathlon ecosystem can do more to capture the attention of younger generations, there are strong bases that biathlon can and should build on, to gain more attention in the future.

The most mentioned strength is the inherent excitement of the format of the sport. The survey results showed that excitement is the #1 ranked factor why fans follow biathlon (figure 1). This was echoed in the focus groups, where participants mentioned that the last shooting and lap are all-decisive, so one often cannot know who will win until the very end.

“

OFTEN THE RESULTS ARE COMPLETELY RE-SHUFFLED AT THE LAST SHOOTING OR IN THE LAST LAP, SO YOU CANNOT KNOW UNTIL THE END WHO WILL WIN

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GERMAN GIRL, 15 Y/O

FIGURE 1 - WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING FACTORS MOST MOTIVATE YOU TO FOLLOW BIATHLON

FACTORS	GEN Z
THE EXCITEMENT OF THE SPORT	1st
SUPPORTING MY COUNTRY (OR ATHLETES FROM MY COUNTRY)	2nd
WITNESSING GREAT SPORTS PERFORMANCES (INDEPENDENT OF WHICH ATHLETE IT IS)	3rd
SEEING MY FAVOURITE ATHLETES IN ACTION	4th
INCREASING MY KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE IN THE SPORT	5th
WATCHING OR FOLLOWING MAJOR EVENTS	6th



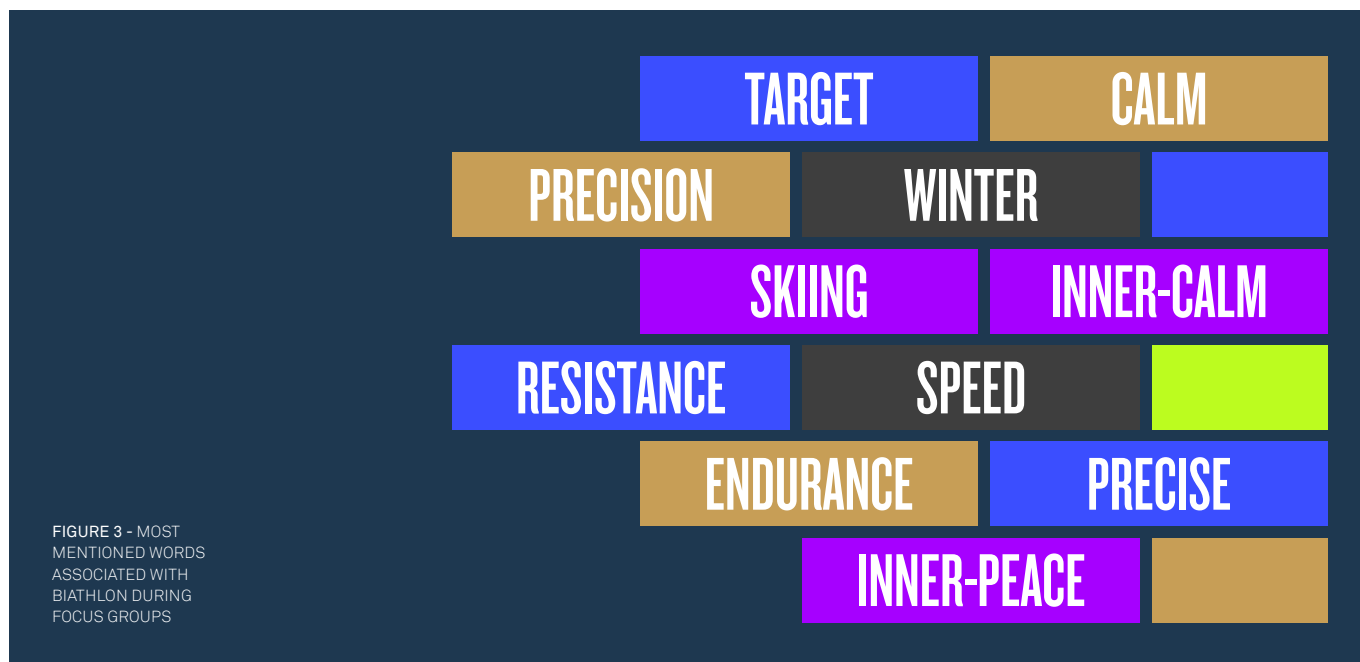
A second positively viewed characteristic of biathlon that resonates with Gen Z fans is the gender equality of the sport. Especially for younger female fans, having a sport that puts equal investment and importance on female athletes and competitions as men’s is a strong motivator to follow biathlon. In a world where women’s sport is on the rise, being able to draw on a long history of gender equality in the sport is an advantage. This is reflected in the way fans follow biathlon:

80% of fans reported following both men and women’s biathlon, with 35% of fans following both equally (figure 2). This puts biathlon on-par with Tennis in terms of following, and ahead of sports such as Volleyball, Handball and Football. A number of female focus group participants suggested that the gender-equality of the sport is a strong factor in them following biathlon over other sports, where male competitions are prioritised.



FIGURE 2 - SPLIT IN FOLLOWING BY GENDER IN FRANCE, GERMANY AND SWITZERLAND

Lastly, and perhaps the strongest point that biathlon can build on in the future, is the USP the sport provides. Biathlon has a unique positioning within sports in that it is one of the rare disciplines that combines two “sub-elements” that need to be completed in close succession and require a very different skillset. What makes it unique, is that these two elements are physically diametrically opposed. Every one of the 100 focus group participants mentioned this combination as being something that drew them into the sport, and should be central to the biathlon family’s efforts to bring biathlon to more Gen Z fans



## OPPORTUNITIES

While the important building blocks are here to make biathlon a fan-favourite amongst Gen Z in the future, there are some challenges that the biathlon family needs to address to make this a reality. The main challenge that biathlon faces today is that it is not well known by the younger masses. Whether a Gen Z fan knows about biathlon largely depends on their family’s knowledge and following of the sport. In a world where digital channels play a key role in building knowledge and awareness, we must meet Gen Z where they are. Given biathlon’s history of being a strong TV product, the challenge will be to continue growing an authentic digital presence to capture Gen Z fans, while maintaining a strong TV product to cater to older generations. We’ve broken

the awareness challenge down into three key opportunity areas that emerged during the research and should be central to future strategies:

**BUILD NEW PATHWAYS  
TO FANDOM**

**BUILD A COMMUNITY  
TO DRIVE FANDOM**

**ELEVATE YOUR  
ATHLETES**

New pathways into the sport need to be built to increase attention with Gen Z fans, communities need to be established to connect fans and drive deeper fandom, and biathletes need to be elevated to serve as gateway into the sport.

## NEW PATHWAYS TO BUILD FANDOM

In proprietary Two Circles research conducted across seven markets with over 32,000 responses, fans from different generations were asked which factors led them to become fans of a sport. Of the eight possible factors, three showed a significant difference between Gen Z and Baby Boomers.

Linear TV/streaming has had the biggest decrease, while social media and gaming have relatively increased the most across generations. This means that fewer young fans are being drawn into a sport through watching live coverage on TV or streaming, and increasingly by engaging with a sport on

social media or via gaming.

This trend is true across sports in general, but is it also true for biathlon? In short, yes. However, the changes are not as pronounced as in other sports. The importance of linear TV / streaming has only decreased by 20% (vs. 51% in sports in general), and social media has only increased in importance by 50% (vs. 121% in sports in general). The change in the importance of gaming could not be researched, as the gaming offering within the biathlon ecosystem is relatively new, and that channel has not had a significant impact on generating fans for biathlon.

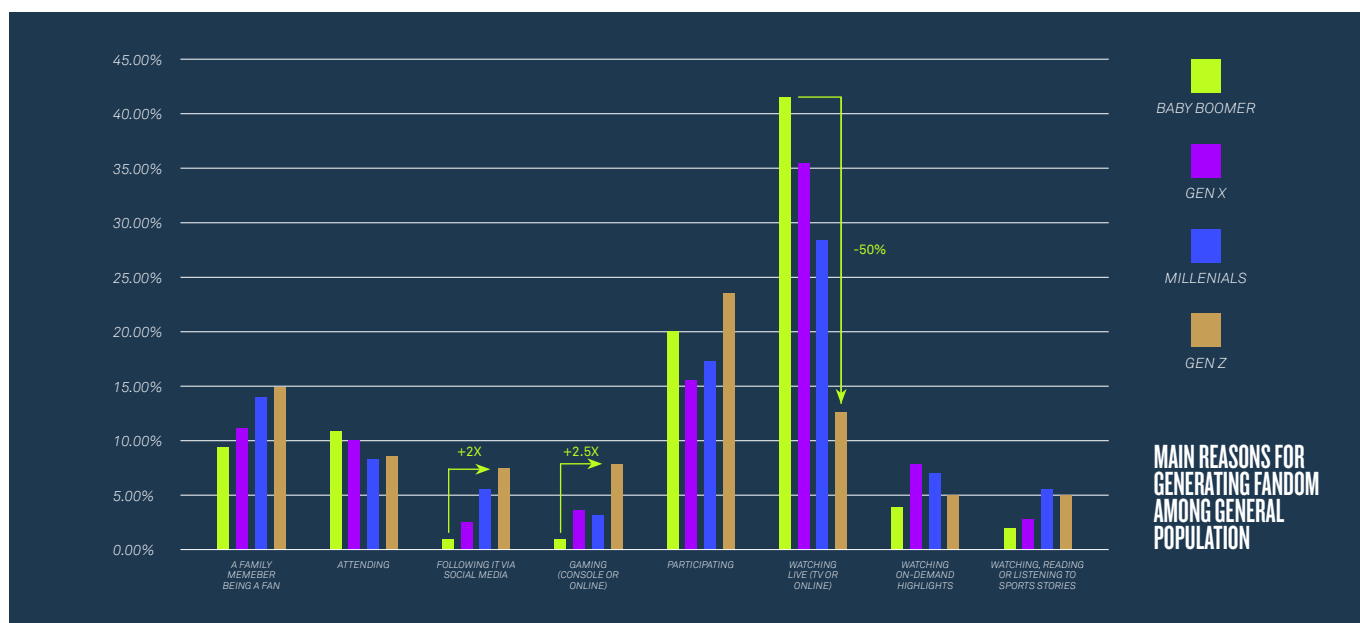


FIGURE 4 - MAIN REASONS FOR GENERATING FANDOM

Comparing these values, and while biathlon has excellent linear media distribution in core winter sport markets, we can nevertheless say that biathlon is still relying heavily on linear TV / streaming, and under performing in terms of using social as a medium to generate new fans. In order to capture the attention of younger fans, we therefore need to do more to meet them where they are, in particular on social platforms.

For social media, there are three actions that can be taken to increase the reach of biathlon:

## ① WORK WITH INFLUENCERS

This is a tactic that is widely used across sports properties today to grow social reach beyond what can be achieved organically. But not all influencer marketing strategies are successful.

Those that are usually have three factors in common:

### 1. USE NICHE OR MICRO-INFLUENCERS

One size does not fit all when it comes to influencers. Successful initiatives tend to speak to specific target groups and then select the best influencer to reach them.

#### TOP TIP

**EVERY INFLUENCER STARTS SMALL. IF YOU COME ACROSS SOCIAL CONTENT CREATORS IN YOUR MARKET WITH POTENTIAL (CREATE EXCITING CONTENT, HAVE BUILT UP A SMALL AUDIENCE, ARE GEN Z) AND HAVE AN INTEREST IN BIATHLON, CONSIDER WORKING WITH THEM. YOU CAN PROVIDE THEM WITH ACCESS TO EVENTS AND ATHLETES, AND IN RETURN THEY CREATE CONTENT THAT YOU PUBLISH JOINTLY. THIS REQUIRES LIMITED INVESTMENT FOR YOUR ORGANISATION AND, EVEN IF THE CONTENT CREATORS DON'T GROW TO BE SUCCESSFUL INFLUENCERS IN THE FUTURE, YOU WILL HAVE ACCESS TO CONTENT WITH A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE TO WHAT YOU USUALLY POST.**

### 2. AUTHENTICITY

The content produced needs to feel authentic to your organisation and to the influencer. Whoever you bring in cannot fake it. Instead, find a topic that is important to you and the influencer as a focal point of the content. Given there are no “biathlon influencers” out there today (at least that we know of), you will need to find another common ground. Examples could be bringing in a beauty influencer to

speak to athletes about the make-up they wear, a mental health influencer speaking to athletes about their pre-race mental preparation, or a food influencer looking at the diet of a biathlete.

### 3. PROVIDE A UNIQUE PERSPECTIVE

Whether it is behind-the-scenes, someone trying out biathlon for the first time, or speaking to athletes about an area that the influencer feels passionately about, the content produced needs to show a new and unique perspective to fans. This generally means that the content will have very little actual biathlon in it. Counterintuitively, having biathlon as a secondary focus of the content can be a more effective way to attract new fans to the sport.

#### CASE STUDY

##### MCLAREN

##### EXAMPLE HERE

**THEY INVITED CONTENT CREATORS FROM ACROSS COMEDY, HEALTH AND BEAUTY AND FASHION TO THE SILVERSTONE RACE, EVEN IF THE CONTENT CREATORS HAD NEVER MENTIONED F1 ON THEIR CHANNELS BEFORE. THE RESULT WAS LOTS OF DIVERSE CONTENT, SHOWCASING DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF THE MCLAREN TEAM AND THE EVENT. AND IN THE END, ONLY A VERY SMALL PORTION OF THE CONTENT SHOWED OR DISCUSSED CARS GOING AROUND THE CIRCUIT.**

## ② ADAPT CONTENT TO BE MORE RELEVANT FOR GEN Z

Unsurprisingly, content preferences change across generations. While older generations were primarily interested in content related directly to the competition, Gen Z increasingly want to see things that they would not see on regular broadcast. Race related content is still important, but they want to experience the sport beyond what is happening on the race trails. Gaming-related, cross-sport or cross-industry content are some examples of types of content that appeal to Gen Z fans. If a biathlete has a passion for cooking, fashion or beauty, Gen Z fans want to know about it. They want to know athlete's favourite recipes, make-up routines or fashion brands. The run up to the Olympics especially is a unique opportunity for biathlon family stakeholders to proactively seek opportunities to authentically connect athletes with their respective other interest groups to build new audiences.

More broadly, Gen Z preferences are moving towards wanting biathlon to be more of an entertaining product, rather than focusing mostly on the physical aspects it celebrates today. This is underlined when looking at the attributes that Gen Z fans feel biathlon represents today vs. what they would like it to represent in the future. While 4 out of 5 attributes relate to physicality today, this drops to only 1 of 5 values in the future. Instead, fans would like to see more emotions, entertainment, and the behind-the-scenes team spirit aspects of the sport. This does not mean that the core of what biathlon is needs to be changed, rather that the framing of how stories are told within biathlon should be adjusted to appeal to Gen Z fans. A great example of how this has already been done today is during relay-races, when the camera

captures the reaction of teammate during the last shooting. This highlights the team spirit and emotional aspect of the sport while still showing the precision and excitement of it.

### CASE STUDY

#### PARALYMPICS TIKTOK

THE CHANNEL HAS OVER 4.5M FOLLOWERS AND IS POPULATED ENTIRELY BY RE-EDITED BROADCAST FOOTAGE, SHOWCASED IN AN ENTERTAINING AND FUNNY WAY. THE TONE IS LIGHT, AND AT TIMES RISKY, AND IT HIGHLIGHTS THE PHYSICAL ASPECTS OF SPORTS WHILE SHOWCASING THE COMPETITION IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT LIGHT. THE CHANNEL IS PURE ENTERTAINMENT BASED ON COMPETITION AND VERY SUCCESSFUL.

#### ATTRIBUTES THAT BIATHLON REPRESENTS TODAY

- SPORT
- ENDURANCE
- PRECISION
- DISCIPLINE
- EXCITING

#### ATTRIBUTES THAT BIATHLON SHOULD REPRESENT IN THE FUTURE

- TEAM SPIRIT
- PHYSICAL EFFORT
- ENTERTAINING
- EMOTION
- POPULAR

FIGURE 5 -  
TOP 5 VALUES BIATHLON REPRESENTS TODAY AND IN THE FUTURE FOR GEN Z FANS



## ③ HELP FANS RELATE TO WHAT IS UNIQUE ABOUT BIATHLON

One thing we can likely all agree on is that biathlon is a unique sport. And it is quite easy to identify why: biathlon effectively combines two opposing disciplines. This is what fans told us in the focus groups and that they found in no other sport. Focus group participants also said that their biathlon fandom grew as they got older, because they had a much better appreciation for how hard it is to ski fast and then try to hit five targets. There are two elements to consider here:

### 1. SHOW PEOPLE HOW UNIQUE BIATHLON IS

The first is to find ways to show people who do not have many touchpoints with biathlon how unique it is. Nowhere else can fans see elite athletes trying to get their heart rate as high as they can, and then as low as they can. Think of creative ways to get that message across to fans.

### 2. MAKE PEOPLE UNDERSTAND HOW DIFFICULT BIATHLON IS

The second element is trying to get fans to understand how difficult biathlon is so they can better appreciate it. Part of the reason why, e.g., football is so popular is that most of us have played it before, and most of us can appreciate how hard it is to do what elite players do. People can relate a lot better to personal experiences they have had. So how can you relate the difficulty of biathlon to situations that people have been in? A great example we have seen from biathlon is the video that Lea Maier posted of her practicing shooting training while balancing on wooden beams with a weight hanging off her rifle. Most people will understand the difficulty of that much more than shooting at the range, because they have likely had to balance on something really thin before, and likely struggled with it without having to hold a rifle.

### CASE STUDY

#### SOCIAL MEDIA

**SOCIAL MEDIA FORMATS THAT AREN'T NEW BUT WE'RE SEEING MORE AND MORE ARE "PROS V. REGULAR PERSON" WHERE A "REGULAR" PERSON TRIES OUT A SPORT WITH A PRO. THIS SHOWCASES THE HIGH LEVEL OF SKILL PROS HAVE AND GENERALLY MAKES FOR SOME ENTERTAINING CONTENT. ONE EXAMPLE IS THE YOUTUBER AVERAGE ROB WHO HAS TRIED OUT SPORTS LIKE CYCLING, FIGURE SKATING, SKELETON, HEPTATHLON AND MANY MORE REACHING MILLIONS OF VIEWS. NOTABLY, VIDEOS WITH BIG NAMES ATHLETES LIKE MATHIEU VAN DER POEL OR NAIFI THIAM HAVE MORE THAN 1M VIEWS, BUT SO DO VIDEOS WITH LESS KNOWN ATHLETES, SHOWING FAN'S INTEREST FOR THE FORMAT.**

When defining your content plans for the season, it is advisable to include content strands that relate to the above points to make sure you help draw more casual fans into the sport.

Tips for putting together a content plan can be found in the appendix.





## BUILD A COMMUNITY TO DRIVE FANDOM

A theme that emerged in all the focus groups is that younger fans generally become fans through their family, and often do not have a community beyond that to share their passion for biathlon with.

From research Two Circles has conducted about sport fandom, we found that fans who have a way to share their passion for a sport with others are more likely to become core fans. Specifically, we saw that fans who do not have anyone to share their passion only have a 12% likelihood of becoming highly passionate. If they can share their passion with one other person, that likelihood doubles to 24%, and fans who have a community

around them to share their fandom with have a 79% likelihood of being highly passionate. This data, combined with the insight from the focus groups, makes a compelling case for us to focus on building communities where fans can share their passion for biathlon.

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**“I GENERALLY WATCH ALONE OR WITH MY PARENTS, MY FRIENDS DON’T REALLY KNOW THE SPORT SO I CAN’T WATCH WITH THEM OR TALK TO THEM ABOUT IT**

ITALIAN BOY, 14 Y/O

We see different approaches taken by rights owners to building these communities for their fans. Some of these, while working well for Gen Z, require specific rights situations or are linked to high effort to setup and maintain. We’ve outlined them as they are best-in-class examples and would require a centralized

push by IBU to implement. From a National Federation perspective, we’ve outlined some lower effort options that are best driven at a local level and can start as valuable entry-points into community building and management.

## MICRO-COMMUNITIES ON FORUM PLATFORMS

NATIONAL FEDERATION DRIVEN

The option with the lowest threshold to providing fans with a place to exchange with other fans are microcommunities on forum platforms such as Reddit, and more recently Discord. Both these types of communities provide alternatives to “real-life” communities, by allowing fans to engage in discussions and opinion exchanges with other fans.

What these platforms also enable – and why we believe they are so relevant for National

Federations – is the creation of communities in national languages. Focus group participants often mentioned that they would like to find fans to exchange with in their native language, something Reddit or Discord can offer. We see today that a number of biathlon Reddit threads exist, but they have yet to garner a large following. This is likely due to them not being moderated properly. Successful sports Reddit threads have dedicated moderators – often fans or frequent Reddit users that volunteer – and help structure the thread.

### TOP TIP

**THERE ARE A NUMBER OF PRINCIPLES TO FOLLOW TO ENSURE ONLINE FORUMS, ESPECIALLY ON PLATFORMS LIKE REDDIT, ARE SUCCESSFUL AND FOSTER ENGAGEMENT AND EXCHANGE FROM FANS. BELOW ARE FOUR ELEMENTS TO THINK ABOUT:**

- **Have clearly defined topics and guidelines** for the forum, and enforce rules to keep discussions on topic and reduce spam.
- **Have frequent and predictable content** that provides a structure to fan exchanges. This can be posting race results on the same day during the season (such as match centers for football reddit threads) or regular offseason content drops. Successful communities are also those that report on breaking news quickest to spark discussion and encourage fans to check back regularly.
- **Have content that is not available elsewhere** to get fans to check back regularly. A successful format for reddit have been “ask me anything” (AMAs) sessions where athletes, actors, singers and other celebrities answer questions posted in the thread.
- **Have moderators** that can ensure community members follow the rules set for the thread or post some conversation starters if engagement is low. This is often a highly engaged community member that will take the role out of love for the sport.



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## COMMUNITIES BUILT AROUND LIVESTREAMS

IBU-DRIVEN

Using platforms like Twitch or YouTube to livestream. These platforms allow fans to live comment during the events and thus exchange with other fans of the sport. Recently, we saw World Table Tennis having a lot of success with this in France. RMC Sport, the French WTT broadcaster, livestreams tournaments on Twitch and YouTube. While WTT tournaments were already available as YouTube streams prior to RMC acquiring the rights, RMCs approach to commentating the games, and livestreaming on Twitch has led to a large increase in viewership. Their approach was to have a Twitch streamer paired with a table tennis expert as a commentating duo. While the expert commented mostly on the happenings of the game, the streamer engaged with the viewing community by responding to chat comments and “speaking the Twitch language”. This seems to resonate well with the Twitch community, as the WTT Montpellier tournament saw over 2.7m views and increased followers of the RMC YouTube and Twitch accounts by more than 40k.

3

## RIGHTS OWNERS AS ENABLERS

IBU-DRIVEN

Some rights owners are taking a different approach by collaborating closely with publishers to help them build communities that then grow the popularity of the sport. One example of this is the collaboration between the NBA and the US-based platform Bleacher Report (B/R). Launched initially by four friends who wanted to be sports journalists, the website grew into one of the key publishers for basketball content. B/R has a number of investors and eventually was acquired by WarnerBrother Discovery – a key broadcasting partner of the NBA. Throughout the ownership changes, the NBA always supplied B/R content creators with content, from highlights, behind-the-scenes, archival content to today even selling single-game passes for live games. The NBA doesn't see B/R as a competitor, rather uses the site as a content distributor to amplify their reach. Given B/Rs popularity with Gen Z fans, this allows the NBA to reach younger fans through little added effort.

Looking at the context that biathlon is in today, we see huge potential in fostering communities on existing platforms such as Reddit or Discord. Especially on Reddit, communities already exist, with one sub-thread having a decent following (current size 9.4k followers). Tapping into these existing communities and soliciting the help of existing Reddit or Discord users that are interested in biathlon could be a low-effort way to provide younger fans the biathlon community they crave.

If you feel setting up communities on Reddit or Discord is not right for your market and fans, there are two additional alternatives through more traditional social media platforms:

- **WhatsApp Communities** can be a low-effort way to bring fans together. This is generally more used at the grassroots sports level, but can serve as a starting point to community building amongst your fans. You can build the community and encourage fans to start fan-led groups within the community. Having these groups will be crucial to foster fan exchange, as communities themselves are generally used to broadcast information rather than discuss. An additional limitation for this option is that sub-groups are capped at 1,024 members.

- **TikTok or Instagram hashtag campaigns** can be a way to make fans aware of each other on these channels and drive communication through comments. Encourage fans to use a unique hashtag for their content, making it easier to discover by other fans. This will increase awareness, but might not directly support the building of communities or exchanges, as it’s up to fans if they interact with each other via comments. You can try to encourage conversation by combining the hashtag promotion with a call to action to fans to comment on each other’s posts.

Whichever option is best suited for your market today, we encourage you to help fans find each other and give them the opportunity to share what they love about biathlon.

ELEVATE YOUR ATHLETES

A theme that is cementing itself in sports is that fans of younger generations are increasingly more interested in individual athletes and their stories than following teams. Research conducted in the US shows that 3 out of 4 Gen Z are fans of individual athletes (vs. 59% of baby boomers) and 38% of Gen Z do not have a favourite sports team (vs. 25% for Baby Boomers). While the team aspect is not as directly relevant for biathlon as for team sports, it does underline that the individual athlete is becoming increasingly

important. Looking at biathlon fans, we see a slightly different trend. When asked what first drew them to the sport, we see that following the sport to see a specific athlete is 3rd out of 4 factors. Further, we see that following a nation is a bigger draw to watching biathlon than following favourite athletes. If we compare biathlon with other individual sports, we see that individual athletes have a bigger draw in other sports, and seeing individual athletes perform is always a bigger draw than following a nation.

MOTIVATION TO FOLLOW THE SPORTS

FACTORS	BIATHLON	ATHLETICS	TENNIS	SKIING	SWIMMING
SUPPORTING MY COUNTRY (OR ATHLETES FROM MY COUNTRY)	1st	4th	3rd	3rd	4th
WITNESSING GREAT SPORTS PERFORMANCES (INDEPENDENT OF WHICH ATHLETE IT IS)	2nd	1st	2nd	2nd	4th
SEEING MY FAVOURITE ATHLETES IN ACTION	3rd	2nd	1st	1st	3rd
INCREASING MY KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERTISE IN THE SPORT	4th	5th	4th	5th	1st
WATCHING OR FOLLOWING MAJOR EVENTS	5th	2nd	5th	4th	2nd

FIGURE 7 - RANKING OF MAIN MOTIVATORS FOR FOLLOWING A SPECIFIC SPORT AMONGST GEN Z FANS

While the results at first look might indicate that the global trend of Gen Z following individuals over teams does not apply to biathlon, we believe it rather shows that, for the Gen Z audience, there is a gap that needs to be filled with regards to biathletes' presence on social media. This was reinforced in the focus groups, where participants reported only rarely coming across social media content about biathlon, and even less content posted by athletes. This suggests that the content being produced today does not match what Gen Z fans are expecting or wanting to see from professional biathletes.

We know that, increasingly, the factor that is drawing fans into a sport is not primarily an athlete's performance, but the ability for young fans to connect with an athlete's personality and backstory. This is in part why social media is becoming a main channel to create new fans, as it allows fans to see what an athlete is like beyond the field or track. As such, elevating biathletes' social media presence represents a huge opportunity for biathlon to increase its reach amongst Gen Z fans. How can this be done? There are a number of factors to consider when developing social media strategies around athletes:

- **Storytelling becomes much more important than before** – repeating what can be seen on the broadcast or during the race is not enough. Fans want to get to know the athletes and see things beyond the competition. The best recent example of this is the impact Drive to Survive had on F1 fandom. But not all content needs to be on the scale of a Netflix Documentary (thankfully). Smaller scale content types can be just as effective in showing athlete personalities. Examples of this are “mic'd up”, “20 questions” or “this or that” that successfully showcase athlete personalities without high production costs. Beyond these examples and more broadly, athletes have a great opportunity to leverage the platform they have during the Olympic season to gain more followers among people who share their other genuine interests, regardless of what those interests might be. They can be into cooking, knitting, fishing or fashion, for example. As long as the interest is authentic, sharing their interest will open up new avenues to engage with new audiences.

## CASE STUDY

### CAMERA WORK

**“WHEN YOU SEE THE CAMERA, MAKE A CHOICE” GIVE ATHLETES THE CHOICE BETWEEN TWO ACTIVITIES AS THEY WALK UP TO THE CAMERA. THIS WAS DONE BY WORLD AQUATICS DURING THE PARIS OLYMPICS, AND THE VIDEOS RESONATED WITH THEIR TIKTOK AUDIENCE. IN THIS EXAMPLE, THE ATHLETES WERE GIVEN A CHOICE BETWEEN THEIR FAVOURITE DANCE MOVE OR DOING A BURPEE. THIS CONTENT PIECE COULD BE DONE IN MANY VARIATIONS: SHOW THEIR BEST DANCE MOVE, MIME A PASSION THEY HAVE, OR ACT OUT THEIR EMOTION AT THE MOMENT. GIVING AN “EASY” OPTION, SUCH AS A PUSHUP OR BURPEE, CAN MAKE THE ATHLETES FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE TO CAPTURE THE NECESSARY FOOTAGE. THESE TYPES OF VIDEOS CAN EASILY BE CAPTURED DURING THE OFFSEASON (E.G. DURING TRAINING CAMPS) OR OUTSIDE OF RACES AND DOESN'T REQUIRE MUCH PREPARATION FROM ATHLETES OR YOUR CONTENT TEAMS. DOESN'T REQUIRE MUCH PREPARATION FROM ATHLETES OR YOUR CONTENT TEAMS.**



## CASE STUDY

## MIC'D UP SERIES

MIC'D UP SERIES ARE A POPULAR FORMAT USED BY RIGHTS HOLDERS OF ALL SIZES – FROM THE NBA AND NHL TO SPORTS LIKE THE WORLD ENDURANCE CHAMPIONSHIP CAR RACING OR NATIONAL TEAMS SUCH AS AUSTRALIA SWIMMING. THE CONCEPT IS TO PUT MICROPHONES ON ATHLETES DURING MEDIA DAYS, TRAINING OR WHEN THEY ARE ON THE BENCH TO CAPTURE WHAT THEY ARE SAYING AMONG EACH OTHER AND SHOW THEIR PERSONALITIES – FROM JOKESTERS TO ANALYSTS. THIS CONCEPT COULD WORK WELL WITH BIATHLETES DURING SHOOTING PRACTICE OR PUTTING A MICROPHONE ON TEAM MATES WATCHING THE LAST LEG OF A RELAY. OUTSIDE OF COMPETITION, AUDIO COULD BE CAPTURED DURING MEDIA DAYS.

## CASE STUDY

## QUESTIONS

THIS CONCEPT HAS ATHLETES ANSWER AS MANY QUESTIONS ABOUT THEMSELVES AS POSSIBLE IN A SET AMOUNT OF TIME, USUALLY AROUND 30 SECONDS. FOR BIATHLON, THE DURATION COULD BE EQUAL TO THE ATHLETE'S FASTEST SHOOTING TIME. QUESTIONS ASKED SHOULD BE LIGHT-HEARTED AND ALLOW FANS TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE ATHLETE'S PERSONALITY.

- **Platform algorithms prioritize athlete-led content during major events** – so getting the Olympics and World Championships right from a social media perspective is crucial. And the results are worth it. Looking at the Paris Olympics, we see that the breakout stars of the games are not necessarily the gold medal winners, but rather athletes like the “muffin man” or Ilona Maher, who gained over 3.5M social media followers, despite not competing in one of the traditionally high-profile sports of the Games. Having a concrete plan in place is central to making the most of the event from a social media perspective. A few things to consider are:
- Communicate with your athletes early and make social media plans. Look at schedules together and pinpoint times when it would easily fit into your athletes' schedules to capture some content during the Olympics
- Discuss how you can best support your athletes during that time. Do they need help before filming to get ideas on what to capture? Do they need help to actually capture the content? Do they need help editing clips? The more details you can clarify before the Olympics, the higher the chances it will go well during.
- Remove the burden from the athletes as much as you can. Some parts they will have to do – like filming or standing in front of the camera – but some parts you can take off their plate, like ideating or editing. Create clear briefs of what you need from your athletes and consider having them send you raw footage that you can then edit into clips.



- **Athletes need support with social media** – the same way that they need to train for the sport, they need to learn how social media works. Many sports have recognised this and have implemented programs to help athletes build up their social media presence. While these programs are helpful and well attended by athletes – such as the NFL or ATP/WTB ones – they also require a large time investment, which not everyone has. Instead, try to find out what the biggest hurdles your athletes currently face regarding social media are, and address them one by one.

Finally, and perhaps the most important part of elevating athletes on social media, is to identify which athletes are best suited for it. We acknowledge that not every athlete's ambition is to make it big on social media, and not every personality is suited for authentic online content. Think about which athletes you think will be most open to collaborating and work with them. Especially regarding the Olympics, try to identify two to three athletes that you think will be open to focusing more on social media in the lead up to and during the Games, and create a social media plan with them during the off-season.

**TO CONCLUDE THIS PAPER WE ASK YOU TO THINK ABOUT HOW YOU CAN USE THE FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH TO ADAPT YOUR FAN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES TO BE MORE RELEVANT FOR GEN Z. BIATHLON WILL ONLY ACHIEVE IT'S FULL POTENTIAL IF EVERYONE IN THE BIATHLON FAMILY THINKS ABOUT THE PART THEY CAN PLAY IN MAKING THE SPORT MORE RELEVANT AMONGST THE GEN Z POPULATION. BE IT BY BUILDING NEW PATHWAYS TO FANDOM, BUILDING COMMUNITIES TO DRIVE FANDOM, OR ELEVATING YOUR ATHLETES, WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO THINK ABOUT HOW YOU CAN INCLUDE ELEMENTS OUTLINED IN THIS PAPER INTO YOUR ACTIVATIONS AND CAMPAIGNS AS YOU PREPARE YOUR PLANS AHEAD OF THE OLYMPIC SEASON.**





## APPENDIX

### KEY DEFINITIONS

- **Gaming:** digital games ranging from gamified interactions (quizzes, polls), simple games (predictor) and more complex games (mobile or console). For the purposes of this paper gaming does not include eSports.
- **Influencer marketing:** working with social media personalities (ranking from a few thousand followers to a few hundred thousand) to promote certain elements of biathlon to their followers, an audience that would otherwise not have any touchpoints with biathlon
- **Core vs. casual fans:** core fans are highly engaged fans, usually ones that have followed the sport since a young age or engage with it regularly. Casual fans are fans who are aware of biathlon and follow occasionally, but don't consider it a key part of their lives.
- **Rights owners:** are the entities that are the original owners of the intellectual property rights to a sport. In our case, this is IBU.
- **Rights holders:** are entities that temporarily hold the intellectual property rights to a sport, these can be broadcasters, media organisations or sponsors. In the context of biathlon, the rights holders are EBU and it's member organisations that have bought the intellectual property rights to biathlon competitions.
- **Publishers:** are media organisations (generally online and print news outlets) that publish content. In the case of biathlon, and sports more broadly, these often also act as broadcasters.

### CONTENT PLANS

Content plans are a supporting document for social media teams to structure capturing and posting of content throughout the season. The level of detail contained in these plans varies from team to team, with some finding high-level information as reminders most useful, and others wanting a day-by-day plan to exactly layout the capture and posting schedule. From our experience, content plans should include three core elements, and can be expanded with additional information if teams find this useful.

CORE ELEMENTS	
CONTENT PLAN ELEMENT	PURPOSE OF THE INFORMATION
<b>Core Content Pillars</b>	<p>Define 3-5 categories that all content captured and posted falls into. Define which ratio of posts should fall into which categories, and periodically track throughout the season if you are posting according to these ratios.</p> <p>Content pillars could be: competition coverage, athlete stories, educational content, BTS, lifestyle &amp; culture, informational, etc.</p> <p>Note: these pillars should be high-level and capture an overall theme. Each pillar will then have formats that fall within them</p>
<b>Content Formats</b>	<p>For each content pillar, define which formats fall within the pillar. These are more specific to guide your teams in their content capture and posting. Generally these are not used for tracking overall posting trends, but looking at which formats perform best can help define which formats are maintained and which ones should be replaced.</p> <p>An example of breaking down the pillar “competition coverage” into formats could be: shooting range content, skiing content, warm-up content, post-race interview/impressions, shooting range reactions</p>
<b>Posting Calendar / Rhythm</b>	<p>Define which level of detail works best for your team (weekly, bi-weekly, monthly). Given competition weeks typically have a recurring structure (defined pre-during- and post-race posts) a weekly template with recurring elements could be created and re-used. Once recurring elements are defined, gaps can be filled with posts that fall within pillars that have been under-represented, formats that have worked well in previous weeks, or ad-hoc content specific to that week.</p> <p>Note: these calendars are living documents, if something unusual happens one week with great content captured, that content should be posted even if it’s not on the calendar.</p>
OPTIONAL ELEMENTS	
<b>Capture Guidelines</b>	<p>Guidelines with mandatory content that should be captured during different times of the season. These guidelines can be separate documents for different times in the year or different people. One document could be a guideline for athletes to capture content when they are away from the rest of the team / your team.</p> <p>These guidelines can be especially useful for more BTS or athlete-centric content that requires more planning or coordination, and that content creators are less used to capturing.</p>
<b>Platform-Specific Adaptation</b>	<p>A document highlighting how content is adapted based on the platform that it is posted on. These guidelines are generally most useful when editing content. They can include elements such as: format (carousel, short-form video, long-form video, etc.), tone of voice of captions or in-video text, optimal length of clips (this will at time be different for Instagram Reels vs. TikToks), etc.</p>