

TIPS for REACHING ATHLETES

Where to Find Your First Top Athlete

1. Ask everywhere for contacts and referrals: churches, other teams, other sport ministries, Campus Crusade ministries, retired athletes, etc.
2. Attend all National Championships, and start talking to athletes.
3. Attend at least one major international event each year. Target the athletes from your team/country. Let them see you associated with this high level event.
4. Arrange for a foreign Christian athlete to spend 6-12 months training or playing with the club you want to target. Ideal if they can live in the dorms with the athletes. (This would be a good opportunity for an intern.)
5. Develop ministry at Olympic Training Center. To get started bring team of athletes (8-15 multi-sport) for a short-term project (2-6 weeks) to live and train at one of the national training sites in your country.
6. Use foreign Christian teams to open doors for you. Before they even arrive in-country, it will give you an opportunity to meet with the President of the club, the Coach of the team, and perhaps others. When the team arrives you will actually have contact with the players – at the game, training, meals, etc.
7. Send your teams to the U.S. You can become a “hero” to several of your Sport Federations if you can arrange for one of the teams to be hosted in the U.S. (or other foreign country). They can stay with Christian families so no expense for lodging will be needed. Perhaps no ministry is more effective in opening hearts as that of Christian hospitality.
8. If a major sports event is in your area, consider organizing a banquet for top athletes, coaches and Federation personnel. This banquet can also be used to reach leaders and businessmen in your city.
9. Give Christian sport videos to athletes as gifts.
10. The Sports University is a place where elite athletes are sometimes found. This is a much easier environment to work in. Even if you don't find the top athlete, you may meet someone who could introduce you to the elite athlete or could open a door for you with another team.

The above ideas will work with almost every sport. Professional soccer, in many countries, will be more difficult. With much prayer, however, God will provide a way for these athletes to be reached.

Understand the Mindset of Elite Athletes

- In many ways they are like you—normal people who have needs, dreams, desires, hurts.
- Their life goals must be reached in a very short time, whereas other professions have their entire lives to reach their goals. They have a tendency to put a full commitment to Christ off until done competing, which is tragic, because God can teach them invaluable lessons through their sport.
- They have little privacy. Everyone wants an autograph or a handshake, and the media wants their time. They are suspicious of making quick friends and begin to fear that everyone is trying to profit from them. They need someone who is open to them and someone they can trust
- Even though they have little privacy, they are often lonely, and their friendships are often superficial.
- They have little time to build a well-rounded life, as time is limited. They have constant demands on their time. The University athlete often spends 40 hours per week in his sport (while also being a full-time student). Most Olympic athletes have to work full-time, in addition to their training.
- Elite athletes are under pressure to perform. They feel that acceptance and love are dependent on their performance. Their affirmation comes through their sport—perhaps they never had it from their parents. They need to have a proper self-image, grounded in Christ, and many athletes think that by becoming champions, their need for approval will be satisfied. Of course it never is, and they will experience a let-down after victory.
- Their emotions are up and down drastically, and winning and losing can be followed by extreme pride or discouragement. At times they are totally exhausted, while at other times they have too much energy.
- They are often away from home.
- They may receive many privileges and can become spoiled. Players tend to begin “demanding their rights” rather than being thankful for the position they earned.
- Athletes often live in a world with a high abuse of alcohol, drugs, sex, or materialism.
- Some athletes might have superstitious behavior.
- They probably have a strong inner drive and a competitive nature. We, as AIA staff members, need to learn how to turn that towards Christ.
- They might deal with fear of injury, losing their position, financial loss, etc.
- They might feel the pressure of knowing they have the potential to influence thousands, or even millions.
- They are dedicated to give their best in order to reach their goals.
- They have a strong belief that they have the capability of reaching the highest level in their sport.



TIPS for REACHING ATHLETES (continued)

Needs of Top Athletes

1. These athletes need someone who is open for them personally.
2. They need a proper self-image, as their self-image is often wrapped up in performance.
3. Identity crisis—They may not know who they are apart from their sport. (For example, they may often be introduced as, “Markus, the runner.”)
4. Love/recognition—Some athletes seek from their sport what they never received from their parents.
5. They need self-control in their financial, social and family lives. Many athletes have problems knowing how to properly respond to the pressures and demands of life.
6. When injured, athletes are often in need of true love and care.
7. The fear of losing and having their career ended is a constant pressure.
8. They need financial management.
9. They need to develop good relationships away from sports.
10. They need people they can trust.
11. They need people with whom they can talk openly about their lives.

Felt Needs of Athletes

Athletes are under tremendous pressure to perform. They subconsciously or consciously are looking for a means of dealing with the stress they feel in their sport and for stability in life apart from their performance. Therefore, they are more open to the Gospel than the average cross-section of university students.

They are looking for relationships with people they can trust to help them deal with the stress. They open up quickly to someone who they sense will care for them and who they feel they can trust. Many times they don't have that in their athletic environment.

They operate best out of a committed personal relationship.

- One main need they have is to see that God is not like their fathers or their demanding coaches. Because of their performance orientation, they need to especially see the emphasis of God's unconditional love and commitment to them.
- Athletes are motivated by challenges. After sensing the athlete is ready for the next step, he or she responds well to the challenge to go for it in their walk with Christ.
- The athlete also needs to understand how to apply Christ in every dimension of their life—in competition, in the gym, and in relationships with teammates. Because Christian athletes are watched closely by their teammates, they need to have a feeling of not being a hypocrite. If they are able to integrate their faith into their life, they will naturally share their faith openly with teammates and other people.
- Athletes are craving someone to be interested in their entire life. Often, people are just interested in them because of what they are—an athlete—or what they have achieved. Therefore, be concerned about all areas of their life. As well, attend their sporting events, as it communicates that you care about them outside of a Bible study setting.

Developing Relationships with Athletes

Hang out with the athletes.

It is good to become their friend, as the closer you are to them, the bigger impact you are going to have on their lives. You will also have the benefit of seeing the issues they really need to deal with in terms of integrating their walk with Christ in to their entire lives.

Go and see them play.

It shows that you are interested in one of the most important areas of their life. After the game or match, make sure you go down to the field or floor and talk with them.

Hold them accountable.

Ask them if they want accountability in the areas you are discussing in terms of quiet times, attitudes towards others, and personal purity. Athletes will appreciate your help and willingness to care for them. Apply Scripture to their specific issues that they have asked to be held accountable for (relationships, sex, attitude, etc.).

Challenge them.

All of their lives, athletes have been motivated by the next level or the next challenge. Once you sense the athlete is ready, give them the next hurdle to leap over. The more you expect, the more you will get. However, there is a careful balance here, as too much structure too soon will cause them to feel you are adding more unwanted pressure.

Be grace-motivated.

If they've failed in their commitment to Christ, don't get down on them. They need to see that you still love them and are committed to them. Model God's grace to them, then talk through the situation and how to handle it better the next time. Always encourage them to be more excellent in their spiritual life.

Have them over to your house.

Athletes love to come over to your house for dinner or to watch an athletic event on TV. Have them come in groups, as it helps them to see that there are other Christian athletes around and that it is okay to be a Christian.

Help them put their sport in perspective.

God's #1 goal is for their character to be transformed into the image of Christ. Sport is a vehicle God is using towards that end.

Give them a realistic perspective.

Help them to see that their Christian growth is a process (Philippians 3:10-15). God only asks them to give 100% and He'll show them areas in their lives that need changing. Encourage the athlete to forget what is behind and push on for what lies ahead.

Be honest.

Share openly about dealing with issues they face such as lust, sex, and parties. Give them examples of how you deal with these issues and offer principles to help.

Show them God's power.

Help them to see God's power to overcome tendencies to sin in the difficult areas of their life.



TIPS for REACHING ATHLETES (continued)

Motivate for Ministry Biblically

Once the athletes have the big picture, they will jump in and help the ministry as much as the schedule allows. Among other things, athletes can help to expose the ministry through their visibility, credibility, speaking, fund raising efforts, etc.

Things Not to Do

Do not:

1. Give out athletes' phone or address.
2. Ask for tickets or autographs.
3. Ask for support or emphasize tithing.
4. Ask for pictures with them (unless strong trust relationship has been built).
5. Discuss their salary.
6. View the athlete as a tool to help the church or ministry grow.
7. Massage their ego (especially in times of poor performance).
8. Ask them to speak publicly until they are well grounded in their faith.
9. Take your position, as a chaplain, for granted.

