Exploring sports agents' behaviour: Ethical challenges in contemporary athletics

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Abstract:

Sports agents operate in a complex environment governed by multiple, sometimes overlapping, regulatory frameworks. In athletics, licensed agents are regulated by World Athletics. Prior research has paid limited attention to why unethical behaviour occurs among athletics agents. This thesis addresses that gap by identifying agents' key stakeholders and the realities of the athletics environment, and by examining the cognitive and practical factors that can prevent agents from acting ethically.

The qualitative study uses an abductive research approach. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, involving 10 licensed agents. This was complemented by secondary data from publicly available World Athletics documents. Interview data were analysed thematically.

Using stakeholder theory and bounded rationality as a conceptual lens, the study shows that unethical behaviour among licensed athletics agents often stems from financial scarcity within athletics, insufficient governance, and strong dependence on networks, pressures further complicated by bounded cognitive capacities. The thesis contributes to existing research by mapping the stakeholder environment from agents' own perspectives and explaining how cognitive limitations and practical constraints together shape ethical decision-making.

Keywords:

Sports agents, Athletics agents, Ethics, Governance, Stakeholder theory, Bounded rationality

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Sammandrag:

Idrottsagenter arbetar i en komplex miljö som styrs av flera, ibland överlappande regelverk. Inom friidrotten regleras licensierade agenter av World Athletics. Tidigare forskning har i begränsad utsträckning uppmärksammat varför oetiskt beteende uppstår bland friidrottsagenter. Denna studie bidrar till att fylla denna forskningslucka genom att identifiera agenternas centrala intressentgrupper, belysa de praktiska realiteterna i dagens friidrott, samt undersöka de kognitiva och praktiska faktorer som kan hindra agenter från att agera etiskt.

Denna kvalitativa studie använder en abduktiv ansats. Primärdata insamlades genom semistrukturerade intervjuer med 10 licensierade friidrottsagenter. Därutöver insamlades sekundärdata från offentligt tillgängliga dokument från World Athletics. Intervjuerna analyserades tematiskt.

Med intressentteorin och teorin om begränsad rationalitet som teoretisk lins visar studien att oetiskt beteende bland friidrottsagenter kan uppstå till följd av finansiell knapphet, otillräcklig reglering och ett starkt beroende av personliga nätverk. Detta kompliceras ytterligare av kognitiva begränsningar. Avhandlingen bidrar till befintlig forskning genom att kartlägga intressentmiljön utifrån agenternas egna perspektiv och genom att förklara hur kognitiva begränsningar och praktiska restriktioner tillsammans formar etiskt beslutsfattande.

Nyckelord:

idrottsagenter, friidrottsagenter, etik, reglering, intressentteori, begränsad rationalitet

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sport is an intriguing global phenomenon. According to Hoye et al. (2018), the sport industry employs millions of people worldwide, with an increasing number of individuals being involved directly or indirectly in sports as fans, employees, or athletes. This growing involvement of stakeholders has made the industry shift from being largely amateur to increasingly professional. For many nations, hosting sports events is seen as an opportunity to promote the country, foster nationalism, and drive social and economic development.

Shilbury (2022) and Pedersen and Thibault (2018) state that, as a social institution, sport is constantly evolving and shaped by organisational, cultural, and social contexts. Within this broader institution, various sports, such as football and athletics, operate in their own distinct environments. In these environments, sports agents work and interact (Edmonds, 2017; Shropshire et al., 2016; Staudohar, 2006). Edmonds (2017) notes that from the early days of the sports agent profession, challenges concerning ethical behaviour quickly emerged, including fierce rivalry between agents over athlete representation rights and questionable financial management.

The governing body of athletics, now known as World Athletics, was established in 1912 (Bolling, 2007). Over the past decade, the organisation has not been without controversy. Ingle (2020) reports that in 2020, its former president, Lamine Diack, was found guilty of covering up Russian doping cases. He had accepted bribes from Russian athletes suspected of doping and, in exchange, promised them protection from being caught. In total, the athletes paid approximately €3.2 million to Diack. Moreover, other forms of financial corruption had occurred, involving not only Diack himself but also individuals close to him.

Ethical issues have also occurred among athletics agents. In 2016, a prominent agent came under the spotlight following doping allegations. Although the agent was suspected of administering prohibited substances to represented athletes, the charges were eventually dropped (Longman, 2016). A year later, the Athletics Integrity Unit (2020) reported another case involving a high-profile agent who was approached by undercover reporters posing as film producers seeking advice for a movie about athletics. The reporters visited a training camp of a world-class athlete represented by the agent. At the camp, the agent was recorded claiming he could obtain illegal performance-enhancing substances. He further stated that everyone competing in the same event used banned

substances, including his own athlete. Although there was no evidence that the agent actually possessed the substances, he received a two-year suspension from working in athletics.

Following these ethical breaches and controversies, a new integrity body was established. According to Krieger (2020), the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU) was created in 2017 in response to a lack of integrity and oversight within and by World Athletics (then known as IAAF). The AIU operates as an independent unit; however, it still reports to World Athletics. Krieger (2020) notes that the unit oversees integrity-related matters such as doping and conflicts of interest.

World Athletics (2023c) introduced a new licensing system in 2023 to enhance the governance of licensed athletics agents. The initiative aims to strengthen integrity and establish *minimum standards* for athlete representation (World Athletics, 2023c). The creation of the AIU and the efforts to improve agent governance are, in principle, intended to promote ethical conduct among athletics agents. However, only time will tell whether these measures will prove effective.

1.1 Research problem

Lumpkin et al. (2011) claim that ethics concerns the study of what is right and wrong while acknowledging that such definitions are contextual. Ethical behaviour is generally guided by frameworks established by organisations across various sectors. Bull and Faure (2022) suggest that for sports agents navigating diverse environments, this often means adhering to multiple ethical frameworks, thereby adding complexity to their professional practice.

Hums et al. (1999) and Rodenburg et al. (2021) argue that the motivations behind the ethical challenges faced by sports agents are often driven by financial incentives. Hums et al. (1999) further highlight the lack of robust regulation as a contributing factor to these challenges. Gardiner et al. (2017) share this view and criticise the narrow focus of major governing bodies on specific issues such as match-fixing, anti-doping, and financial transparency. They argue that genuine integrity in sport should encompass broader values, such as fairness, respect, and accountability, beyond simply preventing obvious breaches.

As stated by Craft (2012) and Ford and Richardson (1994), previous empirical research has shown that ethical behaviour is shaped by both individual and contextual factors.

Individual factors include cultural background, gender, education, and work experience, among others. Higher education and greater work experience have been associated with lower levels of unethical behaviour. Nonetheless, research has found that contextual factors often play a decisive role in steering behaviour. Colleagues, for instance, have been linked to ethical conduct, as individuals are influenced by the behaviour of those around them. Similarly, organisational culture affects individuals' ethical behaviour through ethical policies and programmes. Organisation-specific codes of conduct, which are a set of rules and regulations that individuals are required to follow, have also been found to promote ethical behaviour. The effectiveness of such codes increases when individuals are held accountable and sanctioned for breaches. Finally, highly competitive business environments may foster unethical decision-making due to survival pressures (Craft, 2012; Ford & Richardson, 1994).

Previous research has primarily focused on regulations and on ethical behaviour across different fields, with limited empirical work examining the ethical behaviour of sports agents, particularly from their own viewpoints. In the context of athletics, a research gap exists in studying agents' ethical behaviour through their perspectives and the practical realities they encounter. Therefore, this thesis seeks to fill this gap.

1.2 Purpose and research questions

By acknowledging the presence of the current rules, regulations, and ethical guidelines established by World Athletics, this thesis aims to offer new insight into how and why certain unethical behaviours emerge among licensed athletics agents and why these behaviours may be difficult to govern in practice.

Thereby, the following research questions have been established:

1. **How do athletics agents navigate relationships and ethical challenges with stakeholders?**

2. **How do cognitive and practical limitations shape athletics agents' ability to make ethical decisions?**

The first research question aims to explore and identify athletics agents' close stakeholders, the environment in which they operate, as well as the ethical dimensions.

The second research question provides depth to the ethical challenges by acknowledging both cognitive and practical factors that might prevent agents from acting ethically. The question aims to shed light on the decision-making realities that agents face.

By focusing on agents' subjective perspectives, these research questions together provide a deeper understanding of their ethical behaviour. The study may serve as a foundation for future governance and ethical development within athletics and other sports contexts.

1.3 Presentation of the author

Since ethics lies at the core of this thesis, I feel a responsibility as the author to acknowledge potential bias and to provide context for why this research topic was chosen.

Athletics have always been part of my life. At the age of 19, I was participating in the 2015 European U20 Championships in athletics, eventually ending up in 7th place in the men's long jump. The following year, I unexpectedly found myself at the European Championships final in Amsterdam, reaching 5th place.

Performing well at the championship level often means athletes seek professional representation, which was my experience as well. Coming from a sports family meant that there were established family ties to an active athletics agent. At the time, sports agents were not unfamiliar to me, as growing up within the sports environment, I had already encountered plenty. Moving forward in time, during my early twenties, I had started to question agents and their decision-making rationales. I was often unsure whether decisions were being made with an eye to what was best for the athletes or the agents themselves, and if agents were genuinely interested in supporting athletes, or if there were other hidden motivations present. I was not alone with this thought. Once again, going forward a few years and suffering from endless injuries and health problems, I found myself in Gothenburg, Sweden, taking the *Athletes' Representative exam (*agent exam in athletics) organised by World Athletics. To my surprise, I passed the exam, and suddenly, in 2022, at the age of 26, I became one of the youngest active licensed athletics agents.

At the time of writing, many new updates have arisen since 2022 concerning athletics agents, such as agents' professional development, involving discussions around ethics.

Not to forget the introduced centralised licensing system, as previously mentioned. Therefore, I hope this thesis will be of value in the development of the agent profession.

1.4 Delimitations

In the field of sports, there are countless active sports agents. While ethical behaviours may differ by sport, it is beyond the scope of a master's thesis to capture all of them. Therefore, this study explores the phenomenon exclusively from the perspective of licensed athletics agents and does not consider other stakeholders' views (e.g., athletes, coaches, the governing body, or sportswear companies). The reason for excluding other perspectives is to gain a deeper understanding of licensed agents and why certain behaviours exist, given the complexity of ethics and behaviour. The agents studied are those who currently represent athletes. Agents without represented athletes were excluded.

The thesis relies on interview transcripts and World Athletics' publicly available documents. However, any changes made to those documents after collection are not considered, even if they occur before thesis submission. Finally, the study uses a qualitative method; causality is therefore not tested using quantitative methods.

1.5 Overview of the methodology

This section provides a brief overview based on the main methodology discussion in Chapter 3. The qualitative study utilises an abductive research approach, guided by subjective ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and secondary data through publicly available documents. In total, 10 licensed athletics agents from 3 continents were interviewed. The interviews took place via Microsoft Teams between 10.04.2025 and 04.06.2025. The publicly available documents from the World Athletics website helped triangulate the findings by acting as supporting data. The primary data were analysed thematically.

To ensure research quality, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, were addressed. Ethical standards were ensured by following Hanken School of Economics (n.d.) guidelines and the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In addition, Orb et al.'s (2001) three ethical principles for qualitative research: autonomy, beneficence, and justice, were fulfilled.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of the environment in which sports agents operate. It begins with the sports system, narrows to sports management, and then to sports agents. It then reviews ethics in sport and the central ethical principles and concludes with the two theories that form the conceptual lens: stakeholder theory and bounded rationality.

2.1 Sports as a system

According to Szymanski (2008), modern sports, rooted in Europe, are organised around hierarchical clubs and governing institutions, indicating that the evolution of sport can be understood through the historical development of these institutions. Szymanski (2008) and MacLean (2008) state that back in the 1600s and 1700s, individuals started to meet regularly, creating social networks, with sports clubs essentially formed from these voluntary groups of individuals. Maclean (2008) notes that the development of what today is known as governing bodies was originally formed through one club having greater influence over other clubs, therefore, regulating the sport. Gradually, external modern governing bodies were formed during the mid and late nineteenth century. Jarvie (2006) asserts that although England is considered the disseminator of sports, beginning in the mid-1700s, it was not until around the end of the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s that sports internationalised. This development was driven by the growing emphasis on *fair play* and the need for universally accepted rules, which ultimately led to the formation of today's international governing bodies of sport.

According to Krieger et al. (2020), international sports federations (IFs) and governing bodies are some of the most important stakeholders of modern sports, particularly the Olympic system, involving the International Olympic Committee (IOC), National Olympic Committees and the Olympic organising committees, which all possess significant influence over the development and direction of sports (Krieger et al., 2020). Although the Olympics have its roots in ancient Greece, the modern IOC was first established in 1894 by the initiative of Pierre de Coubertin (Durántez Corral et al., 2010). The modern Olympic Games themselves were first held in 1896 in Athens, Greece (International Olympic Committee, 2025). Forster (2006) states that governing bodies have three distinct functions: governing a sport (such as athletics), governing a major sports event (such as the Olympic Games governed by the IOC), and specialised governing purposes such as the battle against doping (World Anti-Doping Agency) (Forster, 2006).

Commercialism has played a big part in shaping modern sport. According to Szymanski (2008), already back during the 1600s, gambling was a commercial driver. This was followed by professional leagues charging entrance fees and paying their players in the 1800s. Therefore, it increasingly demanded a set of rules to govern and regulate financial activities. However, Jarvie (2006) notes that the real driver of the commercialisation of modern sports is due to the media, which reshaped how sports in consumed, owned and delivered. Over time, the commercialisation of sports increased due to the media providing different ways of sports to be consumed, which in turn started to attract more companies, such as the sports giant Nike and similar, who started to invest more money in sports. Commercialisation naturally increased the need for rules and regulations to govern sports, as new ethical challenges came to light with the increased number of stakeholders in the industry.

Krieger et al. (2020) note that the governing body of athletics had rules to keep the sport amateur. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, as the revenue started to increase by organising international events and signing new commercial contracts, the rules concerning keeping the sport amateur slowly changed. The authors argue that the final step towards professionalism happened when, in 2001, the name of the governing body was altered to remove the word *amateur*.

Forster (2006) asserts that governing bodies generate big commercial revenues. Their main source of revenue comes from their monopoly over the governance of their sport, as they possess the sole right to organise global championships, which attracts broadcasting rights and sponsorship deals. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that these organisations generate big revenue numbers. The author further states that due to the complex nature of these organisations, there have been plenty of accusations of corruption concerning the managers and the governing side of the organisations. He adds that the sports law puts too much emphasis on the oversight of athletes, with little attention paid to the organisations themselves. This is coupled with the self-governance properties of the governing bodies, therefore arguing that the transparency and accountability do not reflect the regulative needs of the modern commercialised sports environment, as self-governing results in inadequate regulatory oversight (Forster, 2006). While governing bodies oversee their respective sports, there is much more happening inside the sports system.

Within this systems view of sport, some authors describe it as an ecosystem to emphasise interdependence among stakeholders that extends beyond governance. Lee and Hassim

(2023) discuss sports as a complex ecosystem involving various components such as athletes, events, and leisure purposes to attract non-professional athletes. The authors view sports as a social phenomenon that involves material and nonmaterial aspects such as facilities, symbols, beliefs, and norms. They argue that sports have both positive and negative sociocultural influences. Among the positive influences are values on a personal, social, and cultural level, not to forget the financial impacts it has on an economy. The downside, however, includes corruption, violence and exploitation. Buser et al. (2022) support Lee and Hassim (2023) by describing the sports ecosystem as a system of interconnected relationships, consisting of economic, political, environmental, technological and social dynamics.

This evolution of the sports system has created a governed environment in which managers, and specifically, sports agents, navigate. Therefore, the next subsections narrow down to sports management and the agent's role within it.

2.1.1 Sports management

Hoye et al. (2018) consider sports management as a complex field that has grown along with the professionalisation of sports, emphasising the need for sports managers to understand the industry. They note that sports management is influenced by several factors, such as globalisation, government policy, technology and the dynamics between different sectors of sport. Hoye et al. (2018) and Acar (2023) note that technological advancements have changed how sports are consumed. With the ever-growing media sector, especially social media, sports managers need to stay up to date with global trends. Hoye et al. (2018) add that national governments view sports as a way of promoting nationalism, economic development, or social development. By providing funding, establishing regulations that support and promote sports, or offering other sorts of benefits, they play a central role in the field of sports management.

Shilbury (2022) asserts that the sports industry consists of a community (amateur) sector and a professional sector, with the professional being commercialised. However, Hoye et al. (2018) add a level to this by noting that the sports industry consists of three interconnected sectors, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below: the public, non-profit, and professional sectors. The public sector consists, for instance, of different nationwide and local organisations that develop sports policies and provide funding to other sectors. The non-profit sector is a so-called voluntary sector, which consists of amateur sports clubs, national governing bodies and international sports organisations. The professional

sector involves commercial or professional organisations, such as event organisers, merchandise manufacturers and sports clubs. Importantly, both Shilbury (2022) and Hoye et al. (2018) emphasise the importance of sports managers in understanding the different areas of sport as they are interconnected.

Figure 1 Sports sectors

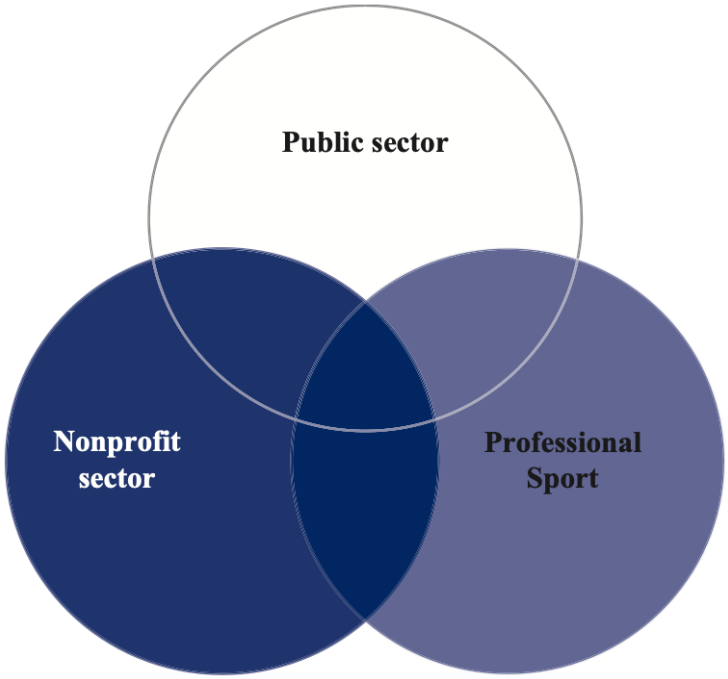


Figure by Hoye et al. (2018), p. 8.

Chadwick (2009) notes that sports have deep socio-cultural roots and therefore present somewhat unique challenges for managers. Sports management differs from management in more conventional sectors in terms of knowledge and skills. Sports managers constantly deal with uncertainty. In sports, there is always a losing side, and it is impossible to predict the winner with absolute certainty, which is why sport attracts so many diverse stakeholders. Sports managers need to maximise the uncertainty of their respective sports to appeal to more people. The author argues that sports management should be more proactive, strategic and innovative about how it promotes fair competition and uncertainty instead of merely addressing problems as they arise.

Chadwick (2009) claims that competitors must collaborate to stay competitive and attract an audience. This is, for instance, done by creating sports leagues and scheduling games. While some innovations are needed, the question that remains is whether managers should alter the product (the sport itself) to respond to market needs or if the

sports identity and the traditions should be prioritised. Due to globalisation, it requires managers to understand international markets, making sure the product stays attractive regardless of the country. Furthermore, with digitalisation having a stronger presence in sports, managers need to use technology creatively to stand out in a competitive media environment.

Sports management involves various stakeholders and institutions. The stakeholders can be fans, athletes, sponsors, or member associations, to name a few (Friedman et al., 2004; Miragaia et al., 2014). Friedman et al. (2004) note that stakeholders continuously influence each other. For instance, a big sponsor can influence a desired outcome of a sports team by threatening an end to a partnership. Conversely, organisations (such as sports teams) can affect local communities by building new facilities. Thus, stakeholders influence each other in different ways.

This section has discussed various stakeholders and interconnected sports sectors, which form the environment in which sports agents operate. As noted by Hums et al. (1999), the sports environment includes ethical dimensions that sports managers, including agents, need to understand. These dimensions will therefore be discussed in the following sections.

2.1.2 Sports agents

Within the field of sports management, sports agents have a significant role in representing athletes and navigating various stakeholders. This section will, therefore, focus on the agent profession and the ethical challenges and dilemmas that agents face.

The sports agent profession has existed for well over 100 years. Bull and Faure (2022) note that while sports agents were already present in the 1800s, their role remained largely unrecognised. Mason and Duquette (2005) and Shropshire et al. (2016) state that it was not until the 1960s that the sports agency industry began to take off due to increased revenues and growing player salaries, particularly in North America. This resulted in a need for knowledge concerning players' contracts, as sports clubs' complex and often unreasonable contract clauses required professional help. Therefore, individuals from diverse backgrounds entered the industry to work as agents.

Shropshire et al. (2016) note that the growing player salaries within the industry were due to the increased revenues in sports leagues in North America. With television and merchandise companies emerging as well, sports agents naturally recognised this

increased competition as a financial gold mine. Bull and Faure (2022) strengthen this argument by noting that the importance of the sports agent profession has grown in importance due to the globalisation, commercialisation and professionalisation of the sports industry. Shropshire et al. (2016) claim that as the sports agent industry grew, many agents chose to focus on a particular sport, while others represented athletes from a variety of sports. However, it is not uncommon to be a part-time agent while having another job on the side. The authors stress the need for sports agents to act in the best interests of their clients. They note that contracts often include *fiduciary characteristics*: agents are required to act in the best interest of the athletes and not themselves. Shropshire et al. (2016) and Bull and Faure (2022) assert that a big reason for athletes employing agents is experience. For instance, sports clubs deal with a large number of contracts yearly, while an athlete might only sign one or a few contracts during their career, essentially putting them at a disadvantage at the negotiation table.

While Bull and Faure (2022) state that a sports agent can be used for roles such as negotiating, consulting, or scouting, to put it simply, agents act on behalf of either athletes or organisations of any kind. As the profession has evolved, a modern sports agent might be handling public relations (PR), assistance with housing and transportation, social media management and sponsorships negotiation, to name a few. Mason and Duquette (2005) note that sports agents handle athletes' contracts and manage endorsements but also maximise athletes' finances in an attempt to ensure financial stability after their careers. They note that agents are compensated in four different ways: an hourly wage, a flat rate, a percentage of the athletes' income, or a combination of the methods.

Bull and Faure (2022) claim that economic factors, such as agents' dependence on commissions or competitive pressures, often play a significant role in shaping their actions, often overriding ethical considerations. Moreover, regulatory bodies are often influenced by existing agents or agencies that act self-interestedly. Shropshire et al. (2016) support this by asserting that financial interests might stand in the way of agents acting in the best interest of their represented athletes. An agent might choose to negotiate with a particular sports club because of economic motives, although the athlete would prefer another. According to Bull and Faure (2022), other ethical concerns include a lack of transparency from the agent's side and taking advantage of inexperienced athletes. Mason and Duquette (2005) further add to the discussed ethical challenges by noting that conflicts of interest are not uncommon. For instance, an agent may represent

several different athletes competing for the same contract. In this case, the agent might prioritise one athlete over the other to achieve a better outcome for themselves. Kelly and Chatziefstathiou (2017) reinforce this argument by noting that *dual representation* is a real problem, as it often creates a conflict of interest.

Mason and Duquette (2005) shed light on further challenges. Because sports apparel companies often remain active throughout an agent's entire career, it is financially more viable to maintain strong relationships with them compared to athletes with a much shorter career span. With modern sports becoming increasingly endorsement-heavy, sports agents can be more interested in an athlete's marketability over supporting their professional development. Kelly and Chatziefstathiou (2017) emphasise that while sports agents often get headlines for unethical conduct, the importance of a good reputation cannot be undermined. While it takes a long time to build trust and reputation, one misstep and it all could be for nothing.

As demonstrated in this section, despite the significant role agents play in representing athletes, their work is not without controversy. Therefore, the next section provides an overview of ethics in sports.

2.2 Ethics in sports

Ethics is a widely recognised concept both within and outside of sport. Since the thesis explores the ethical challenges faced by sports agents, this section examines the term *ethics* and relevant literature on the subject, before introducing 4 ethical principles relevant to the thesis: **fairness**, **integrity**, **accountability** and **transparency**. These principles serve as evaluative criteria for assessing agents' behaviour in later sections.

Loland (2013) asserts that the word *ethics* originates from the Greek word éthos. Depending on the pronunciation, the word either refers to a habit and custom or an institutionalised practice. Cambridge Dictionary (n.d.) defines the word *ethic* as follows: "a system of accepted beliefs that control behaviour, especially such a system based on morals". Loland (2013) describes morality as the rules and values that guide individuals in how they should treat each other. These rules and values form social norms, helping people understand what is right and wrong.

According to Loland (2013), meta-ethics examines the fundamental concepts, methods, and assumptions that form the foundation of normative ethics, which will be discussed next. Normative ethics helps establish a framework for what is considered good and bad,

thus establishing moral principles. The author discusses three normative ethical theories: consequentialism, virtue ethics, and Deontology. Consequentialist ethical theory suggests that the morality of an action is determined by its consequences, rather than by fixed rules or intentions. Deontology evaluates the morality of a behaviour based on its adherence to rules and principles. For instance, in deontology, hitting below the belt in boxing is forbidden as it is against common established rules. Finally, virtue ethics is based on character and virtues.

Related but different to normative ethics, there is descriptive ethics. Loland (2013) asserts that while normative ethics is focused on how people should behave and defines right and wrong using the three theories mentioned above, descriptive ethics is empirical and focused on individuals' morals and how they practically behave. Descriptive ethics do not judge individuals based on their behaviour; instead, it attempts to understand and describe the moral values and norms of different individuals, groups or cultures.

In order to keep the thesis streamlined, normative or descriptive ethics will not be covered further. However, applied ethics, a form of normative ethics, will now be discussed. Loland (2013) notes that applied ethics uses normative ethics theories as tools for thought to understand ethical and moral phenomena. Rather than simply using existing abstract theories to create ethical guidelines and norms, applied ethics uses these theories and applies them in practice. This way, applied ethics creates different guidelines and norms to meet various needs (Loland, 2013). There are several recognised and widely used ethical and moral principles in sports: fairness, integrity, accountability and transparency, which will be discussed in detail.

2.2.1 Fairness

In modern sports, the importance of fairness is often emphasised. After all, regardless of being an athlete or a club, it has become somewhat universally understood and agreed upon that the same rules of competition should be applied to everyone involved.

Loland (2013) states that fairness is based on fair outcomes and equal opportunities. It is based on the idea that if individuals voluntarily choose to participate in diverse activities, they should follow and respect each other and the established rules as long as the shared rules and ethos are fair (Loland, 2013). However, Schweitzer and Gibson (2008) note that when fairness is disregarded, it can influence individuals' willingness to make ethical decisions. The authors argue that when individuals feel they have been treated unfairly they are more likely to justify and behave unethically as a way of revenge

or to correct the perceived unfairness. Furthermore, the feeling of being treated unfairly can lead to satisfaction when behaving unethically as a form of revenge (Schweitzer & Gibson, 2008).

Closely related to fairness but more specific to sports, there is the principle of *fair play*. Loland (2013) asserts that it is a central ethical concept in competition. Fair play involves fairness but also emphasises that everyone involved in sports should demonstrate attitudes and virtues that uphold the moral values of the sport and thus show respect for the competition (Loland, 2013). Dilnoza (2023) asserts that the concept of fair play applies to all stakeholders involved in sports. It is a cultural phenomenon that includes honesty, respect and politeness and therefore extends to the wider social environment.

2.2.2 Integrity

According to Audi and Murphy (2006), integrity is one of the most, if not the most, discussed morally desirable traits. However, its definition varies in the literature. Drawing on existing literature, Huberts (2018) defines integrity as "the quality of acting in accordance with relevant moral values, norms, and rules" (p. 22). Integrity is connected to moral values, often distinct from set rules and laws. Therefore, the author notes that integrity is contextual. What is considered a breach of integrity in one culture or organisation may be considered appropriate in another (Huberts, 2018).

Audi and Murphy (2006) argue that the very central meaning of integrity is that it exists to support various important moral values and principles. Thus, the authors suggest that integrity should not be seen as a moral principle by itself, but rather as a principle that strengthens other moral principles, such as fairness discussed above.

According to Gardiner et al. (2017), integrity has lately become a more frequently used term in sports, although its meaning differs. While international sports organisations have put integrity as one of their core values, no clear definition is provided. The authors argue that integrity in sports can be viewed from 4 different overlapping angles: *the integrity of the sports itself, personal integrity, organisational integrity, and procedural integrity*. *The integrity of the sports itself* refers to the shared understanding among stakeholders of the values that give sport its meaning, such as competition, respect, excellence, and fairness. *Personal integrity* implies that a stakeholder in sports represents the sports identity by acting responsibly and following rules and regulations. It suggests that as stakeholders strive to achieve their goals and commitments, they do so by maintaining their reputation and being true to themselves. *Organisational*

integrity, similar to personal integrity, implies that organisations need to stay true to their identity and values. If money and power become the main drivers of an organisation, it risks corruption. Therefore, while money and power do not need to be ignored, their role shall be to serve the identity and values of the sport. Finally, *Procedural integrity* ensures that sports events and governing bodies operate fairly, transparently, and align with the values of sport. It is based on the idea that everyone involved in sports should and needs to be trustworthy and committed to moral equality. When procedural integrity is lost, it can lead to corruption and scandals.

Integrity issues in sports can take place both on an individual and organisational level (Manoli et al., 2020). Manoli et al. (2020) and Harvey and McNamee (2018) note that integrity issues, such as doping and corruption, affect both amateur and professional sports. Manoli et al. (2020) further state that several challenges are related to integrity breaches, with the *normalisation* of integrity breaches being one phenomenon discovered. There is a level of *moral disengagement* taking place where various stakeholders justify their relationship with integrity breaches and sports by viewing the lack of integrity as a broader social issue.

2.2.3 Accountability

Mulgan (2020) states that the term *accountability* involves being called *to account* for one's actions to an external authoritative body. It includes social interaction between two parties, the one seeking an explanation and the one answering, with the accountable party accepting that the authoritative individual or governing body holds the authority and decisive power. France et al. (2024) state that scandals in the sports industry, such as unethical behaviour and athlete abuse, have increased public expectations for accountability among sports organisations.

Hall et al. (2017) assert that accountability is crucial to individuals, organisations, and even societies, as without accountability, there would be no consequences for certain actions. While the terms *accountability* and *responsibility* are often used as synonyms, the difference lies in the fact that accountability requires an external authority to which one is accountable, as also mentioned by Mulgan (2020). Hall et al. (2017) provide a deeper understanding of *felt accountability*, which refers to how individuals perceive their accountable behaviour. The authors note that individuals care about how others perceive them, therefore adjusting their behaviour to a more appropriate version when they know they are held accountable. Importantly, the authors state that felt

accountability is subjective, noting that the degree to which an individual is accountable depends on that individual's perception to what degree their action will be judged. Thus, it can be implied that certain rules and regulations will be felt differently by individuals, as some perceive them as strict, while others perceive them as soft, thereby continuing with questionable activities (Hall et al., 2017). White and Rezania (2019) found that when sports coaches demonstrate strong ethical behaviour, where actual outcomes meet the ideal outcomes, athletes feel more accountable and strive to meet their coaches' expectations (White & Rezania, 2019). Thus, it can be implied that it should be in the best interest of not only coaches but also sports agents to act in their best ethical behaviour, as it encourages athletes to do the same.

2.2.4 Transparency

According to Ball (2009), the term *transparency* has gradually started being used more and more by the public. Initially, the term referred to allowing light to pass through or to something being easily understood and clear. Today, it is often used alongside the term accountability. Lam (2014) notes that accountability, discussed in the previous section, cannot be applied without transparency. For individuals to be held accountable for their actions, authoritative bodies and decision-makers need access to information to make informed decisions.

In their research, Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) define transparency as follows: "Transparency is the perceived quality of intentionally shared information from a sender" (p. 5). The authors note that transparency involves three dimensions: disclosure, clarity and accuracy. Disclosure implies that the receiver views the information to be both relevant and delivered timely. Clarity is defined as the ease of understanding the delivered message. Lastly, accuracy is defined as the delivered information being both accurate and reliable. The authors argue for the importance of transparency to build and maintain stakeholder trust. For instance, it is mentioned that when stakeholders perceive an organisation as being transparent, it enhances their perception of integrity and goodwill, which in turn influences their trust towards the organisation.

Albu and Flyverbom (2019) assert that transparency can be understood from two perspectives: the Verifiability Approach and the Performativity Approach. The verifiability approach implies that a provider of information should do it as accurately as possible, keeping in mind that the receiver has to be able to interpret the disclosed information. Ultimately, this approach should increase trust and strengthen the

relationships between the provider of information and the receiver. The performativity approach does not solely view transparency as a means of sharing information. Instead, it views it as a complex social process involving communication, power struggles, and symbols. This approach views negotiations and conflicts as the main elements of transparency since what and how information should be disclosed is debatable. Nonetheless, as this approach argues that the information disclosed is up for debate and varies between organisations and individuals, the receiver can, therefore, be manipulated and delivered with information that benefits the provider.

Brunner and Ostermaier (2019) state that while transparency can reveal both ethical and unethical behaviour among managers, the latter has a stronger influence on peers. When managers observe their colleagues behaving unethically, for example, selectively disclosing information to favour a preferred outcome, they may similarly rationalise their own unethical decisions. Thus, the authors note that this kind of *partial transparency* is a significant risk for disseminating false information. They argue for strong oversight measures and punishment for unethical behaviour or inaccurate information disclosure, as managers might otherwise justify their behaviour by looking at their colleagues.

2.3 Conceptual lens

Previous sections attempted to illustrate the complex environment of sports and the role of sports agents within it. Sports agents deal with stakeholders with various needs. To understand stakeholder relationships, the stakeholder theory will be used. In addition, the bounded rationality theory will be applied to understand why unethical behaviour can arise, despite good intentions. Together, these theories form the conceptual lens of the thesis and inform the findings and conclusions.

2.3.1 Stakeholder theory

Freeman et al. (2010) state that the word *stakeholder* has its origins at the Stanford Research Institute in 1963, with stakeholders being defined as "those groups without whose support the organization would cease to exist" (p. 31). Since then, different interpretations have been used in various fields. The authors note that the stakeholder theory, as it is known today, has been greatly influenced by R. Edward Freeman's book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* from 1984. The core idea of the original book was to assist managers in managing and understanding stakeholder relationships by using a pragmatic approach. The development of Freeman's stakeholder

theory attempted to solve three problems. First, it tried to assist managers in a changing business environment, as the existing frameworks did not respond to the changing stakeholder relationships and how to manage them. Second, it tried to illustrate that capitalism and ethics were not distinct elements but interconnected. Third, the book attempted to change managers' mindsets from solely focusing on business outcomes to widening their view by considering others affected by the operations (Freeman et al., 2010).

Redefining value creation is central to the stakeholder theory. However, there are misunderstandings and a lack of clarity about what *value* actually entails, which Harrison and Wicks (2013) clarify. The authors assert that the traditional view of value has been associated mainly with economic performance. They note that the stakeholder theory creates different forms of non-economic value that benefit stakeholders. The authors argue for the importance of *utility*, which refers to the perceived benefits that stakeholders receive and captures both economic and non-economic value. These include a good balance between received and given value, perceived fairness, and shared values and respect that goes both ways.

Freeman et al. (2010) point out that stakeholders can be understood as primary and secondary stakeholders. ***Primary stakeholders*** are those without whom a business would not survive. ***Secondary stakeholders***, in turn, are defined more broadly. If an individual or group can influence a business or the primary stakeholders, then they should be considered in the creation of value. The authors note that every stakeholder contributes to the value creation of a business on different levels; therefore, each stakeholder's interest should be considered, regardless of being primary or secondary. For managers, this means that if there are conflicts between stakeholder groups, the managers must rethink how to create value that benefits every stakeholder. The authors further note that ethics is a central part of stakeholder theory. The traditional view of businesses was that the main and only goal is to maximise profits for their shareholders. However, the stakeholder theory counters this view, arguing for the consideration of all stakeholders, as managers have ethical and moral obligations to balance the interests of the parties.

According to Freeman et al. (2010), the concept of *legitimacy* in stakeholder theory refers to whether a stakeholder's interests should be taken into consideration by a business or manager. Phillips (2003) offers a profound view on legitimacy that can be understood as *normative legitimacy* and *derivative legitimacy*. Normative stakeholders

are discussed as stakeholders with whom the organisation or manager are involved directly, i.e., in a mutually understood and accepted cooperation. This cooperation creates ethical obligations that go both ways, thereby making normative stakeholders legitimate. Derivative legitimacy, in turn, is described as legitimate due to its potential to affect an organisation's normative stakeholders. The author points out that derivative stakeholders can have both a negative and a positive effect and therefore require attention.

Donaldson and Preston's (1995) framework distinguishes three stakeholder theory perspectives: *descriptive, instrumental,* and *normative*. This thesis primarily adopts the normative perspective to clarify why behaviour occurs and which stakeholders athletics agents have *legitimate* obligations toward. It also draws on the descriptive perspective to explain how agents interact with stakeholders in practice. The instrumental perspective, how stakeholder management supports achieving objectives, is not applied.

The reviewed literature on stakeholder theory has provided an understanding of stakeholder relationships and a clear framework for ethical decision-making that considers all stakeholders. However, the stakeholder theory does not fully account for the cognitive and practical constraints that can influence the decision-making of sports agents. Therefore, the next section will introduce the bounded rationality theory.

2.3.2 Bounded rationality theory

Herbert A. Simon was an influential figure in developing the bounded rationality theory, which reshaped the general understanding of decision-making by recognising that individuals act under cognitive and practical constraints. According to Cristofaro (2017), Simon first challenged the idea of perfect rationality in his 1947 book, *Administrative Behaviour*, which largely steered the understanding of human behaviour until the middle of the 20th century. With many theories having their roots in the bounded rationality theory, the author claims that Simon's 1955 article, *A Behavioral Model of Rational Choice*, laid the foundational work in establishing the concept of bounded rationality, which will be discussed next.

Simon (1955) asserts that the traditional view of a decision-maker assumes that individuals have perfect knowledge, stable, unchanged preferences, and the ability to make optimal choices, thus maximising the expected utility. The author argues that in the real world, individuals use mental shortcuts and simplifications, therefore making decisions that are good enough rather than perfect, especially in complex situations. He

notes that individuals evaluate different alternatives in sequences. When an alternative reaches a *satisfactory* level, individuals tend to choose that alternative since evaluating all the alternatives after that point would not in most cases bring any more value.

Simon (1972) notes that rationality theories can be both normative (how people or organisations should behave) and descriptive (how people or organisations actually behave). While some theories argue that decision-making processes are influenced by and only the environment of the decision-maker, bounded rationality acknowledges that decision-making is affected by individuals' ability to process information. A term that Simon (1955) did not introduce explicitly is *heuristics*. Simon (1972) asserts that heuristics can be understood as mental shortcuts that form through experience and familiarity and take place in individuals' unconsciousness during complex decision-making situations. Heuristics is connected to *satisfactory* decisions, as discussed previously. Heuristics aid individuals in choosing satisfactory outcomes, thus making the decision-making process more manageable. Simon (1979) strengthens the key arguments discussed by noting that empirical evidence on organisational decision-makers has supported the concept of bounded decision-making. Based on the discussions above, Figure 2 has been created to visualise bounded decision-making.

Figure 2 Bounded decision-making model

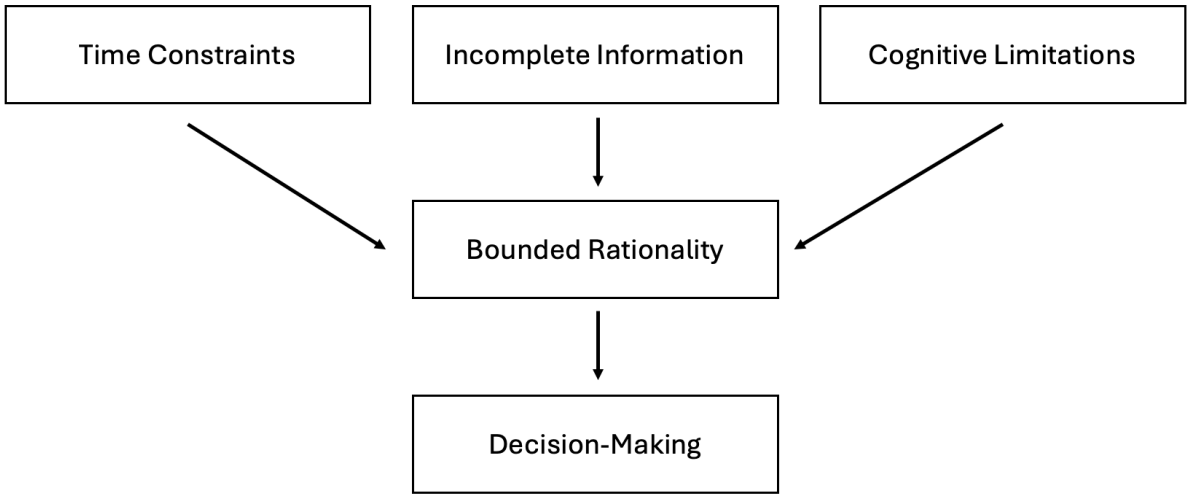


Figure adapted from Simon (1955, 1972, 1979). Author's illustration.

According to Gigerenzer (2010), *heuristics,* as discussed by Simon (1972), have a big influence on moral behaviour and decision-making. Since heuristics are mental shortcuts, making decision-making quicker and easier, these shortcuts can, at times, lead to unethical behaviour. Thus, although this behaviour essentially leads to *moral*

satisficing, which is connected to Simon's (1955) argument on *satisfactory* decision-making, the action would be deemed inappropriate according to external guidelines, even if the cognitive thinking process thought of it as a good enough outcome. Continuing the discussion on ethical decision-making, Batson and Thompson (2001) shed some light on why individuals do not always act morally. They argue that individuals have a strong urge to appear moral. However, if the individuals get a chance, they will act in their self-interest, therefore leading to *moral hypocrisy*. The term *overpowered integrity*, in turn, concerns individuals who genuinely want to act morally. However, when it becomes clear what acting morally practically means, which is often something unpleasant, individuals will make self-serving decisions and thus act immorally (Batson & Thompson, 2001).

Other views on why individuals fail to make ethical decisions are offered by Bazerman and Sezer (2016). The authors build on Simon's bounded rationality theory by discussing the concepts of *bounded awareness* and *bounded ethicality*. They argue that bounded awareness takes place when easily available and observable information exists, but individuals fail to notice it during decision-making. It is noted that this occurs when the information does not match the decision-maker's belief about what factors need to be considered. Furthermore, when individuals are heavily invested in a specific task, their cognitive capacity does not allow them to analyse the environment, although it would be right in front of them. Bounded ethicality, in turn, stems from bounded awareness and occurs when individuals act unethically, even if it is inconsistent with their morals. Several biases can cause bounded ethicality. For instance, individuals may unconsciously overlook unethical behaviour when it benefits them, often due to a conflict of interest. In addition, individuals are less likely to judge unethical behaviour that leads to good outcomes for themselves compared to behaviour that leads to less beneficial outcomes.

The reviewed literature on bounded rationality shows that human decision-making is not perfect. Stakeholder theory helps identify and acknowledge whose interests count, while bounded rationality explains why decisions may sometimes be unethical even when intentions are good. Given the complex environment in which sports agents operate, these two theories together offer a strong conceptual lens for understanding agents' stakeholder relationships and the ethical dimensions of their decision-making.

2.4 Summary of literature

The literature review begins by discussing the sports system. As noted by Szymanski (2008) and MacLean (2008), modern sports can be understood through the development of sports clubs. MacLean (2008) asserts that through the development of sports clubs, governing bodies formed, thereby slowly broadening the sports system. Forster (2006) states that with the rise of commercialism in sports, ethical challenges emerged. These challenges, in turn, created a need for stricter rules and regulations. Lee and Hassim (2023) and Buser et al. (2022) note that modern sports is a system that consists of different interconnected stakeholder relationships, norms and beliefs.

Within the sports system lies the field of sports management. Hoye et al. (2018) assert that sports management is a complex field shaped by globalisation, government policy, technology, and various dynamics. The sports environment consists of three sectors: public, nonprofit and professional. Both Shilbury (2022) and Hoye et al. (2018) emphasise the importance for sports managers to understand these three interconnected sectors. Within the field of sports management, sports agents have existed since the 1800s (Bull & Faure, 2022). However, according to Mason and Duquette (2005) and Shropshire et al. (2016), it was not until the 1960s that the profession began to grow significantly due to increased revenues in sports.

The Ethics in sports section addresses the ethical principles that guide behaviour within the sports system: *fairness, integrity, accountability*, and *transparency*. Fairness involves ensuring equal opportunities by behaving according to the established rules and guidelines (Loland, 2013). Integrity refers to the consistency of actions according to moral values, rules and norms (Huberts, 2018). Accountability emphasises that individuals and organisations should be held to account for their actions (Mulgan, 2020). Finally, transparency is connected to accountability, meaning openness and willingness to disclose relevant information (Schnackenberg and Tomlinson, 2016).

Before concluding the literature review, two theories are introduced, which establish the conceptual lens of the thesis: stakeholder theory and bounded rationality theory. As noted by Freeman et al. (2010), the stakeholder theory emphasises the importance of considering all stakeholders in decision-making. The stakeholders are categorised into primary and secondary stakeholders, with the primary stakeholders being the group without whom a business would not survive, whilst secondary stakeholders are simply those who can influence a business, even with minimal impact. Bounded rationality, on

the other hand, acknowledges that during decision-making processes, there are time constraints, incomplete information, and cognitive limitations (Simon, 1955, 1972).

3 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the research methodology is discussed. It begins by presenting the research philosophy, which guides the entire research process of the thesis. This is followed by a presentation of the chosen abductive research approach before moving on to the qualitative research method. The data collection section outlines how and what type of data was collected, before moving on to the data analysis section, which explains how the thematic analysis was conducted. Finally, research quality and ethical considerations are addressed.

3.1 Research philosophy

Saunders et al. (2023) note that authors' understanding of the environment, as well as how they collect and interpret data, varies. It is shaped by beliefs and assumptions, and it is, therefore, important to acknowledge how the view of the environment affects the way research is conducted. When developing new knowledge through research, the knowledge developed is influenced by the research philosophy, which in turn reflects the worldview of the researcher. The authors note that *reflexivity*, i.e., scrutinising one's own thinking process behind beliefs and assumptions, assists in understanding and articulating the underlying research philosophy. During a research process, three types of assumptions may be made: ontological, epistemological, and axiological, which will be discussed next.

Saunders et al. (2023) assert that ontology refers to the understanding of what reality is, shaping how research objectives are studied and viewed. Epistemology, in turn, refers to the assumptions about knowledge, i.e., what type of knowledge is considered *acceptable* and *valid*, and how this knowledge can be shared with others. Finally, axiology refers to the extent researchers' ethics and values are present. Since values act as a foundation for all human behaviour, they will always be present. However, it is important to communicate why and how certain interpretations in the thesis are made, as every decision, such as chosen data collection methods, reflects personal values regarding what is considered important.

Saunders et al. (2023) further claim that the above-mentioned assumptions can be both subjective and objective. Objectivism views the environment as external, i.e., that the environment or *reality* would be the same regardless of humans, hence the notion of objectivity. Objectivist research believes (in the most *extreme* form) that individuals and society can be studied in the same way as scientists study nature: through facts and

observations. Conversely, subjectivism views the environment as a social reality formed by individual experiences and interactions, which differ across individuals. Subjectivism acknowledges that there are different perceived realities, which subjectivist researchers aim to understand.

This thesis adopts a subjective view of the three aforementioned assumptions. First, the thesis can be understood as ontologically subjective. Since the research is focused on licensed World Athletics sports agents and how they navigate stakeholder relationships and ethical challenges, it is assumed that they have different realities, which are shaped by unique experiences and values. Second, the thesis can be understood as epistemologically subjective, since the data collected from the interviews with sports agents determines the *acceptable* and *valid* knowledge, as well as the narratives being understood through the author's lens. In essence, the thesis aims to discover subjective reasons for certain behaviours and not rely on hard data or numbers. Third, the thesis can be understood as axiologically subjective for two main reasons. As previously mentioned (see section 1.3), the author's background in sports, and later as a sports agent, has strongly influenced both the research topic and research questions. Furthermore, since ethics plays a central role in the thesis, the chosen ethical principles reflect the author's ethical values and will be used to understand athletics agents' behaviour. Reflecting on the discussion above, the thesis would therefore fit the *interpretivism* philosophy, as noted by Saunders et al. (2023).

3.2 Research approach

Saunders et al. (2023) assert that there are three types of research approaches: inductive, deductive, and abductive. These approaches differ in how they use theory for data collection and analysis. The authors state that the choice of a suitable research approach is important for three main reasons. First, it helps structure the research by clarifying what kind of evidence is included and how that evidence is interpreted to answer the research questions. Second, it enables the researcher to identify which techniques align with the chosen approach and which do not. Third, given possible constraints such as restricted access to data or lack of experience, understanding different research approaches helps in selecting the approach that works best for the author in achieving the research objectives. This thesis uses the abductive research approach, which pairs well with the interpretivism philosophy mentioned in the previous section. Nevertheless, to provide a clear understanding of why the abductive research approach is chosen, each of the three approaches will be briefly discussed next.

A deductive research approach is often tested with numeric data, although other sorts of data can also be used. The deductive research approach usually begins with a broad idea or theory. This is followed by narrowing the broad idea or theory into measurable *hypotheses* and defining the context by reviewing existing literature. Finally, the author reviews whether the collected data supports the hypotheses or not. An inductive research approach, in turn, begins with data collection to explore phenomena through which a theory is built. Although the findings might be the same as with the deductive approach, the data collection is the first step and the theory second. It is noted that the inductive approach is often subjective and context-specific; therefore, it is important to gather varied data to capture the complexity of the phenomena (Saunders et al., 2023).

As previously mentioned, this thesis will utilise an abductive research approach. A research approach is abductive if the research aims to explore phenomena through the lens of existing theories, research questions, as well as the identified themes (Saunders et al., 2023). As noted by Bell et al. (2022), an abductive approach begins with phenomena that previous research cannot fully explain, which can be referred to as a *puzzle* that the abductive approach aims to solve. Since abductive data is often complex and allows for multiple interpretations, the researcher aims to select the interpretation that explains the explored phenomena most convincingly. Moreover, the abductive approach often involves moving back and forth between the empirical data and existing theory to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena.

Sætre and Van de Ven (2021) note that abductive research is a *cyclical* process involving four steps. First, the researcher observes *anomalies,* which are phenomena that cannot be explained by existing knowledge. Second, these anomalies are analysed in detail, ensuring the phenomena are real. Third, the researcher generates *hunches*, which are plausible explanations for the identified anomaly. Finally, the researcher selects the most plausible hunch (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021).

Since the thesis aims to address the *puzzle* of sports agents' ethical behaviour, the chosen abductive approach allows for comparison between existing literature and collected data to identify the most convincing explanation of the phenomenon.

3.3 Research method

Creswell and Creswell (2017) note that there are three types of research methods: quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Although the authors refer to them as *approaches,* to be consistent with the terminology used by Saunders et al. (2023), they

will be referred to as *methods*. Creswell and Creswell (2017) state that these methods are not as distinct as they may seem to be. Quantitative and qualitative methods exist on the same spectrum, although the determination of method is influenced by which side of the spectrum the research is inclined towards. Mixed methods, in turn, lie in the middle of the spectrum, therefore being a combination of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative method is used when researchers aim to understand the relationship between variables to test objective theories. The numerical data is usually gathered using various statistical tools, such as numeric surveys or experimental research, which manipulate variables to see if they affect the outcome (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study adopts a qualitative method, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of athletics agents' subjective experiences and aligns with the interpretivism philosophy.

Saunders et al. (2023) note that a qualitative method refers to any data collection procedure that uses or creates non-numerical data. Creswell and Creswell (2017) assert that insights in a qualitative study usually emerge as the research progresses, with the author having the responsibility for interpreting the qualitative insights. The qualitative research method is particularly suitable when a phenomenon requires exploration due to limited previous research, being a new topic, or because the variables that could be used in a quantitative method are unknown. The authors note that in qualitative research, data is often collected through interviews, observations, documents, and audio/visual information rather than relying on a single source. This type of data is open-ended and requires the researcher to structure and categorise the data in order to make sense of it (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This thesis uses one-on-one interviews and public documents as data collection techniques, which will be discussed in more depth in the upcoming sections.

Patton (2015) notes that the data collection is followed by a qualitative data analysis, which reduces the data into a smaller number of themes, as it is the quality of the data that is important and not the amount. The author further adds that qualitative research methods produce plenty of depth and detailed information by focusing on a limited amount of information. However, the findings cannot be as effectively generalised as in the other two methods since the findings are mostly contextual (Patton, 2015). The data analysis technique (thematic analysis) utilised in the thesis will be further discussed in the following sections.

3.4 Data collection

The following subsections discuss the data collection techniques used. As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2017), qualitative research often involves collecting data from multiple sources. To fulfil the purpose of this thesis, semi-structured interviews as well as public documents have been chosen as suitable data collection techniques.

3.4.1 Sampling

According to Patton (2015), qualitative research typically focuses on small sample sizes, and it is therefore important to make the sample purposeful. The sampling strategy used in this thesis can be considered to be criterion-based case selection, where multiple criteria have been set by the author to select participants (cases) who provide the richest information. The aim is to include participants who could contribute valuable insights and thereby help address the research purpose and established research questions (Patton, 2015).

The first and main predetermined criterion was that the research would include only World Athletics licensed agents. This was based on the fact that licensed agents are required to follow World Athletics' rules and guidelines and must pass an exam to obtain the license. Focusing solely on licensed agents helped narrow the study's scope and made it more manageable for a master's thesis. The main criterion was followed by several sub-criteria.

First, a reasonable balance between male and female participants was set as a sub-criterion. The final sample included female agents n = 4 and male agents n = 6. The motivation behind this sub-criterion was purely based on the principle of gender balance. Second, a balance between experienced agents and newly licensed agents was pursued. Agents with fewer than 4 years of licensing experience were considered newly licensed (n = 4), while those with at least 10 years of experience as licensed agents were considered experienced (n = 6). It is worth mentioning that each experienced agent had been working in athletics for over 15 years, although not necessarily licensed throughout the entire period. Third, a sub-criterion related to the number of represented athletes was applied. Only agents with currently listed athletes on their World Athletics profile were included. A strong preference was given to agents representing multiple athletes, based on the reasonable assumption that the more athletes an agent represents, the greater the likelihood of exposure to diverse experiences and insights. Finally, cultural and regional differences were considered. Agents from 3 different continents were

interviewed. This was done to reflect variation in norms within athletics, as it is a global sport. A summary of the participants is presented in Table 1 below. To maintain confidentiality, most identifying information has been anonymised.

Table 1 Participants overview

Participant ID	Gender	Experience level	Interview length
P1	Male	Experienced	51:24
P2	Female	Newly licensed	40:37
P3	Male	Newly licensed	33:20
P4	Female	Experienced	43:02
P5	Male	Newly licensed	27:50
P6	Male	Experienced	91:14
P7	Male	Experienced	69:46
P8	Male	Experienced	128:15
P9	Female	Experienced	73:15
P10	Female	Newly licensed	63:53

Despite a clear set of predetermined criteria and support from both World Athletics and the Athletics Integrity Unit, the process of getting participants proved challenging. Many licensed agents were hesitant to participate. One explanation that became more evident than others was time constraints. Other possible explanations include the sensitivity of the research topic or the perception of the researcher as a competitor. Due to this fact, the original planned sample size (N = 15) was reduced to N = 10. A small sample size is supported by Patton (2015), who asserts that in qualitative research, the quality and depth of the data are more important than quantity (Patton, 2015). Most of the time, the research request was simply left unanswered, or in some cases, politely declined without a given reason. In total, 62 interview requests were sent, of which 16 licensed agents promised to participate. Due to unforeseen circumstances and the thesis deadline, the final number of completed interviews was 10.

Nevertheless, Patton (2015) notes that in studies with small sample sizes, the sample is considered sufficient once the data becomes saturated. Saturation occurs when additional data from participants no longer provides new insights, indicating that further collection is unnecessary (Patton, 2015). By the end of the final interview, the data had reached this saturation point, and the gathered data was therefore sufficient to meet the research purpose.

3.4.2 Interviews

In this thesis, interviews were used as the primary source of data. According to Patton (2015), the purpose of interviews is to gain knowledge that cannot be obtained through observation or that simply cannot be observed. For instance, knowledge gained through experience cannot be observed. The author notes that it is important for the interviewer to be trustworthy and authentic and to avoid judging the interviewee's behaviour. Furthermore, the author asserts that key skills for an interviewer include asking clear and understandable questions, listening carefully, and asking follow-up questions when more depth is required.

The conducted interviews followed the interview guide approach, as discussed by Patton (2015). Another commonly used term for the interview guide approach is semi-structured interview, which is the terminology used throughout this thesis. According to the author, an interview guide consists of questions that the researcher considers important to ask in order to fulfil the purpose of the study. A well-designed interview guide saves valuable time and helps maintain consistency between interviews (Patton, 2015). During the interviews, open-ended questions were prepared in advance, but the exact wording and order of the questions varied depending on how each conversation developed. If the interviewee responded to an upcoming question before it was asked, that question was simply ignored. This flexible approach made the interviews more manageable while allowing for depth and insights to emerge.

In total, 14 questions were included in the interview guide, along with 7 possible follow-up questions. The full interview guide can be found in Appendix 1.

The interview request was sent to each participant by email, using the same subject line. Email addresses were found on the World Athletics website, where the contact information of licensed agents is publicly available. For the most part, the message itself remained consistent. However, after realising how difficult it was to secure interview participants, the text was revised a few times to improve clarity and tone. The initial email sent to potential participants consisted of approximately 230 words. In a few rare cases, a phone call was made to agents when there had been no response to the email request. This effort resulted in one additional participant. The email contained key information, such as the university at which the research was conducted and a brief overview of the research purpose. The author aimed to keep the message personal and friendly while maintaining an academic tone. The interview request was sent from the

author's work email, in hopes of increasing the response rate by being perceived as a peer, or "one of them", rather than as an external academic researcher. After several emails went unanswered, an online meeting was held with representatives from World Athletics and the Athletics Integrity Unit. During the meeting, the research topic and its purpose were presented. The author's background as an agent was also discussed. Following the meeting, and after receiving institutional support from both organisations, the interview request email was slightly revised to include a reference to this support. While the effect seemed to be modest, it is believed that this improved the response rate. Once agents agreed to participate, a consent form and privacy notice were sent to them. Ethical considerations, including the consent process and data privacy, are discussed in more detail in section 3.7 on research ethics.

All interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams between 10.04.2025 and 04.06.2025. The interviews were held online due to the time limitations of participants and the practical benefits of virtual meetings. Scheduling was done according to each participant's availability, with the researcher remaining highly flexible to ensure the interviews could take place. Each interview was conducted in English and automatically transcribed using Microsoft Teams' transcription function. After each interview, the transcript was reviewed, grammatical mistakes were corrected, and any identifying information was anonymised and pseudonymised. The measures taken to maintain participant anonymity are further discussed in section 3.7 on research ethics.

3.4.3 Documents

As a secondary data source, World Athletics documents were examined to clarify the expectations placed on licensed agents. The documents aim to describe the governance structure, the regulatory environment in which agents operate, and to outline agents' ethical obligations. Together, these documents provide a normative framework for expected behaviour. Important to note is that the documents were not included in the thematic analysis discussed in section 3.5.

According to Patton (2015), written communication, such as organisational documents, is a valid source of qualitative data. The author identifies three main forms of qualitative data: interviews (as previously discussed), observations and fieldwork, and documents. Documents can include various types of written communication, such as social media posts, personal writings, and official publications, to name a few. Combining interview and document data strengthens the research by reducing reliance on a single data

collection method. This combination is referred to as *data triangulation* in Patton's (2015) terminology. Thus, the author asserts that using multiple data sources enhances the credibility of the findings. While inconsistencies between methods are sometimes seen as a limitation, they can, in fact, contribute to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

The examined documents were publicly available from World Athletics and included the organisational structure, strategic plans, the Integrity Code of Conduct, Safeguarding rules, World Athletics Athletes' Representative rules, as well as competition rules concerning Continental Tour and Diamond League meetings.

3.5 Data analysis

The data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. A key benefit of thematic analysis, as they note, is its flexibility. Here, thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in the interview data. What counts as a theme depends on the researcher's judgment; a theme does not need to appear frequently to be significant, as long as it helps answer the research questions.

Because thematic analysis is flexible, Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasise the importance of clearly describing each step taken. Without this, it becomes difficult for other researchers working on the same or similar topics to compare or assess the findings. Accordingly, the proposed six-phase guide (see figure below) has been followed and is presented next.

Figure 3 Thematic analysis six-phase guide



Figure adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006). Author's illustration.

The first phase in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis is to familiarise oneself with the data. The authors note that the researcher should gain a deep understanding of the material to support the interpretation of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Familiarisation began during data collection, while conducting the one-on-one interviews. During the interviews, initial thoughts were written down for potential later use. Although automatic transcriptions were used, the author listened back to each recording and carefully proofread the transcripts, correcting spelling errors, removing

filler words (without altering the original meaning) where appropriate, and anonymising/pseudonymising sensitive information. After this, each transcript was read again to ensure familiarisation before moving to the second phase.

The second phase is generating initial codes. At this stage, once familiar with the entire dataset, the researcher summarises relevant parts of the text into codes. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend detailed and comprehensive coding early on, as it is difficult to know which codes will become useful later. Coding can be both data-driven and theory-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While informed by the research questions and relevant literature, the author remained open to codes that did not directly connect to them, acknowledging that the literature chapter of the thesis might need refinement later. The entire dataset was coded, and parts that appeared even slightly relevant were assigned codes. In total, 694 codes were generated, ranging from 58 to 100 per transcript. Each transcript was coded separately, and spreadsheets were used to track the coded data for subsequent phases (see Table 2 below).

Table 2 Generating codes

Transcript ID	Experience Level	Initial Code	Description of Code	Quote	RQ
Respondent Y	Experienced/Newly Licensed	Communication seems to be one-sided	World Athletics not communicating well when it comes to agent concerns	Quote inserted here	1 or 2

The third phase involves sorting the generated codes into broader themes. The identified themes can be further refined in the next phases, and therefore, these themes are not final. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend using tables and mind maps for theme development, which helps in understanding how themes are connected (Braun & Clarke, 2006). With the help of spreadsheets, the author began step 3 by organising the identified codes into broader categories (potential themes and subthemes), each transcript separately. During this phase, a total of 134 categories were created. Moving the categories from each spreadsheet into one main sheet aided in identifying themes and subthemes from the newly created categories. Given the volume and complexity of categories, pen-and-paper mind maps were used to visualise how themes and subthemes, formed from the categories, were connected. As a result, 4 themes were identified, along with numerous subthemes.

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe phase four as refining the initial themes formed during step 3. They note that the researcher should ensure that the data extracts belong under a given theme, i.e., that a clear pattern can be identified. When a theme contains

a clear pattern, the researcher should further ensure that each theme is distinct by avoiding overlap. If any overlap is noticed, the researcher should decide whether to alter the theme or move/remove data extracts from it. Once satisfied with the themes, they should be analysed to see whether they reflect the findings in the whole dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During the analysis, phase four began by looking for clear patterns in the identified themes and subthemes. Several illustrative quotes were moved or removed before clear patterns emerged under each subtheme. The author then checked whether each theme and subtheme were distinct, which again required alterations. Finally, 3 themes were identified along with 11 subthemes. These themes were carefully reviewed to ensure that they reflect the entire dataset and that no clear patterns were ignored.

Phase five, as discussed by Braun and Clarke (2006), involves further refining the identified themes. At this stage, the researcher should ensure that the themes are neither too broad nor too narrow; in other words, they should be balanced. Finally, theme names can be altered to make sure they accurately reflect the identified patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In this study, these recommendations were followed. Table 3 below illustrates the final identified themes.

Table 3 Identified themes

Theme	Subtheme
Athletics system	1. Evolving agent requirements in a static system
	2. Gender bias
	3. Governance frustrations
	4. Scarce market opportunities
Stakeholders	1. Primary stakeholders
	2. Secondary stakeholders
	3. Building and maintaining relationships
	4. Networks for access to competitions
Decision-making	1. Experience and heuristics
	2. Individual values
	3. Financial incentives and challenges

Finally, phase six involves writing a report that discusses the identified themes. Using data extracts (illustrative quotes), the themes should be presented logically and convincingly in relation to the research questions. The authors emphasise that this phase is not about purely describing the data but about creating a clear and compelling

narrative that makes the findings convincing to the reader (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This phase will be comprehensively discussed in Chapter 4, Findings.

3.6 Research Quality

According to Patton (2015), the researcher is responsible for ensuring that the study is conducted with the highest quality possible. To ensure that this study meets the highest qualitative research standards, the trustworthiness criteria, as discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), were followed. The trustworthiness criteria include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which will be discussed next.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that the *credibility* of a study can be strengthened by extended exposure to the phenomenon being researched, which also helps in detecting possible misinformation. Although this thesis is not a field study in the traditional sense, the author was exposed to the research phenomenon in several ways. As previously disclosed, the author works as a licensed athletics agent and is therefore continuously engaged in the environment that the study investigates. It could therefore be argued that the author has been directly or indirectly exposed to the phenomenon in the field. Another central way for enhancing credibility is disclosure and transparency (member checking). Explaining how the data was collected, analysed, and presented to the study's participants strengthens the research by ensuring that the findings accurately reflect their experiences. In this study, each participant's own anonymised illustrative quotes included in the findings were shared with them before the final thesis submission. Lincoln and Guba (1985) also emphasise triangulation, which involves combining multiple data sources to reduce the limitations of relying on a single one. This study applied triangulation by combining interview data with document data, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings and providing additional context. Patton (2015) adds that handpicking participants through purposeful sampling provides depth and helps capture a wide range of perspectives. In this study, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions allowed participants to share rich and detailed experiences. Each participant was selected based on predetermined criteria (see section 3.4.1), ensuring variety in gender, experience level, and cultural background. This diversity added depth and credibility to the collected data.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that *transferability* is the second trustworthiness criterion that qualitative research should meet. Patton (2015) notes that transferability (or generalisability) refers to how well findings can be applied to other similar contexts.

In quantitative studies, random probability sampling is often used to maximise the generalisability of results. In contrast, qualitative studies do not aim to maximise transferability, but rather to provide depth and use purposeful, selective sampling to gain insights into the studied phenomenon (Patton, 2015). To assess whether findings from a qualitative study can be transferred to other contexts, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend using what they refer to as *thick description*. Thick description refers to providing as much information as possible, which helps readers judge whether the findings may be transferable to other settings. This thesis has made efforts to follow this trustworthiness criterion as comprehensively as possible. The previous sections discuss the research problem and theoretical background. The current methodology section, in turn, outlines the sampling technique, how interviews were prepared and conducted, and a transparent description of the thematic analysis method used when analysing data. Chapter 4 will further present and outline the findings.

Dependability is the third trustworthiness criterion discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Dependability is achieved when the whole research process is transparent, well-documented, and logically structured. It is noted that leaving so-called *audit trails*, i.e., documenting every step taken during the research process, which readers can refer back to, further increases the dependability. Throughout the thesis, each section is documented as transparently and accurately as possible. This allows readers to follow the reasoning behind the steps taken and understand how the findings were derived from the data. Furthermore, the thesis supervisor, as well as peer students, have been reviewing and providing feedback throughout the research process, which has ensured that all essential steps have been taken.

The fourth and final trustworthiness criterion, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), is *confirmability*. Confirmability refers to the objectivity of the research, meaning that the findings and interpretations are derived from data and theory and not shaped by the researcher's personal biases or assumptions. As with dependability, confirmability is strengthened through transparent documentation of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the study, each step of the process was clearly described, making it possible for readers to trace how interpretations were developed from both the data and relevant literature. The author's background in athletics and current role as an athletics agent may introduce potential implicit biases (see section 1.3). Additionally, as described in section 3.1 (Research philosophy), the interpretive nature of qualitative research means that some subjectivity is involved. However, to ensure that the findings

reflect the participants' perspectives rather than the author's, every effort was made to show how interpretations were rooted in the data, and any personal connections to the research topic were disclosed so readers can evaluate their influence.

3.7 Research Ethics

In the previous section, the procedures to maintain research quality were described. While containing some ethical aspects, this section will discuss specifically how ethicality was ensured in the thesis.

Saunders et al. (2023) note that it is crucial for researchers to act ethically throughout the entire research process. While ethical behaviour is important, what is considered appropriate often depends on social norms, which can vary across contexts. The authors suggest that following the ethical guidelines of the university where the research is conducted is one way to meet these expectations. Accordingly, this thesis has followed the ethical guidelines set by the author's university, Hanken School of Economics (n.d.), in compliance with strict ethical standards and the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). In addition, the study has been following Orb et al.'s (2001) three ethical principles for qualitative research: autonomy, beneficence, and justice, which will be discussed next.

According to Orb et al. (2001), *autonomy* refers to the participant's right to either accept or decline an invitation to participate in an interview, as well as the right to be informed about the study in question. The authors emphasise that participants have the autonomous right to withdraw at any time without facing consequences. In qualitative research, this principle is typically addressed through the use of informed consent (Orb et al., 2001). In this study, the principle of autonomy was recognised and followed by sending each participant a consent form via email after the interview had been scheduled. Participants were asked to sign and return the consent form before the interview. Alongside the consent form, a privacy notice was sent, providing a detailed explanation of how the data would be collected and used.

Beneficence, as noted by Orb et al. (2001), suggests that when the research topic requires it, the researcher must take appropriate measures to ensure participant confidentiality. Anonymity and pseudonymity should be applied to protect participants' identities, especially when dealing with a sensitive topic. The authors further underline the importance of being transparent about how the collected data will be published, even if anonymity is secured, and recommend that direct quotes should be shared with

participants for approval (Orb et al., 2001). As the research topic of this thesis is considered sensitive, every effort has been made to maintain participant anonymity. In revised transcriptions, participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms, and any potentially identifying information has either been modified without altering the original context or removed entirely. Individual direct quotes were also shared with participants for review before being included in the thesis. Given that the athletics community, particularly among agents, is small and close-knit, no identifying details about individual participants are disclosed in the findings, not even in the form of pseudonyms.

The third and final ethical principle is justice. Orb et al. (2001) define this as ensuring that no harm or exploitation occurs to the participants. For example, when a finding is based solely on data from a single participant, extra caution should be taken to ensure full anonymity. Ideally, such findings should be shared with the participant for review before final publication (Orb et al., 2001). This principle was fully complied with through measures previously discussed. In addition, as noted earlier, direct quotes were communicated to participants for review before submitting the thesis.

The writing process was supported by Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools. A detailed description of how AI was utilised is provided in Appendix 2.

4 FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings of the thesis. It begins with findings from the examined documents, which provide an overview of the governance structure, strategic ambitions of World Athletics, and the regulatory environment in which licensed athletics agents operate (see section 4.1). These findings are derived from publicly available World Athletics documents. Following this, findings identified through thematic analysis of the interview data (see section 3.5) are presented in section 4.2 and its subsections. The two sets of findings are brought together in Chapter 5, Conclusions, where they are juxtaposed and discussed.

4.1 Findings from documents

This section reports findings from the examined documents (see section 3.4.3). It provides a descriptive overview of the governance structures and regulatory frameworks applying to licensed athletics agents and other relevant stakeholders. The governance structure as well as strategic ambitions of World Athletics are first briefly presented, which is followed by the ethical obligations of stakeholders and athletics agents in particular, before finally examining competition and rankings. These findings set the scene for the interview-based themes that follow in section 4.2.

Currently, there are 381 licensed athletics agents, of whom 64 (16.8%) are female. The majority are based in Europe and North America, which illustrates the concentration of representation within these two continents (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 **Distribution of licensed athletics agents by continent and gender**

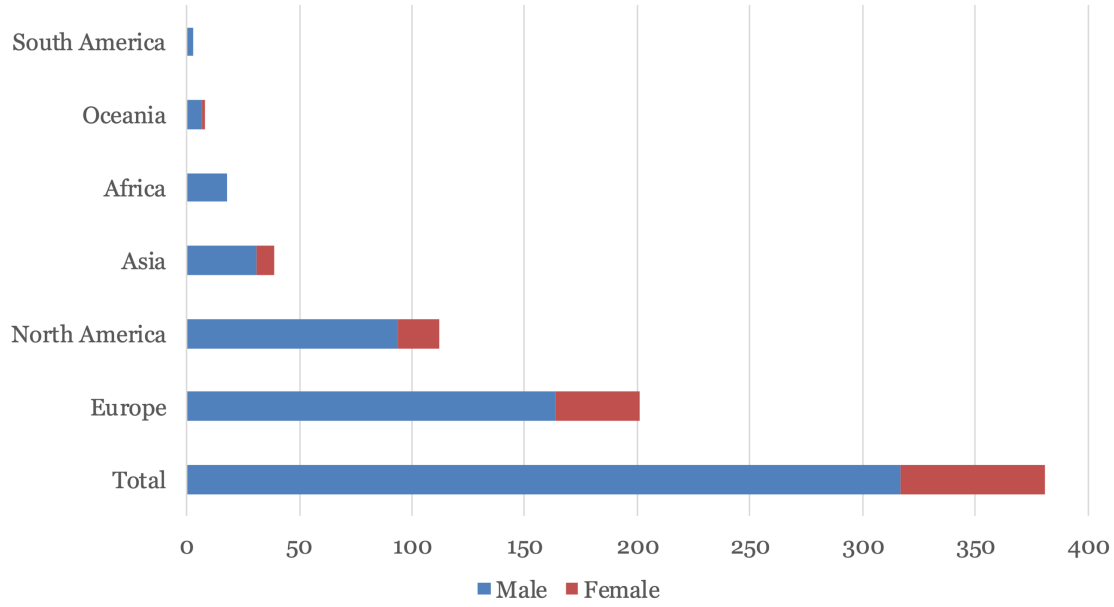


Figure adapted from World Athletics (n.d.-b). Author's illustration.

4.1.1 Governance structure

As outlined in World Athletics (n.d.-c), the organisation serves as the global governing body for athletics, with 214 national member federations (i.e., national-level governing bodies) required to follow its regulations. The ethical governance of athletics is a shared responsibility of World Athletics and the Athletics Integrity Unit (AIU), an independent body founded by World Athletics to prevent and address ethical breaches.

Within World Athletics, the **Congress** is the highest authority. Each member federation is represented by delegates, and each has one vote. Congress elects the President, who leads the organisation. The **Council** governs the sport and is responsible for strategic decisions, including rules and regulations. The **Executive Board** oversees financial management, handling the annual plan, budgets, and other business matters. The organisation also includes committees, panels, commissions, external auditors, and independent bodies such as the **AIU**.

Each member federation belongs to one of six continental area associations. Both member federations and area associations are responsible for complying with World Athletics' rules.

Figure 5 **World Athletics' organisational structure**

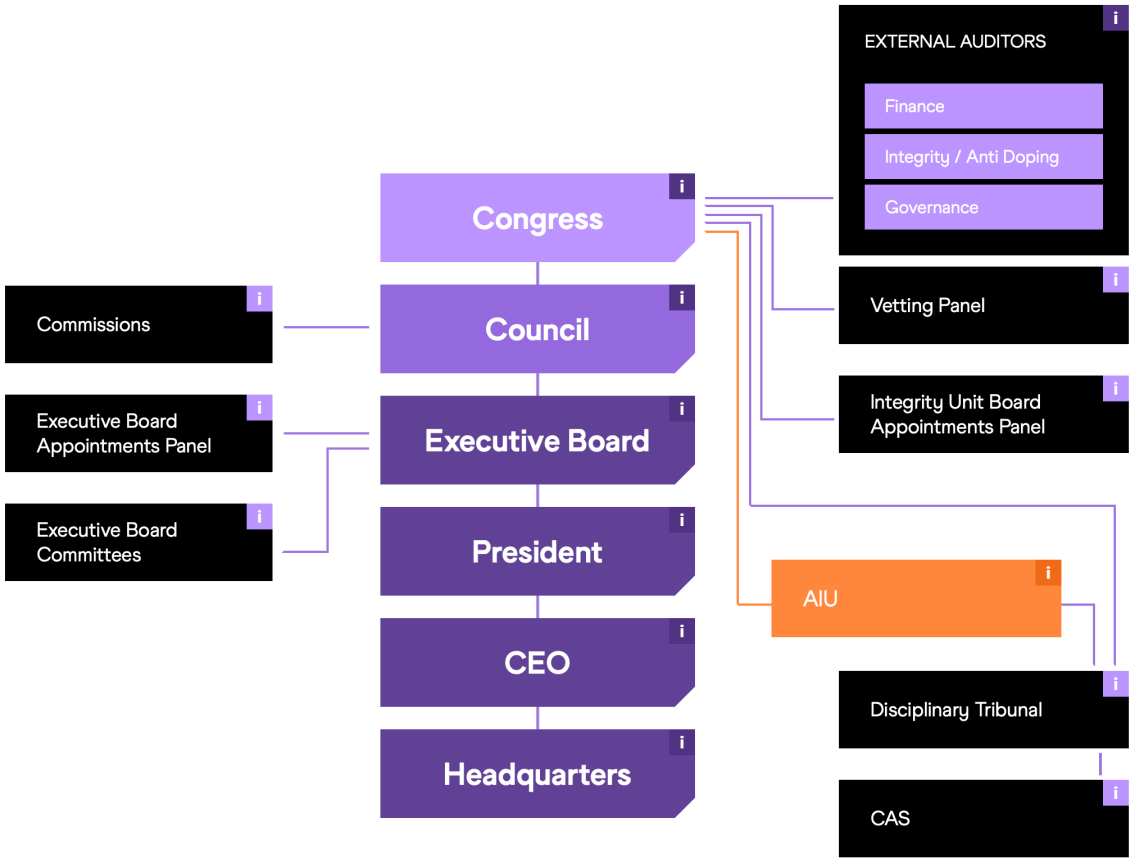


Figure by World Athletics (n.d.-c).

4.1.2 Strategic ambitions of World Athletics

According to World Athletics' strategic plan (World Athletics, 2024a), the organisation recognises the importance of innovation to remain relevant. While the previous strategic plan focused on growing athletics as a whole and was successfully implemented, the 2024–2027 plan focuses on innovation. Using data, various tools and resources, and targeted analyses, the organisation aims to develop the sport systematically and strengthen relationships with key stakeholders. Priority innovation areas include: **competition** (event and competition innovations), **fans** (reaching new audiences and deepening fan relationships), **brand** (leveraging the brand to build partnerships), **delivery** (exploring alternative ways to stage major championships), and **commercial** (expanding and diversifying sponsorships). Out of these areas, competition has a particularly big emphasis.

As outlined in World Athletics (2025d, n.d.-b), other central strategic goals involve promoting gender equality and inclusivity across all levels of athletics. Gender equality

has been achieved among participating athletes at World Athletics Series events, as well as in senior organisational leadership, such as the Council, with 50% female representation achieved in 2023. However, gender inequality remains evident, especially within Member Federations, Area Associations, coaches and officials, and among athletics agents, despite previous efforts to improve it.

According to World Athletics (2025d), in 2017, World Athletics established a Gender Leadership Taskforce aimed at ensuring diversity and promoting gender equality by empowering women at different levels of athletics. This remains an important topic. Through three pillars in its 2025–2027 Gender Leadership Strategy, World Athletics aims to further improve gender equality through work on **succession**, **advocacy**, and **communications**.

4.1.3 Ethical obligations

There are two main documents governing athletics stakeholders, as well as one document applicable to athletics agents: the **Integrity Code of Conduct**, the **Safeguarding Rules**, and the **Athletes' Representative Rules**.

Integrity Code of Conduct

World Athletics (2023b) states that the World Athletics Integrity Code of Conduct applies to a range of stakeholders, including officials at different levels, event organisers, athletics agents, World Athletics staff, athletes, and support personnel. Its *integrity standards* set behavioural expectations for all applicable persons.

For clarity, the integrity standards are summarised below:

- **Honesty:** Act in good faith and in truthfulness.
- **Fulfil duties**: Demonstrate responsibility and professional conduct.
- **Minimal gifts and benefits**: Avoid bribery and abuse of power.
- **Protect assets**: Ensure ethical financial management and prevent corruption.
- **Proper conduct**: Behave respectfully and professionally.
- **Dignity**: Treat all individuals ethically.
- **Maintain confidentiality**: Protect sensitive information and uphold trust.
- **Neutrality**: Act impartially and avoid conflict of interest.

- **Reporting**: Promote accountability by reporting misconduct.
- **Protect reputation**: Avoid actions that could harm the sports image.
- **Clean athletics**: Prevent doping and maintain a level playing field.
- **Maintain integrity of competition**: Prevent manipulation and match-fixing.
- **Disclose interests**: Declare conflicts that could result in unfair advantage.
- **Equality**: Prevent discrimination and ensure equal opportunities (with a strong emphasis on gender equality).
- **Fair elections & fair bidding**: Ensure fair decision-making in leadership and event hosting.

Applicable persons who violate, fail to comply or fail to report a violation attempt of the Athletics Integrity Code of Conduct are subject to investigation by the AIU (World Athletics, 2023b). Safeguarding rules form part of the Athletics Integrity Code of Conduct and will be discussed next.

Safeguarding rules

World Athletics (2024b) defines safeguarding as measures to protect individuals from **abuse**, **harassment**, and **exploitation**. The safeguarding rules apply to officials, accredited participants at major events (e.g., World Athletics Series, Olympic Games), congress participants, and may also apply to other stakeholders where safeguarding measures are lacking. Safeguarding violations may also constitute violations of the Integrity Code of Conduct, and vice versa.

Rules concerning licensed athletics agents

As stated in World Athletics (2025a), the Athletes' Representative (AR) rules apply to individuals seeking to become licensed athletics agents and to those already licensed. They set minimum professional and ethical standards for licensed agents and ensure alignment with the Integrity Code of Conduct and the safeguarding rules.

To obtain a license, applicants must submit an application, pay the required fees, and pass the exam. Applicants must also satisfy the AR panel, which ensures eligibility criteria are met. These criteria include demonstrating integrity, honesty, and credibility; being physically and mentally fit for the role; not holding conflicting business or personal interests; and not holding disqualifying positions. For each applicant, a thorough

background check is conducted (e.g., past disciplinary actions, legal violations, integrity breaches, or public disputes that may damage credibility or the sport's reputation). The exam is intended to assess knowledge of World Athletics rules and regulations and competencies relevant to acting as an agent. To maintain a license, agents must continue to meet the eligibility criteria, comply with the Integrity Code of Conduct (including the safeguarding rules), complete mandatory courses (e.g., safeguarding), and pay an annual license fee. Any relevant positions held by agents (e.g., staff member of a member federation, or employment with a sports shoe company) must be reported to the AR Panel.

In addition, the AR rules set practical obligations. Agents must: act in the best interests of clients; comply with the World Athletics Constitution, rules, and regulations; avoid conflicts of interest unless expressly permitted; ensure clients honour agreements; assist with planning and negotiating competition schedules; ensure client compliance with rules and tax obligations; and report breaches to World Athletics or the AIU. On client disclosure, Agents must promptly inform clients of written offers received and, upon request, provide copies of agreements and details of payments. Prohibited conduct includes: approaching clients under contract with another agent (except within the final two months of that contract); forcing clients to violate agreements; offering bribes to clients or officials; and concealing facts (e.g., conflicts of interest).

Minor violations of the AR rules are handled by a Disciplinary Officer appointed by the CEO of World Athletics, while major breaches are handled by the AR panel, appointed by the council. The most serious breaches, those that also breach the Integrity Code, fall under the jurisdiction of the AIU.

4.1.4 Competitions and ranking

According to World Athletics (n.d.-g), a distinctive feature of athletics is its global ranking system, which ranks athletes hierarchically based on recent performances. In simple terms, the ranking score depends on two factors: 1. how an athlete performs in a competition (**result score**) and 2. the level of that competition (**placing score**). Combined, these produce a **performance score** for each competition. While the result score reflects the performance itself, the placing score varies by meeting category; some competitions award fewer points and others more.

There are two top-tier one-day meetings through which athletes can gain ranking points toward major championships: **Diamond League** and **Continental Tour Gold**, with

the Diamond League ranked higher (World Athletics, n.d.-g). As outlined in World Athletics (2025c, 2025b), for these meetings, meeting organisers may negotiate entry only with licensed athletics agents, a member federation that has received prior written consent from the World Athletics CEO to represent the athlete, or athletes themselves, if self-represented. Continental Tour Gold organisers are required to prioritise entries based on the world rankings, whereas Diamond League organisers have full discretion over their fields (subject to internal regulations). Unsurprisingly, these meetings also offer the highest prize-money structures.

Continental Tour Silver meetings, similarly to Continental Tour Gold, shall prioritise athlete entries by world ranking, while other lower-level meetings operate with full discretion (World Athletics, 2025c). Because numerous athletes qualify for major championships (e.g., the World Championships) via their average performance score from multiple meetings (World Athletics, n.d.-f), fair and transparent selection into those meetings is crucial.

4.2 Findings from interviews

This section reports the findings from the interviews and the conducted thematic analysis (see section 3.5, Data analysis). The findings will be discussed through three identified themes: **Athletics system**, **Stakeholders**, and **Decision-making**, as well as the corresponding subthemes (see Table 3 in section 3.5).

4.2.1 Athletics system

The first identified theme is presented through four subthemes**: Evolving agent requirements in a static system**, **Gender bias**, **Governance frustrations**, and finally, **Scarce market opportunities**. Together, these findings describe the systemic conditions from which ethical challenges arise.

4.2.1.1 Evolving agent requirements in a static system

With the introduction of the athletics agent licensing exam, the governing body sought to professionalise the role, replacing a period when almost anyone could obtain a license from their national federation. In recent years, World Athletics introduced a centralised licensing system under its direct governance. Despite this effort, a resistant athletics system stands in the way, as long-standing norms slow down the progress toward improved competence and ethical behaviour.

Most experienced participants pointed out that the athletics agent profession has become more professionalised compared to the early days. Previously, almost anyone who wished to become an athletics agent could do so; this changed once the examination was introduced. The exam was intended to set a minimum requirement by testing knowledge. It did not require established agents to pass, only new applicants seeking a licence. Currently, all licensed agents must complete professional-development courses, pass background checks, and pay an annual license fee, which has steadily risen and placed financial strain on smaller agents. Participants noted that, with these measures, the number of licensed agents has continued to increase. Some suggested that a portion of licensed agents keep the licence primarily for the perks (e.g., championship accreditation), or represent one or a few family members. This raises the question of whether the examination, requirements, fees, or any initial individual background checks are sufficient to professionalise practice, and whether they assess the right capabilities, which will be discussed next.

> "The environment is more or less professional nowadays. When I started to work as an agent more than 20 years ago, everyone was free to do it. As long as you understood something about athletics, you were free to start working as an agent and represent athletes. And of course, there are a lot more agents today in athletics."

> "I was among the first generations to do the exam after it was introduced. So, for the old guys, the World Athletics said OK, you don't have to do the exam, but all the young ones, the ones having less than five years in the business, had to do it."

While ethics and safeguarding are perceived as cornerstones of the agent's profession, the licensing exam, which ideally should test these competencies, focuses instead on aspects that are not central to maintaining ethics in practice.

> "I studied very hard for the exam. I believe that the most important rules are all the ones around conflicts, safeguarding and ethics. I think that's the main part of our job. And I was surprised that the exam was more focused on very weird things. Like, what is the maximum length of a spike on a javelin thrower's shoe in competition?"

Both experienced and newly licensed agents note that individuals often remain in athletics for their entire careers. As a result, established social groups form, which can create friction for new agents trying to gain a foothold in the environment. These long-standing groups create an institutionalised structure that is resistant to change, as discussed next.

> "Well, it's a very closed environment. There are many people who have been working for many years in this environment."

> "...this industry, a lot of people stay in it for life."

Although agent requirements have been tightened and improved, institutional resistance to change remains evident. Many participants reported a lack of innovation that would drive meaningful change, attributing this in part to deep-rooted social groups that act as barriers. Institutional comfort slows the process, and even though formal requirements progress, this does not always translate into changes in agents' behaviour or the broader environment. Agents who were active before the exam's introduction often continue to work within the same networks and norms. While some praised the efforts of the current World Athletics president, Sebastian Coe, participants suggested it is unrealistic to expect rapid transformation given the discussed constraints.

> "What we are very good at in this sport is the status quo. Seb Co [president of World Athletics] can talk about innovation. We have been doing our sport the same way for 40 years. Nothing has changed. Yeah, sometimes we get new graphics. We went from 2 foul starts to one foul start, but on the whole, there's not a lot of innovation that's happening. Not the way we run the sport... The athletes change. But for the rest, not a lot has changed. Of course, some people die, and some new people come in. I would say the majority of the people who are working in the industry now were working there late 90s, early 2000s. So, for the last 25 years. I think 70% of the people or 80% of the people are still the same, which to me is interesting because there's no other industry where it's like that."

> "...there are a lot of people maintaining the status quo because it suits them: Why shake it up when you know they're very comfortable in this environment that they've been in for 30 years, 40 years? So, I think that's going to continue to be a challenge."

4.2.1.2 Gender bias

Participants describe the environment as male-dominated, with unbalanced power dynamics. The prevalent gender bias puts female agents at a disadvantage as soon as they obtain a license. Although the environment is evidently male-dominated, several female agents emphasise that this can be turned into an advantage, as many athletes seek guidance from female agents. Nevertheless, while some change for the better is perceived, harassment and exploitation rooted in gendered cultural norms still persist.

The majority of the female participants, as well as several male participants, either directly state or imply that the environment they work in is heavily male-dominated. Participants often pointed out that the direction the agent environment is heading takes its cue from closed groups consisting primarily of men. Given this, female agents, particularly newly licensed female agents, are at a clear disadvantage with regard to access to certain networks and overall career opportunities. It is also noted that the respected female agents, of whom there are only a few, tend to belong to the older generation. Hesitation to apply for a license among potential new female candidates is evident, indicating that institutionalised, male-biased structures are still very much present.

> "I see it's a few women who work in this branch, and I understand they have a worse position when it comes to this, because it's a bit of a boys' club. I'm very lucky that my personal appearance fits this branch. I'm an old white man, so I have a good edge. Of course it's not right, but I mean, of course I'm going to utilise it."

> "...I think there's... ...5% of women, I imagine also 5% are probably under 40 and 95% much older and have much more experience."

Despite broad agreement among participants that the environment is male-dominated, female agents do not necessarily view this as a disadvantage. By offering more warmth and empathy to the athletes they represent, they attract female athletes; in this way, the gender bias can sometimes be turned into a strategic asset. Female agents also noted that they can support female athletes on issues their male counterparts may be less familiar with, or with matters athletes may not feel comfortable discussing with men. This, in turn, illustrates why athletics needs more female agents, especially as, generally speaking, the number of female and male athletes in athletics is balanced.

> "It's mainly a men's world, and I'm actually OK with it. I don't feel any disadvantage or whatever in that sense. I think that especially female athletes approach us because there's a certain comfort in being managed by a female agent."

> "What I wanted to add is that I'm where I am today because I can relate to a lot of female athletes, and I help many of the female athletes with personal matters... ...such as pregnancy or family planning. I think I can relate to them more easily compared to my male colleagues."

One female participant emphasised her advocacy for females in sport. Experiencing the disadvantages of being a licensed female athletics agent has fuelled her motivation to make a real impact. As more females choose to pursue an agent license, this may be one step, among others, towards breaking existing male-dominated structures. After all, passing the agent exam is, in principle, a fair and objective process and does not disadvantage aspiring female agents until the real work starts.

> "...I'm a feminist, and I am a huge advocate for women in sport. I generally like to work with women and help them succeed. And I feel like it's harder for female athletes, and it's harder for female agents to get ahead. So that's kind of something that's driven me and has really added fuel. I want to keep going because I like the idea that athletes now have an opportunity to work with a female agent..."

Unprofessional and manipulative behaviour was discussed by numerous participants. While things have improved, several described how, especially in the past, older male individuals in athletics sexualised female agents. Even when female agents tried to keep interactions strictly professional, their gender (and at times their appearance) put them at an immediate disadvantage, affecting not only them but also the athletes they represent. Despite some progress, given the power structures in athletics, female agents often have few alternatives other than trying to make the best of uncomfortable situations.

> "[Looking back] I wanted to negotiate with a meeting organiser for an athlete to participate. … I wanted to talk seriously, but he was just talking about how nice I smelled and about my beautiful eyes. He wanted to take me out for dinner, and we needed to have a glass of wine, and then we could talk. But in the end, he never wanted to talk about business."

Exploitation also appears on a cultural level, particularly in some African contexts. Participants noted that some agents manipulate female athletes' husbands to pressure athletes to switch agents or to remain with a current agent. This kind of self-centred behaviour, which utilises morally questionable cultural norms, is a clear illustration of unethical conduct.

> "Another thing is [male agents] influencing husbands to have women change agents. In Kenya, we come across a lot of unethical things that are so wrong. Empowering the husband to abuse the wife just to stay with them. That's happening a lot."

4.2.1.3 Governance frustrations

Across participants, dissatisfaction with the governing body, World Athletics, was evident. Rules are not consistently monitored, and therefore, individuals who behave inappropriately are rarely held to account. When agents seek assistance, they often feel left on their own, which further fuels frustration. Although some noted small improvements, the present circumstances remain far from adequate.

While World Athletics has plenty of rules and guidelines concerning agents, in practice, they are not consistently respected. Several participants noted that newly licensed agents, or those who do not belong to established closed groups, are simply not heard. A few participants even questioned whether World Athletics actually wants more licensed agents, feeling they prefer to work with familiar names and thereby ignore new input. While representing famous athletes can help an agent to be heard, participants stressed that this should not be the case. In turn, this creates unequal opportunities for licensed agents who, in theory, should be treated equally.

> "In my view, all the agents should have exactly the same opportunities. There should be some common ground and a system for everyone. Regardless, if you have the world's best athletes or if you have the lower-ranked athletes, that should not matter. I think that it is not acceptable that there are only, like maybe 10%, not even that, of the agents that are actually listened to by the World Athletics. The small ones, like myself, those are actually basically nothing."

> "There's a way of how you want it to be and how it is. And at the moment, it is not the same as how you want it to be."

Participants noted that many active agents and other individuals in athletics have behaved in questionable or clearly unethical ways, either currently or in the past. Participants felt these individuals often continue working as if nothing had happened, regardless of the rules they have broken. While it is widely known which agents have a

dark past, the real problem, according to participants, is that World Athletics does not hold these individuals sufficiently accountable and lacks a trusted, anonymous reporting system. Agents want a channel they can use to report questionable behaviour without fear of reprisals. Participants further pointed out that rules, without proper monitoring, are simply useless.

> "There are agents with bad reputations, agents who have big links to doping, agents who have rumours about affairs. They're all still working. They're all still just doing what they've been doing for 40 years. And it's all the same guys who we know about, and nothing gets done. What hurts is that athletes still feel like they have to go with them, still feel like that's the only person who can give them those opportunities. I think that's a real problem. Yeah."

> "…there are instances where World Athletics says that I should mention any misbehaviour… but also because it's a small world, if I do it, even anonymously, it would still be very clear who did it, and that would have consequences for my athletes. So basically, I can't do that. So, in a way, that is wrong, but that could all be prevented by following the rules and somebody monitoring it."

Numerous participants felt they were left alone with matters that directly impacted both themselves and their athletes. This is often reflected in poor communication from World Athletics; acknowledging agents' concerns without taking further measures, or simply not replying at all. Since the job of agents is to help athletes in various situations, it follows that at times agents will require assistance from the governing body. While participants feel World Athletics is strict about agents respecting rules and deadlines, at times it seems to be a one-way street.

> "Agents also have questions, and we need answers. It's quite frustrating if we try to give them always the right things and do the right things according to the deadlines, and whatever, and when we ask a question which concerns one of the athletes, we just don't get an answer to it, which is frustrating."

> "So, after I didn't get a reply from them [National Federation], I sent it to World Athletics. And I was like, hey, just so you know, this is going on, etc. I didn't get a reply. Maybe they could say, well, listen, the athlete is free to do what he wants. And I can say yes, you're right. But at the same time, if an athlete is working with you and you know it's in the best interest of the athlete to have someone who supports and represents them in all aspects of their athletic career, this would be the time that they should have someone sit with them to go over a contract…"

While participants feel they are often left alone in difficult situations, they have lately noticed some small improvements.

> "…I think, at this moment …they [World Athletics contact persons] communicate well. I mean, it's not perfect, not by any means. But hey, we're not perfect. So, at least I can see that they want to improve. I think it's important."

4.2.1.4 Scarce market opportunities

Participants consistently noted that athletics is not a sport for those seeking to build wealth. Agents struggle to keep their heads above water and often have to hold other jobs alongside agency work. While representing star athletes can make a living possible, this

is not the reality for most agents. A long-running failure to innovate, dating back to the 1990s, has left the sport struggling to grow its revenues, resulting in a systemic failure to increase income.

The majority of participants pointed out the difficulty of making a living as an athletics agent. Even representing top athletes in one's home market does not guarantee an income you can live on. The same applies to athletes. Since many athletes struggle to earn enough, agents unsurprisingly struggle as well. Many participants, therefore, said they are forced to hold a side job to make ends meet. This further adds to agents' workload, as the role is already time-consuming. The load is greatest for newly licensed agents working alone, who must build a reputation from scratch. It can take several years, if not longer, to earn even a barely sustainable income.

> "I guess the big thing that has been hard, being a new agent, is that there's not a lot of money in this sport. Unless you have a star. So, I'm struggling to see how it's anything more than a hobby at this stage, but it's so time-consuming because I've taken on so many athletes, so I'm working full time, not earning any money basically."

> "...unfortunately, in athletics, for most athletes, this is not a full-time job. You don't get a nine-to-five salary."

Participants note that although athletics is a large sport, financially it is modest compared to sports like football or tennis. As a result, competition for limited revenue is intense. While the very top athletes, often major-championship medallists, earn well, those striving to reach that level face a very different financial reality, which in turn constrains agents' earning prospects.

> "Our sport is big enough to live off it. I mean, people can make a living and a decent living out of it. But it's too small to be a real professional industry. I mean, if you look at football or tennis or golf and how much money goes around there, then it's just peanuts what we do."

> "Athletes are earning more; those at the top earn and will earn well. But the gap between the rich and the poor, the gap between the elites and not, and the gap between the medalist and the non-medalist - the finalists, is huge. ... we have over four, close to 500 agents. And if I were to guess, I think less than probably 100 will make over $150,000 a year."

According to participants, the weak financial position of athletics is, in part, due to a failure to innovate and thus raise revenue. Several describe a long decline beginning in the 1990s. One perceived driver was moving television rights behind pay TV, which reduced viewership and, in turn, interest in the sport. The steady income from rights deals is also seen to have dampened incentives to innovate. Some participants attribute the situation to both World Athletics and the Diamond League, questioning why other sports have managed to grow while athletics has lagged. Linking this lack of innovation

to the status quo (see section 4.2.1.1) helps explain the sport's broader financial difficulties.

> "At the time (in the 90s) I was primarily working with track athletes, and I saw that the business was, the money being pumped into the sport, the possibility to make a living, was quickly sort of dissipating. It was becoming harder and harder. Prize money was coming down. Appearances were going down"

> "I think that World Athletics is trying to make athletics more interesting globally. In road racing, it's easier because it's a mass event. But for track and field, it's really difficult. How many people are watching track and field on television, and then they decided years ago to have the TV rights behind paid TV. Maybe short term, you have a lot of money because of the paid TV, but not in the long term."

> "These major stakeholders, led by World Athletics and Diamond League, have failed to find a way to raise the money. It's not easy, but if it were easy, everybody would be doing it."

4.2.2 Stakeholders

The second theme is presented through four subthemes: **Primary stakeholders**, **Secondary stakeholders**, **Building and maintaining relationships**, and **Networks for access to competitions**. It begins by mapping stakeholders, then examines how agents build and sustain these relationships, and finally, explores how athletes' competition prospects depend on agents' relationships with meeting organisers. Together, these subthemes show how agents navigate stakeholder relationships, and the ethical challenges involved.

4.2.2.1 Primary stakeholders

In this study, primary stakeholders are those whom participants deal with regularly, those who can affect agents' day-to-day operations, or stakeholders' participants explicitly identify as important, with the latter carrying the most weight. Participants consistently position athletes as the most important stakeholder: without athletes, there would be no employer and, thus, no profession. Coaches come next, given their close, ongoing work with athletes. Meeting organisers are important because they decide which athletes get to compete. Finally, sportswear companies are emphasised for the financial opportunities they enable; without them, many athletes and their teams would struggle to finance their careers.

All participants, implicitly or explicitly, position athletes as the main stakeholders. Several note that athletes are the employers who hire athletics agents to work for them, not the other way around. Athletics agents act as advisors across a range of matters. However, the time and support agents provide varies: while some organise, for instance,

personalised training camps, others focus mainly on helping athletes secure entries to competitions.

> "I mean, I'm working for the athletes, and I think in athletics, that is the main thing. The athletes are basically companies that employ me or us, or they are paying me to do my job, and it's not that I'm paying them."

> "I mean, that's your employer. So, they [athletes] come first."

Coaches are discussed as key stakeholders who are closely involved with athletes. A few participants even place coaches on the same level as athletes when talking about priorities. It is unsurprising that coaches are identified as primary stakeholders, since they are frequently behind athletes' success, on which agents ultimately depend. While athlete–coach relationships vary, several participants note that athletes tend to trust coaches highly; for example, coaches often influence which agent an athlete chooses.

> "...coaches have quite a big influence, to be honest. They basically decide which manager the athletes sign with. ...They're the person they grew up with, have the most trust and spend most of the time with. So, the coach is important."

> "...it takes the coach and the athlete to produce the medal. I don't believe in one over the other."

All participants discuss meeting directors or athlete liaisons as stakeholders they deal with regularly. Participants often use these terms interchangeably to refer to the people who decide whether an athlete is accepted into a meeting. While agents depend on athletes, athletes in turn depend on meeting organisers across all levels; entry decisions always involve some interaction with organisers. Maintaining strong relationships, which will be explored in later subthemes, is highly beneficial. Failing to do so can mean one fewer competitive opportunity for an athlete, which directly affects the agent as well.

> "...there are two big things about being an agent. One aspect is getting your athletes into competitions. So, I've got stakeholders all over the world who are other meet directors, other AR's who I am reaching out to every day to get my athletes into races in Europe and Asia, and so I'm liaising with them a lot."

> "Then, secondly, most important to stakeholders are the meeting organisers. Because you need to have a good relationship with them. As I said, it's invitational [athletics meetings]. So, if the organiser thinks you're a ****, it's harder to get athletes in the race."

Participants describe sportswear companies as important stakeholders because they fund athletes, with one participant even calling them the most important stakeholder. Several note that, given the absence or weakness of reliable revenue streams in athletics, sportswear companies are among the few ways to earn money. In addition to commercial sponsorships and the insufficient prize money available at meetings, sportswear companies are seen as stakeholders whose support helps athletes and their teams finance their careers and pursue their goals. As a result, their importance and influence have

grown; participants mention that sportswear companies sometimes influence which athletes compete at particular meetings and often sponsor or host the events themselves. Unsurprisingly, athletes and their agents, who work with a sportswear company that is organising a meeting, often receive priority.

> "Most of the athletes have to earn money by working with a shoe company and by getting prize money."

> "I would say the most important stakeholder to have a good relationship with is the shoe companies. Because they are willing to commit to for multi-year contract. Which allows you to plan ahead, as a company, but also as an athlete."

> "Maybe, sometimes one agent is working with one big sponsor, such as Nike, Adidas or similar. Then it can have an influence on whether the athletes get to participate in a meeting."

4.2.2.2 Secondary stakeholders

In this study, secondary stakeholders are those whom participants consider from time to time but do not view as important as the primary stakeholders discussed above. World Athletics is acknowledged for setting the regulatory environment in which agents operate and for organising the World Championships. National federations follow with their championship selection processes and various national team–level support for athletes. Athletics agents themselves are discussed as both business partners and competitors. The AIU is noted as overseeing ethics in the sport, with a strong emphasis on anti-doping. Universities in the US are discussed as competitors in recruiting athletes, especially given increased headhunting. Finally, other, less discussed stakeholders (e.g., media and members of athletes' support teams) are acknowledged.

Numerous participants identified World Athletics as a stakeholder. However, across participants, it is viewed mainly as the creator of the "field of play" within which agents operate, rather than an actor they deal with regularly. Participants note that, as long as they comply with established rules, World Athletics largely remains in the background of agents' day-to-day work. Some of the participants also emphasised its importance because of the World Championships. While participants did not explicitly classify World Athletics as a primary stakeholder, the governance challenges discussed in section 4.2.1.3 (Governance frustrations) suggest an implicit need for effective cooperation between agents and World Athletics.

> "...your rule number 1 is to follow World Athletics rules, and then you can make your own rules out of that."

> "And of course, World Athletics... are important. So, you try not to upset them or get into a conflict with them. But, for your daily operation, they're not that important."

Participants view national federations as stakeholders it is important to get along with, because participation in championships goes through them. Federations often set their own selection criteria that athletes must meet to be eligible. They also provide various forms of support, and inclusion in a national team programme can help athletes prepare for the season (e.g., training camps) as well as receive financial assistance. While federations often understand that athletes may at times be unavailable for national team competitions, they also underline that some events are obligatory for national team athletes. Accordingly, participants stress the importance of active communication with the federation.

> "Of course, National federations are important as well. Certain requirements may come from there, and there are competitions where the participation of athletes goes through the federations."

> "So obviously, I do have a relationship with the federation. And I mean, I don't speak with them often, and I'm not employed by them, but I know one individual who works for the federation, because I like to speak to him about my athletes, just to check that he remembers them, and he knows what their seasons are looking like. I think it's good to stay on the side of the federation."

Participants also identified athletics agents themselves as stakeholders. Agents can be both good for business and competitors. While at first glance, agents compete because everyone wants the best athletes, this is not always the case. Closed groups created by experienced agents exist. Although it is unclear how agents are accepted into groups such as the Association of Athletics Managers (AAM), experienced managers noted that World Athletics often discusses challenges and upcoming regulatory changes with this group, which in turn provides input and perspective. This raises the question of whether licensed agents, particularly newly licensed ones, are treated equally and fairly. It also raises the question of whether private groups such as the AAM are needed, given that the licensing process already places agents within a recognised professional group.

> "...apparently, there's a group of agents that get together every year, AAM, and nobody knows how you can get into the group. It's just all the old timers just sitting down and calling all the shots."

> "But also, the international environment is a competitive environment because we want the best athletes."

Perceptions of the AIU were mixed: some participants expressed frustration, while others felt it does a good job; its presence was nonetheless widely acknowledged. While ethics in a broader sense was discussed, the AIU is mainly viewed as the organisation agents turn to for doping-related matters. Several participants noted that they can, or would, contact the AIU if they have suspicions of doping, sometimes as a preventive measure to avoid any association with it. It is unclear whether this is driven primarily by

fear of losing face (and thus harming business) or by a commitment to fair play; it is likely a balance of both.

> "...once you start working with someone and you have a relationship, I would push, for example, for AIU to get people [doping] tested, like, hey, this guy is coming up... Can you put him in the [testing] pool? I would push for that."

> "I actually work really closely with AIU, and if I see anything... I can go to the AIU and say, Hey, I would like you to keep an eye on this athlete a bit more..."

Universities, particularly in the US, were discussed negatively by several participants. With changes at the NCAA level, universities are now permitted to provide financial compensation to athletes. This has created a new kind of competition for athletics agents, who suddenly find themselves up against large, powerful institutions. Participants noted that NCAA universities are now headhunting more actively than ever for talented athletes to represent their programmes. The challenges are especially evident for athletes from developing countries, as university offers can appear to be a quick route out of poverty. The real concern, however, is that universities are perceived as uninterested in athletes' academic skills or interests. Moreover, participants mentioned that universities make approaches to athletes already represented by agents and sportswear companies. Questioning this behaviour often leads to various forms of pressure or even blackmail. This places agents in a difficult position: they may have worked with an athlete for a long period, only to see everything suddenly taken away, while a legal fight with a university is both time-consuming and costly. Fuelling agents' frustration is the belief that, in many cases, universities exploit athletes.

> "...we now have a situation where American universities suddenly can pay athletes, and they've also discovered that they can bring in Kenyans who have zero interest in studying at a university. There have been a lot of breaches of contracts that have happened. ...colleagues of mine had an athlete who had a contract with them, with their management, a contract with a shoe company and a contract with a bank. And that athlete was recruited by a university that offered the athlete good money. The athlete chose to go, although never showing any interest in studies."

> "There are kids who, let's say in Kenya, who are very studious, ...who are very intelligent, who can do well in American universities, for example. But they may not also be the ones that the universities are hoping to get to run for them..."

While receiving limited acknowledgement, one participant identified the media as a stakeholder. Because athletes gain significant exposure through the media, it is treated here as a secondary stakeholder. Another participant noted that the teams around athletes vary, and thus the stakeholders that agents work with vary as well.

> " ...media is one. I have always found that it's important to keep a good relationship with the media; it's important for top athletes."

> "…around the athlete, you have their team, you have the coach, the physio, the nutritionist, the finance planner or accountant. The sports doctor and the medical team. The medical team can be small or big, and it's not the same for every athlete."

4.2.2.3 Building and maintaining relationships

As noted by all participants, building and maintaining relationships in athletics is of utmost importance. Trust and transparency form the foundation of those relationships and, over time, strengthen an agent's reputation. The difficulty often lies in balancing the interests of multiple stakeholders; consequently, some participants acknowledged using *soft lies* to slightly soften the truth and keep relationships intact.

Both experienced and newly licensed participants understand the importance of trust when building relationships. It is an industry based on connections, which emphasises the crucial importance of developing them. Stakeholders, such as sportswear companies, meeting organisers, or even athletes, prioritise agents they trust. Participants note that, as with Rome not being built in a day, the same applies to trust with stakeholders. While it is clear that trust is needed to, for instance, secure contracts with sportswear companies, new agents describe the process as tiring, since establishing and proving oneself is highly difficult.

> "I know that this job is all about relationship building at the end of the day. Maintaining happy relationships with all of your stakeholders. That's kind of the aim of the game. So, I'm trying very hard to, when I get someone's number at a brand, I try to speak to them on the phone. I try to set up an in-person meeting with them just so I can establish the connection, because I think brands and meet directors have their own biases, which they're not aware of, but everyone's gonna go with somebody they know, someone they trust."

> "I believe it's a relationship that has been built on trust. They [athletes] trust me enough to be their agent, and I will do my best for them as long as they will have me."

Participants discussed transparency not only as an important ethical value but also as a strategic asset that helps build trust, as noted above. Given the small size of the athletics environment, participants noted there is little room for deception or mistakes. Honesty was often discussed interchangeably with transparency. Several emphasised being transparent, especially with athletes, and presenting situations as they are. One participant even noted they would consider suggesting a different athlete to a potential sponsor if the fit seemed better. On the one hand, that illustrates the value of maintaining strong stakeholder relationships. On the other hand, it raises an ethical dilemma of whether it is right to prioritise the sponsor's fit over one's own athlete when another athlete might be a better match.

> "It's a small industry, and if you excuse my French, if you **** people over, it's going to come back to you. So, I think that when possible, and as often as possible, I try to be very transparent with everyone."

> "I mean, of course, I want my athletes to get the sponsorship, but if I do have a feeling that there could be something that fits a sponsor better, then maybe I would actually say that that could be a better hit. I mean, like, for future reference, for me to get a more positive view of being more transparent than other ARs. So, I think that's the only way forward. You can't really bullshit around in this place because you only have your reputation."

While participants emphasised transparency, several also acknowledged the prevalence of *soft lies*. Especially when an athlete had been promised a place at a major meeting, fully disclosing to organisers that the athlete, or their coach, had simply changed their mind was seen as too damaging to hard-won trust. As a result, some described being only partially transparent, softening the truth, as the only possible way to preserve a relationship.

> "I mean, you better say he's [the athlete] injured because if you give the real reason, the coach changed this idea, the athlete changed his mind, then the organiser is angry. So, I think in that respect, there's a lot of lying. Like soft lies to not make each other angry."

By building trust and being transparent, a reputation develops in parallel. Participants note that consistently keeping promises strengthens relationships with stakeholders. Particularly around athletics meetings, agents stressed the importance of promising meeting organisers athletes who can actually perform. Because some athletes receive substantial appearance fees, organisers expect them to show up ready. If an athlete arrives injured or badly out of shape, scrutiny falls on the agent. To build and keep a strong reputation, agents must, as best they can, deliver on what they have promised. Reputation thus stems from being trustworthy and transparent, which, in turn, strengthens and sustains long-term relationships.

> "I can't send an athlete to a race when I know he's injured or not feeling well or not in shape. I had to cancel someone from a Major Marathon, as he was injured. Rather than going there and still picking up some appearance fees or whatever, I know that's an open and honest relationship with them. It's very important as well for a long-term good relationship."

> "I think that through the years, relationships are extremely important. If year after year, you're able to bring athletes who are performing well for the most part, you show that they come, they're serious. You're not bringing in your whole group that just DNF's [did not finish] or whatever. You're building your reputation. Basically, your reputation is almost everything in this business. And I think that it's like a proven track record."

Numerous participants note that, although agents work for the athlete, a central part of the role is balancing stakeholder interests. Disagreements do occur, and in those situations, agents act as intermediaries, communicating with different stakeholders before laying out the situation to the athlete, who makes the final decision. Discussions with meeting organisers can be difficult, whether about appearance fees, entries, or disputed disqualifications, and therefore, agents must judge how hard they can press. This creates a dilemma: for instance, continue to push and risk damaging an important relationship, or leave the matter behind, even though injustice might have been done.

> "I feel that I'm in charge of making sure that the whole team around that athlete is working together. Knowing what to do. Going in the same direction. Having good communication with each other. Sometimes, different individuals in the team have different opinions or recommendations, and then I have to make it understandable to the athlete before the athlete makes a decision."

> "But like I said, if I push it too much, then the race director will feel like this agent is disturbing too much, and will not want to work with me anymore in the future. OK. And then I always have to ask myself, do I push it too much for just one athlete, or do I try to balance things and make sure that in the future I can still bring maybe 100 more athletes to that race, and we can all benefit from it for a long time."

4.2.2.4 Networks for access to competitions

Whether agents secure competition entries depend as much on who they know as on how fast their athletes run. Meeting organisers often select fields based on personal preferences, sometimes sidelining selection rules and objective criteria. This, in turn, forces agents to balance ideals of fairness with the realities of relationships.

Several newly licensed participants note that getting athletes into meetings, even when the athletes are at a good enough level, is not a given. While rules for competitions at various levels exist, they are often not followed. Because competitions are central to agents' responsibilities, participants argue that entries should be performance-based, a process often supported by the rules (selections based on rankings), but that is sometimes not the case. Being unknown, which is common for newly licensed agents, often means being ignored, with meeting organisers choosing agents they already know and thereby frequently disregarding athlete performance and fair selection processes. At times, agents are involved in meetings themselves, acting as meeting directors or athlete liaisons, which raises the risk of favouring their own athletes over others. Evidently, this illustrates a clear conflict of interest.

> "That has been hard because I'm not known, and I find that 50% of them [Meeting organisers] won't acknowledge my email. Don't reply. That's been very hard. Some of them are great. You know, they will acknowledge the e-mail, and they do base it on the athlete's performance, and you get your athlete in, and I would hope that that would be the case across the board. It should be based on performance. Not based on whether you are friends with the meeting director or the athlete liaison."

> "...there have been people in this business for many, many years, and I think they have a little bit of an edge over us youngsters, or I'm not a youngster, but I'm new in the business."

> "... I've understood, and I've seen some situations where some agents who are also meeting directors at the same time, favour some athletes over others, which is unfair for the whole system, for athletics as a whole. But that's only what I've seen, I have personally not been involved in these situations."

The majority of participants discuss the power of meeting organisers, who have the authority to select their fields, especially at bigger meetings such as the Diamond League. Agents must get along with organisers and work to establish a connection; failing to do

so can mean they cannot secure entries for their athletes, regardless of performance level. Participants, therefore, question whether this is how it should be, noting instances where meeting organisers blacklisted agents, sometimes with probable cause, other times simply because they had the power to do so. While agents want their athletes to have equal opportunities, the way competition entry currently works does not allow this to happen consistently, tying back to the systemic challenges discussed in the first identified theme and the subsequent subthemes (see 4.2.1). It should be noted, however, that many meeting organisers do base their athlete selections on performance and objective assessment.

> "We are also the only sport where a world champion cannot run in every Diamond League because they don't like him or they don't want to pay him. So, then we don't see the world champion, the organiser has that power as well."

> "So, I write to the meeting director saying that I'm just following up about what kind of process you go through to select your athletes. I just want to give my athlete the best opportunities moving forward, and it's hard to explain this to the athlete from my perspective, given that he has performed better than the athlete you've selected, and the meet director wrote back and said I have absolute discretion in selecting my fields. I know the agent of the selected athlete, and I did him a favour, as he's done a lot of favours for me in the past; this is just the way it works."

4.2.3 Decision-making

The third and final theme is presented through three subthemes: **Experience and heuristics**, **Individual values**, and **Financial incentives and challenges**. The first subtheme discusses the cognitive and practical factors that affect decision-making, before moving to what values agents consider and the associated challenges. Finally, the financial influences on decision-making are addressed.

4.2.3.1 Experience and heuristics

During decision-making, participants reported relying mainly on two things: their own experience and advice from trusted individuals. While new situations may cause anxiety, especially for newly licensed agents, experience brings much-needed calmness. Seeking advice from others is another common way to navigate decisions. Given the frequent cognitive load agents operate under, it becomes clear that fully rational decisions do not, for the most part, take place.

Several experienced participants, as well as a couple of newly licensed participants, noted that they rely on experience in decision-making, particularly when faced with difficult choices. With experience comes greater calm: first-time situations, especially unpleasant ones, are more stressful because of outcome uncertainty. Experience lowers that uncertainty and helps agents approach decisions more calmly.

> "Basically, I rely on the expertise and the gut feeling that I have of what I need to do. Yeah, because I've been around long enough. So, to be honest, you sort of learn to trust your gut feeling, and usually it goes right."

> "...I think experience is maybe what I rely on the most. It happened like this in the past, so it's likely it will happen like this again."

One experienced participant noted that, despite experience, second-guessing will always be present, with each decision being an opportunity to make a better one in the future. This implicitly acknowledges that perfect decisions are rare, even with substantial experience.

> "You will always second-guess yourself, wondering if there's information you might be missing. But this is the best decision at this particular moment. If it turns out to be very good, great. If later you realise it could have been even better, then you use that as a learning and teaching moment and adopt that mindset."

While experience greatly aids decision-making (as discussed above), many participants, both newly licensed and experienced, also turn to seasoned individuals for advice. These trusted individuals help agents gain perspective and draw on others' experience of similar situations. Advice is taken from experienced friends as well as from both internal and external colleagues. One participant emphasised choosing trusted advisors carefully, since taking advice or copying behaviour does not automatically mean acting ethically. This suggests that an agent's close circle influences decision-making, for better or worse.

> "...I have I've built around me a lot of like close people who I can speak to. I have one key person, and then a few of his friends who have also been involved in the sport forever, and they help me a lot. I will chat to them on the phone multiple times a week, and I find that hugely helpful that I have mentors whom I trust. I really take the advice of other people when I'm trying to make a decision..."

> "Pick somebody who "has done well", meaning has been in the sport for a while. Look for longevity where the person has been in the industry for 10, ideally 15 years, and has had success, relative success. And upon that, the next question would be, is this person considered principled and ethical? And from there, try to understand and copy what they're doing."

Participants emphasise that working as an agent is far from stress-free, with a few describing having overworked themselves severely. Some agents work alone, others in teams within management companies, but ultimately, each agent is solely responsible for their own athletes. Both experienced and newly licensed participants stressed the importance of not representing too many athletes, since a heavy workload strains cognitive capacity, thus affecting decision quality. A manageable roster allows athletes to receive the attention they need and helps prevent cognitive overload. Despite representing fewer athletes, participants noted that the work is never finished. Even during interviews with the author, when the discussion went over time, some mentioned that this extra time would be taken from their evening "time off". Taken together, this

illustrates a stressful, demanding environment in which cognitive strain can hinder fully rational decision-making at times.

> "…I have a tendency to think that the work is never done. You can always do more, have that extra phone call…"

> "I only want to work with 25 athletes max. I would rather reduce that amount to 20 or 15 or maybe even 10, to really do my best for them. I don't want to be the guy who forgets things, or you know, things like that."

4.2.3.2 Individual values

Participants always attempt to base their decisions around what is best for their athletes. Integrity, together with adherence to the rules, is described as a core value, though earlier identified subthemes suggest this is not always practically feasible. Doping is seen as a pressing issue, yet tackling it presents its own challenges. Finally, while agents strive to stay true to their values, the way the athletics system functions raises the question of whether this is always possible in a highly competitive environment.

Consistently across participants, athletes guide agents' decision-making. As noted in section 4.2.2.1 (Primary stakeholders), athletes are the main stakeholders. Participants state that their decisions are based on how the outcome affects the athlete in question, emphasising that they would not make decisions that harm or disadvantage athletes in any way. Especially when athletes struggle, whether mentally or physically, agents need to be present and support them through those periods. Participants also point to instances where other agents act inappropriately or make improper comments to athletes, which they say goes against their values. Overall, it is evident that most participants aim to base their decisions on what benefits their athletes the most.

> "…as an AR, I mean your absolute priority and the one thing that you must do is to act in the best interests of your client. And my client is my athlete…"

> "I always think about what benefits the athletes I represent the most. That's the key. That's the number one for me."

Numerous participants highlight integrity as their main value. They were clear about always making decisions based on what they believe is right. Following rules and being consistent across decisions shape participants' approach to decision-making. One participant mentioned that acting against these values would mean losing sleep; therefore, it is easier to act according to personal values and deal with the consequences later. Despite this, it sits somewhat in tension with section 4.2.2.3 (Building and maintaining relationships). While participants argue for the presence of integrity in decision-making, they also have to consider other crucial stakeholders. An integrity bias

seems present: acting fully according to personal beliefs could create friction with primary stakeholders such as sportswear companies (see 4.2.2.1). Therefore, although integrity is emphasised, the way the athletics system is structured arguably prevents it from being fully present in every case.

> "I will never do anything against my values. So, there will always be the integrity that I have and that I work with, so there's nobody and nothing that can affect that. I will never make decisions that go against my own values."

> "I mean to do what's right, I mean that's what those rules are really about anyway. And it's to keep integrity as well."

Several participants highlighted doping as one of the biggest challenges in the sport. They stressed that they would never be involved in doping themselves, nor work with athletes or other individuals with a doping history. The core reason given was the unfairness doping creates for clean athletes. Nevertheless, in some countries, especially developing ones, athletes may view doping as a desperate route out of poverty, often possessing limited anti-doping education. This creates dilemmas for agents operating in these markets. Even while trying to avoid any association with doping, monitoring all athletes, particularly lesser-known ones, can be difficult.

> "I will not work with any athlete or coach who has a history with doping. I will also not invite them to an event hosted by our company."

> "I would say that the biggest problem or one of the biggest problems [in athletics], is doping. It's also different from country to country… I don't condone it. Let's be clear. I would never push anyone to do it."

Participants, especially experienced ones, acknowledge the difficulty of staying true to personal values. As discussed in previous subthemes, the athletics environment is small, and agents often compete for the top athletes. While staying true to own values can feel good and, from an ethical point of view, is the right thing to do, a competitive environment, where other agents may use questionable methods to succeed, puts pressure on even the most virtuous agents. Staying true to oneself is a sound long-term strategy that can pay off as others view it positively. However, the time it takes to get there, with no guarantee of success, can be difficult. This is partly, if not mostly, due to the financial realities agents have to live with, which the next and final subtheme will discuss.

> "There are plenty of people who are backstabbing. There are plenty of people who are trying to poach, you know, steal your athletes, who are promising them bigger contracts or who are promising something that is maybe not even feasible, but use that as a way to sort of lure them, and then once they've left, they've left, right. So, I've always felt that it's hard. I've always felt it's difficult to be generally a good person, stay true to your morals and your ethics and everything else, just because there are so many things that you see that are frustrating."

> "I believe that there is a premium for what you say and delivering on your word. Not easy, because there's a price for it. But if you stay true to your core values and try to deliver as honestly as possible on what you promise, there's a premium for it."

4.2.3.3 Financial incentives and challenges

As it has become clear during the previously identified themes, athletics as a whole is not the most profitable sport. In practice, this challenges agents to stay true to their ethical values, as ethically sound choices may not maximise income, or even allow them to remain in the profession. Participants often prioritise athletes' well-being; however, subconscious financial motivations are arguably present. Ultimately, agents must decide whether to part ways with athletes who are not generating income or continue investing time in them, accepting the risk of a time-consuming commitment with uncertain returns.

Financial aspects are always present in athletics, as there are simply not enough revenue streams to sustain everyone (see section 4.2.1.4, Scarce market opportunities). Participants are therefore often, implicitly or explicitly, forced to think twice before making decisions: choose what makes the most financial sense, or what is ethically right. Experienced agents who have had successful careers representing well-known athletes note that staying loyal to ethical values becomes easier once a certain income threshold is passed. Newly licensed agents are often described as struggling and, at times, resorting to unethical methods to achieve financial success. This can involve manipulating athletes and other stakeholders to secure a preferable outcome, something that can occur among both newly licensed and experienced agents. Participants working for management companies, however, note that a monthly salary reduces financial pressure and, consequently, the risk of financially driven unethical decisions.

> "From the agent's standpoint… …I will bet on the one [athlete] who will win. I'm not here to be the Pope; I'm here to make some money. And some decisions then, because of the economics of the sport, your judgment is coloured between what's right and what makes financial sense."

> "I mean, you also have an agent who might manipulate the athlete. And say, tell the coach you really need this for this and this reason."

Financial interests can affect even experienced agents representing star athletes. A particularly challenging situation is when a well-known athlete and the agent are not on the same page. While cutting ties may make sense, when an athlete earns significant income, the threshold for parting ways is higher. This suggests that merely making a living may not be enough to guarantee moral choices; financial appetite can intensify as earnings rise.

> "...it's difficult if that athlete is a very good, well-known, and successful one who makes a lot of money. Then you don't say, OK, we stopped working together. But if it were somebody at a lower level, I think you should look for somebody else because this is not working."

While participants describe financial factors influencing decisions, this is not true in every case. For instance, in matters of injury, participants prioritise athletes' health over financial incentives. The same applies to contracts with sportswear companies, where participants report choosing what benefits the athlete most. Although these are, in principle, morally sound choices, they do not fully align with the broader picture across other subthemes. A plausible, though arguable, explanation is a subconscious or conscious long-term strategy. Sending an injured athlete to compete or accepting a lucrative deal that requires disruptive changes for the athlete may result in short-term gains but weaken long-term performance and, therefore, financial return. Participants frequently emphasise long-term prospects, suggesting that ethical choices and financial considerations are intertwined. Doing the right thing now is expected to pay off later.

> "Of course, I try to get them as good deals as possible, but in case there is something like a small injury risk involved, I always just tell them not to think about the money. You think about your health. You think about how good you could be later on."

> "For example, one of my athletes with whom I'm now negotiating with a shoe company, we got another offer from another shoe company, which was way higher. But the better offer would have required the athlete to join another training group and change coaches, and he didn't want to do that. And I fully support it."

Participants note that, in the end, being a licensed agent is a job, one undertaken to make a living. The challenge arises when athletes are not generating income for their agents, either because they have not yet reached the required level or because their performance has declined. This puts agents in a difficult spot: continue investing time and effort in the hope of an unlikely return, or let the athlete go, which is particularly hard after a long working relationship. In the long run, many feel forced to part ways, as the financial state of athletics does not allow agents to work for free, at least not if they plan to do it full-time.

> "So, when the market is down, like there are no races that are interested in you [the athlete], there are no shoe companies, the income has almost dropped to zero. The athlete should also ask themselves, is it worthwhile continuing? I mean, and then if you continue, who finances your career?"

> "Yeah, I am going to need to earn money again in my life. So, I'm starting to think about whether I will work part-time again next year. Whether I let go of the athletes who are going to make me no money at all, and I've put in, you know, 50 hours of my life for them, and I get absolutely nothing back, it's not a very good business model."

What makes letting athletes go especially difficult is that many people may depend on them. Ending a contract can mean cutting off livelihoods, as athletes often support others

around them. This can be particularly challenging in developing countries, where success in sports can be a primary route out of poverty, putting agents in a very difficult position when trying to make an ethically sound decision.

> "[A close stakeholder talking to the participant] I just want you to know that you have thousands of people that depend on you, and he said maybe even 10,000. And I said 10,000? That sounds quite a lot. But I said I imagine that you mean like the families of the families. He's like, yeah, he says. You don't realise how many people, whether it's the staff of the camp, the coaches, whether it's the physios, the people, the athletes and their families and their families, and all that. He said that when you multiply all that, it could be in the thousands that are directly affected by what you do and how you do it and all that, and so it was kind of hard to hear because you sort of feel like man, already there's enough pressure in this job…"

5 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter answers the study's research questions by discussing the findings and juxtaposing them against the theory presented in Chapter 2, Literature review. This is followed by section 5.1, which offers practical recommendations for central stakeholders based on the research. Finally, in section 5.2, recommendations for future research are presented.

1. **How do athletics agents navigate relationships and ethical challenges with stakeholders?**

Stakeholder relationships for athletics agents are complex. The athletics system, shaped largely by World Athletics, involves governance gaps, long-standing norms, limited financial resources, and uneven power between stakeholders. In such a network-dependent industry, building and maintaining relationships is essential but often sits in tension with ethical ideals. As noted by Freeman et al. (2010), stakeholder relationships require balancing competing interests, rather than serving a single objective.

Although new rules and regulations are regularly introduced, oversight is lacking, which weakens accountability for breaches and unethical conduct. This is most visible in access to athletics meetings: rules often prioritise world rankings, but practice frequently does not. Moreover, the Integrity Code of Conduct emphasises equal and neutral decision-making for all applicable individuals. Since agents' core work is securing competition entries, discretionary entry decisions by meeting organisers, some of whom also act as athletics agents, creating conflicts of interest, lead to unequal entry access for athletes, who ultimately pay the price for weak accountability. This matters because qualification for major championships frequently depends on average scores from such meetings. Meeting organisers with significant discretion prefer agents they know, which sidelines newly licensed agents and, at times, the written selection criteria. As Hall et al. (2017) note, accountability requires both an external authority and felt accountability; individuals (including agents) must believe their actions will be judged for behaviour to change, implying World Athletics' oversight must be visible, consistent, and enforceable.

Closed groups set much of the direction in athletics. Breaking into these networks is often the only route to being heard, which is especially challenging for newly licensed and female agents. A gender bias persists, limiting access to key networks and opportunities. While World Athletics promotes gender equality at the top of the organisation, only 16.8% of licensed agents are women. According to Phillips's (2003) definition of

stakeholder legitimacy, athletics agents, regardless of background, would be categorised as normative stakeholders. Stakeholders regulated by the Integrity Code of Conduct or other rules, such as rules concerning licensed athletics agents, have ethical obligations toward one another and should therefore be fairly considered regardless of gender, experience, or organisational status. Moreover, as Freeman et al. (2010) emphasise, the core meaning of stakeholder theory lies in the co-creation of value, with every stakeholder contributing to and influencing the system.

Relationships with primary stakeholders: athletes, coaches, meeting organisers, and sportswear companies, are built on trust, transparency, and reputation. Athletes are the most important stakeholders for agents, as they employ agents. Coaches often influence athletes' agent selection and season planning, while sportswear companies finance careers and, in sponsor-led events, may shape competition. Agents must deliver on promises and disclose issues that could compromise commitments. In a small and closed industry, keeping stakeholders satisfied is crucial. This creates ethical tensions: full transparency is not always feasible in practice, and agents therefore sometimes use *soft lies* or partial transparency to preserve relationships. Schnackenberg and Tomlinson (2016) discuss transparency as the perceived quality of shared information, consisting of disclosure, clarity, and accuracy. Therefore, agents may disclose selectively or reduce clarity and accuracy to maintain relationships, as situational and social factors (e.g., power relations) shape disclosure (Albu & Flyverbom, 2019). At the same time, professionalisation efforts by World Athletics (e.g., the licensing exam and professional-development courses) have not sufficiently tested or reinforced the competencies most relevant to ethical practice.

These frictions are amplified by the sport's financial constraints and a longstanding status quo. Financial pressures make agents more dependent on athletics meetings and on sponsors, nudging behaviour toward maintaining relationships rather than rule-based fairness. This dynamic is supported by Bull and Faure (2022) and Shropshire et al. (2016), who note that economic factors often override agents' ethical behaviour. It also aligns with Harrison and Wicks' (2013) view that stakeholders assess relationships by the total benefit they perceive to receive, including fairness and trust, not merely immediate financial returns. As asserted by Schweitzer and Gibson (2008), when fairness is disregarded, it can encourage individuals to act unethically. Although agents may recognise that the static athletics system operates unfairly, they have limited options beyond adapting to the realities if they wish to remain in the industry. World Athletics'

strategies acknowledge the need for innovation; however, current dynamics still leave agents navigating a system where ethical ideals and everyday realities frequently collide.

2. How do cognitive and practical limitations shape athletics agents' ability to make ethical decisions?

Decision-making is shaped by experience-based heuristics and factors that stress agents' cognitive capacity. Although agents aim to act ethically and say they prioritise athletes' interests, practical realities often prevent this from happening consistently and therefore undermine integrity. Especially thin margins and income uncertainty make financial scarcity in athletics a recurrent driver of questionable choices. As stated by Simon (1955), individuals rarely optimise; they make satisfactory decisions, choosing good-enough options, which can undermine fully ethical decisions. Consequently, while integrity is defined as acting in accordance with moral values, norms, and rules (Huberts, 2018), the assessment of unethical behaviour becomes blurred between consciously making decisions that deviate from expected and acceptable standards, and implicit decision-making that leads to undesirable outcomes, even when the reasoning appears appropriate from the agent's perspective.

Experience supports decision-making, particularly for seasoned agents. Participants noted that it reduces the anxiety of facing new decision-making situations and increases the likelihood of having previously encountered similar scenarios. Existing literature recognises experience as one of the most valued competencies of a sports agent. As stated by Shropshire et al. (2016) and Bull and Faure (2022), one of the main reasons for employing an agent is the experience they bring. In essence, experience reduces the information asymmetries between the athlete and other stakeholders, which helps explain why athletes often prefer experienced agents over newly licensed ones, even when the former may have a questionable background.

Participants also described agents' work as cognitively demanding and essentially never-ending. Keeping workloads as well as the athlete rosters manageable helps reduce cognitive strain; if not, health suffers and decision quality declines, which in turn affects represented athletes. In practice, however, this is difficult, as thin financial margins in athletics, time pressure, and competition for top athletes push agents toward heavier workloads and continuous stress. In line with Simon (1972), agents rely on heuristics formed through experience, breaking problems into manageable parts but not fully optimising. As a result, ethically problematic behaviour may occur without conscious

intent. Bazerman and Sezer's (2016) notion of bounded ethicality helps explain this: individuals can unintentionally overlook unethical conduct, especially when outcomes appear favourable (Bazerman & Sezer, 2016). Additionally, as acknowledged by participants, norms within trusted circles may lead to agents copying such behaviour, underscoring the need for agents to critically evaluate advice rather than adopt it unreflectively. At the system level, since information currently flows mainly toward World Athletics, this one-directional communication does little to ease the decision-making constraints agents face.

Agents report anchoring decisions in their personal values, in athletes' best interests, and in applicable rules. In practice, however, maintaining integrity is difficult. Agents must balance competing stakeholder interests while facing rivals who may pursue shortcuts. High-earning athletes and the time already invested can affect value-based decisions, as agents weigh financial returns against their values, even in long-standing relationships. These challenges are to a great extent a cause of the financial state of athletics, where survival pressures can compromise earlier commitments. While agents claim, and likely believe, that their decisions serve athletes' best interests, financial pressures remain a real concern that influences decisions. Consistent with Audi and Murphy (2006), integrity functions less as an independent principle and more as a supporting one that sustains other ethical standards, such as those in the Integrity Code of Conduct. However, as Batson and Thompson (2001) note, practical realities can override principled intentions (*overpowered integrity*), thereby shaping agents' integrity-based decision-making.

The purpose of this thesis was to understand athletics agents' ethical behaviour by taking into account the governance measures established by World Athletics, which the discussion above has sought to address. Research questions 1 and 2 together illustrate an athletics system with governance gaps, network dependence, and financial scarcity, alongside bounded decision-making constraints that together shape agent behaviour. These realities tilt agents toward relationship-preserving choices, even when they conflict with rule-based fairness or their stated values, and toward decisions that enable them to remain in business. The discussion sets the stage for the practical implications presented in section 5.1 and informs the recommendations for future research in section 5.2.

5.1 Practical implications

Based on the discussion above, this section offers actionable steps for stakeholders that most affect athletics agents' ethical behaviour: **World Athletics, licensed athletics agents** themselves, **meeting organisers**, and **sportswear companies**.

World Athletics

Strengthen accountability and oversight: Stakeholders, including agents, need to know that rule breaches and unethical behaviour will be sanctioned. World Athletics should make oversight more noticeable and consistent. Sanctions for breaches of the Integrity Code of Conduct and other rules must be firm; otherwise, accountability is not *felt*.

Improve two-way communication: Regular dialogue with agents should take place, with agents being able to raise challenges and concerns directly to World Athletics representatives.

Reconsider agent representation: Seriously evaluate the need to cooperate with formed groups among agents, as this risks leaving many licensed agents unheard. Instead, establish a new, democratically built representative body for all licensed agents to be heard.

Increase transparency in competition entries: To address concerns about organiser discretion, introduce an entry system where licensed agents register athletes and all parties can view the process. Entries would be granted based on World Rankings, while any discussions around appearance fees would be handled in private when an athlete is at a high enough level.

Refocus education and assessment: Continuous development courses should target practical issues and needs, and the licensing exam should test relevant real-world ethical and cognitive competencies.

Advance gender equality among agents: Set a minimum target for female participation in the licensing exam and take steps to attract new female agents, aiming toward gender balance.

Keep pushing innovation and audience growth: Continued efforts to innovate the sport and reach new audiences can create new revenue streams and market

opportunities, an underlying way to reduce unethical behaviours driven by financial scarcity.

Licensed athletics agents

Improving ethical behaviour is easier said than done, as practical realities often get in the way. Still, agents can make some choices that reduce risk.

Keep workload sustainable: Prioritise a manageable athlete roster as well as the overall load. High cognitive load was a consistent driver of problematic decisions in the findings, which is why keeping the load down supports better judgment.

Choose advisers carefully: A trusted circle strongly shapes decisions. Select mentors with a track record for principled conduct and check the advice against the rules and the athlete's best interests before acting.

Reduce the need for lies: In the context of competitions, late changes by athletes or coaches are common. Therefore, setting expectations early about commitments (e.g., competition entry promises with no exceptions unless the athlete gets injured) helps battle this and reduces the need to act partially transparently with stakeholders, especially meeting organisers.

Meeting organisers

Prioritise fair athlete treatment: Decisions that place athletes at a disadvantage affect careers, both financially and in qualification chances for major championships. Entry decisions should be based on World Rankings (using the system noted above) to ensure fair opportunities.

Allow limited discretion: To give organisers some flexibility (e.g., to draw local crowds), permit a small, clearly defined number of discretionary places within the rules.

Communicate reliably with agents: Even when the message is negative, timely responses help agents and athletes plan their season. A reasonable response-time requirement should be written into the rules.

Reinforce accountability: Link organiser obligations to the broader oversight measures discussed earlier so that consistent, rules-based behaviour takes place.

Sportswear companies

Broaden agent access: While it is common to prefer known agents, opportunities should also be offered to lesser-known and newly licensed agents. Working only with familiar names can leave similarly qualified athletes in unequal positions.

Use development pools when budgets are tight: If budgets are limited, consider funded development pools to support athletes with potential, including those returning from setbacks, who lack individual contract options at a given time. This would help athletes progress and allow agents to keep working with them because a stakeholder is helping finance their careers.

5.2 Recommendations for future research

This thesis explored the ethical challenges licensed athletics agents face. While the sample included 10 participants with variation in experience, gender, and continent, the sample size may be insufficient to generalise across athletics. Further, the study focused only on licensed athletics agents, which is why findings may differ in other sports. Future research could use larger samples to better reflect cultural variation within athletics and conduct comparable studies across sports.

By focusing solely on agents' perspectives, the views of other stakeholders were not captured. Future work could address this by examining the stakeholder groups identified here as most influential for agents' ethical behaviour. This would add depth to the phenomenon and clarify why certain challenges persist in practice.

As previously disclosed, the author is a licensed athletics agent. Some participants may therefore have been reluctant to share sensitive information. While this insider position of the author provided depth of understanding about agents' work and the athletics environment, future studies conducted by external researchers are recommended. Alternatively, research led by the Athletics Integrity Unit could be considered if contextual expertise is deemed advantageous.

Given the qualitative design and the sensitivity of the topic, similar research using quantitative methods is also justified. Survey designs could enable statistical analysis to identify which factors are associated with particular behaviours. Such work could then be combined with the present findings to develop more comprehensive, evidence-based steps for applicable stakeholders.

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APPENDIX 1 INTERVIEW GUIDE

Definitions:

"Before we get into the questions, to make sure that we are on the same page, when I discuss *stakeholders*, I mean anyone who can influence your work as an agent. That could include athletes, coaches, meeting organisers, federations, sponsors, or governing bodies like World Athletics. Basically, anyone you interact with or whose interests you have to consider."

1. Can you describe your background and how you became an athletics agent?

Follow-up: For how long have you been working as an agent?

Follow-up: How would you describe the environment that you work in?

2. Can you describe the stakeholders you work with, and what you think is important to maintain good relationships with them?

3. Can you give an example of a situation where you had to balance the interests of multiple stakeholders (such as athletes, coaches, and/or meeting organisers)? Did you prioritise some stakeholders over others? Why?

4. In your view, what are some common challenges or dilemmas that sports agents face in athletics today?

Follow-up: What was the situation, and how did you handle it?

5. Do you often see behaviour in your work environment that you feel is not right?

Follow-up: Do you usually take any action when you notice something like that? Why or why not?

6. How familiar are you with the rules and guidelines from World Athletics that apply to agents? How do you stay informed when changes are made?

Follow-up: Do you act according to them on a daily basis?

7. How do financial factors like appearance fees or commercial deals affect the decisions you make?

8. Have you ever been in a situation where financial factors made decision-making more difficult?

9. How do your own values or beliefs influence the way you make decisions as an agent?

10. Do you think time pressure or a heavy workload ever affects the quality of your decisions?
Follow-up if the answer is positive: In what way?

11. Can you describe a high-pressure situation where you had to make a quick decision?
Follow-up: Was it difficult? Why?

12. When you face a tough choice, what kind of information do you usually rely on?

13. What kind of support - whether from organisations, mentors, or guidelines - do you think would help agents in challenging situations?

14. Is there anything you would like to add?

APPENDIX 2 THE USE OF AI

Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools, specifically Large Language Models (LLMs), were used throughout the thesis. OpenAI's (2025) ChatGPT was utilised to suggest language edits. Because English is not my first language, the tool was used to improve phrasing, reduce redundancy, and refine the structure of the text written by me. ChatGPT was also used as a research assistant to ask clarifying questions about written sections or research topics. As academic articles play a central role, ChatGPT was used to help identify relevant literature. While the tool provided brief overviews of suggested sources, all articles were read and analysed by me to ensure that the understanding and interpretation remained entirely my own. It should be noted that this method was not very effective, as most of the time the recommended sources were not relevant. For the most part, the articles included in the thesis were retrieved using Google Scholar and accessed through the Hanken account.

The workflow of using ChatGPT was as follows: first, I wrote draft sections based on my own ideas and understanding of the literature. AI was then used to suggest improvements to wording, structure, and clarity. When paragraphs were shared with ChatGPT, prompts were formulated to instruct the tool to work only with the provided text and to preserve my voice and intent. All AI suggestions were critically reviewed and revised or rejected as necessary.

I believe the use of AI helped improve the overall quality of the thesis, as ChatGPT's ability to identify inconsistencies and suggest refinements supported critical self-evaluation during writing. However, the final text represents my own reasoning, argumentation, and conclusions.

No sensitive data, such as interview transcripts or identifying information, were shared with OpenAI's (2025) ChatGPT to maintain confidentiality and comply with research ethics. The interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed using Microsoft Teams. All transcripts were then manually reviewed, refined, and anonymised without the use of AI. All data were handled through services provided by the university, in accordance with Hanken School of Economics' (n.d.) data management guidelines.