

PRESS RELEASE

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California Dreaming: the programme backing Britain's future Olympians and Paralympians

With 641 days until the Olympic Games open in Los Angeles and 673 until the Paralympics, five sports are joining the Olympic programme, and para climbing is making its debut. Behind many of the British athletes chasing a place sits a performance institute most people have never heard of. The Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme (TASS) now supports around 1,500 athletes a year - and new work with Sport England and design studio Explorers Club showcases what this generation of athletes actually needs.

The 2028 Olympic Games will not look like the Games before them. Five sports join the Olympic programme in 2028: flag football and squash make their Olympic debuts, cricket returns after 124 years, lacrosse after 120, and baseball/softball return after a decade away. The Paralympic programme runs to 22 sports and a record 560 medal events, with para climbing appearing for the first time.

For British athletes, that is a lot of new doors. Some of them lead into sports with no century of infrastructure behind them, no established pathway and very little money.

Flag football: an inch from Los Angeles

Take flag football. The five-a-side, no-contact version of American football arrives in 2028 with six teams per gender and the United States pre-qualified as hosts.

Great Britain's women are back-to-back European champions, winning gold in 2023 and again in 2025, when they beat Austria 34-33 in overtime in Paris. They are ranked third in the world.

In August 2026, at the IFAF World Championships in Düsseldorf, the top three teams were guaranteed an Olympic place. In the bronze medal match, GB's Emily Kemp, the tournament's leading scorer, caught a two-point conversion with two minutes left and landed a foot out of bounds. Head coach Jack Reed put it plainly afterwards: "It's a game of inches and Emily was out by an inch."

They did not qualify that day. They are still chasing Los Angeles. But it's not just the team that is chasing Los Angeles, individuals are too: The GB U17 Girls recently defeated Germany to claim the 2026 IFAF European Youth Flag Football Championship – some of these players will be pushing for senior places over the next few years.

Chad Ehlertsen, Chief Executive, British American Football Association

"Two years ago, the idea of a British team competing at an Olympic Games in our sport was a conversation we had carefully. In Düsseldorf we were one inch from it. That is how fast this has moved.

"What people miss is that our players are not full-time. They work, they study, they travel to train. If we are going to get to Los Angeles, it will be because we have built something around them that lets ordinary weeks add up to extraordinary performance. That is the work we are focused on now - and it is why the support these athletes can access matters as much as anything that happens on the field."

Sport England and TASS both back that view, because they have spent the last two years studying exactly what makes an ordinary week add up - and what makes it fall apart.

The support most people never see

For developing and elite athletes alike, sports science and performance support is often the difference between a good week and a wasted one.

Most people who follow British sport have heard of the UK Sports Institute (UKSI). Operating since 2002, it is the high-performance system's main provider of science, medicine, technology and engineering support to elite Olympic and Paralympic athletes and has contributed to more than 1,000 British medals across four Games cycles.

Far fewer people have heard of TASS.

Honey Watson, Great Britain flag football player and TASS-supported athlete

"I don't think people realise what it takes. You are fitting training around a degree and a job, and you are doing it in a sport that most people cannot name.

"Having a physio who knows my sport, a strength and conditioning coach who understands what my body is being asked to do, a psychologist I can actually talk to - that is what has kept me in this. It is the difference between guessing and knowing. I would not be where I am without it."

Twenty-two years, 10,000 athletes, one modest office in Newcastle

The Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme was launched in 2004 at 10 Downing Street by the then Culture Secretary, Tessa Jowell. It runs from College House at Northumbria University in Newcastle upon Tyne - an office that would surprise anyone expecting the nerve centre of a national talent system.

This year's intake will take the total of TASS athletes supported over 10,000, across 73 sports and disciplines.

At Paris 2024, 123 TASS athletes competed and won 60 medals between them. Its current cohort is split evenly between women and men.

At the recent Commonwealth Games (Glasgow 2026), 248 athletes were selected to represent Team England (across 10 sports/215 medal events). Of these: 125 were TASS or TASS alumni - of these 63 won a medal

49 were current TASS athletes - of these, 43 reached at least 'finalist' level.

Guy Taylor, National Director, TASS

"We started with a few hundred athletes. We now support around 1,500 a year, and the shape of that group has changed as much as the size.

"Supporting athletes on the England Talent Pathway is still the core of what we do. But we also work with new and developing sports, where the pathway is being built as we go. We support remote World Class Programme athletes funded by UK Sport. We work with athletes from the other Home Nations.

"It's not about how far an athlete has come, but how the right support at the right time can help them go further."

A performance institute without a building

The reason a national programme can run from a modest office is that TASS is not centralised. It is a decentralised performance services institute, built as a partnership between TASS, Sport England, national governing bodies (NGBs), a UK-wide network of delivery sites and the practitioners who work in them.

Part of the model	Scale
Delivery sites across the UK	47
National governing bodies	42
Discipline expert practitioners	350+
Sports currently supported	52
Athletes supported a year	~1,500

Athletes access support at their delivery site, or remotely where distance makes that impractical.

Sir Matthew Pinsent CBE, Chair of the TASS Management Group

“TASS is funded by the National Lottery through Sport England. To support emerging talent, you have to understand athletes - their sport, and the places they actually live, train, work and study.

“That is why this model works the way it does. We are not asking a seventeen-year-old to relocate to a centre of excellence. We are putting expert support where they already are, in universities and colleges and sports centres across the country, and we are asking practitioners who know that sport to deliver.

“In my own career, the support around me was the thing that let me keep going when the results were not there yet. Most athletes never get that. This is an attempt to change the odds.”

What the research found, and what was built from it

For the last few years, Sport England and TASS have concentrated on understanding the current generation of aspiring athletes well enough to better design environments and support around them.

That work produced *Wired to Win*, a research study and playbook commissioned by Sport England with the Youth Sport Trust. Forty-four athletes across eleven sports recorded 600 video diaries and 100 hours of footage about their sporting and personal lives.

One finding in particular shaped what came next. Motivation in young athletes runs on a visible link between effort and reward. When that link breaks, so does everything downstream. In the study’s own words: *“current sacrifices feel harder to justify when progress isn’t visible.”*

Hannibal Morris, Head of England Talent Development Pathways, Sport England

“We can invest in services, but if athletes do not feel drawn to use them, the investment does not reach them. That is a design problem as much as a delivery problem.

“So, we have put real effort into insight - into understanding this generation rather than assuming we already do. The harder part is what you do with it. Turning insight into innovation. That is why we have been working with Explorers Club: to take rich insight and convert it into simple creative ideas that have the potential to take us somewhere new in how we support and develop athletes.”

Two ideas came out of that work.

The Class of TASS treats the induction moment as something worth marking - bringing athletes together, photographing them as a cohort, and giving them a sense of who else is in this with them.

The carabiner and accolade system is a physical response to the visibility problem. A carabiner in the shape of the TASS star, and a set of accolades unlocked for different kinds of progress - engaging consistently with TASS services, representing your country, and more. Progress you can see, and carry.

Ayo Fagbemi, Co-founder and Strategy Director, Explorers Club

“The brief was unusually honest. TASS did not ask for a campaign. They said athletes do not feel close enough to us, and they were right.

“Both ideas came from the same place in the research. We created Class of TASS to answer a belonging problem - these athletes are part of something and most of them have never seen it or felt it. The carabiner answers a visibility problem - progress in a young athlete’s life is mostly invisible, and invisible progress is the thing that makes people stop.

“We were designing evidence athletes can look back on, and inspire them for future achievement at the highest level, whatever this means to them.”

Los Angeles, then Brisbane

LA 2028 is approaching fast, and Brisbane 2032 is already on the horizon. Some of the athletes who will compete there are in sixth form and university right now, in sports that in some cases did not have a British pathway five years ago.

TASS sits at an unusual intersection: youth culture on one side, high-performance sport on the other.

Kirsty Way, TASS Athlete Representative

“When I came into TASS, it felt like a well-kept secret. The fact that it is growing matters, because it means more athletes get to find out what is available before they have already decided they cannot make it work.

“Most of us are not going to be household names. We are going to be people who got a real shot at finding out how good we could be. That is what this gives you.”

ENDS



NOTES TO EDITORS

About TASS

The Talented Athlete Scholarship Scheme is a partnership between talented athletes, delivery sites and national governing bodies, funded by the National Lottery through Sport England. Launched in 2004, TASS provides performance support - strength and conditioning, physiotherapy, performance nutrition, sport psychology, personal development and medical support, alongside free, confidential 24/7 mental health support - to around 1,500 athletes a year through 47 delivery sites and more than 350 expert practitioners. TASS is headquartered at College House, Northumbria University, Newcastle upon Tyne. tass.gov.uk

About Sport England

Sport England is a public body investing National Lottery and government funding in sport and physical activity. Its Talent Plan for England supports England Talent Pathways in ~50 sports. sportengland.org

About BAFA

The British American Football Association (BAFA) is the National Governing Body for the sport of American football in Great Britain. BAFA is a member of the International Federation of American Football (IFAF), responsible for the organisation and promotion of GB national teams in international competition. britishamericanfootball.org

About Explorers Club

Explorers Club is a strategy and design studio with offices in London and Los Angeles. explorers-club.studio

Media assets

A downloadable asset pack accompanies this release, containing stills and film from the Class of TASS shoot and product photography of the carabiner and accolade system: [\[DOWNLOAD HERE\]](#)

All athletes featured have consented to the use of their name and image. Please credit as directed in the asset pack.

We would like to extend a huge thank you to Explorers Club for being such a fantastic creative partner for this project. Full crew credits for the Class of TASS shoot have been shared below the press contact section.

We would also like to extend our thanks to St Mary's University – we couldn't have asked for a more helpful and accommodating host for the shoot.

Press contacts

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CLASS OF TASS – FULL CREW CREDITS

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