

Business Post

Companies

New online platform gives aspiring athletes a sporting chance with sponsors

Sport Endorse helps new talent to connect with brands while providing the companies with access to a gallery of sports professionals



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Declan Bourke and Trevor Twamley of Sport Endorse

Declan Bourke describes the challenges facing new sports talent in Ireland as an unenviable one. The Dublin-based sports agent said securing sponsorship is trickier than it has ever been.

“It can be an uphill battle, so sadly you tend to see people abandoning their dreams for the lack of commercial support,” Bourke told the *Business Post*.

“On the other hand, you have the sports agencies that struggle to serve the interests of emerging talent because the lower contract values and commissions, especially at the outset of a career, don’t justify the effort involved.”

Bourke and his fellow sports agent Trevor Twamley are hoping to change that with their new venture, Sport Endorse, which aims to disrupt an existing sports agency model that “serves only top-tier sports people”.

According to Bourke, Sport Endorse will give brands easy access to an array of sportspeople who can apply for the various sponsorship opportunities on offer.

“It’s a really simple concept,” he said. “The brands can use the platform to post opportunities for athletes, both active and retired. The athletes can view each opportunity, apply for it if they like, and the brand then chooses from the pool of

applicants.”

SportEndorse.com went live in late October following eight months in development. A total 55 sportspeople and 50 brands have so far signed up to the platform.

Sportspeople can create their profile on the app free of charge, while brands can also register free of charge. Successful match-ups are then subject to an agency commission.

Ladbrokes, the British-owned betting company, was the first company to join Sport Endorse, followed by Rhino Rugby, Craghoppers, Nocco and Grant Thornton, the professional services firm.

Also on board are Four Five, the British CBD company run by rugby players Dominic Day and George Kruijs, Irish-owned food companies Good4U and The Irish Biltong Co, and Revive Active, a Galway-based manufacturer of nutritional supplements.



George Kruijs

“For brands like these, there are a few benefits to having access to a wider range of sportspeople to sponsor. If you’ve got a €30,000 budget for a particular campaign and you plough all of it into one person, there is an inherent risk. If they pick up an injury, for example, they might not be able to compete for a period of time,” Bourke said.

“Dividing your spend across a number of lower-cost athletes, even though they may be

lesser-known, allows you to hedge against the risk of injury, and you may also benefit from a greater and more diverse reach.”

The sportspeople who sign up to the Sport Endorse platform can choose between different sponsorship opportunities based on their personal preferences, experience and abilities. They can elect to act as keynote speakers, for example, or to take part in one-off events or leadership forums.

Other options include influencer activities on social media, product endorsement and brand ambassadorship.

“All of this helps to determine brand fit,” Bourke said. “Not all sportspeople will want to speak at events, for example, whereas others may have a real interest in that area and proven experience.”

Filling out their Sport Endorse profile can also help younger athletes who are at an early stage in their career to determine their personal brand, Bourke said.

“You’ll find sometimes that these people will be incredibly good at their sport and that they really need the financial support of a sponsor, but they’re not quite sure how to present themselves as public figures,” Bourke said.

“They might be using their personal network – family and friends – to get in front of sponsors, or using social media to build up a profile, while being unsure of who they are and how they want to be perceived publicly.”

According to Bourke, creating a compelling personal brand comes down to authenticity.

“It’s really about being able to draw from what you really care about and from your real interests and experiences. You might have a personal interest in climate change and sustainability or in animal rights.

“You may have a family member who has experienced depression or another mental or indeed physical illness, and so that might be something you care deeply about,” he said.

“Aligning your personal brand with what matters to you will give you the greatest chance of building up a sustainable personal brand in the longer term, and picking up the right sponsorship opportunities for you.”

Internationally, Bourke pointed to Roger Federer, the Swiss tennis player, Portuguese footballer Cristiano Ronaldo and Tom Brady, the American football legend, as examples of high-profile sportspeople who have successfully managed personal brands and sponsorship portfolios over the course of lengthy careers.

“In Ireland, the cyclist Nicolas Roche is a really interesting character. He has built up quite a strong personal brand and has been named the 25th most influential person in

his sport by Pro Cycling,” Bourke said.



Autumn Nations Cup, Aviva Stadium, Dublin 13/11/2020 Ireland vs Wales
Ireland's James Lowe with Leigh Halfpenny of Wales
Mandatory Credit ©INPHO/Dan Sheridan

“The New Zealander James Lowe, who plays rugby for Ireland, is another one with a good brand. He’s got a pretty strong personality. He’s quite laid-back, he knows who he is and he doesn’t deviate from that.

“I have great admiration for Dina Asher-Smith, the British sprinter. She knows 100 per cent what she wants to be in terms of her brand.

“A number of companies asked her to partner with them on the Black Lives Matter issue this year, but she turned them down, saying anything she had to say on the matter she would say on her own behalf, not on behalf of a company.”

Bourke and Twamley are launching Sport Endorse in Ireland and Britain initially, but hope to expand into other markets in the future.

“As a small market, Ireland is an ideal test bed for the product, but the unwieldy nature of the traditional sports agency model is a worldwide problem, so we see a lot of potential,” Bourke said.



Irish Life Health National Senior Track and Field Championships, Morton Stadium, Dublin 28/7/2019 Sharlene Mawdsley of Newport A.C. on her way to winning the women's 400m sprint Mandatory Credit ©INPHO/Oisin Keniry

Irish sportspeople already on board include Kieran Donaghy, the Kerry GAA player, runner Sharlene Mawdsley, Jason Quigley, the Donegal boxer, footballer Enda Stevens and rugby player James Lowe.

In Britain, Sport Endorse has signed up Joel Fearon, the Winter Olympics medallist, and triathletes Laura Siddall and Joe Skipper.

Bourke and Twamley launched Sport Endorse in 2018, operating initially as a

mainstream agency. They had met a decade earlier when Twamley was commercial director at Setanta Sports and Bourke was country manager at CMC Markets, the spread betting company.

“A business transaction around sport was the genesis of our relationship,” Bourke said. “Both of us are sports-mad and business-focused so joining up to tackle a problem we both saw was an easy decision.

“From here, the plan is to continue adding more features to the platform and to introduce AI functionality. We also plan to maintain our existing agency contracts with professional footballers and rugby players and rights holders.”

Sport Endorse can be downloaded for smartphones on both the Play and Apple stores.