

# The Growing Tension Between Alcohol and Elite Performance in Modern Sport

*From cycling and cricket to rugby and running, sport is starting to question its long-standing drinking culture—but it's not letting go just yet*

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- New reporting across global sport highlights a growing contradiction at the heart of modern athletic culture: while elite performance science increasingly rejects alcohol, drinking remains deeply embedded in sporting identity, rituals, and commercial structures.

A recent feature in *Bicycling* examined cycling's uneasy relationship with alcohol, describing a culture where post-ride beers and sponsor ties persist despite a growing awareness of alcohol's impact on recovery, sleep, and performance [1]. The article reflects a broader shift seen across multiple sports, where traditional drinking norms are being questioned but not yet displaced.



Alcohol undermines performance, but its social pull in sport is powerful."

*Professor David Nutt, CSO,  
SENTIA Spirits*

Similar tensions are evident in rugby, long associated with a strong clubhouse drinking culture. Recent journalism and research describe how alcohol functions as a form of social currency within teams, reinforcing bonding, hierarchy, and identity, even as professionalisation demands stricter recovery protocols and athlete welfare standards [2][3]. While elite rugby has begun to move away from heavy

drinking, the cultural legacy remains powerful, particularly at amateur and semi-professional levels.



Cricket has provided one of the clearest recent examples of this contradiction playing out in real time. During England's 2025 tour of New Zealand, a night-out involving several players culminated in captain Harry Brook being involved in a nightclub altercation, prompting fines, internal discipline, and wider scrutiny of team culture [4]. The incident, alongside reports of heavy drinking during a mid-series Ashes break in Australia, triggered debate about whether a relaxed team environment had blurred professional boundaries [5]. The controversy exposed the persistence of tour drinking culture within elite sport, even as expectations around professionalism continue to rise.



High-profile US athletes have increasingly spoken openly about alcohol's impact on their lives and careers, reflecting a broader cultural shift in sport. Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps has publicly addressed his struggles with alcohol misuse and subsequent therapy, while NFL quarterback Brett Favre has discussed his experiences with dependence and binge drinking. [6]

At the same time, advances in sports science have made the physiological costs of alcohol increasingly difficult to ignore. Alcohol is known to impair recovery through dehydration, disrupt sleep architecture, reduce muscle protein synthesis, and interfere with hormonal regulation, including growth hormone production. In a performance environment defined by marginal gains, these effects are significant. [6] Elite athletes now routinely optimise sleep, nutrition, and recovery with precision, making alcohol an outlier within otherwise tightly controlled regimes.

Yet despite this, alcohol remains highly visible across sport, not only culturally but commercially. Alcohol brands continue to be major sponsors of teams, leagues, and events, reinforcing the association between sport and drinking at a structural level. This creates a fundamental contradiction: athletes are encouraged to perform at the highest physiological level while operating within a cultural and commercial ecosystem that normalises behaviours detrimental to that goal.

There are, however, signs of change. Increasing numbers of athletes, particularly in endurance sports, are choosing to reduce or eliminate alcohol consumption altogether. Reporting in outlets such as Runner's World and The Wall Street Journal highlights a growing cohort of athletes who frame sobriety not as abstinence, but as a performance strategy, linked to improved recovery,

mental clarity, and consistency [7][8]. This shift is particularly pronounced among younger athletes and those competing in disciplines where marginal gains are decisive.

Professor David Nutt, a leading neuropsychopharmacologist and founder of [GABA Labs](#), notes that the relationship between alcohol and sport is complex and deeply rooted in human behaviour.

“Because drinking is a social activity, peer pressure can be hard to resist. And that’s not taking into account all the extreme drinking activities involved in joining sporting societies or how sports teams bond over drinking. Alcohol fuels that kind of group culture and vice versa.”

Professor Nutt’s research highlights that while people who exercise are often also moderate drinkers, alcohol itself is detrimental to fitness performance, affecting hydration, blood sugar stability, muscle strength, and recovery. He also points to the structural role alcohol plays within sport, from post-match rituals to its importance in funding through sponsorship and sales.

This dual role helps explain why alcohol remains so embedded in sporting culture despite growing awareness of its downsides. It is both a social glue and a commercial pillar, making it resistant to change even as athlete behaviour evolves.

The emerging picture is one of transition. Traditional drinking cultures in sport are being challenged by a new performance-driven paradigm, yet the rituals, identities, and economic structures built around alcohol remain firmly in place. The result is a cultural lag, where behaviour at the elite level is beginning to shift faster than the systems and symbols that surround it.

[SENTIA Spirits](#), developed by GABA Labs and co-founded by Professor David Nutt, sits at the intersection of this shift. [SENTIA](#) is a range of functional, alcohol-free drinks designed to enhance GABA signalling in the brain, promoting relaxation and sociability without the negative effects associated with alcohol. Drawing on decades of neuroscience research, SENTIA offers an alternative approach to social drinking that aligns with modern performance and wellbeing priorities.

Professor Nutt, former Chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs and one of the world’s leading experts on neuropsychopharmacology, leads the scientific development of SENTIA. The brand is part of a broader effort to rethink how people achieve social connection and relaxation in contexts where alcohol has traditionally dominated.

For further information, interviews, or to request samples, please contact SENTIA Spirits.

## References

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[5] ESPNcricinfo / UK media reporting on England Ashes Noosa incident (2025–2026)

[6] Nutt, D. "Drink? The New Science of Alcohol and Your Health" (2020)

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