

IFSPT International Perspective

# From the International Federation of Sports Physiotherapy to the International Sports and Exercise Physiotherapy Association: Celebrating Twenty-Five Years of the International Federation of Sports Physical Therapy

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Over the span of 25 years, the International Federation of Sports Physical Therapy (IFSPT) has grown from its founding in 2000 in the city of Utrecht in the Netherlands to a Federation of more than 40 member organizations. The IFSPT was officially recognized as a member organization of the World Confederation for Physical Therapy in 2003. Since then, it has partnered with the International Journal of Sports Physical Therapy (in 2010), defined the core competencies for sports physiotherapists, launched the pathway to become a Registered International Sports Physical Therapist, and inaugurated its own World Congress in 2015, with the sixth congress planned for December 2026. This perspective reviews these milestones, notes remaining global disparities, and outlines priorities in equity, digital health, and sustainability

### Level of Evidence

5

## INTRODUCTION

Over the past 25 years, the International Federation of Sports Physical Therapy (IFSPT) has established itself as a cornerstone for advancing professional standards, fostering education, and promoting evidence-based practice worldwide. Over these years, IFSPT has continuously reflected on its vital role within the global sports physical therapy community.

This milestone marks not only a moment of consolidation and recognition, but also a celebration of collaboration among national associations and professionals committed to athlete health and performance. The aim of this article is to provide an international perspective on the evolution of the IFSPT, summarizing its key milestones and outlining future directions to strengthen the global impact of sports physical therapy. To better understand the current scope and identity the IFSPT, it is essential to revisit the key historical milestones that have shaped its structure and mission over the past 25 years.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND FOUNDATIONS

The International Federation of Sports Physiotherapy (IFSP) was first established in 2000, based in Utrecht, Netherlands. It started with nine founding member coun-

tries and quickly grew to 14 within the first few months. The organization was formally recognized as a sub-group of World Physiotherapy Confederation for Physical Therapy in 2003. The motivation for member organizations to come together in this way was to promote sports physiotherapy globally and to provide a platform to facilitate professional development. The fundamental principle was to provide the best possible care to individuals participating in sport and exercise at all levels.

In 2004, IFSP was awarded a European Union-funded grant to define sports physiotherapy and identify key expert competencies,<sup>1</sup> which could be used to structure professional development and recognize expertise. This project not only defined the professional profile of a sports physiotherapist and also introduced a competency-based framework that remains the foundation of international educational standards.

The global diversity of physiotherapy education and clinical practice required IFSP to adopt significant flexibility and creativity to remain relevant and accessible worldwide. Much of its early activity focused on expanding the international network of sports physiotherapists and fostering engagement.

Individual physiotherapists from member countries subsequently had the opportunity to achieve the status of a Registered International Sports Physical Therapist (RISPT).

In 2010, the North American Journal of Sports Physical Therapy (NAJSPT) became an official publication of IFSPT. NAJSPT was renamed the International Journal of Sports Physical Therapy (IJSPT) in 2011 to reflect its international scope. By 2014, membership of IFSP had grown to 28 countries and the name was officially changed to the IFSPT. This was also when the decision was made to hold a World Congress of Sports Physical Therapy biennially, with the first one to be held in Bern, Switzerland in 2015. This combination of sports-specific publications and conferences, in addition to ongoing networking, has significantly contributed to the enthusiasm for being part of a World Physiotherapy specialist subgroup today, which today includes more than 40 member countries and over 15,000 professionals worldwide. Building upon this strong foundation, the IFSPT progressively translated its strategic vision into concrete actions and measurable achievements at the international level.

## MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS OVER 25 YEARS

In cooperation with the Norwegian Association of Sports Physiotherapy (FFI), the IFSP organized a one-day symposium (“Current Concept of Rehabilitation of Sports Injuries”, June 22, 2005) preceding the 1st World Congress of Sports Injury Prevention in Oslo, Norway. Another important milestone was the 1st IFSP symposium (“Global Goals”) held as a pre-conference event prior to the Sports Physical Therapy Section of the American Physical Therapy Association’s Team Concept Conference in Las Vegas (November 28, 2012).

In 2015, the IFSPT established its marquee event, the inaugural World Congress of Sports Physical Therapy, organized by the Swiss Sports Physiotherapy Association (SSPA), which will return to Bern for its 6th edition in December 2026.<sup>2</sup>

Between 2016 and 2021, the IFSPT has presented a dedicated symposium at the prestigious Isokinetic Conference, and in Monaco (2017), at the International Olympic Committee World Conference on Prevention of Injury and Illness in Sport, the IFSPT was part of the main program with a dedicated workshop.

In recent years, the IFSPT has increased its involvement in World Physiotherapy’s biennial conferences, organizing symposia and networking sessions (e.g., World Physio Tokyo, 2025). The Bern 2015 World Congress led to the IFSPT’s first major publication, the now renowned **Return to Sport Consensus** published in the British Journal of Sports Medicine in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Several IFSPT board members have contributed to other consensus statements (hip-related pain, shoulder), linked with the Swiss Sport Physiotherapist Association annual conference, and published in leading journals including the British Journal of Sports Medicine and The Journal of Orthopaedic and Sports Physical Therapy).<sup>2-4</sup> These consensus papers have become key reference frameworks in postgraduate curricula and professional guidelines, illustrating the IFSPT’s mission to promote and disseminate evidence-based practice.

Additionally, between 2009 and 2016, several members of the IFSPT actively participated in the worldwide dissemination of the FIFA 11+ injury prevention program, further demonstrating the IFSPT’s strength as a true global networking organization.<sup>5</sup> The implementation of these initiatives (FIFA 11+ dissemination, World Physiotherapy’s biennial conferences, Return to sport consensus) offers a unique opportunity to examine the translation of professional standards into clinical, academic, and societal impact worldwide.

## CLINICAL, ACADEMIC, AND SOCIETAL IMPACT

In most countries, the designation “sports physiotherapist” is not officially protected by law or regulation. This lack of legal clarity can create challenges for both athletes and patients seeking qualified professionals. To address these uncertainties, systems of accreditation and quality assessment have been developed to bring greater transparency to the field. Such systems benefit clubs, sports federations, and other stakeholders who need to identify competent and credentialed practitioners.

The IFSPT has established approved RISPT pathways adapted to each national educational context. These are designed to promote and guarantee a high level of care for athletes of all levels by aligning practitioner education and competencies with the best international practices. In several regions, the RISPT framework has been integrated into national accreditation systems, ensuring standardized postgraduate training and mutual recognition of expertise across countries.

As developments in sports science continue, it is imperative that educational curricula remain up to date. For example, the RISPT has been recently updated with 11th competency — originally focused on “fair play and anti-doping practices” — has evolved to encompass ethical, legal, and cultural practice in sports physiotherapy. This continuous evolution of competencies and best practices has a significant impact on injury prevention, access to care, return-to-sport strategies, and the health of young and female athletes.<sup>6,7</sup> These achievements highlight both the maturation of the IFSPT and the need for continuous adaptation to address the evolving demands of global sports physical therapy.

## CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Despite significant progress, the recognition of sports physiotherapy as a distinct specialty remains variable across the world. In several countries, internal regulations still prevent formal recognition, while in others, postgraduate programs and structured continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities are limited or absent. In some countries formal certification processes exist such as Sports Specialist certification in the United States of America via the American Board of Physical Therapy Specialties and Bel-

gium's 2024 ministerial recognition of the "Sports Physiotherapist" title.

Addressing these disparities remains one of the IFSPT's main priorities. The organization is committed to supporting accessible CPD pathways, fostering mentorship and education, and promoting collaboration between countries with established RISPT frameworks and those still developing their systems. Knowledge transfer through international educational offerings and bilateral partnerships remains central to this effort, ensuring reciprocity and avoiding one-directional support.

The IFSPT's strategic vision is to ensure that all member organizations—irrespective of size, resources, or geographic location—are equally engaged and represented. Future goals include strengthening international research networks, expanding multicenter collaborations, and building partnerships with sports federations, academic institutions, and clinical organizations to enhance clinical translation and maintain globally consistent standards of care. Emerging priorities, including issues associated with digital health, telerehabilitation, connected technologies, inclusivity, and environmental sustainability, reflect the IFSPT's broader commitment to accessible and future-oriented care for all physically active individuals, not solely elite athletes.

Future efforts aim to include systematic evaluation of educational and clinical outcomes, as well as international benchmarking of competency frameworks, to document the long-term impact of IFSPT initiatives. Looking forward, the IFSPT aims to maintain its pivotal role within World Physiotherapy, deepen collaboration with international organizations such as the Olympic medical community, and further raise the visibility of sports physiotherapists world-

wide. The recent name change from the IFSPT to the International Sports and Exercise Physiotherapy Association (ISEPA) will mark a new chapter—extending this mission beyond sport to encompass exercise, health, and lifelong physical activity. Ultimately, the challenges identified are opportunities for IFSPT/ISEPA to reaffirm its leadership in shaping a globally cohesive and evidence-based sports physical therapy.

## CONCLUSION

As IFSPT enters its second quarter-century, the federation stands at a pivotal moment to consolidate its legacy and address priority areas that enhance the impact of sports physical therapy on global health. This 25-year milestone marks both a celebration of past achievements and a renewed commitment to future growth. All the changes that have taken place over the years have led the IFSPT to where it stands today, reaffirming its central role in advancing sports physical therapy through leadership, innovation, and a shared vision of excellence in athlete care worldwide. As we look ahead, the continued collaboration of member organizations and the engagement of future generations of physiotherapists will be essential to sustain and expand this global movement—ensuring that sports physical therapy remains inclusive and innovative for years to come.

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