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Why young athletes quit professional sport in India

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Abstract

There exists a high rate of attrition amongst the young athletes in India, particularly between the ages of 18-21, when academic pressure, financial insecurities and uncertainty about career loom on their shoulders, because of which, these athletes, despite having the requisite talent and after putting in decades of training, drop out of sports, right before reaching their maximum potential. This phenomenon highlights a much deeper structural deficiency within India's sporting ecosystem and culture around sports, where pursuing professionally is still regarded as a high-risk pursuit rather than any other profession. While the country is witnessing rapid commercial growth of sports leagues in the country, following the success of the Indian Premier League and Pro Kabaddi League, these developments, have unfortunately, yet to shift the cultural mindset of families, nor have they provided enough confidence for grassroots athletes to pursue their dreams.

This article examines the causes of such high attrition, linking them to the cultural preference of society toward education, the institutional support provided to athletes, and the absence of a post-sport life framework / pathways for the athletes. The article also examines the consequences of such early dropout, which frequently results in psychological distress, identity crises, and petty jobs for former athletes. The article further argues that existing policy changes, including revision of government job quotas and educational reforms in the country, would remain insufficient to address the fundamental issues faced by young athletes, and therefore require a much more feasible solution to achieve that balance.

Taking reference from the international best practices, specifically from developed countries of Europe and the United States, that outshine other countries in sports and academics, the article proposes an integrated dual-career education framework that can be tailored to Indian realities. Adopting such a framework could combine academic curricula and the sport-specific education, along with digital and blended learning models in a flexible manner to enable athletes to pursue excellence in sports without compromising on future job opportunities, whilst also fostering a more sustainable sporting culture.

The article concludes by contending that India's key to emerging as a global giant in sports does not depend on the success of the few, but on its ability to retain, educate, and empower young athletes throughout.

Keywords: Youth athlete attrition, dual-career education model, sports governance and policy, athlete career sustainability and Indian sporting ecosystem

Introduction

India witnesses an unreasonably high attrition rate among aspiring athletes who drop out before they can realise their true potential or capitalise on the skills they have built over years of training. According to an article published on *TheBridge.in* ^[1], close to 82% of individuals leave competitive sport between the ages of 15 and 18. This alarming figure not only reflects prevailing attitudes toward pursuing a career in sport but also points to the contributing factors like academic pressure, limited career guidance, and inadequate financial or institutional support, that ultimately compel many talented young athletes to abandon their ambitions and follow careers chosen more from necessity than interest.

In a recent *Times of India* interview ^[2], legendary badminton coach Pullela Gopichand highlighted the sorry state of Indian sport by bluntly advising parents “*not to put their children in sports*” unless they are financially well-off or have a reliable fallback career, arguing that India is “*not in a position to offer sports as a career*” for most people. When someone who should inspire the nation issues such a stark warning, it neatly sums up the systemic problems the Indian sporting ecosystem faces today.

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However, with the Indian Premier League, now the world's second-richest sports league behind only the National Football League and with the Pro Kabaddi League's success, the gradual growth of the Indian Super League, and the upcoming Rugby Premier League, the business of sport in India and the opportunities for athletes and professionals are clearly expanding. Yet, whether this boom will actually reduce the attrition rate among young talent remains a major concern.

Beyond the practical problem of limited employability after spending one's formative years in sport, athletes who drop out often suffer profound psychological effects, including emotional distress, identity crises, and a sense of failure, even though most of their lives still lie ahead of them.

Even from the perspective of India's ambition to become a true sporting nation, this high dropout rate shrinks the talent pool and severely undermines the country's chances of nurturing another prodigy like Major Dhyan Chand or Sachin Tendulkar. It also perpetuates a culture in which sport is viewed merely as a co-curricular activity, encouraging most young people either to quit serious sport by 18 or to pursue it only long enough to secure a government job (a policy that carries as many drawbacks as benefits for long-term sporting development).

There is no single, comprehensive solution that can break this cycle or change mindsets overnight. However, the timeless remedy of 'education' can offer a promising start. Today there exists no specific curriculum designed for athletes, that covers subjects like sports psychology, finance, management, operations and other essential subjects, which can equip the athletes with skills that benefit both their sporting careers and future employment within the sports ecosystem including grassroots, administration, league, etc. Such "sports education" or focus on 'dual careers of Athletes' i.e. a combination of high-level sports training with general education or work that provides athletes with comfort and confidence, which allows them to focus on training while knowing they can remain in the same industry after retirement. Although today, many sports-management courses continue to come up in India, however their teaching mode (language/on site), entry requirements and costs make them inaccessible for most athletes and enthusiasts.

Hence there exists an urgent need for initiatives that deliver affordable, regionally tailored sports education at the right stage of an athlete's development. Doing so will not only inform budding athletes about the breadth of career opportunities in sport but also enable them to evaluate those options realistically. In short, building a robust support system around young athletes, so they can chase excellence without sacrificing education or future security, that will not only reduce dropout rates but also foster a more sustainable sporting culture in India.

Background and History

High attrition from sports has become deeply rooted in Indian culture in recent years. The nation remains heavily aligned with academics, while sport is largely relegated to an extracurricular pursuit rather than being viewed as a primary pathway to success. Consequently, sporting infrastructure and related policies have long been neglected or have focused almost exclusively on cricket. Historically, India dominated global hockey and occasionally achieved regional glory in football. In recent times, the country has

excelled in wrestling, shooting, badminton, and other disciplines; yet, despite its vast potential, India still awaits to make its mark on the world sporting stage.

Although the government has taken constructive steps by establishing the Sports Authority of India (SAI) and launching Khelo India games, these initiatives have been unable to tackle the high dropout rate. As mentioned before, nearly 82 percent of young athletes quit sport by the age of 18, a statistic that points to problems extending far beyond building training centres or organising tournaments. The most popular incentive of the government of "guaranteed job" with public-sector units and government departments, on account of sports quotas though offered steady posts to athletes who excelled. Unfortunately, the lure of such jobs encouraged many people to treat sport merely as a ladder to government employment, spawning age fraud, selection scams, and strategic choice of less-competitive sports to secure eligibility. These abuses not only undermined the policy's purpose, but also eroded sporting ethics, while demoralising genuine athletes, who often had to compete against older opponents or faced organised cheating designed to favour a few. Gender dynamics compound the problem. Drop-out rates are significantly higher for girls^[3], reflecting additional social barriers from family expectations to inadequate safe facilities that cause a sharp decline in participation during late adolescence^[4].

In all other cases, parents tend to pull their children out of sport around Classes 10–12, if not earlier, when board examinations and university entrance are the compelling requirements. Academic pressure and concern about future employment therefore become major drivers of attrition. As most Indian schools and colleges do not offer customised timetables for athletes, with only a handful of sports-oriented schools exist; as a result, students face an unfair choice between "sports or studies" at a certain point. As journalist Rajesh Kalra correctly observes^[5], athletes commonly devote 10–15 prime years to training, only to find themselves unprepared for any other career if they fail to reach the top.

International studies have proved that structured support can curb youth attrition. The Western university-sports model is often cited as a gold standard^[6]. Loughborough University in the United Kingdom, for example, has produced more than 300 Olympic and Paralympic medallists and won 16 medals at the 2024 Games, thanks to a system that integrates academic study and career planning with elite training. Stanford University in the United States has generated over 120 Olympic medals under a similar approach, demonstrating that education and sport can not only coexist but also reinforce each other. The European Commission's 2012^[7] guidelines urging member states to enable athletes to combine sport with education or work offer a useful template. India's National Education Policy 2020^[8] recognises sport as an integral part of education and proposes open-schooling and credit-transfer pathways for talented athletes, yet even full implementation would not, by itself, resolve the education-career dilemma that hangs over Indian sport.

Having competed at national level myself and observed many of the country's brightest young talents, the struggle to balance education and sport was apparent which forced majority of promising teenagers to quit just as they began to blossom. Another obstacle was the scarcity of professional pathways or career guidance beyond coaching or fitness

training, which demotivated young athletes' willingness to persevere.

Against this backdrop, there is an urgent need for a solution that bridges the gap between sport and sustainable professional opportunities in India's sporting sector.

Proposal for an Integrated Dual-Career Education Policy and Initiatives for Indian Athletes

As discussed earlier, though National Education Policy 2020 marks a welcome step toward giving sport a formal place in India's school curriculum. For higher education it introduces a credit-bank system and flexible rules so universities can offer sport-centred majors and let athletes adjust coursework around tournament seasons. The aim is holistic growth through structured programmes that run from grassroots to elite level. Yet the policy still lacks detailed syllabi in areas such as sports psychology, management, analytics, operations and finance—gaps that prevent a genuine dual-career ecosystem. In its current form NEP 2020 provides only a partial foundation: it leaves the rigid academic calendar and exam schedule largely intact, and its phased, uneven rollout continues to disadvantage athletes. The European Union's dual-career framework offers a broad blueprint in this regard, whereby the European Union members have adopted measures to support athletes' education and employment alongside sports. Highlights of this system focuses on flexible study schedules, distance learning options, academic tutoring, and career counselling as standard supports for student-athletes. United State's collegiate sports system is also another model that has proved to be a successful dual-career paradigm, whereby institutions like Stanford University provides an environment in which athletes graduate from college with not only Olympics medals but also degrees and skills that help them in their professional careers ahead. Basis these benchmark practices, the following framework can be proposed for India.

Key Features of the Proposed Integrated Education Policy and Initiatives

- 1. Flexible, Athlete-Specific Curriculum:** the most important element is the shift from the standard one-size-fits-all approach to a more customized academic curricula that provides a blend of sports-specific courses like *Sports Science*, *Nutrition*, *Sports Psychology*, *Sports Management*, etc; at both school and university level. Such courses can not only leverage the athletes' experiences, by teaching them practical skills in sports operations, sports marketing, coaching, event management, and finance but can also prepare the athletes for different roles in the sports eco-system after their playing days. It also means when they graduate, they have dual expertise i.e. domain knowledge in sports and a recognized qualification for employment.
- 2. Multiple Modes & Digital Infrastructure:** To accommodate training and competition schedules, the need for blended learning methods along with strategic partnerships with universities is required to provide quality distance learning courses that can be done through a mix of online lectures, interactive modules, and /or in-person workshops at camps or academies. Therefore, strategic partnerships with study centres at SAI centres and state sports academies would also be required to ensure athletes can be involved with the

courses regularly. In order to make this initiative possible and workable, government investment, corporate sponsorship (under CSR) and/ or a public-private model, would also be required to build the requisite digital infrastructure. As such, inviting collaboration between private institutions and government, backed by CSR funding, can effectively bring the classroom to the athlete, rather than forcing the athlete to always leave the field for the classroom. For example, academies run by entities like Padukone-Dravid Centre for Sports Excellence, or JSW's Inspire Institute, or even SAI or state sponsored academies, can possibly sign MoUs with universities in order to provide opportunities to trainees simultaneously earn recognized diplomas in sports education. Similarly, online courses can be launched by start ups that can be accredited by the education board or government department to ensure continuous and flexible learning options for the athletes. Lastly, if all such initiatives are supported through grants or tax benefits in terms of athlete-friendly policies, more private entities and corporate funds shall would come forward to support the cause.

- 3. Emphasis on Life Skills and Post-sport Careers:** Apart from the integrated policy and setting up blended education facilities, another element that is equally important is to place strong emphasis on life skills i.e. financial literacy, ethics, communication skills including media training, and knowledge about legal rights. The purpose of imparting such skill sets is to ensure that athletes are self-reliant, knowledgeable, and prepared for consequences, whether in sport or otherwise for life after sport. By organising regular workshops, certificate courses, etc, can have significant impact on Athletes' personal and professional lives that can take them long way in their careers.

Potential Objections and Counterarguments

Considering the Indian society, the economical background and the existing employment related issue, no doubt that all the stakeholders involved in the sports- ecosystem, will have different concerns or objections to adopt such an integrative policy for dual career options for athletes; some of them have been dealt with below:

Parents' Objection: Undoubtedly for an athlete choosing a sports specific curricula will be preferred option, however their parents will be concerned with diluted academic quality that ends up with a average education and sports career for their kids.

Counterargument

That with the present system, whereby the athletes are made to study in the same format and curricula with others kids who are focused on specific career options, an integrated curriculum is the only manner in which the balance can be achieved in training and relevant education. Plus, by ensuring the difference in delivery and focus, it should not be assumed that the content of education will be diluted. This approach not only ensure maximum chances of excelling in sports by not compromising with education, but also give a back up for a career doesn't pan out for the athletes, by teaching them specific sports related diplomas a shot at sports related jobs can also be ensured.

Coaches' / Team / Federations Objection: Too much time spent on academics, can lead to drop in training with lack of commitment on the end of the athlete and thus might not be favourable for their sports career.

Counterargument: That the purpose of the integrated timetable is to give priority to training with light academics during tournaments or peak season, and more focus in the academics during the off-season, to ensure so practice and training remains uncompromised. Moreover, sport-specific knowledge (physiology, strategy) to the athletes, will actually improves game IQ and keeps athletes in the program longer while ensuring that there is less attrition from the sports and more focus on training without worrying about their careers too much.

School/College Administrators' Objection: Special timetables for athletes may be difficult to adjust with academic calendar while diluting quality, and can also appear to be unfair to other students.

Counterargument: Tweaking with modes of delivery, while keeping the assessments identical can ensure that no extra burden is put on the calendar, or any unfair treatment is contended by any student. Ensuring such flexible approach will not raise overall institutional quality, but adoption of such techniques can be used to serve interest of students in other fields of arts or for students with special needs. Plus, by adopting such special integrated methods, the said schools and colleges can be a stand out in the country, and thus cater to the huge demands of the sports centric economy that continues to grow in the country.

Conclusion

India's current sporting ecosystem suffers from an uphill task of retaining its young talent from dropping out of competitive sport, due to major factors including academic pressure, inadequate support from government and society, economic insecurity, and lack of post-career options. Despite notable government initiatives like the Sports Authority of India (SAI), Khelo India, and provisions in the National Education Policy 2020, none of them have failed to effectively deal with the issue of attrition. With the unprecedented growth of sports market due to success of IPL and other leagues like ISL, PKL and other, clearly the work opportunities for non-athletes and demand for more professionals in the field of sports related jobs have increased manifold but the same has been unable to change the mindset of Indians to see career in the sports industry as one of sustenance and success.

The proposal for an integrated education policy and initiatives that are athlete-specific and focuses on dual-career education model not only seeks to address these systemic lacunas, but also restructure the pathway through which sports and academics can co-exist harmoniously and make sports a preferred career options in the country. A need for tailored curriculum at different stages of education that incorporates specific sports related subjects, but also includes subjects on life skills, finance, and communication; being delivered through blended modes and digital platforms is a must to maintain the balance and ensure overall development for the athletes. The idea is not to dilute academics or training but to adapt them intelligently

so that one complements the other, creating a holistic environment for growth.

There ought to be multiple objections and concerns by various stakeholders including parents, coaches, and administrators, regarding the effectiveness of the system and chances of failing both in sports and education while adopting this approach. But examples from the West, particularly Europe and the United States have proven that structured integration of sport and education not only reduces attrition but elevates overall sporting standards, with extended playing years, better performance better, and a smoother transition into life after sport. The same is thus possible in India and allow the nation to fulfil its dream of becoming a giant in sports one day.

However, lastly, it is extremely crucial to realise that a nation's commitment to sports is not reflected solely by the medals it wins, but how many young minds it empowers to pursue sporting dreams along with freedom and realistic hope. For India, it is time now to go beyond symbolic incentives and isolated schemes, and embrace a comprehensive structural transformation, one that supports athletes holistically across their academic, emotional, and professional journeys.

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