

Elite Athletes' Attitudes Towards Drop Out

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Aim of the Research

Athletic proficiency contributes to overall national elite sporting success. Athletic proficiency is the result of high levels of training and environmental factors. The number of 'talent years' plays a crucial role in the process of athletic development and athletic proficiency. Talent years relate to an elite athlete's involvement in elite sports. Thus, one talent year equals one year of an elite athlete's life invested into high performance sports. Thus, talent years and environmental factors such as financial support, governance, training facilities, or coach development (de Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek, & van Bottenburg, 2015) are crucial for the success of elite sports. The number of talent years is determined by 1) the decision of elite athletes not to pursue high performance sports, 2) the decision of elite athletes to drop out despite high levels of athletic proficiency, and 3) demographic change. From a policy perspective, it is crucial to utilize the available years of athletic proficiency best. Therefore this research aims to identify what influences athletes to think about dropping out and which determinants foster this attitude.

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

The model of sociological explanation (Esser, 1993) serves as theoretical underpinning of this research. The model's starting point is an individual's selection (i.e. thinking about to drop out or not to drop out). This is framed by the social situation (*logic of the situation*; Esser, 1999). The selection is influenced by social norms and an individual's values. This *logic of selection* includes six steps: alternatives, consequences, subjective assessment, assessment expectations, comparative evaluation of alternatives, and selection (Esser, 1999). Since several persons (i.e. athletes) can share the same social situation and create the same ranking of alternatives, a collective attitude can emerge (*logic of aggregation*; Esser, 1999).

Previous findings suggest that elite athletes drop out for reasons related to injuries (Maffulli, Longo, Gougoulias, Loppini, & Denaro, 2010) job, health, or relationships (Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007). Among adolescents, females and those whose sporting career was shorter were more likely to drop out compared to non-drop-outs (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015).

Research Design and Data Analysis

Data were collected from elite athletes using an online survey in 2013 ($n=2,612$), in 2014 ($n=2,700$), and 2015 ($n=2,676$). Thus, a repeated cross-sectional study has been conducted. The data were made available by the German Sport Aid Foundation and represents the total population for each year. Data were analysed using logit models. For the purpose of the analysis, the data of all three years were merged and the survey's year served as control variable.

Results and Discussion

Mean age in the sample ranged from 22 years (2014 and 2015) to 23 years (2013). There were slightly more male than female elite athletes (2013: 56.6%; 2014: 54.1%; 2015: 54.4%). The elite athletes invested approximately 32 (2014 & 2015) to 33 hours (2013) into high performance sports. Almost half of all elite athletes had considered at one point in their career

to drop out (2013: 45.5%; 2014: 47.8%; 2015: 48.7%). Reasons why an early drop-out had been considered were related to a professional job (2013: 20.3%; 2014: 19.5%; 2015: 18.7%), the lack of financial means (2013: 18.5%; 2014: 16.4%; 2015: 15.8%), or family (2013: 13.5%; 2014: 11.1%; 2015: 10.5). The results correspond to previous research (Stambulova et al., 2007). The variable ‘having thought about dropping out’ served as dependent variable in the regression analysis. The model significantly predicted the attitudes towards dropping out ($\chi^2=598.53$; $p \leq .001$). The model had a Pseudo R^2 of 10.6%. Several variables influenced this attitude positively such as the hours of training ($\beta=.006$), age ($\beta=.051$), being a student ($\beta=.220$), and fear of what comes after high performance sport ($\beta=.165$). A significant negative association was linked to dissatisfaction with leisure time ($\beta=-.081$), family ($\beta=-.032$), or being female ($\beta=.140$). If athletes felt valued by society ($\beta=-.185$) and felt that being an athlete was a vocation ($\beta=-.275$) they thought significantly less about dropping out. The negative effect for females has also been found in previous research (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015). Similar to other studies, the lack of time for social relationships (Stambulova et al., 2007) served in our study as constraint.

Conclusion and Implications

The results suggested that a positive attitude in society towards elite sports can foster talent years as athletes think less about dropping out. In contrast, a lack of finances and being a student influences to consider dropping out. Thus, policy makers should invest in promoting a positive image about elite athletes and indicate the importance of appreciating their performance. In addition, more investments are needed. These investments should improve the financial situation of athletes and facilitate better pathways for a dual career. An emphasis should be placed on pathways for a dual career which seem still not attractive enough to reduce drop-outs.

References

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