

Research Article

The Role of Coaches in Bridging the Education-Employment Gap for Athletes: A Case Study on Athlete Mentorship and Career Readiness in India

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Abstract

The transition from competitive sports to mainstream employment presents significant challenges for athletes in India, particularly those who discontinue formal education early. While elite athletes who achieve national and international recognition may secure financial stability through sponsorships, government support, or coaching roles, the vast majority struggle to find viable career paths once their playing years end. The absence of structured career guidance, coupled with a traditional emphasis on performance over holistic development, leaves many athletes without the necessary skills to navigate life beyond sports. This study examines the critical role of coaches in influencing athletes' educational and skill development decisions. Through interactions with 35 athletes who had ceased formal education after class 12th, we identified recurring themes of low motivation, lack of awareness about career options, and the absence of structured mentorship. Most athletes believed that sporting talent alone would secure their future, while others were unaware of the relevance of skill development programs such as English communication, MS Office proficiency, or vocational training. Recognizing the trust and influence that coaches wield; we implemented a targeted intervention involving six coaches. These coaches were educated on the importance of athlete employability, skill-building, and career preparedness beyond sports. They, in turn, engaged with their athletes, emphasizing the value of education and employable skill sets. The results were significant—14 out of the 35 athletes reconsidered their stance and agreed to pursue skill development opportunities. These findings highlight the untapped potential of coaches as career mentors and the pressing need for structured mentorship programs within India's sports ecosystem. If sports federations, associations, and policymakers formalize career guidance mechanisms within training programs, the long-term employability of athletes can be significantly improved. This study advocates for the integration of career mentorship into coaching certification programs, collaborations between sports institutions and educational bodies, and policy-level interventions to ensure that every athlete is equipped not just to compete but to thrive beyond their sporting career.

Keywords

Sports, Sportspersons, Careers, Education, Skill Development, Mentorship

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1. Introduction

In India, sports have traditionally been perceived as a high-stakes pursuit, where success is measured by podium finishes, national recognition, and financial rewards. However, this narrow outlook fails to account for the vast majority of athletes who dedicate years to training and competition but do not make it to the elite level. For these athletes, the transition from sports to mainstream employment is often fraught with uncertainty, leaving them vulnerable to financial instability, limited career options, and, in many cases, a sense of disillusionment. The prevailing notion that an athlete must either achieve sporting excellence or face an uncertain future has contributed to a widespread reluctance among young aspirants and their families to invest in sports as a viable career path. [1-4].

The systemic failure to prepare athletes for life beyond their playing years is a pressing issue in Indian sports. The assumption that sporting talent alone will guarantee financial security has led to a high dropout rate, with numerous athletes abandoning sports in favor of more conventional and financially stable career paths. Those who remain in the system often struggle to find employment once their competitive years are over, as they lack the necessary qualifications and skills to transition into alternative professions. [5-7]

This issue is further exacerbated by the limited career guidance available within the sports ecosystem. While athletes develop invaluable qualities such as discipline, teamwork, leadership, and resilience—traits highly valued in the professional world—there is no structured mechanism to help them translate these attributes into employable skills. Most sports academies and training centers focus solely on performance-driven objectives, neglecting the holistic development of athletes as individuals who will, at some point, need to explore life beyond the playing field. [8-10]

A critical, yet underutilized, resource in this regard is the role of coaches. Coaches are not only responsible for shaping an athlete's technical and physical abilities but also serve as mentors who deeply influence their mindset, aspirations, and career decisions. Unlike career counselors or external advisors, coaches share a bond of trust with their athletes, making them uniquely positioned to guide them in areas beyond sports. This study aims to explore how leveraging the influence of coaches can bridge the gap between sports training and career preparedness, ensuring that athletes are not left without options when their competitive years come to an end. [11-13]

This paper seeks to answer three fundamental questions:

1. What are the key barriers preventing athletes from continuing education and skill development?
2. How effective are coaches as mentors in encouraging education and employability skills?
3. What policy-level interventions can institutionalize career mentorship within Indian sports?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to contribute to the growing discourse on athlete welfare, offering action-

able insights for policymakers, sports federations, and educational institutions to create a more sustainable and career-secure sporting ecosystem.

2. Literature Review

Several studies highlight the athlete career transition dilemma, emphasizing that sports alone cannot guarantee long-term financial stability. The International Olympic Committee (IOC) Athlete Career Programme and initiatives by the NCAA (USA) and AFL (Australia) have recognized the need for parallel career pathways, integrating education with sports. [14, 15]

In India, however, sports career planning remains an unstructured domain. The lack of formal athlete transition programs results in high dropout rates due to financial insecurities, pressure from families, and a lack of role models who successfully balance sports and careers. [16, 17]

Research on coaches as mentors suggests that athletes often trust and follow guidance from their coaches more than external advisors (Côté & Gilbert, 2009). This underscores the untapped potential of coaches as key agents in promoting educational continuity among athletes. [18, 19]

3. Methodology

This study was conducted through direct interaction with athletes from humble family backgrounds (farming community, daily wage labourers or other unorganised sector) and coaches using qualitative interviews and structured discussions.

3.1. Participants

1. 35 athletes (aged 18-22) from various sports disciplines who had discontinued education beyond class 12th.
2. 6 coaches with experience in training athletes at the grassroots and competitive levels.

3.2. Research Design

1. Phase 1: Interaction with 35 athletes to understand their career perspectives, reasons for not pursuing further education, and their outlook on employment.
2. Phase 2: Educating and engaging 6 coaches about the importance of education, employability skills, and athlete career transition.
3. Phase 3: Coaches were encouraged to mentor their athletes and advise them on developing skills like MS Office, English communication, and office communication.
4. Phase 4: Follow-up discussions with athletes to measure any shift in mindset.

3.3. Data Collection & Analysis

1. Qualitative Insights: Personal narratives from athletes and coaches.
2. Quantitative Impact: Number of athletes convinced to reconsider education and skill-building.

4. Findings & Discussion

4.1. The Education Gap in Athletes

Our interactions with 35 athletes who had discontinued formal education beyond the 12th grade revealed a striking lack of career foresight and awareness regarding the role of education in their long-term professional stability. The most common responses when asked about their decision to forego further education included:

1. “I thought sports would be enough to secure my future.” – Many young athletes believe that excelling in sports alone will guarantee financial security, often overlooking the unpredictable nature of sporting careers and the limited number of opportunities at the professional level.
2. “No one told me education mattered if I wanted a career in sports.” – The absence of structured career counselling and a general lack of guidance from sports institutions, coaches, and federations leave many athletes unaware of the significance of education in securing alternative career paths within or outside sports.
3. “I didn’t see the relevance of learning MS Office or English communication for my future.” – Athletes often fail to recognize that skills such as digital literacy, communication, and financial awareness are essential for career transitions, even within the sports ecosystem (e.g., coaching, administration, sports management, or media roles).

This lack of awareness is indicative of a deeper, systemic flaw in India’s sports training ecosystem, where the emphasis remains predominantly on performance rather than holistic career development. Unlike many global sporting nations that integrate education with sports training (e.g., NCAA systems in the U.S. or athlete scholarship programs in Europe), India’s sports development framework largely neglects long-term career planning for athletes. The consequences of this gap are severe, leading to high dropout rates and financial instability among former athletes.

4.2. Coaches as Key Influencers

Recognizing the critical role of mentorship in shaping athletes’ decisions, we engaged six coaches in discussions about the importance of education and skill-building. The impact was immediate and profound—when these coaches, in turn, mentored their athletes, 14 out of the 35 reconsidered their stance on education and agreed to pursue skill development.

This transformation underscores the immense influence that coaches wield in the lives of athletes:

1. Athletes value their coaches’ advice more than external career counsellors. – Unlike formal career counsellors, who may lack an understanding of sports culture, coaches have built long-term trust and rapport with athletes. This trust makes them ideal mentors for guiding athletes beyond their sporting careers.
2. Coaches serve as the crucial link between sports training and career planning. – By integrating educational and skill-based guidance into their training methodology, coaches can significantly impact an athlete’s future trajectory.
3. Formalizing mentorship programs within sports institutions could create large-scale impact. – If every coach were systematically trained to provide career guidance, thousands of athletes could make better-informed career decisions, ensuring long-term employability and financial stability.

These findings highlight the urgent need for structured interventions that position coaches not only as trainers but also as career advisors.

4.3. Policy Implications & Recommendations

To address these challenges and build a sustainable support system for athletes, we propose the following policy interventions:

1. Mandatory Career Counselling in Sports Academies
 - a) All state and national sports training programs should integrate structured career mentorship sessions.
 - b) Coaches should receive specialized training to guide athletes beyond their playing careers, equipping them with knowledge of academic opportunities, vocational skills, and alternative career paths.
2. Educational Collaborations Between Federations & Institutions
 - a) Sports federations should establish formal partnerships with universities and vocational training centres to offer flexible education pathways tailored for athletes.
 - b) Online courses focused on sports-related career domains (e.g., sports management, sports analytics, fitness training) should be developed to ensure continued learning while training or competing.
 - c) Governments and private entities should create scholarship programs that incentivize athletes to continue education alongside their sports careers.
3. Incentivizing Education for Athletes
 - a) Financial Support: Government policies should introduce financial incentives, such as scholarships, fee waivers, or stipends, for athletes pursuing higher education.
 - b) Academic Flexibility: Universities should implement policies that allow athletes to balance their sporting commitments with academic responsibilities, such as

online learning modules and flexible examination schedules.

4. Skill Development Beyond Sports

- a) Federations, in collaboration with educational institutions and corporate entities, should launch targeted skill-development programs focusing on:
- b) Digital Literacy: Training in MS Office, data analytics, and digital marketing.
- c) Communication Skills: English language proficiency and office communication.
- d) Financial Literacy: Basic financial management, investment knowledge, and entrepreneurship.
- e) Workshops should be designed to highlight alternative career options in sports administration, coaching, broadcasting, and entrepreneurship.

5. Coach-Led Athlete Mentorship Programs

- a) Career Guidance Training for Coaches: Coaches should undergo formal training in athlete career development as part of their certification process.
- b) Structured Mentorship Initiative: A nationwide mentorship initiative should be introduced at the state and national levels, wherein experienced athletes and coaches guide younger athletes in making informed educational and career choices.
- c) Monitoring and Evaluation: Sports federations should establish a monitoring system to track the effectiveness of these mentorship programs, with periodic assessments and feedback mechanisms.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore a glaring shortcoming in India's sports development framework—the lack of structured career planning for athletes beyond their playing years. While immense resources are allocated to training athletes for competitive success, very little is done to equip them with the skills necessary to navigate life after sports. This systemic neglect contributes to a high dropout rate, financial instability, and a reluctance among young aspirants to pursue sports professionally due to fears of an uncertain future.

A key insight from our research is the immense influence that coaches wield over their athletes. Unlike career counsellors or external advisors, coaches have built deep trust and credibility with their players over years of training. The intervention's success—wherein 14 out of 35 athletes reconsidered their stance on education after their coaches engaged with them—demonstrates that the solution is not complex; it has simply been overlooked. This presents a powerful and scalable opportunity: by formally integrating career mentorship into coaching structures, we can fundamentally reshape the future of Indian athletes.

To achieve this, federations, sports associations, and policymakers must step up and institutionalize structured career guidance within sports academies. Sports federations should

not merely focus on talent scouting and competitive training but should also collaborate with educational institutions and vocational training centres to offer skill-building programs tailored for athletes. Initiatives such as flexible online learning pathways, skill-development workshops, and financial incentives for continuing education must be prioritized. Furthermore, making career mentorship a formal requirement in coach certification programs will ensure that every coach is equipped to guide their athletes not only in their sport but also in their long-term professional journey.

Ultimately, the purpose of sports training should not be confined to producing champions on the field—it should be about shaping well-rounded, empowered individuals. The measure of a nation's sporting success should not just be its medal count, but also how well it supports its athletes beyond their peak years. Athletes should not just win matches—they should win in life. Ensuring that every sportsperson is equipped with the skills, education, and guidance necessary for a secure future is not just a necessity; it is a moral obligation. Only then can India truly build a thriving and sustainable sporting ecosystem.

Author Contributions

Kanishka Pandey is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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