

# The Reasons for National Athletes with Undergraduate Education to Leave Sports

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** There are studies in the literature scrutinising the reasons for dropping out of sports in terms of physiological, psychosocial, and surrounding factors. In addition to these, it is a fact that there are athletes who end their sports life immediately after beginning their undergraduate education. At this point, the reasons for students to leave sports during their undergraduate education remains a matter to be discovered.

**Aim:** To this end, this study aims to reveal the factors that cause these persons to leave sports.

**Methods:** This research was conducted through the qualitative research method, utilising the phenomenology design. The participants of the study were eleven former national athletes who left sports after beginning their undergraduate education. The participants were selected by criterion sampling method from purposive sampling methods. The data were obtained through face-to-face interviews composed of semi-structured questions. The data acquired were analyzed by the content analysis method.

**Results:** Five main themes were composed in the study: training, social life, health, psychology, and school. It was observed that the participants failed to balance their school and sports life due to heavy and intense training, socialisation needs, unexpected injuries, nutritional problems, psychological fear of failure, and inability to achieve the success they desire.

**Conclusion:** The study results revealed that the participants decided to leave sports not for a single reason, but as a result of a process during which multiple reasons accumulated. In this context, measures can be taken to facilitate their academic and sports life in order to prevent national athletes from leaving sports. These measures may include enabling them to continue to school where they do sports, providing them with distance education and exam opportunities, and enabling them to better integrate into campus life. In order to prevent early specialisation, long-term athlete development models may also be implemented.

**Keywords:** National athlete, undergraduate students, dropping out of sports

## INTRODUCTION

Athletes pursue their careers in two ways, amateur and professional (top-level athlete). While amateur athletes see sports as a leisure activity for socializing and staying healthy, professional athletes see sports as a job aimed at a goal and perform them in a systematic and disciplined manner<sup>1</sup>. In the literature, studies have devised motivation theories such as the expectation-value model<sup>2</sup>, the theory of self-determination<sup>3</sup>, and the theory of social change<sup>4</sup> to reveal the reasons for leaving sports. There are also studies in the literature pointing out the factors of expectation, motivation and gender among the reasons for leaving sports<sup>2</sup>. In some studies that particularly examine the dropout behaviour at a young age, it is seen that many athletes leave sports in the early stages of their career and before they reach their best performance. "Conflict of interests, not having fun, low perception of ability or the excessive demands of competition" appears to play a primary role in dropping out of sports<sup>5</sup>. When examined, it is seen that most of the studies in the literature on dropping out of sports focus on children and adolescents and that the factors in leaving sports are listed as "lack of enjoyment, perceptions of competence, social pressures, competing priorities and physical factors"<sup>6</sup>.

Dropout behaviour stems from two types of reasons. One of them is the sport-specific dropout, and the other is domain-general dropout<sup>7</sup>. Domain-general dropout of sports involves the complete cessation of participation in sport. On the other hand, sport-specific dropout of sports refers to withdrawing from a sport to perform another,

pursuing the sports activities. Sport-specific dropout is seen as normal when the area of interest or sports seasons change<sup>8</sup>. Sport-specific withdrawal may occur as the beginning of investing and specializing in a single sport for early-age athletes<sup>9</sup>. When the reasons for domain-general dropout and how these mechanisms interact with each other are considered, it can be seen that many underlying mechanisms are precursors. Researchers have used multilevel frameworks such as social agents and social-cognitive models to investigate how the reported reasons for withdrawing from sports interact with each other<sup>10,11</sup>. They have used a sports participation model that included social factors such as perceived competence, goal orientation, and interactions with parents, peers, and coaches. In these studies, it was determined that the aforementioned social factors had an effect on domain-general dropout of sports. The studies in the literature discuss the reasons for withdrawing from sports within the framework of physiological, psycho-social and environmental factors. On the other hand, understanding the causes of this phenomenon is vital for sports federations that need to sustain themselves and grow. The fact that the number of athletes who leave sports is mounting despite the increasing number of athletes entails researchers to delve immediately into the reasons for high-level athletes to drop out of sports.

In addition to these discussions in the literature, it is a fact that there are athletes who end their sports life immediately after enrolling in university education. Here, the reasons for national athletes who begin their university education to drop out of sports appears as a matter of

curiosity as this subject has not been directly investigated before. With the aim of filling this gap, this study is a try to reveal the reasons for national athletes who enroll in undergraduate education to drop out of sports.

**MATERIAL & METHODS**

This research was conducted through the qualitative research method, utilizing the phenomenology design. Phenomenology research is utilized to reveal what actually people's experiences regarding an event or a subject mean<sup>12</sup> or to answer questions about the source and structure of a phenomenon for people involved in the study<sup>13</sup>.

**Participants:** The participants of the study were eleven national athletes who dropped out of sports due to their undergraduate education. Participants are between the ages of 20-23 and have at least four years of experience as national athletes. Of the participants, five are female, and six are male. The sports performed by the participants are handball (one woman, one man), volleyball (one woman, one man), taekwondo (one woman, one man), karate (one woman, one man), tennis (one woman, one man), swimming (one man). These participants were currently continuing their undergraduate education in three different universities. Sakarya University of Applied Sciences Ethics Committee approval was obtained for the research in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration.

**Data Collection:** Participants of the study were selected by criterion sampling method, one of the purposive sampling methods. "In criterion sampling, observation units may consist of people, events, objects or situations with certain qualities. The units that meet the criteria of the sampling are included in the sample"<sup>14</sup>. Eleven former national athletes who enrolled in undergraduate education participated in this research voluntarily.

The data for the study were obtained through face-to-face interviews by the researchers through semi-structured questions. The survey prepared for the participants includes questions about general topics, how they began sports and became national athletes, their thoughts about training, the public view towards athletes and the reasons for leaving sports. The interviews were recorded by mobile phone upon the consent of the participants.

**Analysis of the Data:** The data of the research were analyzed by the content analysis method. Content analysis is a technique of conceptualising the acquired data and gathering the created concepts under a common theme in a logical order<sup>15</sup>. The audio files recorded during the interviews were transformed into texts in the computer environment. When analyzing the research data, the codes were extracted first, and then a code pool was created. Researcher diversity is essential for the reliability of the study in qualitative research<sup>16</sup>. In order to ensure the reliability of the study, it is a standard method that different researchers analyze the same data and then compare the results<sup>16</sup>. In this context, the data analysis, including the creation of themes, was made by three different researchers and a consensus was reached on the findings. For the credibility of the study, research methods such as long-term contact, continuous observation, diversification, tactics supporting participant's honesty, meetings in short intervals, and peer review methods are utilized in the

literature<sup>12</sup>. This study employed diversification, the tactics supporting participant's honesty and peer evaluation methods to ensure the reliability and credibility of the survey.

For the integrity of the study, the participants were informed that their identities would remain confidential and that the data received would only be used for scientific purposes. It was ensured that the data formed a meaningful whole, and the consistency of the findings among themselves was guaranteed. All data collection tools used during the research, the raw data obtained, the coding made during the analysis phase are being kept by the researchers to be reviewed when necessary in order for the research to be confirmed.

**RESULTS**

The findings of the study are presented by grouping them into main themes and sub-themes. Accordingly, the study results are shared in Table 1 alongside the main themes, sub-themes and participant code frequencies. Then, each of the main themes is explained with their sub-themes.

**Table 1.** Main Themes, Main-Themes, and Participant Code Frequencies

Main Theme	Sub-Theme	Participants
Training	Intensity of training	P1,P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P11
	Heaviness of training	P2,P5,P7,P8,P9,P11
	Lack of training	P8,P9,P10,
	Inability to attend a match due to lack of training	P3,P4,P8,P9,P10,P11
Social Life	Inability to have leisure time	P2,P3,P7,P9,P10,P11
	Need for socialising	P1,P2,P6,P8,P11
Health	Sports injury	P1,P2,P4,P5,P6,P10
	Weight problem	P1,P4,P7,P8
	Undernourishment	P5,P6,P7,P8,P9
Psychology	Fear of failure	P1,P2,P6,P8,P11
	Inability to acquire sportive success	P1,P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P11
School	Absenteeism	P1,P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P7,P8,P11
	Exam anxiety	P2,P3,P4,P5,P8,P9,P10
	Overlapping of the match and exam dates	P1,P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P7,P8,P9,P11

Note. P = Participants.

The main themes and sub-themes acquired through the study findings are shared below alongside the samples of the participants' statements.

**The Main Theme of Training:** When we look at the sub-themes related to the main theme of training, the statements of the participants in the "intensity of training" sub-theme are as follows:

"The training sessions were very intense. Six days a week... (P1)", "I was training every day... (P2)".

In the remarks of the participants, it is seen that the exercises were very intense as a result of which the participants decided to drop out of sports.

Under the second sub-theme of "heaviness of training", the participants' statements were as follows:

"Training was so tiring that I would not be able to take a step after training...(P7)", "There have been many times when I could not bear the heaviness of training...(P11)"

From the expressions of the participants, we can say that the heaviness of training resulted in fatigue and weariness, and this is among the factors that led them to

leave sports.

Another sub-theme is "lack of training". Among the reasons for leaving sports, participants stated that they lacked training due to spending time for school and could not overcome this difficulty. Participant P8 said,

"You cannot attend training when you go to school, then your performance cannot reach the level you wish for due to lack of training."

In addition, participant P10 stated,

"Missing training affected my performance a lot..."

These expressions of the participants provided the examples for the "lack of training" sub-theme.

The last sub-theme formed in the main theme of the training was participants' "inability to attend matches due to lack of training". Participant P8 said,

"I went to some sports clubs, but could not agree with them. I could not comply with my teammates because I was studying at the university. I could not train. So, I could not attend the matches, and I left the national team because I could not attend the matches." On the other hand, P9 said, "You cannot participate in the matches when you cannot participate in training, naturally..."

The participants' statements reveal that since they could not conduct enough training and participate in matches, their performance worsened.

**The Main Theme of Social Life:** Under the second main theme named "social life" in the study findings, two sub-themes were formed. These are "inability to have leisure time" and "need for socialising". The majority of the participants stated that the inability to socialise and have leisure time for themselves was effective in their decision to withdraw from sports. While participant P4 said, "After a while, I have come to the point of boredom. I was not able to spare time for myself.;"

participant P11 expressed, "I couldn't spare much time for socialising, so I chose to leave sports,"

providing examples for the two sub-themes mentioned.

#### **The Main Theme of Health:**

Another main theme drawn out of participant expressions is the health theme. Under this main theme, three sub-themes, namely sports injury, weight problems and undernourishment appeared. Participant statements in this theme are as follows:

"I left sports because of the injury I experienced during the year I got into university. (P5)", "I lost a lot of weight, we lost our health to participate in the matches taking place constantly. We were bored, and we lost a lot of weight, we suffered a lot in training, we gave up our own works, we left our school when necessary. (P7)", "This situation was very difficult for me in terms of nutrition. (P4)"

Consequently, it is seen in the expressions of the participants that sports injury, weight problems and undernourishment factors relating to health are among the reasons for dropping out of sports.

#### **The Main Theme of Psychology:**

The sub-themes of "fear of failure" and "inability to acquire sportive success" were formed under the main theme of psychology. Participants stated their experiences about failing in life and sports as follows:

"I was stuck in a dilemma for a long time: 'Should I go

to the lessons or the matches? Should I attend the camps or the lessons?' The matches were going on during the exam week. When I went to the matches, I missed the exams that I should not have missed, and I was always faltering between the two, so I decided to leave sports. (P7)", "I was interested in sports. But after I could not achieve the success I wanted, I felt resentful of sports and left it (P9)."

Participants stated that they wanted to succeed in other areas of life and dropped out of sports when they failed in sports.

#### **The Main Theme of the School:**

The sub-themes related to the main theme of school, which is the last main theme of the study, appeared as absenteeism, exam anxiety, and overlapping of the match and exam dates. Statements of the participants regarding these sub-themes are as follows:

"Generally, I had trouble due to absenteeism. Since I could not attend the classes, I was failing the lessons. For that, I was having trouble following my responsibilities.", (P1)"I left (sports) because I thought I should prepare more for the exams at the university. (P2)", "Match dates were overlapping with the exam weeks. When I went to the matches, I was missing the exams, and I had no chance of missing my exams. I was constantly caught between the two, so I decided to leave sports. (P6)"

From the expressions of the participants, it is seen that the time management problems they had about school played a significant role in their decision to leave sports.

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings obtained from the participants in this study have shown that the national athletes enrolled in undergraduate education drop out of sports due to reasons related to training, social life, health, psychology and school. Regarding the reasons that led them to leave sports, the participants stated that they felt exhausted in due course as the training was fast-paced, intense and heavy. It is detected that intense workouts have ended up in psychological distress leading the participants to leave sports.

The literature has pointed out the psychological distress due to intense training in dropping out of sports<sup>17,19</sup> at an early age. Another finding obtained from the answers of the participants about the training theme is the lack of training. The participants mentioned that they were not able to compensate for the lack of training that occurred due to their school life. This situation, according to them, consequently resulted in a decrease in their sports performance. In a study on why athletes leave sports in secondary education, Pehlivan<sup>20</sup> points out that athletes drop out of sports due to failure, decreased interest and desire, and absenteeism in classes. Stating that another consequence of the lack of training was their inability to participate in the matches, the participants said that they did not participate in the matches as they could not improve their performance sufficiently due to the lack of training, and that this paved the way for them to leave sports. Especially since athletes are expected to specialise in their sports in their early ages in Turkey, it can be said that trainers are obliged, albeit partially, to put pressure on athletes. This necessity may result in conflict between

trainers and the athletes with low performance leading the latter to leave sports after a while<sup>21</sup>. This tendency towards early specialisation in sports may be the result of increasing professionalisation in youth sports. However, it seems that the perceived benefits of being an elite athlete and the professionalisation of youth sports outweigh the negative consequences that early specialisation in sports may bring<sup>22</sup>. Adverse consequences resulting from the professionalisation of sports include injuries due to intense exercises, loss of appetite, increased psychological distress, and fatigue risk<sup>23</sup>. It can be argued that these adverse outcomes lead to dropping out of sports.

This study's findings, supporting other studies in the literature, reached the need for socialising among other reasons for athletes to drop out of sports in their early ages<sup>19,24</sup>. It is detected that the needs of the participants for socialising outweigh their interest in sports. It is also obvious that the need for socialising is not the only reason for their leaving sports. There are other factors that motivate individuals in taking this decision. It can be argued that the participants' inability to spare enough time for themselves causes boredom over time and pushes them to leave sports. In this context, studies dealing with the reasons for leaving sports in the literature utilise motivation theories that are used to explain school dropouts, such as the expectation value model<sup>2</sup>, self-determination theory<sup>3</sup>, and social change theory<sup>4</sup>. It is also observed that there is a correlation between leaving sports and ageing<sup>25</sup>.

The sports injury factor is another common finding of the studies in the literature. Many studies on different demographic characteristics and sports show that sport-related injury significantly affects sports dropout behaviour. Six participants of the study stated that they had to drop out of sports due to sport-related injury. Therefore, it can be assumed that their sport dropout was against their wish, an inevitable end due to the injury they suffered. It is argued in the literature that such undesirable situations occur in later periods of sporting<sup>26</sup>. Alfermann et al.<sup>27</sup> argue that in addition to the voluntary dropouts from sports, athletes may also have to leave the sports compulsorily due to ageing, injury, losing popularity and other special reasons. Other findings regarding health issues acquired from participants relate to weight loss and undernourishment. It can be said that losing too much weight and undernourishment results in injuries and poor performance, leading the participants to drop out of sports. Sime<sup>28</sup>, on the other hand, argues that sports dropout because of sports injury can either occur unexpectedly and involuntarily ending the careers of the athletes instantly, or in a gradual fashion with the accumulation of minor injuries weakening their bodies.

In the research findings, psychological factors appeared as fear of failure and inability to achieve sportive success. Taylor and Ogilvie<sup>29</sup> state that factors such as being kept out of the team, ageing and sports injury are the factors that lead individuals to drop out of sports. Bayrak and Tunçkol<sup>30</sup>, on the other hand, argue in their studies that when athletes reach a certain period of their career, they become tempted to leave sports due to social, psychological, occupational and economic reasons. In another study, Uslu<sup>31</sup> states that repeated failures cause anxiety and diminish athletes' motivation, weakening the belief that they will be successful. The decrease in the

expectation of success brings along with it dropping out of sports activities. Sports satisfaction is an integral part of participating in and enjoying sports. Athletes look for other sources of success and pleasure in case of dissatisfaction<sup>32</sup>. Athletes who cannot find these resources may tend to leave sports as a result of dissatisfaction. In this context, satisfaction is crucial for athletes as for every individual working in different business branches.

It is seen that the research participants also experience the dilemma between school and sports. Problems such as absenteeism, exam anxiety, overlapping of the match and exam dates that occur with the beginning of the university education are other factors that prepare the ground for the participants to leave sports. In addition to the lousy trend in the sports life of the participants, it can be concluded that their inability to balance their school life and sports life cause them to leave sports. Pehlivan<sup>20</sup> argued that the reasons for leaving sports are illness and injury, decrease in desire and interest, absenteeism and failure in classes, preparation for exams and lack of financial gain. Kayabaşı<sup>33</sup>, as a result of his study on individuals aged between 10 to 19 (adolescent period) in the Kahramanmaraş city, determined that school life, academic success, family, relations with the coach, and sports life factors play a crucial role in sports dropouts.

Considering the fact that the domain-general sports dropout reasons interact with each other, it can be seen that there are numerous underlying reasons exist for dropouts. Studies that delved into how the reasons for sports dropout interact with each other have utilised multilayered frameworks such as the social-cognitive model<sup>10,11</sup>. In general, they determined that the aforementioned social factors play a role in leaving sports.

## CONCLUSION

It is seen that the intensity and heaviness of training, need for socialisation, health problems, failures, and the inability to balance their school life with sports life play a role for the national athletes studying at university to drop out of sports. Moreover, it can be said that they did not decide to leave sports for a single reason instantly, but as a result of an accumulation of several reasons over a certain period of time. At this point, measures to harmonise and balance the national athletes' university life and sports life may prevent their dropping out of sports. For example, measures can be taken such as enabling them to attend school around the places where they do sports, increased distance education and exam opportunities, and allowing them to integrate campus life better. Moreover, applying long-term athlete development models to prevent specialisation at an early age may also be recommended.

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