

India-Centric Athlete Career Transition Framework: Socio-Cultural Dimensions and Institutional Imperatives*SAURABH KUMAR^{1*}, Prof. SAMIRAN CHAKRABORTY²*^{1*} Research Scholar, Department of Physical Education & Sports Sciences, University of Delhi, INDIA² Professor, Department of Physical Education & Sports Sciences, University of Delhi, INDIA**Corresponding author:** Saurabh Kumar, Saurabhboxer6368@gmail.com.**Abstract**

Athlete retirement in India presents a complex transition marked by psychological dislocation, socio-cultural pressures, and institutional neglect. Unlike structured athlete career transition systems in countries like Australia or the UK, India lacks a unified framework that addresses the socio-political, financial, and identity-based challenges athletes face after retirement. Existing global models often fail to translate effectively within India's unique context of caste hierarchies, gender norms, and collectivist family structures. This paper responds to a critical gap in the Indian sports ecosystem by proposing an India-centric, culturally grounded athlete career transition framework. Drawing on thematic synthesis of international best practices and integrating primary insights on Indian institutional, familial, and socio-cultural dynamics, the study identifies four dimensions of reform: individual-level capacitation, relational and family empowerment, institutional governance, and socio-cultural reconstruction. Particular attention is given to the compounded marginalization of Dalit women athletes, the fiscal dominance of cricket, and the absence of caste- and gender-sensitive retirement support.

The framework emphasizes early identity development, culturally attuned mental health education, dual-career planning, and the need for intersectional policy mandates. It also advocates for structural interventions such as athlete ombudsman offices, community-based peer mentoring, and national re-skilling fellowships. By foregrounding socio-cultural entanglements and proposing systemic responses, this paper positions athlete transition not as a private challenge but a public and institutional responsibility.

Key words: Athlete Career Transition; Post-Retirement Reintegration; Sports Governance in India; Institutional Reform in Sports.**Introduction**

The Post-Career Precipice: In high-performance sports, the narrative of excellence often ends abruptly, leaving a void not only in public recognition but also in personal identity construction. Indian sports: Unfortunately, the vacuum that is left behind is hardly ever fulfilled by a planned systemic transition, which results in confusion, mental stress, and a lack of social empathy among the affected athletes. These socio-cultural barriers are unique for Indian athletes when the structured transition programmes are available in countries like Australia, Canada, the UK, where career development, psychological services and financial literacy are incorporated into systems (Lavallee, 2005; Park et al., 2013). Sportsmen in India can many a times not make a successful transition to their life after retirement, "This process of helping sportsmen is not in place like Australia, Canada, and England. This lack leads to a whole series of problems: older people are stressed, isolated and cut off from society, and identity crises then ensue. It has been found that as many as one in five athletes experience a crisis of transition following retirement wherein high self-esteem and low self-esteem issues are juxtaposed (Cosh et al., 2020).

Internationally, athletes in countries with formalised transition programs have opportunities to develop dual careers by combining sports with education and vocational preparation. These wraparound services help alleviate the "void" many athletes experience after their athletic careers are over through career development, mental health, and financial education. For example, in Norway, retired athletes moving into coaching are guided by career transition models which highlight the requirement for multiple domain specific knowledge, demonstrating the need for education and training support systems (Chroni et al., 2019).

On the other hand, Indian athletes are not blessed with such a ground-breaking framework leading to not being prepared for life post sports. They may find themselves excluded in terms of economic development or other social and professional areas because of this deficiency (Robnik et al., 2022). In addition, the cultural context is also highly influential in the suffering experienced by the athletes in transition. The lack of after-care and societal focus on sports achievements may contribute to sedentization and identity crises after career end (Cosh et al., 2020).

Research has indicated that stepwise programming can be helpful for athletes and support them to understand retirement as an ongoing process, form a more encompassing sense of self, take control of their own transition process, and build confidence for future life directions (Voorheis et al., 2023). In addition, lessons learned from best practices of dual-career support indicate that financial and educational support during active sports careers can greatly improve the quality of post-sports career transitions (Robnik et al., 2022). The abyss felt by Indian sportspeople after retirement highlights the urgent necessity for effective transition programmes that can provide career development, psychological support, and financial counselling, in the manner of more successful precedents from other regions. Introduction of such systems can help in addressing the psychological and social problems faced by the retired Indian athletes and they can facilitate the smooth transition of the sportsperson into life-after-sports. These consist of institutional indifference (the hegemony of cricket over national sports funding), entrenched caste hierarchies, and gendered familial norms that require post-retirement roles. Moreover, as Brown et al. (2018), the meaning-making process in transition is influenced not only by structural support but also perceptions of loss of identity, vulnerability, and disconnection among athletes. Athletes without affirming support systems are more prone to maladaptive coping, identity foreclosure, and psychological withdrawal (Roberts 2011; Wylleman and Lavallee 2004). The lack of holistic and culturally responsive transition mechanisms in India exacerbates these psychosocial risks, particularly for athletes outside of cricket and from marginalized backgrounds. This study critically interrogates these intersecting variables and proposes an indigenous, multi-level framework that responds to India's socio-political context and seeks to enable dignified, supported career terminations for elite athletes.

Table 1. Key Structural Differences Between Global and Indian Athlete Transition Frameworks.

Dimension/Imperative	Key Features	India-Specific Insights
Socio-Cultural Context	Family expectations, societal attitudes, and cultural values shape career decisions	Emphasis on sporting success as a path to social mobility, but limited awareness of post-sport careers (Pandey, 2025).
Educational Pathways	Access to and continuation of formal education during sports careers	Many Indian athletes discontinue education early, limiting post-sport options (Pandey, 2025).
Role of Coaches and Mentors	Coaches as trusted influencers in career and skill development	Coaches can bridge the education-employment gap by promoting skill-building and career readiness (Pandey, 2025).
Institutional Support Structures	Availability of career guidance, mentorship, and transition programs	Lack of structured mentorship and career counselling in Indian sports institutions (Pandey, 2025).
Skill Development Initiatives	Training in employable skills (e.g., communication, technology, vocational skills)	Low awareness and uptake among athletes; targeted interventions show promise (Pandey, 2025).
Policy and Governance	Integration of career transition support in sports policy and federations	Need for formalized career guidance and collaboration with educational bodies (Pandey, 2025).
Psychological Adaptation	Coping with identity loss, building self-efficacy, and reconstructing meaning	Support for psychological adjustment is limited; existential challenges are often overlooked (Pandey, 2025; Zhang et al., 2024).
Social Networks and Belonging	Leveraging peer, family, and community networks during transition	Social repositioning and network support are critical but underutilized in India (Pandey, 2025).

*A comparative overview of institutional, psychological, and policy features in athlete transition systems across select countries.***Socio-Cultural Entanglements in Transition Trajectories**

Caste-Based Marginalization: India's caste architecture continues to stratify access to athletic infrastructure, and this stratification manifests not only through tangible exclusion but also through disparities in the perception and reception of support for athletes with disabilities. For marginalized caste athletes, the support they perceive as available is often filtered through the lens of historical exclusion, whereas the support received—when it exists—may be shaped by tokenism or bureaucratic performativity. Drawing on social cognitive frameworks, this disparity impacts not just their transition outcomes but also their willingness to seek or accept assistance, reinforcing cycles of invisibility and disengagement. and post-retirement pathways for the same. Athletes from Scheduled Castes and Tribes encounter restricted access to elite mentorship, sponsorship pipelines, and administrative influence both during and beyond their active careers (Borooah, 2023).

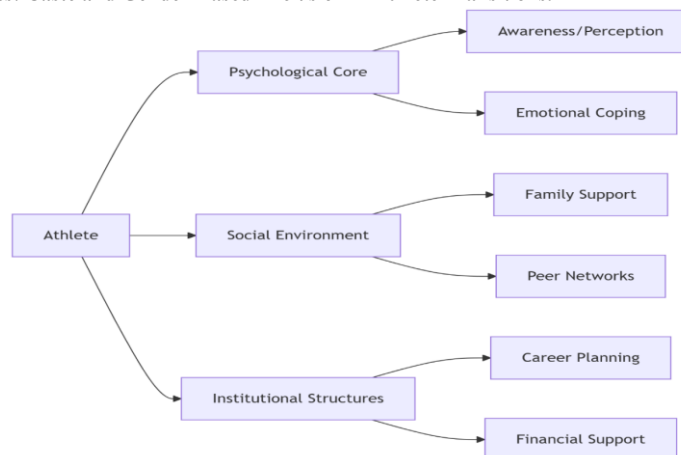
Cricket-Favouring Fiscal Bias: Public spending on Indian sports is overwhelmingly monopolized by cricket, accounting for 78% of national sports funding. This fiscal monoculture not only marginalizes other disciplines during competitive phases but also cripples athletes' long-term career continuity. The absence of structured retirement schemes, institutional mentorship, or parallel employment pipelines means that athletes from disciplines such as wrestling, athletics, and boxing face significant reintegration challenges. As a result, those who come from a non-cricket background find themselves squeezed away in media exposure and endorsement cycles and involvement in policy making and hence post-retirement mobility getting stunted. This process of systemic negligence perpetuates a double exclusion from elite resource distribution in their playing days and now also from the legacy-support structures in their retirement (Roberts et al., 2015).

Gender Normativity and Career Curtailment: Women athletes face early exits hastened by patriarchy imperatives, including early marriage, mandatory dowry, and domestic care-giving responsibilities that compromise professional life-span and after-life security (Miller et al., 2015). These are gendered mandates that work through formal and informal family and sport institutions where the woman athlete is consistently eclipsed as wife, mother or daughter-in-law. Investment in sports is all well and good, as long as not doing so is valued more than doing so. And they are coaching, governing or mentoring at a clip that confirms this is part of an ecosystem that broadly undervalues women and their athletic contributions." This incision, also limits their longevity in the career, as well as their status as role models, to the next crop of female athletes. Systemic erasure which contributes to deepening gender imbalances throughout the sporting lifecycle from talent to legacy.

Familial Dependence and Financial Illiteracy: In a joint family economy, old athletes are usually financial keystones. The need to maintain his extended family's economic status frequently extends into the post active competing phase, and this imposes a special burden on the man during retirement. And it does not help that there are few financial education and literacy programs in place for athletes while their playing careers are going on. According to research, athletes, particularly non-urban or marginalized ones are often seen to have no access to basic investment, pension, and income diversification, thus rendering the transition particularly dangerous for them (Powell et al., 2024). In addition, the symbolic association of the athlete as a 'provider' in family systems postpones psychological adaptation to retirement and may not facilitate early financial planning. Filbay et al. (2017) that athletes who fail to engage in proactive financial planning during their playing careers are more vulnerable to post-career psychological and financial issues. Similarly, Brown et al. (2018) elucidate how lack of formalized financial counselling can amplify identity loss and undermine reintegration possibilities in retirement transitions.

Intersectionality: Gender and Caste as a Double Burden: The inter-factorisation of caste and sex is not just additive, but joyously oppressive. Dalit women athletes are the least visible section in Indian sports, and enter a configuration of structural hurdles that start from the availability for a place for training and continue after retirement. Their scarce representation for national teams, coaching and across federated decision-making bodies highlights wider patterns of social exclusion. Evidence indicates that these athletes encounter disproportionate obstacles to sponsorship, media visibility and post-retirement job prospects due to the double bind of caste stigma and gendered subordination (Poucher et al., 2023). Moreover, as argued by Kukreja (2017), Dalit women remain structurally invisible in national development policies, a trend reflected in sports policy. This invisibility manifests in re- skilling programs in Australia, which often fail to recognize this double-layered marginalisation. Unless explicitly intersectional interventions are made in the process, Dalit women athletes will continue to be excluded from cultural and economic benefits of post-sport life.

Figure 1. Intersectional Disadvantages: Caste and Gender-Based Exclusion in Athlete Transitions.



A conceptual depiction of the interlocking marginalization faced by Dalit women athletes, articulating structural exclusions in terms of access, representation, and reintegration in the post-retirement phase.

Reforming Sports Administration for Ball Game between Governed and Governments in India

Fragmented Transition Architecture: There are isolated initiatives but no clear policy direction in India with regard to athlete-career transition. Job quotas and provisions for post-retirement pensions are among those available on paper, although they are not adequately enforced and their application is dogged by bureaucratic red tape as well as a lack of oversight. According to our review of empirical evidence, Representative Olympians in India receive pension support of < 20% whilst in retirement (Filbay et al., 2017) and this was echoed in Voorheis et al. (2023) who reported chronic underuse of retirement resources in sports systems with low governance control. Moreover, Brown et al. (2018) counter that in the absence of structurally embedded transition services, especially in terms of psychological readiness and career identity, former athletes are often left to negotiate their post-sport life alone, which can in turn lead to an extended identity crisis and a state of underemployment. The lack of a centralized, national apparatus is indicative of a larger institutional failure to approach athletic transitions as systemic and developmental issues.

Mental Health Infrastructure Deficit: The mental aspect of the game is criminally dogged –Not helped by the stigma that is deeply ingrained against fetching for help in Indian sports. Brown et al. (2018) also note that there is a social cost to seeking counselling for psychological problems which further discourage elite athletes from seeking help for psychological wellbeing, particularly within hyper-masculine/independently tough cultures. In a country like India, where mental vulnerability is often associated with incompetence, athletes prefer to remain silent instead of seeking help. Not only does this stigma prevent the development of mental health infrastructure, but it also serves to entrench a culture of loneliness that may have a profound influence on identity transition, post-retirement transition, and emotional health. The shame-stain in our culture surrounding mental illness makes athletes the silent sufferers. The perception of damage to one's reputation leads to 89% not seeking therapy [for sexual abuse] at all (Roberts 2011).

Bureaucratic and Implementation Lapses: Where policy levers are available, institutional inertia, entrenched bureaucratic cultures, and endemic corruption frequently cause them to remain nominal rather than substantive policies. The lack of instant monitoring, performance checks and third party checks on the transition schemes waters down its strength. According to Voorheis et al. (2023), low governance capability in sports organizations is negatively related to the level and stability of retirement programs. Brown et al. (2018) also highlighted that nontransparent systems create distrust, and continue to disengage athletes from using support. This systemic cracks ultimately further pull players down the pit of disenfranchisement and are rights in name only — rights without access or enforcement.

A CULTURALLY SENSITIVE FRAMEWORK: FOUR DIMENSIONS OF REFORM

Individual-Level Capacitation

- Integrate culturally sensitive mental health education in the basic training curricula that is consistent with regional idioms of emotional expression and coping strategies that are locally meaningful, which can decrease resistance to psychologic support. The literature suggests that including an embedded approach to psychological health and well-being into the identity of the athlete from a young age can have the effect of reducing stigma and normalizing help-seeking behaviour (Brown et al., 2018; Roberts, 2011). Further, trust-

building and uptake can rely on both culturally competent care providers as well as native language to the extent possible among educators. Powell et al. (2024) stressed the need for mental health interventions that are congruent with the sociocultural realities and belief systems of the studied groups.

- Collaborate with the NSDC to integrate double-career pathways by mainstreaming flexible vocational training, academic credits and job-readiness programmes into sports syllabus. These partnerships will need to be focused on athletes from underrepresented communities, including women and caste-marginalized groups, many of whom experience a gap in education when transitioning to post-sport employment. Voorheis et al. (2023) stressed that fulfilled integrated job pathways make identity foreclosure in transitions more unlikely. Similarly, Filbay et al. (2017) also found that athletes involved in organized dual-career programs were more life satisfied and less psychologically distressed in retirement (2017). By working together with the NSDC — expertise and funds — a scalable solution can be deployed which utilizes infrastructure that already exists to establish modular, sport-specific educational tracks that can evolve with athletes over their careers.
- Develop pre-retirement courses at national sports academies, initially for the mid-career athlete and with adaptability for sequential advancement through the programme. Modules would be based on psychological support, financial literacy and career progression following retirement. Voorheis et al. (2023) maintain that early and organized post-retirement planning can increase psychological readiness and decrease anxiety over career termination. Similarly, Brown et al. (2018), athletes who are supported to think up life after sports early on are more resilient and flexible when it comes to transitioning. The also reflects the Filbay et al. (2017) observed that proactive involvement in retirement education was significantly associated with greater life satisfaction after sport.

Relational and Familial Empowerment

- Entrench peer mentoring programmes within national training centers promoting the restorative identity benefits of being a 'supporter' (Brown et al., 2019); not just of skill sharing. (2018). This mutual care infrastructure not only helps the mentees make sense of their transition, but also helps their mentors, who are often recent retirees, re-build purpose and self-worth through relationship continuity. These exchanges promote an exchange of experience, which is beneficial for both individual and collective development in the framework of the athletic community.
- Design and deliver systematized family support packages such as Parivaar Prashikshan that include culturally adapted information on role redefinition, emotional adaptation, and economic rescaling following the retirement. These modules should include interactive family counseling sessions, simulated workshops, and community-guided discussions to destigmatize non-linear career paths and collaborative financial support. Brown et al. (2018), from which we draw on here, frame relational scaffolding as fundamental to the post-career adaptation of athletes, particularly in: cases where support networks are engaged through informed and empathetic family processes. Likewise, Roberts (2011) emphasises that the inclusion of close kin in transition planning facilitates the athlete's emotional comfort and the ease over the negotiation of identity in post-sporting life.
- Support family transition conversations through an engagement intervention at the community level by using a participatory framework, such as undertaken at the neighborhood fora, a local storytelling circle, and culturally responsive facilitation tools to make stories about leaving sport more visible. Such engagement must be forward-leaning and inclusive, utilizing trusted community leaders, religious leaders, and former athletes as facilitators to establish legitimacy and trust. Brown et al. (2018) and Roberts (2011) demonstrated that there are professionalised interventions occurring through community organisations that increase the perceived legitimacy of support mechanisms, which in turn better matches the needs of athletes with the expectations of their families. Furthermore, such community-level conversation promotes a collectivist view of post-retirement identity, facilitating the redefining of roles in extended families and deferring opposition to post-retirement non-traditional paths.

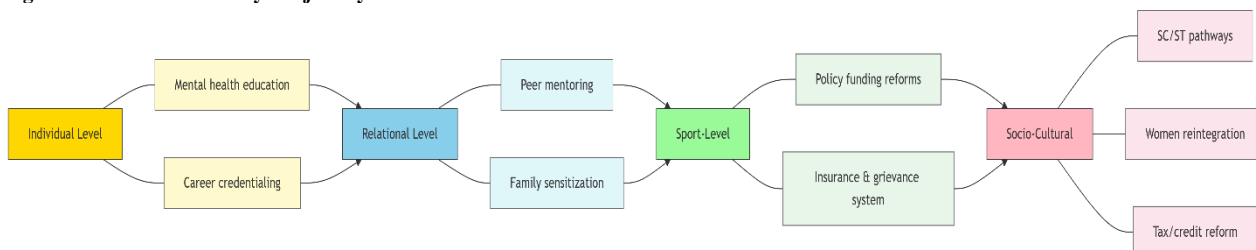
Institutional Governance and Policy Mandates

- Ring-fence at least 5% of NSF budgets for athlete transition programmes and scrutiny and ensure this is spent on an appropriate and accepted criteria of transparency, equality and efficacy. The policy must be paired with opportunities for regular review, auditing of use, and athlete-led advisory boards that influence how these dollars are spent. Empirically, it is evidence-based that institutional resource investment is a condition for sustainable athlete reintegration (Voorheis et al., 2023). In addition, Roberts (2011) and Filbay et al. (2017) highlight the importance of ring-fenced support fund (and in particular any use to provide psychological counseling, career workshops and peer mentors), delivers significant improvements in post-retirement mental health and labour market outcomes. If a 5% requirement were established, things would change, not only to rectify chronic underinvestment in non-performance activity but to represent a shift in thinking; that athletes will be valued for about their body and mind well-being beyond competition days.
- Compulsory provision of career guidance and psycho-counselling at all SAI facilities and uniform operating standards with inbuilt accountability. These should be serviced by trained professionals who are certified, and also trained to cater to the psychological and vocational specificities of the athlete, with protocols for cultural (gender, caste and linguistic inclusivity). Filbay et al. (2017) and Powell et al. (2024) found that the more such services are available and integrated in the training ecosystem, the more athletes become adaptable and psychologically resilient after retirement. Brown et al. (2018) supported by claiming that the institutionalisation of mental health and career support can decrease stigma for service utilisation as well as support ongoing identity negotiation, and thus should form part of a holistic ATHTR strategy.
- The creation of an independent body of athlete ombudsmen for redressal of grievances and ethical oversight shall be considered, which would be an autonomous body under the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports with statutory powers of investigation, mediation, and resolution of disputes. This has to be a multi-dimensional body which will include members of retired athlete unions, legal, sports psychologist also gender and caste campaigners to ensure that justice will be done. According to Voorheis et al. (2023), institution-based trust and prevention of retaliation) as an impartial complaints system. Brown et al. (2018) underscore the need for ethical oversight agencies to maintain dignity and respect of athletes, especially within a context of transition. The Ombudsman should also be given the ability to make mandatory recommendations, monitor compliance with transition standards, and conduct annual transparency audits to highlight systemic deficiencies and suggest improvements.

Socio-Cultural Reconstruction

- Organise caste-sensitive fellowships and Dalit women athlete re-skilling programs from intersectional equity perspectives that are based on community participation. These initiatives must be co-created with stakeholders from Dalit sports networks, grassroots NGOs, and local schools to make them relevant and sustainable. Without due acknowledgement at the level of structure, Dalit women continue to be marginalized from the national development priorities, so too in sports (Kukreja 2017). Poucher et al. "Compounded identity exclusions contribute to significant barriers to post-retirement opportunities" (2023) similarly argue. Hence, fellowships need to ensure that participants receive not just technical upskilling, but are also mentored, incubated into leadership, and psychosocially supported, adapted to caste and gender specific realities. Additionally, Brown et al. (2018) stress that the effectiveness of reintegration increases when re-skilling is linked to relational and visibility support and to the possibility to occupy visible supportive positions in the sportsphere.
- Powerful national media initiatives that work to reset the gender roles in sports, utilizing the medium of multimedia storytelling to elevate the stories of successful female athletes who have successfully transitioned post-retire into leadership, coaching or entrepreneurial roles. Those there time and again, along with influencers, regional language broadcasters and grass-roots organizations should have like-minded campaigns working with them in order to disseminate the message of inclusivity. According to Miller et al. (2015) explains, "changing cultural attitudes about whether women perform and belong in sports is contingent on the visibility of counter-narratives to patriarchal ideologies at work and the role of history" (p. Additionally, Brown et al. (2018) stressed the role of symbolic affirmation via media visibility in maintaining identity continuity in retirement. Such initiatives can be informed by behavior change communication strategies, inspired by Roberts (2011), if they work to change familial and institutional attitudes toward female athlete durability and legacy.
- Provide tax breaks and business incubators for retired athletes, especially in underrepresented sports and from socially marginalized backgrounds. These incentives might come in the form of exemptions or waivers such as tax breaks on capital gains for enterprise led by athletes, GST waivers for products and services tertiary to sports and subsidies for startups that encourage training or education in sports. Business incubators should offer mentorship, seed funding, legal services and market connections (Mast, 2018). Filbay et al. (2017)) One is the fact that economic empowerment tools sensibility increase post-retirement life satisfaction and reintegration to the community. Brown et al. (2018) further note that identity resilience is strengthened by financial autonomy, especially when visible leadership roles are combined with it. This kind of economic scaffolding, which provides not just individual athletes but moments like the one Gurung experienced, is essential to a thriving, inclusive sports economy in the country.

Figure 2. Transition Identity Trajectory of Indian Athletes.



A life course model of athlete identity (from entry into to retirement from) with psychological breaks and external stressors across career stages in the context of the Indian socio-cultural environment.

Conclusion

Toward Equity, Dignity, and Reintegration

Retirement from elite sport should be a fresh start, not a moment of existential fractures. This is illustrated by Brown et al. (2018), so-called the post-retirement space contains potential for repositioning of self-identity, as for example athletes can find a new sense of meaning in support, mentor role engagement and re-involvement with sport communities. In many cases, it is not just a reaffirmation of the value of athletic self-images that come into play but an actual conversion, transitioning from being supported, as a hero, to doing the supporting as a hero—and a process through which a service member develops mentally while also returning to regular society. “Retiring from competitive sports can be a massive identity shift. Research underpinning several studies have identified different dimensions of this transition, pointing to the challenges and opportunities for self-development and adaptation.

First, athletes often continue to feel a strong attachment to their athletic identity, even after the sport is over. It is widely known that many in many cases athletes keep high the athletic identity even after retirement and this affects their future roles and activities (Dimoula et al., 2013). This sustained link to their sports self leads many of them to the roles of coach and mentor within the sports sector. For example, athletes who have moved into a coaching capacity will also have to renegotiate their identity and focus on forging a coaching philosophy and managing role identity transitions (Blackett et al., 2020; Chroni et al., 2019). This type of transition could be supported by shortened education programs that fast-track the start of athletes in coaching roles (Blackett et al., 2020).

The multidimensionality of identity reconstruction:

Psychological and social: One pathway for transformation of one’s identity in retirement for athletes is indicating they can take on supportive and mentoring roles, enabling them to move from receiving team and coaching support, to providing support. This transition can have implications for psychological adaptation and community reintegration, reinstating their sense of worth in a sporting environment (Voorheis et al., 2023). Further, retirement also brings up to professional athletes’ potential risks for physical and psychological health following the dramatic change in their identity and the loss of social support. Successful staged programming is recommended to help the athlete transition from sport toward having a well-developed self-identity and to be able to apply the talent in a different way (Robnik et al., 2022). Furthermore, injuries and demands of sports may influence post-retirement physical activity of the athletes. It has been suggested through research that after retirement, injuries may prevent people from physical activity, and so managing and intervention the use of strategies early could alleviate long-term consequences for individuals physical and mental health due to injury (Russell et al., 2017). Overall, retirement from sports is a difficult time for athletes, but it is also an opportunity for them to redefine themselves and find new aims in life.

In the end, this study recommended the immediate resetting of India’s athlete transition frame by incorporating comprehensive practical, culturally based, policy-oriented interventions. By addressing its embedded asymmetries of caste, gender, funding and familial dynamics, India can turn retirement from a rupture into renewal. The model that the proposed model is not just a model, but a moral act.

Data Availability Statement: The data that support the findings of this study are available in the National Repository for Athlete Transition Studies (NRATS) at www.nrats.org/download. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements, some supporting materials (e.g., anonymized transcripts, coded notes) may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests: The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article. They report no affiliations, financial involvement, or personal relationships that could have influenced the content presented.

Funding; This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors. The study was independently conducted as part of the lead author’s doctoral research.

Author Contributions: Saurabh Kumar contributed to the conceptualization of the study, literature synthesis, thematic analysis, and manuscript drafting. Prof. Samiran Chakraborty supervised the research design, ensured alignment with theoretical frameworks, and critically reviewed and approved all manuscript versions. Both authors confirm responsibility for the integrity of the work and have read and approved the final manuscript.

Acknowledgements

The authors express sincere gratitude to the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, NIMHANS specialists, and former national athletes for their valuable insights. Their perspectives were essential in shaping the socio-cultural dimensions of the proposed framework.

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