



Uncovering Structural Barriers to Youth Engagement in Professional Sports in Belgrade: A Qualitative Study

Descubriendo barreras estructurales para la participación de los jóvenes en los deportes profesionales en Belgrado: un estudio cualitativo

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Key words

- Youth Athletes
- Structural Barriers
- Professional Sports
- Gender Disparities
- Social Biography

Abstract

The structural barriers faced by young athletes in Belgrade during their transition to professional sports are analyzed in the context of socio-economic changes, with particular focus on the impact of transitioning to adulthood in post-socialist societies like Serbia. Utilizing the theoretical approach of social biography, the study examines how social structures and individual actions shape the life trajectories of these young athletes. The qualitative research includes semi-structured interviews with athletes from professional clubs in Belgrade, the epicenter of sports activities in the country. The aim is to identify the key structural barriers that hinder the professional development of athletes and to analyze the strategies they use to overcome these barriers. The findings show that these challenges result from the complex interaction of socio-structural constraints and reliance on family resources, significantly shaping their social biographies and careers in sports.

Palabras clave:

- Atletas Juveniles
- Barreras Estructurales
- Deportes Profesionales
- Disparidades de Género
- Biografía Social

Resumen

Las barreras estructurales que enfrentan los jóvenes deportistas en Belgrado durante su transición hacia el deporte profesional se analizan en el contexto de los cambios socioeconómicos, con un enfoque particular en el impacto de la transición a la adultez en sociedades postsocialistas como Serbia. Utilizando el enfoque teórico de la biografía social, el estudio examina cómo las estructuras sociales y las acciones individuales moldean las trayectorias de vida de estos jóvenes atletas. La investigación cualitativa incluye entrevistas semiestructuradas con deportistas de clubes profesionales en Belgrado, el epicentro de las actividades deportivas en el país. El objetivo es identificar las principales barreras estructurales que dificultan el desarrollo profesional de los deportistas y analizar las estrategias que utilizan para superar estos obstáculos. Los resultados muestran que estos desafíos resultan de la compleja interacción de restricciones socioestructurales y la dependencia de los recursos familiares, lo que moldea significativamente sus biografías sociales y carreras deportivas.

Introduction

The socio-economic changes of recent decades have fundamentally altered the trajectories of youth transitions into adulthood in contemporary societies. The most significant global social changes (including shifts in labor markets, political transformations following the collapse of socialist regimes, crises in welfare states and neoliberal regimes, as well as the process of European integration) have profoundly impacted the lives of young people (DuBois-Reymond and Chisholm, 2006). The transition process is crucial for acquiring adult status, which inherently involves a shift in responsibility, from being the object of their parents' responsibility to assuming responsibility for themselves and others (Tomanović and Ignjatović, 2004, 44). However, the altered socio-economic context influences all aspects of youth transitions into adulthood, including the transition to employment. Research indicates that the transitional regime in Serbia represents a combination of sub-protective (familistic) and post-socialist youth transition regimes (Mojić, 2012). Confronting numerous and significant socio-structural barriers characteristic of post-socialist regimes is combined with a socially and culturally embedded reliance on family resources. This regime can also be observed in the specific transition of

young people into the workforce—particularly in the context of pursuing professional sports careers.

The rapid development of capitalism globally impacts sports, transforming it from mere play and entertainment into a profession. The purpose of the capitalist labor process is the creation of profit or, at the very least, the production of goods whose value exceeds the value of the labor and resources expended in the production process (Jarvie and Maguire, 1994, cited in Skembler, 2007, 92). As the era of liberal capitalism gradually gave way to the era of organized capitalism, there was an increasing emphasis on the potential of sports to create individuals who are esteemed and powerful in society (Skembler, 2007, 127). Sports are being commercialized through the infusion of significant capital via media corporations. Consequently, sports organizations, regardless of the age group of the athletes, take on characteristics of capitalist organizations, where the primary goal is profit generation (Giulianotti, 2008, 73).

A significant number of young people begin participating in sports at an early age due to its positive impact on proper development, but increasingly also due to the popularity of sports, which have gained considerable prominence in society and the media in recent years (Giulianotti, 2008, 156). As they grow older, some young people consciously redirect all their

interests toward sports, viewing it not just as entertainment but as work and a career.

The professional involvement of young people in sports can be considered within the aforementioned transitions and transitional regimes, as it has its own undeniable specificities. However, what is also noticeable is that young people increasingly encounter various structural barriers throughout their careers, leading a significant number to abandon sports, particularly in our society. Regarding professional sports, these barriers can be best examined through the lens of the social biography approach (Tomanović, 2012) and an analysis of the resources, orientations, and actions of young people.

The focus of this paper is on the main structural barriers faced (or previously faced) by young athletes in their professional careers. The aim of this study is to determine the interrelationship between key structural barriers and the ways they are (or are not) overcome in the context of young people's professional involvement in sports in Belgrade. A qualitative study was conducted for this purpose, using semi-structured interviews designed exclusively for this research. The spatial framework of the research encompassed the city of Belgrade. The study focused on athletes who had spent at least one season training in one of Belgrade's professional sports clubs. Belgrade was chosen because it represents the center of most sports activities in Serbia, hosting the majority of professional clubs where young people begin their professional sports careers.

Theoretical Framework

In the social sciences in Serbia, young people were long described using the term "youth" ("omladina"), which suggests unity rather than diversity in living experiences. In socialism, it had an ideological meaning that defined youth as a progressive group that is always homogeneous and collective (Tomanović and Ignjatović, 2004, 39). For the younger generations of contemporary consumer society, who have far more choices to act according to their preferences, lifestyle, and values, the term "youth" is discarded and replaced by the term "young people" ("mladi"). This term is free from ideological connotations and unambiguity, referring to the period between childhood and adulthood (Tomanović and Ignjatović, 2004, 39).

One of the key phases for young people is the transition into adulthood, which involves assuming responsibility for various domains of their lives. Economic transition is crucial for acquiring adult status. Equally important are those transitions that involve a

shift in responsibility: from being the object of their parents' responsibility to assuming responsibility for themselves and others (Tomanović and Ignjatović, 2004, 44). The transition period is considered a highly sensitive life stage for young people in any society, as they face a series of developmental stages, such as identity formation, achieving independence from parents while maintaining a connection with them, fitting into peer groups, completing education, and making decisions about their future careers (Pešić, Videnović and Plut, 2009, 158).

For young people in Serbia, this phase is further complicated by the circumstances of the 1990s, which significantly altered Serbian society. The most significant changes relate to the labor sphere (Bolčić, 2003), which is believed to have the greatest impact on non-standardized paths of individual maturation. Individuals today become the "reproductive unit of the social and life world"—that is, creators of their own lives. Given that the unit of analysis in this study consists of young people who are professionally involved in sports, the study also analyzes the domain of creating one's life during the transition to adulthood and the shift from amateur to professional sports.

Structure and agency are equally important for analyzing the social role of sports, taking a starting point that assumes a dialectical relationship between structure and agency. The first theorist to highlight this connection was Pierre Bourdieu, who argued that objective structures and the dispositions of agents are not independent entities but are embodied within one another (Tomanović, 2010, 13). Bourdieu equates "culture" with "knowledge acquired within a homogeneous group" (Bourdieu, 1999a, 167), while the principle of habitus production is found in "structures that are an integral part of a particular environment." This view is complemented by his stance on the dialectic of the subjective and the objective (Bourdieu, 1999a, 158, cited in Birešev, 2014, 53). Habitus encompasses an agent's knowledge and understanding of the world, as well as the mental structures through which agents comprehend the social world, which are largely the product of the internalization of the structure of the social world (Tomanović, 2010, 14).

Another significant approach is Anthony Giddens' "structuration theory," which posits that structure both constrains and enables action (Giddens, 1994, 227). Structure and agency are not opposing concepts, as every action refers to structure, while social structure exists only through action (Puzić, 1998, 230). Giddens does not perceive structure as "external" to individuals but as "internal" in the memory of agents, leading to the "thesis of individualization" (Tomanović, 2010, 15). Giddens' contribution is particularly em-

phasized through the concept of “individualization,” which explains how individuals, within structural constraints, make decisions and take responsibility for shaping their social biographies.

Bourdieu emphasizes the influence of structures, while theories of individualization emphasize the free will and choices of agents. The sociological dichotomy of structure/agency manifests in whether the key factor is the significance of structural contexts or individual aspirations and choices. The concept of structuration attributes importance to “both sides,” focusing on the dynamics of the structural context and individual action. As a possible solution, the concept of social biography is employed (Tomanović, 2012, 26). The approach of structured individualization postulates structural and cultural variations in shaping the social biographies of young people (Tomanović, 2010, 448).

Structures can be both constraining and enabling. Individuals actively operate within structural conditions, creating biographies and shaping structures (through processes of reproduction, reconversion, and change). The concept that an individual shapes their biography as a social biography, in relation to the social context, resources, strategies, and identity, is accepted (Tomanović, 2010, 18). One’s biography is socially structured but also a product of action. The social biography approach integrates the dynamism and processuality of the life-course approach, showing how socio-historical and structural-institutional factors guide individual action (Tomanović, 2012, 28).

The aim of this paper is to interpret the structural barriers and actions in the formation of the social biographies of young athletes in Belgrade, through the process of transition into adulthood. This form of transition is followed by examining the influence of external and internal structures on the actions, decisions, and strategies of young people striving to succeed in professional sports.

Internal Structure—Habitus

The internal structure that influences the shaping of social biographies represents an individual’s habitus. In habitus, there is a duality of structure; on one side, habitus is a structured structure, i.e., a product of a specific life concept, and on the other side, it is a structuring structure that arises from everyday practices (Tomanović, 2010, 14). Bourdieu views habitus as a system of subjective, internalized structures, schemes of perception, understanding, and action shared by all members of the same group (Bourdieu, 1986a). It incorporates and synthesizes all past experiences (knowledge and memories), but it is also

open to new influences, thus presenting itself as a lasting, yet not unchangeable system of dispositions (Tomanović, 2010, 27). In developing the concept, habitus is most often described as a system of internalized dispositions that mediate between social structures and practical actions, shaping the former and regulating the latter (Birešev, 2014, 56). Habitus tends to function beyond the individual’s self-awareness and “is always oriented towards practical functions.” It possesses “an unlimited capacity for creating products—thoughts, perceptions, investigations, and actions—whose boundaries are determined by the historical and socially established conditions of its production” (Bourdieu, 1990b, 52-55). On the other hand, habitus, for Bourdieu, expresses first the results of organized action, with a meaning close to that of words like structure (Giulianotti, 2008, 238).

The concept of habitus must be expanded by introducing structural factors into the process of growing up, as the ways of growing up are multiplying in contemporary society, allowing the freedom to choose positions on a continuum between dependence and autonomy. These choices are limited only by structural possibilities/risks. Hence, the biography of a young person is a construct by choice or by pressure because the one who is growing up faces the necessity of adapting their identity to the social conditions or opportunities available (Ljubičić, 2012, 246).

The internal structure will be observed through the influence of the family based on the theory of (non)encouraging families (Milić, 2010; Labaš, 2012). Encouraging families are considered a type of family that is between modern and postmodern families. They are more inclined towards postmodern values, as they consider the family an intimate community where the partnership is entered for its own sake, and its duration is linked to the satisfaction derived from the relationship (Milić, 2001). This type of family directs children towards achievement, professional success, independence, self-reliance, responsibility, the development of personal attitudes, higher education, and the building of cultural and intellectual orientation (Labaš, 2012, 221). Parents strive to encourage and stimulate their children to be independent by allowing them to think, express their opinions, advocate their views and rights, discuss them, and defend them with arguments. Contrary to the above, a non-encouraging family, with its attitudes and family climate, does not guide young people towards the development of individuality, independence, the formation of personal attitudes, and independent expression (Milić, 2001, 327). These families are characterized by being distinctly patriarchal with pronounced male dominance and emotional ties among family members (Labaš,

2012, 222). Also, it is considered that these families represent a special type of modern family because they have retained most of the values of the modern family but have also adopted some postmodern values. The modern family is characterized by establishing ideals of care and nurturing among members. The child is a parental investment, from which respect and obedience are expected in return, while the husband has authority over the wife, and parents over the children. Privacy is indirectly monitored by society and serves to maintain the function of the state (Milić, 2001). The peak value of the modern family highlights the sacrifice of individual needs, interests, desires, and rights for the collective (Labaš, 2012, 222). Milić (2010) believes that the Serbian family is still caught between unfinished modernization and the first steps into postmodern forms.

The assumption is that athletes who come from encouraging families have more resources, greater chances, and opportunities for advancement compared to athletes from non-encouraging families. However, a problem with this assumption might be that excessive encouragement in a direction that is not acceptable/accessible to the youth or if they lack sufficient capacity (intellectual and emotional) to achieve the set goals can negatively affect certain aspects of their development. Nevertheless, encouraging families, unlike non-encouraging ones, should give young people a "boost" so that they can later in the process of growing up and maturing follow the path of their personal aspirations (Labaš, 2012, 222).

External Structure–Capital

To be successful, athletes must have different combinations of capital that help secure or improve their positions. Bourdieu describes capital as tokens of different colors that denote various abilities of each person, which can also relate to athletes. To understand the social biographies of athletes from the aspect of external structural barriers, it is necessary to examine the actual amount of tokens/capital they possess and how this capital develops over time (Giulianotti, 2008, 241).

Capital represents a social relation within a system of exchange, referring to all goods, material and symbolic, that appear as rare and valuable enough to be sought within a particular formation (Bourdieu, 1990, 178). Bourdieu distinguishes three interrelated forms in which capital appears: economic, cultural, and social capital. For the purposes of this paper, economic and social capital will be examined. Economic capital is directly and immediately convertible into

money and can be institutionalized through property rights (Tomanović, 2010, 19). Social capital represents a set of cultural characteristics that create and maintain mutual trust and cooperation among members of a given social community (Štulhofer, 2013, 80). Social capital can also be defined as "capital that, unlike economic or cultural capital, is not directly owned by individuals but lies in the relationships that an individual builds with other individuals, thus rooted in the social network" (Petrović, 2013, 208). By connecting people, they build social networks, which can be defined as relatively stable sets of relationships between social actors (whether individuals, groups, organizations), involving the exchange of various resources (material, services, information, values, understandings, norms, practices, etc.) and possessing a certain structure. Network models describe the structure of one or more networks of relationships within a system of actors (Burt, 1982, as cited in Babović, 2005, 353). An individual's membership in a network provides them with certain benefits, such as support when needed, better access to information, and more alternatives available when making choices. Networks thus play an important role in providing social capital (Golubović, 2008, 21).

High social capital among parents, but also among young athletes, is reflected in connections with certain social networks that have recognized positions and economically stronger ties, which play an important role in the development of athletes' professional careers (Labaš, 2012, 228).

Gender inequality- Cultural barriers

The examination of external structural barriers can be extended to include cultural barriers in sports. Cultural patterns represent an external structural barrier in women's sports. It can be argued that we still live in a patriarchal society where distinct cultural differences between genders are evident. Unlike sex, which represents the biological characteristics of men and women, gender is deeply culturally and socially determined. It is shaped by role divisions in society, where women are positioned in the private sphere and men in the public sphere. The private sphere pertains to household responsibilities (roles of mother and homemaker), while the public sphere refers to life outside the household, where men are perceived as providers and protectors of the family. This perspective on gender role divisions is deeply ingrained and influences all spheres of social life (Babović, 2010:15). Women are expected to manage household duties, while men are expected to take control

(Hoyt, 2008:190). Gender stereotypes are widespread and highly resilient, prescribing how men and women should behave. While individuals should not conform to stereotypes, they are often encouraged to avoid behaviors that deviate from them (Heilman, 2001).

In contemporary society, with the increasing participation of women in the labor market, gender roles are gradually changing, reducing gender inequality. The representation of women has grown across nearly all social spheres, including sports. However, the increasing number of women participating in sports has had limited impact on reducing gender inequality because sports remain culturally perceived as a "male domain" (Đulijanoti, 2008).

Culturally, sports are often portrayed as an expression of masculinity, and participating in elite-level sports for men is seen not only as a lifestyle choice but also as a status symbol. Women, therefore, face discrimination in sports on multiple grounds. The first is related to the traditional role of women, emphasizing household maintenance and confinement to the private sphere of work. The second type of cultural discrimination concerns the sexuality of women, where women who professionally engage in team sports are often perceived as less feminine or even "masculine." The third is the way the media reports on successful female athletes, frequently using terms such as "beauty" or "partner," portraying them more as sexual objects than as professional athletes.

Research Questions

The main research question is: What are the structural barriers that young athletes face?

Additional questions that will be explored include:

- Are the structural barriers the same for team and individual sports?
- Are there specific structural barriers unique to women in sports?
- How did athletes overcome these barriers (or fail to do so)?
- What are the main reasons why an athlete either quit or continued pursuing a professional sports career?

Methodological Framework

The research on structural barriers in professional sports employs a qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews, to explore participants' experiences and perspectives. This method is well-suited for studying insufficiently researched top-

ics where unexpected findings may arise (Ajduković, 2014: 349).

Qualitative methods offer participants the opportunity to express their experiences in their own words and within their natural environments, providing researchers with a deeper understanding of their personal lives and everyday challenges (Tomanović, 2010: 42). While acknowledging the limitations of this approach, such as challenges in data organization, subjectivity in data selection and analysis, and reduced reliability of results (Kuvačić, 1973: 82) it was chosen for its ability to offer contextually rich insights based on participants' personal experiences. For this study, in-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method, allowing participants to share their experiences in a relaxed and natural setting, thus ensuring the authenticity of the data collected (Tomanović, 2010: 42).

For data analysis, thematic analysis based on the theoretical framework and research questions was employed. The analysis was conducted using MAXQDA software, which enabled efficient organization of the interviews, text coding, and identification of key themes with a focus on their connection to theoretical foundations.

The research was conducted between June and September 2020, encompassing two groups of participants: professional athletes and athletes who quit their professional careers. The first group consisted of athletes still engaged in professional sports, while the second group comprised individuals who had ceased pursuing professional sports careers. This structure allowed for obtaining meaningful insights into the barriers and challenges faced by athletes.

Sample

The study included participants aged 18 to 35, as professional sports careers typically begin at 18 and conclude around 35. The selected participants were professional athletes who had played at least one season in sports clubs within the territory of Belgrade, given that Belgrade is the center of sports activities in Serbia.

A quota non-probabilistic sampling approach was employed, focusing on four parameters: active or discontinued career, gender, type of sport, and team or individual sports. The sample was balanced regarding career status (50% active, 50% discontinued), with a gender distribution of 65% male and 35% female participants due to the lower representation of women in sports. Similarly, the proportion of team sports participants was higher than individual sports participants, reflecting the larger number of competitors in

team sports compared to individual sports, where a club may have only one athlete. The sample size of 30 participants enabled an in-depth analysis of their experiences and perspectives.

Table 1. Quota sample by the number of participants

	Professional athletes		Athletes who have stopped pursuing a professional sports career		Total
	Team sport	Individual sport	Team sport	Individual sport	
Man	7	3	7	3	20
Woman	3	2	3	2	10
Total	10	5	10	5	30

Source: Own elaboration.

Analysis

The analysis delineates key thematic areas aimed at offering a comprehensive understanding of the social biographies of athletes. It examines both internal and external structures, alongside the cultural barriers that women encounter in sports. A comparative approach is employed, contrasting active athletes with those who have retired from professional sports, with particular attention given to the type of sport they engage in or have previously participated in.

Internal Structure

The analysis of collected data begins with an exploration of childhood and early engagement in sports activities. The goal is to achieve a deeper understanding of the social biography of athletes and the process of forming their habitus. Through detailed interviews, the study investigates the reasons and influences that sparked interest in sports, with particular emphasis on intrinsic motivations that directed athletes toward a potential professional sports career. This stage places particular emphasis on examining the role of family influence, both supportive and unsupportive, on the athletic development of participants (Labaš, 2012).

Motivation for Engaging in Sports

The motivation to engage in sports primarily stems from the surrounding environment and family. Most participants emphasized that parents, friends, or

coaches were key initiators of their entry into the world of sports. However, the analysis of motivational factors also highlighted a gender perspective, revealing specific patterns of roles within families. Male athletes frequently reported that the motivation to pursue sports originated from the broader social environment, while female athletes often indicated that fathers played a leading role in decisions about their sports careers. This difference reflects deeply rooted societal norms that shape the habitus of male and female athletes, imposing different expectations based on gender.

“My father suggested I switch to water polo, and that shaped my career”.
(Water polo player, 27 years old, active, Belgrade)

Additionally, one active professional athlete gave an unusual response, stating that he chose his sport because it did not require a membership fee. This example highlights how some athletes viewed sports as a means of achieving financial independence from an early age, which motivated their further development:

“I loved all sports. I started with basketball, handball, and football because I was talented. I come from a poor family where I couldn’t afford membership fees... for basketball and handball, they told me to stop coming. For football, they told me to come, and that’s the main reason I stayed in football”
(Football player, 34 years old, active, Čačak)

Significant differences among participants become apparent when examining their reasons for entering professional sports. Active athletes predominantly cited motivations such as a love for the sport, a

desire for professional success, and achieving financial stability. In contrast, athletes who quit professional sports often mentioned socializing and entertainment as their primary reasons.

Family Support

The influence of family, ranging from support to its absence, emerged as a crucial factor in shaping participants' sports careers. Analysis revealed differences in how parental support was provided between active athletes and those who had quit.

Most active athletes reported having parental support, though this was not universal. Three participants indicated a lack of full parental support, with their differing family structures influencing their entry into professional sports in various ways. These participants came from diverse family backgrounds:

Families of Divorced Parents – Sports were viewed as a way to keep the child active and occupied, as parents lacked the time to be actively involved in their child's upbringing:

"My parents divorced early and were never really together much. They supported me to an extent, but not as much as they should have...When I was a child, they signed me up for a sport... they would get some time for themselves while I was at practice, and I would be calmer at home".

(Basketball player, 26 years old, active, Belgrade)

Families with Limited Financial Resources – Sports were seen as an opportunity for a better life, influencing the athlete's further development. This was reflected in constant parental dissatisfaction with athletic performance:

"I remember one situation, when I scored a goal against a much stronger team and looked at my mom in the stands; she turned her head the other way. I scored a second goal.... when we got home, my mom said she wasn't happy with how I played. I asked her why she wasn't satisfied, and she said, 'There are a hundred players like you.' I asked, 'What do you mean, a hundred?' She replied, 'A hundred. You scored two goals; there are a hundred players in Serbia like you, and only three will make it.' After that, I wanted to score three goals, then four, and so on."

(Football player, 34 years old, active, Čačak)

Single-Parent Families – Athletes living with their mothers often faced strict academic demands, leading to conflicts. Support from the mother was provided only after balancing education and sports:

"I don't have a father; my mother raised me. When I started handball, everything was fine, but my mom never attended a single training session...I trained in cheap sneakers...The first time she watched me play, I scored my first goal, then another. When I looked at her, she had tears in her eyes...I started crying and dominated the game. A week later, she bought me my first ball."

(Handball player, 26 years old, active, Arilje)

Other active athletes mentioned various forms of parental support, with some feeling a sense of pressure alongside the support they received. In certain cases, parents were heavily involved in the athletes' careers, and while their support was beneficial at times, the excessive expectations became burdensome, leading some athletes to distance themselves from their parents in sports-related matters.

"I should mention that my father set high expectations for me, which created pressure. This is an experience felt by 80% of athletes, who often say that one family member was the source of pressure to be the best"

(Water polo player, 26 years old, active, Belgrade)

Athletes who had quit reported receiving parental support during their youth, often manifesting as moral encouragement and practical help, such as transportation to training. However, for many, this support was conditional **upon academic success**, reflecting a parental emphasis on education equal to sports. **These participants later highlighted the importance of education, frequently mentioning that they pursued or completed higher education, indicating that academics ultimately took precedence over sports.**

External Structure

To understand the significance of external resources in the professional development of athletes, we analyzed the impact of economic and social capital on their careers.

Economic Capital

In modern sports, economic capital plays a pivotal role. As the sports industry becomes increasingly commercialized, engaging in sports requires significant financial investments, including membership fees, equipment costs, and expenses related to training and competitions. This analysis explores how athletes

financed their careers, whether they encountered financial difficulties, and the importance of financial resources in their entry into professional sports.

Financing in Youth Categories

In youth categories, all participants emphasized that their financial support primarily came from parents who invested in their equipment and training

costs. The only exception was one athlete whose club, local government, and sponsors covered all expenses due to their father’s ownership of the sports club.

A shift in financing occurs with the transition to senior-level competitions, where athletes begin to secure their first contracts with clubs or obtain sponsorships. Team sports athletes often sign scholarship contracts by the age of 15 or 16, while individual sports athletes typically rely on sponsors to cover competition costs.

Table 2: Sources of Financing before Entering Professional Sports

Type of Sport	Age Financing Began	Source of Financing
Team Sports	15–16 years	Scholarship contracts
Individual Sports	14–15 years	Sponsors

Source: Own elaboration.

By the age of 18, all active professional team sports athletes had signed their first contracts. Among the ten athletes who quit professional sports, six had also signed contracts, while the rest relied on bonuses to cover partial costs.

Financial Challenges

The lack of economic capital posed a significant barrier for many athletes. This issue was examined through the financial difficulties they encountered, both in youth categories and during their professional sports careers. Professional sports often present growing financial challenges, especially for those who rely on self-financing.

Table 3: Financial Difficulties of Athletes

Category of Athletes	Experienced Financial Difficulties	Main Issues
Active Athletes	6	Delayed salaries, additional competition costs
Athletes Who Quit	10	Lack of funds in youth and professional careers

Source: Own elaboration.

While financial challenges were present for both active and former athletes, their nature differed. Active athletes mostly encountered difficulties during their professional careers, whereas those who quit sports faced challenges even in youth categories.

Among active athletes, those involved in individual sports and female athletes were the most affected.

Individual sport athletes often reported being unable to participate in competitions due to a lack of funds and relied on additional financial support from parents. Individual sports require higher investments, particularly in equipment, training facilities, and registration fees for competitions, whereas team sports generally have lower baseline costs.

Participant responses confirm these differences. All individual sport athletes stated that they had, at some point, been unable to finance their participation in competitions. Additionally, they frequently highlighted the constant need to seek sponsorships to sustain their sports activities. Conversely, team sports athletes reported fewer financial challenges.

"Yes, there were two tournaments at the Balkan Championship when I received an invitation and didn't go due to financial reasons... there were situations where federations wouldn't finance certain categories, which is specific to combat sports. Federations are a disaster... In most cases, parents cover these costs."

(Taekwondo, 24 years old, active, Belgrade)

For athletes who quit sports, financial difficulties were identified as a key factor in their decision to leave. Dissatisfaction was primarily tied to the inability

to rely on sports income, even within professional contexts. In sports such as football and basketball, the financial resources of parents were often decisive for success, as team placements occasionally depended on additional investments.

"Of course, because tennis is a very expensive sport. High-quality equipment is very costly, and then individual training where you have to pay for another coach..."

(Tennis, 25 years old, quit, Belgrade)

Financial difficulties were particularly pronounced among female athletes compared to their male counterparts, especially in professional sports. Female athletes faced a range of barriers, including lower salaries, short-term contracts (typically one or two years), and frequent delays in payments. These issues affected both active and former female athletes.

Table 4: Financial Challenges for Female Athletes

Financial Challenge	Description
Financial Insecurity (Short Contracts)	<i>"Engaging in basketball has become somewhat nomadic, as contracts are usually short-term, rarely spanning 2–3 seasons."</i> Basketball player, 26 years old, Jagodina
Delayed Payments	<i>"Delays in salary payments were common, causing conflicts and stress."</i> Basketball player, 29 years old, Loznica
Insufficient Salary for Living	<i>"Salaries in domestic clubs were insufficient for making a living solely from football."</i> Football player, 20 years old, Belgrade

Source: Own elaboration.

Social Capital

As in other aspects of life, social capital is of great importance in sports. The theoretical framework highlights the significance of social networking for career advancement. Considering that sports can be treated as a business, progress often requires connections with managers, coaches, or administrative personnel who can pave the way for a professional career. This section analyzes the importance of managers for athletes and the relationships between athletes and their coaches.

Managers in Sports

The role of managers in sports has become indispensable, especially for athletes aiming for an inter-

national career. With the professionalization of sports, where the focus is on top-tier results, the sports market, profit, management, and marketing, the need for a new profession sports managers has emerged (Krsmanović, 2021: 292). Managers serve as intermediaries who secure clubs, sponsorships, and legal representation for athletes. One participant remarked, *"A manager is someone you must have if you don't have connections."*

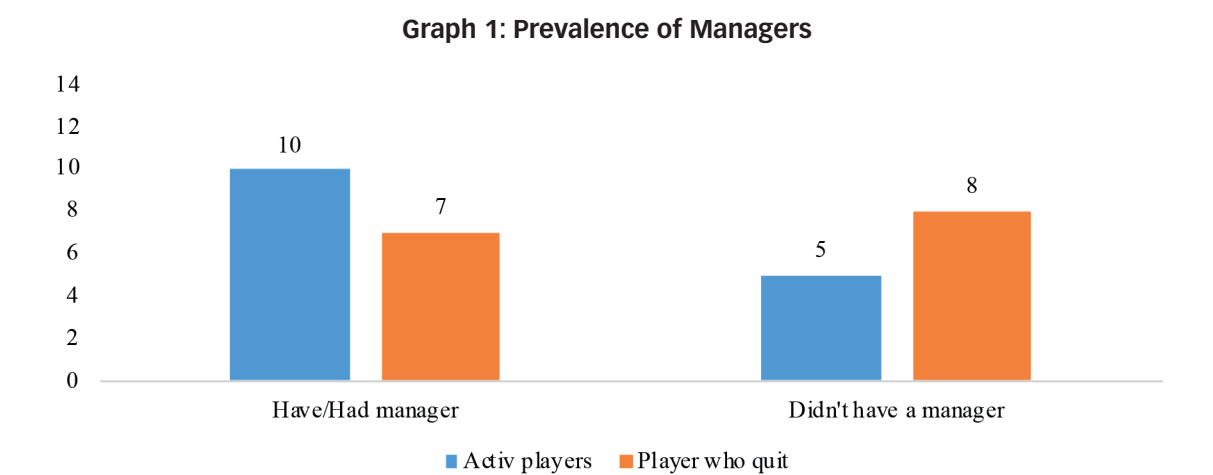
Graph 1 illustrates the relationship between athletes and managers. Active athletes in team sports, particularly those with international engagements, emphasize the critical role of managers in securing clubs and contracts. They perceive managers as central figures leveraging their social capital to ensure career progression. While acknowledging their importance, active athletes note that managers are less necessary within Serbia due to the lower budgets of domestic leagues and limited opportunities. However,

for entering the international scene, having a manager is considered essential.

Among athletes who quit sports, more than half had managers but reported negative experiences, particularly in team sports such as football. One former footballer stated:

"When I signed that contract, I agreed to be represented by some manager from the club. In Serbia, most of those managers are fraudsters and thieves; they do nothing. That's just how it is."

(Football, 27 years old, Požega)



Source: Own elaboration.

In women’s sports, the role of managers is significantly less prevalent than in men’s sports, directly impacting the professional development of female athletes. Respondents indicated that managers are

only necessary for athletes who secure opportunities abroad, while in the domestic context, managers are rarely engaged. Instead, coaches often take on this role.

Table 5: Female Athletes’ Relationships with Managers

Type of Relationship	Description
Former coach is now a manager	Has a close relationship with a former coach who helped transition into professional sports.
Yes, with a manager	Maintains a friendly relationship with a manager who assists in career development and offers personal support.
Yes, the coach as a key figure	The coach has become an informal manager, providing critical support during the transition to the senior team.

Source: Own elaboration.

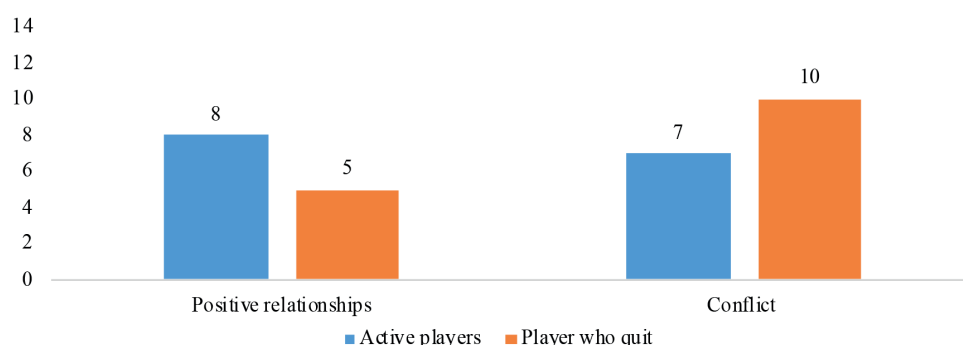
Coaches and Their Influence

Coaches play a crucial role in athlete development, influencing not only training and competition but also offering guidance in pedagogical, psychological, and managerial aspects (Krsmanović, 2021: 274). Due to frequent travel and competitions, coaches often spend more time with athletes than their parents, positioning them as “second parents” (Čokorilo, 2012: 184). Many athletes confirmed this, identifying their

coaches as key figures in their choice of sport and development.

In this section, the relationship with coaches was examined, and the results are presented in Graph 2. Graph 2 shows that, alongside positive relationships, most athletes experienced some form of conflict with their coaches. Respondents frequently mentioned disagreements with coaches over training methods or perceived favoritism, which, for some, posed significant barriers to further progress.

Graph 2: Athlete-Coach Relationships



Source: Own elaboration.

Active professional athletes often highlight coaches as pivotal figures who provided support, motivation, and direction. Some described their coaches as “second fathers,” emphasizing their dedication to athlete development. However, conflicts with coaches were also reported, particularly by athletes who quit sports. Many cited issues such as favoritism or disagreements over training processes, which sometimes had a demotivating or negative impact on their careers.

“The first year when I came, they really appreciated my talent, and everything was great for about three years until a new selector arrived... And so, the new selector came, and I didn’t have my place there at all. I would stay until the last day of the preparations, and then he would cut me before a big competition...”

(Water polo, 26 years old, Belgrade)

Among athletes who quit sports, two-thirds reported experiencing at least one conflict with a coach. The most common issues included unprofessionalism among coaches in youth categories and being denied opportunities due to favoritism, which had long-term negative consequences for some respondents.

Gender Inequality: Cultural Barriers in Women’s Sports

In addition to the previously discussed barriers, another type of barrier prevalent in women’s sports is cultural in nature. Cultural barriers are closely tied to gender inequality and manifest through discrimination, limited financial opportunities, difficulty entering professional sports, lower valuation of women’s sports, and inadequate media representation.

This section sheds light on the challenges women face in sports through an analysis of three segments: underrepresentation in sports, difficulty entering professional sports, and the undervaluation of women’s sports.

Underrepresentation of Women in Sports

Women often face prejudices rooted in patriarchal societal norms. Respondents highlighted that the expected roles of women within the family and society are key reasons for shorter sports careers. Financial factors also limit women’s participation, as their salaries are significantly lower compared to men’s.

“Classic discrimination because male sports, women shouldn’t be doing sports, and that’s all a consequence of patriarchy in our society...”

(Taekwondo, 24 years old (active), Belgrade)

Difficulty Entering Professional Sports

While some women in professional sports mentioned that it can occasionally be easier to start a career due to less competition, the majority of respondents pointed out a lack of support, both from their families and the system. Women who dropped out of sports frequently noted that men receive more opportunities, even when they are not particularly talented.

“They struggle because they receive less support than men. To be a woman in professional sports, you have to be exceptionally good... For girls, they say, ‘It’s better to sit and study than to play basketball’”

(Basketball player, 25 years old, Jagodina)

Undervaluation of Women's Sports

All respondents agreed that women's sports are less valued than men's. Sports are often framed as a male-dominated domain, and women pursuing sports face gender-based discrimination. This is evident through patriarchal attitudes, financial inequality, lower media visibility, and the predominance of male coaches in women's sports. Society continues to perpetuate stereotypes surrounding women's sports.

"Women's sports are generally less valued. The reasons for this are that our society isn't accustomed to seeing women participate in sports. Many people say they won't watch because it's boring, but no one has offered them the opportunity to see if it's truly boring or not..."

(Volleyball player, 24 years old, Belgrade)

Conclusion with Discussion

This analysis explores the key structural barriers faced by young athletes in Serbia during their transition to professional sports. Two main categories of barriers were identified: internal barriers, such as family support and external barriers related to economic and social capital.

Family support emerged as the most significant factor in the early stages of an athlete's career. While most respondents indicated that their parents provided substantial support, excessive involvement could have a detrimental effect, leading to conflict and the exclusion of parents from the athlete's professional life. Notably, one of the most successful athletes in the sample achieved success despite a lack of parental support, highlighting the importance of individualization in the athlete's development.

Financial capital was a major barrier, particularly in individual sports, where the costs of equipment, competitions, and training are high. This challenge was less pronounced in team sports. Social capital, defined by professional networks and connections, also played a crucial role, with a lack of such networks hindering progress, particularly in individual sports where managers are often absent. The relationship with coaches was another critical factor; while many athletes viewed coaches as "second fathers," conflicts with them presented significant barriers in their careers.

Female athletes face additional challenges, such as lower wages and discrimination in sports. While financial barriers affected both genders, they were more pronounced for women, influencing both team and individual sports. Discrimination was evident in the devaluation of women's sports and societal stereotypes that limited female participation in sports.

For active professional athletes, sports were an absolute priority, and their determination enabled them to overcome these barrier. However, for athletes who left professional sports, sports were not the top priority. This group often had to balance sports and education, with education frequently taking precedence.

Structural barriers, whether internal or external, represent significant challenges for the professional development of athletes in Serbia. However, individuals respond differently to these barriers, emphasizing the relevance of the individualization thesis. Therefore, the introduction of a social biography approach to analyzing structural barriers in professional sports proves to be both justified and relevant, highlighting the dynamic interplay between structural contexts and individual actions.

The findings of this study can inform the development of policies and support programs for young athletes in Serbia. Key recommendations include enhancing economic and social capital, reducing cultural barriers, and providing financial support through stipends or grants for equipment, competitions, and training, especially in individual sports. Organizing workshops and mentorship programs to connect young athletes with coaches and sports professionals is also recommended. Furthermore, schools should implement educational programs that promote gender equality in sports to reduce discrimination and address structural barriers.

Despite its valuable insights, this study has several limitations. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, and the disproportionate representation of participants from team sports affects the broader applicability. While qualitative methods provided a deeper understanding of individual experiences, they also restrict generalizability. Gender aspects were only partially addressed, emphasizing the need for further exploration of the barriers faced by female athletes. Compared to men, women face barriers on multiple fronts, and investigating these challenges could significantly contribute to reducing gender inequality in sports.

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