

UNCHARACTERISTICALLY HIGH PLAYER
DROPOUT IN WOMEN'S BASKETBALL
IN RELATION TO DUAL CAREERS



**The research is carried out by the Brainsporting – Sport Economics
and Decision Research Centre and funded by FIBA Europe.**

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ABOUT THE RESEARCH CENTRE

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The main focus of the centre's work is to generate new knowledge about sport industries to support decision making processes, in addition to the use of applied economic techniques, to satisfy the specific requirements of our clients with the aim of overcoming the complexities of sport in today's society and improving how it is governed and managed across all sports.

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FOREWORD

Under the FIBA Europe Youth Commission umbrella, we began conducting research with the aim of examining European youth basketball. In the first study our aim was to understand the efficiency of the European Youth championships in terms of supporting players' becoming senior national players. This research raised many issues, which convinced us to continue our analyses to answer different questions, so our attention turned more broadly to players' basketball and post-sport careers. In this our most recent study, funded by FIBA Europe, we focused on the issue of dropout in women's basketball. We attempted to understand the relationship between the international competition system and dropout and to highlight the main factors affecting unnecessarily high dropout.

We used both qualitative and quantitative methods to describe the dropout phenomenon and attempted to integrate the research group members' scientific, basketball and sport experience. We hope this study will be instrumental in helping stakeholders make more effective decisions in terms of keeping players in the basketball family as it determines the main factors affecting dropout in the special case of young women in basketball.

With this study our aim is to support national federations to avoid uncharacteristically high levels of dropout in their countries and, based on the results of the research, to support them in starting new programmes to positively influence players' dual careers. In the future our research group would like to help FIBA Europe to organise competitions and programmes with the goal of improving young players' skills and knowledge, on and off the court.

Dr Tamás Sterbenz

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INTRODUCTION

In our previous research players who took part in EuroBasket competitions were analysed, with the aim of investigating the importance of FIBA Youth Events.

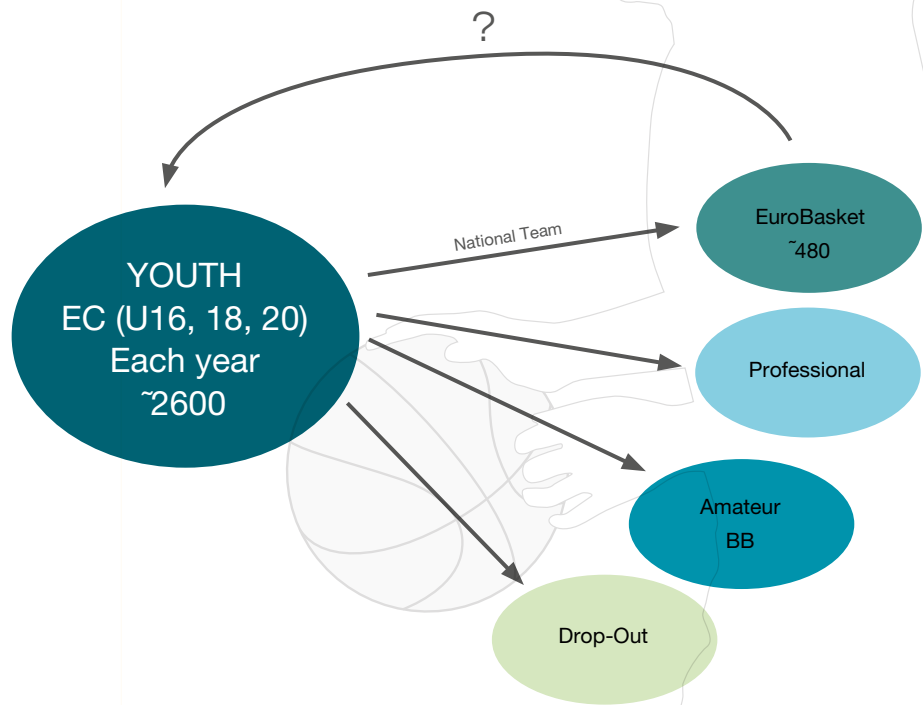


Figure 1: Targeted players in the previous research preliminary study

In addition to some identified characteristics of different countries, one of the most important findings was that women’s basketball follows a different pattern than the men’s game, and high dropout can be identified in different age groups.

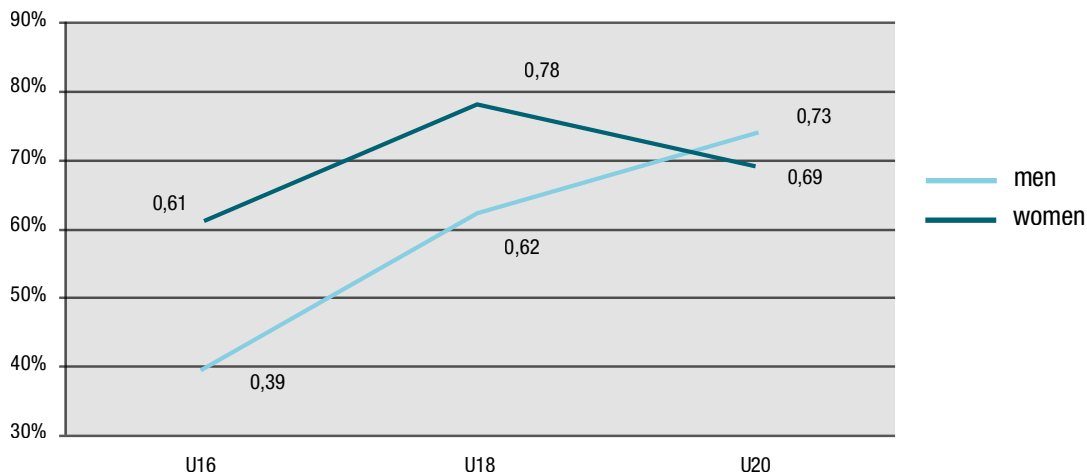


Figure 2: Senior team players who participated in youth competitions - men and women (2005-2013)

Thus, the primary goal with the current research was to gain a deeper understanding of the dropout phenomenon among women basketball players and identify the factors that play an important role in this.

This research was expanded in terms of the number of players who were involved compared to the previous research. The target population was increased from 480 to 2,200. In addition to the number of countries being expanded to twenty, the approach used in terms of how we identified our target groups changed and we included all of the players who took part in the different FIBA Youth Events between 2005 and 2014 (see the detailed specification of the target group on p. 11).

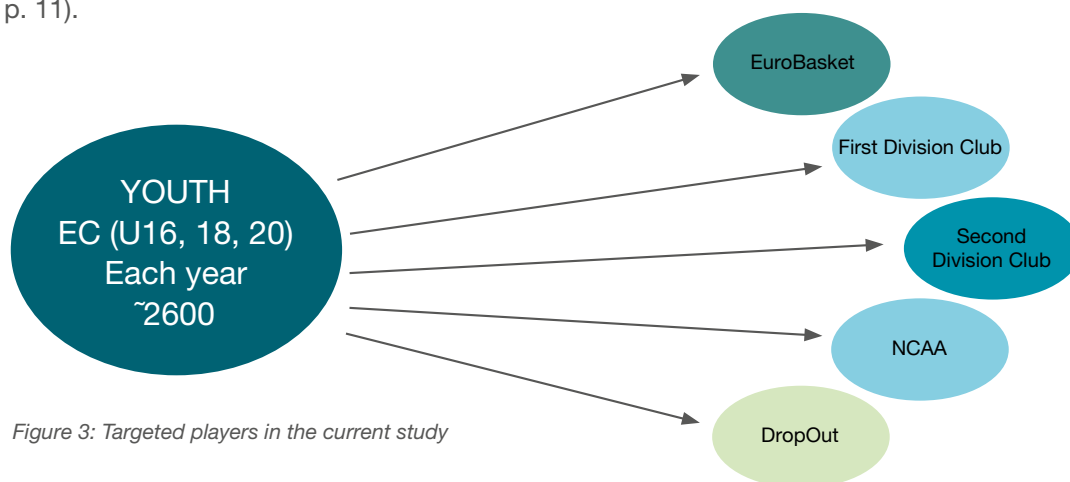


Figure 3: Targeted players in the current study

Sociological approach to the dropout phenomenon

Elite sport has been a focus of scientific research for decades. When summing up the outcomes of these works, Coakley¹ identified the following patterns related to changing and ending sport participation:

- When people drop out of a particular sport, they don't drop out of all sports forever, nor do they cut all ties with sports.
- Many people play different and less competitive sports as they become older, or they move into other sport roles such as coach, administrator, or sports businessperson.



- Dropping out of sports is usually connected with developmental changes and transitions in the rest of a person's life, e.g. changing schools, graduating, getting a job, getting married, having children, and so on.
- Dropping out of sports is not always the result of negative experiences, although injuries, exploitation, poor coaching, and abuse from coaches influence some decisions to change or end participation.
- Problems may occur for those who end long careers in sports, especially those who have no identities apart from sports or lack social and material resources for making transitions into other careers and relationships.

An athletic career differs from others in several respects, and this is even more pronounced in the case of women. The decision to pursue an elite sporting career is constantly challenged by other socially prescribed 'duties', such as studying, paid employment or having children, which in many cases, run parallel with the athletic career. If a female athlete can turn professional, the issue of paid employment is resolved through the sporting activity; however, for the majority of athletes, including many that have been very successful in their sport, alternative ways of supporting themselves financially is a reality.² Indeed, the elite athletes' decision to retire is usually associated with two practical factors: (1) the need to obtain a job and support themselves and (2) realistic judgments about their sport skills and the chances of advancing to higher levels of competition.³

¹Coakley J. (2015) Sport in Society. Issues and Controversies. New York: McGraw-Hill.

²David, P. (1999) Children's rights in sports: young athletes and competitive sports: exploit and exploitation. The International Journal of Children's Rights, 7(1), 53-81

³Koukouris, K. (1994) Constructed case studies: Athletes' perspectives of disengaging from organized competitive sport. Sociology of Sport Journal 11(2), 114-139.

Social environment of elite athletes

Athletes are surrounded by an **entourage of supporters and stakeholders**, who want to influence young sportspersons in ways they feel are best for their development:

- (1) **sports stakeholders**, such as coaches, physiotherapists, psychologists, nutritionists, medical advisers and others;
- (2) **social environment**, including family, friends and peers;
- (3) **education specialists**, e.g., teachers, tutors, mentors and others

Amara, M., Aquilina, D., Henry, I., PMP Consultants (2004). Education of Elite Young Sportspersons in Europe. Brussels: European Commission: DG Education and Culture.

Support from all the members of the entourage is the key to enabling athletes to achieve a balance between their education, sport and social development. Athletes go through several stages of their career transition when pressures and conflicts may become acute. During periods in which they move up to higher levels of competition, they may need additional help and support in terms of managing failure and dealing with the end of their sporting careers.

Sport as a channel of social mobility

On a general level, career and mobility opportunities exist in sport and sport organisations. We can talk about the existence of direct social mobility when the sporting activity becomes a sufficient source of income in itself, which, however, is typical of a limited number of sports and, even within these, a low percentage of elite athletes. As we consider the impact of sports on mobility, it must also be highlighted that the playing careers of professional athletes are usually short-term. In reflecting on the situation of women, it can be said that opportunities for them are growing but remain limited on and off the field in comparison with men.⁴ In taking female basketball into consideration, these statements can all be accepted as valid; the professional career of a female basketball player may last a decade or a little longer, and the range of female professional clubs is generally limited to one or two divisions in European countries.

⁴Coakley, 2015

Playing **sports is positively related to future occupational success and upward mobility** when it:

- (1) increases **opportunities to complete academic degrees, develop job-related skills** and/or **extend one's knowledge about the world outside of sports**;
- (2) increases **support from other significant people** (e.g. coaches) for **overall growth and development**, not just sport development;
- (3) provides opportunities to **develop social networks** that are connected with career possibilities outside of sports and sport organisations;
- (4) provides **material resources and the guidance** needed to successfully create and manage opportunities;
- (5) expands **experiences, identities, and abilities unrelated to sports**;
- (6) **minimises the risk of disabling injuries** that restrict physical movement or require expensive and/or chronic medical treatment (Coakley, 2015, p. 293-294).

PARTICIPATION IN ELITE SPORT: Two theoretical approaches

Zero-sum game: time spent with sport draws attention away from other activities (studies, work), resulting in a win-loss situation in the life of the athlete.

- o This is why status inconsistency (a lack of congruence in different status-dimensions: education level, employment, income level) often occurs in sports.

Developmental theory: participation in sport can mean an advantage for young athletes in studying and later in work as it has several positive outcomes on personal development.

Dual career

Since elite sporting careers are very demanding in time and concentration, athletes cannot avoid finding themselves in the position of having to choose between pursuing a professional career in sports and pursuing an education.⁵ The issue of the dual career, that is, a parallel life as athlete and student, has come into the focus of international scientific and policy attention in the past decade, and there are several diverse initiatives to address this challenge in European Countries.⁶

“In order to ensure the reintegration of professional sportspersons into the labour market at the end of their sporting careers, the Commission emphasises the importance of taking into account at an early stage the need to provide "dual career" training for young sportsmen and sportswomen and to provide high quality local training centres to safeguard their moral, educational and professional interests.” (EU's White Paper on Sport, 2007)

In connection with the dual career of elite athletes, three major areas of intervention can be identified: firstly, to keep as many secondary school students in competitive sports as possible by making them and their parents feel that it is possible to strike a balance between studies and sport; secondly, to help graduates of the public education system to continue their studies in higher education or a vocational education and training (VET) system; and, thirdly, to help athletes to enter the labour market.⁷ In terms of the solutions on offer regarding the student-athlete dual career,

there are different models around the globe. Although a basic distinction can be made between the US and the European model, in the latter there are various solutions with regards to the assistance provided to elite athletes by the relevant stakeholders.⁸

⁵Athletes to Business (2011) Promoting dual career in the EU. Available at: http://eose.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/a2b_guidelines_promoting-dual-career.pdf

⁶Caput-Jogunica, R., Ćurković, S., Bjelić, G. (2012) Comparative analysis: support for students – athletes and the guidelines for the universities in Southeast Europe. Sport Science 5(1), 21–26.

⁷Farkas, J., Bardocz-Bencsik, M., Kozsła, T. (2015) Development and system of athletes' dual career in Hungary. In: Landa, S. (ed.) Sport, Education and Training in Europe: A dual career for a dual life. Angers: Sport et Citoyenneté. 125-134.

⁸Henry, I. (2010) Elite Athletes and Higher Education: Lifestyle, Balance and the Management of Sporting and Educational Performance. Brussels: International Olympic Committee, University Relation Olympic Studies Centre.



In contrast to the European model of collegiate sports, where athletes belong to clubs and may be assisted by universities in pursuing a dual career (athlete as student), the educational system in the USA promotes the dual career within the framework of college sports, where institutions offer scholarships to talented athletes (student as athlete). Time and time again, the question is raised as to whether the American system could in some way be transferred to the European context, but given the major differences in the two sport models, it does not seem likely to happen. Furthermore, American universities are also criticised for exploiting the talent of their students on sport scholarships without taking their academic progress seriously;⁹ despite good intentions, college student-athletes end up feeling like ‘employees’ that ‘have to do their sportjob’, rather than being encouraged to balance their sport with an education.¹⁰ A research carried out among collegiate athletes also revealed that women’s peer culture promoted an academic orientation rather than an athletic one, and female athletes had a stronger student identity, also reinforced by the fact that their athletic achievement was less recognized by the university community than that of males.¹¹

⁹Figler, S., Figler, H. (1984) The athlete’s game plan for college and career. Princeton: Peterson’s Guides.

¹⁰Pavlidis, G., Gargalianos D. (2014) High performance athletes’ education: value, challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Physical Education and Sport* 14(2), 293-300.

¹¹Meyer, B.B. (1990) From Idealism to Actualization: The Academic Performance of Female Collegiate Athletes. *Sociology of Sport Journal* 7(1), 44-57.; Riemer, B. A., Beal, B., Schroeder, P. (2000) The Influences of Peer and University Culture on Female Student Athletes’ Perceptions of Career Termination, Professionalization, and Social Isolation. *Journal of Sport Behavior* 23(4), 364-378.

BOX 1: Réka Csernyi, former national team basketball player who elected to drop out early and pursue a non-sport career.

She represented Hungary at the youth level, and later became a regular player in the national team. The Hungarian basketball community almost went into shock when she announced her desire to quit. She left for Harvard University and obtained a degree in economics in 2001.

Why did you choose to study abroad, and why particularly in the United States?

I wanted to combine athletics and academics at the same time. This idea pushed me to study abroad, at Harvard, which is traditionally outstanding in academics.

The Hungarian basketball community was shocked when you decided to leave the country. Were you aware of all the consequences of your decision? How did you plan your time in the NCAA?

First of all, I was not offered a sport-scholarship; the amount I got was a kind of financial aid to complement my financial resources. Also, I wanted to prove my abilities in a different culture that pushed me to find a new adventure.

You were only 20 when you decided to give up your professional career. It must have been a tough decision. Did you regret your choice?

Some people were worrying about me. They underestimated my opportunities in the NCAA, but they were wrong. As a European national team player, I found a way to improve my performance in university sport and managed to broaden my tactical repertoire.

In which ways did you take advantage of being part of the American student-athlete system?

I would not say that the environment inspired me to live a brand new life, though it was a decisive period in my career. Later, I continued my professional career in Europe. I was a well-respected and successful player, but I felt that I had to put my non-sport goals first. If I had aimed to spend another 5-10 years in professional basketball, then, with no work experience, I would never have got a smart job at the age of 33-34. So I chose a non-sport career and retired from professional sport in 2008. Did Harvard convince you to change your personal goals?

Harvard was an ‘open window’, that convinced me to take academics as seriously as sports. I was able to do both at the same time and do not blame the student-athlete system for my relatively early dropout.

Did you regret your decision?

I felt I would be in a dead-end if I kept on playing basketball for another ten years. I wanted to build up my non-sport career. That was my choice and I did not regret it!”

Work-family conflict

Work-family conflict is defined as a type of inter-role conflict wherein at least some work and family responsibilities are not compatible and have resultant effects on each domain.¹²

Although work-family conflict can be typical in any profession, in the field of sport this conflict can be especially pronounced for several reasons. First, most occupations within the sport industry require long, non-traditional hours (i.e., nights and weekends) and often extensive travel, making it a context where work-family conflict is highly salient. Employees in this industry must constantly find creative ways of juggling both work and family, especially if they have children.¹³ When the emotional component of winning and losing is added, the pressure and stress of many sport occupations certainly carry over into the family domain, and may affect women at a higher level than men.¹⁴



¹²Boles, J., Howard, W.G., Donofrio, H. (2001) An Investigation into the inter-relationships of work-family conflict, family-work conflict, and work satisfaction. *Journal of Managerial Issues* 13, 376–391.; Greenhaus, J.H., & Beutell, N.J. (1985) Sources of conflict between work and family roles. *Academy of Management Review* 10, 76–88.

¹³Dixon, M.A., Bruening, J.E. (2005) Perspectives on Work-Family Conflict in Sport: An Integrated Approach. *Sport Management Review* 8, 227–253.

¹⁴Kelley, B.C. (1994) A model of stress and burnout in collegiate coaches: Effects of gender and time of season. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 65, 48–59.

Descriptive European overview of dropout

After we introduce the social aspects of the investigated phenomenon, the main results of the quantitative research will be presented.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

Target population

Those women basketball players were include in our analysis who:

- Were born after 1984
- AND
- played
- in the U16 national team between 2005 and 2010;
- OR
- in the U18 national team between 2005 and 2012;
- OR
- in the U20 national team between 2005 and 2014.

All the players considered to be DROPOUT PLAYERS, in terms of our research, who finished their active professional careers by 2015 based on Eurobasket data.

Number of included players: 2,197 from 20 countries

We formed four groups from the countries analysed based on their results in the Senior and Youth FIBA Europe Events between 2005-2015 (Table 1).

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Spain	Czech Republic	Slovakia	Poland
France	Serbia	Belarus	Ukraine
Russia	Croatia	Lithuania	Montenegro
Italy	Latvia	Hungary	Great Britain
Turkey	Sweden	Greece	Romania

Table 1: Country groups

- For the analysis of the parameters influencing dropout percentages, two types of statistical models were used:
1. Kaplan-Meier survival curves: These curves show the percentage of NO dropout of players analysed at the given age regarding each analysed factor.
 2. Cox proportional hazard model: This model is suitable for an analysis of multiple factors at the same time. It can estimate the unique effect of a given factor.

RESULTS

(1) Participation in FIBA Youth Events and dropout

The participation of a player in FIBA Youth Events as an explanatory factor of dropout percentage is measured as:

- a) number of occasions in the period analysed;
- b number of occasions in one year;
- c) type of participation.

Table 2 shows that:

- with the increase in the number of occasions in the period analysed or in one year, the mean age of dropout also increases and the dropout percentage decreases;
- players who played in the U20 national team (regardless of whether they played in the U16 and/or U18 national teams) have a lower dropout percentage and higher mean dropout age than other players.

a) Number of occasions in the period analysed

Number of times player participated in FIBA Youth Events in period analysed	Number of players	Dropout Percentage	Mean age of dropout
1	894	58.5%	24.06
2	471	42.9%	25.30
3	355	31.3%	25.64
3<	477	22.0%	26.27
Overall	2197	42.8%	25.48

b) Number of occasions in one year

Participation in two or more FIBA Youth Events in one year	Number of players	Dropout percentage	Mean age of dropout
No	2042	44.4%	25.34
Yes	155	21.9%	26.26

c) Type of participation

Participation in FIBA Youth Events	Number of players	Dropout Percentage	Mean age of dropout
only in U16	310	71.6%	20.85
only in U18	252	59.1%	23.21
only in U20	474	44.9%	26.60
in U16 and U18	234	47.0%	23.03
in U16 and U20	80	38.8%	24.15
in U18 and U20	343	31.2%	26.23
in U16 and U18 and U20	504	21.6%	24.85

Table 2: Participation in FIBA Youth Events and dropout

The dropout characteristics of different player groups are compared with the use of Kaplan-Meier curves as shown in Figures 4-6. The curve of a given player group shows the probability of NO dropout (this means the player still has an active professional basketball career) against the player’s age. For example, from Figure 4 we can see that the percentage of women players remaining professionally active until the age of 21 were:

- 64.4% for those who participated in one FIBA Youth Event in the period analysed;
- 77.0% for those who participated in two FIBA Youth Events in the period analysed;
- 85.6% for those who participated in three FIBA Youth Events in the period analysed;
- 91.3% for those who participated in more than three FIBA Youth Events in the period analysed.

Based on Figure 4, it is clear that greater participation in FIBA Youth Events support a longer active professional career. The statement confirms that these differences between the analysed player groups are statistically significant. Figure 5 shows that players who take part in more than one FIBA Youth Event in one year have a greater likelihood of NO dropout (that means remaining active professionally) at each age. This difference is statistically significant.

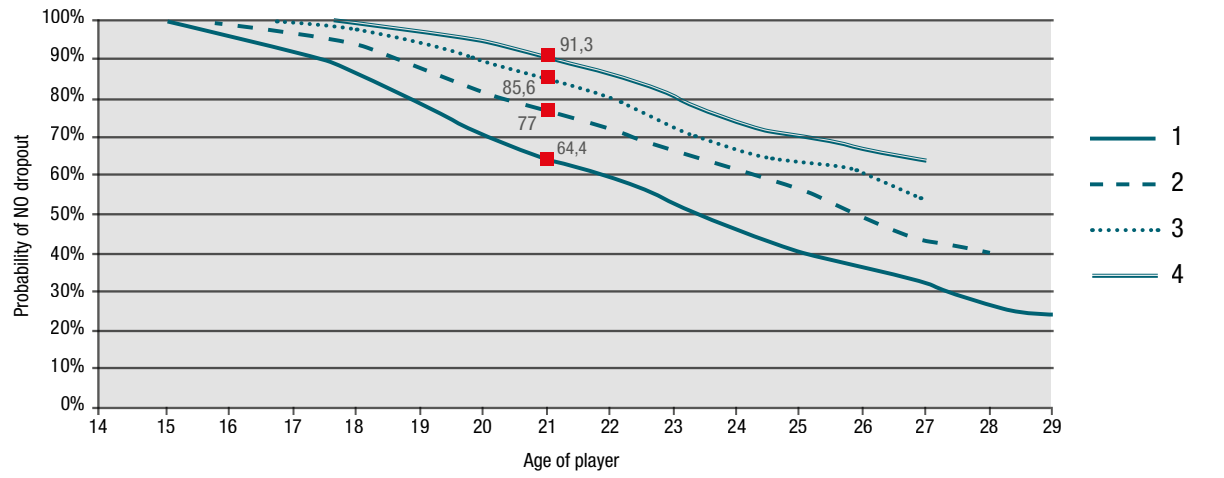


Figure 4: Probability of NO dropout by number of times player participated in FIBA Youth Events in period analysed

Figure 5 shows that players who take part in more than one FIBA Youth Event in one year have a greater likelihood of NO dropout (that means remaining active professionally) at each age. This difference is statistically significant.

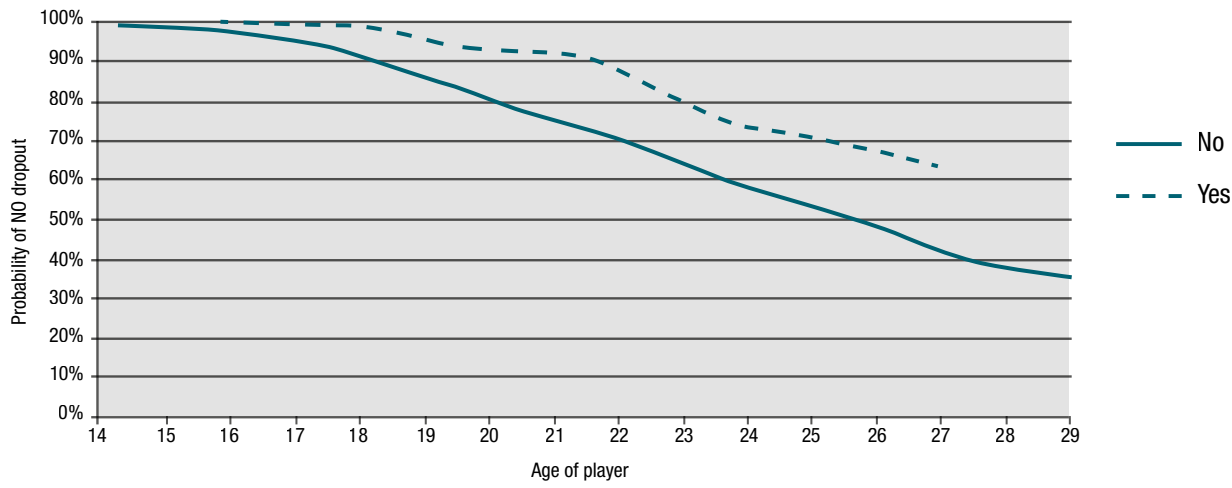


Figure 5: Probability of NO dropout by number of times player participated in FIBA Youth Events in period analysed in one year

By analysing the relationship between dropout and type of participation in FIBA Youth Events, we can conclude that greater participation in FIBA Youth Events increases the likelihood of NO dropout. Participation in U20 events may support a longer active career.

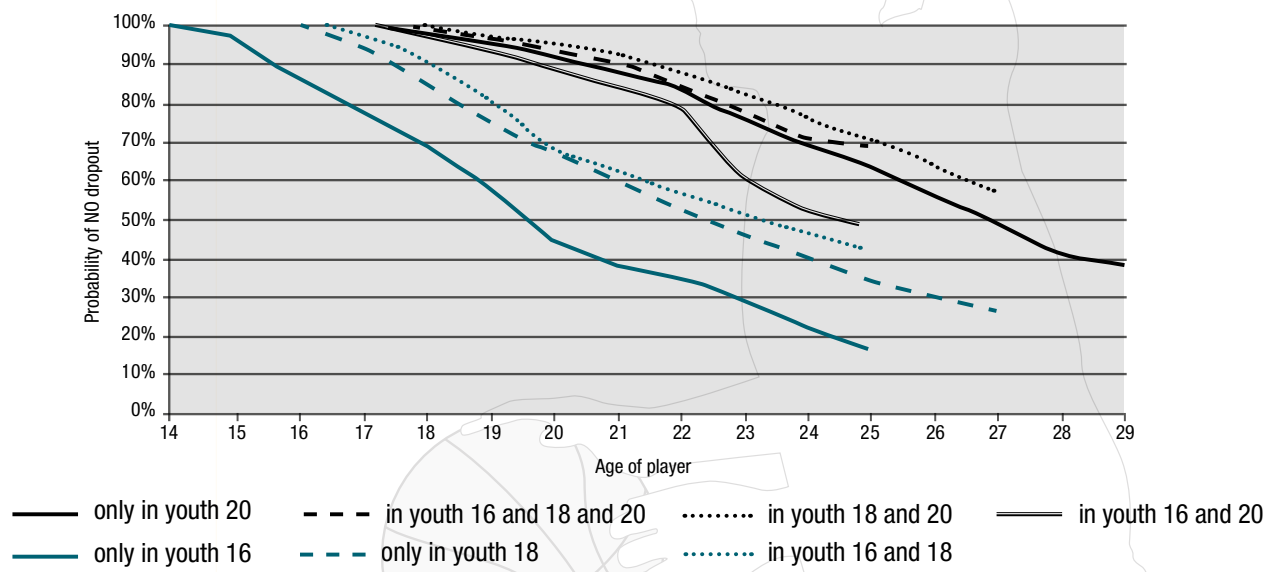


Figure 6; Probability of NO dropout by type of participation



(2) Country groups and dropout

The analysed countries are classified based on the results of the European Championships and the European Youth Championships between 2005 and 2015: the first is the most efficient group, and the fourth is the least successful group. An analysis of the data in Table 3 and the curves in Figure 7 lead to the main conclusion, which is that the first group has the best dropout characteristics.

The third and the fourth groups are characterised by the greatest dropout percentage at each age, and are virtually the same in this regard.

Country group	Number of players	Dropout percentage	Mean age of dropout
1	616	32.0%	26.70
2	520	42.9%	25.51
3	546	49.1%	24.73
4	515	49.1%	24.78

Table 3: Country groups and dropout

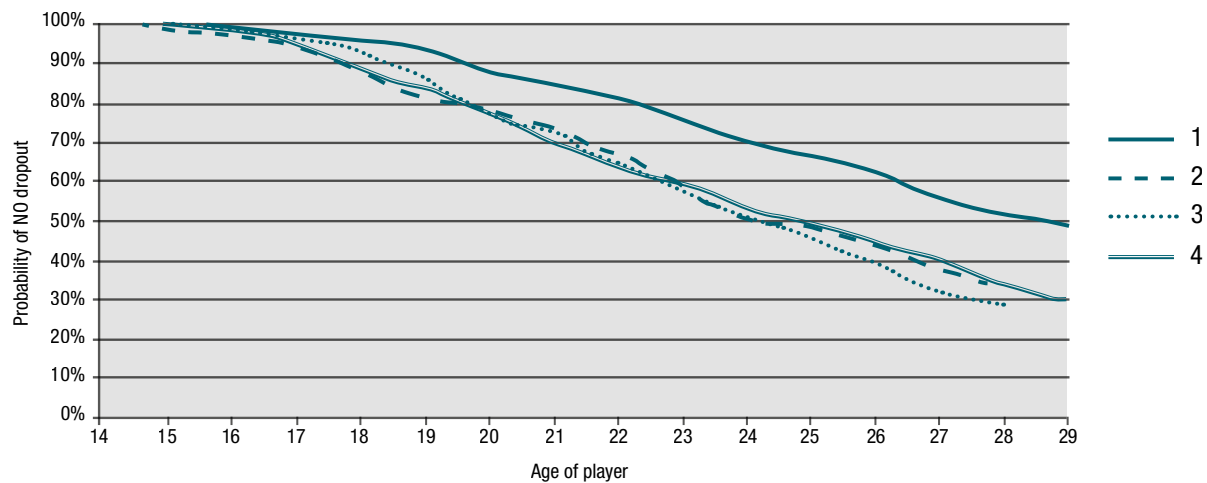


Figure 7: Percentage of NO dropout by country group

(3) Relative age effect – quarter of birth and dropout

The relative age effect (its name is the Matthew effect in sports) is a type of age-discrepancy phenomenon which states that some players born in later months are underrepresented and are at an unfair disadvantage based on their birth date in many aspects of life. The distribution of players by quarter of birth (Figure 8) shows that the proportion of players born in the first quarter of the year is the greatest in all cohorts. In Figure 9 the curves are similar, which means there aren't differences in the dropout rates between players born in different quarters of the year. In summary, the relative age effect is observed in FIBA Youth Events but has no effect on dropout.

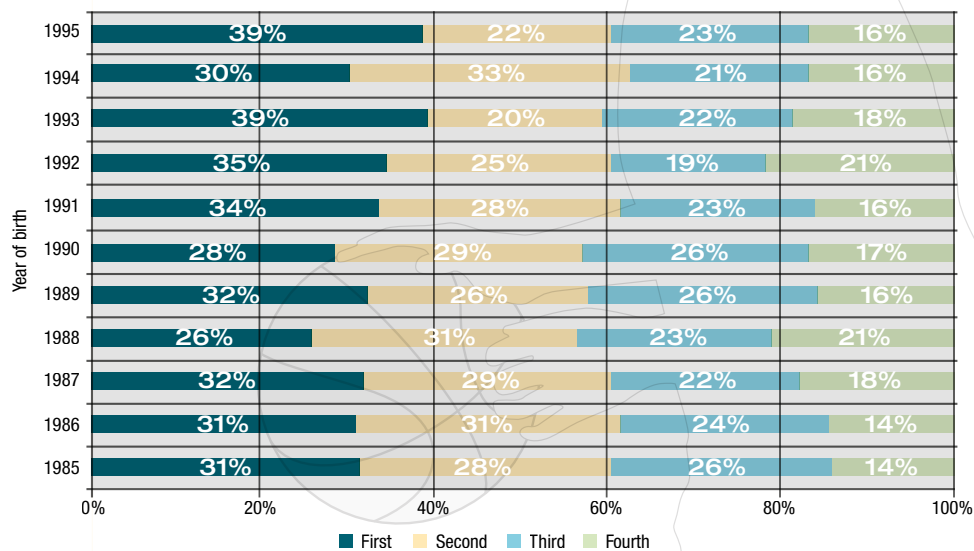


Figure 8: Distribution of players by quarter of birth

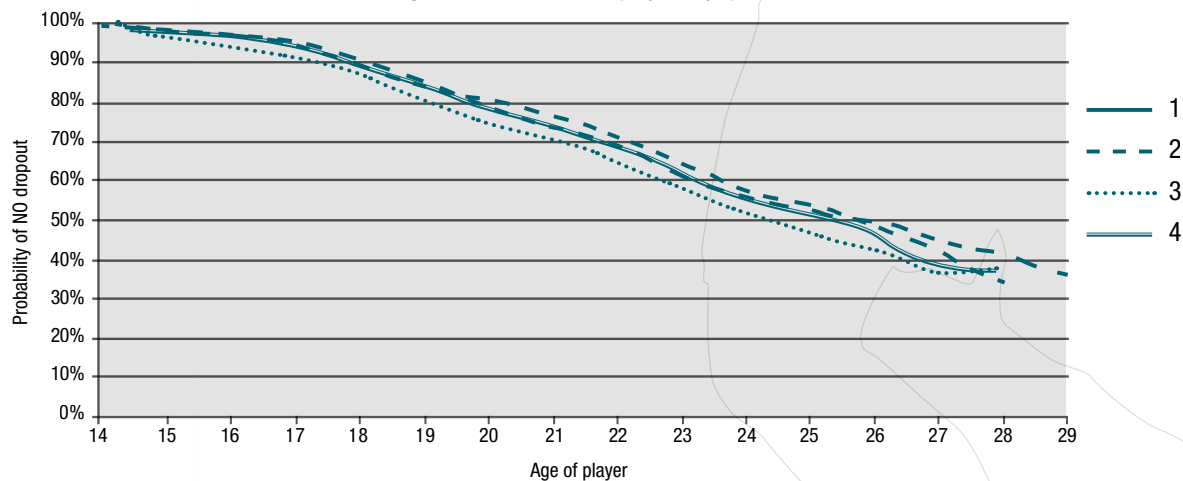


Figure 9: Percentage of NO dropout by quarter of birth

(4) Competition level of player in their final year and dropout

The players are grouped according to their level of competition in their final year. Based on Table 4 and Figure 10, we can conclude that the players who reach the first division have a longer active career, and the players who play in the USA during their studies often finish their playing careers there.

Player's competition level in their final year	Number of players	Dropout percentage	Mean age of dropout
Club - first class	1517	34.5%	26.51
Club - second class	324	50.6%	25.00
Club in USA	159	47.8%	23.06
National team	197	90.4%	19.08
Overall	2197	42.8%	25.48

Table 4:The player's competition level in their final year and dropout

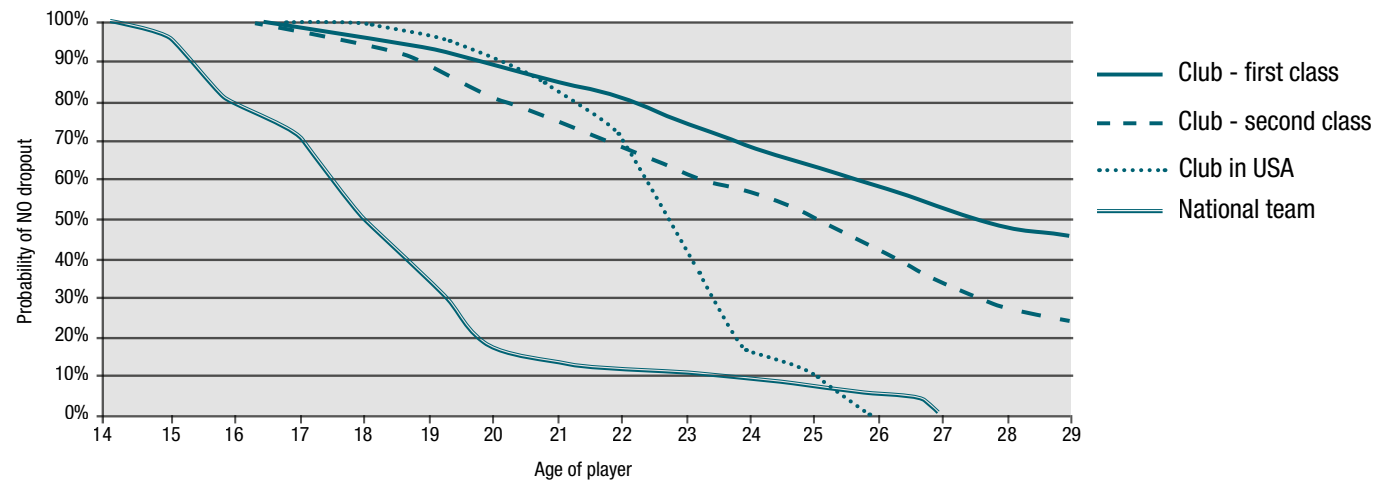


Figure 10: Percentage of NO dropout by player's competition level in their final year



KEY FINDINGS

- The greater the participation in FIBA Youth Events, the better the dropout characteristics.
- The relative age effect was observed in FIBA Youth Events, but has no effect on dropout.
- The countries with the best results in European Youth and Senior Championships between 2005 and 2015 have the lowest dropout rates at each age.
- Players who played in a first-division European club in their final year had the best dropout characteristics; players who played for a club in the USA or in their national team had the worst dropout characteristics.

Results from the qualitative research

Objectives of the research

The aim of the research was to investigate the career prospects of international female basketball players and their plans for the future, on and off the court. We were also interested in knowing how elite female basketball players can manage their life and plans off the court while playing basketball and the reasons for them dropping out. In order to gain insight from multiple perspectives, we targeted three groups in the research: active players, retired players and employees of national basketball federations in Europe.

Research methodology

To be able to answer these questions, an online survey was conducted in the three target groups of the research. The survey consisted of open- and closed-ended questions, so that both qualitative and quantitative results could be obtained. The questionnaires were filled out on a voluntary basis in the period between May and September, 2015. Information on the three samples is presented in Table 5.

	Active players	Retired players	Fed. representatives
N	35	24	11
Nations represented	Croatia (1) Czech Republic (1) Finland (14) Germany (3) Hungary (1) Ireland (3) Italy (6) Luxembourg (4) Slovenia (1) Turkey (1)	Croatia (1) Czech Republic (1) Finland (9) Germany (8) Luxembourg (1) Slovenia (3) Turkey (1)	Czech Republic (1) Finland (1) Ireland (1) Italy (1) Luxembourg (1) Moldova (1) Slovenia (1) Sweden (1) Turkey (1) N/A (2)
Age distribution	-20 (5) 21-25 (15) 26-30 (6) 30+ (9)	-30 (4) 31-40 (13) 40+ (7)	N/A

Table 5: Description of the research sample

Since the total number of respondents is fairly limited, an extensive quantitative analysis of the results was not realistic; however, the open-ended questions offered a rich source of qualitative data, which could be analysed in terms of content, key elements and typical patterns.

In addition to the online survey, semi-structured interviews were carried out with retired female basketball players (N=15) who used to play in the 1st or 2nd league in Hungary. To underline that their answers may be relevant in the topic of dropout, it has to be mentioned that 13 of them quit when they were less than 22 years old.



Typical reasons for dropout and retirement

Age and physical condition can be accepted as a 'natural' reason for retirement, which does not require a sociological understanding.

Due to the extensive, long-term physical workload on players, a serious injury is often their primary reason for finishing their basketball careers, and this is something that these players cannot prepare for, which may result in psychological problems as well.

Some respondents claimed that it is difficult to strike a balance between studying and competing in sport at a high level, so pursuing a dual career, i.e. the life of a student and an athlete, can be identified as a particular challenge.

Injuries, burnout

'I think that those top 3-5% quality players who make it to the national team should be recognised and honoured with more rest time in a given year. I remember playing 4-5 years of almost non-stop basketball all year around, with a 2-3 week break maximum. I think over time we get burnt out,

our bodies can't tolerate 3-4 hours of intense workouts every day for 50 weeks per year continuously. By the age of 20, most players are injured in some way, shape or form.'

'The main reason behind my retirement from professional basketball was my back injury. At 19 I suffered a herniated disc, which made me less athletic, slower and overall less valuable on the court. It took me about four years to overcome my depression after my injury...'

Dual career: sport and studies

'I found it very hard, because everything took a lot of time ... especially during grammar school... 6-7 lectures a day and 6 trainings a week...and I had to travel a lot between all the activities...'

'When I was 14, my basketball club suggested that I begin home-schooling privately in order to spend more time with basketball, but my parents did not support it. So when my coach realized that I have serious future plans for my studies, he gave up on me as a player.'

'It is difficult at times to strike a balance. To combine it with my studies was easy because I went to a university in the US. I believe that their system helps the athletes to combine both.' (from Luxembourg, active player, age 29)

Along the same line, some of the players and federation members pointed out that the smooth transition from playing career to another one is not well-assisted at the institutional level, and players perceive a lack of career support in this respect.



Another, mainly time-related challenge mentioned by the players was social isolation and difficulty in meeting friends, attending family events and dating people (particularly outside the world of sport). The regular training sessions and camps and competitions do not make it easy for youngsters to integrate into any peer group, apart from their basketball community, even though other reference groups, especially the class, are also important socialising agents at a young age.

Institutional shortcomings: lack of career support

'Basketball was such a big part of my identity, and I almost did not see it as possible to live life without it. Also, there were no support services at the time (not sure about now) to help active professional athletes transition into their future life in 'the real world.' (from Finland, retired after age 32)

'In Italy yes, playing is fun, and you can make a living out of it, but that will only last for so long if you are lucky. [...] Also once you stop playing basketball the transition to the work world is not easy; it would help if there were incentives and things basketball players could do to make that transition easier - I don't know, maybe summer jobs offered by the team or the federation.' (from Italy, active player, age 30)

'It's very difficult because our school system does not attach particular importance to the sport, and at the same time the clubs do not have the economic capacity to support this deficiency.' (from Italy, Fed. Board member)

Social isolation: peers

'I lost all other aspects of my life when I was only 12-13...sometimes it felt as if basketball had stolen the diversity from my life...'

'I missed so much to experience apart from this tiny isolated group of people.'

'[...] striking a balance between my best friends, my family and my basketball career works quite well because my best friends are mostly high-level athletes too.' (from Luxembourg, active player, age 19)

'My reasons for quitting most likely related to social life, like getting integrated into high school class and building friendships apart from the basketball team [...] I must say that I just became way more balanced and happier since I stopped playing.'

Spending time with the family is also limited for elite basketball players, especially after starting adult life away from their parents. Often times, the basketball career of a player requires a lot of moving, and sometimes even leaving the country where the family lives.

Social isolation: Family

‘I was willing to sacrifice all my free time activities in order to go to the trainings or to attend a competition... but when I turned 16, my parents slowly and surely ‘opened my eyes’ and I realized that there is so much going on in this world apart from that...’

‘I was playing for a basketball club that was far from my hometown, so I missed many family occasions. ‘

‘In Germany I played in different cities and parts of Germany, so I was always far away from my family and friends. Also when I played in Hungary and Italy, it was even further away and it was harder to stay in contact and meet them. [...] I could almost never be present at birthdays and important happenings in the family. [...] Sometimes I do regret that I’ve lost out on a lot.’ (from Germany, retired at age 28-32)

The social network development of an elite basketball player is mostly realised within the world of basketball, and not outside of it. This is also the case with dating, because the partner is also required to live ‘the basketball way of life’ in many ways, and coming from another background requires a lot of tolerance and understanding.

Social isolation: dating

‘My friends and relationships were very important to me, but honestly I never had enough time to form very deep relationships.. I was always too busy...’

‘The majority of my friends were through basketball, so we pretty much shared a similar way of life. [...] However, dating was hard at times because I felt like I was always the one who had to be waited for, in terms of practices or games. Some relationships ended because of my moving abroad when a season started.’ (from Finland, retired at age 23-27)

As female athletes advance in age, motherhood becomes more important for them, which means that they may have to balance another kind of dual career (as an athlete and a mother), or even a triple career, if they are not a professional player. This again requires a lot of support from the family and one's partner, and may result in a work-family conflict.



Sport can make a direct contribution to a change in one's social status, and many young people engage in high-level sporting activity to achieve social mobility. For female basketball players going pro is not a reality in many countries, and federation representatives perceived financial reasons to be the main factor behind retirement. Even if in a country it is possible to play as professional, early career salaries are not very encouraging, and therefore, many young athletes think that they cannot base their future life on sport.¹⁵

¹⁵Velenczei, A., Gál, A. (2011) New Challenges, Old Answers in Hungarian Sport: The Case of Talent Management. *European Journal for Sport and Society* 8(4), 281-297.

Work-family conflict

'I would respect players' quality/family time over holidays such as Christmas and New Year's Eve by not holding practices/games close to those days.'

'Balancing was manageable with full-time work and studies, but when children were born, it became more difficult. Family (mom, dad, other) helped as much as they could and it was crucial help. A precise timetable was necessary.' (from Finland, retired after age 32)

'Basketball was my whole life and I had very big problems in finding the balance when I got married. My husband was not an athlete and he could never understand my professional life.' (from Turkey, retired after age 32)

'It is just sad that Italy doesn't consider our sport a profession, hindering every support to have a child.

There is no insurance or help from the state; you have to stop your career and then hope to be able to get back all on your own having no financial help or support from the state or team.' (from Italy, active player, age 30)

Lack of social mobility

'As it is a non-professional game in Ireland, a lot of players would not put basketball first, and so it loses out'. (from Ireland, senior technical manager)

'The last time I played professional basketball in Hungary, my monthly salary was 30,000 HUF (96 euros). In the meantime I finished college in the US with a strong degree, which makes me very marketable. Today, I make more money than that in one day working in finance in the US. I had a large incentive to pursue my professional goals beyond basketball. Because at the end of the day, we are all trying to make enough money to support our families, build homes and live comfortably.'

'They [her basketball club] wanted us to sign a contract

for a small wage, saying that we could not join another team anytime soon. I asked what happens if I wanted to stop playing, because I was already considering it, and they did not even take it seriously. So I didn't sign, and that also caused some confrontations.'

Coaching styles, conflicts with the coach

'The coach wasn't willing to understand that, in certain cases, studying comes first, or even social activities [...] if there was a serious injury or sickness, the coach was not supportive and, on the contrary, blamed the player herself for getting injured/sick and missing trainings.'

'I am pretty sure if one of our parents had heard the way these people talk to their young daughters, then they would have walked their girls off the court straight away.'

'When I turned 12-13, coaches were sometimes shouting like crazy and humiliating us; I just really couldn't enjoy it anymore... I think the coaches at that time could really have made a huge difference. Some people need to be trained differently than others – I understand that – but I, for example, am not motivated by humiliation or negativity. I think I would have needed more positive feedback. It's true though, it would have been easier to balance things if I had had more self-confidence.'

On the personal level, relationship and possible conflicts with the coach can be a defining factor in the wellbeing of an elite athlete. Even if the goals of the two parties are the same in terms of being successful and enhancing performance, their points of view may differ with regards to the sacrifice the player should make to achieve them. Often times, this conflict is reflected in 'coaching styles' featuring poor communication with players and a lack of respect for them.



Finally, a challenge on the individual level has to be mentioned, which is the psychological pressure an elite sporting career implies. Some players find it difficult to live with the stress related to the aforementioned issues and the high expectations towards sporting excellence and consistently high performance.

Psychological pressure

‘By far the hardest thing was to find balance with the hopes and expectations of my parents. That was one of my biggest struggles – trying to fulfill their hopes and prove their fears wrong about my choice of career.’

(from Finland, retired at age 23-27)

‘It depends on the psychological profile of the player. There are players who are remarkably versatile, even in academics, while there are also those who do not know life outside basketball. It is difficult to have a ‘normal’ off-court life if you constantly travel or live in different countries season after season, but there are players who create a great balance after all.’ (from Croatia, federation employee)



Concluding thoughts

Questions and doubts related to social mobility and maintaining a standard of living, related to studies in terms of whether to start/suspend them, and those related to family in terms of whether to have children or get married are all inherent elements of an elite female athlete's career and, apart from injuries, the tensions accompanying the decision made in connection with these issues may be the primary reasons for retirement and for dropping out at an earlier point in one's career as well.

Managing career transition issues is a significant factor in an athlete's overall welfare and success. Understanding the challenges of these dual or even triple careers, balancing them with the demands of the game and its economic and social environment, and providing a supportive environment on personal, organisational and structural levels may be a step forward in preventing or reducing the prevalence of dropout among female basketball players.

Decision makers should facilitate the reduction of the uncharacteristically high dropout of women basketball players by introducing programmes which support the retaining of athletes in their sports and promote further researches in order to gain a deeper understanding of the dropout phenomenon at both the country-specific and individual player level.

For more information about the research, please contact: gulyas@tf.hu



