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“It does not matter how many times you get knocked down, but how many times you get up” – Vince Lombardi, famous American football coach

Sports aficionados in India have a recurring set of questions:

- Why did it take over 28 years to win back the cricket World Cup?
- Why did it take 108 years for an Indian to win the first ever Individual Olympic gold medal?
- Why is it that a Singles Grand Slam title is so elusive?
- With eight Olympic gold medals in the past, why didn't the men's hockey team even qualify for the Olympics in 2008?

As the second most populous nation in the world, it's only fair to assume that raw talent is not lacking.

### What, then, is the Problem?

There are several - often inter-connected - causes like the following—

- lack of sporting infrastructure
- apathetic governing bodies
- a traditional apprehension towards careers in sports
- talent being allowed to drop off before it reaches its prime

To be fair, not all of these are without justification – for a nation faced with decades of slow growth, the predictability of a ‘regular’ job did have – and continues to have – a strong appeal.

Times, however, have changed, and a younger, more energetic India is seeking answers.

In a study conducted by Nidhi Gupta and Aditi Kini of GoSports Foundation, a sports-based NGO based in Bangalore, it emerged that a key factor for India's modest successes at the international stage is that high-performing and well-deserving sportspersons who set out to make their careers in sports, drop out even before they reach the peak of their careers.

“There is no lack of sporting talent in India; the only problem is that if there are a 1000 players in a particular sport, only 100 may have the talent required, but only one out of that 100 might be able to defy the norm and succeed - and the rest dropout,” opines Abhijeet Kulkarni, sports journalist with the Hindustan Times.



This article explores this phenomenon of ‘dropouts’, and highlights some of the causes for athletes calling it quits prematurely. The full text of the study is available with GoSports Foundation.

### Top Reasons for Sportspersons to Drop Out Prematurely:

A sample population of 47 people (that included 14 sports journalists and 33 sportspersons - three of whom are currently coaches) was surveyed. The following emerged as the top reasons for sports dropouts (figures in brackets indicate percentage of population that ranked the reason as #1):

- Non viability of career (34.04%)
- Systemic factors (27.66%)
- Physical factors (12.77%)
- Performance related factors (10.64%)
- Economic factors (8.51%)
- External factors (6.38%)

## A Sports Career: Why Not ?

**Non Viability of Career:** Sportspersons in India often believe that while they were active in sports, there was no structured career path for their sport that would give them the financial security during (and after) their sports career. The individual's desire to pursue higher education or a different career was also subsumed under this factor - due to the opportunity cost involved in pursuing sport. "At the time, a select few were able to make a viable career in cricket. Given that selection processes were neither transparent nor always meritocratic, pursuing a cricket career seemed an untenable risk. Presented with the opportunity to pursue a career in law, I opted to undertake a professional course in law, which I thought would give me greater control over my future," confesses Nandan Kamath, former captain of Karnataka state Under-16 cricket team.

**Systemic Factors:** These included a lack of government support, limited access to infrastructure, coaches and medical facilities. From beneath the surface also emerged certain sub-factors like conflicts within the sporting environment, and the lack of platforms for sportspersons to showcase their talent and compete with their contemporaries. "There is no lack of talent, commitment or passion in India. It's the system that fails them," feels Anasuya Mathur, Journalist, NDTV.

"There are associations in every state but most of them are not run by sports people themselves, they are not professional and tend to be highly influenced by politics in the area," opines B Vijay Murty, journalist, Hindustan Times.



**Physical Factors:** These included injuries sustained during the period preceding dropout. They also included the sportspersons' physical limitation to take it to the next level. "No sportsperson in India gives

their 100% while in training camps, as they are always afraid that if they get injured, they will never get to play again. (This is) because there is no guarantee that they would receive appropriate medical attention," said Rajiv Mishra, whose stupendous Golden Goal clinched the trophy for India in the 1997 Junior World Cup hockey tournament. He was one who had to drop out due to an injury that was not given proper medical attention.

**Performance-related Factors:** These included the lack of success or improvement in the athlete's performance (in turn leading to a lack of motivation and drive, and subsequent burnout).

Says former India cricketer, L Sivaramakrishnan: "When they don't get selected for the 'under 16' or 'under 19' team, they get dejected and then concentrate on studies. This lack of self-confidence is one of the main reasons for athletes to drop out of sports."

**Economic Factors:** These included primarily the lack of financial means (either through personal means or sponsorships) for the sportsperson to be able to continue his/her sport. After a certain point in their careers, athletes need to spend considerable money for equipment, training, and travelling to international tournaments. Naturally, this makes it that much more difficult for people from modest backgrounds.

**External Factors:** These included mainly pressures that were social, parental and peer pressure of different kinds, plus a mindset that made parents encourage more predictable careers for their children. They also took into account the fact that sportspersons may choose to drop out once 'intermediate' objectives have been fulfilled (such as using sports to get admission into prestigious colleges or to get a government job).

### At What Age do Athletes Drop Out?

The survey revealed that the average age at which sportspersons drop out is 21 years and 3 months (in the fields of swimming, cricket and tennis). Interestingly, there appeared to be two age brackets where dropping out was most common – the age groups

of 21-22, and 18-19. That these brackets correspond to the typical age group when one begins to think of a traditional career (at 21-22 years of age, immediately after an undergraduate degree) and at 18 years, when one is faced with crucial 12th standard examinations, is probably no coincidence. These data points again to the trend that when faced with an option between a 'traditional' career and a career in sports, more often than not, the former gets the nod.

### Conclusion

From the study, it can be inferred that most sportspersons in India do not see a viable career for themselves in sport.

When asked if there was anything that could have been done to have ensured their continued participation, a majority of sportspersons replied that if funds were more readily available (for travelling in particular, due to lack of tournaments and international exposure domestically) or if the earning potential of their respective sport was higher, they might have considered taking up sports as a career. The journalists were also of the view that government-allotted funds should be easily accessible to sportspersons and that a system should be put in place which ensures that these funds reach the right people. Moreover, they believed that there was a need for a better system of progress for each sport within the country and better management and handling of the Indian sportspersons.

However, while such specific interventions in the area of funding might alleviate the problem, it is unlikely to create a broad ranging impact. This is because the reasons for sportspeople dropping out (the ones highlighted earlier in this article) are not independent of each other, and in some cases, one reason even leads to the other.

Given this, intervention steps to correct the situation might also not be as straight forward as one might hope. Rather, it would possibly mean several interventions by multiple stakeholders, key among them



being the athletes and their immediate support system (family, educational institutes), government sports administrative bodies, the media, corporate bodies who see investment potential and, at a broader level, society at large, in the way it appreciates and encourages sport. Going by recent results in mega sporting events (the 2011 cricket World Cup victory, best-ever outings in the most recent editions of the Olympics and Commonwealth games), some of these steps have been taken, and are bearing fruit. The Indian sports fan hopes that sustained and broad ranging efforts will help polish more raw diamonds that are waiting to shine.

## References:

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### **About GoSports Foundation**

*The GoSports Foundation is a non-profit organisation that works with some of India's best athletes. The athletes are supported by the Foundation through a variety of monetary and non-monetary aid. Through sustained support, athletes supported by GoSports Foundation have achieved immense success and made the nation proud. The Foundation is funded purely by donations, and welcomes interested individuals and corporate bodies to contribute.*

