

Elite Sport Careers: Pathways, Commitments and Reconfigurations

Elite sport today sits at the intersection of sporting, economic, media, and political dynamics that become particularly salient during major international competitions (Roche, 2002; Tomlinson & Young, 2006; Clastres, 2025). In these contexts, sporting performances and international results are frequently mobilized as indicators of national success, instruments of political and diplomatic influence, and vehicles for the economic and media promotion of institutions, territories, and sport organizations (Green & Houlihan, 2005). Elite sport thus appears as a space for the production of economic, symbolic, and political value (Schotté, 2022), in which athletes, as well as coaches, referees, performance staff members, medical personnel, and other elite sport professionals, are embedded in interdependent relationships with sport institutions, media organizations, economic actors, and public authorities.

Sporting careers therefore cannot be reduced to a succession of performances or results. Rather, they are shaped by multiple - and sometimes contradictory - expectations involving sporting, educational, professional, family, media, and institutional dimensions.

Research in the social sciences has extensively demonstrated the relevance of understanding sporting careers as processes unfolding within specific temporalities (Julla-Marcy et al., 2017), structured by successive stages and transitions (Wylleman & Lavalée, 2004; Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007; Stambulova, Ryba, & Henriksen, 2021). Such research encourages scholars to move beyond the sole moment of performance and to consider the broader social, institutional, economic, and media conditions that enable, support, or undermine career pathways and transitions. Studies devoted to dual careers have notably highlighted the tensions, trade-offs, and resources associated with combining sporting commitment, educational pathways, and professional integration (Aquilina, 2013; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). More broadly, they emphasize that elite sport trajectories are constructed within differentiated contexts shaped by available resources, support policies, governing structures, territorial configurations, and the economic conditions specific to sports disciplines and national settings.

Although dominant representations of sporting careers often rely on naturalized conceptions of talent and the idea of a continuous progression toward excellence (Schotté, 2002), pathways in elite sport are socially constructed and marked by bifurcations, interruptions, returns, partial career shifts, and overlapping engagements across sporting and non-sporting spheres of activity

(Schotté, 2012; Fontaine, 2022). They are also embedded within multiple temporalities in which sporting, educational, professional, economic, family, and media logics intersect (Bertrand, 2012; Forté, 2020). These pathways are grounded in processes of socialization and learning that contribute to the acquisition and embodiment of specific dispositions (Chevalier, 1998; Papin, 2008; Viaud & Papin, 2012; Viaud, 2015; Julla-Marcy et al., 2017; Visentin, 2023). Such dispositions are shaped by training environments, sport institutions, communities of practice, as well as by the family, educational, professional, and media environments in which athletes are socialized. This raises questions regarding the strength, durability, and transferability of these dispositions across contexts: while some may be reinvested in other social and professional spheres, others appear more closely dependent on the sporting institutions that produced them (Longchamp et al., 2025). Furthermore, the processes of socialization, learning, and recognition that support progression within sporting careers are closely intertwined with relations of gender, class, and race, as well as with the institutional conditions governing access to and support for athletes with disabilities, family resources, and the organizational settings in which athletes develop their careers.

Analysing elite sport careers therefore requires attention not only to the conditions under which they are formed, but also to the concrete ways in which sporting activity is carried out. Elite sporting careers can indeed be understood as specific forms of work characterized by organizational, bodily, emotional, and identity-related constraints (Roderick, 2006; McGillivray & McIntosh, 2006; Roderick, 2013). Research focusing on athletes' everyday professional lives has highlighted the uncertainty, constant availability, competitive pressures, and varying degrees of institutional dependence that structure their activities (Fleurriel & Schotté, 2008; Rasera, 2015; Amenna, 2023). Such studies also show that sporting professionalism does not correspond to a single model; rather, it encompasses diverse ways of defining oneself as a professional, becoming professionalized, and pursuing a professional sporting career depending on the discipline, available resources, and support environments (Forté et al., 2024). From this perspective, performance cannot be understood solely as the product of athletes' individual qualities. It also results from collective activities, organizational arrangements, coordination with support staff, and power relations embedded within performance preparation systems. Studies by Rix-Lièvre et al. (2015) on the co-production of elite refereeing performance, as well as those by Derycke et al. (2025) on relationships between elite athletes and their support teams, invite us to situate performance within broader configurations of actors, evaluation processes, and regulatory mechanisms.

These careers also involve significant identity and relational work within environments increasingly characterized by demands for performance, visibility, mobility, and availability (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). Visibility has become an increasingly important dimension of elite sport careers. In some contexts, entry into elite sport is accompanied by early public and digital exposure, transforming the ways athletes are recognized, valued, and professionalized (Pegoraro, 2010; Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Filo, Lock, & Karg, 2015). Social media platforms contribute to the construction of athletes' public image, the development of communication and commercial activities, and the emergence of new forms of digital labour associated with elite sport (Bourneton et al., 2025).

However, elite sport careers cannot be understood solely through their conditions of entry and participation. They must also be examined through their longer-term effects, when sporting engagement changes, declines, or comes to an end. Career termination thus provides a privileged lens through which to observe the differentiated consequences of involvement in elite sport, whether for athletes themselves or for other actors such as elite referees (Duvant & Nuytens, 2020). It opens up processes of career transition and pathway reconfiguration, shaped by accumulated resources, lived experiences, conditions of career exit, and the forms of recognition acquired throughout the sporting trajectory (Coakley, 1983; Torregrosa et al., 2004; Gordon & Lavallee, 2012; Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). Research on career transitions and the professional integration of former elite athletes has highlighted the importance of available resources, educational qualifications, mobilizable networks, and institutional support mechanisms in shaping professional insertion and career change processes (Collinet & Pierre, 2024). Such work also encourages reflection on what remains of sporting socialization after retirement, the differentiated uses of accumulated sporting, social, and media capital, as well as experiences of downward mobility, invisibilization, or withdrawal that may accompany the end of engagement in elite sport.

Within this perspective, this special issue seeks to analyse elite sporting careers as complex, dynamic, and non-linear processes. It aims to shed light on the diversity of career experiences and configurations, the continuities and disruptions that characterize them, as well as the resources, constraints, inequalities, and power relations that shape them. More specifically, the issue examines the factors structuring sporting careers by jointly addressing the broader transformations of elite sport (professionalization, mediatization, sport policies, and support

mechanisms) and the contexts within which career pathways unfold (sport disciplines, organizations, institutional frameworks, territories, and national settings).

The call is open to contributions from a wide range of social science disciplines, including sociology, history, education studies, media and communication studies, management and organization studies, political science, social anthropology, social geography, economics, and social psychology. The objective of this special issue is to foster dialogue across disciplinary perspectives, methodological approaches, and levels of analysis in order to better understand the diversity of experiences, career trajectories, and organizational forms that characterize elite sport.

While athletes' careers constitute the central focus of this issue, contributions examining other actors involved in elite sport - such as coaches, referees, performance staff members, medical personnel, sport administrators, and managers - are also welcome when they help illuminate the processes of socialization, commitment, professionalization, work, or career transition specific to this field.

To structure the discussion, the call for papers is organized around three thematic axes corresponding to different phases of sporting careers. This division should not, however, be interpreted as reflecting a linear or homogeneous model of sporting trajectories. On the contrary, careers are frequently characterized by returns and reversals, bifurcations, overlaps between different spheres of activity, and simultaneous forms of engagement across multiple social worlds.

Contributions may address one or several of these thematic axes. Empirically grounded papers that pay close attention to the diversity of sporting, institutional, and national contexts are particularly encouraged. Through this special issue, we seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of sporting careers by articulating the analysis of individual experiences, the institutional arrangements that frame them, and the political, economic, and media dynamics that shape them.

Axis 1. Entering Elite Sport: Socialization, Training, and Inequalities of Access

This axis focuses on the conditions under which individuals enter elite sport. It examines processes of sporting socialization, training pathways, as well as talent identification, selection, and support mechanisms, and more broadly the institutional frameworks that contribute to the making of elite sporting careers. Contributions may analyse these processes across different levels of analysis - including families, sport clubs, schools and universities, training centres, sport federations, territories, sport labour markets, and public policies - in order to better understand how opportunities for access to elite sport are constructed.

This axis also seeks to examine the social, territorial, gendered, economic, racial, and disability-related inequalities that shape access to elite sport, as well as the resources mobilized throughout these pathways. Particular attention may be paid to processes of early professionalization, the articulation between education, sporting participation, and other forms of commitment, as well as the effects of media and digital transformations on the trajectories of young athletes. Contributions may draw on perspectives from the sociology of socialization, the history of training systems, education studies, sport policy analysis, social anthropology, sport management and organization studies, or media and communication studies, particularly when addressing early forms of public visibility and recognition. These orientations are not intended to be restrictive, and the axis remains open to other theoretical and disciplinary approaches capable of shedding light on the conditions of access to elite sport.

Axis 2. Experiencing Elite Sport: Commitment, Sporting Labour, and Forms of Visibility

This axis focuses on the conditions under which elite sport is practiced, the forms of commitment it entails, and the mechanisms that organize, regulate, and valorize athletes' activities. It seeks to analyse athletes' forms of engagement, the constraints and conditions shaping their activity, and the ways in which experiences of elite sport are constructed and transformed within contexts marked by increasing demands for performance, visibility, and availability.

Contributions may address athletes' working conditions, processes of professionalization, uses of the body, relationships to time, health, injury, performance, and recovery, as well as the tensions between sporting commitment, personal life, professional activities, and other forms

of involvement. Particular attention may be paid to the differentiated effects of these constraints according to gender, social class, disability, age, nationality, racialization, or sporting discipline.

From a multidisciplinary perspective, this axis welcomes contributions drawing on the history and sociology of sporting labour, activity analysis, or the anthropology of the body. In a context marked by ongoing transformations in digital and media environments, submissions may also engage with media and communication studies or political science in order to examine the institutional, economic, and legal forms of regulation governing these media-related activities, as well as the effects of such transformations on professional identities, career conditions, and power relations within elite sport.

These orientations are not intended to be exhaustive. The axis is open to any contribution that enhances our understanding of the conditions under which elite sport is practiced, regulated, and valorized.

Axis 3. Exiting Elite Sport: Career Transitions, Professional Integration, and Pathway Reconfigurations

This axis focuses on the cessation, reduction, or transformation of engagement in elite sport. It aims to analyse career transition processes, conditions of professional integration, and the various forms of pathway reconfiguration that emerge in the medium and long term, considering career exit as a revealing moment that sheds light on the resources, constraints, and inequalities accumulated throughout sporting careers.

Contributions may examine the continuities and disruptions that characterize these reconfigurations, as well as the lasting effects of elite sport careers on social positions, professional identities, and relationships to work and the body. Particular attention may be paid to what remains of sporting socialization after retirement, the transfer of dispositions to other professional fields, and the differentiated uses of the symbolic, social, economic, and media resources accumulated during sporting careers.

Changes in the media, economic, and institutional conditions through which sporting careers are valorized also invite further examination of how accumulated visibility capital is mobilized,

how former athletes transition into fields such as communication, consulting, management, entrepreneurship, or digital influencing, and how experiences of media withdrawal, loss of public recognition, or digital silence shape post-sporting trajectories.

Particular attention may also be devoted to transition support mechanisms, career transition policies, and the subjective experiences associated with career exit. This axis therefore welcomes contributions drawing on sociological, historical, anthropological, communication, or social psychological perspectives, while remaining open to other analytical frameworks capable of shedding light on post-career reconfigurations.

Submission Guidelines

Authors interested in contributing to this special issue are invited to submit an article proposal in the form of an abstract of 500 to 800 words by 1 October 2026. The abstract should clearly present the research question, the theoretical framework, the methodology employed, and the main findings expected or obtained. A short biographical note specifying the author(s)' institutional affiliation and research interests should accompany the proposal.

Proposals should be sent to the guest editors at the following addresses:

jeremy.pierre@univ-eiffel.fr ; marion.philippe@univ-eiffel.fr ; lucie.forte@univ-tlse3.fr

All proposals will be reviewed by the guest editors. Authors whose abstracts are selected will be invited to submit a full manuscript. Manuscripts may be submitted in either French or English and must comply with the editorial guidelines of *Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure*, available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/action/authorSubmission?show=instructions&journalCode=rles>
[20](#)

Submitted manuscripts will undergo anonymous peer review in accordance with the journal's editorial procedures.

Provisional Timeline

1 October 2026: Deadline for submission of abstracts

20 October 2026: Notification of editorial decisions

15 January 2027: Deadline for submission of full manuscripts for peer review

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