

Causes and countermeasures of academic problems of elite athletes in colleges and universities in China

Tuo Yu*

Business School, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

**Corresponding author: 2428589651@qq.com*

Keywords: Colleges and Universities, Elite Athletes, Academic Problems and Causes

Abstract: In this paper, we delve into the unique challenges faced by elite college athletes within China's higher education system. These student-athletes are not just exceptional in their sports but also navigate the academic rigors set by the current enrollment policies. Their struggle with academic performance is not singular but multifaceted, stemming from a weak foundation in practical courses, conflicting demands between sports and studies, an inflexible curriculum, and a general lack of motivation towards academic pursuits. To address these issues, the paper proposes a multi-pronged approach. It emphasizes the need to spark interest in learning among athletes, modernize training ideologies, and design scientific training schedules that accommodate academic commitments. It also calls for enhanced management structures and the establishment of support platforms dedicated to assisting student-athletes facing academic hurdles. These measures aim to tackle the root causes of academic underperformance among elite athletes and elevate their overall quality. The paper employs the contradiction analysis method, rooted in materialist dialectics, to scrutinize the evolving nature of academic and training conflicts those elite athletes face. This method helps identify and mitigate potential ideological stagnation. Moreover, the paper references the latest directives from the Ministry of Education and the General Administration of Sport. These guidelines advocate for equitable and improved recruitment processes for elite sports teams in universities, setting higher academic thresholds and prerequisites for student-athletes. Such standards are intended to foster a more balanced and realistic approach to nurturing elite sports talent in China, ensuring that they excel both on the field and in the classroom.

1. Introduction

In the landscape of higher education in China, elite athletes enrolled in colleges and universities represent a distinct subset of students. Known as students with sports specialties, these individuals are selected based on their athletic prowess and in accordance with the annual enrollment regulations set forth by educational authorities. These regulations align with the strategic development of elite sports teams within the institutions. For these student-athletes, academic achievement is the foremost priority, followed by the enhancement of their competitive edge through rigorous and sustained training, qualifying them for participation in top-tier sports competitions.

The recruitment of such sports-specialized students serves a dual purpose: it not only nurtures a pipeline of exceptional athletes for national representation but also bolsters the educational institution's prestige and competitive standing[1]. This practice is a cornerstone in China's approach to fostering athletic excellence and is equally pivotal in advancing the nation's commitment to holistic quality education.

Tracing back to 1987, the initiative to build elite sports teams within Chinese colleges and universities has surpassed three decades, witnessing a steady growth in enrollment numbers. By 2021, the enrollment figures for these elite sports programs exceeded 4,000 individuals[2]. The rapid development of these teams has been mirrored by the remarkable accomplishments of their athletes, such as Yang Qian's gold medal victory in the women's 10m air rifle at the Tokyo Olympics and Zhao Jiawen's pioneering achievements in Nordic combined at the Beijing 2022 Winter Olympics.

However, the luster of these triumphs does not obscure the myriad challenges confronting elite athletes in academic domains. Research by Wang et al. reveals a concerning disparity[3]: the average college entrance examination scores of elite athletes are merely 60.5% of the national average, and their practical course grades in college languish at 66.8% compared to their non-athlete peers. Furthermore, the attrition rate among these athletes is alarmingly high at 12.5%, significantly surpassing the national average dropout rate of 1.2%. These statistics underscore the pressing and pronounced academic difficulties faced by elite athletes, necessitating immediate and effective intervention.

The academic struggles of these athletes are not isolated incidents but rather the culmination of several interrelated factors. A deficient foundation in practical courses, the inherent tension between academic and athletic training, an inflexible curriculum, and diminished enthusiasm for learning collectively impede not only their academic performance but also their personal growth and future career opportunities. Addressing the root causes of these academic issues is imperative. This paper aims to dissect these contributing factors and proffer recommendations to enhance the all-around caliber of elite athletes, thereby shaping the future of China's sporting talent. This endeavor holds significant importance and forms the crux of the paper's objectives.

2. The current situation of academic problems

The academic landscape for elite athletes in Chinese colleges and universities is fraught with challenges that extend beyond the field of play. While their athletic achievements often garner much attention and acclaim, it's crucial to acknowledge the academic hurdles they encounter[3], particularly in practical courses. This issue is not merely a matter of subpar performance but hints at a troubling trend towards academic derailment, as evidenced by examination failures and delayed graduations.

An analysis of the academic records of 161 elite athletes from Nanjing and 208 from Guangzhou reveals a stark reality depicted below(Figure 1). Nearly half of these student-athletes have failed exams, with some failing up to six subjects. Alarmingly, the incidence of failure correlates with an increase in academic level, suggesting a systemic issue rather than isolated cases.

The repercussions of these academic shortcomings are profound and multifaceted. On the surface, they jeopardize the athletes' prospects for graduation and subsequent employment. Digging deeper, the psychological toll on these individuals is significant, often leading to feelings of inferiority. This, in turn, can precipitate a disengagement from their studies, further exacerbating their academic struggles and trapping them in a self-perpetuating cycle of underachievement and diminished self-worth. It is this complex web of academic difficulties that this paper seeks to unravel and address, aiming to break the cycle and pave the way for both academic and athletic success for China's elite

collegiate athletes.

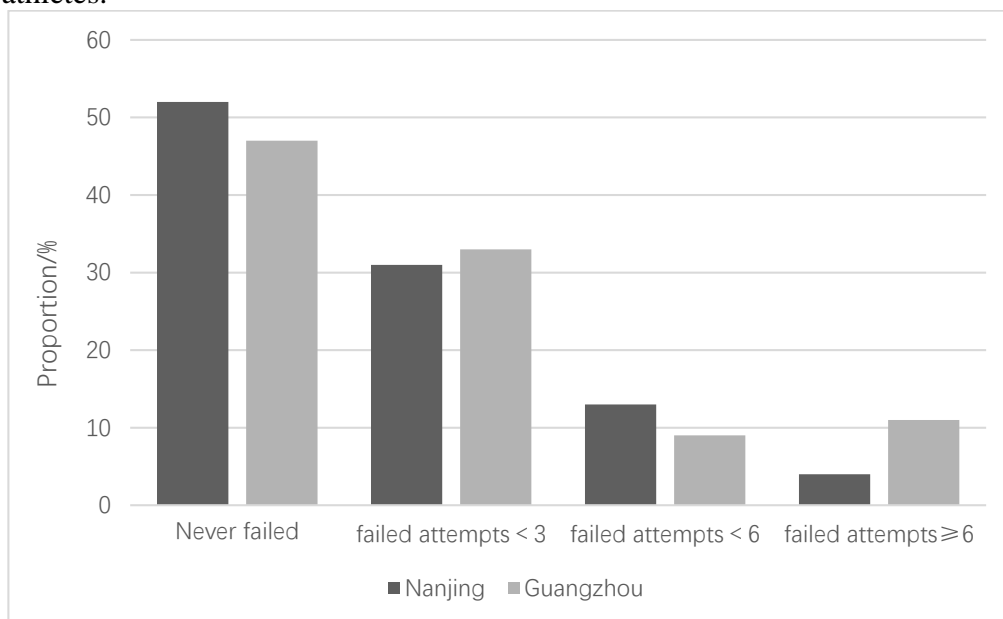


Figure 1: Statistics of elite athlete examinations in colleges and universities in Nanjing and Guangzhou

3. Causes of academic problems

Elite athletes in Chinese colleges and universities face a complex array of academic challenges, influenced by both objective and subjective factors. These challenges can be distilled into four primary categories:

Firstly, the foundational level of practical courses is often inadequate. Elite athletes are typically admitted to universities through special enrollment policies, which may permit lower academic scores compared to their peers. This, combined with a predominant focus on sports training rather than academic preparation, results in many athletes having an insufficient foundation in practical coursework. For example, a notable proportion of elite athletes from Nanjing have engaged in intensive training for over three years prior to university admission, a scenario that is indicative of a wider pattern across various institutions. This extended emphasis on sports frequently comes at the cost of academic study, leading to struggles with college-level coursework and a potential lack of interest in learning. The root of these academic difficulties lies in the long-term prioritization of training over the study of practical courses. The majority of elite athletes in higher education gain admission through special policies, resulting in a lower college entrance examination score than their non-athlete counterparts and, consequently, a weaker base in practical courses. Additionally, the extensive focus on sports training leaves them with limited time and energy for academic pursuits, often lacking the fundamental knowledge and skills crucial for collegiate success. Data reveals that most of the 161 elite athletes in Nanjing had undergone more than three years of training before entering university (Table 1). A similar trend is observed at other universities, with 90% of elite athletes at Hunan Normal University having 4 to 8 years of pre-university training [4], and some at Xi'an Jiaotong University having trained for up to 12 years [5]. Such long-term professional training inevitably consumes the majority of their study time, resulting in generally subpar performance in practical courses. The special enrollment policy further exacerbates this issue, as it leads to a weaker academic foundation, making it challenging for them to keep pace with the college curriculum and potentially diminishing their interest in academic learning.

Table 1: Statistics of the training years of elite athletes in Nanjing

Years of training	1~3	3~5	5~7	7+
Number of people	57	33	35	36
Percentage/%	35.4	20.5	21.7	22.4

Secondly, the tension between academic commitments and training requirements is a persistent challenge for elite athletes, starting as early as middle school and extending into their university years. These athletes are often under immense pressure to perform athletically to honor their institutions, which prioritizes their sports achievements. This focus can lead to a significant strain, impacting their motivation and concentration in both sports and academics. Over 50% of elite athletes in cities like Nanjing and Guangzhou are reported to train more than five times a week, which leaves them with scant time for academic activities. This enduring contradiction between learning and training is not only prevalent during the athletes' formative years but also remains pronounced upon their entry into higher education. Elite athletes are tasked with the crucial role of securing victories and accolades for their schools, making their competitive outcomes a central concern for universities and a measure of coaches' performance. They are required to meet the rigorous demands of their sports teams, often participating in numerous competitions and events that consume much of their time and energy, thereby affecting their classroom attendance and engagement. Concurrently, they must satisfy the academic expectations of their colleges, completing assignments and examinations, which can induce considerable stress and anxiety. The result is a daily regimen of intense training that may encroach upon their study and rest time. Statistics indicate that a significant portion of elite athletes in Nanjing and Guangzhou maintain a training schedule exceeding five sessions weekly. Such high-intensity and frequent training regimens make it arduous for them to allocate adequate time and energy for regular academic coursework. Consequently, they often encounter dilemmas and frustrations in balancing the demands of academic and athletic training, potentially leading to compromises or sacrifices in one area for the sake of the other. Without addressing this fundamental conflict between study and training, it is challenging to resolve the issues related to the learning, career, and employment prospects of elite athletes.

Thirdly, the curriculum and scheduling in educational institutions often fail to accommodate the unique needs of elite athletes. The specificities of their training schedules are not always considered, leading to a curriculum that may be overly challenging or insufficiently rigorous, and class timetables that conflict with training sessions. For instance, the mandatory inclusion of advanced mathematics and economics has proven to be particularly challenging, with a majority of students finding these subjects the most difficult. Colleges and universities could improve by paying closer attention to the particularities of elite athletes' training programs. The current curriculum design and scheduling may not align with their actual needs and characteristics, nor does it always adhere to the principle of individualized and differentiated teaching. Some courses may not suit their interests and abilities, being either too difficult or too easy, too rigid or too flexible, too theoretical or too practical, failing to strike a balance between knowledge and skills. Notably, about 92% of students have identified advanced mathematics, macroeconomics, and microeconomics as the 'most difficult courses,' highlighting the disconnect between the curriculum and the athletes' real-world conditions. Moreover, the course schedule often does not consider the prime training times for elite athletes, typically between 3:00-5:00 p.m., resulting in a clash that exacerbates the conflict between learning and training. This scheduling oversight can lead to significant problems and obstacles in adapting to and benefiting from the curriculum, potentially eroding the athletes' confidence and enthusiasm for learning.

Lastly, a significant lack of motivation for learning is evident among elite athletes. Influenced by personal traits such as personality, attitudes, goals, values, and environmental factors, many athletes

adopt a passive stance towards their education. Statistics reveal that the vast majority of elite athletes in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Nanjing allocate less than three hours for study outside their training schedules. Some even display avoidance behaviors, like tardiness, early departures, class absences, or excessive indulgence in online gaming and entertainment. This disinterest in academics can be traced back to a mix of insufficient academic foundations, vague learning objectives, and unsupportive educational environments. The need for heightened learning motivation among elite athletes is clear. Their low enthusiasm for academics may stem from a lack of solid academic grounding and robust learning skills, leading to diminished interest and confidence. For instance, some athletes might have a passive or negative disposition, lacking curiosity or enthusiasm for learning. Others might view learning from a purely practical or instrumental perspective, lacking a sense of responsibility or commitment. Additionally, unclear or short-term goals, skewed values, or an unsupportive learning environment can further dampen their drive for education. As indicated by statistics (Table 2), over 80% of elite athletes in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Nanjing spend less than three hours on study in their free time daily. Avoidance of study, manifested in behaviors such as lateness, early departure, skipping classes, and addiction to online games and leisure activities, points to a broader issue of disengagement. Therefore, fostering more motivation and initiative for learning is essential, as is providing an environment conducive to satisfactory academic improvement.

Table 2: Proportion of elite athletes' after-school study time in Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Nanjing

After-school study time	Nanjing	Guangzhou	Shanghai
<1h	5.59	22.79	87.00
1 ~ 2h	31.06	39.94	6.60
2 ~ 3h	41.61	18.52	4.70
>3 h	21.74	18.75	1.70

To address these issues effectively, it is crucial to create a more supportive learning atmosphere, synchronize academic and training schedules, and offer specialized assistance to help elite athletes manage their dual responsibilities. Such measures would not only bolster their academic performance but also contribute to their holistic development and future career opportunities.

4. Conclusion

Enhancing the cultural quality of elite athletes is a critical concern in the evolution of China's sports sector. As competitive sports progress, the cultivation of exceptional athletes who exhibit high practical quality, adaptability, and proficiency in scientific training methodologies is essential for nurturing sports talent[6]. To thoroughly address the academic challenges faced by elite athletes, it is vital to foster their interest in learning and to rectify their approach to education. Schools can excel in several key domains:

Firstly, it is crucial to establish a novel concept of elite athlete training. Echoing General Secretary Xi's assertion that education is instrumental in elevating the populace's overall quality and fostering holistic human development, we must adopt a new educational paradigm in the training of elite athletes[7]. This paradigm should be rooted in the comprehensive and healthy development of athletes, taking into account their unique needs and the specific context of the school. A people-oriented approach that cares for and respects the athletes' needs is paramount, as it promotes their all-around development.

Secondly, formulating a scientific training program is imperative. Elite athletes differ significantly from typical students, often struggling with practical classes and learning in general, and frequently sacrificing rest or class time for training. This reality necessitates the creation of targeted and scientific training programs that cater to the distinct characteristics of each athlete[8].

By reinforcing learning requirements, establishing a selection and elimination mechanism, and linking learning outcomes with training and credits, we can enhance athletes' eagerness to learn. Adjusting the ratio of compulsory to elective courses, considering the practical course foundation and athletes' learning interests, and developing a curriculum that meets societal needs and fosters athletes' comprehensive quality are all essential steps. Flexible course scheduling, supplementary tutoring, and adjusted course assessments can help reconcile the demands of learning and training.

Thirdly, improving the management mechanism is essential. Although elite athletes constitute a small group within the college student population, their management and service levels can indirectly reflect a university's educational calibre. Building upon a strong ideological foundation, it is necessary to refine the management system for these athletes[9]. Establishing a dedicated management entity, revising policies in response to changing circumstances, and implementing a dual teacher system that bridges the gap between counselors and coaches can mitigate learning-training conflicts. An improved reward and punishment system will recognize academic excellence and address disciplinary infractions effectively.

Fourthly, constructing a support platform for students in need is vital. The academic struggles of elite athletes often stem from multiple factors. A comprehensive support platform involving parents, educators, coaches, and counselors is crucial. Coaches should adopt a student-centric approach, focusing on athletes' well-being and helping them balance academics and training. Counselors should provide targeted guidance to address academic issues, while schools should engage parents in supporting their children's educational journey.

In summary, by establishing a tailored and realistic talent development system for elite athletes, emphasizing a pragmatic approach, focusing on teaching process management, and setting up appropriate oversight and incentive mechanisms, we can invigorate athletes' passion for learning and training. This will steadily enhance their overall quality and fulfill the nation's educational mission.

References

- [1] Zhou Yingchun. *Discussion on the cultivation of sports students in colleges and universities* [J]. *Liaoning Physical Education Department Technology*, 2011(5):114-116
- [2] Huang Lu, Zhang Wanting, Wang Xiaodong, et al. *New Policies for the Examination and Enrollment of Elite Sports Teams in Chinese Universities: Concept Guidance, Practical Concerns and Promotion Strategies*[J]. *Journal of Shanghai University of Sport*, 2022(11):28-41.
- [3] Yan Liliang. *Reasons and countermeasures for poor cultural performance of students with sports specialties* [J]. *Contemporary Education Science*, 2002(9):31-32.
- [4] Tan Jiaqi, Fan Yunxiang. *Investigation on the learning status of college sports students: A case study of Hunan Normal University* [J]. *Contemporary Sports Science and Technology*, 2017(10):151-152.
- [5] Zhao Jianghong. *Investigation and analysis of the contradiction between the academic training of students with sports specialties in ordinary colleges and universities: a case study of Xi'an Jiaotong University*[J]. *Physical Education Research and Education*, 2015(2):73-75.
- [6] Tan Liang. *Investigation and research on the current situation of sports students in Changchun ordinary colleges and universities* [J]. *Journal of Jilin University of Physical Education*, 2012(6):127-131.
- [7] Xi, *Be a Good Teacher to the Satisfaction of the Party and the People: Speech at the Symposium with the Representatives of Teachers and Students of Beijing Normal University*[EB/OL].[2021-12-03].http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2014-9/10/content_2747765.htm.
- [8] Xiong Jun. *Problems and countermeasures in the cultivation of sports students in science and engineering colleges* [J]. *Contemporary Sports Science and Technology*, 2013(26):150-151.
- [9] Zhang Shuwei, Shao Kai. *Group behavior characteristics of competitive sports teams in China*[J]. *Journal of Shanghai University of Sport*, 2021, 45(11):81-89.