

India-Centric Athlete Career Transition Framework: A Technical, Evidence-Informed and Policy-Responsive Model for Post-Retirement Reintegration

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ABSTRACT

Retirement from competitive sport is a multidimensional life-course transition involving athletic identity reconstruction, psychological adaptation, career reorientation, financial planning, social repositioning and renegotiation of family roles. In India, athlete transition support remains dispersed across performance schemes, pension provisions, employment incentives and informal institutional support. This manuscript develops an India-centric Athlete Career Transition Framework (I-ACTF) that integrates individual, relational, institutional and socio-cultural determinants of post-retirement reintegration. The framework is grounded in contemporary evidence on athlete mental health, dual-career development, transition distress, career adaptability, social support and sports-governance reform. It conceptualizes transition adjustment as a measurable outcome influenced by athletic identity foreclosure, mental-health literacy, educational continuity, career adaptability, financial preparedness, family role expectations, institutional access and intersectional vulnerability linked to gender, caste/class, region, disability and sport type. The paper follows a structured conceptual and narrative synthesis approach to translate global evidence into a culturally responsive Indian model. The proposed framework recommends baseline transition screening, individual transition portfolios, dual-career planning, pre-retirement education, confidential mental-health referral, family counselling, peer mentoring, financial literacy, reskilling fellowships, athlete ombudsman mechanisms and a digital transition registry. It also proposes operational indicators, a 36-month implementation roadmap and testable propositions for future empirical validation in universities, Sports Authority of India centres, National Sports Federations and state sports departments. The manuscript argues that retirement should not be treated as an individual crisis or one-time welfare issue; it should be governed as a planned institutional responsibility embedded in athlete welfare, performance sustainability, social justice and national sports development.

Keywords: Athlete career transition, Elite athlete retirement, Dual career, Mental health, Sports governance, Athlete welfare, India, Post-retirement reintegration, Career adaptability, Transition readiness, Intersectionality

INTRODUCTION

High-performance sport is usually structured around talent identification, training volume, competition exposure and medal outcomes. The post-performance phase is often treated as a secondary concern even though retirement from sport can alter an athlete's identity, income, social status, daily routine, body image, mental health and future employability. Contemporary athlete-

welfare literature increasingly recognizes that career termination is not merely the end of sport participation but a major developmental transition requiring planned support (Brown *et al.*, 2018, 2019; Kuettel and Larsen, 2020).

Athletes may retire voluntarily or involuntarily due to age, deselection, injury, family pressure, performance decline, funding discontinuity or institutional conflict. Involuntary retirement often creates higher psychological

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and vocational vulnerability because the athlete has less time to prepare for non-sport roles. Even voluntary retirement can be difficult when an athlete's self-worth, social recognition and daily discipline have been constructed around competitive identity for many years. For this reason, transition research emphasizes preparation before retirement rather than crisis management after retirement.

Internationally, dual-career systems and athlete-support programmes have attempted to integrate education, vocational development, psychosocial care and post-sport planning. Stambulova and Wylleman (2019) describe dual career as an area where sport, education and work must be managed through coordinated support. Mental-health frameworks similarly stress that awareness should be followed by early intervention, confidential referral pathways and multidisciplinary care when symptoms become complex or severe (Purcell *et al.*, 2019; Reardon *et al.*, 2019).

The Indian sports system requires a culturally situated approach. India has seen major policy and institutional reforms, including Khelo India, Target Olympic Podium Scheme support, pension provisions for eligible meritorious sportspersons, and recent sports-governance reforms that emphasize transparency, accountability and athlete welfare. However, these initiatives do not yet operate as a unified athlete-transition continuum covering early awareness, mid-career career planning, pre-retirement readiness, family engagement, mental-health referral, employment/enterprise linkage and long-term follow-up (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2026; Sports Authority of India, n.d.; Government of India, 2025).

The present manuscript strengthens the earlier article by developing a technical framework that can be measured, piloted and evaluated. It treats athlete transition as a multi-level system involving the athlete,

family, coaches, peers, institutions, state and national sport bodies, employers, media and wider socio-cultural norms. The central argument is that Indian athlete retirement should be addressed through a structured transition architecture rather than through fragmented welfare responses.

Research Gap and Rationale

The major research gap is the absence of an integrated India-specific model that connects athlete mental health, athletic identity, dual-career preparation, financial literacy, family-role negotiation, policy support and post-retirement livelihood outcomes. Existing international models offer useful principles but cannot be directly transplanted without adapting them to Indian socio-cultural realities, including collectivist family expectations, uneven educational continuity, regional disparities, gendered norms, caste/class inequalities and differential institutional access (Table 1).

A second gap is operational. Many discussions of athlete welfare remain descriptive and policy-oriented, but fewer frameworks specify measurable variables, risk-screening tools, intervention modules, referral pathways, implementation timelines and evaluation indicators. Without such operationalization, athlete welfare remains a moral statement rather than an accountable system.

A third gap concerns equity-sensitive design. Indian athletes from rural, economically vulnerable, women, para-sport, caste-marginalized and non-cricket backgrounds may experience transition differently. A universal policy without subgroup monitoring may reproduce inequality. Therefore, an India-centric transition framework must include disaggregated indicators and culturally responsive delivery mechanisms.

The proposed I-ACTF addresses these gaps by combining conceptual modelling, research-informed

Table 1 : Research gaps and technical contribution of the expanded manuscript

Observed gap	Problem in existing practice	Contribution of the proposed framework
Fragmented welfare focus	Support is often restricted to pensions, jobs, awards or ad hoc assistance.	Life-cycle transition system integrating health, education, livelihood and follow-up.
Limited Indian contextualization	Global transition models may understate family collectivism, gender norms and uneven institutional access.	India-specific ecological model with socio-cultural adaptation.
Weak measurement culture	Few clear indicators for transition readiness, service uptake or reintegration outcomes.	Operational dashboard with baseline, midline and follow-up indicators.
Low preventive orientation	Support is usually provided after retirement distress or crisis.	Pre-retirement screening and transition portfolio during active career.
Limited equity monitoring	Subgroup differences are rarely tracked systematically.	Gender-, disability-, region-, caste/class- and sport-disaggregated monitoring.

intervention components, institutional accountability and pilot evaluation planning. It is not presented as a completed empirical theory; rather, it is a structured model that can be tested and refined through future mixed-method research.

Conceptual and Theoretical Basis

The framework is informed by three broad theoretical orientations: developmental transition theory, ecological systems thinking and career-construction/career-adaptability perspectives. Developmental approaches view sport retirement as a process unfolding across the athletic life course rather than a single event. Ecological systems thinking places the athlete within interacting layers of family, coaches, sport institutions, state policy, labour markets and socio-cultural expectations. Career-adaptability perspectives emphasize concern for the future, control over career decisions, curiosity about possible roles and confidence to pursue post-sport pathways.

Athletic identity is a central construct. A strong athletic identity can support motivation and discipline during active sport, but excessive identity foreclosure may make retirement psychologically difficult because the athlete has fewer alternative roles through which to reconstruct meaning. Transition readiness therefore requires identity flexibility rather than identity rejection. Athletes do not need to abandon their sport identity; they need to extend it into coaching, mentoring, education, enterprise, administration or other meaningful roles.

Mental health is treated as both an outcome and a support domain. Recent consensus and systematic review literature shows that current and former elite athletes may experience symptoms such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, substance misuse, disordered eating, distress after injury and transition-related adjustment difficulties (Gouttebarger *et al.*, 2019; Reardon *et al.*, 2019; Rice *et al.*, 2016). The framework therefore integrates mental-health literacy, early detection, referral and follow-up as normal parts of athlete support rather

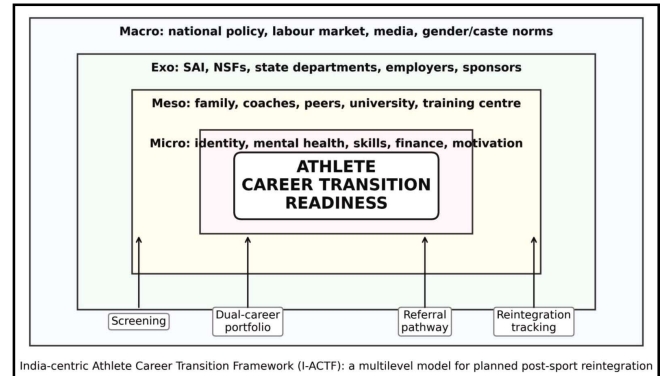


Fig. 1 : High-resolution ecological architecture of the India-centric Athlete Career Transition Framework

than exceptional crisis measures (Di Rocco *et al.*, 2025; Gwyther *et al.*, 2024; McCluskey *et al.*, 2025; Purcell *et al.*, 2022).

Dual-career development is another key construct. Athletes who combine sport with education, vocational skill-building or entrepreneurship exposure are likely to hold more post-sport options. Dual career must be flexible in India because many athletes come from rural, modest-income or government-employment pathways where academic continuity and digital access are uneven. Flexible modular courses, credit recognition, distance learning and employer partnerships are therefore necessary design features (Linnér *et al.*, 2024; Usenik *et al.*, 2025) (Fig. 1).

Methodological Positioning

This manuscript is positioned as a structured conceptual and narrative review paper, not as a primary empirical survey. Its purpose is to revise the earlier short article into a scientific framework manuscript suitable for further empirical validation. The evidence base is framed around peer-reviewed literature published mainly between 2016 and 2026 on athlete career transition, elite athlete mental health, dual career, sport retirement, social support and athlete welfare. Policy context is drawn from

Table 2 : Methodological positioning of the revised article

Methodological element	Technical description
Population focus	Elite, national, university, retiring and recently retired athletes in India; adaptable to para-athletes and non-Olympic sports.
Evidence domain	Athlete transition, dual career, mental health, social support, career adaptability and governance reforms.
Type of review	Structured narrative synthesis with conceptual translation into an India-centric framework.
Primary output	A measurable model with constructs, indicators, intervention modules and pilot implementation logic.
Future validation	Mixed-method study with surveys, interviews, institutional records and longitudinal follow-up.

official Indian sports policy and government sources relevant to athlete welfare and sport governance (Di Rocco *et al.*, 2025; McCluskey *et al.*, 2025) (Table 2).

The synthesis process involved five stages. First, major constructs were identified from recent transition and mental-health literature. Second, these constructs were mapped against Indian sport-context variables such as family role expectations, policy fragmentation, sport-type inequality, employment pathways and social vulnerability. Third, intervention components were extracted from evidence-informed approaches, including early intervention, mental-health literacy, dual-career programming, peer mentoring and referral mechanisms. Fourth, measurable indicators were proposed for institutional monitoring. Fifth, a 36-month pilot implementation model was designed for sports universities, SAI centres and National Sports Federations.

The framework is therefore explanatory and translational. It does not claim empirical effectiveness until pilot testing is completed. Its immediate value lies in converting a broad policy problem into measurable constructs, intervention modules and evaluable outcomes.

India-Centric Context and Policy Relevance

The Indian athlete-transition environment is shaped by a combination of performance ambition, institutional fragmentation, family expectations, education-employment pathways and public recognition patterns. High-performing athletes may receive awards, jobs, scholarships or state support, but many athletes outside medal-linked or highly visible pathways face uncertain transitions. The challenge is especially visible in sports

where financial rewards, media attention and employer linkages are limited.

Khelo India has contributed to grassroots sport development and talent identification, while TOPS provides customized support to selected medal prospects. Pension support exists for eligible meritorious sportspersons after retirement, and recent sports-governance reforms emphasize sportsperson welfare, representation and institutional accountability. These policies can become stronger if transition readiness is embedded as a formal requirement across athlete-development pathways (Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2024; Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, 2026; Press Information Bureau, 2025; Sports Authority of India, n.d.; Government of India, 2025).

An India-centric model must also consider the family as an active transition stakeholder. In many contexts, the athlete is not an isolated individual decision-maker. Family expectations influence education, marriage, employment, migration, finances, continuation in sport and post-retirement role choices. This is especially important for women athletes, rural athletes and athletes from economically vulnerable households. Family counselling and financial planning are therefore not optional add-ons; they are core design components.

The policy relevance of I-ACTF lies in its compatibility with existing institutions. It does not require creation of a completely separate welfare system. It can be integrated into SAI centres, sports universities, National Sports Federations, state sports departments, high-performance centres, university sports boards and athlete welfare cells. The model can begin as a pilot and scale into a national athlete-transition standard (Table 3).

Table 3 : Policy alignment for integrating athlete-transition support into Indian sport governance		
Policy/institutional platform	Current relevance	Recommended transition integration
Khelo India	Youth development, participation, talent identification and sports ecosystem strengthening	Add transition literacy for youth athletes, parents and coaches from early pathway stages.
TOPS/NSDF support	Customized performance support for selected medal prospects.	Add mandatory transition portfolio, post-event counselling and post-Games reintegration planning.
Pension and welfare schemes	Financial support for eligible retired meritorious sportspersons and welfare assistance.	Add pension literacy, financial planning and support for athletes who do not qualify for medal-linked pension.
Sports governance reforms	Transparency, accountability, athlete representation and welfare orientation.	Create transition officer, ombudsman, grievance mechanism and annual transition audit.
Sports universities and SAI centres	Training, education, performance support and athlete monitoring.	Run pilot transition cells with screening, counselling, skilling and referral pathways.

Determinants of Athlete Career Transition

The transition outcome of an athlete is shaped by interacting risk and protective factors. At the individual level, athletic identity, self-efficacy, coping style, injury history, education, financial literacy and psychological readiness are important. At the relational level, family expectations, coach support, peer networks and mentor

availability influence whether the athlete feels supported or isolated. At the institutional level, selection systems, pension awareness, employment pathways, grievance redressal, counselling availability and administrative responsiveness shape the transition environment (Table 4 and Fig. 2, 3, 4).

The I-ACTF separates determinants into risks,

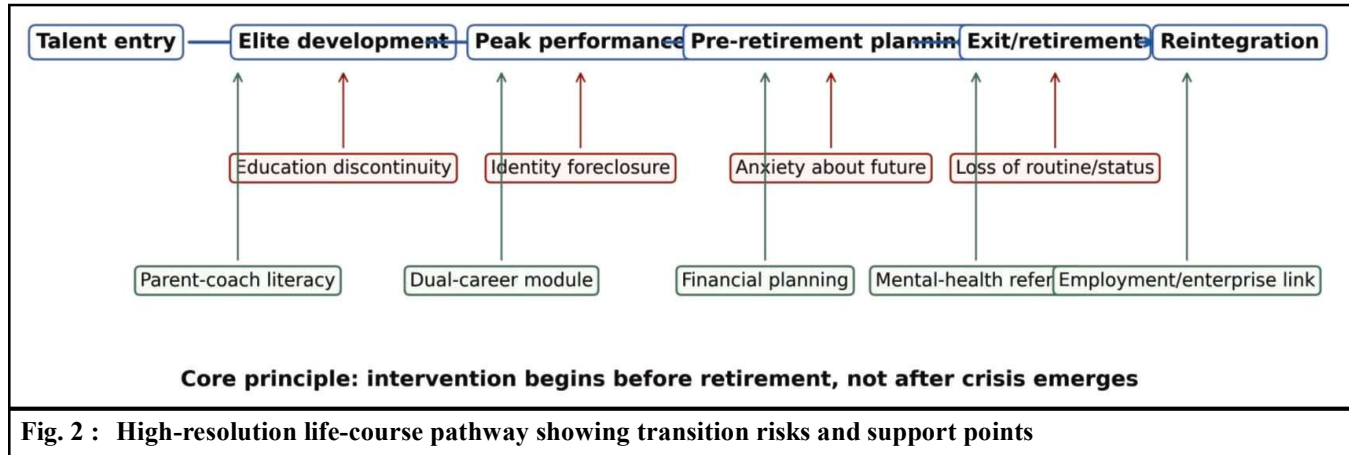


Fig. 2 : High-resolution life-course pathway showing transition risks and support points

Table 4 : Multilevel determinants of athlete career transition in the Indian context

Level	Risk determinants	Protective/intervention determinants
Individual	Identity foreclosure; low mental-health literacy; low education continuity; injury history; financial insecurity.	Career exploration; self-management skills; mental-health referral; modular education; financial planning.
Relational	Family pressure; loss of peer network; coach dependency; stigma around counselling.	Family counselling; peer mentoring; coach education; community role-models.
Institutional	Fragmented schemes; weak transition tracking; limited counselling; delayed benefits; poor grievance redressal.	Transition cell; registry; ombudsman; annual audit; referral SOP; service-use dashboard.
Socio-cultural	Gender norms; region/class/caste inequalities; media invisibility; non-cricket sport marginality.	Equity-sensitive monitoring; targeted fellowships; women/para/rural modules; local-language support.

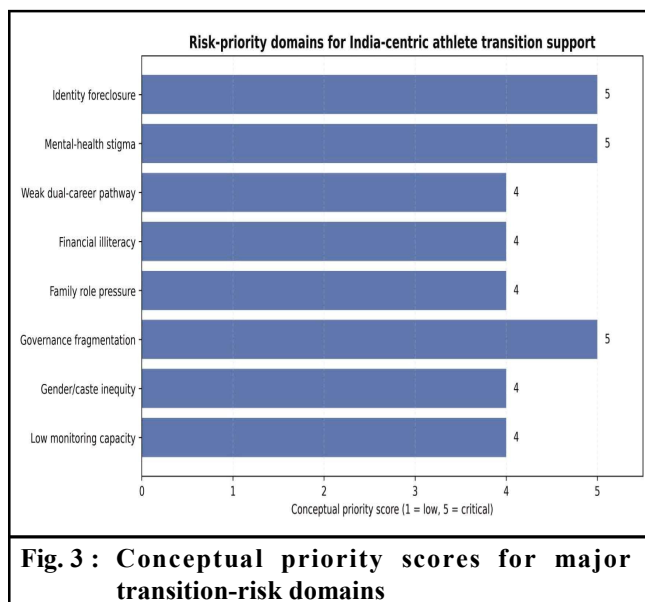


Fig. 3 : Conceptual priority scores for major transition-risk domains

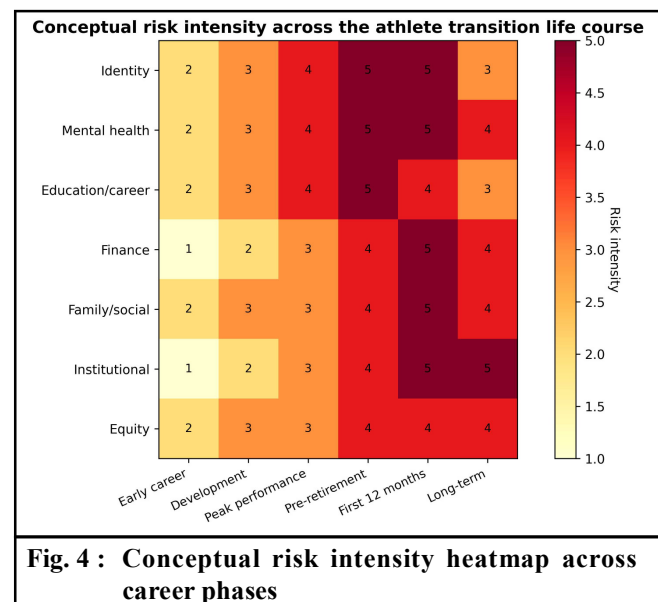


Fig. 4 : Conceptual risk intensity heatmap across career phases

protections and modifiable intervention targets. For example, identity foreclosure is a risk factor, but identity flexibility can be strengthened through career exploration and role-modelling. Financial uncertainty is a risk factor, but financial literacy and pension awareness are modifiable. Family pressure is a risk factor, but family transition counselling can improve understanding and role negotiation.

Gender, disability, caste/class, region, sport type and level of achievement should be treated as equity moderators. These variables may influence who receives information, who is encouraged to continue education, who is visible to recruiters, who has family approval to work after sport and who can access institutional support. Transition research in India should therefore avoid one-size-fits-all assumptions.

Proposed I-ACTF Framework

The India-centric Athlete Career Transition Framework has four pillars: individual readiness, relational scaffolding, institutional governance and socio-cultural reconstruction. Individual readiness refers to identity flexibility, mental-health literacy, career adaptability, financial planning and educational/vocational continuity. Relational scaffolding refers to structured involvement of family, coaches, peers, mentors and community actors. Institutional governance refers

to formal mechanisms such as transition cells, SOPs, ombudsman offices, data dashboards and referral systems. Socio-cultural reconstruction refers to interventions that challenge stigma, invisibility and inequity in post-sport life (Table 5 and Fig. 5).

The framework is designed as a continuum. During the early athlete-development phase, the emphasis is on awareness, parent-coach education and education continuity. During elite performance, the emphasis is on dual-career portfolio development and mental-health literacy. During the pre-retirement phase, the emphasis shifts toward individualized transition planning, financial literacy, family counselling and career exploration. During retirement and reintegration, the emphasis becomes referral, employment or entrepreneurship linkage, mentoring, follow-up and grievance redressal.

This continuum prevents the common error of treating retirement as a sudden administrative event. It also allows institutions to track readiness before athletes leave sport. A transition plan should become as normal as a training plan, recovery plan or injury-management plan.

Intervention Modules

The framework is operationalized through eight intervention modules. Each module can be delivered as a short course, counselling unit, workshop, mentor

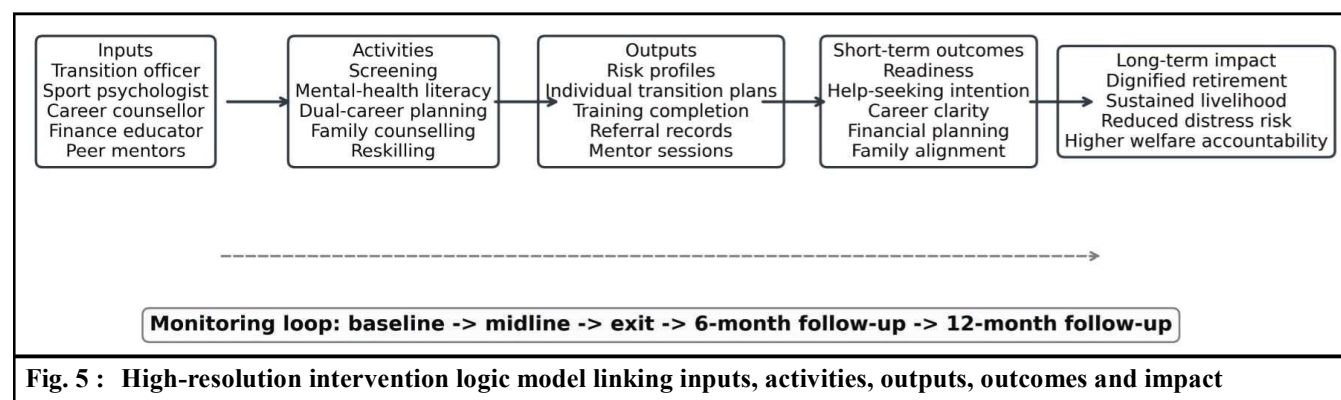


Fig. 5 : High-resolution intervention logic model linking inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes and impact

Table 5 : Pillars, components and outputs of the proposed I-ACTF framework

Framework pillar	Core components	Institutional outputs
Individual readiness	Transition-readiness screening; identity flexibility; mental-health literacy; career planning; finance planning.	Athlete transition portfolio; readiness score; referral record; career-plan document.
Relational scaffolding	Family counselling; peer mentoring; coach education; community support.	Family transition plan; mentor matching; parent/coach literacy module completion.
Institutional governance	Transition cell; digital registry; confidential referral; ombudsman; annual audit.	Transition dashboard; service-use data; grievance log; policy compliance report.
Socio-cultural reconstruction	Equity-sensitive fellowship; media role-modelling; women/para/rural support; local language resources.	Disaggregated participation data; targeted support uptake; reintegration case studies.

Table 6 : Intervention modules for practical implementation of athlete-transition support

Module	Target group	Technical content	Measurable output
1. Transition literacy	Athlete, parent, coach	Career timeline, normality of transition, early planning, service awareness.	Orientation session; readiness checklist.
2. Identity and mental-health literacy	Athlete, coach, support staff	Identity flexibility, stress signs, help-seeking, referral protocol.	Screening form; referral pathway.
3. Dual-career planning	Athlete, university, counsellor	Education continuity, skill mapping, career exploration, CV/profile building.	Transition portfolio.
4. Financial literacy	Athlete, family	Budgeting, saving, insurance, pension awareness, tax basics, income diversification.	Financial planning worksheet.
5. Family transition counselling	Athlete and family	Role negotiation, family support, post-sport expectations, gender-sensitive dialogue.	Family transition agreement.
6. Peer mentoring	Retired and active athletes	Role modelling, experiential knowledge, emotional support, network building.	Mentor-mentee log.
7. Reskilling and livelihood linkage	Athlete, NSDC/skill partners, employers	Skill certification, internship, coaching, enterprise, public/private employment.	Skill certificate; employment/ enterprise linkage.
8. Welfare and grievance navigation	Athlete, federation, SAI/state body	Scheme access, documentation, ombudsman, grievance redressal, follow-up.	Case-management record.

session or referral protocol. The modules are designed for flexibility because athletes have different education levels, competition calendars, regional languages and digital access (Table 6).

Module 1 is transition literacy. It introduces athletes to the idea that sport careers are time-bound and that planning is a strength rather than a sign of weak commitment. Module 2 is identity and mental-health literacy. It normalizes help-seeking and teaches athletes to identify stress, sleep disruption, anxiety, depression, injury distress and identity conflict. Module 3 is dual-career planning, which helps athletes build education and career capital during active sport. Module 4 is financial literacy, including budgeting, savings, insurance, pension awareness, taxation basics and income diversification.

Module 5 is family transition counselling. It supports families in understanding the athlete's changing identity, income patterns, marriage or caregiving expectations, and career decisions. Module 6 is peer mentoring by retired athletes, especially those who successfully moved into coaching, education, administration, public service, enterprise or social work. Module 7 is employment, enterprise and reskilling linkage. Module 8 is institutional grievance and welfare navigation, including how to access schemes, submit documents, use ombudsman mechanisms and seek referral support.

Measurement Framework and Indicators

A scientific framework must define what will be measured. The I-ACTF proposes transition readiness as

Table 7 : Suggested measurement domains and indicators for transition monitoring

Domain	Operational definition	Measurement method	Timing
Identity flexibility	Athlete can describe multiple future roles beyond competitive performance.	Self-report scale; interview probe; transition portfolio.	Baseline, pre-retirement, 6-month follow-up.
Mental-health literacy	Awareness of symptoms, help-seeking pathways and stigma reduction.	Literacy checklist; referral awareness test.	After module and annually.
Career adaptability	Future concern, control, curiosity and confidence.	Career adaptability questionnaire; counsellor rating.	Baseline and pre-retirement.
Financial preparedness	Budgeting, savings, pension awareness, insurance and income planning.	Financial planning worksheet; completion score.	After financial module.
Family support	Perceived emotional, practical and decision support.	Family support scale; family session feedback.	Pre-retirement and post-retirement.
Institutional access	Knowledge and use of schemes, counselling, grievance and referral services.	Service-use records; dashboard.	Quarterly.
Reintegration outcome	Work/study/enterprise engagement; well-being; social belonging.	Follow-up survey; interview; institutional record.	6 and 12 months after exit

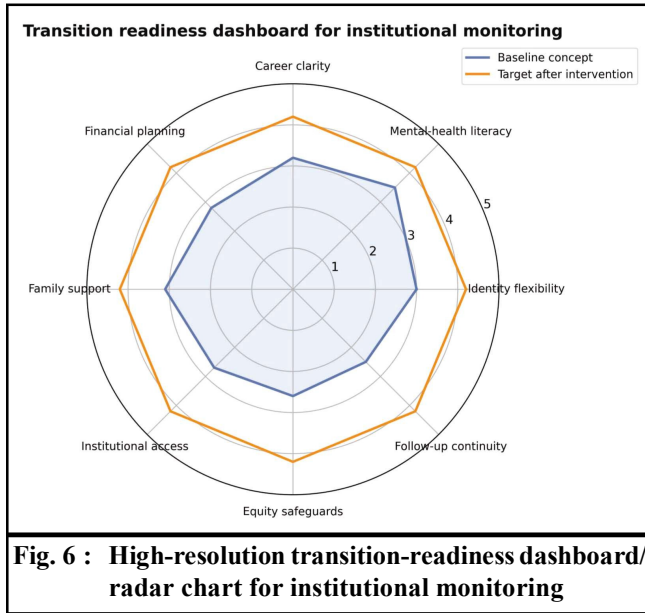


Fig. 6 : High-resolution transition-readiness dashboard/radar chart for institutional monitoring

the primary intermediate outcome and post-retirement reintegration as the long-term outcome. Transition readiness can be measured before retirement using domains such as identity flexibility, mental-health literacy, career clarity, education/skill continuity, financial planning, family support and institutional access. Reintegration can be measured after retirement through employment or education status, income stability, psychological adjustment, social belonging, physical activity continuity, service use and satisfaction with support (Table 7 and Fig. 6).

Validated scales should be used where available, but India-specific tools may need adaptation and translation. For example, mental-health literacy tools, career adaptability measures and social-support indicators can be adapted to local languages. Institutional indicators should be simple enough to collect routinely: number of athletes screened, number with transition portfolios, number referred to counsellors, number completing skill modules, number linked to employment or enterprise, and number followed up after six and

twelve months.

Measurement should be non-punitive. Athletes should not fear that reporting anxiety, distress or uncertainty will affect selection. Ethical data handling and confidential support are necessary for honest reporting.

Equity, Ethics and Data Governance

Athlete transition support must be equity-sensitive. Women athletes may face marriage, caregiving and mobility expectations that influence career decisions. Para-athletes may require additional accessibility, medical, assistive-technology and employment-support pathways. Athletes from rural and low-income households may experience stronger financial pressure and weaker access to digital learning. Athletes from marginalized caste/class locations may face limited mentorship, sponsorship and administrative access. Non-cricket and low-visibility sports may have fewer endorsement, media and employment pathways (Olive *et al.*, 2022) (Table and Fig. 7).

Equity-sensitive implementation requires disaggregated monitoring. Transition cells should track participation and outcomes by gender, sport type, disability status, state/region, rural/urban location, education level and socio-economic background where ethically and legally appropriate. The purpose of

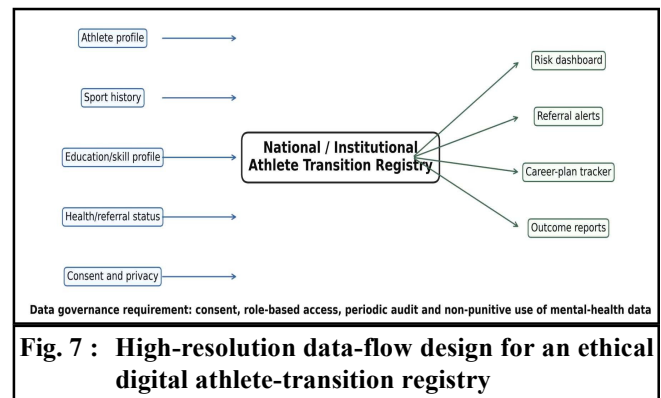


Fig. 7 : High-resolution data-flow design for an ethical digital athlete-transition registry

Table 8 : Ethical and data-governance safeguards for athlete-transition support		
Ethical principle	Operational meaning	Safeguard mechanism
Informed consent	Athletes understand what data are collected and how the data will be used.	Consent form in local language; annual renewal
Confidentiality	Mental-health and counselling records protected from selection misuse.	Role-based access; separate welfare database
Non-discrimination	Vulnerable athletes receive support without stigma or penalty.	Equity audit; anonymized reporting.
Data minimization	Only necessary transition data are collected.	Defined data dictionary; retention schedule.
Referral safety	Athletes at risk receive timely professional support.	Referral SOP; emergency escalation protocol

disaggregation should be support and accountability, not labelling or discrimination.

Ethical governance is also essential in mental-health and transition data. Athletes must provide informed consent for data collection. Mental-health information should be confidential, stored securely and accessible only to authorized professionals. Selection committees should not use counselling records to penalize athletes. A clear separation between performance selection and welfare support is necessary to build trust.

A digital transition registry can improve tracking, but it must include privacy safeguards, role-based access and periodic audit. Data should help institutions identify support needs, not create surveillance. The registry

should be used to generate aggregated reports on service delivery, not to expose individual vulnerabilities.

Implementation Roadmap

The I-ACTF should be piloted before national scaling. A pilot can begin in selected sports universities, SAI centres, state sports academies and National Sports Federations. The pilot should include athletes from at least four groups: active elite athletes, athletes within two years of expected retirement, recently retired athletes and retired athletes facing reintegration difficulty. Inclusion of women athletes, para-athletes and athletes from low-visibility sports should be mandatory for validity (Table 9 and Fig. 8).

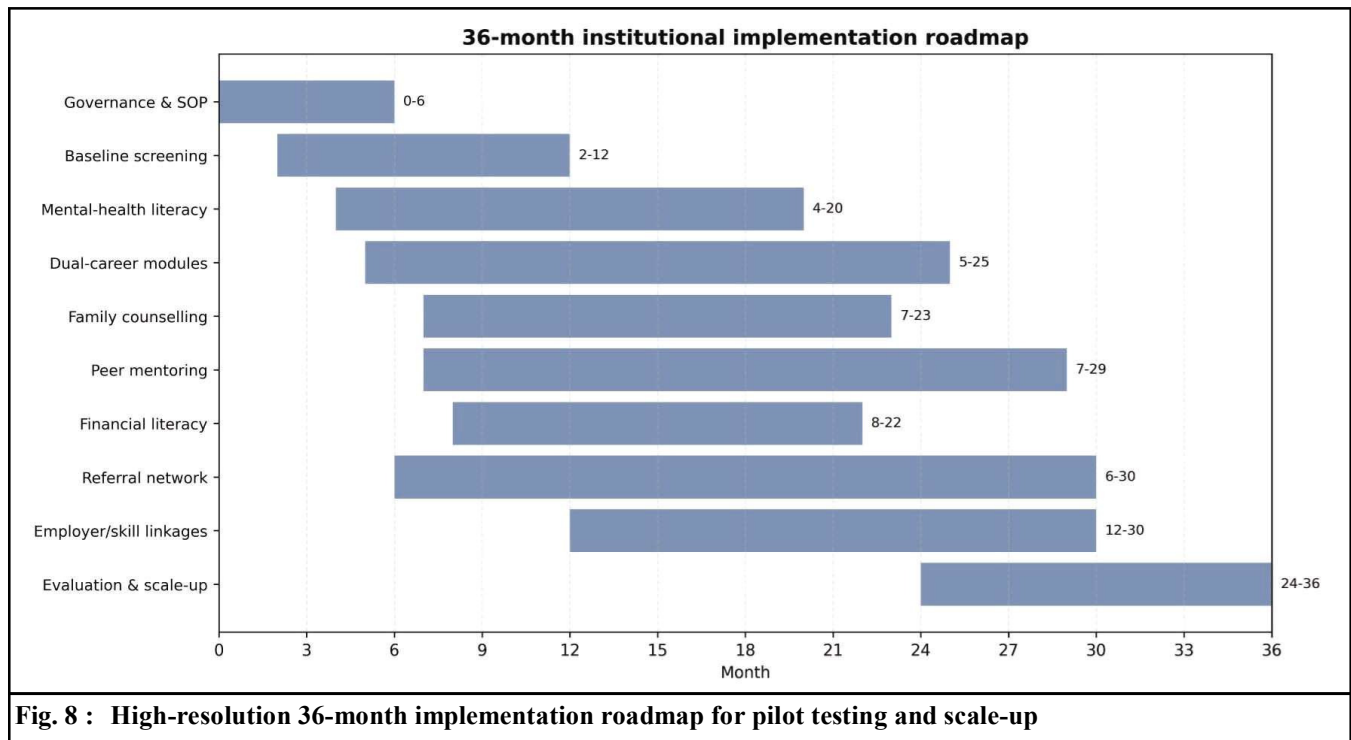


Fig. 8 : High-resolution 36-month implementation roadmap for pilot testing and scale-up

Table 9 : Detailed 36-month pilot implementation plan

Phase	Duration	Major activities	Expected outputs
Phase I: Diagnostic setup	Months 1-6	Transition committee; SOP; ethics protocol; baseline registry; counsellor/mentor pool; institutional mapping.	Protocol, baseline data, referral directory, implementation manual.
Phase II: Intervention pilot	Months 7-18	Mental-health literacy, career modules, financial literacy, family counselling, peer mentoring, welfare navigation.	Transition portfolios, module-completion data, referral records, mentor logs.
Phase III: Institutionalization	Months 19-30	Transition officer system, registry dashboard, ombudsman/grievance workflow, employer/skill partnerships.	Dashboard, compliance audit, partnership MoUs, grievance reports.
Phase IV: Evaluation and scaling	Months 31-36	Follow-up survey/interviews, cost analysis, outcome report, training manual, state/national dissemination.	Impact report, validated framework, training package and scale-up plan.

Table 10 : Testable propositions for empirical validation of I-ACTF

Proposition	Statement	Suggested analysis
P1	Higher dual-career readiness predicts better post-retirement career adaptability.	Regression/SEM using career-readiness and adaptability scores.
P2	Athletic identity foreclosure predicts transition distress, moderated by social support.	Moderation analysis with identity and support measures.
P3	Mental-health literacy predicts help-seeking intention and referral uptake.	Pre-post module comparison and service-use records.
P4	Family transition counselling improves perceived family support and role clarity.	Paired pre-post comparison and family feedback.
P5	Financial literacy predicts perceived financial security after retirement.	Longitudinal follow-up at 6 and 12 months.
P6	Institutional access mediates the effect of vulnerability on reintegration outcomes.	Mediation model with institutional-service indicators.
P7	Gender, disability, region and sport type moderate access to transition resources.	Subgroup analysis and equity dashboard.

The implementation roadmap is divided into four phases. Phase I establishes governance, SOPs, counsellor networks and baseline tools. Phase II delivers the intervention modules and collects service-use data. Phase III institutionalizes the system through dashboards, transition officers and grievance mechanisms. Phase IV evaluates outcomes and prepares scale-up guidelines. Each phase should produce tangible outputs rather than general awareness activities.

Empirical Testing Plan

Future research should validate the framework through a mixed-method design. A cross-sectional baseline study can identify transition readiness among active and retiring athletes. A longitudinal follow-up can examine outcomes after six and twelve months of retirement. Qualitative interviews can explore lived experiences of identity reconstruction, family pressure, institutional support and livelihood adjustment. Institutional data can provide information on service uptake, module completion, referrals and grievances (Zhang *et al.*, 2024) (Table 10).

Sampling should include diversity across gender, sport type, level of achievement, region, disability status and socio-economic background. The empirical model should examine direct and indirect relationships. For example, dual-career readiness may predict career adaptability, while mental-health literacy may increase help-seeking intention. Social support may moderate the relationship between identity foreclosure and transition distress. Institutional access may mediate the relationship between vulnerability and reintegration outcomes.

The framework can be tested through both statistical and thematic analysis. Quantitative data may be analysed

using descriptive statistics, group comparisons, correlation, regression or structural equation modelling when sample size is sufficient. Qualitative data may be analysed using thematic analysis to capture context-specific meanings. The strongest design would combine measurable outcomes with lived experience narratives.

DISCUSSION

The expanded framework contributes to athlete-transition scholarship and Indian sport policy in four ways. First, it moves the discussion from a descriptive account of retirement challenges toward a measurable and implementable model. Second, it integrates psychological, educational, financial, familial and institutional dimensions rather than treating these as separate problems. Third, it adapts global dual-career and mental-health evidence to Indian socio-cultural realities. Fourth, it introduces equity and data-governance considerations needed for responsible implementation.

The framework also challenges the assumption that athlete welfare begins when the athlete stops winning. A high-performance system should protect the human being throughout the entire athletic life course. Transition planning can improve not only post-sport life but also active performance because athletes who feel secure about their future may experience reduced anxiety about career termination. Planning for life after sport is not a distraction from performance; it is a component of sustainable performance culture.

The model is institutionally practical because it can be implemented in layers. A small sports university or state academy can begin with transition literacy, screening and mentor matching. Larger national bodies

can add digital registries, ombudsman systems, referral networks and employer linkages. The framework is therefore scalable: it can function as a low-resource pilot or as a national standard depending on institutional capacity.

The main limitation is that this manuscript remains conceptual until field validation is undertaken. The framework requires testing with Indian athletes across sports, genders, regions and performance levels. It also needs feedback from coaches, families, sports administrators, psychologists, employers and retired athletes. Pilot testing should refine the language, tools, timelines and intervention intensity.

Recommendations

- Establish athlete transition cells in SAI centres, sports universities, state sports academies and major National Sports Federations.
- Introduce mandatory mid-career and pre-retirement transition screening for elite and national-level athletes.
- Develop multilingual transition modules covering identity, mental health, education, career planning, financial literacy, pension awareness and livelihood options.
- Create individual athlete transition portfolios beginning during active sport, not after retirement.
- Create confidential mental-health referral pathways with trained sports psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors.
- Integrate family counselling into transition planning, particularly for women athletes, rural athletes and economically vulnerable athletes.
- Build retired-athlete peer-mentor networks across sport disciplines and regions.
- Create skill, employment and entrepreneurship linkages through universities, NSDC partners, employers, CSR initiatives and state departments.
- Develop athlete ombudsman or grievance mechanisms linked to welfare, transition and post-retirement support.
- Publish annual athlete-transition audit reports with disaggregated but anonymized indicators.
- Pilot the framework for 36 months and scale it only after independent evaluation.

Conclusion

Athlete retirement in India should be understood as a planned developmental transition, not as a private struggle after the end of competition. The India-centric Athlete Career Transition Framework provides a technical, measurable and culturally responsive approach that integrates mental health, dual-career readiness, financial literacy, family support, institutional governance and socio-cultural equity. It converts broad athlete-welfare concerns into practical intervention modules, indicators, dashboards and an implementation roadmap.

The central policy message is that the athlete is not only a medal-producing body but a person with a continuing life course, family responsibilities, future livelihood, psychological needs and social identity after sport. A country that invests in performance must also invest in dignified reintegration. By piloting and validating the proposed framework, India can develop a transition-support system that protects athlete dignity, improves welfare accountability and strengthens sustainable sports development.

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