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A Study on the Identity Crisis and Lack of Academic Motivation Among Korean Student-Athletes

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Abstract. The purpose of this study is to examine the imbalance between academic and athletic performance among South Korean student-athletes, focusing on the systemic, cultural and institutional factors that affect the negative association between academics and athletics. By comparing NCAA policies and American student-athletes, this paper investigates how South Korea's authoritarian training culture and lack of academic support prioritize athletic performance over education. The early start to intensive live-in training camps, and the complicity of teachers and coaches reinforce the identity of young athletes as competitors rather than students, leading to disengagement from academics and limited long-term career prospects. Although the Korean University Sport Federation (KUSF) and the Ministry of Education has implemented policies such as minimum grade and attendance requirements, these measures remain insufficient without broader cultural change and stronger academic support systems. Through a comparative lens with U.S. practices, this paper argues that restoring the dual identity of student-athletes requires collaborative reforms across schools, coaches, and policymakers. Ultimately, embedding academic accountability within Korea's sports system is essential for empowering athletes to succeed both on and off the field.

Keywords. Educational Policy, Sports and Education, Student-athletes, Academic Motivation, Educational Imbalance, Athletic Identity

Introduction

Student-athletes struggle to balance between academic performance and athletic performance due to the institutional demands of their sport, which detaches them from realistic academic success. This imbalance is a significant issue for South Korean students. Since the majority of student-athletes begin to build their sports career at a young age, it is common for them to abandon their education to focus on their future athletic careers. In consequence researchers noticed that athletes perform about three-tenths worse than non-athlete students and tend to lag behind their peers in academics [1]. While in the short-run, the negative association student-athletes have with academic performance does not directly affect the students, it is an unstable situation that causes detrimental effects such as career losses in the long-term.

The establishment of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in the U.S. was targeted at addressing these issues. The NCAA implemented a 2.3 minimum grade requirement along with a mandatory core courses and test scores for the players to be able to play the game [2]. Since the NCAA, there has been an increase in academic performance among

U.S. student-athletes in high school and college, highlighting the developing motivation young athletes have for both their sport and education [3]. Observing the success of the NCAA, South Korea followed and tried to adopt its own organization known as the Korean University Sport Federation (KUSF).

For years, South Korean student-athletes struggled to keep up with classes given that they are focusing only on their athletic careers. Preliminary studies targeting South Korea found that the causes of the imbalance in academic performance among South Korean student athletes is that the educational structures and systems associated with sports are unfavorable to education and have contributed to building the academic and athletic imbalance [4]. South Korea developed an authoritarian type of training that is enforced from elementary school. From a young age, student-athletes are introduced to various intense, elite training programs that prioritize athletic performance over formal education and even psychological well-being. Young athletes start training sessions at an early age to pursue a successful career, taking away time and energy to study. In general, students enlist in sports training camps for extra practice at specific times throughout the season [5]. However, Korea has adopted a compulsory live-in training camp throughout the athlete's career, giving teachers and coaches the power to thoroughly monitor the life of all athletes to ensure the increase of the individuals' mental strength, develop discipline in a military-service style emphasis on obedience and strict hierarchy, provide intense training, and encourage teamwork. While the system boosted sport performance in a short amount of time, it failed to prepare athletes from building a life outside the sport system, and rather created an abusive environment. This type of training cultivation is rooted deeply in Korea's sporting history. In 1988, Korea successfully became the host of the Summer Olympic Games to expose the rest of the world to the country. Therefore, the government pushed for elite-level athlete performance through national policies that focused on winning gold medals. By concentrating on creating only elite-level athletes, it also created an imbalance in sports culture where athletic success was everything. This sporting culture is prevalent and affects South Korean student-athletes. The type of mindset that only desires the athletes' athletic achievement creates a training system that lacks academic motivation from the students, coaches, and institutions [6].

Furthermore, the Korean education system is a highly competitive, test-focused environment that requires long study hours in addition to after-school lessons in academies known as hagwon. Like young student-athletes, young students are pushed to follow intense study schedules by entering elite English academies and "cram" schools, limiting the amount of time to play around [7]. Not only is it highly demanding and competitive, students are required to focus on excelling in standardized tests to enter into prestigious universities and gain a well-paid job in the future [8]. Therefore, balancing both education and sport in Korea is near impossible as both are intense and time-consuming.

By 2017, the government implemented the minimum grade requirement for active athletes and mandatory attendance through the KUSF [9]. However, conditions of abusive training sessions did not fade away, nor did the consistently low academic performances among many young athletes. Coaches pushed athletes to be attentive to their sport, and schools and teachers continued to pass the athletes' missing assignments and attendance, allowing the athlete to pass without effort.

Therefore, there are still many factors, such as skipping school for training, problems in the education system, and games, that have been considered to be the cause of this. However, the lack of academic support from schools and teachers, and the regulations of coaches still foster the cultivation of athlete success over anything causing the student athletes to only view

themselves as athletes, not students. Student athletes are expected to carry two identities: that of a student and that of an athlete. Ideally, they should be able to balance their academics with athletic training. This research would be looking into the causes of the loss of the student identity, the problems it may cause for student athletes' future, and the solutions to these causes.

Consequence of Academic Imbalance

Though student-athletes may benefit from an early career start, focusing on their sport only can harm them in the long-term. Studies found that while there are many young prospects not all young athletes make it successfully to junior college or even at a professional level [10]. According to Korea University, they found that only 2.5 percent from both middle and high school make it to junior college. Furthermore, the Korean Olympic Committee uncovered that while 2,500 players attempt to reach the professional soccer team, only 100 of them succeed, which is about one-third of athletes. However, even though the players make it on a professional level, the average span is about 3.29 and 3.87 years, this excludes major injuries [11]. With about a 2 to 4 percent success rate, most young Korean student athletes feel lost and uncertain of what to pursue when they are forced out of their sport, highlighting the importance of education for a better long-term goal.

Factors of Low Academic Performance

School Environment

The significantly low performance among South Korean student athletes reflects not only on the authoritarian training system but also the lack of academic support from the school system. The school environment can greatly impact the student-athletes' perspective and motivation level on education. These influences can mainly come from staff/faculty support, student group support, and systematical support. With training sessions averaging more than 34 hours per week, in addition to a 2 hour practice on weekends, student-athletes barely have any time to make up for school work or have the energy to pay attention during class [12]. As a result, they are frequently excused from classes and school activities, including assignments, and even exams without much complaint or consequences. This is because teachers and coaches prioritize training sessions over education [11]. Teachers would do these types of favorable acts just because they believe that the student-athlete's future does not rely on academics rather their athletic ability. Such encouragement from the coaches and teachers reinforces the perception that academics are irrelevant to their future. With no authoritative figure strongly discouraging bad academic performance, the student athletes gain the courage to continue to miss assignments, be inattentive during class, and skim over important exams. Consequently, many student-athletes would detach themselves from education and school activities, increasing the inexperience with education where about over 80% of Korean student-athletes pass with insufficient academic experience [4].

Limited classroom experience often leads players to feel discriminated against by their teachers, who treat them as outsiders or disregard their presence altogether during class. [11]. In many cases, student athletes are referred to by their sport rather than by name (i.e., Hockey players being called "hockey" instead of their name), solidifying their identity as athletes rather than students. This separation extends to peers, who view student-athletes as a separate group because the system encourages a sense of privilege to athletes as student athletes are rarely in class, which further isolates them from the academic environment. One student described how 'birds of a feather flock together', explaining that athletes primarily socialized with other athletes rather than regular students [11]. In support, a study further examined the experiences

of student-athletes through various interviews and following their daily schedule. The majority of the students mentioned feeling guilty about their academic performance, but still never seem to gain the motivation to turn in their assignments [12]. Even more, universities for a while did not require athletes to have a minimum grade. They would examine the student's sports ability and ignore class grades and GPA, further encouraging the lack of academics. The constant lack of experience with academics, the students accepted that they will have a hard time catching up with higher education with the elite standard Korea holds, which makes them view academics as often meaningless or lacking value.

To further understand the reason behind the lack of academic motivation, two studies compared American student-athletes and Korean student-athletes. In the first study, the research compared the difference between NCAA and KUSF by examining each policy and leading a controlled questionnaire between US student-athletes and Korean student-athletes. Through careful analysis, the study found that though KUSF had policies similar to NCAA, Korean students lacked a strong academic support, such as an academic advisor [13]. An academic advisor is someone who personally helps and advises the athlete with academic work, regulations, and monitors their study hall. Additionally, the academic advisors actively motivate and encourage athletes to attend class and emphasize the importance of academics to the student. The second study compared American student-athletes' and Korean student-athletes' college experiences through a series of interview questions that focused on academic motivation. The results of this study showed that American student-athletes perceived their academic motivation to be related to their athletic motivation. Meaning their academic performance affected their athletic performance and vice versa, therefore the American students knew the importance of both. However, the Korean students did not perceive academic motivation and athletic motivation to be related. Rather, the majority of the Korean students emphasized the importance of their athletic performance and did not see how academic performance can improve their ability [14].

Coach's Influence

The lack of emphasis on the importance of academic motivation for athletic performance among Korean students reflects on the training structure and the coach. Coaches hold disproportionate power over athletes, as playing time and future career opportunities often depend on their discretion. While teachers and parents may reinforce academic imbalance, the coach ultimately has the authority to change it.

In the 2005 American biographical sports drama film, *Coach Carter*, Coach Ken Carter enforces a strict code requiring each team player to take education more seriously. While the teachers and parents shamed Coach Carter for prioritizing academics over athletics, Carter remained steadfast in his commitment to academic excellence, ultimately guiding his players to value education alongside sports [15]. This exemplifies the positive influence a coach can have on student-athletes.

However, given that most Korean coaches were once athletes and grew up in the same authoritative system, they also lack academic motivation. Coaches tend to focus solely on athletic performance because their own careers depend on team success. They may discourage students from attending school if they are tired or suggest that time spent studying would be better used for training. If they are unsatisfied with the training or game results, it can lead to more hours of training. While coaches understand the importance of balancing both athletic performance and academic performance, they don't place emphasis on it because of how the system is built [12]. If the results are not good, such as the athlete's ability not improving or

game losses, the coaches have no choice but to prioritize training to get good results. Furthermore, unlike NCAA coaches, Korean coaches do not put emphasis on academic regulations. While NCAA coaches not only complete an annual exam on the rules and regulations, they expect student-athletes to know the regulations by heart [2]. Again, this type of regulation is ignored as long as the coach produces wins or gold medals.

Discussion

There are various factors that contribute to the imbalance between athletic and academic performance among young Korean athletes. Given the cultural emphasis on athletic achievement over anything in Korea, student-athletes fail to obtain a sufficient amount of education. Due to the authoritarian style of training system, student-athletes are pushed to detach from education leaving them nothing but their sport. There has been cases of abuse mentally and physically, pushing athletes toward suicide or often feeling lost once they finish their sport. While the implementation of KUSF helps guide Korean sports to the importance of academic motivation, many student-athletes still lack the academic support to gain that motivation.

In 2017 KUSF implemented various rules including a minimum required 2.0 GPA rule for its member institutions and a required number of attendance to incentivize academic motivation. Based on the rules, athletes who do not meet this requirement are ineligible to compete in the following semester. Since then, KUSF and the Ministry of Education has constantly worked on enhancing academic ability to emphasize the importance of it. Overall, South Korean student-athletes recognize the importance of academic motivation and performance. However, student-athletes place athletic performance more important to their future [16]. Many students admitted to having no intentions of studying. Back in 1999, Derek Van Rhee, developed a motivation measurement among student-athletes. This measurement was split into four categories: Success-Oriented, Overstrivers, Failure Avoiders, and Failure Acceptors. Success-Oriented and Overstrivers are motivated to succeed academically and athletically. Whereas, Failure Avoiders were motivated enough not to fail in academics and Failure Acceptors accepted their failures and were not motivated at all [16]. Though it has not been directly measured, it can be assumed that many Korean student-athletes fall into the Failure Avoiders or Failure Acceptors category. The internalized career perceptions and attitude towards academics are not only self-formed but shaped through interactions with coaches and parents that reinforce a narrow perspective on education [17]. Furthermore, teachers, coaches, and parents conform to the sports-centered environment lowering institutional expectations. As mentioned before, Korea lacks a supportive system to expose athletes to academics to show the importance of studying. For example, the absence of academic advisors and mandatory study contribute greatly to the shift in motivation. The study shows a positive correlation between academic and athletic motivation when students that meet with their academic advisors. Through academic advisors, they are able to keep-up with class and gain help when they are falling behind by being fully monitored and able to freely ask questions whenever. Furthermore, the coaches and students need to know the regulations and rules set up by KUSF. In America, a common theme is that both the student-athletes and the coaches know and understand the regulations of NCAA. Therefore, it puts emphasis on the importance of applying those rules daily.

There are some limits to this research. The first is there is a limited amount of current research analysis done on measuring academic success in Korea among student-athletes. While low academic performance has been a significant issue in Korea, there has been some

controversy on whether KUSF has been effective or not. Secondly, this paper does not take into account gender or the type of sport. Depending on the gender, the relationship between academic motivation and athletic motivation may differ. This is the same for the type of sport. While all sports take immense training, different sports may result in a higher concentration of athletics with high academic performance compared to other types of sports (i.e. tennis v.s. basketball). Therefore future studies should consider the type of sport and the gender when measuring academic and athletic motivation. Additionally, there should be a thorough study down on the regulations and eligibility of coaches in South Korea.

Conclusion

The academic challenges faced by South Korean student-athletes stem not only from structural flaws within the education and athletic systems but also from a deeper identity imbalance that prioritizes athletic success at the expense of educational development. Restoring the dual identity of student athletes—as both students and athletes—is essential for ensuring their long-term success beyond the playing field. This requires a cultural shift as well as institutional reforms. Education institutions should enforce academic standards consistently, while also investing in support mechanisms such as academic advisors, mandatory study programs, and career counseling. Coaches should be trained and held accountable for supporting both athletic and academic growth, rather than focusing exclusively on performance outcomes.

Although the KUSF and Ministry of Education's recent regulations are making progress, they remain insufficient without broader cultural and systemic changes. By embedding academic accountability into the structure of Korean sports and fostering environments where athletic and academic motivation are mutually reinforced, it can help athletes avoid uncertain career trajectory. As a result, schools and coaches should strongly encourage education more. Ultimately, strengthening academic support does more than safeguard student-athletes' futures—it cultivates more well-rounded individuals who are prepared to contribute meaningfully to society, whether or not they succeed in professional sports.

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