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Title: An Analysis on how Society's Perceptions Regarding the Career Prospects of Professional Athletes Influences the Participation of Youths in High Performing Sport

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Declaration

I declare that this assignment is my own work and does not involve plagiarism or collusion. The sources of other people's work have been appropriately referenced, failing which I am willing to accept the necessary disciplinary action(s) to be taken against me.

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Abstract

This paper explores the perceptions held by Singapore's society with regards to the career prospects and developmental opportunities of local professional athletes. Existing works have asserted that intrinsic and extrinsic motivators are the two main factors in play concerning a youth's decision to partake in high performing, and in turn professional sport. However, there is a paucity in research done on societal perceptions, which does not seem to fall into either the intrinsic or extrinsic component. Through the use of a survey and interviews, this paper incorporates a blend of both quantitative and qualitative data as a means of research. Thematic Analysis is used as an effective method of data interpretation, uncovering common themes or patterns among the diverse responses. Aligned with past research, intrinsic and extrinsic factors are indeed critical in influencing the participation of youths in high performing sport. Two other distinct factors were also uncovered: support systems and competition exposure. The findings from this paper indicate that a monumental shift in Singapore's societal mindset is necessary for the long-term growth and development of more local professional athletes.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 General Background

Singapore is widely acknowledged as an academically-focused nation (Ng, 2020). Academic excellence is largely believed to be the safest and surest path to financial wealth (Phillipson, Koh & Sujuddin, 2019). There is a drive to chase exemplary results in examinations, with the pursuit for prestigious paper qualifications seeming like an arms race. In this rush for academic success, it is inevitable that many in Singapore have overlooked the avenue of sports and sporting success as alternative career paths. As a result, we are known as a nation with high quality education, frequently topping international examinations, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (“PISA”) and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (“TIMSS”) tests (Davie, 2020). In contrast, Singapore is rather lacklustre in the field of sports, winning proportionally fewer competitions, with five Olympic medals throughout the nation’s history.

An exception in recent years was Joseph Schooling. When Joseph Schooling won the nation’s first Olympic gold medal back in 2016, it seemed to signal the birth of a new era of sports in Singapore (Jagdish, 2018). National athletes became more motivated, and youth enrolment in sports activities increased (Chew, 2016). Yet, many were unsure if Singapore could continue to produce more successful athletes (Low, 2016). The newfound commitment to sports has not really translated into more people pursuing a professional sporting career. This reluctance to pursue a career in professional sport could be due to several factors, but not overlooking the past year which was also disrupted by Covid-19. A somewhat unspoken factor that undergirds the lack of youth participation in high performing sport is society’s perceptions regarding the career prospects of professional athletes, especially when considered against other career options which may provide more stability.

1.2 Rationale

Sports played at a higher level, such as at the professional stage, does more than just develop the individual athlete. Professional sport plays a significant role in reaping social, political and economic benefits for a nation. For example, it can help bring communities together to support Singapore’s athletes at major games. This can foster nationalistic pride among the people. According to Houlihan & Green (2008), professional sport encourages social cohesion and national identity building. It can also give Singapore the international recognition it needs,

elevating it to a status on par with other bigger nations on a world stage (Cha, 2016). Professional sport is an effective avenue to aid the development of the entire Singapore, and as such, should not be overlooked.

1.3 Research Questions

My research questions are as follows:

1. What are society's perceptions regarding the career prospects of professional athletes?
2. How are these perceptions formed?
3. What is the influence of these perceptions on youth participation in high performing sport?

1.4 Thesis Statement

Generally negative perceptions regarding the career prospects of professional athletes have hindered youth participation in high performing sport, making a professional sporting career unattractive in Singapore.

1.5 Scope

This paper focuses mainly on society's perceptions regarding the career prospects of professional athletes as a factor which might influence youth participation in high performing sports.

The issue of sports played at a recreational level is not covered. Instead, reference is only made to sports played at a high performing and professional level. The definition of professional athletes provided by Swann, Moran & Piggott (2015) will be used in this paper.

Figure 1: Table used to classify and evaluate the competence of athletes (Swann, Moran & Piggott, 2015)

Variable/score	1	2	3	4	
A. Athlete's highest standard of performance	Regional level; university level; semi-professional; 4 th tier leagues or tours	Involved in talent development; 3 rd tier professional leagues or tours	National level; selected to represent nation; 2 nd tier professional leagues or tours	International level; top tier professional leagues or tours	Within-sport comparison
B. Success at the athlete's highest level	Success at regional, university, semi-professional, or 3 rd /4 th tier	National titles or success at 2 nd /3 rd tier	Infrequent success at international level or top tier	Sustained success in major international, globally recognised competition	
C. Experience at the athlete's highest level	<2 years	2-5 years	5-8 years	8+ years	
D. Competitiveness of sport in athlete's country	Sport ranks outside top 10 in county; small sporting nation	Sport ranks 5-10 in country; small-medium sporting nation	Sport ranks top 5 in country; medium-large sporting nation	National sport; large sporting nation	Between-sports comparison
E. Global competitiveness of sport	Not Olympic sport; World championships limited to few countries; limited national TV audience	Occasional Olympic sport; World championships limited to a few counties; limited international TV audience	Recent Olympic sport with regular international competition; semi-global TV audience	Regular Olympic sport with frequent major international competition; global TV audience	

Figure 2: Equation for classification of athletes (Swann, Moran & Piggot, 2015)

<p>'Eliteness'/expertise of athletic sample =</p> $[(A + B + C/2)/3] \times [(D + E)/2]$ <p>Classification :</p> <p>1 – 4 = semi – elite;</p> <p>4 – 8 = competitive elite;</p> <p>8 – 12 = successful elite;</p> <p>12 – 16 = world – class elite</p>
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For this research, the professional athletes who were contacted for interviews fall in the range of “competitive elite” to “successful elite”. Owing to the fact that Singapore is a small nation with an even smaller sporting scene, it is highly unlikely to find and subsequently reach out to many “world-class elite” athletes here. Hence, the interviewees in this paper are in fact some of the choicest athletes in Singapore. This makes the research interesting and relatively unexplored.

Lastly, in this paper, the term “society” refers to people in Singapore aged 13 to 65 years of age. In relation to Allender, Cowburn & Foster (2006), this age range includes “young people” (15 to 30 years old) and “middle-aged people” (30 to 65 years old). Note that in this study, age 13 was used as the cut-off age instead of age 15, since it is more appropriate in Singapore’s context, occurring when secondary school begins. The selected age range encompasses the current group of high performing and professional athletes, as well as their parents. Therefore, this group can be classified as most relevant for the purpose of this research.

1.6 Significance

This paper aims to shed light on society’s perceptions regarding the career prospects of professional athletes, and at the same time explore if these perceptions hold true in reality. It can provide the necessary breadth and depth which is needed to understand the considerations of youth athletes as they decide to pursue professional sporting careers, a courageous and unconventional path in Singapore.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Reasons for youths taking up sports

Sports are a critical part of youth development. More often than not, it has a positive impact on their physical and emotional growth, teaches important values, and provides the necessary experiences and relationships that lead to success in life (Coakley, 2011). On a wider stage, sports are used as a means to improve national health and fitness levels (McNeill, Sproule & Horton, 2003).

There are several reasons why youths may take up sports. It could be due to parental pressure, personal interest, self-actualisation needs or for the sake of social interaction (Allen, 2003). As youth athletes progress in their sport, there are a few distinct phases which they can transition to (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008). These phases can be defined as high performing and professional; and there are various factors influencing youths to transition to these higher levels of sport.

2.2 On society's perceptions regarding a professional athlete's career prospects

It is widely known that sustaining a career as a professional athlete in Singapore is an immense challenge. From the very beginning, the odds are against the athlete, and chances of experiencing momentous success (e.g. winning on a global stage) and earning a huge income are slim (Osman, 2019). Consider the two main ways through which athletes can earn an income; competition winnings and sponsorships.

2.2.1 Competition winnings

In Singapore, there are insufficient competition opportunities due to the country's minute land size and thus remarkably small professional circuit (Houlihan & Green, 2008). Given the few professional competitions held locally each year, it becomes impractical to rely solely on competition winnings for an income, owing to the fact that winning invariably is impossible. Participation in regional competitions may increase an athlete's chances of accumulating earnings, but when taking into account the various expenditures incurred for the overseas trip, these earnings seem minimal (Brijnath, 2019). Thus, the financially uncertain nature of such a career can deter youths from becoming a professional athlete.

2.2.2 Sponsorships

Furthermore, it is difficult for even a successful athlete in Singapore to reach the same level of international fame that athletes from other bigger countries seem to obtain and to do it with ease. The media coverage and exposure of local professional sporting events is simply insubstantial compared to places such as the United States or the European nations (Chen, 2013). As such, sports equipment or apparel companies may deem it pointless to sponsor local professional athletes, as it does not provide themselves any considerable marketing and economic benefits. This lack of sponsorships in Singapore removes an essential income source for professional athletes. As a result, this similarly discourages youths from becoming professional athletes here in Singapore.

In short, there is a general consensus of how society's perceptions regarding the career prospects of local professional athletes may impede youth participation in high performing sport. However, more research can be conducted with individual athletes, to gain more specific and perhaps accurate insights about how these perceptions really influenced their decision making process before turning professional. This factor remains largely unexplored and inconclusive.

2.3 Other possible motivational factors influencing youth participation in high performing sport

These other motivational factors can be defined under two main categories, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

2.3.1 Extrinsic motivators

Extrinsic motivation tends to be fueled by government policies (de Cruz & Duncombe, 2016). In recent years, the Singapore government has promoted sports played at a higher level (McNeill & Wang, 2005). Systems have been put in place to foster a sport-centric environment, including establishment of the Singapore Sports School, and the opening of the National Sports Hub. Material incentives were presented to reward success; for example, there is a S\$500,000 bonus for an Asian Games gold medallist, as well as a S\$1,000,000 bonus for an Olympic gold medallist (Houlihan & Green, 2008). When compared against major sporting nations such as the United States or Australia, which reward \$37,500 and \$15,000 for their gold medallists respectively, the extent of which Singapore is willing to award its sporting achievements definitely becomes apparent (Choudhury, 2021). In Singapore's context, this outcome-oriented system is closely linked to an athletes' extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation can sometimes lead to better performance, especially in competitive sport (Vallerand & Losier, 1999). These policies have equipped Singapore with the adequate resources to support the growth of high performing youth athletes. More youths in Singapore may be attracted to develop their sporting talents, participating in high performing sport, with the hope to obtain such rewards.

Another extrinsic motivator can be an athlete's desire for fame and recognition by others. This is commonly known as "ego orientation" (Treasure & Roberts, 1994). In such cases, the supposed recognition and fame that athletes may receive from success is enough to attract them to a sport for a longer term. There is a need for some form of external validation for the athlete, to reassure them that they have indeed succeeded. An inclination towards "ego orientation" suggests that an athlete may prioritise outward signs of achievement and acknowledgement, and rely on these as validation of their successes (McNeill & Wang, 2005). In other words, the evaluation of their performance is based on the amount or extent of recognition that they receive. These can come in the form of physical awards or other means of commendations from people around them and in the community that they are in. Sometimes, chasing such recognition is enough to encourage youths to partake in high performing sport.

2.3.2 Intrinsic motivators

Intrinsic motivation is another driving factor, pushing youths to pursue sports at a high performing and in turn professional level (de Cruz & Duncombe, 2016). Intrinsic motivation plays a key role in improving athletes' well-being by taking stress off from external circumstances, providing the ideal conditions for them to obtain better results. Intrinsic motivation can refer to a satisfaction in playing the sport (Allen, 2003). The satisfaction that some athletes experience while playing a sport is precisely what draws them back continuously to it. Athletes may not feel like giving up on a sport, because they gain a sense of contentment and fulfillment every time they engage in it (Vallerand, 2007). For example, basketball players may feel motivated to engage in high performing training because they enjoy the feeling when their shots drop through the net. The frequency of high performance playing opportunities provides them with more chances to experience their desired satisfaction, thus they may be inspired to continue training.

Intrinsic motivation can also be the drive for self-improvement (Allen, 2003). Perhaps there is a personal compulsion to perform well, especially when an athlete has the required talent, potential and confidence to reach greater heights. This drive or compulsion is what pushes athletes to persistently chase their personal best, and set new records for themselves. This is known as "task orientation" (Treasure & Roberts, 1994). The focus is placed on attaining mastery over a skill, not for external rewards, but for one's personal accomplishment (McNeill & Wang, 2005). An inclination towards "task orientation" over "ego orientation" suggests that an athlete may prioritise their effort and improvement process based on their individual benchmarks, and outcomes are less reliant on the actions or comparative performance of others. Therefore, the drive for self-improvement can influence youth participation in high performing sport.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Procedure

A survey was used to gather data on society's perception regarding the career prospects of local professional athletes. An online survey was carried out through a blend of convenience and snowball sampling, to reach a greater number of respondents. Responses were stratified according to age, gender, education level and interest towards sports. The results of this survey were analysed using Thematic Analysis.

Interviews were conducted to gather data on the professional athletes' experiences as they progressed through the local sporting system. The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling from two selected sports, golf and canoeing. Access was available to various professional athletes from both sports, many of whom were Southeast Asian Games ("SEA Games") participants and medalists. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured style, to encourage greater flexibility and open-ended responses. Amid the current Covid-19 situation, online interviews were used instead of face-to-face interactions.

3.2 Research Method

This paper adopts an inductive research approach, drawing conclusions on how society's perceptions influence the participation of youths in high performing sport based on specific examples. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative data was collected. The qualitative data is the responses from the interviewees, since individual experiences are subjective to personal interpretation, and tend to be centred around thoughts or feelings which are opinionated in nature. The survey responses were organised as quantitative data, and presented using descriptive statistics as well as inferential statistics. Data from the survey was succinctly summarised and conclusions were obtained through logical generalisations from the responses.

3.3 Data Analysis Framework

The Thematic Analysis ("TA") framework was used to analyse data collected from the interviews. This refers to "organising and offering insight into patterns of meaning in a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). In TA, it is crucial to make use of relevant patterns in the analysis for the purpose of addressing the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). By using TA, this paper is able to examine and clarify the similar shared experiences of the respondents. For example, distinguishing the various common obstacles that athletes might have faced as they pursue a professional sporting career. In some cases, there were patterns which were deemed neither significant nor worthwhile exploring; these were not included in the data analysis.

In this research, TA was used to identify and find meaning in recurring themes across the professional athlete's responses. TA was used critically, not superficially, as a means for data analysis and definitely not as a research method. Below is a table of the phases of TA.

Figure 3: Steps of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

With reference to Fig. 1, preliminary ideas and observations were noted down after familiarisation with the interview responses. Thereafter, initial codes were used to categorise the responses. A foundational set of themes was drafted, with the relevant data grouped under each theme. Subsequently, these themes were refined once more. The final set of defined themes were “support systems”, “competition exposure and opportunities”, “intrinsic factors” and “extrinsic factors”. All four themes are discussed in detail in the following section.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

4.1 Data Summary

Figure 4: Summary of respondent demographics from the survey

Age	13 to 19	40 to 49	Others		
	39 (39.5%)	50 (50.5%)	10 (10%)		
Gender	Male	Female			
	63 (63.6%)	36 (36.4%)			
Highest education level	Current student	O'Levels or equivalent	A'Levels/ Diploma	Bachelor/ Master/PHD	
	39 (39.4%)	2 (2%)	3 (3%)	55 (55.6%)	

General interest or passion in sports	1 (Least interest)	2	3	4	5 (Most interest)
	4 (4%)	8 (8.1%)	28 (28.3%)	29 (29.3%)	30 (30.3%)
Thinks promoting professional sports is advantageous for Singapore	No	Yes			
	14 (14.1%)	85 (85.9%)			

As for the interviews, a total of 8 professional athletes were approached, 6 golfers (5 male, 1 female) and 2 canoeists (1 male, 1 female). The interviewees are anonymised and are referred to as Person 1 (“P1”) to Person 8 (“P8”). As mentioned above, all the athletes are classified as either “competitive elite” or “successful elite”.

From Fig. 2, we can understand the level of interest that the respondents have towards sports as a whole. This is important as it underpins their responses in the survey. From the chart above, it is clear that the majority of respondents have a high level of interest in sports. These are likely people who have had greater exposure to sports related topics, close personal experiences with professional sports persons, interaction with sports-inclined people and staying updated about sports news. This supports the credibility of the data.

86% of respondents believe that promoting professional sports is advantageous for Singapore (Fig. 2). In today’s academically-focused Singapore, it is a note-worthy surprise that the majority of people still support efforts to encourage more sports involvement and professional sports development. Perhaps when professional sport is mentioned, it is common for people to think of the possible success that athletes can achieve and the immense jubilation derived which can bring communities together. 14% of respondents think otherwise. These could be the people who are not inclined towards sports, making it difficult for them to empathise with it. Another reason is that they may have considered the tremendous amount of resources and financial cost pumped in to support professional athletes, which when weighed against the obtained results or lack thereof, may not seem as beneficial or rewarding, and therefore a difficult balance to strike.

Ultimately, a large proportion of respondents are in favour of advocating professional sports. It will be interesting to explore their opinions on the factors that influence youths to pursue sports as a career.

4.2 Support systems

The support available for aspiring youth athletes is crucial in their development. From the interviews, three types of support stood out.

4.2.1 Financial support

First and foremost, financial support must be given, as this is how sporting opportunities come about. Youths are not yet earning, thus requiring others to finance the cost of equipment, training, and overseas trips, on top of daily living expenses. In Singapore, parents are often the main stakeholders who are compelled to provide financial support.

P2: "... financial support, funding my university expenses and supporting me over the past 3 years since I turned professional".

P4: "they [parents] paid for my equipment, travel expenses and tournaments [fees]".

Another source of financial support comes from Government organisations such as the various National Sport Associations ("NSA"). There are certain high performance programmes which allocate monthly stipends to the top athletes in the sport, intended as training expenses and participation fees for local or overseas competitions. These systems do help to relieve the financial stress which is inevitably placed on the parent's shoulders once their child starts to train at a more vigorous, intense standard. However, such arrangements are usually only made for a select few sports (e.g. canoeing, table tennis, badminton), and may not cover an exceptionally wide span of sports.

P7: "NSA provided financial support for competitions initially. As I produced better results, I received support for training expenses (local and overseas), training equipment as well as monthly stipends. This was funded by Sport Singapore".

P8: “[NSA] provided us with financial support for overseas competitions and training camps. Spex scholarship provided me financial support and the facilities, equipment & medical assistance required to improve in my sport”.

4.2.2 Moral support

Another important aspect of support is from a moral standpoint; as reflected by current professional athletes. Many youth athletes are still dependent on parental support, and do not have the means to manage every aspect of their lives. Parents are vital pillars of support; those with the encouragement of their parents tend to receive more opportunities. Conversely, parents who do not back their child’s determination to pursue high performing sport, often results in youths being less likely to eventually turn professional.

P3: “They have supported me 100%. From ferrying me to my training session, getting me to see the right coaches as well as sending me overseas to compete”.

P6: “... ferried me to and from training sessions which allowed me to rest a little more”.

P7: “They supported me in pursuing high level sport as long as it was what I wanted”.

P8: “They supported my decision to join the National Team, encouraging me when I am tired or frustrated with my training results”.

4.2.3 Systemic support

Support from schools or the various NSAs is necessary, as this gives the youth athletes adequate structure in their daily routines. With the correct guidance and encouragement, youths can be better prepared to manage their lifestyle as a professional athlete. On one hand, some athletes mentioned that the availability of sport-centric streams or programmes catered to their needs by allowing a balance of both sports and studies.

P1: “I was lucky to have very good teachers & mentors at the Sports School. They gave me make-up lessons whenever I came back from competitions. That definitely eased the stress to balance both sports & studies”.

P4: "I didn't find it too difficult [to keep up with schoolwork] as the school program schedule I was in allowed me to practice and study".

However, other athletes did contest this idea, stating that it was difficult to always juggle sports and studies perfectly. This commonly results in unavoidable circumstances where focus can only be placed on one aspect, causing performance in the other aspect to plunge. The youths who eventually turn professional are usually the ones who may choose to prioritise sports over studies, especially in dilemmatic situations.

P6: "I wanted to do well in both studies and sport, and ... I also wanted to hang out with friends and be a normal teenager too. All those things take up time, and I was missing school a fair bit to compete in overseas events. Eventually, my studies suffered ...".

P7: "It was difficult to maintain the same amount of effort and time on academics when training full-time as an athlete. Academics became second priority to training, resting and recovery".

4.3 Competition exposure and opportunities

Figure 5: Comparison of the aspects shaping society's perceptions, against their opinion of whether there are enough opportunities to turn professional in Singapore

		What contributes the most to shaping your perceptions regarding the career prospects of professional athletes?					
		Interaction with professional athletes	Government policies	Media and news narratives	Personal beliefs and experiences	All of the above	Total
Are there sufficient opportunities to become a professional athlete in Singapore?	Yes	1	0	2	2	0	5
	No	8	12	21	15	0	56
	Somewhat	7	3	23	3	2	38
	Total	16	15	46	20	2	99

Fig. 5 demonstrates that only 5% of respondents think there are sufficient opportunities to pursue a professional sporting career in Singapore. The other 95% of respondents perceive that there are either somewhat sufficient or insufficient opportunities to do so. It is evident that many youths in Singapore may not be encouraged to play professional sport, due to the impression that there are inadequate chances for them to further their development in sports.

16% of respondents selected "Exposure to and interaction with professional athletes" as the main factors which shaped their perception regarding the career prospects of professional athletes. These respondents are likely the ones with intimate knowledge of and relationships with professional athletes, which might make their responses slightly more reliable. Among these particular respondents, only one thinks that opportunities to pursue a professional career are sufficient, while the other 15 respondents disagree (Fig. 5, column 3, "Interaction with professional athletes"). This concurs with and echoes the broad findings stated on top. Thus, it is probably accurate to presume that this is indeed the case: Singapore lacks opportunities for professional athletes to develop.

From the above results, there is an overwhelming sense that there is a shortage of opportunities for youths to chase their sporting goals. Yet such developmental opportunities and competition exposure are in fact critical, giving athletes the optimal assistance and experience to ultimately pursue professional careers. This is clearly articulated by the professional athletes, who unequivocally attest to the benefit and even necessity of competition opportunities.

P1: "Playing in bigger and stronger events to peat yourself against the field. It is the biggest way to learn and develop as an athlete".

P3: "[NSA] has been very supportive, providing me with many opportunities and access to high quality training, as well as the chance to compete in many places which has certainly given me a lot of experience".

P4: "[NSA] ... sending us to regular local and overseas tournaments".

4.4 Intrinsic Factors

Intrinsic motivation of aspiring youth athletes is critical and fundamental to their growth. In general, pursuing a career in professional sport is challenging and demands hard work. Hence being willing to take up this challenge in a safe and comfortable Singapore requires very strong intrinsic motivation. It is the self-motivation and satisfaction of what they enjoy that sustains the desire to play a sport as a career.

P1: "Doing what I love every day. Always enjoyed the process and thinking of ways to get better & better".

P7: "I was motivated by the improvement I could make based on my own effort".

P8: "Passion for the sport made me resolve to turn professional".

Another shared theme among the professional athletes is that of personal success. Many of them were pushed to train and pursue a professional career because of their achievements and performance as youths. This is somewhat expected, as one's impression of their competence and skill level builds self-confidence, which is the first step to piquing their interest in a sport.

P1: "... started getting into the national radar and continued working harder to climb the ranks and compete in bigger events".

P2: "... allowed all of us the opportunity to win and experience competition at a young age. ... I enjoyed competing and winning and kept playing golf during my schooling years".

P6: "the constant chase to get better kept me coming back for more".

4.5 Extrinsic Factors

Figure 6: Comparison of society's impression of local athletes' fame, against their opinion of whether it is an incentive or deterrent for youths

		How well known do you think the local professional athletes are in Singapore?			
		Not known at all	Not really well known	Somewhat well known	Total
Is fame a deterrent or incentive for youths to pursue a career in professional sports?	Deterrent	0	0	0	0
	Incentive	6	42	20	68
	Neutral	3	21	7	31
	Total	9	63	27	99

An intriguing observation can be noticed from Fig. 6. Even though roughly 63% of respondents feel that professional athletes in Singapore are not really well known, 68% of them still believe that fame is an incentive for youths to turn professional. The incentive may come from the expectation that all professional athletes would at least be well known to some degree, and attaining such fame might be appealing for some. It is worth acknowledging that high performing athletes do experience a certain level of prominence as youths, mainly within their own social circles. As they work towards playing sports at a professional level, they tend to become more well-known too. Yet as mentioned earlier, widespread international recognition is nearly impossible to acquire in Singapore. This ultimately restricts the athletes' fame to at best, being somewhat well known within Singapore.

Figure 7: Comparison of society's impression of professional athletes' income, against their opinion of whether it is an incentive or deterrent for youths

		What do you think is the income level (including competition winnings, sponsorships and endorsements) of local professional athletes?			
		Above average	Average	Below Average	Total
Is money a deterrent or incentive for youths to pursue a career in professional sports?	Deterrent	0	11	18	29
	Incentive	5	21	3	29
	Neutral	4	14	23	41
	Total	9	46	44	99

A similar pattern can be observed from Fig. 7. A large majority of respondents think that professional athletes in Singapore earn an average or below average income. Still, an equal number of respondents find that income is an incentive for aspiring youths, as do the number of respondents who find that it is a deterrent. Those who see income as an incentive are likely considering the possible success and in turn monetary rewards that professional athletes are able to obtain. After all, no one becomes a professional athlete without the strong hope and belief that they are going to achieve success. However, the chances of reaching such peaks of achievement are slim, which on the whole, makes the income of professional athletes average.

Undeniably, one of the biggest considerations at stake for youths and parents alike is the income and job stability of professional athletes. After all, at a professional level, a sport no longer remains as just another leisure activity. Instead, it now carries significant gravity, as consistent and exceptional performances are the only things that matter to make a living. Likewise, the consequences of bad performances are amplified tremendously, where one slip-up can cause an athlete to lose a competition and miss out on the monetary payout for that event. Below are some

responses from the athletes when asked about the biggest factor that discouraged them from pursuing professional sport.

P1: "Job stability, as well as very streaky performance".

P4: "Financial capacity that you need to have to be able to support your travel".

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Practical Implications

From previous research and the survey results, there is a consensus that professional sport is important in our society. It is clear that societal perceptions regarding the career prospects of professional athletes do influence youth participation in high performing sport. This manifests in several ways, such as perceptions regarding the developmental opportunities, income, fame and job stability of professional athletes. In Singapore's context, these are all valid, pragmatic and realistic considerations for aspiring youths to bear in mind. The perceptions of society are mainly shaped by media and news narratives. This suggests that in Singapore the media has a crucial role to play, as it has the influence to portray professional sport in an attractive manner. Media organisations, especially mainstream ones such as The Straits Times, can increase their coverage of youth and professional competitions alike, so that sports hold a more noteworthy or prominent place in society.

5.2 Recommendations

At the end of the interview, the professional athletes were asked about their opinions on what more can be done to support aspiring youth athletes, having gone through the Singapore system themselves. Their responses point to the fact that more can be done to encourage youths to play professional sport. Their views provided a refreshing and unique perspective based on their personal experiences. Below are some of their responses.

P3: "I think having more competitions domestically on a consistent basis would help local players test themselves more often. Having a support framework where players are encouraged to go overseas to compete and get more exposure is also important because sometimes it's very easy to get too comfortable here in Singapore".

P6: "Parents would be more supportive of their children's' aspiring dreams to pursue professional sport if there was a better, well-rounded system that catered to athletes after retirement from the sport. Such would include tie ups with sport related companies to offer alternative jobs or careers to ensure the livelihood of the athlete is being met".

P7: "Athletes must be taught to present their sporting skills in a universal context and articulate how the values and skills learnt from sport can help them perform in other roles. Locally, retired full-time athletes are pigeonholed into coaching roles. This discourages young athletes from taking the next step as they will lose out to their peers when they retire from competitive sport. Employers generally do not see value in the years spent training and competing, even if at a high level. It is still viewed as a "CCA" or hobby even if it serves the athlete's livelihood".

Building on what was cited by the athletes, a suggestion would be for NSAs to organise a greater number of competitions for youth, to create more opportunities and perhaps introduce a better balance between studies and sports. Such competitions should also be extended to younger children, to promote interest in sports from a young age. Bearing in mind that an "academic first, sports second" mindset is rather deeply ingrained in Singapore's culture, this would still be a relatively feasible change. Furthermore, smoother transitions from the high performing stage to a professional one, and thereafter from a professional stage to a post-professional career, are definitely something to work towards. This will guarantee some extent of stability and support for the athletes, allowing them to transfer their skills (after competitive retirement) to more diverse jobs other than the conventional coaching role.

5.3 Limitations

The research was limited by the evolving Covid-19 situation. As a result of Safe Management Measures ("SMM"), it was not possible to gather mass survey data through face-to-face random sampling. Responses mainly came from online survey participants, causing the sample size to be limited to people within two to three degrees of connection, which may be less representative of the entire Singapore. The stricter SMM put in place has also reduced the scope of this research, as access to athletes from a wider variety of sports became extremely challenging to obtain. As such, the interviewees were limited to only two sports, canoeing and golf. Again, this may not be completely indicative of the experiences of all professional athletes across Singapore.

The measures put in place to control the spread of Covid-19 also has an impact on the sporting climate. The lack of sports competitions around the region has restricted athletes' development, inevitably leading to a drop in their overall performance. This is significant since Singapore is an outcome-oriented nation, and a lack of competitive exposure can be perceived to reflect poorer achievements from the professional athletes. Thus, the current sporting scene in Singapore may not accurately display the performance of the professional athletes before the pandemic.

5.4 Future Research

Future works may choose to conduct further research on professional athletes from a wider variety of sports. This can give the findings greater comprehensiveness and reliability. This paper managed to reach out to canoeing and golf professional athletes, two sports which are predominantly played individually. It will also be interesting to explore whether the type of sport, be it team or individual, has an impact on a youth's decision to pursue a professional sporting career.

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