Sport, Social Mobility, and Elite Athletes

Chapter · September 2022
DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780197519011.013.35

2 authors, including:

Ramon Spaaij
Victoria University Melbourne

194 PUBLICATIONS  4,482 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:

Diversity in community sport clubs in australia View project

WE PLAY - Refugee Settlement through Sport View project

All content following this page was uploaded by Ramon Spaaij on 23 February 2023.

The user has requested enhancement of the downloaded file.
Sport, Social Mobility, and Elite Athletes

Ramón Spaaij  
Victoria University and University of Amsterdam  
Suzanne Schrijnder  
Victoria University

Abstract: This chapter explores the association between sport and social mobility. Drawing on a review of literature and primary research on elite women’s road cycling, it is shown that opportunities for social mobility exist in sport, with key mechanisms being earnings, occupational status, educational attainment, and social prestige. However, it is evident from the literature and the primary data that these opportunities and pathways are not distributed evenly. There is considerable evidence to support the argument that, on the whole, sport is not the social equalizer it is considered to be, regardless of what high-profile rags-to-riches stories may suggest. Social factors such as gender, race-ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (and the intersections between them) moderate opportunities for social mobility in and through sport. Those from privileged backgrounds, and especially white middle-class males, are more likely to benefit from social mobility opportunities and pathways in sport than persons from underserved communities. This social stratification pattern is influenced by conditions and circumstances of early life, which shape disparities in access to sport participation opportunities from an early age. The case study of women’s road cycling illustrates how these dynamics will vary across sports labor markets of different size, depending on both the economic opportunities within a sport and the resources required to enter the sport and to maintain a playing career.

Keywords: elite sport, social mobility, social inequality, equality of opportunity, sport participation, gender, cycling

Popular belief holds that sport offers those living in poverty or socioeconomic marginality considerable opportunities for upward social mobility. Media outlets such as The Guardian and the Bleacher Report have published “the greatest” (Dart, Doyle, & Hill, 2006) and “most inspiring” (Ferrari-King, 2014) rags-to-riches stories of how some boys or young men, with only the shirts on their backs, were able to launch stellar and highly lucrative sporting careers. Diego Maradona, Pelé, boxing champion Kassim Ouma, and mixed martial artist Bibiano Fernandes all seem to fit this storyline, as does the quote attributed to long-distance runner Emil Zátopek: “An athlete cannot run with money in his pockets. He must run with hope in his heart and dreams in his head” (GETVAL, 2017). Both researchers and critics, however, have dispelled this popular belief as being false or at least misleading (Eitzen, 2000). For example, Tom Farrey (2017), founder of the Aspen Institute’s Sports & Society Program, has provided strong evidence for the rising gentrification of college sports in the United States, which have seen a decline in opportunities for disadvantaged students, even in the big-money sports of basketball and American football.
Social mobility is a vibrant topic of research in sociology at large. Social stratification is a structuring principle in sport (Bourdieu, 1978; Pociello, 1995; Sugden & Tomlinson, 2000), and it is therefore unsurprising that the relationship between sport participation and social mobility has attracted scholarly attention over the years, including some attempts to pull together some of the existing knowledge (Spaaij, 2011; Spaaij, Farquharson, & Marjoribanks, 2015). However, relatively little is known, by way of scientific research, as to who benefits, how, and under what circumstances. In this chapter, we will examine to what extent, and in what ways, sport provides a context within which elite athletes can improve their individual and collective social positions. We will first provide an overview of key issues and definitions in social mobility and their application to the career trajectories of athletes. This will be followed by a discussion of the different theoretical and methodological approaches that scholars have taken to the topic. This discussion will followed by a more in-depth examination of one of the most vibrant current debates in the field: gender bias and the professional career and mobility prospects of women athletes. This debate will be empirically illustrated through findings from the second author’s research on professional women cyclists. These findings illustrate the tensions and some of the key debates concerning social mobility and sport. The concluding section of the chapter will reflect on the current status of research on athletes’ struggles and achievements in advancing their social positions through elite playing careers in sport, and identify potentially fruitful directions and methods for future research.

### Issues

Social mobility can be seen as a standard feature of modern societies (Bottero, 2005). It occurs when the correlation between one’s origins and future destinations may be less than perfect (Hasenbalg & Silva, 2003; Hout, 2015). Although social mobility is a slippery and multidimensional concept, it may be broadly defined as “the movement or opportunities for movement between different social classes or occupational groups” (Aldridge, 2003, p. 189). The concept is strongly associated with educational attainment, occupational status, and earnings (Breen & Jonsson, 2005). People move both up and down in relation to others and their own origins (Hout, 2015). This is so-called vertical mobility, resulting in a relatively durable change to a person’s or a group’s position within the system of social stratification (Lipset & Bendix, 1992). In this chapter, we are concerned primarily with relative mobility, which refers to “movement of an individual between different social classes, regardless of changes in the distribution of the population between them” (Nunn, Johnson, Monro, Bickerstaffe, & Kelsey, 2007, p. 16).

A distinction can be made between intergenerational and intragenerational mobility. Intragenerational mobility refers to the movement of individuals between different social strata during their lifetime. In principle, this can be measured between any two points during their life (Nunn et al., 2007). In contrast, intergenerational mobility refers to the difference between the social positions of individuals at a particular point in their adult life (i.e., destination) with that of their parents (i.e., origins). Whereas intergenerational mobility is envisaged as transitions between social origins and destinations, intragenerational mobility tends to be approached from within a complete life-course perspective (Goldthorpe, 2003). Although the focus of this chapter is on the latter, it will also be seen that there tends to be a strong correlation between social origins and destinations. In this regard, Hout (2015) argues that it is more appropriate to ask “how the conditions and circumstances of early life constrain adult success than to ask who is
moving up and who is not. The focus on origins keeps the substantive issues of opportunity and fairness in focus” (p. 27).

How do these conceptualizations of social mobility apply to sport? The academic literature on the relationship between social mobility and sport participation suggests the possibility of accumulating wealth, social prestige and cultural capital in and through sport exists, especially within the context of the global sports–industrial complex that is characterized by hyper-commodification, professionalization and mediatization (Maguire, 2005). However, as we will show below, the relationship between sport and social mobility is complex and ambivalent. Moreover, the literature features some areas of contention and theoretical and methodological diversity that can make it difficult to make meaningful comparisons across studies, or to come to an overarching, “generalizable” conclusion.

Recent decades have seen a growth in research on at least three aspects of the relationship between sport and social mobility: (1) gender and elite sport, (2) race, sport, and social mobility, and (3) career duration, termination, and post-career transitions. Below we summarize select work from each of these sub-areas in turn.

**Gender, Sport, and Social Mobility**

The social mobility of women in sport has been a topic of considerable research, and is discussed in greater depth in the Debates section. In sport, access to available occupations, income, and prestige is primarily reserved for men. It largely remains that men dominate the playing, coaching, managerial, and occupational aspects of sport (Ann & Rodriguez, 2000; Messner, 2007). Such evidence suggests that social mobility pathways in sport may be relatively limited for women, but there is also some evidence supporting the belief that female athletes benefit from athletic experiences beyond sport in various ways including quality of life, academic performance, educational attainment, and economic earning power (Espinoza, 2009; Kane et al., 2007; LaVoi, Thul, & Wasend, 2018; Sabo & Veliz, 2008; Schultz, 2018). For example, LaVoi et al. (2018) report that 94% of women executives played sport and that wages of athletes were 7% higher than for non-athletes. However, women’s sport participation did not boost their employment numbers in the professional sport industry. There is an ongoing lack of women in leadership and management positions in many sports (Staurowsky et al., 2020).

Factors that limit women to experience upward mobility within the sports industry include stereotypical hiring perceptions (i.e., employers looking for stereotypical leaders, in other words: masculine leaders), a hiring bias in regards to women’s family obligations, the lack of mentors and role models, and workplace climates that perceive women as less competent than men in their jobs (Staurowsky et al., 2020). The presence of these barriers suggests that the mere participation in sport does not mean a proportional hiring reality for women in sport.

Finally, it is important to understand that girls are not a homogenous group and that their participation and the associated benefits are distributed unevenly (Sabo & Veliz, 2008). This gap reflects wider socioeconomic inequalities that affect the capacity of families, schools and communities to create equal opportunities for all children and young people to engage in sport (Sabo & Veliz, 2008). The population group that appears to benefit most from the positive correlation between sport participation and college completion (with educational attainment being important for subsequent socioeconomic status [SES]) are girls and women who identify as white and who have benefitted from their families’ generational social mobility (Biscomb, 2012). Troutman and Dufur (2007) found that white girls from higher SES families, living with both parents, and attending private, suburban, or rural schools (i.e., not attending urban schools)
were the most likely to participate in sport. Their odds of completing a college degree were higher than the odds of girls who did not engage in interscholastic sport (Troutman & Dufur, 2007) but it is unknown if this difference in educational attainment can be attributed to their sport participation. Daughters of wealthier parents who value physical activity and share an interest in their daughters’ participation, report the highest levels of physical activity (Biddle, Whitehead, O’Donovan, & Nevill, 2005; LaVoi et al., 2018). In contrast, in the United States, parents of girls from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to encourage their daughters to work outside the home or focus on school instead of participate in sport (LaVoi et al., 2018; Sabo & Veliz, 2008).

Race, Sport and Mobility

The extent to which sport offers a realistic pathway for social mobility for racialized minorities, and particularly African American young men, has long occupied the hearts and minds of scholars of sport (e.g., Book, Henriksen, & Stambulova, 2020; Edwards, 2000; Hawkins, 2010). Hawkins (2010), for example, argues that while, at the surface level, college sport offers African American student-athletes opportunities for mobility, in reality their bodies have been exploited as a valued commodity in generating wealth for predominantly white institutions. He shows how, among other critical findings, there have been no significant or enduring changes in African Americans’ access to administrative positions. A similar absence from positions of power has been found among black and minority ethnic (former) athletes in European soccer (Bradbury, 2013), and for Indigenous people in Australia (Hallinan & Judd, 2009).

Eminent sports sociologist Harry Edwards (2000) echoes this critical perspective by stating that “the dynamics of black sports involvement, and the blind faith of black youths and their families in sport as a prime vehicle of self-realization and social-economic advancement, have combined to generate a complex of critical problems for black society” (p. 9). Yet, he argues that, in the context of high levels of crime, incarceration, unemployment, and school drop-out, “exploiting black youths' overemphasis on sports participation and achievement may be our only remaining avenue for guiding increasing numbers of them out of circumstances that today lead to even more devastating destructiveness and a greater waste of human potential than that which I, and others, have long decried in connection with unrealistic black sports aspirations.” Edwards advises that “all involved must learn to dream with their eyes open, always remaining fully cognizant of participation's pitfalls no less than its positive possibilities, of its potential as a dead end trap no less than its promise as a vehicle for outreach and advancement” (Edwards, 2000, pp. 12-13).

More granular, empirically driven research suggests that race and gender intersect to produce more adverse outcomes for Black girls and women in sport. For example, Black male athletes from urban areas were four times more likely than non-athletes to be in college working toward Bachelor’s degrees, but for Black female athletes from urban areas, sport participation seemed to actually work against them as they were far less likely to have high-status jobs (5%) after high school compared with non-athletes (59%) (Hanson & Kraus, 1998; Smith, 1992). The best route to upward social mobility for Black women is believed to be the one of education, which is stressed by their families and results in a socialization into self-sufficiency and leadership (Smith, 1995). The lower participation rates in sport and physical activity of this group of girls and the lack of family support makes it difficult for them to experience socioeconomic benefits of sport.
Career Termination and Post-Career Transitions

In taking stock of the issues raised in some key studies that have garnered attention over the years, it is important to recognize that the majority of studies that found a correlation between sport and upward mobility have focused on elite athletes who had achieved professional status. Here, it should be kept in mind that for every athlete who achieves professional status, there are thousands of aspiring athletes who never reach elite or professional status (Leonard, 1996). The odds of becoming a professional athlete are low, and even after a rigorous selection process, a major league career may be brief. Just two of 10,000 males aged 15 to 39 reach professional athlete status (Leonard, 1996). Leonard (1996) found that the odds are better for high school athletes: the odds of a high school baseball player entering the major leagues are .002, roughly the same for football players and two times better than for basketball players (Leonard, 1996).

A characteristic that distinguishes professional sports careers from most other careers is that players know (but do not necessarily accept) that the role is temporary, and here exit is often involuntary, and the elite status conferred by the role is difficult to achieve after leaving the role (Drahota & Eitzen 1998). Career termination is often one of the most significant and traumatic experience encountered by athletes (Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Many professional sport careers tend to be relatively brief and compressed as the window for the ability to compete at elite levels is often short. As a result, Witnauer, Rogers, and Saint Onge’s (2007) study of baseball careers in the United States aptly characterizes such careers as ones that spend “an inevitably short time on a very slippery slope” (p. 382).

The turbulent and fragile nature of sports careers stresses the importance of establishing viable post-career opportunities (Butt & Molnar, 2009; McCormack & Walseth, 2013). Upward mobility achieved during an athlete’s career may be followed by downward mobility after retirement (Spaaij, Farquharson, & Marjoribanks, 2015). Yet, research on post-career transition experiences and strategies, such increased institutional investment in education, suggests that athletes are often so focused on establishing and maintaining a professional career that other aspects of identity and investment become of secondary importance. For example, Hickey and Kelly (2008) identified the tensions that Australian footballers face in trying to respond to the pressures and practices associated with undertaking education and training programmes outside of football. They conclude that: “While time and access are recurring issues, by far their greatest obstacle to them achieving success in these arenas is their general lack of focus and commitment. Although many players genuinely attempt to engage in education and training practices, whenever these programmes clash with football, football is given priority” (Hickey & Kelly, 2008, p. 491). A recent study by Schmidt, Torgler, and Jung (2017) examined the factors that influence young people’s tendencies to choose a professional football career option over a lower risk one. They found that such risk taking could be explained by potential benefits expected from this decision, as well as one’s own assessments about the likelihood of achieving a professional career.

In the next section, we outline different theoretical and methodological approaches to the relationship between elite sport and social mobility.

Approaches

The relationship between social mobility and sport has been studied from different theoretical and methodological perspectives. In terms of theory, the first approach reflects a
developmental model, wherein participation in sport is thought to contribute to performance in education and in the labor market (Mackin & Walther, 2011). Barron, Ewing, and Waddell (2000) refer to this as the “human-capital enhancement model,” arguing that athletic involvement enhances productivity. From this perspective, sport participation can be conceptualized as a vehicle for intragenerational and intergenerational social mobility through mechanisms such as occupational status, income status, educational attainment and social prestige (Eisen & Turner, 1992; Loy, 1972; Semyonov, 1986; Sohi & Yusuff, 1987). Athletic development can thus be viewed as a resource that can be converted into performance, wealth, and prestige. This resource may be seen as considerable, most particularly for athletes from marginalized backgrounds, such as, for example, disadvantaged aspiring athletes (Book, Henriksen, & Stambulova, 2020). This developmental model has been verified empirically. Mackin and Walther (2011) found limited support for the developmental model, concluding that some sport participation increases the number of years of education that the athlete will complete and increases the probability of earning a college degree. Barron et al. (2000) reported some evidence that athletic participation directly affects wages and educational attainment. However, they hasten to add that “much of the effect of athletic participation on wages and educational attainment appears to reflect differences across individuals in ability or value of leisure” (p. 409).

Another approach, which comes in different variants, offers resistance to this received conventional wisdom. Building on social reproduction theory and neo-Marxism, one strand argues that the popular belief that sport offers a viable social mobility pathway is detrimental to disadvantaged athletes and community groups and reproduces their disadvantage (e.g., Anderson & White, 2017; Carrington, 1986). Here it is recognized that the relationship between sport and social mobility may be seen as a zero-sum game as the time and energy invested in sport takes away from time that could be spent on education, which, by virtually all accounts, offers a more feasible pathway to social mobility. Qualitative studies, such as Rodriguez and McDonald’s (2013) study of Polynesians in Australia, illustrate this zero-sum approach well. They conclude that the main earning potential of working-class Polynesian men is between the ages of 20 and 50. If these years are spent by “chasing the goal of being an elite athlete, this may come at the expense of acquiring other skills or experience” that are more likely to translate into economic capital (i.e., educational attainment and work experience) (p. 213). From this perspective, elite sport appears to primarily benefit those from relatively privileged backgrounds in terms of economic resources and educational attainment (Coakley, 2009). Aspiring athletes from disadvantaged backgrounds often face challenging realities that are summed up in a “sink or swim” narrative of risk, descent, and gain (Book et al., 2020). For example, Book et al. (2020) report on the career narratives of two African-American elite athletes whose “pathway to professional sports focuses more upon their underserved communities, racial issues, and how these social factors presented a myriad of challenges they would overcome to reach the professional level” (p. 11). Quantitative studies, on the other hand, appear to have found little or no evidence of any negative effect of sport participation in terms of labor market outcomes or educational attainment (e.g., Barron et al., 2000; Mackin & Walther, 2011).

The collective evidence from research conducted from these different perspectives point in a similar direction with regard to the issues of equal opportunity and equality of outcome. As the developmental model suggests, sport participation can indeed serve to increase social mobility for various population groups. However, in many cases, access to social mobility opportunities and pathways in sport is moderated by race-ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status (SES). It appears that white males from middle-class backgrounds generally benefit most
from professional sports careers (Sabo, Melnick, & Vanfossen, 1993), while there are fewer viable, well-paid career opportunities for women, racial and ethnic minorities, those from lower SES backgrounds, and for those athletes at the intersections of these attributes (Leonard, 1996; Messner, 2007; Sabo et al., 1993). For example, research by Snellman, Silva, Frederick, and Putnam (2015) has noted a growing “engagement gap” and found that there has been a sharp increase in the class gap in involvement, whereby working-class students’ access to, and involvement in, extracurricular sports activities, and hence their opportunities for associated social mobility outcomes, is diminishing. There are also significant differences in social mobility opportunities between the small number of high paid, male-dominated sports such as football, baseball, basketball and rugby, and other sports that are less well funded and broadcast (Eitle, 2005; Eitle & Eitle, 2002). This is demonstrated by, for example, Schotté’s (2008) findings in a study of the economic precariousness of long-distance running in France.

**Methodological Approaches**

Reflecting the diversity of social mobility studies in general (Hout, 2015), conceptualization and measurement of social mobility in sport vary considerably across different studies. In their discussion of the quantitative literature, Macklin and Walther (2011) argue that the results of the literature are in part due to the variety of ways social mobility is operationalized, whether cross-sectional or longitudinal studies are conducted, and whether results are disaggregated by SES, race, gender, or other social factors. They highlight the need for nationally-representative longitudinal studies to assess the effect of participation in sport on social mobility.

Research tends to take a quantitative and aggregated approach to social mobility (cf. Miller, 1998). Some studies define and measure social mobility by years of education, educational attainment, and earnings, while other research uses occupational attainment or subjective factors such as social prestige as proxy indicators. In quantitative studies, social origins have often been examined in relatively crude ways, reduced to broad social factors such as gender, race-ethnicity, and SES; and, more occasionally, the intersections of these factors. Qualitative researchers argue that “hard” or aggregated indicators alone provide insufficient insight into how changes in socioeconomic status are actually experienced by individuals. Spaaij’s (2011, 2013) research draws on the biographical method of the French sociologist Daniel Bertaux (1981), who argues that life stories bring home the complexity of the sequences of cause and effect in human lives, emphasizing the evolving interconnection between individual actors and structural opportunities and constraints. Bertaux and Thompson (1997) argue that ‘objective resources . . . and constraints . . . are so much mediated by the perceptions that young people have of them that they remain ineffective and almost unreal as such’ (pp. 15-16). Similar qualitative methods that have been employed in this field of research include narrative analysis (Book et al., 2020) and ethnography (Rodriguez & McDonald, 2013; Schotté, 2008).

Another problem with much of the literature on the topic is that it typically adopts an individualistic perspective, where it only examines intragenerational mobility or, when it does look at intergenerational mobility, measures the family’s social location by one of its members (i.e. the father alone). This approach appears to be out of step with advances in social mobility studies more broadly, where calls have been made to adopt a family-level perspective (e.g., Beller, 2009; Miller, 1998). This can be achieved by, for example, broadening the traditional view of intergenerational mobility, that is, father-to-son/daughter mobility, to include other
(intergenerational) pathways within the family, such as female pathways of mobility (Miller, 1998).

In the remainder of this chapter, we elaborate on the intersection between social mobility and inequality in sport by examining in greater detail how gender moderates the relationship between social mobility and sport. The career prospects and experiences of women athletes have been receiving growing scholarly attention, and it is timely to synthesize this knowledge through the lens of social mobility. We do so by drawing on a combination of academic literature and primary data collected by the second author as part of her doctoral research. This research engages ethnography in examining the gender, labor, and power relations in the field of professional women’s road cycling. The methods include participation in the Melbourne, Australia road racing scene, observations at the Women’s World Tour (WWT) races, and semi-structured interviews with elite/professional women cyclists. The data presented in this chapter are derived mostly from interviews, and is presented anonymously using pseudonyms.

Debates

As noted in the previous section, the question if – and if so, how and for whom – sport participation can lead to social mobility proves to be complex, with research pointing in different directions. It is clear, however, that the relationship between sport participation and academic achievement differs by gender, race, the particular sport one plays, and the achievement domain (Eitle, 2005). In the Issues section, we flagged gender, sport, and social mobility as a major area of research in this field. In this section, we pick up on this thread and elaborate on it by focusing on an increasingly prominent scholarly and public debate: professional women’s sport and its opportunities for social mobility. We do so by examining, first, some of the key literature, and, second, a case study of elite women’s road cycling that is based on the second author’s PhD research.

Elite Women Athletes and Social Mobility

Sport development outcomes are complex and depend on many factors (Clark & Burnett, 2010). As discussed earlier, most social mobility opportunities in and through sport are destined for men, especially those with relatively high SES. Nonetheless, women are believed to benefit from sport participation, and some research suggests they may actually benefit more from experiences with sport than do men (e.g., Hanson & Kraus, 1998). Findings from a number of studies, such as those considered below, contribute to a better understanding of the complexities of sport and social mobility for women athletes.

In South Africa, most football players live in the context of poverty, and sport provides them an opportunity to escape harsh living conditions, especially for the talented individuals playing professionally (Clark & Burnett, 2010). Despite professional football not being a viable option for women in South Africa1, Clark and Burnett (2010) suggest that playing football gives some young women the opportunity to attend tertiary education as they receive sport scholarships, and with that, improve their chances for upward social mobility and break the cycle of poverty. Female footballers’ dreams of social mobility also impacts the decision for some to take their football skills abroad (Agergaard & Botelho, 2014). Playing abroad enhances footballers’ social prestige in their home country because, for most people, leaving Central Africa is part of a larger migration dream. However, compared to male players, female players’ attainment of prestige is not as widespread, and their sports careers often lack financial security or career structure (Agergaard & Botelho, 2014).
The problem of limited financial rewards in women’s sport leaves many high-level competitors requiring extra income and this is often gained through supplemental employment. In Scotland, for example, many female football players require additional income from a job besides their competitive football career restricting their economic mobility (Gilmore, 2008). The need for additional income clearly signals the lack of economic viability for these women, but in turn, their possibility to grow in a career outside of football might be limited by their time, energy, and money invested in football. This precarious situation leads many Scottish female football players to retire early, as they are not in a position to wait to be ‘forced’ out (by either age or atrophy) as they need to make decisions earlier for their future professional careers beyond football (Gilmore, 2008). For female African migrant players, in addition to the limited financial rewards for their football labour, their opportunities for a post-career professional occupation is restricted by their young age when they migrate. These women have not completed a level of schooling that allows them to study in the country where they play, which results in a lack of education (Agergaard & Botelho, 2014). Low educational attainment and language difficulties result in limited possibilities for pursuing a football coaching career, the main considered post-playing career option (Agergaard & Botelho, 2014). For these women, playing football abroad might provide small economic benefits and locally attained social prestige, but their participation in elite football contributes little to their long-term social mobility.

For women athletes in China and the United States, things seem to look slightly different. Jinxia’s (2001) analysis of sportswomen and social mobility in China indicates how the mere status of being an elite athlete makes sportswomen a “state worker,” which means that they acquire formal occupation status in terms of wage, city residence, and welfare benefits. After retiring from sport, many female athletes receive a job in either sport or non-sport fields, and thus, a secure future and one that for many, results in upward social mobility (Jinxia, 2001). In the United States, Eisen and Turner (1992) found that Olympic athletes enjoyed increased social prestige. This is the result of an essentially guaranteed education (compulsory college attendance for intercollegiate athletes) and the fact that their athletic achievements helped most of them to gain employment (Eisen & Turner, 1992).

**Elite Women’s Road Cycling**

Similar to the elite female athletes in Sohi and Yusuff’s (1987) study and the active girls in the research by LaVoi, Thul, and Wasend (2018) and Troutman and Dufur (2007), elite women cyclists mostly originate from a higher social and economic class (see also Sirna, 2016). Where boots, a ball, and club membership generally suffice to develop football skills, cyclists need to purchase a particular kind of bike with clip-in pedals, a helmet, and shoes with cleats to be allowed to race. Besides paying for a membership license with a club and with representative cycling bodies, a rider must pay an entry fee for every race. The technological advancements of the bicycle might make riding and racing more enjoyable, but it can also influence who lines up at the start. Carbon frames are lighter, Shimano’s Dura-Ace is the superior (and concomitantly costly) groupset (i.e., the brakes and gears), electronic shifting is faster, and MIPS technology (Multi-directional Impact Protection System) helmets reduce the impact on the brain should one crash. These are also amongst the most expensive options and the talented riders who can afford a lighter, better, and thus, faster bike are more likely to win, draw attention of the right people, and attract sponsorship and other opportunities. The road cycling culture requires a certain type of expensive clothing (using Lycra and other technologically advanced fabrics) and accessories that match one’s bike. Bicycle maintenance, custom professional fittings, insurance, repairs from
crashes, and transport add significant expenses. Elite level cycling is expensive and thus novice riders generally reliant on their family’s ability and willingness to financially support them in order to train and compete in the right races. In total, the requirements of competitive road racing often works strategically against the notion that sport the a great equalizer that it is often considered to be (Maguire, 2011; Sohi & Yusuff, 1987).

When riders make it to the elite level of cycling (i.e., competing in the WWT), the above-mentioned costs are often mostly covered by professional cycling teams. The team functions as an employer and riders sign labour contracts with them. However, as with many women’s sports, there is little money to win and earn in elite women’s road cycling. The most prestige race in the sport, the Tour de France, organized by the ASO, offers a 21-day stage race with a total prize money of €2,293,000 (ASO, 2020b). A stage winner wins €11,000 while the overall winner leaves with €500,000. The women’s version of this race, La Course, is reduced to a one-day race with a total prize pot of €20,200 and the winner goes home with €6000 (ASO, 2020a). The minimum wage of third-tier male cyclists is set at €30,855 (Mitchell, 2020) but top World Tour men riders can have million Euro contracts. A minimum wage for WWT team riders was implemented by the UCI (the international governing body of cycling) in 2020 and was set at €15,000 (UCI, 2019). In 2020, there were only five WWT teams. The remaining teams are classified as Continental teams and do not have to pay their riders the minimum wage. Only 12% of the women’s peloton earns more than €40,000 a year (The Cyclists' Alliance, 2019). This means that during their active cycling career, few elite women cyclists have the opportunity to save or invest money or build a retirement fund. Many, mostly non-European, riders have to take out loans to make their dream of professional bike riding a reality and/or depend on their support network.

One point of focus within social mobility scholarship is the strong relationship with educational attainment. The women’s peloton is highly educated. According to the 2019 The Cyclists’ Alliance Rider Survey (The Cyclists’ Alliance, 2019), around 59% of female riders have a college degree or higher, and 32% are currently enrolled as a student (although 6% of these students also hold a second job). For some, the world of elite road cycling gives them the opportunity to combine their cycling career with their academic experience. This is illustrated by the following comments from Violet (pseudonym), who was in the midst of pursuing a business degree focused on sport:

It’s been good, it’s applicable. I can see how it applies to the world that I live in. I actually did my internship with [my team] which was quite interesting, I got a little bit more of an insight inside the team. I worked with the marketing team, so I had to help them with the website and sort of help with the marketing and I guess awareness of [our] project. I did a little bit of data analysis and I wrote some blogs for them as well. All different little things I had to do. It was enjoyable, it was good. So, I got a lot out of it and [the internship] kind of brought together a lot of [my course’s] topics.

It is important to note that despite the high numbers of educated riders, the survey does not describe how or when these degrees were acquired. Cyclists interrupt their education, finish their study over many years, or burn out from the high demands of excelling in sport and school, as the following comments indicate:

I nearly finished a science degree, but I have been doing it for ten years, like very slowly. (Lisa)
After five years of studying – my Bachelor took me five years – I had to really recover from that. Combining elite sport and university… So, for two seasons I focused on cyclo cross, to really tone it down, but I got over trained and it’s since this summer that I started riding on the road again, for the Giro [Rosa]. Sometimes I wonder how I did it, because I also lived in a student house and had a job. It was all too much really. (Ane)

Just as their education provides the cyclists with a safety net undergirding financial security, it also may lead them to justify a decision to pursue an elite cycling career. As Abigail reflects:

It was not really a decision I had to think about. You only get one chance, you can only be a professional athlete for so many years and I am already… pretty old to be starting out, so it’s really only a few years of my life, whereas I can sit at my desk and be an engineer for decades. (Abigail)

As Ann and Rodriguez (2000) point out, occupational opportunities in sport are dominated by men, and here road cycling is no exception. Despite the announcement that two current professional cyclists, Anna van der Breggen and Chantal Blaak, have become sports directors for their teams in 2021 and 2022 respectively (Cash, 2020), there are few women directors, managers, team owners, or race organizers. In other words, while these elite women cyclists do indeed gain specific cycling capital, this particular cultural capital does not often lead to higher status occupational positions. Although many women cyclists work at jobs besides cycling, and cycling careers might leave space for education, the pattern here in terms of social mobility, is that this combination largely leads to the aforementioned zero-sum model. Reinforced is their finding that studying and working takes away from progressing as an elite cyclist, and full-time cycling takes away opportunities for earning and saving money and gain work experience for a professional career. The following comments by cyclists Violet and Hannah illustrate this:

Yeah, [my parents] helped me [financially] and I also had to get a loan to cover the other expenses, like visas, things like that; additional costs that I hadn’t quite considered. I think my scholarship was for $36,000 or something but my tuition was $48,000 but like covered a room and that sort of thing as well. (Violet)

The effects on my career have more been that I have stayed at the same workplace because of the security. Which has been fabulous, which just means you cannot progress, your career, as much as you might want to. I was working at the […] Institute of Sport doing physical preparations so strength and conditioning and that sort of thing. Obviously, that is regarded quite highly as a career. I would’ve liked to have pursued that more but because of becoming the athlete, you only have a limited time you can actually be the athlete, so I made that choice. (Hannah)

Such setbacks in the course of a professional career, when combined with the lack of savings and potential debts, makes it difficult to advance one’s social mobility, given that most women cyclists come from a middle-class status to begin with. This example reflects some of the complexities and limitations of the “sport as a vehicle for social mobility” thesis, as well as the aforementioned “trade off” between commitment to a sports career and alternative investment that may pay higher dividends post-career. In the next section, we draw together some of the main findings of this chapter.

**Conclusion**
In his synthesis of trends and pressing questions in the study of social mobility, Hout (2015) argues that the main question we should ask is: “To what extent do the conditions and circumstances of early life constrain success in adulthood?” (p. 28). According to Hout (2015) and others, such as Hasenbalg and Silva (2003), focusing on the association between social origins and destinations gets us “closer to the ultimate questions of whether society offers opportunity and whether it does so fairly” (Hout, 2015, p. 28).

In this chapter, we have sought to adapt this question to sport, by exploring whether sport offers opportunities for social mobility, and whether it does so fairly. The findings from both quantitative and qualitative studies presented in this chapter suggest that opportunities for advances in one’s social mobility do in fact exist in sport, with key mechanisms being earnings, occupational status, educational attainment, and social prestige. However, it is evident from the literature that these opportunities and pathways are not distributed evenly. The available research shows that these factors moderate opportunities for social mobility in and through sport, whereby those from privileged backgrounds are more likely to benefit than persons from disadvantaged backgrounds.

As discussed earlier, there are some divergences and contradictions in the literature. Nonetheless, there is now a considerable amount of evidence to support the argument that, on the whole, sport is not the social equalizer it is often considered to be, regardless of what high-profile rags-to-riches “success stories” may suggest. White males from middle-class backgrounds appear to benefit most from their experiences in professional sport, while there are fewer viable and durable mobility opportunities for those who are women, belong to racialized minorities, have initially lower SES, or hold an intersection of these characteristics. Overall, this social stratification pattern is influenced by conditions and circumstances of early life, which shape disparities in access to sport participation opportunities from an early age. This brief case study of women’s road cycling illustrates how these dynamics can vary across sports labor markets of different size, depending on both the economic opportunities within a sport and the resources required to enter the sport and to maintain a playing career.

Compared to the vibrancy of social mobility research at large, the study of social mobility in and through sport is a rather underexplored field of research in terms of both its volume (of publications) and methodological innovation. As discussed in this chapter, recent decades have seen a growth in research on three particular aspects of the association between sport and social mobility: (1) gender and elite sport, (2) and race, sport, and social mobility, and (3) career duration, termination, and post-career transitions. We expect that these three sub-fields, which intersect also with SES, will continue to produce new insights about the association between sport and social mobility in years to come. The study of transnational sports labor migration, a topic we have not discussed in this chapter, is another area that promises to deliver further insights into the relationship between sport and social mobility, building on recent advances in the body of anthropological scholarship (e.g., Besnier, Calabrò, & Guinness, 2020). Yet, if we are to follow Hout’s (2015) lead, we need to pursue further methodological innovation. As noted earlier, social origins have often been examined quantitatively in relatively crude ways in the literature, reduced to broad social factors such as gender, race-ethnicity, and SES; and, more occasionally, the intersections of these factors. As discussed in this chapter, incorporating intergenerational family effects or dynamics help to broaden and deepen our conceptualization and measurement of social mobility. Moreover, there is room to bridge the aforementioned divide between quantitative and qualitative approaches, by designing mixed methods studies that
capture both measurement and meaning. Herein lie welcome opportunities for moving this field of research forward.

Notes

1. In South Africa in particular, ‘lack of material resources such as sponsorships, facilities, coaches, equipment, transportation, professional leagues and to a lesser degree lack of non-material resources such as media coverage and advertising, recognition and public support appear as important obstacles for women athletes’ (Agergaard & Botelho, 2014, p. 524).

References


