

Understanding Key Factors in Basketball Dropout

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Article history: Received 2026 January 09; Revised 2026 February 20; Accepted 2026 February 27; Available online 2026 March 30; Available print 2026 April 30

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ABSTRACT. Dropout from performance-level sport represents a critical challenge in youth and young adult athletic development, with implications for long-term physical activity and psychological well-being. This study investigates factors associated with withdrawal from performance basketball among former athletes, with particular emphasis on academic demands, psychological experiences, coaching climate, injuries, and post-dropout adjustment. **Objectives:** The primary objective was to identify key individual, psychological, and structural factors influencing dropout from performance basketball and to explore athletes' experiences during and after withdrawal from competitive sport. **Materials and Methods:** A cross-sectional, questionnaire-based study was conducted between 1 and 30 April 2025 on a sample of 48 former performance basketball players (32 women, 16 men), aged 18–29 years. Data were collected online using a 33-item questionnaire developed for this study, informed by existing literature on sport dropout and validated through expert consultation. Descriptive statistical analyses were applied, complemented by categorical analysis of open-ended responses. **Results:** Dropout occurred predominantly during late adolescence, with a mean withdrawal age of 17.5 years, despite early engagement in basketball (mean starting age = 8.91 years). The most frequently reported reasons for dropout were other academic opportunities and perceived lack of progression pathways. Psychological demands were high, while access to psychological support during athletes' careers was limited. Coach-related pressure, injury experiences, and insufficient recovery resources further contributed to withdrawal decisions. Post-dropout experiences included both emotional difficulties and positive life reorientation, with the majority of participants continuing to practice basketball at a recreational level. **Conclusions:** Dropout from performance basketball emerges as

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a multifactorial and transitional process rather than a single negative outcome. The findings underline the need for athlete-centred development models that integrate dual-career support, psychological services, and supportive coaching environments to promote sustainable engagement in sport.

Keywords: *sport dropout, performance basketball, youth athletes, psychological factors, sport participation.*

INTRODUCTION

Participation in organized sport during childhood and adolescence is widely recognised as a critical contributor to physical health, motor development, and psychosocial well-being. However, a considerable decline in sport participation is observed as young people transition from early adolescence into later teenage years and young adulthood, with participation sometimes decreasing sharply during this developmental period (Lara-Bercial et al., 2025). This phenomenon, commonly referred to as sport dropout, has therefore attracted substantial attention in sport science and public health research as a complex behavioural outcome with implications for lifelong physical activity and health (Zhang et al., 2024).

Despite decades of research, conceptual clarity around dropout remains limited, and the process is now understood as multifaceted, involving intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural influences rather than a simple loss of interest (Battaglia et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Systematic reviews have highlighted that multiple discrete factors contribute to dropout, including lack of enjoyment, perceptions of competence, social pressures, competing priorities such as academic demands, and physical concerns such as injury or maturation-related challenges (Back et al., 2022; Crane & Temple, 2015; Zhang et al., 2024). These findings underscore that dropout often reflects a cumulative interplay of factors rather than a single cause.

Motivational and psychological factors play an important role in whether young athletes continue participating in sport or choose to withdraw. Research indicates that athletes are more likely to remain engaged when their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and social connection are satisfied, while lower levels of self-driven motivation are associated with an increased risk of dropout (Back et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). Furthermore, social support from coaches, peers, and parents appears to moderate these motivational processes, as supportive environments may enhance intrinsic motivation and foster continued participation (Back et al., 2022). In turn, environments perceived as controlling, stressful, or excessively result-oriented may undermine intrinsic motivation and contribute to decisions to discontinue sport.

In addition to motivational and social factors, the broader sport environment plays a significant role. Systematic evidence suggests that structural elements such as the intensity of training requirements, lack of adaptive developmental pathways, and competing life demands (e.g., academic workload) can influence the likelihood of dropout (Zhang et al., 2024). Moreover, research indicates that dropout is not confined to a single developmental stage; rather, it can occur at multiple transition points, including the shift from youth to late adolescence, when individuals encounter increased academic, social, and personal demands (Lara-Bercial et al., 2025). One of the most frequently reported reasons young people give for withdrawing from organised sport before reaching adulthood is a loss of enjoyment.

Enjoyment has been identified as one of the most common intrinsic motivators for sport participation among children and adolescents; however, it is also repeatedly cited as a key reason for dropout when sport is no longer perceived as pleasurable (Crane & Temple, 2015). Many children and young people initially engage in sport because of the sense of well-being experienced during participation, yet when this experience becomes dominated by pressure, monotony, or negative emotions, the likelihood of withdrawal increases.

In our opinion, performance in basketball is mainly influenced by physical, physiological, and behavioural characteristics, and young athletes who struggle to meet these demands or experience delays in physical, mental, or emotional development may be particularly vulnerable to withdrawal (Soares et al., 2020). Performance pressure and limited opportunities to continue competitive participation beyond certain age levels further intensify dropout risk. Structural constraints, such as local infrastructure, availability of qualified coaches, financial limitations, and challenges related to athlete transfers, may also restrict developmental pathways and contribute to disengagement. Intrapersonal factors such as perceived physical competence also play an important role in the dropout process (Lima et al., 2020). A decline in motivation may occur when young athletes transition into a higher age category, where previously acquired skills are no longer sufficient to meet performance expectations. If these developmental transitions are not adequately explained or supported, athletes may develop feelings of inadequacy or perceive limited potential for improvement, which can contribute to disengagement from sport (Schmid et al., 2023).

Basketball performance depends on physical, physiological, and behavioural factors, and young athletes who struggle to meet these demands or experience developmental delays may be more vulnerable to dropout (Soares et al., 2020). Performance pressure, limited post-youth opportunities, and structural constraints such as infrastructure, coaching availability, financial resources, and transfer barriers can further restrict development and increase disengagement. At the same time, some authors suggest that a diminution in organised sport participation

should not always be viewed as a negative outcome, as it can reflect normal developmental changes rather than solely problematic experiences (Battaglia et al., 2024).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the present study is to examine the factors associated with dropout from performance basketball, with particular attention to motivational, psychological, interpersonal, and structural influences experienced during athletes' developmental pathways. Building on contemporary research that conceptualises dropout as a multifactorial and context-dependent process, this study seeks to explore how former basketball players perceive the conditions that contributed to their withdrawal from organised competitive participation.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study employed a cross-sectional, descriptive design using a self-administered questionnaire to examine factors associated with dropout from performance-level basketball. The sample consisted of 48 former basketball players (32 women and 16 men) who had previously performed in Romanian basketball clubs and had discontinued performance participation at the time of data collection.

Data were collected between 1 and 30 April 2025, using a 33-item structured questionnaire administered online via Goggle Forms platform. The questionnaire consisted in demographic characteristics, sport participation history, perceived reasons for withdrawal, and psychosocial experiences related to disengagement from basketball. It was newly developed for this study and conceptually informed by the Youth Sport Dropout Questionnaire proposed by Lara-Bercial et al. (2025), while being adapted to the specific context of performance basketball. Item formats included multiple-choice questions, yes or no ending responses, Likert-type scales, and selected open-ended questions.

Content validity was ensured through consultation with two experts in basketball, with the aim of confirming the relevance and clarity of the items in relation to the study objectives. This approach is consistent with methodological guidelines for context-specific instrument development and adaptation (Boateng et al., 2018). The questionnaire was administered online to ensure accessibility and anonymity, with participation being voluntary and based on informed consent. Data analysis was primarily descriptive, using frequencies, percentages, and measures of central tendency, complemented by qualitative content analysis of open-ended responses to identify recurring themes related to dropout experiences.

RESULTS

From the findings of the study we will first describe the demographic profile of the participants, followed by an overview of their sport participation background and reported experiences related to withdrawal from performance-level basketball. Demographic data indicate that participants were predominantly in early adulthood, with ages ranging from 18 to 29 years and a concentration of responses in the early twenties. The mean age of the sample was 22.17 years, and the most frequently reported age was 23 years, represented by 13 participants. Participants reported a wide range of ages for the onset of basketball participation. The mean age at which respondents began practicing basketball was 8.91 years, indicating early engagement with the sport. The most frequently reported starting age was 9 years, reported by 15 participants (31%), while one participant began at the age of 5 years and two participants reported a later start at 15 years of age.

Withdrawal from performance-level basketball occurred predominantly during late adolescence. The mean age at dropout was 17.5 years, with the highest concentration of responses at 17 years (n = 14) and 18 years (n = 10). Only one participant reported discontinuation at a later age, 26 years, indicating that dropout most commonly occurred before early adulthood.

Table 1. Basketball participation background of the participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Years of performance participation	1–3 years	5	10.4
	4–6 years	15	31.3
	7–10 years	21	43.8
	>10 years	7	14.6
Highest competition level	Junior	12	25.0
	High school	9	18.8
	National	18	37.5
	International	6	12.5
	Senior	3	6.2

Table 1. presents participants’ competitive background, indicating that most respondents accumulated between 7 and 10 years of performance-level experience and competed primarily at national or junior levels.

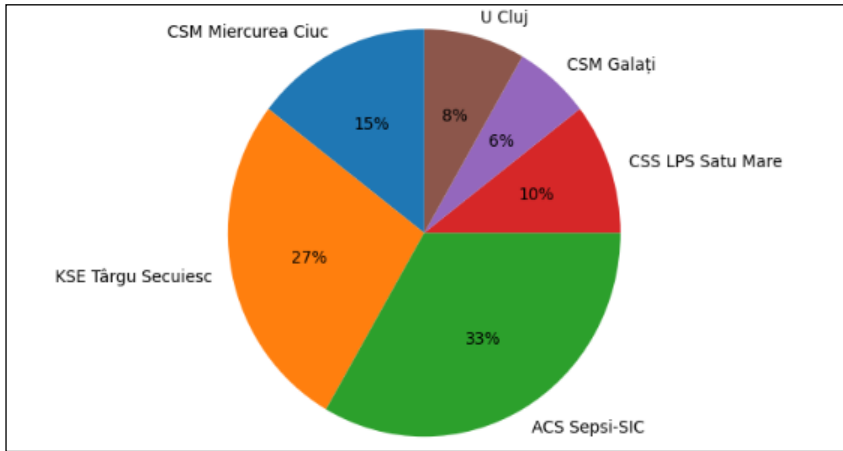


Fig. 1. Club affiliation of former performance basketball players

Fig. 1., illustrates the club affiliation of the former performance basketball players included in the study. The largest proportion of participants reported prior involvement with ACS Sepsi-SIC and KSE Târgu Secuiesc, followed by CSM Miercurea Ciuc, while smaller proportions represented CSS LPS Satu Mare, U Cluj, and CSM Galați.

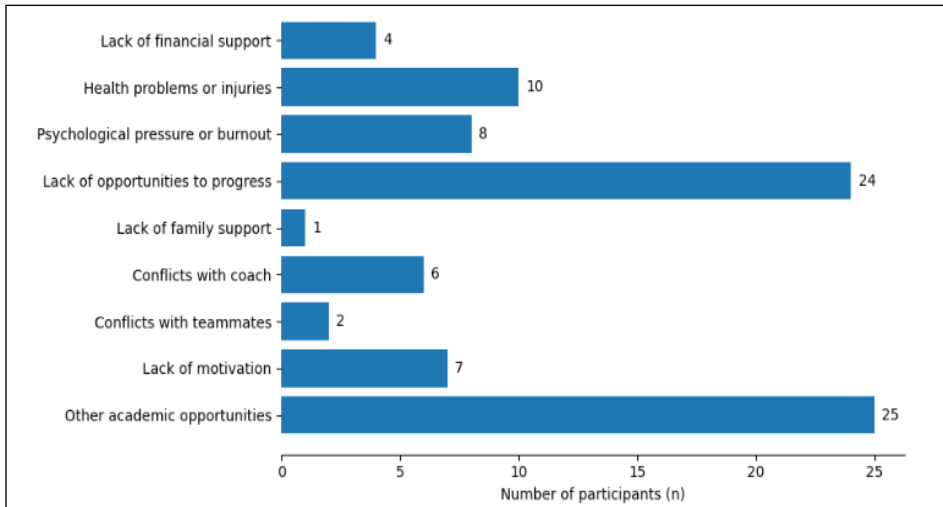


Fig. 2. Reasons for dropping out of performance-level basketball

As it is represented in Fig. 2., the main reasons reported for withdrawal from performance-level basketball are the following: Other academic opportunities and the perceived lack of opportunities to progress were the most frequently reported factors, followed by health-related issues, psychological pressure or burnout, and lack of motivation. Factors related to family support and peer conflict were reported less frequently.

Table 2. Psychological experiences reported during performance basketball careers

Item	Response options	%
Access to psychological support during career	Yes	35.4
	No	64.6
Mental preparation considered as important as physical preparation	Yes	95.8
	No	4.2
Competitive environment perceived as overly stressful	Yes	29.2
	Partially	56.3
	No	14.6
Experienced mental overload during career	Yes	50.0
	No	50.0
Perceived level of psychological pressure	Very high	8.3
	High	39.6
	Moderate	48.8
	Low	8.3
Would have continued sport with greater psychological/emotional support	Yes	50.0
	No	50.0

Table 2. summarises participants’ psychological experiences during their performance basketball careers, including access to psychological support, perceived mental demands, and evaluations of competitive stress.

As shown in Fig. 3., 60.4% of participants reported experiencing excessive pressure from coaches, while 39.6% did not. Perceived emotional support from coaches was distributed across responses, with 29.2% indicating sufficient support, 39.6% partial support, and 31.3% insufficient support.

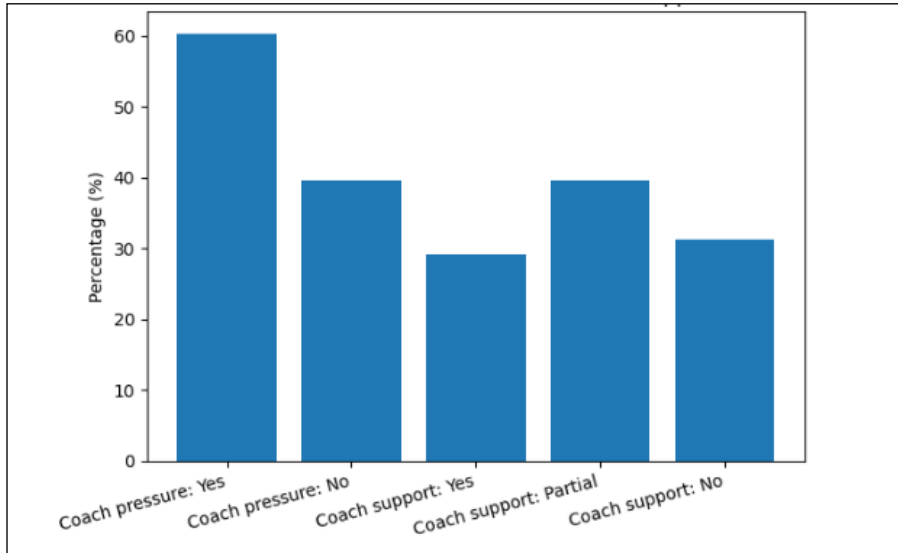


Fig. 3. Coach related pressure and emotional support

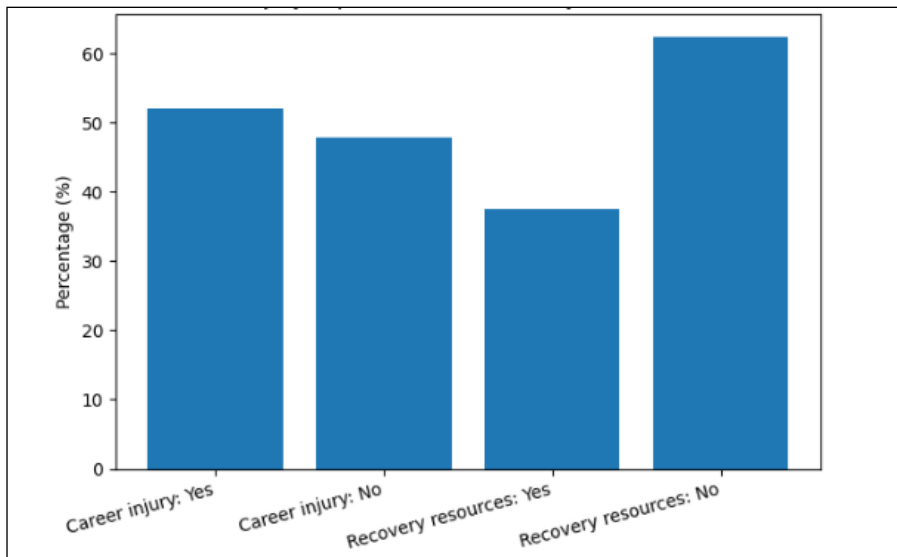


Fig. 4. Injury experience and availability of recovery resources during basketball careers

According to Fig. 4., 52.1% of participants reported sustaining injuries that affected their basketball careers, while 47.9% did not. Among respondents, 62.5% perceived recovery resources as insufficient, whereas 37.6% reported adequate resources for injury recovery.

Table 3. Post-dropout experiences reported by former performance basketball

Category of reported experience	Description	Number of participants (n)	Percentage (%)
Loss of routine and team belonging	Statements referring to the absence of structured training schedules, competition routines, and team identity after withdrawal	29	60.4
Emotional and psychological difficulties	Reports of emotional distress, anxiety, reduced motivation, feelings of emptiness or sadness following sport dropout	24	50.0
Difficulties with adaptation and identity transition	Responses describing challenges in adjusting to post-sport life, uncertainty about personal direction, or loss of athletic identity	19	39.6
Reduced physical activity levels	Mentions of decreased exercise frequency and difficulty maintaining physical activity after leaving performance sport	17	35.4
Positive life reorientation	Responses highlighting positive outcomes such as increased focus on education, improved social life, personal development, or better life balance	21	43.8
Continued recreational sport participation	Explicit mentions of continuing basketball or other physical activity at a recreational or hobby level	43	89.6

Analysis of the open-ended responses revealed that post-dropout experiences were multifaceted, with most participants reporting loss of routine and team belonging (60.4%), emotional or psychological difficulties (50.0%),

and challenges related to adaptation and identity transition (39.6%). At the same time, a substantial proportion also identified positive reorientation outcomes (43.8%), while the majority continued engaging in basketball at a recreational level (89.6%).

DISCUSSIONS

This study examined factors associated with withdrawal from performance-level basketball, integrating demographic characteristics, sport participation histories, psychological experiences, and post-dropout outcomes. The findings reinforce the view that sport dropout is a multifactorial process shaped by developmental, psychological, and structural influences rather than a single decisive event.

First of all, withdrawal from performance basketball occurred most frequently during late adolescence, with a mean dropout age of 17.5 years and a clear concentration at ages 17–18. This period coincides with major educational and life transitions, during which athletes face increased academic demands and decisions about future careers. Participants typically began basketball at an early age (mean = 8.91 years), indicating long-term engagement before withdrawal. Together, these findings highlight late adolescence as a critical phase for dropout risk, consistent with previous research identifying transition periods as vulnerable moments for sport disengagement (Battaglia et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Moreover, as shown in Fig. 2, the most frequently reported reasons for withdrawal were other academic opportunities and the perceived lack of opportunities to progress in performance basketball. This perception is supported by the competitive background data (Table 1), which show that most participants competed at junior or national levels, where advancement options may be limited. These findings align with evidence that conflicts between education and sport, combined with unclear development pathways, are major contributors to dropout during late adolescence (Zhang et al., 2024).

Taking into account, psychological factors played an important role in athletes' experiences. Although almost all participants recognised mental preparation as equally important as physical preparation, most reported no access to psychological support during their careers (Table 2). Many described the competitive environment as stressful and half experienced mental overload. These findings suggest a gap between athletes' psychological needs and the support structures available, which may increase vulnerability to disengagement. Similar concerns have been reported in recent research on mental health risks among young and elite athletes (Lundqvist et al., 2023).

Coach-related factors appeared to influence athletes indirectly.

As illustrated in Fig. 3, a majority of participants experienced excessive pressure from coaches, while emotional support was often perceived as partial or insufficient. Although most participants did not attribute their dropout decision solely to coaches, these findings indicate that coaching behaviours may shape the motivational climate in ways that contribute to withdrawal. This is consistent with previous studies showing that controlling or highly result-focused coaching environments can undermine motivation and well-being (Orbach et al., 2022). Injury experiences were common, with over half of participants reporting injuries that affected their careers (Fig. 4). Most also perceived recovery resources as insufficient, pointing to structural limitations within clubs or sport systems. Inadequate access to rehabilitation and medical support may increase both physical and psychological strain, contributing to dropout decisions, particularly when combined with other pressures.

Post-dropout experiences were mixed. As summarised in Table 3, many participants reported loss of routine, emotional difficulties, and challenges adapting to life after performance sport, reflecting disruptions in daily structure and athletic identity. At the same time, most participants continued to engage in basketball or other physical activities recreationally, and many reported positive outcomes such as improved life balance and personal development. These findings support the idea that reduced participation in organised sport does not always indicate negative outcomes, but may represent an adaptive transition when physical activity and well-being are maintained.

CONCLUSIONS

Findings from this study highlights withdrawal from performance-level basketball as a multifactorial and developmentally sensitive process. Dropout occurred most frequently during late adolescence, despite early and long-term engagement with the sport, and was strongly influenced by academic demands, limited perceived opportunities for progression, and increasing psychological strain. Discussions revealed a clear mismatch between athletes' psychological needs and the support structures available, with high performance pressure, limited access to psychological support, and coaching climates perceived as emotionally demanding. Injury experiences and insufficient recovery resources further contributed to disengagement from performance basketball.

Importantly, withdrawal from performance sport did not result in complete disengagement from physical activity. Most participants continued to practice basketball recreationally and reported both challenges and positive adjustments after dropout. These results suggest that dropout should be understood not only as a negative outcome, but also as a transitional phase requiring better structural, psychological, and educational support.

STUDY LIMITATIONS

The cross-sectional design of the study does not allow for causal inferences. Although associations between various factors and dropout were identified, it is not possible to determine the prior direction or relative weight of these influences over time.

AUTHORS CONTRIBUTIONS

Ildiko Manasses and Claudiu-Adrian Pașcan contributed to the conceptualization, design of the study and initial drafting of the manuscript. Denisa-Annamária Kis contributed to the data collection, literature review and writing of the manuscript. Paula-Alina Apostu and Maria-Daniela Macra-Oșorhean contributed to the methodological design, data analysis, interpretation of results and also scientific supervision. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is the result of teamwork between the authors and started from the findings in Kis Denisa Annamária's dissertation thesis.

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