Proceedings of ICELIA 2027 Symposium: Modern Education Strategies: Innovative Pedagogies and Digital Learning
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2027.NL38538

How Does the Relationship Between Elite Youth Sports Participation and Post-Secondary Enrollment Vary Across Different Races and Ethnicities in Canada?

Zifeng Yao

Collingwood School, West Vancouver, Canada
fredrickzfyao@gmail.com

Abstract. Elite youth sport is often described as a pathway to university, scholarships, and future opportunity, but access to that pathway is not equal for every athlete. This paper asks: How do race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic factors shape the relationship between elite youth sport participation and post-secondary opportunities in Canada? To investigate this question, this paper employs a qualitative case study using two in-depth, one-on-one interviews with elite youth athletes from soccer and hockey. Their experiences were compared with existing Canadian research on sport participation, financial barriers, discrimination, family support, and recruitment knowledge. The interviews suggest that race was not the most visible barrier in either athlete's personal experience, although both accounts leave open the possibility of less obvious forms of racial bias. Instead, socioeconomic status, family resources, recruitment knowledge, and personal connections appeared to have a stronger direct influence on access to elite development and post-secondary opportunities. In short, elite sport can create educational opportunities, but access to and benefit from those opportunities depend on more than athletic talent alone.

Keywords: Elite Youth Sport, Race and Ethnicity, Socioeconomic Factors, Post-secondary Opportunities, Access and Inequality

1. Introduction

Elite youth sport is often presented as a system where talent, effort, and commitment determine how far an athlete can go. However, it still remains a question whether the pathway is actually equally accessible to everyone, especially when high-level participation can require significant financial investment, transportation needs, family support, and knowledge of recruitment systems. Existing research suggests that sport participation in Canada is influenced by socioeconomic status, race, immigration status, and access to resources, raising questions about who is able to benefit from sport as a pathway to post-secondary education [1]. What remains unclear is whether race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic factors shape the relationship between elite youth sport participation and post-secondary opportunities in Canada. Therefore, this paper extends existing research with two in-depth qualitative interviews involving elite Canadian youth athletes from soccer and hockey. Results suggest that race does not appear as a significant factor in differentiating the pathway, but it exerts

© 2026 The Authors. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2027.NL38538

an impact less visibly. However, socioeconomic status and family lineage in sports cast an influence more than expected.

2. Literature review

Elite youth sport is often presented as a pathway to educational opportunity, but this pathway is not equally available to all athletes. Access to competitive sport depends on more than talent. It is shaped by family income, race, geography, transportation, parental knowledge, and access to strong clubs or school sport programs. Statistics Canada reports that sport participation in Canada differs by gender, racialized group, and immigration status, while also showing that cost remains a barrier for many racialized participants [1]. This matters because sport participation is the first step in the sport-to-university pathway. If athletes are excluded early because of money, location, discrimination, or lack of information, they are less likely to reach the recruitment and scholarship stage later.

Financial barriers are especially important in elite youth sport. The Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute [2] found that children and youth from higher-income households participate in sport at higher rates than those from lower-income households. This connects directly to elite pathways because families often need to pay for club fees, equipment, travel, tournaments, private coaching, highlight videos, and recruitment support. Sulz, Gleddie, Kinsella, and Humbert [3] also show that pay-to-play sport models can limit participation for students from low-income families. Therefore, athletic ability alone may not be enough. An athlete may have strong potential, but without financial support, they may not be able to access the programs and exposure needed to become a recruitable university athlete.

Another barrier is recruitment knowledge, which can act like cultural capital. Families often need to understand tryouts, club rankings, recruitment timelines, eligibility rules, coach communication, and scholarship opportunities. This kind of insider knowledge gives some athletes an advantage before performance is even considered. Research on school sport and social class shows that socioeconomic status can shape who participates, persists, and gains recognition in athletic systems [4]. This means the recruitment pathway is not completely purposive. Two athletes may have similar ability, but the one with more family knowledge, connections, and money may be better positioned to turn sport into a post-secondary opportunity.

These barriers are especially important because broader educational inequalities already exist in Canada. For instance, Indigenous adults continue to have lower post-secondary completion rates than non-Indigenous adults [1, 5]. If elite sport is expensive, selective, and dependent on travel and recruitment exposure, it may not automatically reduce educational inequality. Instead, it may reproduce some of the same barriers already present in education. Race also shapes sport experiences. Racism and discrimination are problems in Canadian community sport, with racialized participants reporting higher levels of unfair treatment than non-racialized participants [1]. However, sport can also create belonging and identity benefits. Higginbotham [6] found that athletic identity can support Black students' sense of belonging across high school and the transition to college. This shows that sport can be empowering, but only when athletes can access inclusive and supportive pathways.

A final issue is the lack of clear Canadian data on race, recruitment, and athletic scholarships. Existing research shows that sport participation is shaped by income, race, immigration status, and family knowledge, but there is less public data showing which athletes actually receive scholarships or convert sport participation into university opportunities. This creates an important research gap. The central question is not simply whether sport helps students reach university. The stronger

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2027.NL38538

question is which athletes are able to access elite sport pathways in the first place, and whether those pathways operate differently across racial, ethnic, Indigenous, immigrant, and economic backgrounds.

3. Methods and case selection

This study uses a qualitative case-study approach based on two one-on-one, in-depth interviews with elite youth athletes, Tyler and June (pseudonyms). The interviews lasted approximately 35 minutes each, were transcribed, and were then analyzed for recurring themes involving race, socioeconomic status, family support, financial barriers, recruitment knowledge, and post-secondary opportunities. The two cases were selected to provide contrasting experiences across different sports and recruitment systems: Tyler is an elite soccer player planning to continue his education and soccer in Madrid. His sports journey was straightforward and linear, as he always knew, from a young age, that he wanted to be a soccer player. In Contrast, June is a Chinese Canadian hockey player who has gradually navigated his way to competitive hockey, considering the high financial costs and the back-and-forth decision-making processes. Rather than assigning each athlete a fixed socioeconomic class based on assumptions, socioeconomic status was examined through their own descriptions and perceptions of factors such as club fees, travel, private training, family financial support, access to information, and personal connections. Comparing these two cases does not represent the experiences of all Canadian athletes, but it allows for a closer examination of how race, financial resources, and family knowledge can shape an athlete's ability to turn elite sport participation into post-secondary opportunity.

4. Results

4.1. Race does not seem to be a defining factor for the severity of inequality in sports

Race does not play as direct an impact in the interviewees' accounts; from both interviews, we can identify that neither Tyler nor June experienced racial discrimination or unfairness in their respective sports due to ethnicity. Neither athlete described experiencing clear racial discrimination that prevented them from joining teams, receiving playing time, or progressing through their sport. June, being a Chinese Canadian hockey player, directly states that he "wouldn't say any of the decision-making was necessarily based on race." Instead, he believed coaches' decisions were based "more [on] how I played" and on the actions of other players. Although June described unfairness within hockey, he connected it to money, parental influence, private training, and relationships with coaches rather than ethnicity. For example, he explained that some players received advantages because their parents managed teams or funded programs, which indicated advantages gained essentially through connections. Meaning, specifically in June's experience, financial advantage and network privileges were more influential than race.

Tyler similarly said that he had never personally been treated differently because of his ethnicity. However, his interview adds an important complication. While he did not experience obvious discrimination himself, he still believed that "there was bias for sure" and that "everyone has some subconscious type of bias," though he did not elaborate on this matter too much and just made a broad claim based on his personal view. No further explanation or examples were given. Despite that, he still explained that if two athletes of different races had the same skill level, a coach might choose one over the other "because whatever race he is has that bias." Unlike direct discrimination,

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2027.NL38538

subconscious bias may be difficult for athletes to identify because coaches can present their decision as a judgment about skill, physicality, position, or playing style.

Overall, the strongest conclusion is not that their sports were clearly racist, but that race was not the most visible barrier in either athlete's individual experience. June's account points more strongly toward money and connection, while Tyler's account suggests that racial assumptions may still operate quietly.

4.2. Financial resources strongly affect who can reach elite levels and benefit from university opportunities

Both Tyler and June agree that talent and effort are not always enough to succeed in elite youth sports. To them, athletes also need families to support the expenses required to remain in competitive programs. Tyler explains that elite soccer in North America operates through a "pay-to-play system," which means that players must pay team fees before they can even be rostered. He believes this "can be discriminatory towards people who aren't as fortunate," as skilled athletes from lower-income families may never receive the same training or exposure as wealthier players.

June describes an even greater financial barrier in hockey, where families must pay for various items, including the fees for registration, equipment, travel, private coaching, and additional ice time. He says that some high-level programs can cost as much as private-school tuition and concludes that hockey is "a sport for the rich." These costs matter because athletes usually need years of expensive development before university coaches begin noticing them. Both interviews suggest that elite sport may create post-secondary opportunities, but those opportunities are more accessible to athletes who have better financial resources.

4.3. Family support, knowledge, and connections give some athletes a major advantage

Tyler and June both suggest that family familiarity with elite sports influences how easily athletes move through elite sport systems and into postsecondary education. Tyler considers himself "fortunate" to have family support and an older brother at the same school, who could provide firsthand guidance on the application process, soccer environment, and a potential athletic life in Madrid. This makes the pathway less confusing and less risky for him. In contrast, June's experience illustrates the challenges faced by families without the same familiarity with elite sports. He explains that his family was "not that informed of how hockey really works" because the sport contains many different junior leagues, levels, and recruitment pathways. He also noted that personal connections can shape opportunities, as athletes may be more likely to secure roster spots or development opportunities when family members know coaches or team officials. Together, the interviews demonstrate that families provide more than money, as information, transportation, encouragement, contacts, and experience are all important resources for athletes' growth. Two athletes with similar ability may receive very different opportunities depending on how well their families understand and are connected to the sports system. This may particularly affect athletes whose families are newer to Canada or unfamiliar with the country's university recruitment process.

4.4. Elite sport can lead to post-secondary opportunities, but the pathway is complicated and never guaranteed

Both interviews show that elite youth sport can help athletes continue playing after high school, but participation does not automatically result in university admission or a scholarship. Tyler hopes to

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2027.NL38538

attend a school in Madrid with a soccer team, but he explains that the school does not offer him a guaranteed athletic place. Instead, students must first be admitted academically and then try out for the team. As Tyler says, "You get into the university first, and then you go try out." June describes a similarly uncertain pathway in hockey. Unlike soccer, where recruitment often occurs during high school, hockey players may spend several years in junior leagues before attracting serious attention from university recruiters. As a result, some delay university until their early twenties while pursuing NCAA opportunities, which means that elite athletes must decide whether continuing in sport is worth the financial cost, physical pressure, and possible delay to their education. Families with greater financial stability and knowledge may feel less pressure taking this risk, while less privileged individuals only have the choice to decide on university immediately or stop playing competitively. Tyler's and June's experiences show that elite sport can create pathways to postsecondary education, but pursuing them requires athletes and their families to navigate considerable uncertainty and risk.

5. Discussion

One major finding was that race did not appear to be the strongest factor in either Tyler or June's sports journey. Both recognized that bias and stereotypes can still exist, but neither felt race directly limited their own opportunities. From the superficial level, this may echo what Higginbotham [6] said about the affirmative consequences of sport for racially minority students. However, this research suggests that racism is nowhere absent from elite sport, especially because different sports can have very different levels of diversity. It may appear differently depending on the sport, environment, and people involved. For example, hockey has historically been less racially diverse than soccer, while soccer often brings athletes from a much wider range of ethnic backgrounds. Because of this, racial stereotypes or feelings of exclusion may be more noticeable in certain sport environments than others. At the same time, discrimination does not always appear as something obvious, such as when a coach directly excludes an athlete because of race. It can also appear through stereotypes of physical ability, assumptions about certain racial and ethnic groups, or people's unequal access to networks and opportunities. Therefore, the fact that Tyler and June do not personally identify race as a major barrier does not mean that racism does not exist.

Socioeconomic status appears to be a much stronger factor in the data. Tyler described soccer as a "pay-to-play" system, while June explained that hockey can become extremely expensive at higher levels. Both interviews showed that success depends not only on talent, but also on access to various resources. This suggests that athletes from wealthier families may have a much easier path toward elite sport and eventually post-secondary enrollment. This echoes findings from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute [2] and Sulz, Gleddie, Kinsella, and Humbert [3], which highlight the importance of socioeconomic status in post-secondary opportunities in elite sports. This paper, bringing new data from the Canadian context, confirmed the same point.

6. Conclusion

The research reveals that elite youth sport can create pathways to post-secondary education, but access to those pathways reveals inequalities and inequities. In Tyler and June's experiences, race does not emerge as a visibly salient factor shaping access to postsecondary opportunities. Instead, socioeconomic resources, family support, familiarity with recruitment systems, and personal connections appear to play a more immediate role. However, the absence of explicit discrimination does not mean that race is irrelevant. Structural forms of racism may continue to shape opportunities

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7048/2027.NL38538

in less visible ways through recruitment practices, access to social networks, coaches' assumptions, and judgments about who is perceived as a good "fit" for particular teams or programs. These mechanisms are often embedded in routine decision-making, and athletes may experience them as day-to-day assessments of talent rather than discrimination.

Although this study draws on only two student-athletes' substantial account of life experiences, their experiences highlight recurring themes of financial resources, family knowledge, social connections, and subtle forms of exclusion. Rather than limiting the study's contribution, the small sample suggests directions for further research. For instance, researchers could examine a larger and more diverse group of athletes across sports genres, geographical regions, racial backgrounds, and socioeconomic groups to assess how consistently these factors influence postsecondary educational opportunities.

References

[1] Statistics Canada. (2023). Participation in Canadian society through sport and work.
[2] Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute. (2022). Sport participation among children and youth.
[3] Sulz, L. D., Gleddie, D. L., Kinsella, C., & Humbert, M. L. (2023). The health and educational impact of removing financial constraints for school sport. *European Physical Education Review, 29*(1), 3–21.
[4] Hextrum, K., Knoester, C., & Tompsett, J. (2025). Who plays, persists, and stands out in interscholastic athletics? Habitus, parenting, social class, and the institutionalized cultural capital of school sports. *Journal for the Study of Sports and Athletes in Education*.
[5] Melvin, A. (2023). Postsecondary educational attainment and labour market outcomes among Indigenous peoples in Canada, findings from the 2021 Census. Statistics Canada.
[6] Higginbotham, G. D. (2021). Can I belong in school and sports? The intersectional value of athletic identity in high school and across the college transition. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology, 27*(4), 613–629.