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► **To cite this version:**

Eunice Ndunge Mutuku, Felix Ngunzo Kioli, Benoit Gaudin. Psychosocial Challenges Facing Athletes (Medium and Long distance Runners) in Eldoret, Kenya. Benoit Gaudin. Kenyan and Ethiopian Athletics - Towards an Alternative Scientific Approach, IRD Editions, 2017. hal-01428776

**HAL Id: hal-01428776**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01428776v1>**

Submitted on 6 Jan 2017

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# **Psychosocial Challenges Facing Athletes (Medium and Long distance Runners) in Eldoret, Kenya**

*Eunice Ndunge Mutuku,<sup>1</sup>Dr. Felix Kioli Ngunzo and Dr. Benoit Gaudin.*

## **Abstract**

*All over the world, sports have been known to bring social cohesion at the individual, family and socio-economic development to a country. Over the years, in Kenya, athletics have promoted development, aesthetic value and recognition to the country and individuals as well. Despite the positive impact athletics can have on development to a country and individuals, studies have shown that athletes do not receive much psychosocial support to reach their full potentials and participate effectively in the general development of the country. This study examined the psychosocial challenges facing athletes in Eldoret, Kenya. The study specifically investigated individual-related psychosocial challenges; family and community-related psychosocial challenges facing athletes; and the coping strategies devised by athletes to deal with psychosocial problems in the study area. The study was informed by Social Breakdown Theory (SBT) theory. The study used descriptive research design. The study targeted medium and long distance runners in Eldoret and limited itself to 99 professional athletes from 8 locations that are major sources of athletes in Eldoret through simple random sampling. The study used snowball sampling in selecting key informants (elite athletes) from each selected location and government officials from the sports ministry. Both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection were used. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. In qualitative analysis, the data was presented by use of quotes and narrative descriptions. Quantitative analysis involved derivation of statistical descriptions and interpretation of data by use of descriptive statistics that purely relied on numerical values. The study found that athletes (medium and long-distance runners), have not been given much psychosocial support. Instead, they are exposed to much vulnerability aggravated by lack of social acceptance, over-dependence by close kin, isolation, lack of mentorship and peer support and are thus unable to participate effectively in the sport. The study recommends that there is a need to designing appropriate interventions that mitigate psychosocial challenges among athletes to promote athletes' wellness and personal development.*

## **Introduction**

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a massive growth in the extent to which sport impacted on the lives of many of the world's populations. In part, this has been due to the progressive internationalization, professionalization and commercialization of various sports including football, short and long distance running, rugby and cricket, which developed in England in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and their evolutionary offshoots in North America including baseball, American football and basketball.<sup>2</sup> Physical activities have long been the integral part of the human life and used as a major tool to achieve physical and mental perfection.<sup>3</sup> Despite socio-economic deprivation among athletes in the country, Kenya has produced world and international running champions

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<sup>2</sup>Noakes T. D., Physiological models to understand exercise fatigue and the adaptations that predict or enhance athletic performance, *Scand J Med Sci Sports*, 10, 2000, pp.123-145.

<sup>3</sup> Manners, J., Kenya's running tribe; *The Sports Historian*, 17(2), 1997, pp.14-27.

repeatedly. For the past 30 years, Kenyan runners have been well recognized for their success in distance running.<sup>4</sup> These athletes have become role models for the younger generations, who take up running in the hope of a better future for themselves. Favorable environmental conditions, motivational and socio-economic factors are all possible reasons for the unsurpassed achievements of Kenyan distance runners.<sup>5</sup>

Notwithstanding the positive impact athletics has on the lives of athletes and Kenya's development, studies have shown that athletes, particularly medium and long distance runners, do not receive much social and even spiritual support to reach their full potentials. This is partly confirmed by Wahome who asserts that in Kenya, despite the athletes bringing international glory and injecting into the national economy substantial foreign exchange, there seem to be no clearly defined sports policies such as social protection or finance policies to support the development of athletics in the country.<sup>6</sup> Hence, athletes are exposed to too much vulnerability aggravated by over-dependence on unforthcoming sponsors, close kin, isolation, lack of mentorship and peer support. As a result, athletes are faced with many economic, social and psychological challenges ranging from the individual level to family and community. According to this study, psychosocial challenges refer to factors that affect the psychological, economic or socio-cultural spheres of athletes.

The inclination of this study is towards the realm of aspects that inflame psychosocial challenges, which include socio-economic status, education level, family situation, lifestyles, social relations and interaction with the family and other community members. According to the Social Breakdown Theory (SBT) by Kuypers and Bengtson<sup>7</sup>, these aspects can be as a result of labeling, one's financial status, health and education and as a result, social and psychological challenges experienced along the way, affect them negatively. Others become deviants of the values, norms and morals of the society, which in return have adverse societal implications as well as on their careers and development. Over their life course, athletes are likely to face a variety of life transitions that require the acquisition of new norms, behaviors, and roles in order to live as per the expectations of society. However, their struggle to adjust to societal norms while, accommodating new ways of life, comes with it psychosocial challenges.

This study recognizes that prolonged psychosocial challenges may cause long-term negative effects in the life of an athlete. It is within this background that this study examined the psychosocial challenges facing athletes, with particular interest in Eldoret, Kenya. The study was guided by the following research questions; *what are the individual-related psychosocial challenges facing athletes in Eldoret? What are family and community-related psychosocial challenges facing athletes in Eldoret? And which coping strategies have been devised by athletes to deal with psychosocial challenges in the study area?*

## **Methodology**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Kong P. W. and de Heer, H., Anthropometric, gait and strength characteristics of Kenyan Distance Runners, *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine*, 7, 2008, pp.499-504.

<sup>6</sup> Wahome M., Kenya Rowing and Canoe Association (KRACA), *Daily Nation*, August 24, 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Kuypers J. A. and V. L. Bengtson, Social Breakdown and Competence: A Model of Normal Aging, *Human Development*, 16, 1973, pp.181-201.

The study used descriptive research design and targeted medium and long distance runners in Eldoret. The study limited itself to 99 professional athletes from 8 locations that are major sources of athletes in Eldoret, by stratification of athletes into locations and then applying simple random sampling. According to this study a professional athlete is a person who has participated in national and international competition for more than two years. The study used snowball sampling in selecting 4 key informants (elite athletes) from each selected location and 4 government officials from the sports ministry. Both quantitative (through use of questionnaire) and qualitative (Observation and observation guide) methods of data collection were used. The study employed both qualitative and quantitative analysis.

## Findings and Discussions

### 3.1 Demographic Characteristics of Athletes Characteristic

Table 1: Sex of the respondents

Sex	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	71	76.7
Female	28	23.3
Total	99	100.0

Analysis in Table 1 above shows that majority (71, 76.7%) of the respondents were male, whereas 28 (23.3%) of the respondents were females. This reflects the fact that more men were involved in middle and long distance running than their female counterparts. The researchers argue that the idea of sports has always had a masculine viewpoint. It has been seen as unladylike for female to participate in certain sports, let alone those that are primarily male dominated. From interview discussions, it was observed that the Kalenjin culture associates male with athletics such as medium and long distance running. The researchers observed that this situation is also experienced in other parts of the country. Traditionally, sports are associated with masculinity, and therefore, considered inappropriate for women to participate in sports. This observation concurs with Knight & Giuliano<sup>8</sup> who asserted that participation in sports that require what are considered typically 'male characteristics' such as speed and strength can present an 'image problem' for many female athletes. The study was also interested on understanding the age of respondents. The result is shown in Table 2 below:

Table 2: Age of the respondents

Age Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
18-25	25	26.0
26-33	38	40.0
34-41	24	24.0
42-49	12	10.0

<sup>8</sup>Knight J. L. & Giuliano T.A., Blood, sweat, and jeers: The Impact of the Media's Heterosexist Portrayals on Perceptions of Male and female athletes, *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 26, 2003, pp.272-285.

Total	99	100.0
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Analysis in table 2 above indicates that majority 38 (40.0%) of the respondents who were actively involved in middle and long distance running were between 26-33 years, whereas the least 12(10.0%) number of respondents involved in the profession were between 42-49 years. It was established that the age between 26-33 years is when most respondents had gained their competence. Therefore, they are participating in various competitions to maximize their full potentials.

### ***Individual-related Challenges***

The research sought to establish the average monetary gains per annum of the athletes from their participation in athletics in order to determine the extent of influence of athletics on the life of the youth. The findings showed that the majority of the respondents had received some form of monetary rewards as a result of athletics. Fifteen percent of the respondents reported to have received an average of over 1.5 million shillings, while 12% respondents reported to have received between Kshs. 500,000 and 1 million, and the rest reported to have received between Kshs. 100,000 (\$1,000) to Kshs. 500,000 (\$5,000). However, athletes are faced with many individual-related challenges that eventually detach them from the family and society as well. Therefore, this study sought to understand the individual related challenges facing athletes in the study area. It was revealed that athletes (medium and long distance runners) in the study area face a myriad of psychological challenges. For instance, the majority (68%) of the athletes, especially those who are first timers in the competition, faced personal challenges such as lack of a sponsorship.

Many of the individual athletes in the study said that they have always been cash strapped with constant appeals made through the media such as daily newspapers, televisions and radio for well-wishers to salvage them. The worst hit are normally self-sponsored medium and long distance runners who are denied the opportunity to participate in various national and international championships because of lack of sponsorship. This situation makes them miss opportunities for their career and personal development. For example, a self-sponsored youth in Chepkoilel camp could not sustain himself in one of the championships in the country league despite being highly rated by the Athletics Kenya (AK) body.

The authors observed that ironically in Kenya, despite the athletes bringing international glory and injecting into the national economy substantial foreign exchange, there seems to be no clearly defined sports financing governmental policy, especially for distance runners. Hence, on many occasions, Kenyan runners have failed to meet their financial requirements for effective growth and development. At the same time, most athletes come from poverty ridden regions, therefore, they have not been able to pay for themselves to compete in local events and occasionally, upon struggling to train well for their fitness in competitions, they fail to participate in various championships within and outside the country. To realize this objective sound financing strategies must be employed.

On the same note, the research sought to investigate the availability of privately-owned athletic facilities that promote athletics. The findings indicated that 90% of the respondents were aware of privately owned athletic facilities that promote athletics in the study area whereas, 10% of the

respondents were not aware of any privately owned facilities. The majority (70%) of the respondents indicated that the privately owned facilities were expensive, while 30% of the respondents reported that the privately owned athletic facilities were affordable. The result of the findings shows that while indeed privately owned athletic facilities that promote athletics do exist, they are however, mostly expensive and thus, unaffordable for the majority of the athletes.

The respondents were asked to mention some of their sources of finance used to help them participate in various competitions. The study found that sponsor companies such as Safaricom, and Kenya Commercial Bank provided the biggest support, particularly for the renowned athletes. About 30% of the respondents acknowledged company sponsors as their main financiers. Further, 10% of the respondents indicated that a runners' own contributions, and well-wishers such as Safaricom, and Kenya Commercial Bank (KCB), were instrumental in funding their activities, especially at the local level. For those athletes who could not afford to raise any cash for sponsorship, they have never participated in competitive events. The researchers observe that the country, apart from the salaries given by the parastatal clubs to their athletes, doesn't have proper strategies to support talents in the country. At the same time, sports governance and coordination in Kenya suffers from multiple problems including weak and inadequate existing sports policies, poor financial management and leadership and failure to invest equally in all sports.

Through key informant interviews, the study revealed that coaches also play a major role in athlete's achievement. For instance, they determine the athletes' sponsorship for instance, looking for sponsors within and outside the country; however, this depended on an athlete's performance. The coach is also under pressure to win. Those athletes who do not compete well may end up losing sponsorship. The study also found that structurally embedded discrimination, social stereotyping that subjects female athletes to conflict between social norms for femininity such as submissiveness, grace, beauty and attributes needed for athletic success such as strength, aggressiveness and achievement, greatly affected their performance.

### ***Family-related Psychosocial Challenges***

The researchers were interested in understanding family-related psychosocial challenges facing athletes in the study area. The majority (84%) of the respondents reported that medium and long distance runners, like any other athlete, require financial, non-financial and welfare issues as incentives for participation in athletics. However, the study found that the runners are faced by many family demands. It was evident from the study that their families depended on them financially, so much that they could not invest in themselves and their families for future. In contrast, those families that had a generation of athletes did not experience many challenges as they could cost share the financial needs in terms of supporting other family members.

Newcomers to athletic competitions were also given incentives by older athletes. The incentives were reasons why they participated in athletic competitions. In poverty-stricken families, there was a lot of pressure to financially support all members in the household including wife, children, siblings, parents, grandparents and relatives. This finding explains why some distance runners are poor and end up retiring without making any economic investments. During the study it was found that some athletes engaging in extra-marital relationships, because of their sudden wealth, which led to unplanned haphazard spending, break up of their marriages, transmission of

sexually transmitted infections, and high cases of alcoholism. These challenges negatively affected them socially, psychologically and economically, hence, causing imbalance between their careers and personal needs.

### ***Community-Related Psychosocial Challenges***

The researchers asked respondents about their feelings about the sporting activities. The majority (70%) of the respondents who participated in professional athletic competitions and succeeded gained social acceptance in their families and communities. This motivated them to increase their participation in athletic activities in order to bring honor and respect in their community. The recognition associated with achievement among the athletes led to the development of an athletic identity and the influence of others as well as the athlete himself/herself affected them psychologically and cognitively.

It was evident through interviews that athletes' good performance in competitions was greatly influenced by parents, siblings, coaches and friends through moral and spiritual support, as well recognition in the community. However, the pressures and demands to win in competitions brought with it many dangers. The study found that it not only brought about reinforcement but also became negative because athlete's failures become news events that people discussed publically. Athletes were faced with a myriad of psychosocial challenges and found relationships with others quite traumatic. For instance, given that they faced pressure to perform better, many of them strained themselves during training to get fit for competition, which rendered them susceptible to injuries and psychological disorders and hence poor performances in athletic competitions.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Kenya is recognized worldwide for its prowess in athletics and for producing world-class athletes. Medium and long distance running is highly dominated by athletes in their twenties and early thirties and, as such, constitutes an increasingly important part of social and economic development of the country. The study examined the psychosocial challenges facing athletes in Eldoret town. The study found that in Kenya, athletes (medium and long-distance runners), have not been given much psychosocial support. Instead, they are exposed to many psychosocial challenges aggravated by inadequate social acceptance, overdependence by close kin, isolation, lack of mentorship and peer support. As a result, they are faced with many social and psychological challenges ranging from individual, family and community level. These have negatively affected their participation and performance in the sport. The study recommends that there is a need to design appropriate interventions that mitigate psychosocial challenges among athletes and thus promote their wellness and personal development.