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► **To cite this version:**

Axel Maugendre, William Gasparini. Trajectories and figurations: An analysis of sports elite in Lebanon. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 2024, 10.1177/10126902241265621 . hal-04663809

**HAL Id: hal-04663809**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04663809>**

Submitted on 31 Jul 2024

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## Trajectories and Figurations: An analysis of sports Elite in Lebanon

By **Axel Maugendre**<sup>1</sup> & **William Gasparini**<sup>2</sup>

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### 8 Introduction

9 In Lebanon, the President of the Rugby Federation goes by both Alex and Abdallah. He  
10 resides in the Christian neighborhoods, yet his family is one of the prominent Shia families in  
11 the country. Having lived in England, he can be found cheering for the England rugby team in  
12 the pubs of Beirut during the Six Nations Championship. Locally, with the support of  
13 Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian Lebanese militia party, he facilitates the training of the Lebanese  
14 national rugby team for international matches. This biographical example highlights the  
15 intricacies and paradoxes of the Lebanese society. Individual trajectories often reflect diverse  
16 influences: both Arab and Western.

17 In the Middle East, Lebanon has several unique features, namely that it has a democratic  
18 system with a constitution based on multi-confessionalism. On one hand, it stands apart from  
19 other Middle Eastern countries because it is not governed by any form of Islamic law (Feki,  
20 2011). On the other hand, it differs from Western democracies as its constitution carries the  
21 weight of communities inherited from the Ottoman Empire. As a multi-confessional state built  
22 on a quota system, contemporary Lebanon is a mosaic of eighteen religious communities  
23 (Table 1), whose significance varies based on their role in history of the country and region,  
24 as well as their demographic and political weight.

25 Table 1. Confessional distribution in Lebanon (Henley, 2016).

Muslim communities	Christian communities	
Shi'a	Maronite	Syriac Orthodox
Sunni	Greek Orthodox	Syriac Catholic
Druze	Greek Catholic	Coptic
Alawite	Armenian Orthodox	Chaldean
Ismaili	Armenian Catholic	Assyrian
	Protestant	Latin Catholic
<b>Jews</b>		

26

1 For this reason, academic literature devotes significant attention to Lebanon's political  
2 regime, which is unique in the Middle East (El-Husseini, 2004; Haddad, 2009). However, this  
3 top-down approach emphasizes social phenomena that arise from a form of determinism.  
4 Social superstructures, churches, branches of Islam, political currents or parties, and  
5 affiliations with powers outside Lebanon, tend to overshadow the role of individual actors. As  
6 a result, personal strategies and margins of freedom, both within communities and various  
7 social spaces, are often obscured.

8 The national press and most academic publications consistently draw links between Lebanese  
9 clubs and religious communities (Nseir, 2012), whether political through the funding of clubs  
10 by political parties (Moroy, 1998; Reiche, 2011; Nassif & Amara, 2015; Al-Masri, 2016), or  
11 geographical (neighborhoods, districts, or regions) through the analysis of the populations  
12 living where the clubs are based (Boukhater, 2004; Maugendre, 2018). Mina reminds us that  
13 less than 10% of federation leaders are women (Mina, 2015). Paradoxically, it was a woman,  
14 Varti Ohanian, who served as the Minister of Youth and Sports from November 2020 to  
15 September 2021. This exception poorly reflects the reality in which few women hold  
16 leadership positions (Maugendre, 2023). Apart from these two theses that explored, in some  
17 sections, gender issues on the Lebanese sports scene, Toufaily (Toufaily, 2022) has laid the  
18 groundwork with an initial study on the prospects for the professionalization of women's  
19 football in Lebanon.

20 In Lebanon, sports hold a relatively marginal position in the construction of the "modern"  
21 state". The first clubs emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, that is before the  
22 establishment of the French Mandate in 1920 (McClenahan, 2007; Souto, 2015). Built in 1957  
23 to host the Arab Sports Games, the Camille Chamoun Sports Stadium of Beirut was, for a  
24 time, the most modern sports complex in the Near East. It was during this same period that the  
25 first two of Lebanon's four Olympic medals were won at the 1952 Helsinki Games (Reiche,  
26 2017). This post-independence period can be seen as the golden age of Lebanese sports. In  
27 1997, the year Beirut hosted the eighth Pan-Arab Games and seven years after the end of the  
28 civil war (1975–1990), Lebanon was reintegrated into the regional and international sports  
29 circuit. The country has organized several major sports events, including the Arab Football  
30 Supercup in 1999, the Asian Football Cup in 2000, and the Francophonie Games in 2001 and  
31 2009. In recent years, Lebanon hosted the 2017 Asian Basketball Cup in the renovated  
32 Nouhad Nawfal Stadium in Zouk Mosbeh. This venue has the peculiarity of being located in  
33 the predominantly Christian coastal strip, north of Beirut.

1 From a sports perspective, aside from men's basketball at the clubs and national team levels  
2 that has managed to win trophies or "runner-up positions" in regional competitions, the  
3 primary achievements of Lebanese athletes are qualifications for the Olympic Games (Reiche,  
4 2017) or continental competitions in team sports. Regarding results, Pan-Arab Games and  
5 competitions yield the most victories, but the sub-regional level seems to be the glass ceiling  
6 for Lebanese performances (Maugendre, 2023).

7 In examining the stages and transitions of the trajectories of the elite actors and their  
8 cumulative advantages in the actual figurations of Lebanese sports, this research allows for  
9 the integration of the unique aspects of the Lebanese society by reversing the analytical  
10 perspective. However, we must also provide a definition of the sports elite within the  
11 Lebanese context. Lebanese elite sport, marked by weak results but consistent participation in  
12 international competitions, aligns with the conceptual framework defined by Nassif and  
13 Raspaud (p. 2, 2023): "Elite sport is all the environment related to international and/or  
14 professional sport". This framework legitimizes the Lebanese sports elite without relying on  
15 Olympic medal scoreboards. In their respective articles, Reiche and Elia & Alii (Elia and al.,  
16 2019; Reiche, 2017) highlight that elite sports in Lebanon are hindered by a weak state with  
17 no funding or strategic vision, often relying on its diaspora to assemble Olympic delegations  
18 or form a team for the Rugby League World Cup (Reiche, 2019; Reiche & Maugendre, 2020).  
19 Women's sports suffer from the same dynamics, although the low regional level, meaning the  
20 West Asian Arab countries, allows Lebanese women to achieve regular results (Maugendre,  
21 2023).

22 The aim of this contribution is: (1) to identify typical trajectories of elite members based on  
23 elements induced from the data; (2) and through the figurational approach, we will seek to  
24 understand how stakeholders, according to their role in the sports elite (athletes, coaches,  
25 management), their religious community, and their gender, mobilize their relational power and  
26 dispositions to secure or maintain their position in the elite.

27

## 28 **Theoretical Framework**

29 The theoretical approach of this study is determined by our decision to introduce a dynamic  
30 analysis of the establishment of elite members while trying to highlight the main determinants  
31 of success and failure in their paths. By relying on Elder's Life Course Theory (LCT), we can  
32 grasp, step by step, the temporal and geographical dynamics of stakeholders (both individual

1 and collective). Each stage is understood through resource use, as well as each individual's  
2 specific dispositions and opportunities. However, the analysis of figurations allows for the  
3 interpretation of the elements (resources, dispositions, and opportunities) and advantages  
4 acquired in the race to the elite.

### 5 *Life Course Theory*

6 Our study is conducted with the theoretical framework of Life Course Theory (LCT) to  
7 explore the dynamic progression of elite stakeholders in Lebanon. This approach integrates  
8 life paths and social trajectories as explanatory factors influencing behaviors across various  
9 domains such as family, work, education, and sports. For Glen Elder, whether individually or  
10 collectively, constrained or desired trajectories cannot be produced in a “social vacuum”  
11 (Elder, 1998). All possible choices are defined by “historical forces” and social structures  
12 (Elder, 1998), which do not prevent some individuals or groups from having some freedom of  
13 choice in the elements of their trajectories based on opportunities. This phenomenon is known  
14 as “human agency” (Elder, 1998).

15 In the Lebanese context, Elder's concept of “human agency” seems relevant to understand  
16 how individuals make strategic choices within the “sports figuration”. These choices are  
17 partly constrained by “historical forces” such as communal affiliations, religious and ethnic  
18 diversity, gender, age, and class. Highlighting those choices could help us understand the  
19 balance of power, as defined by Elias (1978), in the interaction between individual agency and  
20 societal structures (Elder, 1998). However, in our theoretical approach, the “power” to act on  
21 the balance of power is built throughout the trajectory. It is neither given nor innate. To  
22 interpret this “power play” in choices, we borrow from Dubar's theoretical reflection which  
23 grounded his vision of trajectory construction (Dubar, 1998; Dubar & Nicourd, 2017).  
24 According to Dubar, resources and dispositions are both the means and acquisitions of  
25 individuals in their trajectories (resources) as well as the adjustments within contrasting social  
26 spaces (dispositions). These elements allow everyone to consider the opportunities for  
27 trajectories available to them. Let's take the example of a Sunni Muslim basketball coach in a  
28 club labeled as Sunni, who would have the opportunity to take over the major club in his  
29 region, even though it is labeled as a Christian club. How could we understand his  
30 positive/negative response? This example encapsulates our theoretical reflection as, by going  
31 through the different stages within the Lebanese sports figuration, this coach has acquired the  
32 resources to “aspire to”. To be possible, this aspiration requires chains of interdependencies,  
33 in which stakeholders must integrate the presence of others and as an alterity.

1 By applying this theoretical approach to the literature on sports in Lebanon and our data, we  
 2 were able to identify important stages in the life course of elite members: “Tribe”,  
 3 “Education”, “University”, “Occupation”, “Elite Sports” (ES), and “National Politics” (NP).  
 4 These stages shape, directly or indirectly, the trajectories of elite actors. Each stage provides  
 5 distinct resources and enables actors to acquire dispositions that influence the “balance of  
 6 power”:

- 7 • **Tribe:** Reflects early family (nuclear) and community (schoolmates and/or extended  
 8 family) influences that shape initial sports engagement.
- 9 • **Education and University:** These stages focus on the academic and social  
 10 environments that contribute to athletic development, including the adherence to  
 11 competitive norms and acquisition of essential skills.
- 12 • **Occupation:** Examines how athletes integrate their sports careers in other professional  
 13 endeavors to maintain or enhance their status in elite sports.
- 14 • **Elite Sports (ES) and National Politics (NP):** These stages explore the institutional  
 15 and political dimensions of sports, highlighting how athletes interact with sports  
 16 organizations and leverage political connections to advance their careers.

#### 17 *Figurational approach in the Lebanese context*

18 The stages presented above provide a vision of the temporalities available to actors, but how  
 19 do these actors meet and interact with each other? What are their perceptions of their own  
 20 trajectory and the resources that enable them to activate dispositions within their team, club,  
 21 or federation? To address these questions, we will try in this subsection to lay the foundations  
 22 for a figurational understanding of sports trajectories.

23 For the sports system to function, sports organizations (teams, clubs, or federations) must be  
 24 interdependent and interconnected. Throughout Lebanon’s history, elite sports organizations  
 25 have almost systematically been labeled as representatives of political currents and parties or  
 26 community organizations, themselves linked to religious communities (Boukhater, 2004;  
 27 Moroy, 1998; Nassif, 2013; Nassif & Amara, 2015; Nseir, 2012; Reiche, 2011).

28 Norbert Elias’s figurational approach emphasizes that societies develop and change through  
 29 social processes that encompass both constraints and learning opportunities (Dunning, 1999).  
 30 In the Lebanese context, sports “figurations” are not mere isolated entities, but dynamic  
 31 chains of interdependencies where processes surrounding the balance of power play out in

1 relationships. However, not all groups are equal; Shia Muslim women in basketball, a sport  
 2 labeled as predominantly controlled by Christians, face difficulties in organizing or accessing  
 3 the elite. In the same way that “the Outsiders” of Winston Parva struggled to access roles  
 4 monopolized by “the Established” (Elias & Scotson, 1994). This sociological issue reminds us  
 5 of Eric Dunning’s contribution on the issue of racial inequalities in the USA (Dunning, 1999:  
 6 p. 179): “*I shall try to lay the foundations for a figurational/process-sociological*  
 7 *understanding of the part played by sport in ‘race relations’ and, reciprocally, of some of the*  
 8 *ways in which sport has been shaped by inequalities and struggles between so-called ‘racial’*  
 9 *groups.*” In the figurational approach, these inequalities, struggles, or even advantages are  
 10 formed in the relationships of interdependence where “*actors and organizations that control*  
 11 *the rules and norms*” (Elias and Dunning 1986: 209) can increase the power of their groups.  
 12 These actors (athletes, coaches, or administrators) have the capacity to influence and be  
 13 influenced by other members, which contributes to the overall dynamics of the Lebanese  
 14 sports figuration. To summarize our theoretical approach, the sociological issue we wish to  
 15 tackle by combining the two sociological approaches, LCT and figuration, is that of the  
 16 processes that have allowed individuals to increase their agency throughout their trajectory  
 17 within the sports figuration in Lebanon.

### 18 *Transition and power in elite trajectories*

19 The construction of this figuration tool demanded that we define life stages such as schooling,  
 20 entering the workforce, and engaging with the elite, to name but a few. However, these ‘pre-  
 21 scripted’ stages are not fixed for the stakeholders; they enter, exit, and operate at these stages,  
 22 generating various dynamics. These dynamics are then analyzed as transition processes that  
 23 reveal the actors’ interests and the relationships among them (Riemann & Schütze, 1991).  
 24 These transitions also depend on the use of resources, particularly power as conceptualized by  
 25 Elias. According to Elias, power is a structural characteristic of human relational  
 26 interdependencies: “*Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is*  
 27 *a structural characteristic of human relationships – of all relationships*” (Elias, 1978: p. 74).  
 28 In the sports context, these interdependencies can manifest through the interdependence  
 29 between athletes and sports organizations, where each party holds a certain power that  
 30 influences their progression and trajectory. Let’s take the example of the analysis indicators of  
 31 an athlete’s progress in their trajectory:

- 32 • An entry stage into the competition system: where young athletes begin to exert their  
 33 influence and navigate the sports network.

- 1       • A stage of increasing athletic capital aimed at entering the elite: where athletes  
2       increase their power by accumulating essential skills and experiences.
- 3       • A stabilization stage within the elite: where established athletes use their accumulated  
4       power to maintain their position and influence new generations.

5       However, not all trajectories, including those of coaches and leaders, are as “mechanistic”. As  
6       shown by Guy Elcheroth and his colleagues (Elcheroth et al., 2003), these transitions require  
7       discernible transition processes, such as a change in position, club, or reaching the elite with  
8       one’s team. These transitions are perceived by the actors as acquiring a new function or  
9       position in their network of interdependence, reflecting changes in the power balance.  
10      Measuring these transitions between stages also offers the advantage of interpreting social  
11      differences between genders and ethno-religious groups (Elcheroth et al., 2003), which is  
12      relevant in the case of Lebanon. It remains to integrate into the analysis that these transitions  
13      are temporally limited processes, the result of which is always settling into a new stage.

## 14      **Methodology**

15      This study is based on a qualitative study conducted in Lebanon between 2017 and 2022.  
16      Initially, we conducted an exploratory survey on about ten active members of the elite  
17      (researchers, journalists, athletes, or managers of the Lebanese Olympic Committee), which  
18      allowed us to distinguish three temporalities: from independence to the civil war (1943 to  
19      1975), the civil war (1975-1990), and the “present times” (1990 to 2019). These perceived  
20      temporalities partly served to fuel discussions on the construction of trajectories in interviews  
21      and the analysis of upheavals in the chains of interdependence within Lebanese sports. Then,  
22      we carried out an analysis of the national general press and the available scientific corpus, as  
23      well as a review of television audiences (Aoun & Monin, 2017) to determine, among other  
24      things, which sports were the most “popular”. Three sports emerged from this preliminary  
25      survey: football, basketball, and volleyball. The next step involved selecting a sample (Table  
26      3) of clubs. Based on religious community, political, geographical, sporting, and gender  
27      criteria, we selected six clubs from the following three denominational communities: Shiite,  
28      Druze, and Armenian.

29      After analyzing the denominational representation of first division clubs in the three selected  
30      sports for the 2016-2017 season (football, basketball, and volleyball), for both women and  
31      men, five communities emerged as the most “dynamic”. In other words, they “hold” most of  
32      the clubs: Shiite, Sunni, Druze (from the Muslim communities) and Maronite and Armenian



1 (from the Christian communities). Contrary to what the literature on the subject suggests,  
2 which analyzes the elite structures of Lebanese sports from a top-down perspective, we have  
3 taken a reverse approach. Our analysis first identifies individual actors (managers, coaches, or  
4 athletes) in their respective positions and figurations, and then goes up to the wider Lebanese  
5 superstructures (religious communities, political parties, etc.). This approach will refine the  
6 analysis of Lebanese society and Lebanese sports alongside the customary macro-social  
7 studies.

8 The two authors of this study have extensive backgrounds in Lebanese sports. One has  
9 supervised doctoral theses on sports in Lebanon and the Middle East, while the other  
10 completed his thesis on sports in Lebanon. Additionally, he has been an assistant coach for the  
11 national rugby XV team and the coach of the U18 national team. He has also held positions  
12 within a sports federation (rugby XV and 7s) after a career as a high-level athlete. This  
13 experience facilitated data collection due to shared experiences and familiarity with the  
14 various positions of the participants. He has also contributed to the establishment of LESSN, a  
15 think tank and exchange group gathering researchers, journalists, and elite sports figures.

16

1 Table 3. Sample of actors: first name + club/sport + gender + faith/community.

Sport	Club + caza (target team gender)	Club's Official Community	First name	Function	Faith/Community
Basketball	Antranik <i>Beirut</i> (Women)	Armenian	Vicken Tc (m <sup>1</sup> )	Management	Armenian Orthodox
			Vicken To (m)	Management	Armenian Orthodox
			Tony (m)	Management	Armenian Orthodox
			George (m)	Coach	Maronite
			Stephany (f)	Athlete	Maronite
			Narine <sup>2</sup> (f)	Athlete	Armenian Orthodox
			Karen	Athlete	Greek Orthodox
			Ninar (f)	Athlete	Greek Orthodox
	Jana	Athlete	Protestant		
	Homenetmen <i>Metn</i> (Men)	Armenian	Sevag (m)	Management	Armenian Orthodox
			Joe (m)	Coach	Greek Orthodox
			Elijah (m)	Athlete	Maronite
			Hayk (m)	Athlete	Armenian Orthodox
			Karam (m)	Athlete	Sunni
			Sevag <sup>3</sup> (m)	Athlete	Armenian Orthodox
	Patrick (m)	Athlete	Maronite		
	Hoops <i>Baabda</i> (Women)	Shi'ite	Jassem (m)	Management	Shi'ite
			Ziad (m)	Coach	Greek Orthodox
Sana (f)			Athlete	Shi'ite	
Ninar <sup>4</sup> (f)			Athlete	Greek Orthodox	
Narine (f)			Athlete	Armenian Orthodox	
Karine (f)	Athlete	Sunni			
Volleyball	Sarafand <i>Saïda</i> (Men)	Shi'ite	Muhammad (m)	Management	Shi'ite
			Muhammad (m)	Coach	Shi'ite
			Rawad (m)	Athlete	Maronite
			Ali (m)	Athlete	Shi'ite
Football	Safa WFC <i>Beirut</i> (Women)	Druze	Nour (f)	Management	Sunni-Druze
			Abdelaziz (m)	Management	Sunni
			Boudi (m)	Coach	Sunni
			Rhea (f)	Athlete	Greek Orthodox
			Aya (f)	Athlete	Druze
			Assile (f)	Athlete	Shi'ite
	Mira (f)	Athlete	Shi'ite		
	Akhaa Aley Aley (Men)	Druze	Ali (m)	Management	Druze
			Fadi (m)	Coach	Druze
			Rabih (m)	Athlete	Druze
Zaher (m)			Athlete	Druze	

2

3

<sup>1</sup> (f) for female & (m) for male<sup>2</sup> Narine moved from Hoops to Antranik during her career.<sup>3</sup> During the research and during the interview, Sevag went from being a player to being a manager in Homenetmen. At the time of the interview, his position was that of manager of the men's first team.<sup>4</sup> Ninar moved from Hoops to Antranik.

1 Each community is represented by two clubs, one female and one male, to allow for a gender  
2 comparison between trajectories and figurations within the same community. Thirty-five  
3 semi-structured interviews were conducted using a structured interview guide, based on three  
4 main themes: the social path (family, studies/work), the sports trajectory, and the perception  
5 of differences between the genders. One of the authors visited the targeted clubs and made  
6 contacts during the visits or through their networks stemming from the Lebanese Olympic  
7 Committee, sports federations, and Lebanese sports-related academic institutions.

8 For the analysis of the interviews, we followed Combessie's analytical frameworks  
9 (Combessie, 2007). We used "meaning hypotheses", as suggested by Jean-Claude Combessie  
10 (Combessie, 2007), which were developed from the analysis of the literature review, data  
11 extracted from the preliminary survey, and our field experiences. Three main hypotheses  
12 emerged from this analysis: the influence of social and political structures on trajectories,  
13 community dynamics in sports, and gender inequalities. These hypotheses guided the initial  
14 exploration of the data to "extract meaning", allowing us to construct typologies of  
15 trajectories. The method involves extracting, identifying, and classifying themes and  
16 subthemes through a cross-sectional analysis built on keywords (Combessie, 2007). We then  
17 temporally defined the positions and functions of stakeholders (elite athletes, coaches, or  
18 managers) to interpret what the sources (articles, observations, interviews) conveyed to us.

19 The study was conducted in a very particular context. In addition to the issues related to the  
20 COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in the first semester of 2020, it was preceded by the  
21 revolutionary events of October 2019, centered in Beirut (Khatib, 2022), and the explosion at  
22 its commercial port in August 2020. These events led to massive departures to the diaspora  
23 (Abouzeid et al., 2020), including some actors who had been selected for this study. The  
24 initial protocol planned for the interviews to be conducted face-to-face, but only four were  
25 able to adhere to this protocol, so we had to resort to phone or video interviews via the Skype  
26 platform with the other participants. Each interview was recorded with the consent of the  
27 participants.

## 28 **Results**

### 29 **Global Trajectories of the Elite: Constructing Elitism in Context**

30 In this section, we explore the trajectories of sports elites in Lebanon, highlighting the  
31 mechanisms through which these individuals—whether athletes, coaches, or leaders—manage  
32 and influence their paths in the complex socio-political and religious context of Lebanese

1 sports. We start by analyzing the impact of religious community affiliations and gender  
 2 dynamics on their careers, before detailing the strategies and dispositions they mobilize to  
 3 navigate these spaces. This exploration is structured around specific subsections that address  
 4 different aspects of their experiences and positions in the sports elite.

5

## 6 *Management*

7 In the early stages of their sports trajectories, managers are rooted in their “Tribe” (extended  
 8 family-physical and emotional proximity) and “Education” stages (from ages 3 to 18 -  
 9 school/college/high school) with limited access to sports. The acquisition of dispositions is  
 10 steered by parents towards careers and professions perceived as “useful”. This characteristic is  
 11 shared among participants, with the exception of Abdelaziz (Safa WFC - Beirut), whose father  
 12 was a member of the Kuwaiti athletics team. Parents or family members are reluctant to invest  
 13 resources in sports practice, perceived as a waste of time and professionally too uncertain,  
 14 Tony (Antranik - Beirut) summarizes this sentiment:

15           He [his father] didn't understand. He'd say, '*Why are five guys chasing a ball against five other*  
 16           *guys... what's that all about? Come work with me.*

17 In these formative years, sports connections are primarily established in two ways: through  
 18 school sports and community engagement, notably scouting. For future managers or  
 19 administrators who attended denominational school networks, membership in these all-  
 20 encompassing organizations played a pivotal role in fostering commitment. For instance,  
 21 Armenian schools linked to the AGBU (Armenian General Benevolent Union) or  
 22 Homenetmen networks, which represent diverse political and cultural tendencies within the  
 23 Armenian diaspora, are highlighted by Sevag (Homenetmen – Metn):

24           Armenian schools, for Homenetmen, were seen as the reservoir from which the club could fish  
 25           for future talents. For athletics, for instance, Homenetmen organizes athletics competitions.  
 26           The best athletes are invited to register and can then participate in the Lebanese national  
 27           championships under the Homenetmen banner.

28 This same principle applies to other sports as well. Cultural associations and scouting, with  
 29 their inherent sense of community, offer conducive environments for instilling a shared, and  
 30 often community-specific, culture. As Sevag (Homenetmen – Metn) notes:

31           Being Armenian, I wouldn't go to places where either Shiites or Sunnis were in the majority.

1 Unlike the narratives of other actors (coaches and athletes), the majority of Lebanese  
2 managers are strongly influenced by their communal origins from the beginning of their  
3 sports trajectories. Consequently, the matrices of their commitment are the result of a process  
4 related to strong intra-community interdependencies rather than a “sports affair”. However,  
5 the role of interconnection between the sports figuration and the community figuration  
6 evolves according to the dispositions acquired. Three out of the eight managers had  
7 trajectories that led them to the first division in basketball, football, or volleyball as athletes.  
8 The path of these three “athlete” managers relies more on their athletic dispositions (those  
9 who are “more gifted”) and the available resources of a generation that benefited from a  
10 stronger institutionalization of sports after the civil war (1975-1990) in Lebanon (Nassif,  
11 2013), exemplified by Sevag (Homenetmen – Metn):

12           Due to my sports performances at school, I managed to get a sports scholarship to attend  
13           Hagazian University. I got a 70% discount on tuition fees, which allowed me to complete my  
14           degree.

15 This divergence in trajectory between the two groups, “athletes” and “non-athletes”, becomes  
16 even more pronounced in the “University” (post-secondary education from age 18 to 22/23)  
17 and “Professional” (paid activities) stages. For “athletes”, career development, especially  
18 during the university period, enhances a “sporting” agency, that is, oriented towards sports  
19 performance within the sports figuration rather than sports performance within the community  
20 figuration. For “non-athletes”, the university period, or immediately after, allows them to  
21 discover or rediscover the sports figuration in their trajectory, often within a community  
22 organization. This is the beginning of an engagement where the agency of this group will  
23 develop in the sports figuration, as for Nour (Safa WFC – Beirut) & Ali (Akhaa Aley – Aley):

24 Nour:

25           I got into sports when I started university. I joined the JFA club and began training with the  
26           beginners. I quickly realized that I preferred working for the team rather than playing. So, I got  
27           certified to manage teams, and that’s when I met Bouddi [Mohammad - coach of Safa WFC].

28 Ali:

29 Interviewer: “What’s your background in football?”

30 Ali: “First, I earned a Bachelor’s in Computer Science from the American University of  
31 Beirut, right by your school. Later, I pursued a Master’s in Engineering Management. I also  
32 played in my village for a fourth-division club, but my parents decided to pull me out of

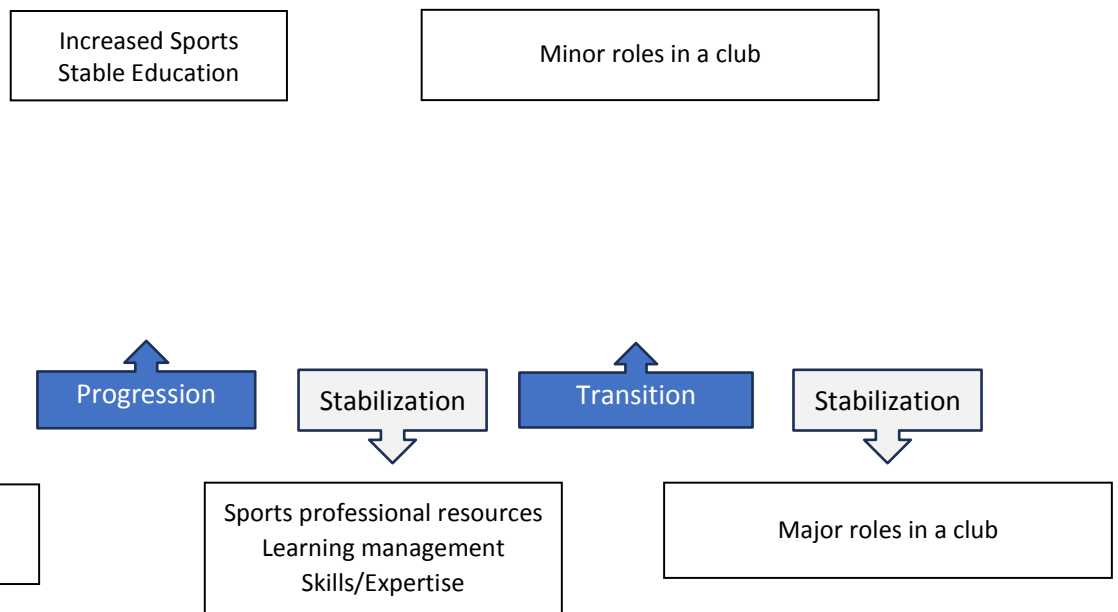
1 football, ensuring I stayed away. After finishing my studies and starting work, I got involved  
 2 in my club’s administration [with parental consent]. I was part of a project to create a football  
 3 field funded by sponsors from the US [USAID], and, after that, I joined the administration of  
 4 the Akhaa club.”

5 In analyzing individual journeys, what fundamentally shapes the trajectory is not just an  
 6 understanding of the needs of the Lebanese sports scene but also the process of recognizing  
 7 issues during previous stages in their sports journeys. Due to the varied roles they have played  
 8 within the sports sphere, former athletes (Figure 1), through their club transitions, have  
 9 encountered multiple cultures and forms of associations. They often arrive, midway or at the  
 10 end of their athletic careers, with a vision of the actions required to shape part, if not all, of  
 11 the organizational culture. Within the sports figuration, they derive their relational power from  
 12 their “sports knowledge” necessary for the clubs to continue to be “the established” within the  
 13 figuration.

14

15 Figure 1.

16 Theoretical  
 17 Trajectory of  
 18 “Athlete  
 19 management”.



25

26 Conversely, through their inception into a leadership team, non-athletes (Figure 2) do not so  
 27 much contribute to culture as they are its recipients. This culture is often determined by the  
 28 political and communal position of the club within the “sports” and community figurations.  
 29 They are anchored to a foundation of values and an environment delineated by the more or  
 30 less flexible guidelines of their respective organizations (Gasparini, 2000). Concerning non-

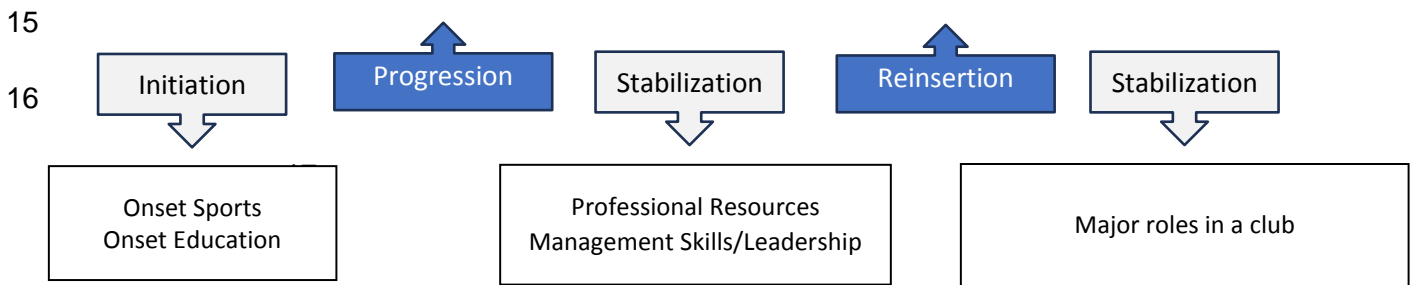
1 athletes, creating or being part of a club, or even an organization, allows them to maintain a  
 2 connection with their passion for a specific sport, as exemplified by the sports studied here.  
 3 Indeed, the creation of a club is where we find the only female leader. To develop her club,  
 4 she benefited from both the familial resources and dispositions of a father who was a  
 5 restaurateur and a “political ombudsman” between two communities, the Druze and Sunni; a  
 6 sponsor (Sunni) from the Gulf; and the infrastructure of a “Druze” men’s first division club.  
 7 On an equal footing, she deployed far more resources and dispositions than her male  
 8 counterparts, while also facing sexist remarks in commission within the federal bodies.

9

10 Figure 2.

11 Theoretical  
 12 Trajectory of “Non-athlete  
 13 management”.

14



19

20 *Coaches*

21 Before we delve into the results, it is important to highlight that during our survey, no female  
 22 coach or assistant was associated with a first division team, regardless of gender and sport.  
 23 We will present our reflections in the discussion section below. Thus, the coaches mentioned  
 24 in this subsection are all men.

25 The coaches who participated in the survey did not encounter many obstacles or restrictions in  
 26 discovering one or several sports during the “Tribe” and “Education” phases. Several of them  
 27 were fortunate to inherit resources and dispositions through a father figure, as was the case for  
 28 Georges (Antranik, Beirut):

1 My father played basketball but not at a professional level. He was also into many different  
 2 sports. We often played basketball together, my brother, my father, and I, near our house until I  
 3 was about 14-15 years old. Obviously, I believe this had an impact on my passion.

4 In addition to a passion for sport, a form of communal, cultural capital served as an anchor for  
 5 the trajectories of two of them, Mohammed (Safa WFC, Beirut):

6 From time to time, I watch Ansar team matches. My father me to see the matches during their  
 7 golden era when the team was winning titles. With my father, we didn't miss a match for five  
 8 or six years. It was the golden period.

9 As demonstrated by Reiche and Al-Masri regarding the economic and organizational client-  
 10 patron dependency relationship in Lebanese professional sport (Al-Masri, 2016; Reiche,  
 11 2011), political leaders have used the clubs to solidify their position in the public sphere. In  
 12 the case of al Ansar, the club was part of the galaxy of the billionaire and former Sunni Prime  
 13 Minister Rafic Hariri, who was assassinated in 2005. This post-civil war period also left a  
 14 mark on another coach thanks to a second flagship club of the era (1990-2005), this time from  
 15 the Christian side, *al Hekme* (La Sagesse), Joe (Homenetmen, Metn):

16 Author: "Were you in La Sagesse school or their educational system to be so drawn to this  
 17 club?"

18 Joe: "No, I was at the club La Sagesse. I started my career in the youth [players] programs,  
 19 then in the senior program, and then I became a coach in the youth programs, always at La  
 20 Sagesse. Later, I became an assistant coach for La Sagesse's main team."

21 If, through the interplay of identity reconstructions in post-civil war Lebanon, many Lebanese  
 22 sports figures over 30 years old have experienced the takeover of the sports space by the  
 23 Christians vs. Muslims confessional narrative, the coaches, as a whole, have constructed their  
 24 sports trajectories outside of their community affiliation. It is possible to understand the  
 25 evolution of their paths during the "University" and "Occupation" stages.

26 First, within the university system and as a coach or assistant coach at secular universities  
 27 such as AUB or LAU (Lebanese American University), they were able to select players based  
 28 on their talent regardless of their community origins. Next, during their careers as assistants or  
 29 head coaches, they regularly moved from one club to another, exemplified by Joe  
 30 (Homenetmen, Metn):

31 I have a lot of experience in management ... athletic department [private universities],  
 32 basketball, and the federation. I also have experience with the university's competitions of the



1 Lebanese University [public]. And then, throughout my career, I was the head coach of  
2 Homenetmen [Armenian], Champville [Maronite Christian], and Mouttahed [Sunni Muslim].

3 Upon reaching the elite, the rationale of agents such as coaches and athletes tends to  
4 deconstruct the denominational system, introducing a certain degree of independence.  
5 Typically, one of their arguments supporting this perception stems from numerous unpaid  
6 dues or bad payers, as Fadi (Akhaa Aley, Aley) explains:

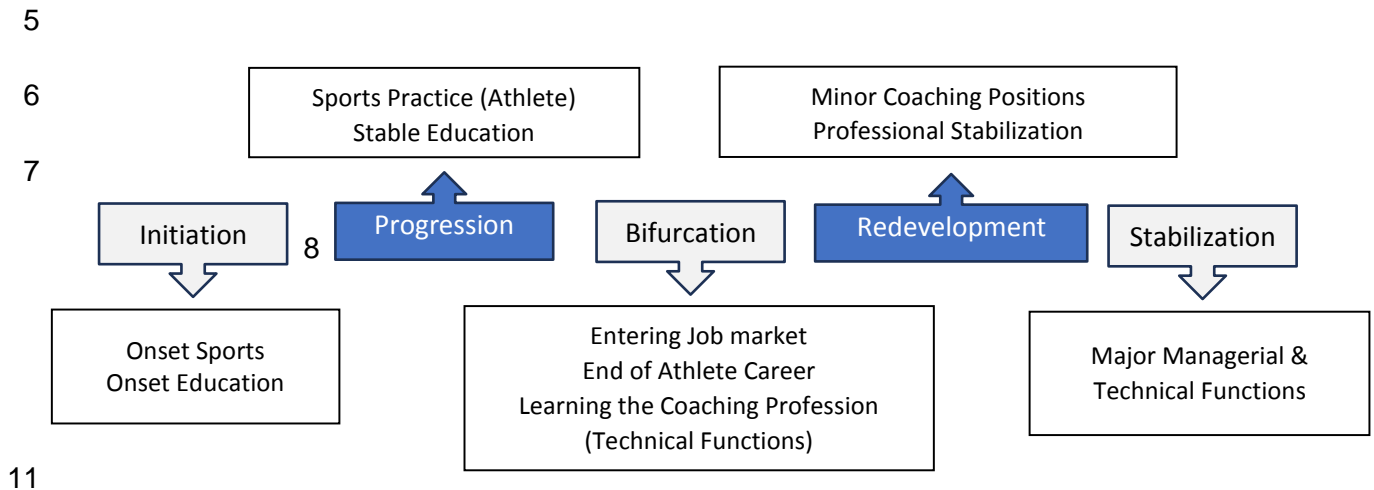
7 As for club N., I don't want to talk about it because the person running the club is one of the  
8 worst people I've ever met in my life. His name is A.S., truly one of the worst people I've ever  
9 met! He brings in players, others come, and I know he hasn't paid the contracts of six to seven  
10 players and two to three managers. He doesn't respect the contracts; he's truly a big mess!

11 Frequently faced with clubs described as highly politicized amateur or semi-professional  
12 organizations, on-the-ground stakeholders (coaches and players) foster a distrust that spans  
13 the clubs and the political sphere, including the federations, which are seen as political tools.  
14 The so-called "reliable" clubs tend to be favored by coaches in their career trajectories,  
15 irrespective of political or community considerations. This distrust is evident in interviews,  
16 during which every coach supports the claims of the October 2019 revolutionary movements  
17 calling for the respect of democratic rules of play (Khater, 2021), adapting these demands to  
18 the realm of elite sports. In this regard, two coaches (Mohammad, Safa WFC; Mohammed,  
19 Sarafand), at the beginning of their "technical" careers, chose to establish their own clubs and  
20 select sponsors that align with their sporting vision.

21 In summary, a different line of reasoning must be applied to coaches if one wishes to analyze  
22 the coherence of their trajectory. This is primarily because they became interested in the  
23 technical and tactical aspects of the game at a very young age. Even if only one of them  
24 played at the elite level, most have cited their limitations as athletes to justify an early shift in  
25 their sporting trajectory towards a coach position. This is a major indicator for this group: the  
26 early onset of harnessing their resources and dispositions to invest in learning the coaching  
27 role (Figure 3). Whether through assistant positions in youth teams or by acquiring theoretical  
28 and practical knowledge on the Internet, these individuals are in a continual dynamic of  
29 learning outside of the sectarian system. To complete their stabilization strategy in the sports  
30 space, coaches seek roles that connect a directorial position and that of sports manager/coach,  
31 aiming to become vital to various clubs and organizations, while maintaining a degree of  
32 independence. Their actions and visions reflect a desire to disinvest from the chains of  
33 interdependencies towards politics, to empower the sports figuration independently from the

1 political figuration. This demonstrates that the confessional system is a burden for individuals  
 2 who have derived their relational power predominantly from a “sports” process rather than a  
 3 communal one, unlike the managers.

4 Figure 3. Theoretical trajectory of coaches.



## 12 *Athletes*

13 Similar to the coaches, the athletes did not experience any hindrances when they began their  
 14 sporting journey in either the “Tribe” or “Education” stages. Looking at the data, and unlike  
 15 the two previous categories, some athletes, predominantly women, were able to reach the elite  
 16 level before entering the university system. This is exemplified by Narine’s story (Hoops,  
 17 Baabda & Antranik, Beirut):

18 I first started playing basketball with the other players’ children, along with my brother. And  
 19 then, when my father was a player at Antranik, we played at Antranik. Later on, I moved to  
 20 Hoops, a basketball academy. I played at Hoops for a few years, and by the age of 13, I began  
 21 playing in the top women’s division with the Riyadi club. I believe I played there until I was  
 22 18.

23 Early access to the elite level results in a high degree of independence compared to other  
 24 peers (Popovych et al., 2022). It also comes with strong family involvement (White et al.,  
 25 2022) but has associated challenges such as potential doping behavior (Gasparini, 2004),  
 26 complicated relationships with body image and weight (Braizaz et al., 2020; Crissey &  
 27 Honea, 2006), and various forms of abuse (Gustafsson et al., 2017; Parent et al., 2022). For  
 28 women, these factors lead to a rapid wearing out of their careers in an environment that is not  
 29 well structured for the development of young athletes.

1 Upon entering the “University” stage, the athletes’ journeys exhibit a certain ambivalence.  
2 While the majority have been able to hone their physical and technical skills due to increased  
3 training and matches (both in clubs and university), male basketball players are the exception.  
4 As Elie (Homenetmen, Metn) aptly describes the elite level of Lebanese men’s basketball —  
5 one of the best on the continent and qualified for the 2023 World Cup — leaves little room for  
6 both academic pursuits and sports practices at the university:

7         Then, when I was in university, I didn’t get the opportunity to prepare my body athletically.  
8         Also, eating well wasn’t always feasible because of the training schedules. And with university  
9         commitments, sometimes I missed club trainings and, vice versa, some training sessions  
10         caused me to miss out on university moments. When I quit university, I was able to dedicate  
11         several months to refining my basketball skills, and my performance skyrocketed from zero to  
12         100%! I could train, eat well, and lead a full high-level life.

13 While the structuring of elite women’s sports does not subject female athletes to the same  
14 challenges as their male counterparts, there is, however, significant social pressure, between  
15 the “University” and “Occupation” stages, for women to enter the matrimonial market (De  
16 Bel-Air, 2013). Assile’s (Safa WFC, Beirut) story illustrates this:

17         The issue is, by the time a girl reaches 24, a significant portion starts thinking, “I need to get  
18         married.” The girl tries to support herself and her family. So, she looks for a job, and for most  
19         jobs, considering the working hours, you have to make a choice [between sports and work].  
20         Hence, along with their families, they reflect and think, “I gain nothing from football, the  
21         timings are impossible, and moreover, I lose my entire evening.” Consequently, many girls  
22         conclude, “There’s no added value for me; I gain nothing, so I should quit.”

23 As a result, aside from a few rare male athletes who achieve results in top clubs and also fit  
24 the profile for national team selections (Figure 5), the majority of elite athletes, across all  
25 sports, have to pursue a professional activity alongside their intense sports practice (Figure 4).  
26 This activity often involves regular three-way negotiations between the club, the athlete, and  
27 the company. Zaher’s (Akhaa Aley, Aley) experience as a first division soccer player  
28 exemplifies this:

29         That’s the challenge [time management]! I spoke to my employer, and, as a result, I have a  
30         partially adjusted schedule. He allowed me the flexibility to attend trainings, and I already  
31         have weekends off. To give you an example of my day, I start work at 7:30 a.m. and go till  
32         1:30 p.m., then head to training. I get back to work around 4:30 p.m. and continue till 8:00  
33         p.m. from Monday to Friday. I have work, and in the end, just two hours for family time.

1 These negotiations are not the only obstacles to stabilizing the trajectory of athletes. In  
 2 addition to the fundamental importance of on-field sports performance, the risk of injury,  
 3 sometimes challenging contractual and wage relationships with certain clubs or federations  
 4 (Table 4) shorten career spans in the elite.

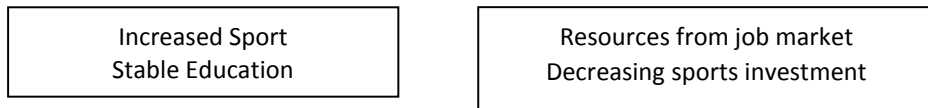
5 Table 4. Structural Barriers for Athletes' Careers in Lebanon.

Sport + Gender	Unpaid Salaries		Contract Issues		Perception of the Federation			
					<i>Very Negative</i>	<i>Negative</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Positive</i>
Football (Male)	3 out of 3		2 out of 3		2	1	0	0
Football (Female)	0 out of 5		1 out of 5		2	1	2	0
Basketball (Male)	6 out of 6		6 out of 6		2	2	2	0
Basketball (Female)	1 out of 9		1 out of 9		2	5	2	0
Volleyball (Male)	2 out of 2		2 out of 2		1	1	0	0
<b>Gender total</b>	<i>M</i>	11 out of 11	<i>M</i>	10 out of 11	5 out of 11	3 out of 11	2 out of 11	0 out of 11
	<i>F</i>	1 out of 14	<i>F</i>	2 out of 14	4 out of 14	6 out of 14	4 out of 14	0 out of 14
<b>Total</b>	12 out of 25		13 out of 25		9 out of 25	9 out of 25	6 out of 25	0 out of 25

6

7 In conclusion, multiple dimensions should be considered. Firstly, very few live solely off their  
 8 sporting practice. For the athletes of the sample, several factors play into their career  
 9 strategies. Firstly, gender: due to quicker access to the elite level, women's careers span their  
 10 adolescence to mid-twenties. For some, university marks the end of their elite-level career.  
 11 This trend parallels the limited funding available for women's sports and the societal pressure  
 12 compelling them to enter the matrimonial market earlier than men consider having a family  
 13 (De Bel-Air, 2013). For the men, although all earn income from their sports, unlike women,  
 14 many have concurrently built a professional career starting from their university days to  
 15 ensure economic stability. Athletes have been forced to adopt this parallel development  
 16 strategy for three reasons: the economic decline of the Lebanese sports sector since the 2000s  
 17 (Nassif, 2013; Nseir, 2012), the fragile status of athletes due to injuries, and, finally, their  
 18 legal status. Federal regulations consider athletes more as an object than a full-fledged  
 19 individual. These three analyses are not mutually exclusive but should be interpreted  
 20 concurrently to understand the structures of elite athletes' career trajectories.

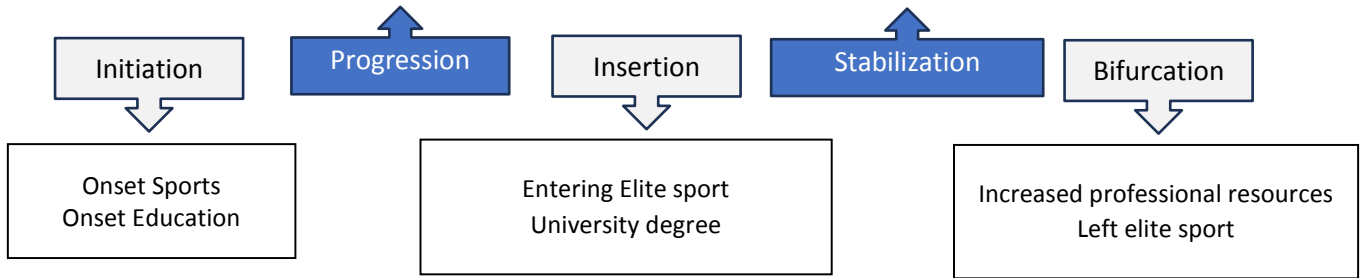
1 Figure 4.



2 Theoretical trajectories of athletes outside “top athletes”.

3

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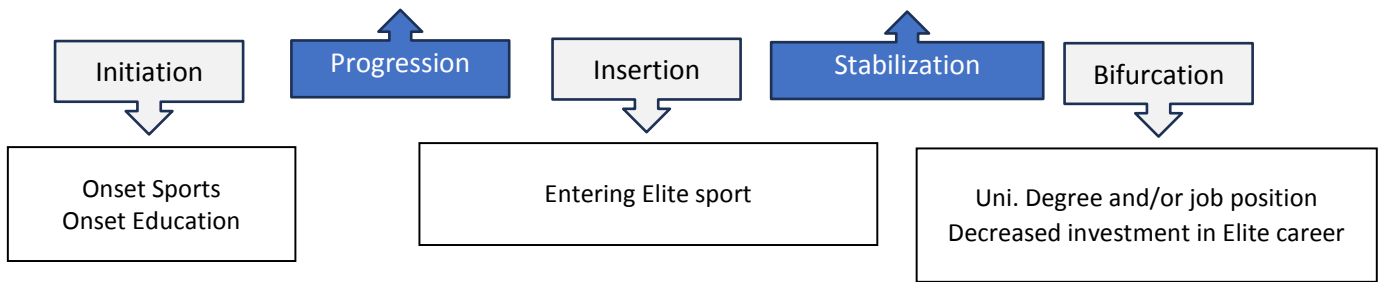
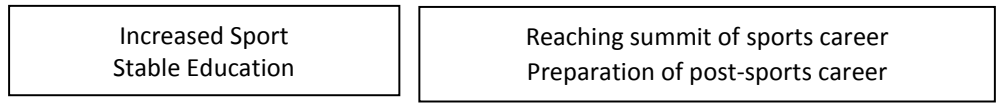


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Figure 5.  
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s of “top athletes”.



## Discussion and Conclusion

This article aimed to identify the trajectories of elite sports actors in Lebanon and determine the processes available within the figuration based on positions within the elite (athlete, coach, or manager), religious community, and gender. The results indicate that throughout their sports careers, despite the Lebanese context, actors can choose various paths at each stage.

Early initiation to sports, often with the family or through educational institutions, does not guarantee access to the elite level. However, this initiation lays the necessary foundations for later development in sports careers, even if sports activities are assigned a minor role in leisure or socialization by families and educational institutions (Santina et al., 2022).

One of the most important findings of this study is the trajectory of coaches within the sports figuration. Through the accumulation of managerial and technical expertise, they are in pivotal positions within the sports architecture of clubs and federations. Through their resources and dispositions, coaches push in their relationships with managers to free themselves from denominational contingencies and recruit the best sports talents.

1 For managers, two main strategies appear to be in play. Firstly, there are those who have  
2 chosen to be “mediators” between the political and sports figurations, particularly through  
3 Armenian organizations. In the political sphere, the mediator acts both as an “intermediary  
4 and producer or recipient of knowledge” (Jobard et al., 2020). In Lebanese sports, some  
5 “mediators” transfer confessional norms to the clubs and institutions they oversee. Then, there  
6 are those who wish to distance themselves, since they consider confessionalism as a true  
7 obstacle, like coaches. Actors in this latter group often need to negotiate their positions with  
8 confessional stakeholders to thrive at the top of Lebanese sports.

9 As far as athletes are concerned, depending on gender and generation, some have favored  
10 lucrative careers, while others have chosen careers allowing them to build a professional  
11 trajectory alongside their sports journey. This “dual career” choice is generally not so much  
12 determined by community origins than by low salaries and a lack of resources to influence  
13 managerial processes in their favor. Nevertheless, very few of the most talented athletes have  
14 achieved independence on both a financial and sports level.

15 Regarding the two determinants of our survey, i.e. religious community and gender, two  
16 reflections seem pertinent for future works on Lebanon. First, on community membership,  
17 this must be contingent on the historical period serving as the basis for the analysis of  
18 figuration processes. In the case of sports figuration in Lebanon, it has been significantly  
19 reconfigured four times: (1) pre-civil war (1943 to 1975); (2) the civil war (1975 to 1990); (3)  
20 post-civil war (1990 to 2005); and finally (4) the actual crisis period that began in 2005 with  
21 the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and worsened with the revolutionary period of 2019  
22 and subsequent economic crisis (2005 – ongoing).

23 Regarding trajectories, following the 2019 revolutionary movements, the reconfiguration of  
24 the sports space seems to have been stifled by the exhaustion of the revolution, as well as the  
25 economic and COVID crises. However, the sudden bifurcations in trajectories at the end of  
26 the study would deserve an investigation to assess the accuracy of our intuition. This intuition  
27 concerns a sclerosis of the sports figuration since 2005, where power relations are relatively  
28 fixed due to the imminence of a conflict with Hezbollah. What remains uncertain is the nature  
29 of this conflict: (1) An external conflict with Israel as in 2006, which legitimized Hezbollah’s  
30 rise to power, particularly in sports figuration, or (2) internally and the return of civil war that  
31 would impose a division, potentially followed by a reconfiguration. And (3) a third path could  
32 be a mix involving another actor: Syria, which in our view would strengthen the departure of  
33 the Lebanese youth to a diaspora already comprised of several million people (Reiche, 2019).

1 Apart from the uncertain times of the civil war, which would deserve in-depth studies, the  
2 “the Established” vs. “the Outsiders” sports dynamics allows for a relevant reading of  
3 intercommunal relations on the sports scene. Indeed, the resources and dispositions acquired,  
4 especially in the community game within a relatively small state space like Beirut/Lebanon,  
5 are relatively common to all communities. The analysis of the trajectories of individuals,  
6 though they come from different communities, reveals a similar incorporation of their  
7 relational power according to: (A) their community in (B) the sport practiced in (C) a given  
8 era. For example, a Shiite Muslim, who felt excluded from federal institutions before the civil  
9 war, will be even more ambitious today as the federation has come under the political control  
10 of the Shiite Amal/Hezbollah tandem.

11 Finally, concerning gender, even if in the actors’ perception Lebanon is a Middle Eastern  
12 society that is more emancipated than other societies, women do not have access to the  
13 resources that allow them to hold coaching or management positions, with a few exceptions.  
14 Paradoxically, one of the female athletes on the panel was entrusted with the direction of a  
15 newly created women’s branch in a first division basketball club in Saudi Arabia. This  
16 trajectory is possibly that of a pioneer who, as a relatively emancipated Arab woman, will  
17 come to structure the sports activities of the women of the Gulf, just like Lebanese and  
18 Palestinian bankers did in the 1950s, or Iraqi and Lebanese engineers in the 1970s, who  
19 structured these activities in the Gulf countries at their time (Laurens, 2004).

20 To conclude, this study presents several limitations that need to be taken into account. Firstly,  
21 the targeted sampling might not reflect the full diversity of experiences within individual  
22 sports. Secondly, the results might be influenced by interview biases, where participants may  
23 present idealized or socially desirable versions of their trajectories. Lastly, the rapid changes  
24 in the sociopolitical and economic context of Lebanon suggest a need for ongoing research to  
25 understand how these dynamics influence long-term sports trajectories.

26

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