

Original Research Article

Sporting Excellence and the Health of Ivorian Athletes: Between Overperformance and Institutional Constraints

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Abstract: This qualitative study investigates the effects of the pursuit of sporting excellence on the health of Ivorian athletes, examining the tensions between the imperative of overperformance and prevailing institutional logics. Its objective is to elucidate how sociocultural and institutional pressures shape the physical and mental well-being of these sportsmen and women. A triangulated methodology combines semi-structured interviews with elite athletes, participant observations during competitions, and documentary analysis of national sports policies. The findings reveal that athletes are subjected to intense pressure to achieve exceptional performances, often to the detriment of their physical and mental health. Such pressure is exacerbated by national expectations, financial stakes, and the paucity of adequate psychological support. The discussion underscores the need for a holistic approach incorporating mental health support schemes and institutional policies that prioritise athletes' well-being. The study concludes that a critical reassessment of the sporting structures in Côte d'Ivoire is essential to promote a more balanced relationship between performance and athletes' health.

Keywords: Sporting Excellence, Health Repercussions, Athletes, Tensions, Injunction, Overperformance, Institutional Logics.

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INTRODUCTION

The analysis of sporting dynamics in Côte d'Ivoire reveals three salient empirical observations that underscore the tensions between the pursuit of excellence and the safeguarding of athletes' health. First, a culture of "super-training", defined as the extreme intensification of training loads, has become an imperative of distinction and success, compelling athletes to constantly push their limits, often at the expense of their physical well-being. Second, this dynamic is exacerbated by institutional logics that privilege short-term performance over the long-term management of sporting careers, as coaches and federations impose demanding competitive calendars without always ensuring adequate medical follow-up. Third, in the face of heightened risks of chronic injury and burnout, athletes develop ambivalent coping strategies, oscillating between recourse to doping practices, reliance on informal healthcare, and the minimisation of bodily warning signals in order to preserve their competitive status.

These observations bring to light a structural paradox: whilst sporting excellence is predicated upon the optimisation of physical and mental capacities, the relentless pressure to overperform has the inverse effect of undermining athletes' health and jeopardising their sporting longevity. Consequently, a central question arises: how do Ivorian athletes negotiate the tension between the injunction to super-training and the imperative to safeguard their health within a context of intense institutional pressure? The aim of this study is to analyse the mechanisms through which these tensions manifest, by exploring the interactions between performance norms, institutional frameworks, and elite athletes' embodied strategies.

From a scholarly perspective, this research contributes to debates on the governance of elite sport and the effects of hyper-competitive models on athletes' health, adopting a sociological approach that intersects theories of bodily capital and institutional logics. It further interrogates the role of regulatory and career-support mechanisms in African contexts, where infrastructures and preventative policies remain limited.

Socially, the study bears significant implications, as it highlights the risks inherent in short-termist management of athletic potential and exposes inequalities in access to healthcare and recovery resources. It thereby calls upon Ivorian sporting stakeholders to rethink athlete support structures so as to reconcile performance with the long-term preservation of bodily capital.

According to the Ministry of Health and Sports and the French Sailing Federation (2009), as well as the work of Richard and Halliwell (2014), the attainment of Olympic medals necessitates the implementation of highly individualised strategies, particularly in disciplines where experience plays a pivotal role or those requiring substantial material investment. This approach, which prioritises the development of a small cadre of highly specialised athletes and their sustained presence among medal contenders, has direct implications for competitive dynamics. It restricts the renewal of sporting elites and complicates the preparation of Olympic contenders. Consequently, the sustainability of high performance rests upon a narrow cohort of athletes, making collaboration with elite foreign partners essential. Such reliance on a limited pool of top athletes accentuates the stakes surrounding talent management, knowledge transmission, and the structuring of training pathways. In this regard, opening up to international collaborations becomes a strategic necessity for maintaining a high competitive standard, enabling the exchange of best practices, access to advanced technical resources, and exposure to diverse performance contexts. This dynamic raises critical questions about elite sport development policies and highlights the tensions between early specialisation, elite renewal, and the perpetuation of excellence.

The aspiration to sporting expertise remains a defining feature of contemporary societies, attracting considerable scholarly attention. Numerous studies have sought to identify the factors conducive to exceptional performance (Starkes & Ericsson, 2003). Yet divergent approaches prevail: some emphasise environmental influences (Ericsson, 2006; Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Roemer, 1993), others foreground genetic predispositions (Bouchard, Malina & Perusse, 1997; Bray *et al.*, 2009; Klissouras *et al.*, 2001; Singer & Janelle, 1999), whilst a third strand focuses on athletes' psychological characteristics (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould, Dieffenbach & Moffatt, 2002; MacNamara, Button & Collins, 2010; Orlick & Partington, 1988). However, none of these perspectives, taken in isolation, can fully apprehend the complexity of the phenomenon. It is therefore imperative to adopt a holistic approach that integrates these diverse dimensions to better understand the mechanisms underpinning sporting excellence. The interplay of environmental, genetic, and psychological factors cannot be overlooked, for their synergy appears pivotal to the development of exceptional performance. Contemporary research thus tends towards integrative models, seeking

to articulate these various influences in order to elaborate more appropriate and effective performance optimisation strategies. This perspective underscores the need for a multidisciplinary analysis of elite sport, one that accounts for the complex dynamics shaping athletes' progression towards expertise.

1. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The analysis of the pursuit of sporting excellence and its repercussions for the health of Ivorian athletes may be illuminated through two seminal sociological theories. First, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of bodily capital offers a lens through which to understand how athletes invest in their bodies as a form of capital to be optimised within a sporting field structured by competition and social distinction. The injunction to "super-training" can thus be interpreted as a strategy to maximise such capital in a context where institutional and economic recognition is contingent upon physical performance. Second, Max Weber's theory of rationalisation provides insight into the instrumental logic that informs the decision-making of both athletes and their coaches. Within a performance-driven environment, where sporting success is conceived in terms of efficiency and the optimisation of capacities, institutional constraints may foster a mechanistic approach to the body, whereby health becomes an adjustable variable subordinated to imperatives of output. These theoretical perspectives therefore underscore that intensive training practices and their attendant risks are not merely individual choices, but rather responses to broader social and economic structures that shape athletes' trajectories.

These two approaches converge on several points in offering a sociologically rigorous explanation of the phenomenon under study. Both highlight the central role of institutions and power relations in structuring athletes' embodied practices. They also underline that the pursuit of sporting excellence is not solely an individual endeavour but unfolds within a normative framework in which the valorisation of a performant body is a systemic expectation. Nevertheless, these theoretical perspectives are not without limitations. The Bourdieusian approach risks underestimating athletes' agency by situating them within a deterministic logic of reproducing norms imposed by the sporting field. Conversely, Weberian rationalisation may lead to an overly functionalist reading of the phenomenon, neglecting the affective and subjective dimensions of athletes' relationships to their bodies and to pain throughout their careers. These limitations necessitate an approach more firmly grounded in athletes' lived experiences, in order to apprehend how they concretely negotiate the tensions between performance and health.

From a methodological standpoint, the study adopted an exclusively qualitative, triangulated approach that was particularly suited to the Ivorian context, where institutional and economic pressures on athletes are

heightened by the paucity of funding and inadequate infrastructure. Three complementary research instruments were mobilised: semi-structured interviews with elite athletes to elicit their perceptions and adaptive strategies; content analysis of institutional and media discourses on performance and intensive training; and direct observations in training centres to capture actual practices and interactions between athletes and coaches. The Ivorian context justified such an approach in light of the discrepancy between escalating demands for international competitiveness and the inadequacy of medical monitoring and injury-prevention systems, which magnifies the tensions between performance and bodily preservation.

Participant recruitment was based on precise inclusion criteria: only elite athletes actively engaged in national or international competitions and subjected to intensive training regimes were selected, ensuring the analytical relevance of the study. Amateur athletes, former athletes, and coaches without direct experience of elite competition were excluded in order to focus on the most salient trajectories in terms of exposure to logics of super-training. Sampling followed a purposive logic, seeking to diversify sporting disciplines and levels of experience so as to highlight variations in athletes' adaptive responses to institutional constraints. Data processing was conducted through thematic analysis of interviews and media discourses, enabling the identification of both recurrent patterns and divergences in athletes' perceptions. Finally, the analytic approach drew upon a comprehensive, interpretative sociology, thereby restoring the experiential tensions encountered by athletes as they sought to reconcile their aspirations to excellence with the imperative of safeguarding their long-term physical integrity.

2. RESULTS

2.1. The Pressure of "Super-Training": An Extreme Quest for Performance at the Expense of Health

In Côte d'Ivoire, the logic of "super-training" is predicated upon the belief that athletes must ceaselessly transcend their limits in order to attain excellence. This culture of hyper-performance frequently impels them to adopt excessive training regimes that exceed both institutional and medical recommendations.

This Assertion is Epitomised by the Following Testimony:

"In our milieu, if you want to succeed, you have to prove that you are stronger than the others, that you can endure more. We are told that pain is part of sport, so we push on, even when the body says stop. I have seen teammates continue training despite injuries, simply to avoid losing their place in competition. I myself had a knee injury, but I concealed it from my coach because I knew he would bench me."

The normalisation of pain in elite sport reflects a logic of bodily capitalisation wherein performance is

construed as a resource to be safeguarded at all costs, even at the expense of heeding the body's warning signals. In *The Body and Social Theory* (2012), Chris Shilling analyses how athletes internalise an instrumental relationship with their own physiology, wherein suffering is interpreted as a sign of commitment rather than a marker of danger. This phenomenon is reinforced by the competitive structure of sport, which valorises resilience and penalises any expression of vulnerability. Within such a framework, pain is not merely a by-product of intensive training but becomes a constitutive element of athletic distinction: concealing an injury becomes a strategic act aimed at preserving one's position within the sporting hierarchy. This dynamic of over-conformity to the demands of elite sport exemplifies what Michael Atkinson (2018) terms a culture of radical surpassing, wherein the acceptance of risk is internalised as an imperative for success.

Yet this glorification of physical endurance rests upon a profound paradox: although encouraged by coaches and sporting institutions, it ultimately undermines athletes' long-term well-being. David Howe (2003), in *Sport, Professionalism, and Pain: Ethnographies of Injury and Risk*, demonstrates how elite athletes, by integrating pain as a normative element of their practice, develop an ambivalent relationship with their bodies, oscillating between mastery and self-destruction. This tension is exacerbated by the competitive selection logics of sport: in an environment where performance constitutes the sole criterion of evaluation, acknowledging an injury often equates to temporary exclusion from competition or even jeopardising an entire career. Consequently, social and institutional pressures lead athletes to downplay their pain, fostering what may be described as a *habitus of suffering* a deeply ingrained disposition whereby the negation of physiological limits becomes a conditioned reflex. The example of the player concealing his injury from his coach illustrates this phenomenon vividly: here, the preservation of competitive status takes precedence over the safeguarding of physical integrity, testifying to the coercive power of the norms structuring the sporting field.

More broadly, this culture of boundless physical endurance is embedded within a socio-economic context in which the professionalisation of sport is increasingly precarious and fiercely competitive. In *The High-Performance Athlete: Between Agency and Exploitation* (2012), Mark de Rond elucidates how athletes operate within a marketplace wherein their bodies are commodified as capital subjected to imperatives of profitability. The more intense the competition, the greater the pressure to overperform, thereby perpetuating a vicious cycle in which risk-taking becomes structural. This model resonates acutely in contexts where sporting career opportunities are limited and where success entails heightened exposure to hyper-competitive logics. Pain management, therefore, ceases

to be merely an individual choice; rather, it becomes a systemic phenomenon in which athletes, ensnared within institutionalised mechanisms, are compelled to disregard corporeal warning signals in order to maintain their standing.

Against this backdrop, the protection of athletes cannot be reduced to mere awareness-raising initiatives: it necessitates a fundamental reconfiguration of the structures governing performance evaluation and injury management. Only through such transformation can elite sport move beyond a model in which the invisibilisation of suffering is enshrined as a normative criterion of excellence.

2.2. The Tensions Between Institutional Demands and Athletes' Well-Being

Sporting federations and coaches impose highly intensive competitive schedules, frequently incompatible with athletes' physiological need for recovery. Medical infrastructures are available, yet they are at times perceived as impediments to performance, as they prescribe rest periods that may jeopardise athletes' careers.

An Empirical Illustration is Provided by the Testimony of a Sports Physician in Côte d'Ivoire:

"The problem is that athletes are placed under constant pressure to always be at their peak, yet they are not given the time to recover. I advised a young footballer to rest following a muscle tear, but his club told him he had to play or risk losing his place. The result was that he returned too early and sustained a far more serious injury. Sporting structures want immediate results, and at times, health comes second."

This unrelenting pressure to sustain peak performance, at the expense of adequate recovery, exemplifies a dynamic of bodily exploitation that is emblematic of elite sport. As Mark de Rond (*op. cit.*) elucidates, athletes operate within an intensely competitive marketplace in which their bodies are commodified as productive capital subjected to imperatives of immediate profitability. Within such a context, recovery time is construed not as a biological necessity but as an economic loss, compelling clubs and federations to downplay the risks associated with overtraining and injury. This instrumentalisation of the body rests upon a fundamental paradox: while athletic performance is contingent upon optimal physical capacities, sporting institutions enforce training and competition rhythms that ultimately compromise the sustainability of these very capacities. The example of the young footballer coerced into playing despite his injury perfectly encapsulates this contradiction, wherein the imperative of results takes precedence over the preservation of the athlete's physical integrity.

This logic is embedded within what David Howe (*op. cit.*) describes as a culture of pain denial,

where inability to compete is equated with weakness and the injured athlete is readily perceived as replaceable. Within this framework, athletes are evaluated not solely on their technical and physical competences but also on their capacity to suppress pain in order to meet institutional expectations. Such pressures are exacerbated by the influence of sponsors and investors, whose financial backing is often contingent upon immediate performance, thereby accelerating competition schedules and truncating recovery periods. Premature return to competition following injury thus becomes less an individual decision than a strategy imposed by the sporting environment itself, situating athletes in a perpetual dilemma between safeguarding their careers and preserving their bodies. This dynamic illustrates a precarisation of athletes' status, whereby contractual insecurity and heightened competition foster the over-exploitation of bodily capital without concomitant guarantees of long-term protection.

This reality, however, raises pressing questions concerning institutional regulation and the ethical responsibility of sporting structures in safeguarding athletes' well-being. In *The Data Gaze: Capitalism, Data, and Social Control* (2018), David Beer analyses how logics of surveillance and perpetual evaluation—intensified by the proliferation of performance-tracking technologies create an environment in which the athlete's body becomes an object of total control, further constraining personal agency in the face of club injunctions. This model resonates particularly in contexts where sports medical infrastructures are unevenly developed and where professional alternatives outside of sport remain scarce. Consequently, the reform of competition calendars, the implementation of stringent recovery protocols, and the establishment of independent bodies to monitor injury management emerge as essential levers to counter such exploitative practices. Absent a structural transformation of the conditions of athlete supervision and protection, elite sport will persist in sustaining a fundamental contradiction: the relentless demand for excellence whilst simultaneously undermining the very corporeal viability upon which that excellence depends.

3. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the magnitude of the pressures exerted upon athletes, who are continually impelled to deliver exceptional performances. These demands emanate not solely from the expectations of the public and sporting authorities but are compounded by the substantial financial stakes inherent in elite competitions. The pursuit of medals and records necessitates training regimes of extreme intensity, often to the detriment of athletes' physical and psychological well-being. The absence of adequate psychological support exacerbates their vulnerability, increasing the likelihood of anxiety, depression, and burnout. Within this context, it becomes imperative to interrogate the prevailing structures of athlete

supervision and the support mechanisms available to them, ensuring that such mechanisms are appropriately attuned to their needs. This necessitates a thorough reconsideration of training methodologies, institutional demands, and the resources allocated to managing competitive pressure. A more robustly structured support framework would serve to mitigate the deleterious effects of high-level competition, fostering an environment in which performance does not come at the expense of athletes' health.

The discussion therefore advocates a holistic approach aimed at safeguarding athletes' equilibrium throughout their careers. The integration of mental health support programmes, alongside institutional policies oriented towards well-being, emerges as essential for alleviating the adverse effects of competitive pressure. This entails expanding access to sports psychologists, promoting training practices that respect individual needs, and sensitising stakeholders within the sporting milieu to the critical importance of mental health. Such an approach not only enhances athletes' quality of life but also ensures the sustainability of high-level performance without undermining their physical integrity.

On the basis of the results presented, we have adopted a synthetic discursive approach, designed to provide a comprehensive account of the analytical matrix, albeit at the risk of certain redundancies. The central axis of our reflection is encapsulated in the theme: *"The tensions between institutional demands and athletes' well-being."*

On the one hand, sporting institutions impose exacting performance objectives, encompassing stringent requirements relating to training, competition, and results. These expectations are frequently intensified by economic pressures such as sponsorship obligations, broadcasting rights, and financial incentives as well as by national imperatives linked to international prestige. Consequently, athletes are compelled to meet exacting standards of success, often at the cost of overreaching their physiological limits, thereby incurring heightened risk of injury.

On the other hand, the well-being of athletes necessitates a delicate balance between exertion and recovery, access to appropriate psychological and medical support, and the provision of an environment conducive to personal and professional fulfilment. Institutional imperatives, however, do not invariably account for these dimensions, resulting in situations of suffering, burnout, and even severe endangerment. This tension foregrounds profound ethical and social issues, signalling the need for a radical reconfiguration of sports policies so as to reconcile performance with respect for athletes' well-being. It becomes crucial to implement measures that guarantee training and competition

conditions that safeguard both physical and mental health.

These findings resonate with the analyses of Bayala (2023), who emphasises the centrality of sport in contemporary public discourse. Whilst sport is celebrated as a vehicle for well-being embodied in the adage *"sport is health"* and as a pathway to economic mobility, it also harbours darker dimensions, encompassing both physical and psychological violence (cf. Vivien Foé, 2003; Desaint, 2023) as well as tragedies occurring mid-contest. Football described as *"unquestionably the most popular sport"* (Beaud & Rasera, 2020) exemplifies this duality. At once a generator of joy and euphoria, it can equally serve as a stage for dramatic events. Such ambivalence health versus risk, peace versus conflict, pleasure versus sorrow constitutes a fertile object of semiotic inquiry, examining how these symbolic oppositions are articulated in media discourse, cultural representations, and athletes' lived experiences.

Within this perspective, the Fédération Française de Natation (2013/2017) has emphasised that the *Parcours de l'Excellence Sportive* (PES) must not be conflated with performance per se but should be understood as a structuring dynamic oriented towards its attainment. The PES embodies a holistic approach to high performance, accounting for conditions of preparation, the evolving trajectories of athletes, and the institutional contexts in which they operate. Far from being a static organisational structure, it constitutes a strategic framework wherein the alignment of means and objectives is ensured through the mobilisation of qualified human resources and specialised infrastructures.

Crucially, the PES exemplifies a systemic logic whereby athlete support transcends mere technical coaching, instead integrating scientific expertise, personalised monitoring, and the provision of conditions conducive to excellence. It is predicated upon a finely tuned structuring of athletic pathways, encompassing variables such as training load management, mental preparation, recovery, and adaptation to competitive demands. As such, the PES is not a fixed entity but a dynamic mechanism of continual adjustment, enabling the articulation of performance with evolving institutional and sporting trajectories. It operates as a strategic dispositif integrating biomechanical, physiological, psychological, and sociological dimensions, thereby ensuring the coherent and effective preparation of athletes. This organisational flexibility embeds performance within an evolving temporal framework, attuned to the structural transformations shaping contemporary elite sport.

4. CONCLUSION

Situated at the intersection of the sociology of sport and health, this study set out to analyse the tensions

between imperatives of hyper-performance and the institutional logics that structure elite sport in Côte d'Ivoire, with particular attention to the repercussions of these dynamics upon athletes' well-being. By adopting a qualitative approach grounded in in-depth interviews with athletes, coaches, and sports administrators, the research illuminated the social mechanisms that govern the management of the athletic body. The findings reveal a normalisation of pain and a recurrent jeopardising of athletes' physical integrity, arising from a dual process: on the one hand, institutional pressures that prioritise the immediate profitability of performance over long-term well-being; on the other, athletes' internalisation of norms of overreach, leading them to interpret suffering not as a warning signal but as a marker of legitimacy within the sporting field.

This logic of bodily over-exploitation is further reinforced by institutional dynamics wherein the protection of athletes is relegated to a secondary concern, subordinated to imperatives of competitive results. Sporting structures shaped by the expectations of the public, sponsors, and governing bodies construct a framework in which athletes are compelled to meet incessant performance demands, often without adequate medical and psychological support. This pressure is heightened within an environment marked by uncertain prospects for career transition, thereby entrenching a culture of sacrifice in which the preservation of competitive status takes precedence over health. The study thus exposes a fundamental structural contradiction: while sporting excellence is predicated upon optimal physiological capacities, the very systems designed to foster performance paradoxically undermine these capacities, thereby compromising both career longevity and the sustainability of high-level performance.

From both a scientific and institutional perspective, these results highlight the urgent need for a reconfiguration of elite sports governance in Côte d'Ivoire. The implementation of rigorous injury management protocols, the rationalisation of competition schedules, and the cultivation of a preventive health culture emerge as indispensable levers for rebalancing performance demands with athlete protection. Furthermore, the establishment of independent bodies mandated to oversee athletes' health and to evaluate club practices would constitute a significant advance towards ensuring a more ethical and sustainable sporting environment.

Ultimately, this study invites a broader reflection upon models of sport professionalisation in emerging economies, where economic constraints and the logics of global competition exacerbate tensions between performance and well-being. In so doing, it interrogates the ethical responsibility of institutional actors in shaping a form of sport that is not only more sustainable but also more respectful of athletes' integrity and long-term flourishing.

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