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From Aretē to Institutional Reward: Athletic Excellence and Access to Higher Education in Greece. The Case of Department of Physical Education and Sport Science (DPESS DUTh), Komotini

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Abstract

The study examines the historical evolution of excellence in sport and its relationship with education and access to higher education, focusing on the Greek context and the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science (DPESS) in Komotini. Drawing on the ancient Greek concept of *aretē*, excellence is initially understood as the holistic development of physical, intellectual, and moral qualities linked to education and the common good. Over time, particularly in modernity, excellence shifts from an ethical and pedagogical ideal to a measurable performance institutionalized within organized sport and the modern state. The analysis emphasizes the 19th and 20th centuries, when physical education became part of national education systems and athletic achievement gained social significance. In Greece, legislation since the late 20th century has connected athletic excellence with admission to higher education. The study reviews this legal framework and presents quantitative data showing that admission through athletic excellence does not necessarily lead to timely graduation. Ultimately, excellence is viewed as a dynamic concept that requires a balanced integration of performance, education, values, and institutional support for athletes' dual careers.

Keywords: institutional reward, reforms, higher education, career, recognition.

Introduction

Excellence in sport constitutes a timeless institution that reflects the prevailing social, political, economic, and cultural conditions of each historical period. From the ancient Greek conception of *aretē* to the modern notion of high performance and professional success, excellence has undergone significant transformations without losing its core: the pursuit of transcending human limits and achieving social recognition (Guttmann, 1978;

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Coakley, 2015). Sport functions as a social mirror through which the dominant value systems of each era are projected.

In ancient Greek thought, excellence is inextricably linked to the concept of *aretē*. *Aretē* is not identified with a single skill, but with the holistic realization of human potential within the framework of the city-state (Jaeger, 1939).

During the transition to modernity, excellence in sport underwent profound transformations. The introduction of objective measurement criteria, the institutionalization of records, and the development of organized competitions altered the meaning of athletic superiority from a moral ideal to a measurable performance (Guttmann, 1978). At the same time, the emergence of the modern state and the strengthening of educational institutions gradually connected excellence with social mobility and access to institutional goods, such as education and professional advancement (Holt, 1989).

From the nineteenth century onward in particular, education emerged as a central field for the institutional reward of excellence. Physical education and school sport were incorporated into national education systems as means of moral upbringing, discipline, and social integration (Coakley, 2015). Within this framework, athletic distinction began to function not only as symbolic capital but also as a factor facilitating access to educational opportunities, especially at higher levels of study.

In the Greek case, the linkage between excellence in sport and access to universities acquired particular significance from the late twentieth century onward. Recognizing the long-term and demanding effort required to achieve high-level athletic distinction, the Greek state proceeded to establish special provisions that allow distinguished athletes to enter higher education either without examinations or through bonus point systems (Papadopoulos, 1989; Mylonas, 2005). These provisions are based on the assumption that athletic excellence entails substantial sacrifices in time and educational preparation, which may limit athletes' ability to participate on equal terms in academic competition.

However, the institutionalization of university access through athletic excellence has been neither static nor immune to criticism. From the 1990s to the present, the legislative framework in Greece has been characterized by continuous revisions, reflecting efforts to balance the reward of excellence with the safeguarding of academic credibility and social justice. The initially broad granting of privileges was gradually restricted through stricter criteria, age limits, hierarchies of distinctions, and, more recently, through the implementation of the Minimum Admission Threshold (Houlihan, 2014).

International literature emphasizes that the linkage between athletic excellence and education is situated within the broader framework of athletes' so-called "dual career," namely the simultaneous pursuit of sporting distinction and academic or professional development (Andreff & Szymanski, 2006). While this policy can function as a mechanism of social mobility, it simultaneously entails the risk of reproducing inequalities, insofar as access to excellence is not equally available to all social groups (Waddington, 2000).

The present study draws on official institutional documents and legislative regulations of the Greek state concerning access to higher education through athletic distinctions. The analysis is complemented by primary quantitative data on admitted students and graduates from the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science (DPESS) in Komotini, derived from the Department's archival records. These data enable an empirical investigation of the relationship between admission and academic completion. Overall, the sources combine theoretical documentation with empirical analysis, thereby strengthening the validity and coherence of the study.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the historical evolution of the concept of excellence in sport and to analyze its institutional connection with education and access to higher education in Greece. The study focuses on the legislative framework governing the reward of athletic excellence and empirically examines the relationship between admission through athletic distinctions and the completion of academic studies, using as a case study the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science (DPESS) in Komotini. Through historical, legislative, and quantitative analysis, the article seeks to contribute to the scholarly dialogue on the sustainability of excellence policies and the management of athletes' "dual careers" within the contemporary university environment.

Excellence and Sport in Antiquity

Sport in ancient Greece constituted a fundamental component of paideia. In gymnasia and palaestrae, young men were educated not only physically but also morally, learning self-discipline, endurance, and respect for their opponent (Kyle, 2007). The Panhellenic Games functioned as supralocal institutions, reinforcing a shared Greek identity.

The Olympic Games, established in 776 BC, represented the supreme expression of excellence. The prize, the *kotinos*, was symbolic (Albanidis, 2025); nevertheless, the

social rewards were substantial, including public honors, political privileges, lifelong meals, and financial support from the city-state (Golden, 1998; Miller, 2004).

In ancient Greece, excellence was not identified exclusively with athletic victory but was embedded within the broader pedagogical and political ideal of the city-state. Athletic distinction functioned as a means of social recognition and political advancement, while the reward of victors—although often symbolic in terms of the prize itself—was accompanied by significant social and material privileges (Golden, 1998; Miller, 2004). The Homeric ideal of *"aien aristeuein"* and the philosophical grounding of virtue in classical Greek thought, as articulated primarily by Plato and Aristotle, constitute the core of the ancient conception of excellence and exerted a decisive influence on later understandings of the relationship between body, soul, and education.

For Plato, *aretē* is conceived primarily as knowledge and inner harmony of the soul, achieved through education and philosophical cultivation. In the *Republic*, virtue is associated with justice, understood as the proper functioning of the three parts of the soul (rational, spirited, and appetitive), each fulfilling its appropriate role (Plato, *Republic*, 441c–444a). Physical training, through gymnastics, is not an end in itself but operates complementarily with music and philosophy, contributing to the formation of balanced and virtuous citizens (Plato, *Republic*, 410b–412b). Thus, excellence is not equated with athletic superiority per se, but with the individual's overall pedagogical and moral completion.

Aristotle, by contrast, attributes to virtue a more practical and experiential character, distancing himself from the Platonic identification of virtue with knowledge. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he defines virtue as a *hexis proairetikē*, that is, a disposition acquired through habit and repetition and guided by right reason (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b36–1107a2). For Aristotle, excellence is realized through practical engagement and adherence to the mean, avoiding the extremes of excess and deficiency. Physical exercise and sport are incorporated into this framework as means of cultivating self-control, endurance, and discipline, insofar as they serve the ultimate goal of *eudaimonia*, that is, the fully realized human life (Aristotle, *Politics*, 1337a10–1338b5). Through this philosophical foundation, virtue and excellence acquire a clear pedagogical and social content, establishing the view that superiority in athletic competition should be accompanied by moral and intellectual cultivation.

The victory odes of Pindar constitute one of the most characteristic literary representations of athletic excellence in ancient Greece, presenting victory not as a purely

individual achievement but as a collective accomplishment that honors the city, the lineage, and the community of the athlete. Through his poetic narrative, Pindar connects the victor with both the past and the present of his city, portraying victory as evidence of a favorable relationship between humans, the gods, and the political community (Pindar, *Olympian Odes* 1.7–15; Miller, 2004). Athletic distinction thus acquires symbolic capital that transcends the competitive arena and becomes integrated into the collective identity of the city-state.

At the same time, excellence in sport was inextricably linked to social and political advancement. Victors in the Panhellenic Games enjoyed honorary privileges such as public honors, ceremonial precedence, and, in certain cases, access to public office, endowing athletic excellence with a dimension of social power (Golden, 1998; Parker, 2000). Physical superiority and public recognition functioned as indicators of leadership capacity, reinforcing the political legitimacy of victors and confirming the close connection between athletic distinction, prestige, and authority in ancient Greek society.

Hellenistic and Roman Period

During the Hellenistic period, excellence acquired a more specialized character. Systematic training, itinerant professional athletes, and monetary prizes indicate an early form of professionalization (Kyle, 2007). City-states competed to attract distinguished athletes by offering financial incentives and forms of social protection.

In the Roman era, sport was transformed into a mass spectacle. Gladiators, although socially marginalized, enjoyed high earnings, gifts, and popular adoration, illustrating the shift of excellence from moral superiority to spectacular success (Wiedemann, 1992; Futrell, 2006). These sporting practices contributed to the maintenance of social cohesion and the promotion of cultural values through spectacle and public recognition. Moreover, the training of athletes included specialized programs of physical conditioning and strategic preparation, confirming the importance of systematic training for the achievement of excellence.

Middle Ages

The Middle Ages are characterized by a restriction of organized sport. The Christian worldview often regarded physical exercise as secondary to spiritual salvation (Mandell,

1984). Nevertheless, chivalric contests and tournaments constituted arenas for the display of excellence, closely linked to honor, social prestige, and material rewards. These rewards often included land, noble titles, and access to royal courts, indicating the persistence of the connection between excellence and social recognition. Moreover, references in chronicles and literary sources of the period show that tournament victors frequently served as models of leadership and military skill.

Renaissance

The Renaissance marks a re-evaluation of the body and physical cultivation. The revival of classical ideals restores excellence as a component of holistic education (Guttmann, 1978). At the same time, the first forms of organized sports emerge within educational institutions and military academies, linking excellence to military preparation and leadership ability. Interest in the body and in excellence influence pedagogical thought and lays the foundations for the concept of sport as an educational tool. City-states promote athletic cultivation as a means of social advancement and political legitimation, while schools and academies systematically introduce educational programs based on ancient models.

The 19th Century – The Formation of Modern Sport

The 19th Century constitutes a turning point for sport. The Industrial Revolution, urbanization, and the expansion of leisure time led to the institutionalization of rules and federations (Holt, 1989). Excellence became associated with amateurism and moral superiority. The revival of the Olympic Games in 1896 by Pierre de Coubertin incorporated the ideal of participation and fair play. Rewards were largely limited to medals and social recognition, while professionalism was ideologically rejected (Young, 2004).

In Greece, nineteenth-century educational policy played a decisive role in shaping athletic excellence. Schools and gymnasia introduced organized physical education and athletic programs, promoting the concept of excellence as a synthesis of physical, intellectual, and moral development. Educational reforms, inspired by Western models, advanced the cultivation of the body as a means of social mobility and the construction of national identity (Droumeva, 1996; Koliopoulos, 2002). Students were encouraged to participate in competitions and athletic activities that fostered morale, discipline, and self-esteem, while victory and distinction were perceived as both personal and social affirmation of excellence. Educational authorities promoted participation in local and

Panhellenic competitions, establishing institutions such as Physical Education Associations and Gymnastic Clubs, which functioned as precursors of modern sports clubs (Koulouri, 1997).

Between 1900 and 1950, modern Greek educational policy incorporated the principles of European physical culture, leading to the creation of national infrastructures of athletic schools and gymnasia. Excellence thus acquired a dual dimension: as a means of personal development and as a tool for shaping national character and pride. The establishment of Panhellenic and University Games confirmed the importance of organized education and athletic excellence for youth, while athletic distinctions received social recognition and were prominently featured in the media of the period (Papadopoulos, 1989; Mylonas, 2005). Teachers and physical education instructors acted as key transmitters of values, linking physical ability with moral superiority, while athletic excellence was reinforced through institutionalized incentives such as medals, prizes, and commendations.

The 20th Century: State Involvement and Professionalism

During the 20th Century, excellence became embedded in state strategies. In socialist states, athletes functioned as representatives of the ideological superiority of the system, enjoying state benefits, housing, and opportunities for social advancement (Riordan, 1977). In the West, the process of professionalization expanded, particularly after the Second World War.

The lifting of amateurism restrictions in the Olympic Games during the 1980s marked the institutional acceptance of financial remuneration as a component of excellence (Toohey & Veal, 2007). At the same time, Greece actively participated in the strengthening of national programs supporting athletes and developing sports infrastructure, integrating educational and athletic ideals.

The Contemporary Era – A Critical Perspective

In the twenty-first century, excellence in sport has become fully integrated into the global economy. Elite athletes enjoy substantial financial rewards through contracts, sponsorships, and image rights (Andrews & Jackson, 2001). At the same time, states and

sports federations offer monetary bonuses for Olympic distinctions, reintroducing, in modern terms, forms of honorific rewards reminiscent of those in antiquity.

Contemporary excellence is subject to intense criticism. Commercialization, inequalities of access, doping, and psychological pressure challenge the moral content of excellence (Houlihan, 2014; Waddington, 2000). The question of how to balance performance with human value remains central.

The Rewarding of Athletic Excellence in Higher Education (Institutional Changes, late 20th–early 21st Century)

According to Olympic values, “excellence” is defined as the condition in which one gives their best, whether in the field of play or in life, striving for victory while also valuing participation and achieving personal goals. When applied to sport, excellence should be understood as a continuous state of peak performance attained through systematic training, discipline, the effective development of talent, ethical conduct, and psychological resilience. Recognizing the demanding and sustained effort required to achieve athletic distinction, the Greek state established an evolving framework of rewards aimed at linking athletic success with access to higher education, thereby creating the conditions to support this dual career pathway.

The concept of “excellence,” as articulated by Olympic values, refers to the individual’s ongoing effort to maximize their potential, pursuing competitive success without diminishing the importance of participation and personal fulfillment (International Olympic Committee, 2017). In the field of sport, excellence is not confined to a single outcome but is conceived as a stable and long-term condition of high performance, grounded in systematic training, discipline, talent cultivation, ethical values, and psychological resilience (Coakley, 2015; Houlihan, 2014). Achieving high-level athletic distinctions entails increased demands and long-term commitment, which often affect athletes’ ability to participate fully and uninterruptedly in educational processes. In this context, the Greek state institutionally acknowledged the particular nature of athletic excellence and developed a progressive framework of rewards linking competitive distinction to access to higher education. These regulations aim both to recognize the contribution of distinguished athletes and to ensure the conditions necessary to support the so-called “dual career,” that is, the combination of athletic and academic development, while simultaneously reinforcing the educational and social role of sport (Andreff & Szymanski, 2006; European Commission, 2012).

Law No. 1268/1982 clearly established the recognition of distinguished athletes for admission to tertiary education. According to this law, athletes could be admitted beyond the regular intake quota, either without examinations or through bonus-point systems, provided that they had achieved specific competitive distinctions.

Law No. 2009/1992 explicitly provided for the admission of distinguished athletes to higher education, allowing entry beyond the standard quota either without examinations or through point-based advantages, provided that specific criteria of athletic distinction were met. These provisions applied to both individual and team sports, with differentiated approaches to participation and performance recording.

With Law No. 2725/1999, the overall framework of benefits for athletes was comprehensively organized, including appointments, financial rewards, and admission privileges. This period established a new educational reality, whereby the distinguished athlete acquired educational and professional advantages.

Law No. 3708/2008 amended Article 34 of Law No. 2725/1999, clearly defining what constitutes an exceptional athletic distinction. The amendment introduced detailed provisions specifying percentage-based bonus points according to the type of distinction, ranging from world championships to school competitions, thus creating a hierarchy of sporting events. Both athletic performance and age category were taken into account. Emphasis was placed on the gradation of athletic achievements, providing an objective basis for evaluation and a clear incentive framework for athletes.

Article 17 of Law No. 3748/2009 established special collective bodies responsible for assessing eligibility criteria and athletic distinctions. Subsequently, Law No. 3773/2009 placed particular emphasis on academic performance, linking school sport with national entrance examinations and thereby granting athletes advantages in access to tertiary education.

Law No. 4115/2013 marked a transition from the generalized granting of privileges to a more qualitative control of such benefits. Its provisions introduced an age limit (up to 29 years) and required active participation in competitions during the most recent years of the athlete’s career, signaling a shift from the previous practice of broad privilege allocation toward more rigorous qualitative assessment.

With Laws No. 4326/2015, 4373/2016, and 4410/2016, provisions were introduced allowing for the revocation of privileges, while also enabling—under certain conditions—the recognition of past athletic distinctions.

Law No. 4429/2016 (Article 17) established specific admission quotas for Schools of Physical Education and Sport Science (20%) and for other Higher Education Institutions (4.5%), strengthening the position of athletes without affecting the number of admissions through general examinations.

Under Law No. 4603/2019 (Article 36), age ceased to be a restrictive criterion for admission to Higher Education Institutions and Schools of Physical Education and Sport Science.

Law No. 4589/2019 (Article 75) increased the academic requirements for candidates seeking admission through athletic distinctions. Whereas previously candidates were required to achieve 90% of the score of the last admitted student in their chosen department, the new provision requires 100% of that score, meaning that candidates must fully match the entry threshold of the last admitted applicant.

Finally, Law No. 4753/2020 updated the conditions for the recognition of athletic distinctions, placing emphasis on participation in more than 50% of competitions and introducing the Minimum Entry Threshold (E.B.E.) even for athletes.

Record of Admitted Students and Graduates at the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science (DPESS), Komotini

This section focuses on the assessment and recording of admitted student-athletes and graduates of the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science (DPESS) in Komotini, with the aim of investigating the relationship between access to higher education and the completion of studies. Through the longitudinal analysis of quantitative data, the study seeks to identify trends in admissions and graduation rates, as well as to highlight possible discrepancies between institutional provisions and educational reality. This examination allows for a better understanding of the impact of institutional regulations and socio-economic conditions on students' academic trajectories. At the same time, it contributes to the broader discussion on the concept of academic success and the sustainability of policies aimed at widening access to higher education.

Figure 1 illustrates, over time (from 1984 to 2020), the relationship between admitted students and graduates, distinguishing those who complete their studies within 4 years from those who graduate after more than 4 years (in spring and winter semesters). The

interpretation of the chart highlights significant fluctuations, reflecting both institutional changes and broader social and educational conditions.

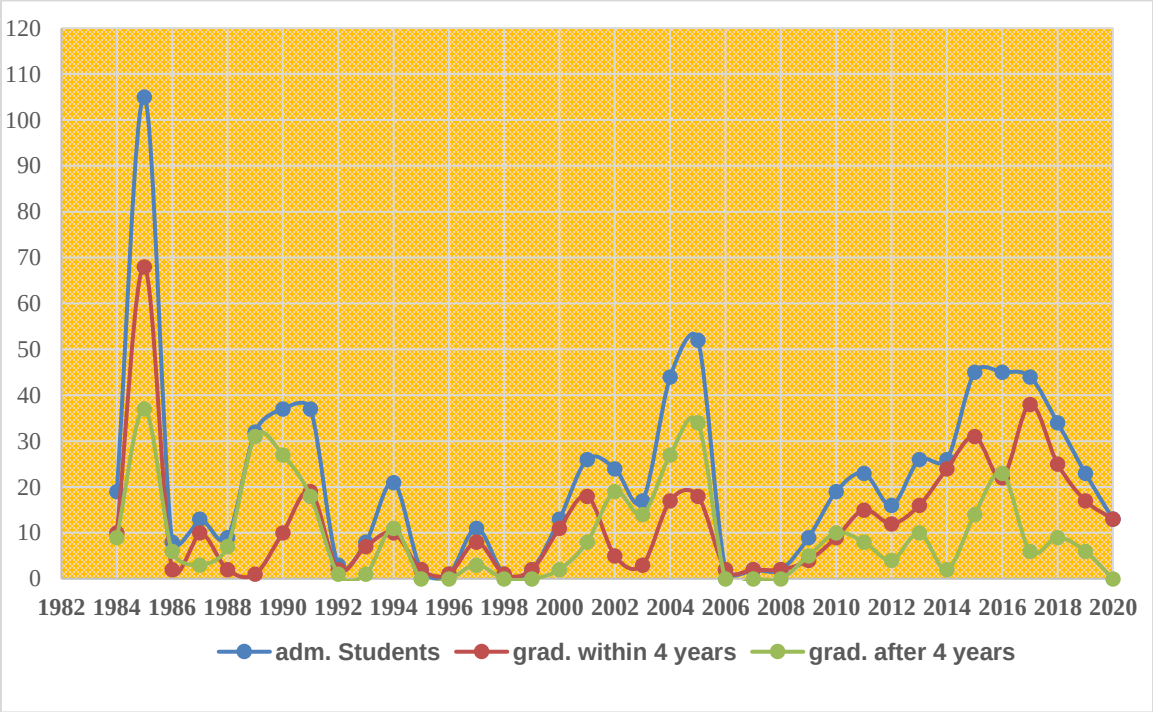

Figure 1. Admitted Students and Graduation Timeline at the Department of Physical Education and Sport Science (DPESS), Komotini

Primarily, sharp peaks in admissions are observed in certain years (notably in the mid-1980s and around 2004–2005), which are not accompanied by a corresponding increase in four-year graduates. This suggests that the massification of access to higher education does not automatically translate into timely completion of studies. On the contrary, in many cases, the increase in admissions appears to shift the graduation load to subsequent years, reinforcing the phenomenon of extended study duration.

Secondly, the curve of graduates within four years remains lower than admissions throughout most of the period, with sporadic exceptions. This indicates that the “normal duration of studies” functions more as an institutional limit than as an actual average time for completion. In contrast, the curve of graduates after four years often either follows the increases in admissions with a delay or surpasses the number of four-year graduates, a fact that confirms the structural significance of delayed graduation in Greek universities.

Particularly noteworthy is the period from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, where there is a concentration of graduates after four years, likely due to accumulated “lingering” students, changes in study programs, as well as socio-economic factors (working alongside studies, military service, family obligations). This phenomenon is further amplified after 2010, coinciding with the economic crisis, which can be interpreted because of increased pressures that slow academic progress.

Overall, the table highlights an asymmetrical relationship between admission and graduation: policies aimed at widening access are not accompanied by equally stable mechanisms to support timely completion of studies. From an educational and institutional perspective, the data suggest that the concept of “excellence” or academic success cannot be evaluated solely because of admissions or single-year performance but requires long-term monitoring of the student trajectory. The table, therefore, functions not merely as a statistical representation but as a tool for understanding the structural weaknesses and social factors affecting the relationship between access, enrollment, and graduation in higher education.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that excellence in sport constitutes a complex and multi-layered phenomenon, which cannot be fully understood outside its historical, social, and educational context. At the heart of the analysis is the longitudinal transformation of the concept of excellence, which has evolved from antiquity to the present day without losing its core value-based essence. In ancient Greece, excellence (ἀρετή) was closely associated with the comprehensive education of the citizen and the unity of body and soul, as expressed through competitive sport, participation in Panhellenic Games, and public recognition of effort. The Homeric ideal of “always to excel” (αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν) and the classical philosophical grounding of virtue by Plato and Aristotle endowed excellence with a clear moral and educational dimension, in which distinction was not an end but a means of cultivating character and contributing to the common good.

During the Roman and medieval periods, excellence shifted toward service to the state or religious morality, limiting its public competitive aspect. In the modern era, with the rise of humanism and the nation-state, it re-emerged as an ideal of personal transcendence and social recognition. In the contemporary world, athletic excellence exists within the context of institutionalized competition, professionalization, and globalization, which

enhances its significance while simultaneously creating new tensions between ethics, performance, and social equity.

Within this framework, the study highlighted the close link between athletic excellence and education, particularly through policies granting access to higher education. The Greek legislative experience of recent decades reflects a sustained effort by the state to recognize and reward high athletic distinction, providing special entry opportunities or point advantages to distinguished athletes. This practice is based on the acknowledgment that athletic excellence requires long-term dedication, discipline, and sacrifice, which often hinder equitable participation in academic competition. At the same time, the gradual revision of the legislative framework—with stricter criteria, age limits, and connections to school performance—demonstrates an effort to balance the reward of excellence with the assurance of academic integrity and social justice.

Particularly illuminated was the analysis of quantitative data on admissions and graduates, which showed that access to higher education, even when based on excellence, does not automatically guarantee timely completion of studies. The discrepancies between admitted students and graduates, as well as the phenomenon of extended study duration, underscore the difficulties student-athletes face in managing their dual roles. Socio-economic conditions, institutional changes, and the heightened demands of modern sport make it clear that excellence cannot be approached piecemeal but requires a comprehensive framework of support and pedagogical care.

In summary, the main conclusion of this study is that “excellence” in sport should be reconceptualized as a dynamic and ongoing process that combines performance with ethics, education, and social responsibility. Its historical trajectory shows that when excellence is detached from the values that gave rise to it, it risks becoming an instrumental goal or a mechanism of inequality. Conversely, when embedded within a coherent pedagogical and institutional framework, it can serve as a driver of personal fulfillment, social mobility, and cultural progress. From this perspective, excellence in sport is not merely a matter of distinctions and numbers but a profound cultural and educational choice, reflecting how society perceives the relationship between effort, achievement, and the collective good.

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Archives

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