



Social Adaptation of Athletes in Ukraine: Challenges and Priority Areas of Support

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Abstract

Background. Sport represents a crucial component of human life, yet the intensity of training, coupled with significant physical and psycho-emotional strain, often restricts athletes' opportunities for holistic personal development and limits their integration into the social environment. These challenges become especially acute during the transition from active competitive activity to the post-career stage.

Objectives. This study aimed to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the level of awareness among specialists in the field of physical culture and sport regarding the concept of athletes' social adaptation and to identify the key problems athletes encounter throughout this process.

Materials and Methods. The study was based on an anonymous online survey involving 150 specialists representing diverse sectors of the field of physical culture and sport in Ukraine. A set of complementary methods was employed, including system analysis, analysis and synthesis of scientific literature, sociological survey, and statistical analysis, using the chi-square (χ^2) test to assess the relationship between professional experience and awareness levels.

Results. The findings indicate that 87.3% of respondents considered the social adaptation of athletes to be "undoubtedly very important". The most critical challenges during athletes' professional careers were identified as the imbalance between sport and education (54.5%) and psychological overload and stress (40.0%). In the post-career stage, the leading difficulties were related to employment (33.8%) and financial instability (26.9%). The most effective forms of post-career support were recognized as employment assistance (mean score = 4.3) and financial support (mean score = 4.0). At the same time, the primary barriers to implementing adaptation programs included insufficient funding (37.3%) and athletes' limited awareness of available opportunities (19.3%).

Conclusions. The study underscores the urgency of developing and institutionalizing comprehensive national programs for the social adaptation of athletes in Ukraine, ensuring their continuity across all career stages.

Keywords: social adaptation, athletes, sports career, support mechanisms, challenges, dual career.

Introduction

Sport constitutes an integral part of human life, fostering not only physical abilities but also exerting a significant influence on social identity and personal development. Nevertheless, demanding training schedules, high psychological and physical workloads, and constant competitive pressures often limit athletes' opportunities for holistic development and hinder their full integration into the social environment (Korzh et al., 2024; Ponomaryov et al., 2024). The interplay of these factors creates substantial challenges for social adaptation, which become particularly

critical during the transition from an active athletic career to the post-sport stage of life (Pryimak, 2025a; Leeder et al., 2025). Previous studies emphasize the necessity of psychological support to help athletes overcome critical stages in their careers and highlight the importance of effectively managing these transitions (Aptsiauri, 2024; Samuel et al., 2011). At the same time, scholars stress the need for the development of effective adaptation programs that take into account the specific characteristics of athletes' transition to life after sport (Voorheis et al., 2023; Voronova et al., 2024).

The relevance of examining the problem of athletes' social adaptation in Ukraine is shaped by several factors, among which the absence of comprehensive and systematic support programs and the insufficient awareness of specialists

regarding athletes' actual needs are particularly significant (Voronova et al., 2020; Polishchuk et al., 2025). Effective social adaptation is a crucial condition for psychological well-being, professional self-realization, and the full integration of individuals into society after the completion of a sports career (Pryimak, 2025b; Choi et al., 2021). Within this context, athletes' education acquires special importance, being viewed not only as a tool for individual development but also as a strategic factor in sustaining sport at the national level. Domestic research highlights the importance of Olympic education, which is regarded as an integral component of the national educational and sports system (Bulatova et al., 2019; Radchenko et al., 2024).

An analysis of contemporary scientific literature demonstrates a growing scholarly interest in the issue of athletes' social adaptation within the international academic community. The works of researchers such as Hong et al. (2023) and Glandorf et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of psychological and social preparation for career termination, while also noting the economic challenges that arise during the post-career stage (Nuetzel, 2023; Pilkington et al., 2024). Considerable attention has also been devoted to mental health, stress, and professional burnout, which emerge as critical dimensions of the adaptation process (Thornton et al., 2023; Tossici et al., 2024; Trigueros et al., 2019). Ukrainian studies likewise address the problem of social adaptation, particularly in the context of the role of educational programs and psychological support. The works of Pryimak (2024, 2025c) focus on the distinctive features of athletes' adaptation at different stages of their sports careers and their interactions with the social environment-factors essential for a comprehensive understanding of the adaptation process. Furthermore, research on models of professional growth and career development offers valuable conceptual guidelines for the design of effective support programs for athletes in the post-career period (Pryimak, 2025d; Samuel et al., 2023).

Despite these contributions, several aspects of the broader issue remain highly relevant for further academic inquiry. Specifically, these include the level of awareness among Ukrainian specialists in physical culture and sport regarding athletes' social adaptation, their perceptions of the effectiveness and content of existing programs, the identification of athletes' primary needs within the Ukrainian context, and a systematic analysis of the barriers that hinder the implementation of effective support initiatives. These considerations highlight the urgency of addressing existing gaps through a focused examination of the aforementioned aspects under contemporary Ukrainian conditions.

The purpose of the study is to examine the level of awareness among specialists in the field of physical culture and sport regarding athletes' social adaptation and, based on the results of the conducted survey, to substantiate the necessity of developing and implementing social adaptation programs within the activities of physical culture and sports organizations.

Materials and Methods

Study Participants

The study employed an anonymous questionnaire survey aimed at assessing the level of awareness among specialists

in the field of physical culture and sport regarding athletes' social adaptation, as well as substantiating the necessity of developing and implementing relevant programs within the activities of physical culture and sports organizations. A total of 150 respondents ($n = 150$), representing leading specialists in the field of physical culture and sport in Ukraine, participated in the research. The sample was formed on the principles of voluntary participation and accessibility, which allowed for the inclusion of a broad range of physical culture and sports organizations, as well as higher education institutions with a physical culture profile. Such a composition of participants ensured a sufficiently broad and representative reflection of professional perspectives on the issue under investigation.

The largest proportion of respondents represented children and youth sports schools (36.0%, $n = 54$), underscoring the importance of addressing athletes' adaptation from an early age. A substantial share of participants were affiliated with higher education institutions specializing in physical culture and sport (13.3%, $n = 20$) and with the Ministry of Youth and Sports of Ukraine (12.7%, $n = 19$). Specialists from sports clubs (7.3%, $n = 11$), physical culture and sports societies (6.7%, $n = 10$), and local administrations (6.0%, $n = 9$) were also represented. Smaller groups included respondents from schools of higher sports mastery (5.3%, $n = 8$), the National Olympic Committee of Ukraine and its regional branches (4.7%, $n = 7$), non-governmental and charitable organizations (3.3%, $n = 5$), municipal institutions (2.7%, $n = 4$), and the Olympic Academy of Ukraine with its regional branches (2.0%, $n = 3$).

An analysis of respondents' professional experience revealed that the majority were highly experienced specialists. Nearly half (47.3%, $n = 71$) reported more than 20 years of professional experience, 24.0% ($n = 36$) had 11–20 years, 17.3% ($n = 26$) had 6–10 years, while only 11.3% ($n = 17$) reported less than 5 years of work experience. The professional positions of participants covered a wide spectrum, ranging from coaches, academic staff, and sports managers to administrative personnel and senior executives of physical culture and sports organizations. This diversity provided a multifaceted perspective on the research problem and contributed to a deeper understanding of the complex processes of athletes' social adaptation. The largest group consisted of coaches (44.7%, $n = 67$), making their perspectives particularly valuable. Managers and executives of physical culture and sports organizations accounted for 22.7% ($n = 34$), senior specialists (including managers and administrators) represented 19.3% ($n = 29$), while academic staff comprised 13.3% ($n = 20$).

Study Organization

The study was conducted between May and August 2025. The research process included theoretical preparation, the development of research instruments, data collection, and subsequent analysis. The primary stage of data collection was implemented through an anonymous online questionnaire, which ensured confidentiality of responses and allowed for the inclusion of specialists from diverse regions of Ukraine, thereby minimizing geographical limitations.

To achieve the stated research aim, a set of complementary methods was employed.

System Analysis

This method was applied to examine the process of athletes' social adaptation as a complex, multi-component system. It enabled the identification of the structural elements of this system (e.g., individual characteristics of the athlete, the social environment, and institutional factors), their interrelations, and their functions. The use of system analysis contributed to a deeper understanding of adaptation mechanisms and facilitated the identification of key leverage points for the development of effective support programs.

Analysis and Synthesis of Scientific Literature

This method was used to comprehensively review contemporary national and international research, concepts, and theories related to athletes' social adaptation, the factors influencing this process, and existing support programs. The aim was to establish the theoretical foundations of the study, identify key problems and unresolved issues, and substantiate the relevance of the chosen topic.

Sociological Survey (anonymous online questionnaire)

The primary method of collecting empirical data was an anonymous online survey. A specially designed questionnaire was developed to capture the core aspects of specialists' awareness in the field of physical culture and sport regarding athletes' social adaptation, their perceptions of existing programs, and their assessment of athletes' priority needs within the Ukrainian context. The questionnaire included closed-ended questions (with multiple-choice options and rating scales for quantitative analysis) as well as open-ended questions to obtain deeper qualitative insights and clarify respondents' positions.

Statistical Analysis

Statistical methods were applied for the quantitative processing, analysis, and interpretation of the collected data. Descriptive statistics, including frequency analysis, calculation of means, and percentages, were used to summarize and present the results. In addition, the chi-square (χ^2) test was employed to assess statistically significant relationships between categorical variables (in particular, professional experience and level of awareness). Data analysis was carried out using Microsoft Excel and Statistica software.

Results

The analysis of the obtained results made it possible to form a comprehensive understanding of respondents' awareness of the concept of "social adaptation of athletes" and to identify key challenges and priority areas of support. The vast majority of specialists (87.3%) defined social adaptation as an "undoubtedly very important" component of the athlete support system; 12.0% of respondents considered it "important but not a priority," while only 0.7% regarded it as "not particularly important." These findings indicate a high level of recognition of the problem's significance among experts and highlight the urgent need for the development and implementation of effective support mechanisms.

The effective design and implementation of social adaptation programs require a unified understanding of the concept among specialists. The study revealed a certain degree of variability in respondents' interpretations of the term "social adaptation of athletes". The distribution of responses reflecting these differences in perception is presented in Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1, the most common definitions among respondents were "successful integration of the athlete into the social environment during and after a sports career" (39.3%) and "the ability of the athlete to balance sport with other spheres of life, such as education, professional activity, and family" (29.7%). This distribution of responses demonstrates respondents' awareness of the multidimensional nature of social adaptation, which extends beyond preparation for the completion of a sports career and encompasses the continuous integration of the individual into various social contexts throughout an athlete's life course.

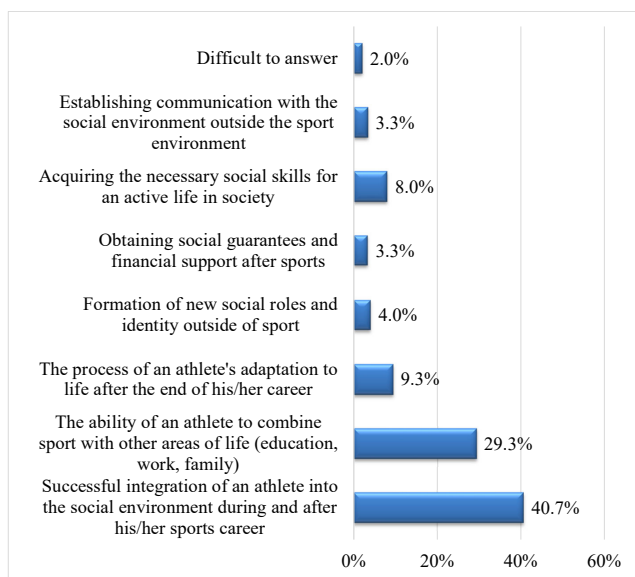


Fig. 1. Understanding of the concept of "social adaptation of athletes", respondents' views (n = 150)

To test the hypothesis regarding the relationship between specialists' professional experience and their level of awareness of existing social adaptation programs, statistical analysis was conducted using the chi-square (χ^2) test. This approach allowed us to determine whether the observed differences in awareness were dependent on work experience or occurred by chance. The following hypotheses were formulated:

Null hypothesis (H_0): The distribution of specialists' awareness levels is independent of their professional experience. In other words, there is no statistically significant association between these variables.

Alternative hypothesis (H_1): There is a statistically significant association between professional experience and awareness level, meaning that specialists' awareness is substantially influenced by their work experience.

The overall distribution of responses, reflecting the number of specialists with different lengths of professional

experience across each awareness category, is presented in Table 1.

To examine the relationship between professional experience and specialists' level of awareness, a chi-square (χ^2) test was conducted. The obtained χ^2 value was 128.53 with 12 degrees of freedom (df). Since the p-value (< 0.001) was considerably lower than the standard significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), the null hypothesis was rejected. This indicates the presence of a statistically significant association between work experience and specialists' level of awareness.

Table 1. Contingency table of observed frequencies

| Work experience | Unaware | Heard only | Aware, not involved | Aware, involved | Aware (national level) | Total |
|-----------------|---------|------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------------------|-------|
| ≤5 years | 12 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 17 |
| 6–10 years | 12 | 11 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 26 |
| 11–20 years | 4 | 14 | 4 | 6 | 8 | 36 |
| ≥20 years | 2 | 15 | 8 | 5 | 41 | 71 |
| Total | 30 | 44 | 13 | 11 | 52 | 150 |

Specialists' awareness of existing social adaptation programs is a critical factor for their effective functioning and for encouraging athletes' participation. Within the framework of the study, respondents' level of knowledge about programs implemented both during active sports careers and after retirement was analyzed. The results, reflecting the current state of specialists' awareness, are presented in Figure 2.

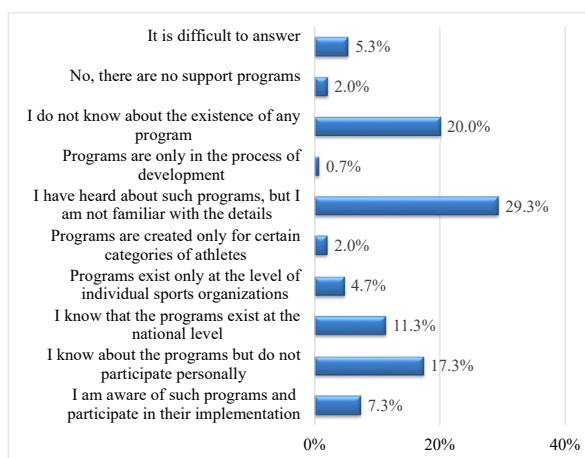


Fig. 2. Respondents' awareness of the existence of social adaptation programs for athletes during and after their sports careers (n = 150)

The findings (Figure 2) indicate that, despite the generally high recognition of the importance of social adaptation, the level of specialists' awareness of existing support programs remains a problematic issue requiring further scholarly investigation. A considerable share of respondents (20.0%) reported being completely unaware of the existence of such programs, while 29.3% stated that they had only heard about them but were unfamiliar with their content or implementation specifics. Only 7.3% of participants not only demonstrated awareness of these programs but also

reported direct involvement in their implementation. This situation reflects the absence of a unified, well-structured, and accessible system of support for athletes' social adaptation. The insufficient level of specialists' awareness may significantly limit the effective use of available resources and reduce the degree of engagement of the target audience in relevant programs.

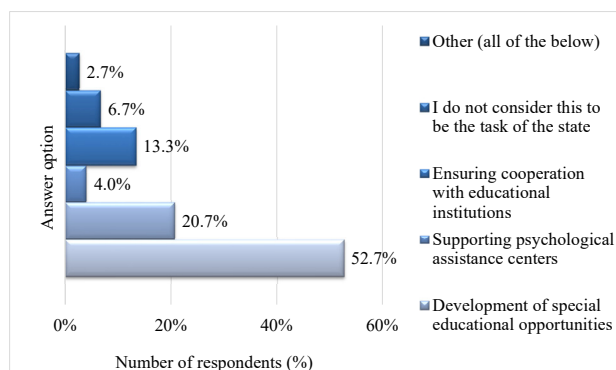


Fig. 3. The Role of the State in Supporting Athletes' Social Adaptation (n = 150)

Regarding the role of the state in the process of athletes' social adaptation, respondents expressed clear and consistent expectations. The majority of specialists assigned primary responsibility to the state for financing and developing targeted programs, reflecting an urgent need to establish a systematic national-level approach to this issue. Figure 3 presents the distribution of respondents' opinions on the functions that, in their view, the state should perform to ensure effective social adaptation of athletes.

As the survey results demonstrate (Figure 3), respondents attributed a leading role to the state primarily in "financing relevant programs" (52.7%) and "creating special educational opportunities" (20.7%). In addition, a substantial proportion of participants (13.3%) emphasized the importance of "establishing cooperation with educational institutions". Several respondents also highlighted the need to develop mechanisms for legal protection and to provide informational support for athletes in the context of their social adaptation.

This distribution of responses reflects specialists' recognition of the necessity for comprehensive, systematic, and institutionally secured state support capable of creating a stable foundation for the successful social adaptation of athletes.

Identifying the main difficulties athletes face during their sports careers from a social perspective is essential for designing effective support programs. A clear understanding of these challenges enables the development of targeted interventions aimed at improving athletes' quality of life and promoting their harmonious integration into society. The distribution of responses to this question, reflecting the key social challenges encountered during the active sports career stage, is presented in Table 2.

The survey results (Table 2) indicate that the most common difficulties faced by athletes in the context of social adaptation are "lack of balance between sport and education" (55.3%), "insufficient future planning" (41.3%), and "overload and stress" (39.3%).

These findings emphasize the multidimensional nature of the challenges athletes encounter, as they extend beyond purely athletic activity and directly affect their social development, psychological well-being, and overall quality of life.

Table 2. Key social challenges faced by athletes during their sports careers (n = 150)

| Challenges During the Sports Career | n (respondents) | n (%) |
|---|-----------------|-------|
| Lack of balance between sport and education | 83 | 55.3 |
| Social isolation / limited social circle | 45 | 30.0 |
| Insufficient communication skills | 25 | 16.7 |
| Overload and stress | 59 | 39.3 |
| Inadequate future planning | 62 | 41.3 |
| Low level of civic engagement | 30 | 20.0 |
| Insufficient communication with family | 13 | 8.7 |
| Other (all specified items) | 2 | 1.3 |

For the development of effective strategies to address these difficulties, it is crucial to understand the underlying factors that cause them. To this end, respondents were asked to identify the key factors that, in their opinion, underlie these problems during the course of a sports career. The aggregated results, which reveal the root causes of these challenges, are presented in Table 3.

The analysis shows that among the main causes of the identified difficulties, respondents most frequently cited “high levels of physical and psychological stress and lack of time” (60.7%) and “absence of state or municipal programs for social adaptation” (38.6%) (Table 3).

Continuing the analysis of the challenges athletes face in the context of social adaptation, it is essential to consider the specific difficulties that arise during the post-career period. The conclusion of a sports career is accompanied by profound transformations in an athlete’s life, which are often even more dramatic than those encountered during active professional activity. These challenges are largely associated with the loss of a familiar social environment, stable income, and the professional role that has long shaped the athlete’s identity.

Table 3. Factors underlying athletes’ difficulties during their sports careers (n = 150)

| Reasons for difficulties during a sports career | n (respondents) | n (%) |
|--|-----------------|-------|
| High levels of physical and psychological stress; lack of time | 93 | 62.0 |
| Insufficient support from coaches | 8 | 5.3 |
| Insufficient support from sports managers / sports organizations | 33 | 22.0 |
| Insufficient support from family | 5 | 3.3 |
| Absence of state or municipal adaptation programs | 56 | 37.3 |
| Limited initiative or motivation of the athletes themselves | 34 | 22.7 |
| Low level of awareness about available opportunities | 47 | 31.3 |
| Limited access to quality psychological assistance | 12 | 8.0 |
| Other (please specify) | 3 | 2.0 |

During this stage, issues such as employment, financial stability, social integration, and the preservation of psychological well-being become particularly pressing.

Table 4 presents the main difficulties athletes encounter after the end of their careers, outlining the primary challenges of post-sport life and highlighting the directions in which support is most urgently needed.

Table 4. Post-career challenges experienced by athletes (n = 150)

| Difficulties after the end of a sports career | n (respondents) | n (%) |
|---|-----------------|-------|
| Sharp decrease or loss of income | 85 | 56.7 |
| Difficulties in finding new professional employment | 107 | 71.3 |
| Lack of adequate psychological support | 26 | 17.3 |
| Insufficient level of education/qualification | 43 | 28.7 |
| Challenging social adaptation / feelings of isolation | 56 | 37.3 |
| Health problems | 49 | 32.7 |

For the development of effective support systems, it is important not only to identify the key problems athletes face but also to determine the forms of assistance perceived by specialists as the most effective. Within this study, respondents’ evaluations of the importance and potential effectiveness of various types of support for athletes during the post-career period were analyzed. A five-point scale was used (where 1 – not effective at all; 2 – slightly effective; 3 – moderately effective; 4 – fairly effective; 5 – highly effective).

The results indicate that the highest mean scores were recorded for “career guidance and career path development” (M = 3.88), “financial counseling, including budgeting and investment advice” (M = 3.88), and “building a support network” (M = 3.76). These findings suggest that respondents attach particular importance to practical forms of assistance that can ensure a smooth transition to post-sport life, promote professional self-realization, and enhance financial literacy. The detailed results of respondents’ evaluations of different forms of support are presented in Table 5.

The analysis of the data presented in Table 5 confirms the priority of career guidance, career path development, and financial counseling as key components of an effective athlete support system. The findings demonstrate specialists’ recognition of the necessity for a comprehensive approach to ensuring athletes’ successful reintegration into society after the completion of their sports careers. The high evaluation of mentoring programs involving former athletes further emphasizes their significance as an effective mechanism for transferring unique experience, fostering motivation, and facilitating adaptation through personal example and social support.

Alongside the identification of effective forms of support, an equally important task is to uncover and analyze the barriers that hinder the implementation or initiation of social adaptation programs for athletes. Understanding these obstacles provides the basis for developing strategies to overcome them and for ensuring the effective realization of adaptation initiatives. Among the most significant barriers identified by respondents were “limited funding or lack of resources” (37.3%) and “low levels of awareness or interest among athletes themselves” (19.3%). These factors have a systemic nature and require comprehensive solutions at

Table 5. Assessment of the importance of support measures for athletes in the post-career stage (n = 150)

| Form of support | n | | | | | M |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----|
| | Not effective at all (1 point) | Slightly effective (2 points) | Moderately effective (3 points) | Fairly effective (4 points) | Very effective (5 points) | |
| Individual consultations with a psychologist | 7 | 29 | 40 | 43 | 31 | 3.4 |
| Educational programs with flexible schedules | 6 | 19 | 33 | 55 | 37 | 3.7 |
| Courses in communication skills development | 7 | 21 | 56 | 40 | 26 | 3.4 |
| Participation in volunteer or social projects | 10 | 25 | 44 | 50 | 21 | 3.3 |
| Mentorship programs from former athletes | 10 | 14 | 38 | 48 | 40 | 3.6 |
| Career counseling | 7 | 18 | 36 | 57 | 32 | 3.6 |
| Psychological support (individual and group) | 5 | 22 | 34 | 40 | 49 | 3.7 |
| Career guidance and career path planning | 7 | 12 | 21 | 60 | 50 | 3.9 |
| Financial counseling (budgeting, investments) | 6 | 16 | 22 | 48 | 58 | 3.9 |
| Establishing a support network | 6 | 14 | 28 | 60 | 42 | 3.8 |
| Opportunities for formal education/training | 8 | 16 | 25 | 57 | 44 | 3.8 |

Notes: n – number of respondents; M (Max = 5) – arithmetic mean value.

the state level. A detailed list of the identified barriers is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Barriers to the implementation of athletes' social adaptation programs (n = 150)

| Barriers | n (respondents) | n (%) |
|--|-----------------|-------|
| Limited funding or lack of resources | 56 | 37.3 |
| Insufficient number of qualified specialists | 20 | 13.3 |
| Lack of political or institutional support | 26 | 17.3 |
| Low level of awareness or interest among athletes themselves | 29 | 19.3 |
| Lack of interagency coordination | 7 | 4.7 |
| Difficult to answer | 12 | 8.0 |
| Total | 150 | 100.0 |

Building on the analysis of support forms presented in Table 5, the following table provides more detailed information on the perceived effectiveness of specific measures aimed at supporting athletes' social adaptation after career termination. These data are based on mean scores provided by respondents using a five-point scale and

are critical for identifying the most promising directions for the allocation of resources and efforts (Table 7).

According to the data presented in Table 7, respondents identified the most effective support measures as "employment assistance" (M = 4.3) and "financial support/compensation" (M = 4.0). These results highlight the strong demand among athletes for practical career and material assistance after the completion of their sports careers, serving as an important reference point for the development of targeted social adaptation programs.

Discussion

This study provides a comprehensive overview of the current state and challenges of athletes' social adaptation in Ukraine, focusing on specialists' awareness, difficulties encountered during and after sports careers, and the perceived effectiveness and importance of various forms of support.

The findings demonstrate a high level of recognition of the significance of this issue among professionals: 87.3% of respondents identified athletes' social adaptation as "undoubtedly very important." This aligns with global trends, where increasing attention is being paid to the holistic

Table 7. Effectiveness ratings of specific support measures for athletes in the post-career stage (n = 150)

| Form of support | n | | | | | M |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|-----|
| | Not effective at all (1 point) | Slightly effective (2 points) | Moderately effective (3 points) | Fairly effective (4 points) | Very effective (5 points) | |
| Programs of professional retraining / advanced training | 4 | 17 | 28 | 59 | 42 | 3.8 |
| Psychological support and rehabilitation | 7 | 14 | 40 | 53 | 36 | 3.6 |
| Financial support / compensations | 6 | 13 | 20 | 45 | 66 | 4.0 |
| Individual career counseling | 7 | 12 | 31 | 72 | 28 | 3.7 |
| Employment assistance | 3 | 6 | 15 | 39 | 87 | 4.3 |
| Mentorship programs | 5 | 12 | 39 | 56 | 38 | 3.7 |

Notes: n – number of respondents; M (Max = 5) – arithmetic mean value

development of athletes and their well-being after retirement from professional sport (Brown et al., 2018; Pierce et al., 2024).

A key result with significant practical implications is the statistically significant relationship between specialists' length of professional experience and their awareness of social support programs for athletes. This finding not only confirms that awareness depends on experience but also points to a systemic gap in knowledge transfer within the field. The highest levels of awareness were reported by specialists with more than 20 years of experience, who were more likely to be informed about national-level programs. By contrast, younger professionals often reported no knowledge or only superficial awareness of such initiatives. This highlights the ineffectiveness of existing information mechanisms in reaching new generations of specialists, creating a substantial barrier to the expansion and implementation of social adaptation programs.

The study also revealed heterogeneity in specialists' interpretations of the concept of "athletes' social adaptation" (Figure 1). The majority of respondents emphasized integration into the social environment during and after the career (40.7%) and the ability to combine sport with other spheres of life, such as education, professional activity, and family (29.3%). Harmonizing sport with educational, professional, and personal domains was viewed as a key condition for successful social adaptation and as a critical factor for a smooth transition to post-sport life. This approach is consistent with the dual career concept, which has been widely studied and implemented internationally (Ryba et al., 2015; Stambulova et al., 2020). Conversely, overly narrow understandings of social adaptation (e.g., limited only to financial aid or psychological rehabilitation) may impede the creation of comprehensive support programs, as the absence of a shared conceptual framework disperses efforts and reduces alignment between program content and athletes' actual needs.

Another important finding is the generally low level of specialists' awareness of existing social adaptation programs (Figure 2): nearly half of the respondents (49.3%) reported either no knowledge or only superficial awareness. This points to systemic communication deficiencies and the absence of a centralized national platform for information dissemination. Given that program effectiveness depends on awareness and engagement of the target audience, such shortcomings represent a serious barrier to implementation.

The study also highlights expectations regarding the role of the state in the process of athletes' social adaptation (Figure 3). Respondents clearly expect active state involvement, primarily in financing adaptation programs (52.7%) and creating educational opportunities (20.7%). This finding corresponds with the analysis of underlying causes of adaptation difficulties, where the absence of state or municipal programs was identified as a leading factor (37.3%, Table 2). Thus, there is a clear societal demand for a systemic and institutionalized state-level approach that goes beyond isolated initiatives.

The analysis of challenges athletes face during their professional careers (Table 2) revealed dominant problems such as lack of balance between sport and education (55.3%), insufficient future planning (41.3%), and overload/stress (39.3%). These findings are consistent with prior research (Nuetzel, 2023; Pilkington et al., 2024; Trigueros et al.,

2019; Tossici et al., 2024), which emphasize the prevalence of mental health issues and burnout among athletes. This demonstrates that social challenges are not confined to the post-career stage but accompany athletes throughout their professional trajectory, thereby underscoring the importance of early and preventive interventions.

The main factors underlying these difficulties (Table 3) were identified as high levels of physical and psychological stress combined with lack of time (62.0%) and the absence of adequate state programs of support. These findings stress the need for integrated approaches that combine athletic, academic, social, and psychological dimensions. Our earlier studies (Pryimak, 2024; Pryimak, 2025c) also confirmed that the nature of an athlete's interaction with the social environment at different stages of their career is central to the adaptation process.

In the post-career stage, challenges assume a different nature (Table 4). The most frequently reported difficulties were finding new employment (71.3%) and loss of income (56.7%). These findings correspond with the scholarly literature describing the phenomenon of role exit (Samuel et al., 2011), whereby retirement from professional sport is often accompanied by a loss of social status and economic instability. Feelings of isolation and the need for psychological support also remain significant concerns for retired athletes.

The evaluation of the effectiveness of various forms of support (Tables 5 and 7) indicated the prioritization of career guidance, career development, and financial counseling, which directly address the key challenges of the post-career period. The high value attributed to mentoring programs involving former athletes highlights the importance of personal experience as a resource for adaptation, a point also emphasized in contemporary research (Voorheis et al., 2023).

At the same time, serious barriers to the implementation of adaptation programs remain, including limited funding (37.3%) and low awareness or interest among athletes themselves (19.3%) (Table 6). These factors create a dual challenge: on the one hand, the need for adequate resourcing, and on the other, the need for effective mechanisms to motivate and inform athletes about available opportunities.

Finally, the expectations of specialists regarding the state's leading role in financing adaptation programs (52.7%) and expanding educational opportunities (20.7%) further underline the necessity of systemic policy-level solutions. The significance of cooperation with educational institutions (13.3% of respondents) also aligns with the recommendations of Bulatova et al. (2019) and Radchenko et al. (2024) on the importance of Olympic education. The implementation of professional growth management models, as substantiated in the works of Pryimak (2025d) and Pierce et al. (2017), could provide the foundation for building an effective national support system for athletes.

Conclusions

This study provided a comprehensive overview of the state of athletes' social adaptation in Ukraine from the perspective of specialists in the field of physical culture and sport. The findings allow for the following conclusions:

The majority of specialists recognize the high importance of athletes' social adaptation, although some heterogeneity in interpreting the concept persists. The dominant view

defines adaptation as the integration of athletes throughout their careers and their ability to combine sport with other spheres of life. This perspective aligns with the dual career concept and emphasizes the necessity of a holistic approach.

A significant deficit in specialists' awareness of existing social adaptation programs was identified, indicating a fragmented information environment and the absence of a centralized system of communication and coordination. Statistical analysis, including the χ^2 test, confirmed one of the study's key hypotheses: there is a statistically significant relationship between specialists' professional experience and their level of awareness of social adaptation programs. This finding points to a systemic problem in knowledge dissemination and substantiates the need for targeted educational initiatives aimed at younger professionals. The state is perceived as the primary actor in the process of athletes' social adaptation, bearing responsibility for financing and developing systemic programs, particularly in the domains of education and career support.

The main challenges identified during athletes' active careers were lack of balance between sport and education, insufficient future planning, and overload/stress. After retirement, the most pressing problems were related to employment and financial losses. The primary factors underlying these difficulties include excessive physical and psychological demands, as well as the absence of state-level support programs.

The most effective forms of support were identified as financial assistance for the development and implementation of social adaptation programs and measures facilitating athletes' employment. This underscores the urgent need for practice-oriented solutions. At the same time, limited funding and low levels of athletes' awareness remain the main barriers to program implementation.

The results of this study provide an empirical basis for improving policies and support programs for athletes in Ukraine. They emphasize the necessity of shifting from fragmented initiatives to a comprehensive, multi-level, and continuous support system that accompanies athletes throughout their entire careers. Theoretically, the study confirms the relevance of the dual career concept and highlights the importance of systemic support in minimizing the negative consequences of athletic transitions.

Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on analyzing the direct experiences of athletes themselves, particularly their subjective needs, challenges, and evaluations of the effectiveness of existing forms of support. A promising avenue also lies in conducting comparative studies of social adaptation programs across different countries in order to identify best practices. Furthermore, an important task is the development and pilot implementation of innovative support models tailored to the socio-economic realities of Ukraine.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Соціальна адаптація спортсменів в Україні: виклики та пріоритетні напрями підтримки

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Авторський вклад: А – дизайн дослідження; В – збір даних; С – статаналіз; D – підготовка рукопису; E – збір коштів

Реферат. Стаття: 10 с., 7 табл., 3 рис., 30 джерел.

Історія питання. Спорт – важлива частина життя значної частини населення. Проте інтенсивний тренувальний процес, високий рівень фізичних та психоемоційних навантажень істотно звужують спектр можливостей для всебічного особистісного розвитку спортсменів та обмежують їхню інтеграцію в соціальне середовище. Сукупність цих чинників формує комплексні виклики для процесів соціальної адаптації, що набувають особливої актуальності в період переходу від активної спортивної діяльності до посткар'єрного етапу життя.

Мета дослідження полягала у здійсненні ґрунтовного та комплексного аналізу рівня обізнаності фахівців сфери фізичної культури та спорту щодо сутності соціальної адаптації спортсменів, а також ідентифікація ключових проблем, з якими стикаються атлети в процесі їх соціальної адаптації.

Матеріал та методи. Методологія дослідження ґрунтувалася на проведенні анонімного онлайн-опитування, в якому взяли участь 150 фахівців сфери фізичної культури і спорту. Було застосовано комплекс методів, зокрема системний аналіз, аналіз і синтез наукової літератури, соціологічне опитування та статистичний аналіз, включно з критерієм χ^2 для перевірки взаємозв'язку між професійним досвідом та рівнем обізнаності.

Результати дослідження засвідчили, що 87.3% респондентів розглядають соціальну адаптацію спортсменів як «безумовно, дуже важливу». Серед провідних труднощів, з якими спортсмени стикаються у процесі професійної кар'єри, респонденти виокремили дисбаланс між спортивною діяльністю та освітнім процесом (54.5%), а також психологічні проблеми/стрес (40.0%). У посткар'єрний період ключовими викликами визначено працевлаштування (33.8%) та фінансові труднощі (26.9%), що виникають в житті спортсменів. Найбільш результативними формами підтримки постспортивної адаптації спортсменів визнано сприяння у працевлаштуванні (середній бал – 4.3) та надання фінансової допомоги у розробці відповідних адаптаційних програм (середній бал – 4.0). Водночас серед головних бар'єрів реалізації програм соціальної адаптації названо обмежене фінансування їх розробки та реалізації (37.3%) та недостатній рівень обізнаності спортсменів щодо існуючих адаптаційних можливостей (19.3%).

Висновки. Дослідження підкреслює актуальність і необхідність розроблення та впровадження комплексних системних програм соціальної адаптації спортсменів на загальнодержавному рівні в Україні.

Ключові слова: соціальна адаптація, спортсмени, спортивна кар'єра, підтримка, виклики, подвійна кар'єра.

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