



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Role of Sports in Work-Life Balance: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between sports participation and work-life balance (WLB) has attracted sustained scholarly interest, yet the mechanisms through which different categories of sporting engagement shape employees' professional and personal lives remain incompletely theorized and empirically underexplored, particularly within the Indian organizational context. This paper presents a systematic review of published empirical and theoretical studies examining the role of leisure sports, professional sports, team sports, and workplace physical activity programs in facilitating or constraining WLB among employees across sectors. Drawing on twenty-five studies identified through searches of Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and allied databases, the review synthesizes evidence on the differential effects of sporting engagement across key outcome dimensions including job satisfaction, psychological well-being, employee engagement, stress reduction, and organizational commitment. The findings indicate that leisure-time sports participation exerts a consistently positive effect on multiple dimensions of work-life balance, primarily through recovery from occupational stress, enhanced physical and psychological well-being, and the strengthening of social capital within and beyond the workplace. Professional sports present a more complex and sometimes adverse profile, with elevated mental health risks among elite athletes co-existing with transferable competencies of discipline and stress tolerance. Team sports and institutionalized workplace sport programs demonstrate particular value in building organizational cohesion and interpersonal trust, though empirical evidence of direct effects on individual WLB outcomes remains methodologically constrained. Research conducted outside India predominates in the literature, and the dearth of India-specific studies represents a material gap warranting systematic address.

Keywords: *work-life balance; leisure sports; physical activity; team sports; employee well-being; workplace sport; professional sports; India*



INTRODUCTION

The concept of work-life balance (WLB) refers to the degree to which an individual is able to simultaneously fulfil the competing demands of their professional and personal domains without one systematically depleting the resources—temporal, psychological, and physical—available for the other. While the term has achieved widespread currency in management discourse and human resource policy, its precise conceptual boundaries have been subject to sustained scholarly debate. Early formulations conceptualized WLB primarily in terms of time allocation and the absence of inter-role conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), but more recent frameworks have moved toward enrichment models that foreground the conditions under which engagement in one life domain generates resources and positive affect that enhance functioning in another (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). The present review adopts this broader enrichment perspective, which creates theoretical space for understanding how activities such as sports participation—taking place primarily outside the formal work domain—can generate resilience, social connection, and psychological renewal that feedback positively into professional effectiveness.

The organizational and societal conditions generating demand for effective WLB strategies have intensified considerably in recent decades. The feminization of the workforce, the normalization of dual-career households, the global proliferation of technology that renders professional demands potentially boundless in time and space, and the structural transformations in employment relationships associated with the gig economy and hybrid working have collectively generated a landscape in which the boundaries between work and non-work are both more negotiated and more contested than at any prior period (Aziz et al., 2023; Shanmugasundaram & Srinivas, 2024). Within this context, organizations are increasingly pressured to develop interventions—ranging from flexible scheduling and remote working arrangements to health promotion programs and wellness benefits—that enable employees to sustain high performance while preserving the relational and restorative capacities that long-term organizational contribution requires.

India's corporate landscape presents a particularly instructive case for examining these dynamics. The Indian workforce is undergoing a rapid structural transition, characterized by significant expansion of the services and knowledge economy sectors, rising female labour force participation, and growing awareness of occupational stress and its health consequences. A national survey conducted in 2023 found that approximately 48% of corporate employees in India reported significant mental health challenges, with work-related stress identified as the primary driver, disproportionately affecting mid-level employees and those in the 35–45 age bracket (MPOWER & IPSOS, 2023). Against this backdrop, sports and physical activity have emerged as both individual coping strategies and organizational wellness tools, with Indian corporations increasingly investing in sports infrastructure and events as components of their employee engagement and health management agendas.

Participation in sports—whether in the form of organized recreational leagues, individual fitness activities, or structured workplace sport programs—represents a category of non-work activity that has been theoretically linked to WLB through several distinct mechanisms. At the physiological level, regular physical activity reduces the allostatic load associated with chronic occupational stress, attenuating the hormonal and inflammatory markers that represent the biological substrate of work-related ill health (Marin-Farrona et al., 2023). At the psychological



level, sports participation serves a recovery function—providing psychological detachment from work demands, a sense of mastery and autonomy that may be constrained in highly regulated work environments, and positive affective experiences that replenish emotional resources depleted by demanding professional roles (Dallmeyer, Wicker, & Breuer, 2023). At the social level, sport creates opportunities for the development of trust, communication, and collaborative relationships that can reinforce organizational cohesion while simultaneously providing the non-work relational experiences that employees need to sustain a sense of self that extends beyond their occupational identity (Kang et al., 2024).

Despite these well-articulated theoretical pathways, the empirical literature on the specific role of sports participation in WLB outcomes among employed populations remains fragmented, methodologically heterogeneous, and—in the Indian organizational context—severely limited in scope. The majority of existing research focuses either on the health benefits of physical activity in the general population or on the WLB challenges of elite athletes and sports professionals, leaving the large and practically important middle ground of recreational and organizational sports largely uncharted. This review addresses that gap.

This review has three principal objectives: (1) to synthesize the empirical and theoretical evidence on the relationship between sports participation and work-life balance among employed adults; (2) to distinguish the differential effects of different sporting modalities—leisure sports, professional/elite sports, team sports, and structured workplace sport programs—on key WLB-related outcomes; and (3) to identify the methodological limitations and substantive gaps in the existing literature that define the priorities for future primary research, with particular attention to the Indian organizational context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Work-Life Balance: Theoretical Foundations and Evolving Frameworks

The scholarly treatment of work-life balance has evolved through several conceptually distinct phases. The earliest formulations, drawing on role theory, understood WLB primarily as the mitigation of inter-role conflict: the situation in which the demands of the work role and the demands of family or personal roles were experienced as mutually incompatible (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). This conflict-centred paradigm produced a substantial body of research on the antecedents and consequences of work-family conflict, establishing that high role conflict was associated with lower job and life satisfaction, elevated psychological distress, and deteriorated health (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998). Subsequent theoretical developments challenged the unidimensional negativity of this framework, introducing the concept of role enrichment—the process by which engagement in one life domain generates skills, perspectives, and positive affect that enhance performance and satisfaction in another (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). More recently, the concept of work-life integration has gained traction, particularly in knowledge economy contexts where the spatial and temporal boundaries between work and non-work have become structurally blurred by digital technology (Shanmugasundaram & Srinivas, 2024).

Lazăr, Osoian, and Rațiu (2010) made a significant contribution to the organizational literature by arguing that WLB practices should be understood not merely as accommodations for employees with caregiving responsibilities but as strategic human resource management tools with



demonstrable effects on organizational performance. Their review established that effective WLB policies generate a win-win dynamic between employers and employees, reducing absenteeism, enhancing engagement, and improving retention, while simultaneously enabling employees to fulfil their personal commitments more fully. This strategic framing has gained considerable traction in the corporate sector, and it establishes the conceptual basis for understanding why organizations that invest in physical wellness programs—including sport facilities and events—may reap productivity and engagement dividends that justify the investment on purely managerial grounds.

In the Indian context, Kumar (2020) documented the specific mechanisms through which WLB challenges manifest among married working women, identifying long working hours, target-oriented performance demands, significant commuting time, and the asymmetric distribution of domestic responsibilities—particularly childcare and eldercare—as the primary structural drivers of role conflict. This finding situates the WLB problematic within broader patterns of gender inequality in Indian society and highlights the extent to which WLB interventions, including sports and recreation programs, must be designed with an awareness of the differential constraints facing male and female employees.

Leisure Sports and Physical Activity: Evidence on Well-Being and Work Outcomes

The relationship between leisure-time physical activity and psychological well-being has been among the most extensively studied questions in exercise psychology. Hassmén, Koivula, and Uutela (2000), in a landmark population-based study conducted in Finland, established that individuals who exercised at least two to three times per week reported significantly lower levels of depression, anxiety, and cynical distrust compared with their less active counterparts, with a near-linear dose-response relationship observed between exercise frequency and psychological well-being. This foundational finding has been replicated across diverse national populations and occupational groups, generating a consensus that regular physical activity constitutes one of the most effective, accessible, and economically efficient tools available for the prevention and management of common mental health disorders in employed populations.

Huang and Humphreys (2012) extended this line of inquiry to the domain of subjective happiness, demonstrating through analysis of large-scale US microdata that both men and women derived significant increments in self-reported happiness from physical activity participation, controlling for health status and other confounders. Their findings foregrounded the happiness-productivity link—the well-established empirical relationship between positive affect and work performance—and positioned physical activity as a plausible lever for organizational productivity enhancement. More recent and methodologically rigorous evidence has consolidated and extended these findings: Dallmeyer, Wicker, and Breuer (2023), employing dynamic panel data models on two decades of data from the German Socio-Economic Panel, established a positive and causally plausible relationship between regular leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) and job satisfaction, with recovery from occupational stress identified as the primary mediating mechanism. Crucially, their analysis demonstrated that this positive relationship was most pronounced among employees with long working hours—precisely the group for whom WLB challenges are most acute—suggesting that leisure sports participation has particular protective value for overworked employees.



Aziz, Urich, Balber, and Wuensch (2023), publishing in the *Career Development Quarterly*, examined how leisure participation moderated the damaging relationship between workaholism and work stress. Their study found that physical activity participation significantly buffered the stress-generating effects of workaholic tendencies, providing empirical support for the DRAMMA model of leisure and recovery, which identifies need satisfaction, affective experiences, and mastery as key mechanisms through which leisure activities restore the psychological resources depleted by work demands. These findings have direct implications for corporate wellness strategy: they suggest that organizations seeking to reduce the health costs of high-demand work cultures would benefit from actively facilitating employees' access to sporting and physical activity opportunities, rather than treating such participation as a purely private matter.

Marin-Farrona et al. (2023), in a systematic review of worksite wellness programs based on physical activity published in *Systematic Reviews*, synthesized evidence from multiple randomized and quasi-experimental studies and found consistent positive effects on physical health indicators (body mass index, blood pressure, musculoskeletal health) and reasonably consistent positive effects on productivity metrics, including reduced absenteeism and improved work ability. Their review also identified that the effectiveness of workplace physical activity programs was moderated by the quality of organizational implementation—programs with strong leadership endorsement, accessible and convenient facilities, and integrative digital support tools demonstrated markedly better outcomes than those offering sports opportunities without embedded organizational support structures. The practical implication is that the simple provision of sport facilities does not, in itself, constitute an effective WLB intervention; the organizational culture must actively normalize and facilitate participation.

A 2024 pilot study by Carrasco-Poyatos and colleagues, published in *Applied Sciences*, provided direct evidence that a structured 12-week workplace exercise program significantly improved quality of life dimensions among sedentary office workers, with effect sizes comparable to those observed in clinical exercise interventions. Their sample included employees in hybrid, on-site, and remote working arrangements—a practically important finding given the structural diversification of working arrangements following the COVID-19 pandemic—and they documented that quality-of-life improvements were observed across all working modalities, suggesting that the benefits of workplace sport programs are not restricted to the traditional office context.

Professional and Elite Sports: Complex Effects on Work-Life Balance

While the evidence on leisure sports participation is predominantly positive, the relationship between professional and elite athletic careers and work-life balance is considerably more complex and, in several respects, profoundly concerning. Professional sports impose extreme and often irreconcilable demands on athletes' time, energy, and psychological resources, leaving little capacity for the personal relationships, educational development, and non-athletic identity formation that constitute the non-work dimensions of a balanced life (Dewenter & Giessing, 2015).

The mental health literature has documented higher prevalence rates of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance use among professional athletes compared with age-matched non-athlete populations, with particular vulnerability concentrated among retired elite athletes, those



experiencing performance failure, and those who have sustained career-threatening injuries (Gouttebauge et al., 2019). The psychological mechanisms underlying this vulnerability are well-understood: elite athletic careers involve a highly compressed timeline in which the athlete's entire identity, social network, and economic security are organized around performance in a single domain, creating conditions of intense role constriction that are antithetical to the enriched, multi-domain engagement that WLB frameworks identify as protective against burnout and psychological distress.

Notwithstanding these challenges, Dewenter and Giessing (2015) identified a set of transferable competencies—including goal-directedness, tolerance of failure, team orientation, and the capacity for disciplined performance under pressure—that elite sports careers consistently develop and that demonstrably enhance post-athletic career success. This finding suggests that the long-term WLB implications of elite sports participation are more nuanced than simple deficit models imply, and that institutions responsible for athlete development should invest systematically in the dual career development frameworks that facilitate transitions between athletic and professional careers.

Team Sports and Organizational Cohesion

Team sports occupy a distinctive position in the literature on sports and work-life balance by virtue of their capacity to build the social capital—networks of trust, reciprocity, and shared norms—that simultaneously supports effective organizational functioning and enriches employees' interpersonal lives. Joubert and Beer's (2011) qualitative investigation of team sport participation among employees of two South African financial organizations documented a consistent pattern of social capital formation: participants reported enhanced mutual trust and respect, more open communication channels, stronger interpersonal relationships, and reduced absenteeism following organized team sport participation. Crucially, these outcomes were attributed not merely to the physical activity involved but to the shared challenges, vulnerabilities, and collective achievement experiences that team sport creates in ways that individual physical activity cannot replicate.

Kang, Liu, and Zhang (2024), publishing in the journal *Buildings*, examined the effects of team leisure sports on the occupational commitment and sustainability of construction workers in China, a high-stress, high-turnover occupational group. Drawing on data from 509 workers, they found that four dimensions of team sports experience—social interaction quality, emotional engagement, team culture perception, and work pressure relief—each independently and positively predicted organizational commitment, with team cohesion emerging as a significant mediator. This finding extends the evidence base from white-collar service sectors to blue-collar industrial contexts, suggesting that the WLB benefits of team sports participation are not restricted to particular occupational groups.

Mercanoğlu and Şimşek (2023), writing in *SAGE Open*, examined the relationship between employee recreation—a broader category that includes but is not limited to sports—and workplace productivity. Their analysis confirmed that sports and recreational activities serve as effective mechanisms for resource recovery and motivational regeneration, and they argued that organizations in developing economies, which have historically underinvested in recreational



infrastructure, have a significant opportunity to improve both employee welfare and organizational performance by integrating structured recreation into their human resource development strategies.

The most recent systematic evidence on team building through sports comes from Kwon's (2024) meta-analysis of team-building interventions in sports teams, published in *Frontiers in Psychology*. While the study focused on athletic teams rather than workplace sport programs, its finding that team-building interventions significantly enhanced cohesion through behavioural change over sustained time periods reinforces the theoretical basis for expecting analogous effects in corporate team sport settings, and it identifies consistency and duration of participation as critical moderators of the intervention's effectiveness.

Job Stressors, Sports Participation, and the Health-Work Nexus

The direction of causality in the relationship between sports participation and WLB is not uniformly from sports to WLB; the characteristics of the work environment also significantly determine whether and how employees can access the restorative benefits of sporting activities. Mutz, Abdel Hadi, and Häussler (2020), in a study drawing on a large-scale representative German sample, systematically examined how specific categories of job stressors constrained employees' sports participation after work. They identified three particularly detrimental stressor categories: arduous physical labor, which depleted the physical energy available for post-work sport; job insecurity, which generated the psychological preoccupation that made disengagement for recreational activity difficult; and unfavorable working hours, including shift work and night work, which structurally excluded employees from the conventional time windows within which organized sport takes place. These findings have important implications for organizational design: they establish that WLB interventions targeting sports participation will be ineffective unless the upstream work conditions that prevent participation are simultaneously addressed.

The role of specific workplace sport formats in addressing these barriers was examined by Jakobsen et al. (2015), who conducted a randomized controlled trial of workplace exercise in female healthcare workers—a population characterized by high physical work demands, unfavorable shift patterns, and elevated rates of work disability. Their results demonstrated that structured workplace-based exercise significantly reduced the deterioration of work ability, suggesting that the temporal and organizational integration of sport into the work environment itself may overcome the participation barriers that Mutz et al. (2020) identified for leisure-time sport in high-demand occupational groups.

Balogh and Baba (2016) contributed an important demand-side perspective by examining how young people prioritize WLB and physical activity opportunities when selecting employers. Their study found that while young job seekers valued WLB in the abstract, they did not spontaneously identify sports facilities and wellness benefits as significant employer selection criteria—suggesting a gap between the potential value that physical activity programs represent and employees' awareness and articulation of that value in career decision-making. This finding has implications for how organizations communicate their sport and wellness offerings to prospective employees, and it underscores the importance of active programming and engagement rather than passive facility provision.



The Indian Context: Sports Culture, Corporate Wellness, and Research Gaps

India's relationship with sports in the corporate and organizational context is undergoing a structural transition that is creating both new opportunities and new research imperatives. The country has witnessed a significant shift in elite-level sports investment and public sporting culture since the mid-2010s, with professional sports leagues across cricket, football, kabaddi, badminton, and other disciplines expanding the visibility and social legitimacy of competitive sport across demographic segments. Simultaneously, the Indian corporate sector has embraced employee wellness as a strategic priority, with organizations increasingly organizing intra-company sports tournaments, supporting employee participation in running events and fitness challenges, and integrating sports facilities into workplace design as markers of organizational culture.

Chandorkar (2019) documented the multifaceted organizational benefits of sports events for employees through analysis of primary and secondary data across Indian organizations, concluding that such events generate benefits across the full spectrum of the workforce regardless of age, gender, or seniority—a finding that challenges the common assumption that corporate sports programming primarily serves young, physically active male employees. Solomon (2013) demonstrated that corporate male employees who participated in minor games reported significantly lower stress and absenteeism, alongside higher job involvement, job satisfaction, and productivity, compared with non-participating counterparts—findings that, while limited by their male-only sample and single-site design, provide useful preliminary evidence for the Indian organizational context.

Nithyanathan (2017) demonstrated the positive effects of yoga—a distinctively Indian form of physical and contemplative practice—on emotional intelligence, WLB, and quality-of-life satisfaction among working professionals, establishing that culturally embedded physical practices can function as effective WLB interventions. Masten et al.'s (2010) finding that employees who valued the group atmosphere and productivity motives of sports participation demonstrated more positive attitudes and higher self-motivation provides a motivational psychology framework that is applicable to Indian corporate wellness program design: interventions that appeal to collective rather than purely individual achievement orientations may be particularly effective in organizational cultures characterized by high power distance and collectivist social norms.

Nevertheless, the research base in India remains thin in both quantity and methodological rigour. Kumar (2014) and Rajan (2015) each provided descriptive accounts of sports and organizational performance in Indian contexts, but neither employed longitudinal designs or representative sampling procedures capable of generating causal inferences. The absence of large-scale, methodologically rigorous, India-specific studies on the relationship between sports participation and WLB outcomes across sectors, occupational groups, and regions represents the most significant gap in the extant literature.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a narrative systematic review methodology. Relevant literature was identified through structured database searches conducted across Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and PubMed. Search terms included combinations of the following concepts: "work-life balance", "sports participation", "leisure sports", "physical activity",



"workplace sport", "employee well-being", "job satisfaction", "organizational commitment", "team sports", and "elite sports". No formal date restriction was applied to capture foundational theoretical contributions; however, particular attention was given to studies published from 2020 onward to ensure that the review reflects the most recent evidence. All included studies underwent content assessment for methodological adequacy and relevance to the review objectives. Studies were categorized by research design, sampling methodology, country of origin, and primary variables of interest to enable cross-study comparison and synthesis.

The review encompasses twenty-five studies in total, across descriptive, exploratory, and empirical designs. The methodological profile of the included studies is summarized in Tables 1 through 3.

Table 1. *Distribution of Included Studies by Research Design*

Research Approach / Design	Number of Studies
Descriptive	10
Exploratory	8
Empirical	7

Note. Total studies reviewed = 25. Studies were classified by primary methodological orientation.

Table 2. *Distribution of Included Studies by Sampling Methodology*

Sampling Method	Number of Studies
Simple random sampling	12
Stratified random sampling	6
Multi-stage random sampling	1
Convenience sampling	4
Purposive sampling	1
Systematic sampling	1

Note. Sampling method classifications are based on authors' reported procedures.

Table 3. *Geographic Distribution of Included Studies*

Country / Region	Number of Studies
International / Outside India	13
India	12

Note. Studies classified as 'India' were conducted primarily within Indian organizational contexts; 'International' encompasses all other countries.



KEY VARIABLES IN THE REVIEWED LITERATURE

Analysis of the included studies reveals two clusters of focal variables. The first and more prevalent cluster—appearing in the majority of reviewed studies—comprises variables with established centrality in the WLB and organizational behavior literatures: job satisfaction, physical activity level, employee productivity, and sports participation frequency. These variables have accumulated sufficient empirical attention to permit tentative generalizations about the direction and magnitude of their inter-relationships, and they constitute the empirical core of the evidence base reviewed in Section 2.

A second, less commonly studied cluster of variables has received attention in specific subsets of the literature. These include sports motivation (Masten et al., 2010), life satisfaction (Huang & Humphreys, 2012; Dallmeyer et al., 2023), attitude toward sports (Balogh & Baba, 2016), self-confidence and competitive disposition (Dewenter & Giessing, 2015), job involvement (Solomon, 2013), leisure activity preferences (Aziz et al., 2023), anxiety and depression (Hassmén et al., 2000), healthy lifestyle orientation (Marin-Farrona et al., 2023), working conditions and schedule flexibility (Mutz et al., 2020), health promotion infrastructure (Marin-Farrona et al., 2023), recreational activity diversity (Mercanoğlu & Şimşek, 2023), and social capital formation (Joubert & Beer, 2011; Kang et al., 2024).

The variable landscape has evolved meaningfully in the most recent literature. Post-2020 studies demonstrate a notable trend toward more nuanced operationalization: rather than treating physical activity as a unitary construct, recent studies increasingly distinguish between occupational and leisure-time physical activity (Dallmeyer et al., 2023), between individual and team-based sport formats (Kang et al., 2024; Kwon, 2024), and between objective participation indicators and subjective experience dimensions such as flow states, mastery orientation, and social belonging. This conceptual elaboration represents methodological progress and creates new opportunities for theory development in the field.

RESEARCH GAPS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The systematic examination of the reviewed literature reveals a set of interconnected gaps that, taken together, define the priorities for future primary research in this domain.

Geographic and Contextual Limitations

The majority of high-quality empirical studies in this review were conducted in Western European, North American, or East Asian contexts, with Germany, the United States, Finland, South Korea, and China disproportionately represented. While the fundamental psychophysiological mechanisms through which physical activity promotes well-being are likely to generalize across cultural contexts, the specific organizational conditions, sporting cultures, gender dynamics, and institutional supports that mediate the relationship between sports participation and WLB are highly context-dependent. India's distinct labour market structure, socio-cultural norms around gender and leisure, diverse regional sporting traditions, and rapidly evolving corporate wellness culture represent a sufficiently distinctive context to require dedicated empirical investigation rather than simple extrapolation from Western findings.



Demographic Underrepresentation

Several demographic variables that are known to moderate the sports-WLB relationship—including marital status, parental status, caste identity, socioeconomic background, disability status, and occupational sector—have been inadequately addressed in the existing literature. Studies that restrict their focus to a narrow range of demographic characteristics generate findings that are difficult to generalize even within the national context in which they were conducted. Future research in India should employ representative sampling strategies that enable the examination of heterogeneous effects across the full breadth of the working population.

The Organizational Level of Analysis

A persistent limitation of the reviewed literature is its predominantly individual-level analytical framework. The decision to participate in sports and its consequences for WLB are not purely individual choices but are significantly shaped by organizational factors—including the availability and quality of sport facilities, the cultural norms around work intensification and discretionary time, supervisory support for wellness activities, and the organizational recognition of sport as a legitimate component of the employment relationship. Future research should adopt multi-level designs that enable the simultaneous examination of individual-level sports participation and organizational-level sport policy variables, enabling a more adequate account of how organizational interventions generate their effects.

Longitudinal Evidence Deficits

The overwhelming majority of included studies employed cross-sectional designs, which are inherently limited in their capacity to establish causal ordering or to examine how the sports-WLB relationship evolves over time. The exceptions—notably Dallmeyer et al.'s (2023) panel data study and the randomized controlled trials of workplace exercise conducted by Jakobsen et al. (2015) and Carrasco-Poyatos et al. (2024)—demonstrate the methodological gains available from longitudinal designs, both in causal inference and in the examination of sustained versus transient intervention effects. Future research, particularly in India, should prioritize longitudinal survey designs and quasi-experimental evaluations of organizational sport programs.

Differential Effects by Sport Modality

The extant literature rarely examines the comparative effectiveness of different sporting modalities as WLB interventions. Whether individual endurance activities, team contact sports, mind-body practices such as yoga and martial arts, or esports produce equivalent or differential WLB effects—and for which employee subgroups—is a question that the current literature cannot adequately answer. As organizations make investments in specific sport infrastructure and programming choices, this question carries direct practical significance.

DISCUSSION

The body of literature reviewed here sustains a coherent and increasingly well-supported conclusion: sports participation, particularly in its leisure and team-based forms, generates meaningful positive effects on the psychological, social, and physical resources that enable employees to achieve and sustain an adequate balance between their professional and personal lives. This conclusion holds across a diverse range of national contexts, organizational settings,



and occupational groups, though the strength and specificity of the evidence vary considerably across these dimensions.

The theoretical mechanisms are well-articulated. The recovery hypothesis—articulated most precisely in the DRAMMA model and operationally tested by Aziz et al. (2023) and Dallmeyer et al. (2023)—establishes that leisure-time physical activity restores the cognitive, affective, and motivational resources depleted by occupational demands, generating a post-recovery work capacity that is demonstrably superior to that produced by passive leisure alternatives. The social capital hypothesis—supported by Joubert and Beer (2011), Baledi et al. (2020), and Kang et al. (2024)—establishes that team-based sport builds the interpersonal trust and communication quality that constitutes relational WLB: the experience of meaningful, mutually supportive relationships that extend beyond the purely transactional character of much professional interaction. The health production hypothesis—grounded in the large physiological and epidemiological literature on physical activity and health, and most recently synthesized by Marin-Farrona et al. (2023)—establishes that regular sport participation reduces the burden of occupational ill health, thereby increasing the energy and vitality available for non-work life domains.

These mechanisms operate alongside one another and are in some respects mutually reinforcing. Employees who recover more effectively from work stress through sport are likely to experience less role conflict, more positive affect in non-work domains, and stronger social connections—creating a virtuous cycle of resource generation that is difficult to initiate through any single wellness intervention but may be self-sustaining once established. This systemic character of the sports-WLB relationship has important implications for organizational wellness program design: piecemeal interventions that address one mechanism in isolation are likely to be less effective than integrated programs that simultaneously target physical health, social connection, and psychological recovery.

The findings on professional and elite sports present a necessary corrective to any simplistic equation of sports participation with well-being and WLB. The evidence that elite athletes experience elevated rates of mental health disorders, that the extreme temporal and psychological demands of professional sport preclude the development of a balanced multi-domain identity, and that career transition poses particular psychological challenges for athletes whose entire sense of self has been organized around competitive performance all suggest that the WLB benefits of sports participation are contingent on the modality and intensity of participation. Sports as leisure and recreation differ fundamentally from sports as vocation in their WLB implications, and policies that encourage recreational participation should be designed with explicit attention to the risk of inadvertently normalizing performance imperatives that transform leisure into work.

The Indian context demands specific and sustained research attention. The structural transformation of India's economy—rapid urbanization, expansion of knowledge-intensive services, growing female labour force participation, and a young, technologically connected workforce with rising awareness of health and wellness—creates conditions under which the role of sport in WLB management is likely to grow in both organizational salience and individual significance. The finding that Indian corporations are increasingly investing in sports infrastructure and events, and that awareness of fitness and sports is growing across social strata, suggests that the organizational and cultural conditions for effective corporate sport programming are



developing; what is required is the rigorous empirical evidence base that can guide those investments toward the program designs most likely to generate genuine WLB benefits for the full diversity of the Indian workforce.

CONCLUSION

This review has synthesized evidence from twenty-five empirical and theoretical studies to examine the role of sports participation in employees' work-life balance. The accumulated evidence supports the conclusion that leisure-time sports participation, team-based workplace sport, and structured physical activity programs each make meaningful positive contributions to WLB outcomes, operating through the complementary mechanisms of psychological recovery, physical health improvement, and social capital formation. Professional and elite sports present a more ambiguous profile, with well-documented mental health risks co-existing with the development of transferable career competencies.

Several important limitations in the existing literature have been identified. The geographic concentration of high-quality research in Western contexts, the predominance of cross-sectional designs, the inadequate representation of diverse demographic subgroups, and the individual-level analytical focus of most studies collectively limit the strength and generalizability of current conclusions. These limitations are particularly acute with respect to the Indian organizational context, where the paucity of primary research creates a significant gap between the practical urgency of understanding the sport-WLB relationship and the evidence available to inform organizational and policy responses.

Future research should prioritize large-scale, longitudinal, multi-level studies in the Indian context that examine the sports-WLB relationship across sectors, occupational groups, and demographic categories; quasi-experimental evaluations of corporate sport programs that can generate causal evidence on effectiveness; and qualitative investigations that can reveal the contextual conditions—cultural, organizational, and structural—that determine whether sports participation generates WLB benefits in specific settings. The integration of sports and physical wellness into organizational human resource strategy represents a promising avenue for improving employee well-being and sustaining organizational performance; realizing that potential requires a commensurate investment in the rigorous empirical research that can guide strategic implementation.

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