

Athletes' Experience of the Khelo India Programme: A Survey of Participation, Selection, Games Experience and Career Impact

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Abstract

The Khelo India programme is the Government of India's flagship scheme for grassroots sports development and talent identification. This study reports the experiences of 360 athletes who participated in Khelo India tournaments, examining their demographic and training profile, the influence of the selection process, their evaluation of the conduct of the Games, the opportunities that followed participation, and the challenges they encountered. A structured questionnaire was administered and responses were analysed using frequencies, percentages and the chi-square goodness-of-fit test ($p < 0.05$). Participants were predominantly male (67.5%) and most had trained for more than eight years (38.6%), yet the majority (59.2%) relied on self or family funding before selection. For most athletes the selection process significantly increased motivation (63.3%), the quality of competition was rated excellent (80.3%), and participation led to selection to state or national camps (84.4%) and to scholarships (90.6%). The most frequently reported challenges were insufficient competition exposure (81.7%) and a lack of consistent financial support (80.0%). The findings indicate that Khelo India delivers strong competitive and developmental value to participants while important gaps in sustained financial and infrastructural support persist.

Keywords: Khelo India; athlete development; talent identification; sports policy; grassroots sport; India

1. Introduction

Launched in 2018, the Khelo India programme seeks to revive sporting culture in India by developing grassroots infrastructure, identifying talent early and creating a structured competitive pathway from school to the elite level. Its principal competitive platforms — the Khelo India Youth Games, University Games, Winter Games and Para Games — bring together young athletes from across the country, while associated scholarships and Khelo India Centres are intended to sustain athletes beyond a single event. Although the programme has expanded rapidly, comparatively little published research documents the experience of the athletes themselves: how they were funded and trained before selection, how they evaluate the conduct of the Games, what opportunities followed, and what obstacles they still face. This article addresses that gap through a structured survey of 360 Khelo India participants, and is complemented by a companion study of coaches associated with the programme.

2. Materials and Methods

A descriptive survey design was adopted. The sample comprised 360 athletes who had participated in one or more Khelo India tournaments. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire organised into five sections: participant profile; pre-Khelo India experience and selection; experience at the Games; post-participation impact and career development; and overall perception and challenges. Items used categorical and multi-point ordinal response formats (for example excellent/good/average/poor and yes/no/can't say). Responses were tabulated as frequencies and percentages, and the chi-square goodness-of-fit test was applied to each distribution to determine whether observed response patterns differed significantly from a uniform distribution; the 0.05 level was adopted throughout, with the critical value determined by the degrees of freedom of each item. Five tables were selected for this article to represent the participant journey from profile through selection, Games experience, career impact and challenges.

3. Results

3.1 Demographic and training profile. Table 1 summarises the gender, level of participation and training experience of respondents.

Table 1: Profile of participating athletes (N = 360)

Variable	Category	No.	%
Gender	Male	243	67.5
	Female	117	32.5
Level of participation	Khelo India Youth Games	189	52.5
	Khelo India University Games	125	34.7
	Khelo India Winter Games	38	10.6
	Khelo India Para Games	8	2.2
Training experience	< 2 years	55	15.3
	2–5 years	82	22.8
	5–8 years	84	23.3
	> 8 years	139	38.6

All three distributions differed significantly from uniform ($\chi^2 = 246.15, 227.27$ and 41.40 ; $df = 2, 3$ and 3 ; $p < 0.05$).

Respondents were predominantly male (67.5%). Just over half competed in the Khelo India Youth Games (52.5%) and a further 34.7% in the University Games, with smaller shares in the Winter (10.6%) and Para Games (2.2%). Training experience was substantial: 38.6% had trained for more than eight years and 61.9% for more than five, indicating that participants were, in the main, seasoned athletes rather than newcomers.

3.2 Pre-Games funding and the impact of selection. Table 2 reports how athletes were funded before selection and how the selection process affected their training and motivation.

Table 2: Pre-Games funding source and impact of the selection process (N = 360)

Item	Response category	No. (%)
Primary source of pre-selection funding	Self / family funded	213 (59.2)
	School / college support	94 (26.1)

	State Government academy	39 (10.8)
	Private academy / club	14 (3.9)
Impact of the selection process	Significantly increased motivation	228 (63.3)
	Provided a clear goal to work towards	61 (16.9)
	Added pressure and stress	43 (11.9)
	Had no significant impact	28 (7.8)

Both distributions differed significantly from uniform ($\chi^2 = 416.69$, $df = 4$; and $\chi^2 = 288.20$, $df = 3$; $p < 0.05$).

Before selection, the majority of athletes (59.2%) depended on self or family funding, with only 10.8% supported by a state academy and 3.9% by a private club — a striking indication that participants largely financed their own early development. The selection process itself was experienced positively: it significantly increased motivation for 63.3% and provided a clear goal for a further 16.9%, while only 11.9% reported added pressure and 7.8% no significant impact.

3.3 Experience at the Games. Table 3 presents athletes' ratings of seven operational aspects of the Khelo India Games.

Table 3: Athletes' rating of the conduct of the Games (% , N = 360)

Aspect	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Quality of competition	80.3	15.0	4.7	0.0
Organization & management	30.0	64.4	5.6	0.0
Accommodation & food	10.8	80.0	7.5	1.7
Travel arrangements	11.9	60.0	16.1	11.9
Sports facilities & venues	53.9	27.2	13.6	5.3
Medical & anti-doping services	24.2	45.0	22.5	8.3
Fairness of officiating / umpiring	15.8	58.1	10.3	15.8

All distributions differed significantly from uniform (χ^2 ranging 98.6–603.6; $p < 0.05$).

The quality of competition was the standout strength, rated excellent by 80.3% of athletes, and sports facilities and venues were rated excellent by a majority (53.9%). Organization and management, accommodation and food, travel arrangements, medical services and officiating were most often rated good rather than excellent, indicating solid but improvable delivery. Travel arrangements and fairness of officiating each drew the highest “poor” ratings (11.9% and 15.8% respectively), marking them as the operational areas most in need of attention.

3.4 Career opportunities following participation. Table 4 shows the proportion of athletes reporting each opportunity after performing at the Games.

Table 4: Opportunities arising from Games performance (“Yes” responses, N = 360)

Opportunity	Yes (No.)	Yes (%)
Receiving a scholarship (Khelo India or other)	326	90.6
Selection to the state / national camp	304	84.4
Admission to a better sports academy / university	284	78.9
Increased financial support from govt./private sponsors	264	73.3
Increased media attention and personal recognition	194	53.9

Invitation to other national / international competitions	167	46.4
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“Yes/No” distributions per item; those with χ^2 above the critical value were significant at $p < 0.05$ (all except invitations to other competitions and increased media attention).

Participation translated into tangible advancement for most athletes. The most common outcomes were receiving a scholarship (90.6%) and selection to a state or national camp (84.4%), followed by admission to a better academy or university (78.9%) and increased sponsor support (73.3%). Outcomes were weaker for wider exposure: only 53.9% reported increased media attention and 46.4% an invitation to further national or international competition — the latter being the only outcome not endorsed by a majority.

3.5 Challenges faced by athletes. Table 5 reports the challenges athletes encountered around their participation.

Table 5: Challenges faced by athletes (% , N = 360)

Challenge	Yes	No	Can't say
Insufficient competition exposure	81.7	14.2	4.2
Lack of consistent financial support	80.0	11.9	8.1
Inadequate training infrastructure	74.2	19.4	6.4
Balancing sports and education	71.9	9.2	18.9
Lack of quality coaching	55.3	29.4	15.3
Bureaucracy in sports federations	46.4	11.1	42.5

All distributions differed significantly from uniform (χ^2 ranging 80.8–383.9, $df = 2$; $p < 0.05$).

Challenges clustered around resources and exposure. The most widely reported were insufficient competition exposure (81.7%), lack of consistent financial support (80.0%) and inadequate training infrastructure (74.2%); nearly three-quarters (71.9%) also struggled to balance sport with education. Lack of quality coaching was reported by a smaller majority (55.3%). Bureaucracy in sports federations was the most ambiguous item, endorsed by 46.4% but with 42.5% unsure — suggesting limited athlete visibility of administrative processes.

4. Discussion

The profile of respondents — experienced, largely self-funded athletes concentrated in the Youth and University Games — frames the central tension in the findings. Khelo India is evidently succeeding as a competitive and developmental platform: it sharply raised motivation at the point of selection, delivered a competition rated excellent by four in five athletes, and opened concrete pathways in the form of camp selection, scholarships and academy admission for the large majority of participants. These are precisely the outcomes the programme was designed to produce, and the athletes’ own testimony affirms them.

Yet the same athletes report that the resources underpinning their development remain fragile. The dominance of self and family funding before selection, combined with the high proportion citing inadequate financial support, infrastructure and competition exposure as ongoing challenges, indicates that the programme’s elite competitive layer is not yet matched by consistent grassroots support. The relatively weaker outcomes for onward competition

invitations and media exposure, and the operational “poor” ratings for travel and officiating, point to specific, addressable delivery gaps rather than systemic failure.

5. Conclusion

From the athletes’ perspective, Khelo India functions effectively as a high-quality competitive stage and a springboard to camps, scholarships and better training environments, and it markedly strengthens motivation at the moment of selection. Its principal shortcomings, as experienced by participants, lie not in the Games themselves but in the surrounding ecosystem: inconsistent financial support, uneven infrastructure, limited routine competition exposure and the difficulty of balancing sport with education. Strengthening sustained financial and infrastructural support at the grassroots, expanding regular competitive opportunities beyond the flagship events, and improving travel and officiating arrangements would allow the programme to convert its strong competitive experience into durable athletic careers. The perceptions of coaches, reported in the companion study, provide a complementary institutional view of these same dynamics.

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