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The Real Challenges and Difficulties in Employment Placement for Retired Athletes in China — Findings from a Survey Across 10 Provinces, Municipalities, and Autonomous Regions

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Abstract

Based on specialized empirical research on the employment placement of retired athletes across 10 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions nationwide, combined with the 2023 revised Sports Law of the People's Republic of China and the latest policy documents issued by the General Administration of Sport of China in 2025, this study systematically analyzes the current characteristics and core challenges of employment placement for retired athletes in China. The study reveals that China sees an annual average of over 3,000 retired athletes, with retirement peaks during Olympic years and post-National Games surging 40% higher than regular years. The overall employment placement landscape exhibits three key characteristics: "diverse policy frameworks but uneven regional implementation, expanded employment channels but insufficient job matching, and strengthened support systems but limited coverage." The core contradictions currently center on four dimensions: structural mismatches between individual employability and market demand; fragmented provincial policies and inter-provincial coordination bottlenecks; psychological transition barriers and lack of intervention mechanisms; and gaps in social security safety nets and coordination discontinuities. By comparing empirical data from eastern, central, western, and northeastern regions, this study proposes a four-dimensional solution: "institutional coordination + capacity enhancement + market linkage + psychological support." This framework provides empirical references and policy recommendations for

improving China's employment placement system for retired athletes and advancing the implementation of the "sports-education integration" strategy.

KEYWORDS: Retired athletes; Employment placement; Sports-education integration; Policy implementation; Career transition; Social security

1. Introduction

As a major sporting nation, China's talent development system under the "state-led system" for competitive sports has achieved remarkable results. By 2024, it had cultivated over 300 Olympic champions and more than 1,500 world champions. However, "postretirement transition" remains a critical challenge throughout athletes' career cycles. Data from the General Administration of Sport of China's 2022 monitoring indicates that China sees over 3,000 athletes retire annually, with peak retirement periods following the National Games and Olympic Games. Short-term unemployment rates among retired athletes in certain strength-based disciplines (e.g., weightlifting, wrestling, boxing) have reached as high as 15%. Retirement from elite athletics marks a pivotal life transition, profoundly impacting athletes' physical and mental health, social adaptation, and career development (Voorheis et al., 2023). Facing physical changes or functional decline post-retirement, some athletes may experience negative emotions. This negative perception of body image can become a significant source of psychological stress during career transitions (e.g., Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007). Since 2023, China has introduced and implemented relevant laws and innovative measures, such as the Sports Law of the People's Republic of China (hereinafter referred to as the New Sports Law) and the Opinions on Further Improving Employment Placement for Retired Athletes, to support the employment placement of retired athletes.

However, provincial-level practices reveal significant disparities in the effectiveness of employment placement for retired athletes, influenced by economic development levels, industrial foundations, and policy implementation intensity. Based on this, this paper systematically reviews domestic and international empirical papers, five national-level regulatory documents (including the New Sports Law and the Interim Measures for the Employment of Athletes), three industry reports from 2024-2025, and the General

Administration of Sport of China's 2024 National Sports Talent Development Report, extracting core quantitative data such as provincial employment rates, proportions of career transition directions, policy satisfaction levels, and training coverage rates. By integrating empirical data from provincial studies, this paper constructs a three-dimensional matrix of "region-issue-outcome" to quantitatively analyze the impact of provincial disparities on employment placement. It focuses on practical contradictions within the placement process, providing data support and pathway references for policy optimization.

2. Core Conceptual Definitions

2.1 Retired Athletes

Following the definitions in the Interim Measures for the Employment of Athletes (Tirenzi [2007] No. 412) and provincial empirical studies, "retired athletes" in this paper refer to individuals aged 16 or older who have been registered with provincial teams, national teams, or professional sports teams under industry sports associations for at least two years. They have voluntarily or involuntarily ceased professional training due to reasons such as age limits (e.g., retirement typically occurs after age 25 in skill-based sports like gymnastics and diving), chronic sports injuries (e.g., lumbar disc herniation, anterior cruciate ligament tears), declining athletic performance, or team restructuring. This category includes athletes who participated in the Olympics, National Games, national championships, as well as provincial and municipal professional teams.

It is essential to distinguish between "voluntary retirement" and "involuntary retirement": Voluntary retirees typically transition based on career planning (e.g., pursuing higher education or entrepreneurship), while involuntary retirees are often forced out due to external factors like injuries or team cuts. Significant differences exist in the employment needs and psychological states of these two groups, necessitating tailored support policies.

2.2 Employment Placement

The "employment placement" referred to herein constitutes a systematic support framework led by the government and spearheaded by sports authorities, with collaborative participation from universities, enterprises, and social organizations. Its core objective is to facilitate retired athletes' smooth transition "from the playing field to the workplace" and foster sustainable livelihood development, rather than merely providing a "safety net for employment." This framework encompasses four categories of support:

- (1) **Policy-Based Placement:** Ensuring elite retired athletes secure employment within the public sector through targeted civil service recruitment and specialized hiring by public institutions (e.g., sports administrative departments, K-12 schools, sports venues).
- (2) **Career Transition Support:** Market-oriented assistance including vocational training (e.g., coaching, refereeing, athletic rehabilitation), entrepreneurship support (subsidies, incubators, mentorship), and employment guidance (resume optimization, mock interviews);
- (3) **Social Security Safety Net:** Comprehensive safeguards including retirement placement allowances, cross-provincial pension transfer coordination, sports injury medical subsidies, and transitional living subsidies;
- (4) **Academic Advancement Pathways:** Address educational gaps and enhance employability through direct admission programs (e.g., Olympic champions admitted to 985 universities), adult higher education, and vocational skill certification (e.g., Junior Athletic Trainer).

3. Current State of Employment Placement Policies—Analysis Based on Multi-Region Surveys

3.1 National Policy Framework

- (1) **Legal Safeguard System:** The 2023 Sports Law establishes the legal foundation for retired athletes' employment placement, clarifying three core provisions: ① "Schools shall prioritize hiring outstanding retired athletes for sports teaching and coaching roles" (Article 31), providing legal basis for "campus integration"; ② "Outstanding athletes shall receive preferential treatment in employment and further education" (Article 46), covering direct admission and targeted civil service recruitment; ③ "People's governments at all levels shall strengthen vocational skills training and social security" (Article 47), reinforcing the government's safety net responsibility.
- (2) **Specialized Policy Innovations:** The 2025 General Administration of Sport's Opinions on Further Improving Employment Placement for Retired Athletes proposed three key measures: (1) Implementing a "flexible training mechanism" allowing athletes to adjust training schedules according to competition and training rhythms; (2) Establish a "credit conversion system" to convert international competition results and athletic grade certificates into vocational training credits; (3) Open a "special channel for campus teaching positions" to streamline teacher qualification assessment procedures. Concurrently, launch the "Retired Athletes Transition to Junior Sports Therapists" initiative, aiming to cultivate 5,000 marketready sports rehabilitation professionals by 2025.
- (3) **Financial Support Mechanism:** The China National Sports Foundation has established a dedicated fund for retired athletes, allocating 120 million yuan by 2025 for vocational training and entrepreneurship subsidies. Sixty percent of these funds will be directed toward western provinces to address funding shortages in economically underdeveloped regions.

3.2 Regional Policy Implementation Status and Variations

3.2.1 Eastern Provinces: Diversified, Market-Oriented Approach

Guangdong Province: Established a "three-dimensional placement system," reducing the average employment cycle for retired athletes to 2.3 months in 2023: (1) Policy-based placement: Reserves 5% of annual recruitment quotas for public institutions within the sports system. In 2024, the Provincial Sports Bureau and Provincial Sports Lottery Center recruited 32 retired athletes; (2) Market-Driven

Entrepreneurship: Provides up to 500,000 yuan in startup subsidies and established "Sports Industry Entrepreneurship Incubation Bases" in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, achieving a project survival rate of 68%—23 percentage points higher than the national average;(3) Sports-Education Integration: Collaborated with 21 universities to launch "Champion Classes." Partnered with the Department of Education to facilitate retired athletes' employment as teachers in K-12 schools, with 82% securing positions through this channel in 2023. (Li Dalong, 2024)

Fujian Province: Focusing on "entering schools" mechanism innovation, it has hosted the "Retired Athletes to School Coaches Job Fair" for three consecutive years. In 2025, in collaboration with the Department of Education, it attracted 70 primary/secondary schools and vocational institutions to participate, resulting in 73 on-site employment intentions with an 89% job-matching rate;Pioneered the "Retraining Mechanism for Employed Athletes," providing 20 hours of specialized annual training for athletes transitioning to physical education teachers. Content covers campus sports teaching techniques, youth psychological counseling, and curriculum design. In 2024, teacher satisfaction reached 91% (Lin Yunming, 2025).

Zhejiang Province: Focused on expanding "sports + cross-industry" employment pathways, offering specialized training programs like "sports + cultural tourism" and "sports + technology" for retired athletes in small ball sports (table tennis, badminton). Launched 21 training initiatives including sports rehabilitation, athletic agent services, and short-video operations;From 2022 to 2024, over 1,200 retired athletes received training, achieving a 31% entrepreneurial success rate—12 percentage points higher than the national average. Projects like "Sports Tourism Planning" and "Sports Rehabilitation Studios" generated average annual revenues exceeding 500,000 yuan. (Zhang Yan, 2024)

3.2.2 Central Provinces: Prioritizing Sports-Education Integration, Policies Focus on Transformation

Henan Province: Establishing a "Full-Chain Support System for Physical Education Teacher Transition," with retired athletes transitioning to physical education teachers accounting for 58% in 2023: (1) Access Optimization: Streamlining teacher certification assessment procedures, with specialized tests (including teaching demonstrations and tactical guidance) accounting for 60% of the assessment, while cultural tests focus on education policy and teaching theory;(2) Competency Enhancement: Collaborating with Henan Normal University to launch a three-month "Teaching Competency Enhancement Program" covering classroom management, lesson plan design, and youth physical training. Post-training certification rates increased from 42% to 78%;(3) Compensation Guarantees: Clearly stipulate that athletic years are converted to teaching experience at a 1:0.5 ratio (e.g., 10 athletic years = 5 teaching years) after transitioning to physical education teaching, ensuring equal compensation with other subject teachers. (Zhang Shaodi, 2024)

Shanxi Province: While centered on "order-based training," significant shortcomings exist: (1) Limited training programs: 80% of training focuses on traditional roles like coaches and referees, with emerging fields like sports rehabilitation and athletic operations receiving less than 10% coverage;(2) Lack of psychological intervention: 33.7% of retired athletes experience psychological barriers like anxiety, inferiority, and identity crises, yet provincial sports authorities operate only one psychological service station in Taiyuan, covering less than 10%;(3) County-level channels are obstructed: Rural school physical education teacher vacancies reach 42%, yet only 9% of retired athletes choose county-level employment due to

"frozen staffing quotas" and "transportation difficulties." (Liu Xuening, 2024)

3.2.3 Western Provinces: Primarily Security-Oriented, Insufficient Marketization

Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region: Policies centered on "one-time monetary compensation": (1) Compensation standards: 200,000 yuan for International Masters, 150,000 yuan for National Masters, and 80,000 yuan for First-Class Athletes—35% below the eastern provinces' average;(2) Implementation challenges: Significant shortages in policybased positions. Between 2017 and 2022, only 12% of retired athletes from the Jiangnan Training Base secured positions in public institutions. Vocational training coverage remained below 30%, with 80% of training concentrated in cities like Nanning and Liuzhou, leaving county-level coverage virtually nonexistent. (He Jiaoping & Zeng Jie, 2024)

Gansu Province: Constrained by economic conditions, policy support remains limited: (1) Weak entrepreneurship support: The maximum startup subsidy of 100,000 yuan is only

20% of Guangdong's level. Applications require seven steps—"community endorsement → county/city sports department review → provincial approval"—taking an average of six months;(2) Low cross-regional employment: 78% of retired athletes are concentrated in central cities like Lanzhou and Tianshui, while remote areas such as Jiuquan and Zhangye see less than 5% application rates for local positions;(3) Difficulties in social security transfer: 42% of retired athletes face obstacles in transferring pension insurance, requiring three or more trips back to their original locations. Some athletes cannot complete transfers due to lost contracts. (Zhang Baoming, 2024)

Yunnan Province: Focuses on "transition-period training" but faces prominent "training-practice disconnect": (1) Outdated training content: Courses like sports rehabilitation and fitness coaching use textbooks updated over three years ago, failing to meet market demands;(2) Lack of practical training: 45% of courses are theoretical lectures with no corporate internships or hands-on practice. Trainee satisfaction is only 45%, and posttraining employment rates fall below 30%, significantly lower than eastern provinces. (Tian Yuxiang, 2024)

Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region: Geographic and linguistic constraints narrow employment pathways: (1) Monolithic employment structure: 63% of retired athletes enter the sports system, 21% join the education system, while market-based employment accounts for less than 16%;(2) Bilingualism bottleneck: A 2024 Xinjiang Sports Bureau survey revealed only 29% of ethnic minority athletes can proficiently use Mandarin for teaching or management roles, hindering cross-regional employment;(3) Weak industrial support: The sports industry scale is only 8% of Guangdong's, with virtually no positions in emerging fields (e.g., sports technology, esports). (Li Weimin, 2024)

3.2.4 Northeast Region: Strong Policy Continuity, Limited Innovation

• **Heilongjiang Province:** Leveraging the ice and snow industry to develop a distinctive model, but non-ice and snow projects face challenges: (1) Traditional Strengths: Retired athletes from ice and snow sports (skiing, skating) transition to coaching at a rate of 65%. An employment cluster has formed along the "Harbin-Changchun" ice and snow industry belt, achieving a 94% employment rate for such athletes in 2023;(2) Current Shortcomings: Employment rate for non-winter sports athletes (e.g., track and field, weightlifting) is only 72%. Policies lack sufficient support for emerging employment channels like short videos and live streaming. Only 5% of retired athletes have explored online employment, with no specialized training or traffic support available. (Wu Mingying, 2024)

Table 1. Comparison of Provincial Policy Implementation Outcomes

Region	Core Placement Method	Average Employment Rate (2024)	Transition Satisfaction Rate (2024)	Key Strengths	Key Weaknesses
Eastern Region	Diversified Market-Oriented Approach +	91.3%	78.5%	Adequate funding, extensive channels, and a well-established	Intense regional competition, large market
	Integration of Physical Education and Sports			training system	
Central Region	Integration of physical education and sports + order-based training	85.7%	69.2%	Clear career transition pathways, stable positions within the system	Limited training programs, lack of psychological intervention
Western Regions	Monetary compensation + policy-based resettlement	76.2%	58.3%	Comprehensive safety net in place, low policy implementation costs	Low marketization, difficult social security transition
Northeast	Specialized industrial employment + traditional resettlement	82.1%	65.8%	High industry alignment (winter sports projects)	Insufficient policy innovation, employment challenges for non-winter sports

4. Practical Issues and Challenges in Employment Placement for Retired Athletes in China

4.1 Individual Level: Dual Barriers of Skill Discontinuity and Psychological Transition

4.1.1 Structural Mismatch Between Employment Capabilities and Market Demands

- (1) **Dual Shortcomings in Cultural Foundation and Vocational Skills:** A 2024 Shanxi Province study revealed that 72% of retired athletes possess only a high school diploma or lower, with 45% holding only a junior high school diploma or below. Fewer than 15% meet proficiency standards in mathematics and English, while only 18% master basic computer office software (Excel data processing, PPT creation), failing to meet foundational requirements for administrative or operational roles. Significant skill disparities exist across different sports disciplines: Athletes in strength-based sports (weightlifting, track and field) exhibit low cross-industry employment rates (23% lower than skill-based sports like gymnastics and table tennis) due to highly specialized physical abilities and lack of transferable skills like communication and planning. Data from Zhejiang's 2025 "Sports + Cultural Tourism" training program indicates that only 31% of retired athletes can independently design cultural tourism sports activity plans, highlighting the contradiction between "single-skill specialization" and "market diversification."
- (2) **Lack of career planning awareness and capability:** A 2022-2024 tracking study of retired athletes at Guangxi's Jiangnan Training Base revealed that 68% received no systematic career guidance during their active careers. Within 3-6 months of retirement, 68% still lacked clear employment direction, and only 19% could select positions aligned with their strengths. Case Study: Zhang, a provincial weightlifter (National Level 1 Athlete), focused solely on training without acquiring additional skills. After retirement, feeling "unskilled in anything but weightlifting," he took physical labor jobs like security guard and delivery driver, earning less than ¥4,000 monthly—a stark contrast to his ¥8,000 monthly allowance during active duty. This "career gap" led to feelings of inferiority.

4.1.2 Multidimensional Manifestations and Causes of Psychological Transition Barriers

(1) High incidence of psychological issues with insufficient intervention: A 2024 survey of 500 retired athletes in Shanxi Province revealed that 33.7% experienced varying degrees of psychological barriers, with anxiety disorders (18.2%), identity crises (8%), and depression (7.5%) being the most prominent. Core causes include three aspects: ① **Difficulty in Role Transition** — The disparity in social attention from being the "center of attention on the field" to a "newcomer in the workplace." For example, an Olympic champion admitted after retirement, "Before, I received flowers and applause after competitions. Now, when I go for interviews, HR questions me, 'What else can you do besides winning medals?' The psychological gap is huge." ② **Anxiety over future uncertainty** — Among retired athletes in western provinces, 58% worry about "losing competitiveness as they age," rising to 72% for those over 30; ③ **Compounded economic pressures** — Gansu's 2025 data reveals that 82% of athletes unemployed within six months of retirement face financial burdens like rent and mortgages. Some rely on parental support, further intensifying psychological strain.

(2) Insufficient and fragmented psychological support systems: Nationwide, only 28% of provincial sports departments have established psychological support hotlines or service centers for retired athletes, with coverage rates below 10% in western provinces

(Xinjiang, Yunnan). Even in eastern regions, psychological services suffer from "one-off, fragmented" issues. Guangdong Province provides one centralized counseling session before retirement but lacks long-term follow-up. Seventy-three percent of athletes report "encountering new psychological issues post-retirement with no channels to seek help." Moreover, existing services are mostly provided by sports department staff in a dual capacity, with professional counselors accounting for less than 15% of personnel, failing to meet individualized needs.

4.2 Policy Level: Mechanistic Challenges of Fragmentation and Implementation Deviations

4.2.1 Provincial Policy Fragmentation and Inter-Provincial Coordination Barriers

Regional disparities in resettlement standards and support intensity: Significant gaps exist between eastern and western provinces in core policies: ① **Resettlement allowance:** Guangdong provides international athletes with a one-time allowance of 200,000 yuan, plus up to 500,000 yuan in entrepreneurial subsidies; Gansu offers only 80,000 yuan with no additional support—a 2.5-fold disparity. ② **Training Program Availability:** Zhejiang offers 21 programs including "Coaching, Sports Rehabilitation, Short Video Operations, Sports Agent," while Yunnan provides only 3 programs ("Coaching, Refereeing, Fitness Instruction"), resulting in starkly different opportunities for athletes; ③ **Policy-based Position Quotas:** Fujian's 2025 public institution recruitment targets 5% for retired athletes, while Xinjiang's quota is only 1.2%. Moreover, Xinjiang's specialized positions are concentrated in remote areas like Hotan and Kashgar, with application rates below 30%.

4.2.2 Deviations in the "Last Mile" of Policy Implementation and Their Causes

(1) Selective Implementation and Formalistic Tendencies: ① Policy Implementation Discounted: 30% of county-level sports departments in Guangxi failed to implement the "priority hiring of retired athletes by schools" clause in the new Sports Law. Among rural school physical education teacher vacancies from 2022 to 2024, only 9% hired retired athletes, with the remainder predominantly filled by non-sports professionals. ② Training Exercises in Formality: In Yunnan's 2024 vocational skills training, 45% of courses suffered from "instructors reading from scripts without practical exercises." Some trainings amounted to mere "sign-in-for-certificate" sessions, with trainee satisfaction at only 45% and posttraining employment rates below 30%. ③ Lack of assessment mechanisms: Only 18% of provinces (e.g., Shandong, Guangdong) established evaluation systems for employment placement policy implementation. The remaining provinces "prioritized policy formulation over effectiveness oversight," leading to persistent issues. For instance, Shanxi Province issued employment placement policies for three consecutive years (2022-2024) without conducting a single implementation assessment.

(2) Core Causes of Implementation Deviations: ① Insufficient grassroots resources — County-level sports departments in western provinces typically have only 1-2 staff members handling retired athlete placement, who must also manage training, competitions, and mass sports activities, leaving them unable to advance specialized tasks like training and recruitment; ② Poor interdepartmental coordination — Education and sports departments lack alignment on "campus recruitment" policies. In 2025, a county in Henan planned to hire 10 physical education teachers. The sports department recommended 8 retired athletes, but the education department only hired 2, citing "frozen staffing quotas." ③ Conflict of interests — In some regions, "policy-based positions are occupied by non-retired personnel." In a 2024 targeted recruitment drive by the sports system in a prefecture-level city in Shanxi, three positions reserved for retired athletes were filled by non-professional "connected individuals," sparking discontent among the athlete community.

4.2.3 Challenges in Implementing Entrepreneurial Support Policies

1. High Barriers and Lengthy Processes for Financial Support: ① Stringent Application Requirements — While Guangdong offers up to 500,000 yuan in startup subsidies, applicants must meet conditions like "business registration for over one year, employment of at least three people, and annual revenue exceeding 200,000 yuan." Most retired athletes, lacking startup capital and business experience, fail to qualify, resulting in a mere 19% approval rate in 2024. ② Cumbersome Approval Process — A retired athlete in Gansu faced seven steps to apply for a ¥100,000 subsidy: "community endorsement → county/city sports department review → provincial sports department approval →

finance department disbursement." The six-month process ended in rejection due to "incomplete documentation."^③ Restrictive fund usage — Some provinces mandate that subsidies "must be used for equipment procurement," excluding operational costs like rent and labor. This causes 80% of ventures to fail due to broken funding chains. A retired swimmer in Yunnan opened a swimming pool but closed after six months because the subsidy couldn't cover rent.

3. Fragmented and Under-Specialized Support Services: Only 15% of provinces (e.g., Zhejiang, Fujian) provide retired athletes with entrepreneurial mentors, who are predominantly government officials or university professors lacking sports industry operational experience. They cannot offer practical guidance on market analysis or cost control. Typical Case: A retired swimmer in Yunnan opened a swimming pool but received only a "business plan template" from their mentor, with no guidance on site selection or pricing. This led to insufficient customer traffic after opening, resulting in monthly losses exceeding 20,000 yuan. Additionally, the coverage rate of entrepreneurial incubation bases is low—only 3% of prefecture-level cities in western provinces have sports industry incubation bases, far below the 28% rate in eastern regions. Most incubation bases only provide office space without financial or resource connection support.

4.3 Societal Level: Dual Barriers of Cognitive Bias and Market Disconnect 4.3.1

Societal Stereotypes and Communication Biases

Discriminatory Perceptions Among Employers: 35% of companies harbor stereotypes about retired athletes during recruitment, viewing them as "low-educated, poor adapters, and hot-tempered," explicitly rejecting them for non-athletic roles (e.g., administration, operations, customer service). Case Study: An internet company recruiting for an operations role in 2025 directly marked retired athletes' resumes as "not considered." HR admitted concerns that athletes "are accustomed to 'coach-directed' work and may struggle with team collaboration, while also potentially unable to keep up with the 996 work schedule." Additionally, small and medium-sized enterprises lack awareness of "preferential policies" for retired athletes—only 21% of companies know that "hiring retired athletes qualifies for up to three years of corporate income tax exemption," resulting in low proactive recruitment willingness.

Public perception biases and misleading coverage: Some media outlets excessively sensationalize isolated cases like "champions selling vegetables" or "Olympic gold medalists running street stalls" (e.g., a weightlifting champion selling pork after retirement, a gymnast performing street acts), overlooking policy improvements. This creates a "predominantly negative" societal perception of retired athletes' employment realities. A 2024 public survey in Shanxi revealed that 63% of respondents believed "retired athletes generally face employment difficulties," while only 18% were aware that "82% of retired athletes in Guangdong secured stable employment through campus recruitment." This misperception not only intensifies athletes' "identity anxiety" but also dampens corporate hiring willingness.

4.3.2 Systemic Gaps in Labor Market Integration

Information asymmetry is prominent: ① Insufficient effectiveness of official platforms — National employment platforms like the "China Sports Talent Network" average fewer than 500 monthly job postings, with 80% concentrated in eastern provinces. Utilization rates among western athletes are only 12%, and platform response times are slow, with inquiries taking an average of 3 days to address. ② High Reliance on Informal Channels — In

Shanxi, 68% of retired athletes secured job leads through "personal connections," while only 9% used official channels. This leads to poor job-skill alignment, forcing skill-based athletes into manual labor like security or delivery work;③ Weak university-enterprise collaboration — Only 23% of universities nationwide have established targeted recruitment mechanisms for retired athletes. Most athletes must engage in "mass resume submissions," requiring an average of 20 applications to secure one interview opportunity, with a success rate below 15%.

Mismatch between market demand and athlete skills: Emerging sports sectors (e.g., athletic rehabilitation, sports technology, esports operations) face significant talent shortages, yet retired athletes' skills fail to meet these needs. Data from the General Administration of Sport in 2025 indicates a shortage of 120,000 athletic rehabilitation specialists in China, but only 7% of retired athletes have received relevant training. Additionally, non-sports industries underutilize "athlete traits" — sectors like the military, security, and emergency response require "discipline, resilience under pressure, and teamwork," which align perfectly with athletes' strengths. However, targeted recruitment mechanisms remain undeveloped, leaving these advantages untapped.

5. Policy Recommendations for Addressing Employment Placement for Retired Athletes in China

5.1 Institutional Level: Establish a "Nationally Unified + Provincially Coordinated" Policy Support System

5.1.1 Refine top-level design to establish national uniform standards

Enact specialized regulations with detailed implementation rules: Expedite the introduction of the Regulations on Employment Placement for Retired Athletes, clarifying four core provisions:① Establish nationally uniform minimum standards for retirement placement allowances (not less than ¥150,000 for International Masters, ¥100,000 for National Masters, and ¥50,000 for First-Class Athletes), shared proportionally between central and local governments (3:7 in eastern regions, 7:3 in western regions), with triennial evaluations and revisions conducted jointly by the General Administration of Sport and the Ministry of Finance;② Mandatory implementation of the "Compulsory Academic Course System for Active Athletes," requiring no fewer than 8 academic hours per week, with training allowances tied to academic performance (10% allowance increase for those meeting standards, suspension for those failing until passing a makeup exam);③ Establish a "CrossProvincial Policy Coordination List" to ensure pension insurance transfers require "no more than one visit" and training credits are nationally recognized. The General Administration of Sport will lead the creation of a "Cross-Provincial Coordination Office" with a 24-hour hotline to resolve coordination challenges in regions like Xinjiang and Guangxi;④ Incorporate employment placement outcomes into local government performance evaluations.

Provinces with employment rates below 80% for three consecutive years will face a 10%20% reduction in sports-specific funding allocations, while those exceeding 90% will receive additional subsidies.

Optimize policy implementation oversight and strengthen evaluation accountability: Establish a "three-tier evaluation mechanism": ① Provincial sports departments conduct quarterly self-inspections of policy execution, focusing on "campus policy implementation rates," "training satisfaction," and "social security transition rates," producing and publishing self-assessment reports; ② The General Administration of Sport will annually commission third-party evaluations (through institutions like Beijing Sport University and Shanghai Sport University) to publish the National White Paper on Employment Placement for Retired Athletes, disclosing provincial data for public oversight; ③ Launch the "12345 Sports Rights Protection Hotline" to receive athlete complaints regarding policy deviations, achieving full provincial hotline coverage by 2025 with a maximum 48-hour response time.

5.1.2 Strengthen provincial coordination to address regional development disparities

Establish a pairing assistance mechanism between eastern, central, and western regions: Implement the "3+1" assistance plan (3 eastern provinces assisting 1 western province), such as Guangdong, Zhejiang, and Fujian assisting Guangxi, Gansu, and Xinjiang, focusing on advancing three key tasks: ① Training Resource Sharing — Eastern provinces will open high-quality courses like "Sports + Cultural Tourism" and "Short Video Operations" to western regions. Through a combined "online livestreaming + offline practical training" model, the number of training programs in western provinces will double by 2025 (from 3-5 to 10-12), with instructors selected and dispatched by eastern provinces; ② Cross-Provincial Job Placement — Eastern provinces reserve 10% of annual sports system positions for targeted recruitment of retired athletes from the west. For example, Fujian plans to hire 20 winter sports coaches from Xinjiang by 2025, addressing the imbalance of "excess winter sports talent in the northeast and shortages in the south." Housing subsidies and educational support for children will be provided. ③ Cross-provincial social security processing — Supporting provinces will handle social security transfers and qualification certifications for western athletes. Online submission via the "National Social Security Public Service Platform" will reduce processing time to within one month.

Establishing a National Integrated Information Platform: Led by the General Administration of Sport of China, the "China Retired Athletes Employment Service Platform" will launch in 2025 for trial operation and achieve nationwide coverage by 2026. It features five functional modules: ① Job Matching System — Automatically recommends positions based on athletes' sports discipline, education level, and skill tags (e.g., "Gymnastics + Sports Rehabilitation," "Basketball + Campus Instruction"), targeting an 80%+ accuracy rate; ② Credit Recognition System — Records training credits earned by athletes across provinces, generating a "Nationally Recognized Skills Certificate" verifiable online by employers; ③ Policy Inquiry System — Integrates provincial entrepreneurship subsidies and tax breaks, offering "one-click calculation" (enter province, education level, and discipline to automatically display eligible subsidies and job directions); ④ Psychological Support System — Connects to psychology departments at 200 top-tier hospitals nationwide, providing free online counseling (30 minutes per session) and supporting in-person appointment scheduling; ⑤ Success Case Library — Features case studies like "Wang Hao transitioning to national team coach" and "Li Yuanyuan boosting agriculture through livestreaming (monthly sales exceeding ¥500,000)" for athlete reference. The platform targets an 80%+ usage rate, assisting at least 5,000 retired athletes in securing employment annually.

5.2 Capacity Building: Establishing a "Full-Cycle + Tiered" Career Development Support System

5.2.1 Optimize skill reserves during active careers and advance transition preparation

Implementing a dual-track system of "athletic career + academic career": ① Academic Support — Require professional teams to partner with local universities (e.g., provincial normal universities, sports colleges) to establish "athlete-specific classes" with a "flexible academic system" (completing 4-year studies in 5 years). Curriculum emphasizes "practical skills" (e.g., computer fundamentals, business writing, basic financial management, workplace communication) to ensure over 90% of athletes obtain associate degrees or higher during their careers. Athletes failing academic assessments are suspended from major competitions; ② Pre-Embedded Skills Training — Mandatory participation in "Career Transition Preparation Training" for athletes 1-2 years prior to retirement. Training directions are recommended based on sport characteristics (e.g., strength athletes focus on fitness coaching, skill-based athletes on sports rehabilitation, team athletes on event operations). Training duration must be no less than 200 academic hours. Those who pass the assessment receive a "Vocational Skills Certificate"; those who fail have their retirement delayed. By 2025, achieve 100% training coverage for national team athletes and 80% coverage for provincial team athletes.

Implement tiered career planning guidance to precisely match needs: ① Youth Athletes (16-18 years old) — Conduct a "Career Orientation Session" every six months, inviting successfully transitioned athletes (e.g., retired sports entrepreneurs or world champions who became university professors) to share experiences and foster career awareness; ② Adult athletes (19-28 years old) — Assign a "1+1" mentor team (1 sports coach + 1 career planner) to develop annual personalized career plans, setting short-term (1-2 years) and mid-term (3-5 years) goals, e.g., "Obtain fitness trainer certification within 2 years; open a fitness studio within 5 years"; ③ Athletes nearing retirement (within 6 months of retirement) — Conduct "mock job search" training covering resume preparation, interview techniques, and workplace etiquette. Guangdong plans to organize a "Retired Athlete Job Search Simulation Competition" by 2025, with winners recommended to partner companies like

Wanda Sports, Anta, and Tencent Esports to achieve "competition-driven employment." 5.2.2 Strengthen post-retirement targeted training and psychological support to overcome transition challenges

Establish a "three-track training + project-based" model to enhance job suitability: ① Traditional training (coaches, referees, physical education teachers) — Collaborate with teacher training colleges and sports associations to incorporate "teaching practice" components (e.g., one-month internships at K-12 schools overseeing PE classes and afterschool sports activities). The Henan model demonstrates that athletes undergoing practical training achieve a 75% success rate in transitioning to physical education teachers, up from 58%. ② Cross-sector training (sports rehabilitation, athletic agents) — Partnering with industry leaders (e.g., iKang Healthcare, China Sports Industry) to implement "apprenticeship-based" training (3 months theory + 3 months corporate internship). Qualified graduates receive direct employment. Aiming to train 5,000 sports rehabilitation specialists by 2025 to address market shortages; ③ Emerging field training (short-video operations, esports refereeing) — Partnering with platforms like Douyin and Tencent to launch the "Retired Athlete Creator Support Program." Courses cover sports science scriptwriting, livestream sales techniques, and traffic management. Top performers receive platform traffic support (e.g., ¥100,000 traffic subsidy in the first

month). Aims to train 1,000 "sports streamers" by 2025, targeting average monthly income exceeding ¥8,000; Additionally, for injured athletes, "Light-Asset Entrepreneurship Training" (e.g., sports media content creation, online personal coaching) is offered, providing a "zero-deposit" online teaching platform to lower startup barriers.

Establish a "full-cycle psychological support system" to address mental barriers: ① Prevention Phase (active duty) — Conduct quarterly psychological assessments (using SCL-90 scale), provide one-on-one counseling for high-risk athletes (e.g., those experiencing consecutive losses or recovering from injuries), and offer at least two professional counseling sessions annually. ② Transition Phase (6 months post-retirement) — Offer a "Psychological Adaptation Camp" (one-week intensive training) covering role transition, stress management, and workplace interpersonal skills, featuring HR professionals sharing industry norms; ③ Follow-up Phase (1 year post-retirement) — Conduct monthly online follow-ups, with referrals to tertiary hospital psychology departments when necessary. Aim to increase psychological intervention rates in western provinces from 10% to 50% by 2025; Simultaneously, promote the "Peer Support Program" by organizing successfully transitioned athletes to serve as "psychological volunteers." For example, Shanxi plans to recruit 100 volunteers to pair with 200 retired athletes, alleviating psychological pressure through "firsthand experience."

5.3 Market Integration Level: Building an employment ecosystem integrating sports-education synergy, industrial linkage, and emerging channels

5.3.1 Deepening sports-education integration to broaden employment pathways within the system

Refine policy implementation mechanisms for campus entry to stabilize teaching positions: ① Quota Guarantee — Joint directives from the Ministry of Education and General Administration of Sport mandate primary/secondary schools to allocate 30% of physical education teacher quotas for retired athletes based on a "1 PE teacher per 200 students" standard. Achieve full coverage in rural schools by 2025; counties with insufficient quotas may apply for "temporary staffing quotas." ② Assessment Optimization — Simplifying teacher certification exams by increasing the weight of "athletic skill tests" to 60% (e.g., basketball players assessed on tactical coaching and physical training design capabilities), while cultural tests emphasize education policy and youth psychology. Henan's pilot shows this approach boosted athlete certification rates from 42% to 78%. ③ Compensation Guarantees — Retired athletes transitioning to physical education teaching will receive dual seniority calculation ("teaching years + athletic career length"), e.g., 10 years of athletic career equates to 5 years of teaching seniority. Base salaries will increase by 15%, with performance-based pay prioritized for physical education teachers to prevent unequal pay for equal work.

Expanding other positions within the system to broaden employment options: ① Targeted recruitment within the sports system — Requiring provincial sports departments to reserve 5% of civil servant and public institution positions annually for retired athletes. For example, Fujian plans to recruit 30 retired athletes into its Sports Bureau, Sports Lottery Center, and Sports Venue Management Center by 2025; ② Targeted recruitment by military and public security forces — Collaborate with the Ministry of National Defense and Ministry of Public Security to annually recruit retired athletes as "special forces personnel, security officers, and emergency responders," leveraging their discipline and stress resilience. A 2025 pilot program aims to recruit 1,000 individuals, prioritizing athletes from physical fitness disciplines; ③ Community Sports Position Development — Each community will be equipped with one "Retired Athlete Sports Instructor" responsible for organizing square dancing, youth

sports activities, and exercise guidance for chronic disease patients. Funding for these positions will be shared 50:50 between central and local governments. By 2025, nationwide community coverage will reach 50%, addressing employment bottlenecks in county-level areas.

5.3.2 Leveraging Industry Development to Stimulate Market-Driven Employment and Entrepreneurship

Promote precise alignment between sports industry needs and athlete skills to fill market gaps:

① Establish an "Industry Demand - Training - Employment" linkage mechanism — The General Administration of Sport will release quarterly "Sports Industry Talent Demand Reports" (e.g., Q1 2025: 30% growth in demand for sports rehabilitation therapists, 50% growth for esports physical trainers) to guide provincial training adjustments and prevent "training-practice disconnect"; ② Targeted partnerships with industry leaders — Sign "talent supply agreements" with companies like China Sports Industry, Wanda Sports, and Tencent Esports. These firms co-design training curricula (e.g., Wanda Sports contributes to "Sports Event Operations" training; Tencent Esports develops "Esports Physical Conditioning" programs). Trainees who pass assessments secure direct employment. By 2025, the initiative aims to partner with 50 companies and supply 10,000 professionals; ③ Emerging field development — Collaborating with esports companies to create roles like "esports referees" and "esports physical trainers." For instance, Tencent Esports plans to hire 200 retired athletes as physical trainers by 2025 to enhance esports players' physical fitness and prevent occupational injuries, with monthly salaries reaching 12,000 yuan [6].

Optimizing startup support policies to lower entry barriers: ① Enhanced funding support — Raising the maximum startup subsidy to 1 million yuan, distributed in three tiers (50% at launch, 30% after 6 months of operation, 20% after 1 year of profitability). Central government covers 70% of subsidies for western provinces; Lower application thresholds by removing requirements like "one year of registration" and "job creation," replacing them with "submission of a viable business plan"; ② Streamline Procedures — Implement "online application for startup subsidies" via the "China Retired Athletes Employment Service Platform." Applications with complete materials will be approved within 3 working days.

Gansu Province reduced application processing time from 6 months to 15 days by 2025; ③ Service upgrades — Each province establishes "Retired Athlete Entrepreneurship Incubation Bases" offering "free office space + professional mentors + funding connections." Sports industry investors and successful entrepreneurs serve as mentors. Guangdong's incubation base data shows project survival rates rising from 31% to 68%. Additionally, a "Startup Risk Compensation Fund" will be established, offering athletes who experience business failure a subsidy of up to 100,000 yuan to offset losses, thereby reducing the cost of trial and error.

5.3.3 Cultivating Emerging Employment Channels and Unlocking Athletes' Diverse Value

Empowering short video and live streaming sectors to open online employment pathways:

① Platform-specific support — Collaborating with Douyin and Kuaishou to launch the "Retired Athlete Creator Support Program": Accounts publishing sports tutorials, event commentary, or sports rehabilitation content receive traffic boosts (initial 10,000 followers). Those exceeding 1 million monthly views receive a ¥50,000 creation subsidy. The 2025 plan aims to cultivate 100 "sports bloggers" with over 100,000 followers; ② Refined Skill Training — Offering courses like "Sports

Science Scriptwriting," "Live-Stream Sales Techniques," and "Fan Engagement Management," featuring insights from top Douyin sports influencers. For instance, Zhejiang aims to train 1,000 "sports streamers" by 2025, targeting average monthly earnings exceeding ¥8,000;^③ Case Promotion — Highlighting success stories like "Li Yuanyuan's Livestreaming for Agriculture" (boosting hometown agricultural sales via sports livestreams, exceeding ¥500,000 monthly) and "Zhang Moumou's Sports Rehabilitation Science Popularization" (Douyin account with over 2 million followers monetizing through course sales and advertising partnerships) to inspire athlete participation.

Expanding into other emerging fields to broaden employment opportunities: ① Sports Technology Sector — Partnering with companies like Huawei and Xiaomi to train athletes as "Sports Equipment Experience Officers" and "Smart Wearable Device Instructors" (e.g., guiding users in utilizing fitness watches for health data monitoring and training plan development). Plans to cultivate 2,000 individuals by 2025, with monthly salaries reaching 8,000–12,000 yuan [6]; ② Silver Economy Sector — Developing "Senior Sports Instructors" roles, training athletes to provide Tai Chi, brisk walking, and chronic disease exercise intervention guidance for the elderly. Partnering with community senior care centers, Beijing pilot programs indicate strong demand for these positions with monthly salaries up to ¥6,000 and flexible working hours [6]; ③ Study-travel sector — Collaborate with cultural tourism enterprises to develop "sports study-travel programs" (e.g., soccer camps, rock climbing experiences, Olympic cultural tours). Retired athletes serve as instructors responsible for skill teaching and safety management. In Zhejiang, such programs created 500 athlete jobs in 2024 with average monthly incomes exceeding ¥7,000.

6. Conclusion

China's employment placement efforts for retired athletes have achieved phased results: the policy framework has evolved from "single monetary compensation" to a "diversified support system"; employment channels have expanded from "primarily within the system" to "sports-education integration + market-driven + emerging channels"; New models like sports-education integration and market-driven entrepreneurship are gradually being promoted in eastern provinces. In 2024, the national average employment rate for retired athletes reached 83.6%, an increase of 12.3 percentage points compared to 2020. However, empirical research across 18 provinces reveals four core challenges persist: structural mismatches between individual employability and market demands; fragmented provincial policies and interprovincial coordination bottlenecks; psychological transition barriers and lack of intervention mechanisms; and gaps in social security safety nets and transitional support. Significant disparities exist between eastern, central, and western regions, as well as urban and rural areas, with western provinces showing an average employment rate 15.1 percentage points lower than eastern regions.

Addressing these issues requires establishing a four-dimensional system encompassing "institutional coordination + capacity building + market linkage + psychological support": At the national level, specialized regulations should establish unified standards to dismantle provincial barriers; at the local level, policy implementation and resource allocation must be strengthened to address deficiencies in western regions; at the individual level, "lifecycle training" should enhance comprehensive capabilities to meet market demands; At the societal level, foster an environment that "respects and hires athletes" to unlock their multifaceted value. With the deepening implementation of the New Sports Law, the ongoing advancement of sports-education integration, and the continuous expansion of emerging employment channels like short videos and sports technology, it is projected that by 2027, the

proportion of retired athletes securing market-based employment nationwide will rise to over 40%. Employment placement will gradually shift from a "security-oriented" to a "development-oriented" approach, achieving the goal of "enabling athletes to live with greater dignity and value after retirement."

Future research may focus on two key directions: First, cultivating emerging employment channels for retired athletes in the context of digital transformation, such as building capability matching and training systems in fields like AI + Sports (sports data analysis), Metaverse Sports (virtual event commentary), and Sports Esports (physical trainers). Second, employment support policies for special groups, such as targeted assistance mechanisms for minority athletes, those from remote regions, older athletes, and injured or retired athletes, to provide a more robust talent foundation for achieving the goal of becoming a "sports powerhouse."

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