

Commercial vs. Open-Access Youth Sports Infrastructure in Pakistan

Nyle Imran
The Lahore Alma
O2

Executive Summary

Across Pakistan, state-run sports facilities that were once open to everyone are increasingly being run like businesses. This brief looks at what that shift means for young athletes who can't afford the new price of entry. Drawing on a survey of junior athletes training at public, private, and semi-commercial facilities, along with a review of provincial sports board reports, the findings point to a steady move away from open-access infrastructure.

Most of the athletes surveyed have trained for more than three years, yet the vast majority now have to pay just to access their main training ground, and over half say they've had to skip training or tournaments because they couldn't afford it. The sample is small and shouldn't be read as nationally representative, but the pattern it points to, families being priced out of public land, is hard to ignore.

The brief recommends that provincial sports boards set aside a fixed share of their annual development budgets for maintaining open-access grounds, put a portion of commercial facility revenue toward subsidising lower-income athletes, and require publicly funded complexes to offer a minimum number of free-access hours each week.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, public sports facilities in Pakistan have changed a lot. They used to be built around community access, the places where athletes from any background could get noticed and get trained. Local grounds and open courts did most of that work.

More recently, tight budgets and fast urbanisation have pushed provincial sports authorities toward building complexes that generate revenue instead. These new complexes mostly serve people who can already afford to pay, while the older public facilities sit neglected and gradually fall apart. That's created a real equity problem in how young athletes are developed in this country.

Most existing research on sport in Pakistan looks at team performance, medal counts, or governance issues like corruption, rather than at how local facilities are actually managed day to day. The Inter-Provincial Coordination Committee tracks how much revenue commercial sports clubs bring in, but nobody is tracking how many promising athletes simply drop out because they can't afford to keep training. There's no public data on how many talented kids from low-income families are shut out because facilities are too expensive or in too poor a state to use. This brief tries to fill that gap by looking at the lived experience of ordinary athletes, rather than national-level statistics, to understand what happens when commercial revenue is prioritised over public access.

Methodology

This brief is based on a survey of junior athletes training at public, private, and semi-commercial facilities, supplemented by a review of provincial sports board reports, national sports frameworks, and an interview with Rashid Malik. Given the small sample size, this should be read as an exploratory, urban convenience sample rather than a representative one. The findings point to patterns worth investigating further, not conclusions that can be generalised to the whole country.

Respondents were asked about their training history, the condition of their facilities, what they pay to train, and how much their households spend on sport each month.

There are two clear limitations worth flagging. First, it's hard to get reliable data on how much sports boards earn from commercial activities compared with what they spend maintaining public facilities. Second, because most respondents were based in urban areas, these findings may not hold for athletes training in rural parts of the country.

Key Findings

The data point to a clear pattern of exclusion in junior athletic development. Rather than running on merit alone, athletic development in Pakistan increasingly looks commercialised, with more and more of the financial burden landing on families.

The Decay of Infrastructure

There's a real maintenance gap in public athletic spaces. The athletes surveyed are a dedicated bunch: 61.5% have trained in their sport for more than three years, and the remaining 38.5% for one to three years, which suggests these are committed athletes on a genuine competitive path rather than casual participants.

How many years have you been training for?

13 responses

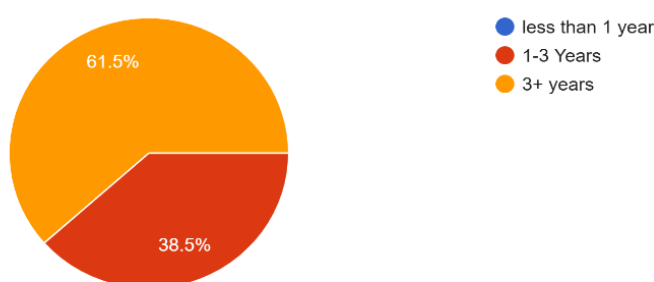


Figure 1. Years spent training.

But where they train varies a lot. 46.2% train mainly on free public ground, 38.5% at private clubs, and the remaining 15.4% rely on paid memberships at government complexes.

Where do you spend most of your time training

13 responses

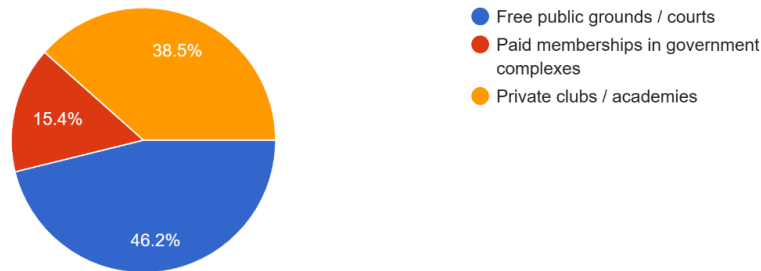


Figure 2. Primary training location.

The condition of these facilities is just as uneven. 61.5% rate their main training location as ‘good,’ 23.1% as ‘average,’ and 15.4% as ‘poor.’ On top of that, 38.5% said their regular training ground had visibly gotten worse over the past year, and another 30.8% weren't even sure of its condition. This lines up with, though doesn't fully prove, a broader pattern where open grounds that don't generate revenue get less maintenance, which pushes athletes toward the paid private sector.

Rashid Malik put it plainly: “when we let courts fall into disrepair, we are essentially cutting off our own supply lines.” He said the next generation of champions doesn't start out in premium clubs, it starts on local cement, and that letting these spaces go risks cutting off the talent pipeline right at its source.

Financial Gatekeeping of Public Land

The shift toward commercially run public sports boards has created a real pay-to-play barrier. Among the athletes surveyed, 84.6% now have to pay a direct fee just to access their main training facility, even though it sits on public land.

Do you have to pay a fee to access your main training facility

13 responses

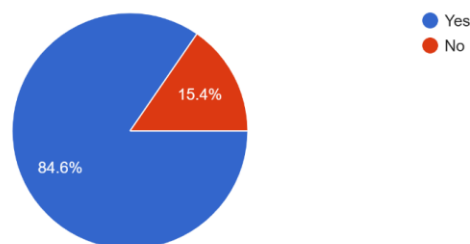


Figure 3. Fee required to access main training facility.

That shifts the cost of maintaining a public asset onto individual families, and the burden adds up. 46.2% of families spend over PKR 10,000 a month on training, tournaments, and coaching; 23.1% spend under PKR 2,000; another 23.1% spend between PKR 2,000 and PKR 5,000; and the remaining 7.7% spend between PKR 5,000 and PKR 10,000.

On average, how much does your family spend per month on your sports training?

13 responses

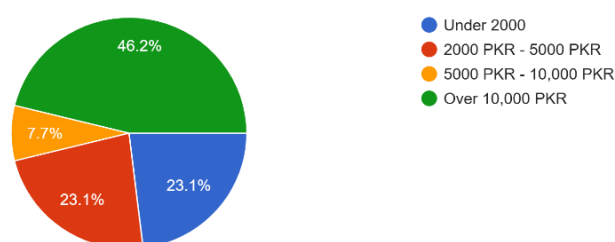


Figure 4. Average monthly family spending on sports training.

For a lower- or middle-income family, spending over PKR 10,000 a month on training is a serious strain, and it often forces hard trade-offs. When public sporting space gets commercialised, participation ends up concentrated among families who can already afford it.

Systemic Talent Drain and Perceived Class Bias in Selection

Financial exclusion seems to directly cut off the progress of talented lower-income juniors. 53.8% of athletes surveyed said they've had to skip training sessions or pull out of tournaments because fees, registration, or travel costs were too much.

That kind of financial gatekeeping also feeds a broader perception of class bias in national selection: 76.9% of athletes believe those training at expensive private clubs get selected for major tournaments more easily than those at public facilities. It's worth being clear that this is a perception of bias, not direct proof that selection itself is biased, and that distinction matters for how the finding should be read.

"If there were more free, well-maintained public sports grounds near my house, I would be able to train much better and compete at a higher level." How much do you agree with this statement

13 responses

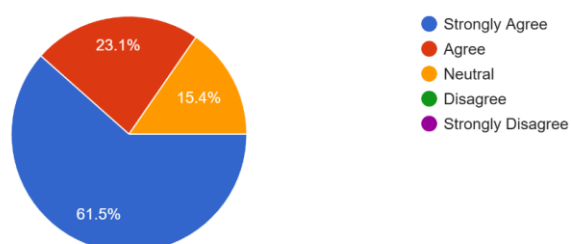


Figure 5. Agreement that more free, well-maintained public grounds would improve training and competitive performance.

That response suggests there's a lot of untapped potential out there, held back mainly by how few free, accessible facilities exist.

Recommendations

To address these economic barriers, the Ministry of Inter-Provincial Coordination and the provincial sports boards should put the following measures in place.

1. Restore Public Facilities (Target: Provincial Assemblies)

1. Provincial assemblies should amend provincial sports acts so that a fixed share of the annual sports development budget, an illustrative benchmark of 45%, is legally ring-fenced for maintaining and repairing open-access grounds.
2. This wouldn't require new government funding. It would simply stop sports boards from diverting community development budgets into commercial, profit-generating complexes.

2. Introduce a Cross-Subsidy Mechanism (Target: Provincial Sports Boards)

1. Direct 30% of the revenue generated by high-fee commercial sports complexes into a development fund for public facilities.
2. Use that fund to cover tournament entry fees and travel costs for strong, lower-income athletes so they can keep competing.

3. Establish Community Access Quotas (Target: IPC)

1. Require every publicly funded athletic complex to offer at least 20 hours a week of free field access to non-elite youth and local public schools.
2. Monitor compliance through mandatory public usage records, reviewed as part of annual facility performance inspections.

Conclusion

When the state puts profitability ahead of public service, athletic opportunity stops being about merit and starts being about who can pay. The commercialisation of Pakistan's public sports infrastructure doesn't just leave grounds to rot, it risks shutting out a whole generation of athletes who don't have the money to keep up.

Based on these early findings, this isn't just a matter of convenience, it's a matter of fairness, and one that deserves larger-scale research to confirm how big the problem really is. Pakistan isn't going to build a sustainable, globally competitive sporting future on high-fee clubs alone while the grassroots pipeline keeps getting starved of resources.

References

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