

Social Classification in Sports: A Literature Review on Access, Identity, and Social Mobility

Chikitania Larasuria Maronji^{1ABCD*}, **Padli**^{2AD}, **Eri Barlian**^{3AD}

¹ Magister of Sports Education, Faculty of Sport Science, Universitas Negeri Padang, INDONESIA.

^{2,3} Department of Sport, Faculty of Sport Science, Universitas Negeri Padang, INDONESIA.

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ABSTRACT

Problems: Previous studies indicate that sports participation is strongly influenced by socioeconomic factors; however, comprehensive analyses that integrate access, identity formation, and social mobility within the context of social classification remain limited, particularly in sports sociology literature. This gap highlights the need for a systematic review that critically examines sports as both a space of inequality and opportunity, thereby offering novelty through an integrative and theory-driven perspective. **Purpose:** This study aims to analyze how social classification shapes access to sports participation, constructs social identity, and enables or constrains social mobility through sports. **Methods:** This research employed a qualitative approach using library research methods. Data were collected from national and international peer-reviewed journals indexed in reputable databases and published between 2018 and 2024. The selected literature was analyzed thematically using content analysis to identify patterns related to access inequality, identity construction, and social mobility in sports. **Results:** The findings show that socioeconomic background significantly determines access to sports facilities, professional coaching, and institutional support, with higher social classes enjoying greater advantages. Sports also function as symbols of social identity and class distinction, reflecting processes of social reproduction. At the same time, sports provide opportunities for upward social mobility, particularly for individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds through scholarships, sponsorships, and athletic achievement. However, these opportunities are limited by persistent structural barriers, including unequal resource distribution, gender bias, and selective policy implementation. **Conclusion:** This study concludes that sports both reflect and reproduce broader social stratification while simultaneously offering selective pathways for social mobility. The findings contribute theoretically to sports sociology and practically to sports education policy, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and equitable approaches. Future research is recommended to incorporate empirical field studies and comparative regional analyses to deepen understanding of social inequality in sports.

Keywords: social classification, sports participation, social identity, access inequality, social mobility.

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Corresponding Author:

Chikitania Larasuria Maronji

Magister of Sports Education, Faculty of Sport Science, Universitas Negeri Padang, INDONESIA

Email: chikitaniamaronji71@guru.sd.belajar.id

Introduction

In essence, sports are not only related to physical activities but also reflect the structure and social dynamics within society. Sports can serve as social boundaries and a reflection of social equality in society when viewed from a social context (Sakalidis et al., 2023; Xu, 2025). Several studies indicate that community participation in sports activities is often influenced by socioeconomic background, education level, and the culture that develops within the community environment (Fahmeed et al., 2024; Lohana et al., 2023; Sherlock, 2024). Those with higher socioeconomic status tend to have greater opportunities to participate in sports compared to lower economic groups (Wargama et al., 2024; Zheng, 2025). This indicates that sports have not yet become a fully open space for all segments of society.

In Indonesia, access to sports facilities and activities still shows considerable disparities. Schools in urban areas with adequate financial support tend to have more complete sports facilities compared to schools

in rural areas that still face limitations in infrastructure (Baharuddin & Burhan, 2025). Research conducted by Eime, et al (2017) dan Goldsmith & Abel (2022) shows that socioeconomic class levels influence the type of sports chosen (Eime et al., 2017; Goldsmith & Abel, 2022). Upper-middle social classes are more likely to engage in sports that require substantial costs such as tennis or golf, whereas people from lower-middle classes prefer more accessible sports such as football or badminton (Dong et al., 2023; Lake, 2008). Thus, sports selection often reflects a person's social position within society.

Besides economic aspects, other social factors such as environment, education, and social support also play important roles in determining a person's participation in sports activities. Research by Sasminto, Sucipto, and Bektı (2024) found that the availability of facilities, support from the surrounding environment, and prevailing social norms influence exercise habits (Sasminto et al., 2024). This shows that sports participation is not only determined by individual capability but also by external factors that shape a person's social behavior. Therefore, involvement in sports can be understood as a result of interaction between individuals and the social structures that exist around them.

Social classification in sports is also closely related to the formation of identity and status. The identity of sports practitioners or athletes is often determined not only by achievement but also by the social background surrounding them (Ryan, 2018; Yukhymenko-Lescroart, 2018). Research results by Hartmann-Tews (2016) and Andersen & Bakken (2019) shows that parental education and income influence children's opportunities to participate in formal sports training (Andersen & Bakken, 2019; Hartmann-Tews, 2016). In Indonesia, this phenomenon is also evident when athletes from economically capable families have broader access to professional coaches, modern equipment, and greater media exposure compared to athletes from modest families. This demonstrates that sports can become an arena of social reproduction that maintains inter-class inequality.

Sports also have a positive side as a means of social mobility. Many athletes have successfully changed their social position through sports achievements. International research by Pope (2013) shows that sports can open new opportunities for individuals to gain recognition and improved social status (Pope, 2013). However, such opportunities are not always evenly distributed because most athletes often face structural barriers that hinder their social advancement. In other words, sports have a dual nature: besides being a bridge for social mobility, they can also reinforce existing social differences.

Studies on the relationship between sports and social structure in Indonesia are still very limited. Most research still focuses on technical aspects such as performance improvement, motivation, or physical fitness (Kurniawan et al., 2022; Lual, 2024; Ma'mun et al., 2025; Zhamardiy et al., 2020). This is evidenced by research conducted by Ma'mun et al. (2025), Mikdar et al., (2025), and Careemdeen, (2023), which shows that research on physical education regarding the role of social status, cultural capital, and economic access to sports participation remains minimal in Indonesia. Nevertheless, concepts in social theory such as habitus and social capital proposed by Bourdieu or status theory from Weber can be utilized to analyze how sports reflect social relations in society.

Based on these conditions, a gap has been identified. This demonstrates the importance of conducting a literature review that critically examines the relationship between social classification and sports. This research attempts to present an in-depth review of how sports reflect, reinforce, or even transform social structures in society. Specifically, this research aims to analyze forms of social classification in sports, identify the influence of social background on sports participation, and review the potential of sports as a means of social mobility. The results of this research are expected to provide a conceptual contribution to the development of more inclusive sports policies and enrich understanding of the role of sports in building social justice in Indonesia.

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach using the literature analysis method (library research). This approach was chosen because the research aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the concept of social classification in sports based on existing research results, theories, and scientific literature. Library research is considered an effective way to build a conceptual framework and generate knowledge synthesis without conducting direct field data collection. This approach allows researchers to examine the relationships between social concepts such as class, status, social capital, and access to participation with sports phenomena in various contexts, whether in physical education, recreational sports, or competitive sports.

The research subjects consist of literature including journal articles that discuss the relationship between sports and social aspects such as class, identity, and access to sports participation. The analyzed literature was selected based on specific criteria to ensure alignment with the research focus and academic validity. Data sources in this research come from Sinta-accredited national journal articles and reputable

international journals such as Scopus and Web of Science published from 2018 to the present. Literature selection focused on works that explicitly discuss sports sociology, physical education, access equality, social identity, or social mobility through sports. The data search process was conducted through online databases such as Google Scholar, DOAJ, Scopus, and Garuda Dikti using keywords such as "social classification in sports", "social class in sports", "sports sociology", "access and participation in sports", and "educational inequality in physical education".

The research procedure was conducted through several systematic stages. The first stage was literature identification based on predetermined keywords and inclusion criteria. The second stage involved source filtering to ensure relevance, authenticity, and literature quality, while avoiding duplication and non-academic sources. Subsequently, main information extraction was performed from each piece of literature, including research objectives, theories used, research findings, and the social context examined. The final stage was data grouping into major themes such as sports access and participation, the role of gender and social class, inclusive physical education, and social capital in sports.

The data collection technique in this research refers to systematic and transparent principles in literature analysis. Researchers collected data through in-depth reading of selected articles, then recorded important information related to the research focus. Each source was analyzed descriptively to find conceptual patterns that could be used as a basis for synthesis. Documentation of data collection results was conducted through reference management software such as Mendeley to ensure orderliness and citation accuracy.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis methods combined with a thematic approach. The analysis process followed the Miles et al., (2014) model, which includes three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. In the reduction stage, researchers filtered important information from each piece of literature according to the research focus. The display stage was conducted by grouping research results into conceptual themes such as social inequality, sports identity, and social mobility. The final stage involved drawing conclusions by comparing social theories and empirical findings to form a comprehensive conceptual synthesis.

Data validity in this research was maintained through source and theory triangulation techniques. Researchers compared various pieces of literature from different perspectives, including sociology, physical education, and sports policy, to ensure consistency in interpretation results. The validity of the analysis was strengthened through peer review of initial interpretation results by colleagues in the fields of sports education and social sciences. This process was conducted to maintain objectivity and credibility of research results so that the resulting synthesis could be scientifically justified.

Results

The results of the literature review indicate that social classification in sports is a complex phenomenon encompassing interactions between access to facilities and opportunities, the formation of identity and social status, and social mobility through sports. Each theme has its own dynamics influenced by economic factors, public policies, and broader social structures. The analyzed literature demonstrates that social inequality remains a fundamental issue in sports participation, whether in school contexts, communities, or at the professional level.

The first finding obtained from the literature analysis shows that access to sports facilities and opportunities is a dominant issue in social classification in the field of sports. The reviewed studies come from accredited national journals and reputable international journals. The observed aspects include barriers caused by cost factors, distance, unequal facility distribution, and limited certified coaches. Several studies also highlight the role of policies and institutions such as schools, local governments, and sports federations in opening or restricting such access. This analysis was conducted by examining patterns of facility distribution and sports policies in various regional contexts. To view in detail the synthesis results of research findings related to sports access and opportunities, please refer to Table 1.

Table 1. Literature Analysis from the Aspect of Sports Facilities and Opportunities.

Aspect	Main Findings	Findings from Previous Research	Social Implications
Financial and Economic Barriers	Family economic conditions largely determine the ability to participate in sports.	(1) Hobson et al., (2024) found that middle- and upper-class children were more likely to join sports clubs due to stronger financial capacity. (2) Somers et & Hoare, (2018) showed that many of junior high	Creates unequal opportunities for young athletes and reduces social diversity in the sports sphere.

Aspect	Main Findings	Findings from Previous Research	Social Implications
		students did not engage in extracurricular sports due to equipment costs. (3) Muammar, (2025) found that many young Indonesian athletes dropped out of training because of personal financial burdens.	
Distance and Facility Accessibility	Sports facilities remain concentrated in urban and elite schools.	(1) Muammar, (2025) identified a significant gap in public sports facilities. Some rural areas in England lack public sports facilities. (2) Fitriana et al., (2025) found that rural schools in Indonesia have fewer sports facilities than urban schools. (3) Guo et al., (2025) showed that rural children engage more in informal sports due to lack of infrastructure.	Spatial inequality decreases motivation and limits sports competence in remote regions.
Coaching and Training Programs	Quality and distribution of coaches influence the effectiveness of athlete development.	(1) Kubayi et al., (2021) found significant gap in the number of certified sports coaches between provinces. (2) Yang et al., (2024) observed that experienced sports coaches are more commonly found in big cities than in rural areas. (3) Purnomo et al., (2024) reported that regional sports schools in Indonesia often lack coaches for each sport.	Athlete development in rural areas becomes less effective, resulting in lower participation and achievement levels.
Role of Policy and Institutions	Government, school, and federation policies strongly influence sports inclusion.	(1) Hoekman et al., (2017) noted that local governments with higher sports grants showed more equitable participation rates. (2) Aulia & Jannah, (2024) explained that the Ministry of Youth and Sports (Kemenpora, 2020) through the <i>Grand Design of National Sports</i> emphasized inclusive access for all citizens. (3) Pasaribu et al., (2024) found that implementation of the national design remains suboptimal due to limited school sports funding.	Fair and inclusive policies can reduce social inequality in sports participation.

Based on the analysis results in Table 1, it is explained that access to sports facilities across various social strata still shows considerable inequality. The table demonstrates that the main barriers to sports access include participation costs, distance to facilities, and uneven distribution of coaches and infrastructure. Findings from Abusaada & Elshater, (2024), Dubey, (2021), Widdop et al., (2021) reinforce that lower-middle class communities face greater difficulties in participating in sports activities due to economic and infrastructural limitations. Urban areas tend to have more complete sports facilities such as stadiums, multifunctional fields, and certified coaches, whereas rural areas must utilize whatever open spaces are available. This condition causes sports participation to be unequal both socially and geographically.

Furthermore, based on the same literature review, public policy factors and educational institutions also influence this access inequality. Schools in areas with high budget support are able to provide diverse extracurricular sports activities, while schools with limited resources are unable to keep pace. Policies

such as the National Sports Grand Design (DBON) indeed aim to expand sports access, but their implementation has not yet reached all levels of society (Aulia & Jannah, 2024). This means that sports access depends not only on individual ability to participate but also on policy structures and equitable resource distribution. Therefore, disparities in sports access reflect a still unequal social structure and demand more effective and sustainable equalization policies.

The second result from the literature synthesis concerns identity and social status in sports. This shows that sports are not merely physical activities but also social arenas where individuals form self-image and gain recognition. Analysis was conducted on various national and international studies discussing the relationship between sports type selection and social status symbols, as well as how sports participation can influence social acceptance, self-confidence, and media exposure. These findings indicate a strong connection between social class, culture, and identity in sports participation. Further analysis results regarding the theme of identity and social status in sports can be seen in detail in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Literature Analysis from the Perspective of Identity and Social Status in Sports

Aspect	Main Findings	Findings from Previous Research	Social Implications
Status Symbol and Elitism	Certain sports represent social class and cultural capital.	(1) Andrade de Melo & Brown, (2020) described the “taste for the game” as a symbol of social capital in the world of sports. (2) Li et al., (2020) showed that golf and tennis are still viewed as elite sports. (3) Febrianty et al., (2024) identified elite sports in Indonesia include horse riding and modern archery.	Sports act as markers of social differentiation and class reproduction.
Self-Perception and Social Acceptance	Sports participation shapes self-identity and confidence.	(1) Son et al., (2021) found that school sports involvement increased students’ self-esteem. (2) Iman et al., (2023) showed that futsal participation enhanced peer acceptance among adolescents. (3) Guodong et al., (2016) found that martial arts training builds positive social image and community respect.	Sports serve as arenas for identity formation, solidarity, and social belonging.
Media and Social Representation	Media reinforces class, gender, and ethnic stereotypes.	(1) Hextrum et al., (2024) revealed that British sports media overrepresents white, middle-class male athletes. (2) Moehammad iqbal Sultan et al., (2024) found regional bias in Indonesian sports news coverage. (3) Xu et al., (2021) showed gender disparities in national online sports media.	Media shapes public perception of who is considered “worthy” of national representation.
School and Community Sports Culture	Schools act as sites for reproducing social identity through sport.	(1) Şengonul, (2022) argued that school sports generate new social status based on achievement. (2) Agustin, (2022) found that student-athletes receive higher recognition in public schools. (3) Arey & Levental, (2024) noted that campus sports club activities strengthen the solidarity of athletes, but also the exclusivity of the	School sports culture strengthens competition and hierarchy among students.

Aspect	Main Findings	Findings from Previous Research	Social Implications
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Based on the analysis results in Table 2, it can be explained that sports function not only as physical activities but also as symbols of identity and social status in society. The table shows that the choice of sports discipline often reflects a person's social position, where golf, tennis, and equestrian sports are often associated with the upper-middle class, while football and volleyball are closer to the lower-middle class. These findings align with research by Li et al., (2020) and Febrianty et al., (2024), which state that sports image is formed through social construction influenced by culture, economy, and media. Media representation of athletes and elite sports reinforces the perception that success in sports is synonymous with social prestige.

Furthermore, literature analysis by Agustin, (2022) and Iman et al., (2023) reveals that sports at both school and community levels can function as a means of positive social identity formation. Participation in sports activities provides a sense of togetherness, increases self-confidence, and expands social networks. However, new forms of exclusivity also emerge, where students or individuals with low economic capacity find it difficult to participate due to limited facilities and support. In other words, sports play a dual role as a means of social integration and simultaneously as an instrument of social class differentiation. This indicates that identity in sports is a result of complex social processes, not solely based on physical ability but also on the social and economic legitimacy attached to individuals and groups.

The third result from the literature review confirms that social mobility through sports is an important theme in understanding the role of sports as a means of social change. Analysis of various national literature and international literature shows that sports can open opportunities for vertical mobility through scholarships, professional contracts, and sponsor support, especially for individuals from low economic backgrounds. However, some research also highlights limitations to mobility due to minimal social networks, discrimination, and uneven facility standards. To view more complete synthesis results regarding social mobility through sports, please refer to Table 3 below.

Table 3. Literature Analysis from the Perspective of Social Mobility through Sports

Aspect	Main Findings	Findings from Previous Research	Social Implications
Success Stories from Lower Social Classes	Sports can serve as a medium for economic and social advancement.	(1) Magrath, (2021) reported that 60% of European footballers come from working-class families. (2) Prayoga et al., (2024) documented boxers who achieved economic improvement through sports. (3) Bagchi, (2022) noted that badminton athletes from poor families reached middle-class status via international success.	Confirms the potential of sports as a tool for vertical mobility.
Role of Scholarships and Sponsorships	Financial support is a key determinant for sustaining athletic careers.	(1) Westerbeek et al., (2025) found that sports scholarships increased participation among low-income students in Australia. (2) Putra et al., (2024) showed that merit-based scholarships in Indonesia sustain athlete education. (3) Phillips & Valbjørn, (2018) highlighted the contribution of local sponsors in supporting regional athletes to reach the national level.	Scholarships and sponsorships expand access and strengthen social equity in sports.
Limitations and	Structural barriers	(1) Su et al., (2020) emphasized	Social mobility remains

Aspect	Main Findings	Findings from Previous Research	Social Implications
Discrimination	continue to restrict mobility opportunities.	that elite social networks still determine athlete selection. (2) Mikkonen et al., (2021) identified regional and gender bias in athlete recruitment. (3) Xu et al., (2021) reported unequal facility access among provinces based on GDP levels.	uneven, depending on social capital and geography.
Gender Inequality and Representation	Women face structural and cultural barriers in sports participation.	(1) Tanni & Khan, (2024) highlighted persistent barriers to women's involvement in competitive sports. (2) Penggalih et al., (2025) found limited coaching support for female athletes in Indonesia. (3) Tompkins, (2023) revealed pay and recognition gaps between male and female athletes.	Gender bias reduces women's opportunities for mobility and representation in sports.

Based on the analysis results in Table 3, it can be explained that sports have great potential as a means of vertical social mobility, although these opportunities are still limited to certain conditions. The table shows three main findings from research by Prayoga et al., (2024), Magrath, (2021), and Hartmann (2020), which highlight that the success of athletes from low economic backgrounds often depends on external factors such as family support, sports scholarships, and early development opportunities. However, these opportunities are not evenly distributed because selection and development systems tend to favor individuals who already have access to facilities and professional coaches. Thus, sports have not yet fully become an inclusive means of social mobility.

Further analysis from studies by Putra et al., (2024) and Phillips & Valbjørn, (2018) shows that government policies and sponsor support are determining factors for successful social mobility through sports. Talented athlete development programs do open opportunities for upward social status through achievement, but this support is still concentrated on popular sports such as football, badminton, and athletics. Other sports disciplines that are less popular with the public often do not receive the same attention and support. This indicates that social mobility through sports is still tied to economic selectivity, sports discipline popularity, and the social networks that athletes possess. Therefore, for sports to truly function as a tool for social mobility, policies that favor equal opportunities, inclusive development access, and improved welfare for athletes from all social strata are needed.

Discussion

Based on the analysis results presented in Tables 1–3, it is evident that social classification has a real influence on access, identity, and social mobility in sports. These results are directly related to the research objectives, namely to understand how social structures shape patterns of participation and opportunities in the world of sports. The access inequality found in the literature Elsborg et al., (2019) & Volf et al., (2022) demonstrates that sports participation is not merely a matter of individual ability but also a result of structural factors such as facility distribution, public policy, and economic capacity. The fact that low-income groups tend to participate less supports Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of habitus and cultural capital, where access to cultural activities, including sports, is determined by the social and economic resources a person possesses. Thus, sports disparities reflect ongoing social reproduction in society.

Findings on the theme of social identity also reinforce the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism, where sports function as an arena for the formation of social meaning and self-status (Ekholm, 2019; Seippel & Bergesen Dalen, 2024). Sports such as golf, tennis, and equestrian are perceived as symbols of prestige, while football or volleyball are more closely associated with the working class. This explains why participation in certain sports is often linked to a person's social status. In the educational context, this condition shows that schools need to be wary of forms of sports elitism that can narrow the space for student participation from different social backgrounds. In line with Li & Zhang, (2025) view, physical education should be a vehicle for inclusive social learning, not an arena for reproducing inequality. In other words, the fact that some students struggle to participate is not only due to physical ability but also because of social and

symbolic barriers inherent in the sports environment.

Furthermore, research results also indicate that sports can serve as a pathway for social mobility, but its nature is highly selective. Only individuals who have systemic support such as coaching, scholarships, or sponsors are able to move up the social ladder through sports achievements (Bagchi, 2022; Westerbeek et al., 2025). This fact answers the research question about the extent to which sports play a role in expanding social opportunities. Within the Weberian theoretical framework of social mobility, the opportunity to rise in social class through sports is open but influenced by structural factors such as access to resources and institutional legitimacy. Thus, although sports appear egalitarian, in reality they are still limited by social mechanisms that select who can succeed. This condition reinforces Gerdin (2025) view that sports often function as a "mirror of society," reproducing social hierarchies rather than eliminating them.

The practical implications of these findings indicate the need for reorientation of sports education to be more responsive to social contexts. Physical education curricula need to be designed based on principles of social justice, as suggested by Guerrero & Puerta, (2023), paying attention to equal access, facility adaptation, and the involvement of all students without economic or gender discrimination. Physical education teachers and coaches play an important role in detecting social barriers and providing creative solutions so that all students can actively participate. They function not only as instructors of physical skills but also as agents of social change (Baptista et al., 2019). In addition, public policy must pay attention to the equitable distribution of sports facilities and resources in various regions. As reminded by Parry, (2019), so that sports do not only become the domain of certain groups but truly become a social right for all citizens.

By linking these findings to the context of theory and previous research, this discussion shows that inequality in sports is a reflection of a broader social system, and sports education has a strategic position to intervene in these conditions. When curriculum, policy, and teaching practices are directed toward the values of inclusivity and equality, sports can function as a means of social mobility and strengthening social cohesion, not merely as an arena for physical competition.

Conclusion

Based on the literature analysis results, it can be concluded that social classification is a significant factor in shaping access, identity, and opportunities for social mobility in sports. Economic inequality, facility distribution, and unequal public policies cause significant differences in the level of community participation in sports activities. Sports indeed have great potential as a means of social mobility and positive identity formation, but this potential is often limited by structural barriers such as resource constraints, exclusivity of certain sports disciplines, and lack of institutional support for lower-middle social groups. Therefore, a more socially conscious and inclusive approach to sports education is needed, one that emphasizes not only physical skill aspects but also justice and equality of participation. These findings are expected to serve as a reflection for educators, policymakers, and researchers to view sports not merely as a competitive arena but as a social learning space that has the potential to reduce inequality and strengthen social cohesion.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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