

Original articles**Reasons for Decreased Race-Walking Participation and Performance in Sri Lanka: A Qualitative Study**Kokilavani Kumar¹, Jeganenthiran Sellathurai^{12*}¹ Department of Sport Sciences and Physical Education, Faculty of Applied Sciences, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, Sri Lanka² School of Health Sciences, College of Education, Health & Human Development, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand*Corresponding author: jeganenthiran@gmail.com**Abstract**

Race walking is a technically complex athletic event that requires early skill acquisition, specialised coaching, and sustained institutional support for long-term athlete development. Despite its inclusion in national-level competitions, participation and performance in race walking in Sri Lanka have declined in recent years. This qualitative study explored factors contributing to this decline from the perspectives of key stakeholders. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with national-level race walkers (n = 5), experienced coaches (n = 5), and administrators from the Athletics Association of Sri Lanka (n = 5). Interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Six major factors were identified: technical difficulty of race walking, limited exposure at school level, lack of competitive opportunities, insufficient coaching expertise, inadequate institutional support, and low athlete interest. Participants emphasized the importance of introducing race walking in schools, improving coach education, expanding competition opportunities, and strengthening institutional support. The findings provide evidence-based insights to inform policy and practice aimed at improving race-walking participation and performance in Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Race walking; Sport participation; Coaching; Athlete development; Qualitative research**Introduction**

Race walking is a long-established athletic discipline that has been included in the Olympic Games since the early twentieth century and in international championships for several decades. The event is governed by strict technical rules requiring continuous ground contact and a straightened supporting leg, making it physically demanding and technically challenging (Marlow, 1990; Maughan et al., 2007; Hanley, 2013). Successful performance in race walking depends on early technical training, continuous coaching, and regular competitive exposure.

In Sri Lanka, race walking has been included in national-level competitions such as the National Sports Festival; however, both participation rates and performance outcomes have declined over time (Rajakaruna, 2017). Research in sport development suggests that limited grassroots participation, insufficient coaching expertise, and weak institutional support negatively influence athlete engagement and performance (Bailey et al., 2010;

Vierimaa et al., 2014). These challenges are particularly evident in technically demanding sports that require long-term athlete development pathways.

While previous studies have examined sport participation and development in Sri Lanka (Rathanayaka, 2015), there is limited research focusing specifically on race walking. Qualitative approaches are valuable for exploring stakeholder experiences and identifying contextual factors that influence sport participation and performance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2010). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the reasons for decreased race-walking participation and performance in Sri Lanka and to identify potential strategies for improvement from the perspectives of athletes, coaches, and administrators.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design was adopted to gain an in-depth understanding of factors influencing race-walking participation and performance. Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow participants to describe their experiences and perceptions in detail (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure inclusion of individuals with substantial experience in race walking. The sample comprised national-level race walkers ($n = 5$), race-walking coaches with a minimum of ten years of coaching experience ($n = 5$), and administrators affiliated with the Athletics Association of Sri Lanka ($n = 5$). Both male and female participants were included. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new themes emerged from the interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review committee prior to data collection. All participants received written information regarding the purpose of the study, confidentiality procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Data Collection

Data were collected between October 2022 and January 2023 using a semi-structured interview guide developed with input from an expert in qualitative research and athletics. The interview guide was pilot tested to ensure clarity and relevance. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with permission, and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and further elaborated by Byrne (2022). The analysis involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development and refinement of themes, and interpretation of findings. An inductive approach

was used, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was ensured through strategies addressing credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data and inclusion of participant quotations. Dependability was supported by maintaining a clear audit trail of analytic decisions. Confirmability was addressed through reflexive discussions among the researchers to minimize bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010).

Results

Analysis of the interview data revealed six major themes influencing race-walking participation and performance in Sri Lanka.

Technical Difficulty of Race Walking

Participants described race walking as a highly technical event requiring precise movement patterns and strict adherence to rules.

“Race walking is very technical, and even small mistakes can lead to disqualification, which discourages young athletes.” (Coach 2)

Limited School-Level Exposure

The lack of race walking in school sports programmes was identified as a key barrier to early athlete development.

“Most schools do not introduce race walking at all, so students never get the chance to learn the event.” (Administrator 1)

Limited Competitive Opportunities

Participants reported that the small number of competitions reduced athlete motivation and performance development.

“We have very few competitions each year, and without competition experience it is hard to improve.” (Athlete 4)

Insufficient Coaching Expertise

A shortage of coaches with specialized race-walking knowledge was highlighted.

“There are only a few coaches who really understand race-walking technique and rules.” (Coach 5)

Inadequate Institutional Support

Athletes and coaches expressed concern about limited funding, facilities, and incentives.

“Race walking receives less attention and support compared to other events.” (Athlete 1)

Low Athlete Interest

Low participation was linked to technical difficulty and limited exposure.

“Athletes prefer other events because race walking looks difficult and has fewer opportunities.” (Administrator 3)

Discussion

The findings indicate that the decline in race-walking participation and performance in Sri Lanka is influenced by technical, developmental, and institutional factors. The technical complexity of race walking requires early exposure and specialized coaching, consistent with previous research highlighting the biomechanical and technical demands of the event (Hanley, 2013; Vinogradova & Sovenko, 2020). Limited school-level exposure restricts talent identification and long-term athlete development. Sport development literature emphasizes the importance of early engagement and structured youth programmes in sustaining participation and performance (Bailey et al., 2010; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). The absence of such pathways in race walking may explain declining participation.

Insufficient coaching expertise and limited competition opportunities further hinder athlete progression. Effective coach education and continuous professional development are critical for improving technical instruction and athlete outcomes (Cushion et al., 2003; Nash & Collins, 2006). In addition, regular competitive exposure is essential for maintaining motivation and developing performance capacity. Institutional support also plays a vital role in athlete retention and success. Previous research has shown that funding, infrastructure, and policy support significantly influence sport development outcomes (De Bosscher et al., 2006). Strengthening collaboration between

schools, sport federations, and government agencies may therefore help address the challenges identified in this study.

International Context of Race-Walking Development

Race walking has achieved sustained success in several developed countries and in some developing nations largely due to structured long-term athlete development systems. Early exposure, systematic skill progression, and continuous competitive engagement are critical for success in technically demanding sports (Bailey et al., 2010; Vierimaa et al., 2014). In countries such as Japan, China, Australia, and several European nations, race walking is introduced at the school or junior club level, allowing athletes to develop correct technique from an early age and reduce the risk of disqualification at higher levels of competition.

Another key factor contributing to international success is the availability of specialized coaching. Coach education and sport-specific expertise are essential for athlete performance and retention, particularly in events governed by strict technical rules (Cushion et al., 2003; Nash & Collins, 2006). In successful race-walking nations, coaches receive targeted training in biomechanics, judging regulations, and event-specific conditioning, which enhances athlete confidence and technical consistency. Regular access to competitive opportunities further distinguishes countries where race walking is flourishing. Competition exposure supports performance development, motivation, and international readiness (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

In contrast, Sri Lanka’s race-walking system lacks several of these elements, including early talent identification, specialized coaching pathways, and consistent competitive exposure. These limitations may restrict athlete development and contribute to declining participation and performance. Adapting evidence-based practices from successful international models, while considering local constraints, may be essential for revitalizing race walking in Sri Lanka.

Future Directions and Recommendations

The findings suggest several practical strategies for improving race-walking participation and performance in Sri Lanka. First, integrating race walking into school-level physical education and

inter-school competitions could facilitate early exposure and technical skill acquisition. Early engagement is a key factor in sustaining long-term athlete development in technically complex sports (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005; Bailey et al., 2010). Second, structured coach education programmes focused specifically on race walking should be established. Providing coaches with formal training in event-specific technique, judging rules, and athlete development principles may enhance coaching quality and reduce technical errors among athletes. Continuous professional development opportunities could further support coaches in adopting modern training methodologies. Third, increasing the number and frequency of competitive opportunities at district, provincial, and national levels may improve athlete motivation and performance progression. Competition exposure plays a critical role in developing performance capacity and maintaining athlete engagement (De Bosscher et al., 2006). Finally, stronger institutional support from governing bodies is essential. Investment in facilities, access to sports science services, and long-term development policies may contribute to a more sustainable race-walking system. Collaborative efforts involving schools, athletic clubs, coaches, and sport administrators are necessary to ensure the long-term growth and international competitiveness of race walking in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

This study identified multiple factors contributing to decreased race-walking participation and performance in Sri Lanka, including technical difficulty, limited school-level exposure, insufficient competitions, lack of specialized coaching, inadequate institutional support, and low athlete interest. Lessons from countries where race walking flourishes highlight the importance of structured long-term athlete development, early exposure, systematic skill progression, and access to specialized coaching. Addressing these challenges in Sri Lanka through school-level introduction of race walking, improved coach education, expanded competition structures, and stronger institutional support may enhance participation and performance. These findings provide practical guidance for policymakers, coaches, and sport administrators

seeking to revitalize race walking and support sustainable athlete development in the country.

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Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Administrators and Coaches Associated with AASL

Code	Role	Gender	Years of Experience	Position / Achievements
A1	Administrator	Male	20	Technical Officer
A2	Administrator	Male	20	Technical Officer
A3	Administrator	Male	19	Technical Officer
B1	Coach	Female	20	Trained 5 National and 4 International Athletes
B2	Coach	Male	30	Trained 7 National Athletes
B3	Coach	Male	19	Trained 6 National and 2 International Athletes
B4	Coach	Male	21	Trained 7 National and 4 International Athletes
B5	Coach	Male	30	Trained 5 National and 4 International Athletes

Table 2. Competitive Achievements of Selected Sri Lankan Race Walking Athletes

Code	Gender	Achievements
C1	Female	National record holder; Asian Championship 4th (2003), World Championship 61st (2004), Commonwealth Games participant (2006)
C2	Male	3rd place – 2022 Open National Festival; 6th place – 2021 Open National Festival
C3	Female	1st–3rd places in Union & Youth National Championships; 6th–8th in Open National Festival
C4	Female	2nd–3rd places in Union National Championships; 5th–6th in Open National Festival