

IMPACT OF EXTRINSIC AND INTRINSIC INCENTIVES ON THE PERFORMANCE OF ELITE TRACK AND FIELD ATHLETES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The study investigated the impact of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations on the performance of top track and field athletes in Nigeria. It especially looks at how athletes' motivation, resilience, and performance results are impacted by monetary rewards, non-monetary acknowledgment, personal fulfilment, and goal completion. The study examines the motivational processes that link well-designed incentives to consistently high performance, drawing on Self-Determination Theory and Expectancy Theory. The subject is contextualized through real-world examples, such as the Olympic incentive schemes and Nigeria's National Sports Festival. According to the review's findings, intrinsic rewards are essential for promoting long-term dedication and moral behaviour, even while extrinsic incentives might produce temporary performance increases. The study suggests that incentive systems be culturally responsive, that reward distribution be transparent, and that both incentive types be integrated. These insights provide valuable guidance for coaches, sports administrators, and policymakers seeking to enhance athlete motivation and performance in competitive sports.

Keywords: *incentives, athletic performance, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, track and field, Nigeria.*

Introduction

Professional proficiency, psychological preparedness, environmental support networks, and physical conditioning all have an impact on athletic performance, which is a complex result. Motivation is one of these elements that is commonly recognised as being crucial to an athlete's performance, perseverance, and consistency in competitive settings (Weinberg & Gould, 2019). A key factor in determining motivation and focusing performance-related efforts are incentives, which are characterized as rewards or stimuli intended to promote particular behaviours. These incentives might be internal (such self-satisfaction, skill mastery, and the thrill of competition) or extrinsic (like monetary prizes, scholarships, and public recognition) (Deci & Ryan, 2018).

The use of incentives has been particularly prevalent in Nigerian sports, particularly in top track and field competitions, where players are frequently motivated to perform at their best by the prospect of cash bonuses, chances for professional growth, and national recognition (Akindutire & Adegboyega, 2021). However, if extrinsic rewards are not properly balanced, they can occasionally erode intrinsic motivation, a phenomenon known as the "crowding out" effect (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). This is true even when extrinsic rewards may offer temporary performance improvements. On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that intrinsic incentives promote sustained excellence, ethical behaviour, and long-term commitment (Razali, Ramli, & Alias, 2024).

Motivational theories like Self-Determination Theory, which shows autonomy, competence, and relatedness as motivators, and Expectancy Theory, which connects effort to performance through perceived reward value, serve as the foundation for the strategic use of incentives in sports (Vroom, 1964; Deci & Ryan, 2018). An understanding of how well-crafted incentive systems can improve both short-term and long-term performance outcomes can be gained by applying these frameworks to the elite track and field environment in Nigeria. Therefore, using theoretical analysis and real-world examples, this research critically investigates how extrinsic and intrinsic incentives affect the performance of elite Nigerian track and field athletes. It then suggests strategies for long-term motivation and performance excellence.

The concept of sports incentives

The concept of incentives is essential to understanding behavioural dynamics in a variety of domains. In general, incentives are seen to be elements that motivate people to behave in a particular way, functioning as important motivators during the decision-making process. "In economics, incentives refer to factors that motivate individuals to act in a certain way," noted Kumar and Gayathri (2023), underscoring their widespread influence on decisions. This idea is further reinforced by Li, Deng, and Sun (2024), who assert that incentives have a significant impact on employee motivation, emotion, and cognition, hence impacting behaviour and decision-making. In addition to their overall ability to motivate, incentives are distinguished by their concrete manifestations and real-world uses. Incentives are described more specifically by Usman et al. (2022) as "any kind of compensation that is given to an

employee in the form of cash," or more generally as "the objective criteria where an individual simply wants to establish quantifiable standards for performance." The functional strength of incentives is further demonstrated by Rathod and Kulkarni (2023), who point out that they can "help influence behaviour," especially in situations where people must put their immediate demands ahead of long-term gains. This helps to motivate particular behaviours in difficult circumstances.

Types of Incentives in Sports

Based on where they originate from, incentives in sports can be divided into two categories: extrinsic and intrinsic. The way that various incentive structures affect athlete behaviour, effort regulation, and performance results is clarified by this classification, which is well-established in sport psychology and motivation research (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2018; Weinberg & Gould, 2019).

1. Extrinsic Incentives

Extrinsic incentives are rewards often provided by coaches, sponsors, sports organizations, or the public. They are typically tangible and measurable, such as financial bonuses, salaries, and sponsorship deals, although they can also include intangible forms of external recognition like awards, titles, and public praise (Deci & Ryan, 2018; Hamzah & Matkhairuddin, 2023; Nyirenda, Nyirenda, & Jere, 2024). Such incentives are designed to influence behaviour by linking performance to desirable outcomes, thereby encouraging athletes to exert greater effort and maintain high levels of competitiveness (Vroom, 1964; Weinberg & Gould, 2019).

Monetary Rewards: These are observable financial incentives intended to encourage greater levels of effort and achievement. They include salary, sponsorship deals, performance-based bonuses, prize money, and appearance fees. Because they offer immediate, measurable advantages that can sharpen focus, boost training intensity, and strengthen competitive drive, monetary incentives are widely acknowledged as successful short-term motivators (Nyirenda, Nyirenda, & Jere, 2024; Weinberg & Gould, 2019; Lawler, 1973; Vroom, 1964). Events like the National Sports Festival and the Olympic Games, where medalists frequently receive substantial monetary incentives from state governments, national sports agencies, and private sponsors, are where their influence is most noticeable in Nigeria. In addition to acting as immediate incentives, these bonuses offer vital financial support, allowing athletes to pay for training plans, purchase gear, and cover personal expenses (Akindutire & Adegboyega, 2021; Muwanga & Kimani, 2019). Outstanding results have often resulted in long-term career advantages like lucrative corporate endorsements or jobs in sports administration, which further supports the motivating power of financial rewards in top Nigerian sports.

Non-Monetary External Rewards: Public recognition, medals, trophies, honorary titles, and other symbolic recognitions that acknowledge sports accomplishment without offering direct money recompense are examples of non-monetary external benefits. It has been demonstrated that these intangible rewards have a major impact on athlete motivation by raising social standing, bolstering one's reputation both personally and professionally, and creating a feeling of pride and community (Hamzah & Matkhairuddin, 2023; Njororai, 2020; Weinberg & Gould,

2019). Elite sports frequently feature national honours, public ceremonies, and media attention as outward symbols of achievement that can motivate sustained dedication and hard work. These types of acknowledgment boost an athlete's marketability and validate their achievements in the eyes of the public and peers, which may lead to sponsorship opportunities and career advancement (Okeke, Chinedu, & Abiola, 2022; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2021). The awarding of chieftaincy titles, state celebrations for medal-winning athletes, and inclusion in national honours lists are a few instances in Nigeria that serve to both build the athlete's identity within the sporting community and bolster their sense of achievement.

2. Intrinsic Incentives

Intrinsic incentives are rewards derived from the internal satisfaction of performing an activity. They focus on the athlete's psychological fulfilment rather than external gain (Frontiers narrative review, 2025; Zhang, Huang & Wang, 2024). Personal Satisfaction and Mastery: The profound sense of achievement, self-improvement, and skill mastery that athletes feel when they accomplish personally significant goals is referred to as personal satisfaction and mastery in sports (Razali, Ramli, & Alias, 2024). Even in the absence of outside incentives, this type of intrinsic motivation cultivates a self-determined drive that keeps up effort throughout time (Zhang, Huang, & Wang, 2024; Kostopoulos et al., 2024). Mastery-driven athletes are more likely to train intentionally, rise to difficulties, and see failures as chances for improvement rather than as a challenge to their performance (Frontiers in Psychology, 2025). Self-Determination Theory's competence component, which holds that meeting this psychological demand improves perseverance, resilience, and overall performance quality, is consistent with this kind of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2018; Frontiers in Psychology, 2025). In comparison to athletes who are driven primarily by extrinsic rewards, mastery-oriented athletes exhibit higher levels of long-term commitment, lower risk of burnout, and greater satisfaction with their athletic careers, according to studies conducted in both elite and amateur sport contexts (Kostopoulos et al., 2024; Weinberg & Gould, 2019).

Enjoyment and Passion for the Sport: Beyond material rewards, intrinsic motivators such as love and enthusiasm for the activity are essential for maintaining athlete involvement. According to a number of studies, athletes who truly enjoy their sport and have a sense of fulfilment, flow, and personal relevance are more likely to remain dedicated and perform better over time (Rodrigues et al., 2024; Shannon et al., 2023). This motivation is derived from meeting basic psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness, in a nurturing, growth-oriented setting, according to Self-Determination Theory (Self-Determination Theory framework, 2025). For instance, it was found that young football players who exhibited greater satisfaction in mid-season evaluations were more inspired and involved over time, particularly when raised in task-involving settings that prioritize mastery and individual growth (Rodrigues et al., 2024). Even in the face of little outside incentives, this internal source of enthusiasm fosters long-term physical development term motivational anchors (intrinsic) with the aid of this dual classification. For long-term athletic success, the two must be equally integrated.

Theoretical Foundation of Incentives

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is the most appropriate paradigm for this study and offers the finest perspective on the motivational impact of rewards in sports. According to SDT, which was first put forth by Deci and Ryan and has since been refined in sports psychology studies, optimal performance is attained when the fundamental psychological demands for relatedness, competence, and autonomy are met (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2024). Incentives work best in high-level sports, such as Nigerian track and field, when they go beyond financial compensation to promote a feeling of autonomy, competence, and community (McLean & Mallett, 2024). For example, while a monetary award for winning a medal can serve to reinforce competence, it can also strengthen autonomy and relatedness when combined with organized training support and team leadership chances. According to recent research, incentives that are in line with these needs improve intrinsic motivation, which maintains resilience, ethical behaviour, and long-term engagement (McLean & Mallett, 2024). SDT does, however, caution against the "crowding out" effect, which occurs when an athlete's focus is diverted entirely to external validation or autonomy is compromised by an overemphasis on extrinsic rewards, so undermining intrinsic motivation.

A more thorough explanation of how incentives function in competitive sport can be obtained by combining Expectancy Theory and Goal-Setting Theory, even if SDT gives the main explanatory framework. By connecting motivation to the conviction that effort will result in better performance (expectancy), that performance will be rewarded (instrumentality), and that the reward has personal significance (valence), Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964) explains the decision-making process behind athlete effort. This viewpoint is also important for making sure that rewards are seen as realistic, equitable, and personally fulfilling, all of which are prerequisites for meeting SDT's psychological demands (Nyirenda et al., 2024). This is supported by goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002), which demonstrates that rewards linked to clear, difficult, but attainable objectives aid in maintaining focus and effort, particularly when feedback is given (Santos et al., 2020). By integrating these theories, incentive systems are guaranteed to meet athletes' psychological needs (SDT), uphold a distinct and inspiring relationship between performance, effort, and reward (Expectancy Theory), and emphasize the importance of goal-setting and structured, quantifiable objectives (Goal-Setting Theory). When combined, they offer a strong framework for creating incentive schemes that maximize both short-term performance results and long-term athlete growth.

Case Study: Incentives in Practice

The use of various incentive schemes in professional sports provides useful context for understanding how abstract ideas are applied to actual results. From a Self-Determination Theory (SDT) perspective, the most effective incentives are those that promote competence, autonomy, and relatedness, while also aligning with the expectancy and goal-setting processes that sustain motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Rodrigues et al., 2024).

D) Nigeria's National Sports Festival: An excellent example of a multi-layered incentive scheme is the National Sports Festival in Nigeria. Athletes gain from career

options including recruitment into state sports councils or military and paramilitary agencies in addition to the immediate financial advantages, which frequently include cash bonuses and scholarships (Akindutire & Adegboyega, 2021). By enhancing social ties and validating athletes' contributions to community pride, public recognition through award ceremonies, media attention, and state banquets promotes relatedness (Njororai, 2020). According to SDT, the combination of material rewards (which improve competence) and social validation (which improve relatedness) encourages both immediate performance gains and sustained athlete involvement. However, openness and equity in the distribution of rewards are crucial for the motivational effect, and their absence has been connected to athlete discontent (Ariyo & Yusuf, 2023).

ii) The Olympic Games: A global illustration of performance-based reward systems is the Olympic Games. Along with non-monetary rewards like a lifetime stipends or national awards, many nations, such as the US, Singapore, and Nigeria, provide sizeable medal bonuses (Muwanga & Kimani, 2019). By acknowledging exceptional skill achievement, these awards satisfy SDT's competence demand and can strengthen ties through pride in one's country and prestige abroad (McLean & Mallett, 2024). According to research, athletes are more likely to sustain effort and focus during the rigorous four-year Olympic cycle if they believe these rewards are just, achievable, and personally relevant (Nyirenda et al., 2024). Additionally, Goal-Setting Theory is reflected in how Olympic incentives are tied to clear performance benchmarks, such as podium finishes or national record-breaking performances, providing concrete targets that sustain long-term motivation (Santos et al., 2020).

iii) European Football Clubs: A common practice in elite leagues where competitive success directly affects revenue and brand value, performance-based incentive systems embedded within contractual agreements are exemplified by European football clubs in the professional sports landscape (Franck & Nüesch, 2012; Müller et al., 2017). According to Herm et al. (2014) and Franck & Lang (2014), these contracts usually tie extra money to quantifiable goals, assists, the ability to keep clean sheets, or reaching group goals like winning league titles, cup competitions, or getting into lucrative tournaments like the UEFA Champions League. Clubs can reduce moral hazard risks and maintain competitive performance over a season by explicitly linking pay to quantifiable performance, which also ensures that compensation reflects on-field impact and aligns player incentives with larger organizational goals (Franck & Lang, 2014; Frick, 2011). According to empirical research, well-designed performance pay improves top talent's motivation, focus, and retention while fostering a strong performance culture that supports both individual and group success (Bryson, Frick, & Simmons, 2014).

Table 1

Types of Incentives, Their Motivational Effect, and Impact on Athletic Performance

Incentives Types	Examples	Motivational Effect	Impact on Performance	Supporting Literature
Monetary Bonus	Sponsorship deals, appearance fees, medal bonuses	External motivation driven by tangible rewards	Short-term performance boost; increased effort in competitive settings	Nyirenda, Nyirenda, & Jere (2024); Lawal <i>et al.</i> (2024)
Public Recognition	Award presentations, medals, national honours	Mixed Motivation; combines extrinsic recognition with intrinsic pride	Increased confidence; boosts morale; inconsistent effect on sustained performance	Njororai (2020); McLean & Mallett (2024)
Praise and Encouragement	Support from fans, peers, family, and national pride	Intrinsic Motivation, driven by emotional fulfilment and belonging	Long-term performance improvement; enhanced resilience	Rodrigues <i>et al.</i> (2024); Shannon <i>et al.</i> (2023)
Playing Time.	Starting positions, increased match participation	Performance-Based Motivation, reward linked to demonstrated ability	Heightened effort, skill application and commitment to training	Franck & Lang (2014); Frick (2011)

Adapted from Nyirenda, Nyirenda, & Jere (2024).

Ethical and Psychological Concerns

Extrinsic motivators like cash bonuses and public recognition must be balanced with intrinsic motivators like mastery, autonomy, and personal development in order to create an incentive system that is both ethical and effective (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Kvaløy & Olsen, 2016). Extrinsic rewards can be strong short-term performance boosters, but studies in organizational behaviour and sports psychology caution that in order to maintain long-term engagement, they work best when combined with intrinsic motivators (Frey, Homberg, & Osterloh, 2013; Vallerand, 2012). For instance, offering medal bonuses at national competitions in addition to professional development opportunities, like leadership positions or access to cutting-edge training facilities, fosters autonomy and relatedness, two essential elements of Self-Determination Theory, while also reinforcing competence (Rodrigues et al., 2024).

Excessive dependence on incentives has significant negative consequences. Excessive reliance, especially on external rewards, can have serious unintended consequences, even when incentives are effective instruments for promoting behaviour and performance (Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2020). The possibility of decreased intrinsic motivation, sometimes known as the "crowding-out effect," is one of the main worries. People's internal drive may decrease when they get rewards for work that they may otherwise find important or enjoyable, causing them to focus more on the reward than the satisfaction of the activity itself (Frey & Jegen, 2001; Kvaløy & Olsen, 2016). This weakens self-motivated participation and encourages a transactional mentality that puts short-term benefits ahead of long-term growth.

Furthermore, ethical transgressions might be triggered by extreme pressure to meet goals and receive rewards. The desire for large financial bonuses or social recognition in highly competitive settings can lead athletes to compromise their moral character and participate in illegal activities like match-fixing to manipulate results for financial gain or doping to obtain an unfair advantage (Petróczi, 2021; Engelberg et al., 2012). Another example is age cheating, which is frequently motivated by the desire to obtain prizes and recognition, especially in youth sports where eligibility criteria might impact future job possibilities (Haugen, 2020).

Team cohesion can also be harmed by perceptions of an unfair or unclear incentive distribution. Resentment and jealousy can develop when awards are not fairly given or adequately explained, which lowers morale and undermines confidence (Ariyo & Yusuf, 2023; Rocha & Chelladurai, 2011). These divisions erode cooperation and impair group performance in collaborative contexts. This emphasizes how crucial it is to have open and fair reward structures that not only acknowledge individual efforts but also support common goals.

In essence, incentives are essential for focusing efforts and accomplishing goals, but there are risks associated with their improperly planned or uneven use. Creating incentives that stimulate desired actions without suppressing intrinsic drive, promoting unethical behaviour, or causing team dynamics to break down due to perceived injustices is a delicate balance (Frey, Homberg, & Osterloh, 2013; Deci & Ryan, 2000). For incentive programs to be in line with moral principles and encourage long-term participation, sports organizations and legislators must carefully examine the psychological, behavioural, and cultural effects over the long run.

Balancing Incentive System

Extrinsic motivators like cash bonuses and public recognition must be balanced with intrinsic motivators like mastery, autonomy, and personal development in order to create an incentive system that is both ethical and effective (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Kvaløy & Olsen, 2016). Extrinsic rewards can be strong short-term performance boosters, but studies in organizational behaviour and sports psychology caution that in order to maintain long-term engagement, they work best when combined with intrinsic motivators (Frey, Homberg, & Osterloh, 2013; Vallerand, 2012). For instance, offering medal bonuses at national competitions in addition to professional development opportunities, like leadership positions or access to cutting-

edge training facilities, fosters autonomy and relatedness, two essential elements of Self-Determination Theory, while also reinforcing competence (Rodrigues et al., 2024).

Reward distribution that is transparent and equitable is also essential for preserving team cohesiveness and motivation. Research indicates that athletes' trust in management rises when they believe that criteria are stated properly and incentive allocation is fair, which lowers interpersonal conflict and performance drop (Rocha & Chelladurai, 2011; Ariyo & Yusuf, 2023). On the other hand, it is possible for perceived unfairness or unclear selection procedures to cause discontent, lower morale, and divert attention from group objectives (Haugen, 2020). Furthermore, individual and cultural variations in motivational preferences must be taken into consideration by incentive systems that are effective. In certain situations, social recognition might be more important than money, whereas in others, effort might be primarily motivated by financial stability (Shaw & Gupta, 2015). The necessity of customized strategies that honour athletes' values, cultural customs, and career stages is made clear by this.

Finally, incentive programs should prioritize long-term development above short-term profits in order to prevent the creation of a "win-at-all-costs" mentality. In addition to performance measurements, this can be accomplished by rewarding moral behaviour, learning new skills, and contributions to team culture (Frey & Jegen, 2001; Petróczi, 2021). Incentives that are designed in this manner not only produce quantifiable outcomes but also complement the larger ideals of honesty, sustainability, and athlete welfare, fostering an atmosphere in order for optimal performance to be attained and sustained without sacrificing morality or internal motivation.

Conclusion

This study emphasises how important incentives are in determining sports motivation and performance, whether they are intrinsic (such as passion, mastery, and personal fulfilment) or extrinsic (like monetary rewards and public acclaim). Evidence shows that well-designed incentive schemes may greatly increase athletes' dedication, resiliency, and competitive performance. This is evident in both the Nigerian athletic environment, particularly the National Sports Festival, and international venues, such as the Olympic Games. Self-Determination Theory provides the best theoretical framework for explanation, emphasizing that incentives work best when they meet the fundamental psychological demands of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The integration of Expectancy Theory and Goal-Setting Theory further clarifies that incentives must be perceived as attainable, linked to performance, and tied to specific, challenging goals in order to sustain motivation.

Therefore, incentives play a dual role in performance: in the short term, they can produce instant performance gains by focusing effort on quantifiable results; in the long term, when paired with intrinsic motivators, they promote ethical behaviour, long-term engagement, and personal growth. This effect is dependent on thoughtful design, though, which guarantees openness, equity, and cultural relevance while avoiding over-reliance that can weaken intrinsic motivation or result in unethical behaviour. Creating incentive programs that go beyond transactional exchanges to

foster an atmosphere where athletes are motivated not just to win but also to develop, contribute, and maintain greatness throughout their careers is a challenge for lawmakers, sports administrators, and coaches.

Recommendation

Sports organizations and legislators should do the following to increase athlete motivation and performance:

i) Combine the two incentive types: To prevent relying too much on one kind of reward, a balanced strategy is essential. Extrinsic incentives, such as cash payouts and public acclaim, can enhance performance temporarily, but in order to promote sustained excellence and long-term dedication, they need to be combined with intrinsic motivators. For example, provide leadership positions and professional development opportunities in addition to monetary bonuses to foster a sense of competence and independence.

ii) Assure fairness and transparency: To keep the team cohesive and stop morale from dropping, rewards must be given out in a fair and transparent manner. Athletes' trust in management rises when they believe that the criteria are presented properly and that the incentive allocation method is fair. This lowers conflict and boosts performance. On the other hand, a lack of openness can result in interpersonal problems and discontent.

iii) Promote long-term development: Rather than focusing only on short-term benefits, incentive programs should be created to support athletes' long-term development. This can be accomplished by rewarding contributions to team culture, skill development, and moral behaviour in addition to performance indicators. This strategy aids in fostering a sustainable and honest culture.

iv) Implement culturally sensitive structures: Incentive systems should be modified to account for cultural and individual variances in motivating preferences. In some settings, social recognition and national pride could carry more worth than financial gains. In order to guarantee that the incentives are both effective and personally meaningful, it is crucial to design a system that respects athletes' values and career stages.

Following these suggestions, Coaches, sports officials, and legislators may provide a comprehensive environment that promotes excellence and supports athletes' long-term careers and well-being.

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