



Woman and sport: academic background and its association with social support and self-esteem

Mujer y deporte: formación académica y su asociación con el apoyo social y la autoestima

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Abstract

Introduction: The media and economic visibility of women's sports has a distinct social impact compared to that of men's sports. The professional future of female athletes may be influenced by several factors of interest.

Objective: To analyze the perceptions of female athletes regarding their academic training in relation to support and self-esteem.

Methodology: The participants were 243 Spanish professional or semi-professional female athletes. The instruments used were the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support and a self-esteem test. In addition, personal and training data were collected from the athletes. Data analysis included descriptive statistics, Student's t test and ANOVA.

Results: The athletes generally had an intermediate to high level of education, although their studies were not directly related to their sport. The social received from others influenced the branch of knowledge chosen for their studies, and those with family support viewed establishing partnerships with companies as a viable alternative for entering the labor market. Self-esteem was higher among athletes pursuing university degrees.

Discussion: Based on previous studies, issues related to dual careers, perceived social support and the self-esteem of female athletes were discussed.

Conclusions: It seems necessary to address this reality from a gender perspective, exploring the barriers to labor market integration. Some practical implications are described, such as the development of programs that promote self-esteem and social support to enhance the compatibility between academic studies and athletic careers, facilitating a shift in mindset within society and sports organizations.

Keywords

Academic background; self-esteem; social support; sport; women.

Resumen

Introducción: La repercusión mediática y económica del deporte femenino tiene un impacto social distinto al de los deportes masculinos. El futuro profesional de las deportistas puede verse influido por varios factores de interés.

Objetivo: Analizar las percepciones de deportistas sobre su formación académica en relación con el apoyo y la autoestima.

Metodología: Las participantes fueron 243 deportistas españolas profesionales o semiprofesionales. Los instrumentos utilizados fueron la Escala Multidimensional de Apoyo Social Percibido y un test de autoestima. Se recopilaron datos personales y de formación de las deportistas. Se utilizó estadística descriptiva, t de Student y ANOVA.

Resultados: Las deportistas presentaban un nivel educativo entre medio y alto, aunque sus estudios no estaban directamente relacionados con su deporte. El apoyo social recibido de otras personas influyó en la rama de conocimiento elegida para sus estudios, y aquellas que contaban con el apoyo familiar consideraban que establecer alianzas con empresas era una alternativa viable para ingresar al mercado laboral. La autoestima era más alta entre las atletas que cursaban estudios universitarios.

Discusión: Basándose en estudios anteriores, se discutieron cuestiones relacionadas con la doble carrera, el apoyo social percibido y la autoestima de las atletas femeninas.

Conclusiones: Parece necesario abordar esta realidad desde una perspectiva de género, explorando las barreras para la integración en el mercado laboral. Se describen algunas implicaciones prácticas, como el desarrollo de programas que promuevan la autoestima y el apoyo social para mejorar la compatibilidad entre estudios académicos y carreras deportivas, facilitando un cambio de mentalidad dentro de la sociedad y las organizaciones deportivas.

Palabras clave

Formación académica; autoestima; apoyo social; deporte; mujeres.

Introduction

Over the last few years, women's professional sport has grown dramatically (Johnston & Weatherington, 2018). The increase in the number of fans, broadcasts, competitions and advertising revenue are some of the most important milestones. However, an explosion has not been matched by research offering insights or solutions regarding the future employment prospects of female sports professionals. This may be due to the fact that the most of women's sport is semi-professional and amateur in nature (Ronkainen et al., 2020).

Since 1994, the International Conference on Women and Sport has emphasised the need to support professionalisation in all its dimensions. Ten fundamental principles were adopted, among which sport information and research hold a key place (Brauner, 2015).

The choice of a particular sport, and specifically a team sport, is based on various reasons: the context, the characteristics of the sport, the economic possibilities of access to it and self-esteem, among others (Moral-García et al., 2021). In the specific case of women, the practice of sport is not related to a specific future career in sport, but rather as a complement or extracurricular activity.

In terms of the level of professionalisation, women still suffer from the glass ceiling that does not allow them to compete with men in terms of salaries and media impact (Martínez-Abajo et al., 2020). With a few exceptions, such as the Burela futsal club in Spain, which has been a pioneer in the creation of a labour agreement to regulate the conditions of its female players, professionalisation is far from being a reality. Many find athletes who, despite being able to combine national and international competitions with studies, do not receive any salary (Mogaji et al., 2021).

In relation to academic training in elite female athletes, although studies are seen as a priority (Perez-Rivases et al., 2020), high-level sporting competition is only really carried out when it is backed by success or outstanding triumphs, and compatibility with other work or training activities is often overlooked. In general, female athletes prioritise a stable professional future over an uncertain career where economic conditions are far removed from those found in male sports (Heineken, 2018).

Social support is understood as a person's perception of feeling loved, valued, and part of a social network that provides affection, care, and help when needed. Numerous studies have highlighted its relevance to different health factors such as the perception of well-being, coping skills and anxiety reduction (Astutik et al., 2025; Lei et al., 2019; Nurullah, 2012). Recently, for example, it has been shown that perceived social support plays a very significant role in improving the mental wellbeing, self-esteem and school readiness among abandoned children and also plays a positive role in psychological resilience (Shi, 2022).

In the case of female athletes, it can be understood as the emotional, informational, or practical assistance they receive from people with whom they have meaningful relationships (Thoits, 2010). In this context, it is considered an external resource that facilitates better adaptation and coping with the demands of training and competition (Katagami & Tsuchiya, 2016).

There is very little research on social support among elite female athletes with regard to their academic training. In this regard, it is reasonable to assume that the social support received may positively influence decisions related to the academic training of female athletes.

Another relevant issue in this study is self-esteem. This can be defined as the concept that people have of themselves, which can be positive or negative, and depends on the context, life experience and relationships of the individual (Moral-García et al., 2021). This concept is understood through interaction between friends, family and society in general: the media, leisure, work, sport, etc. Female athletes who compete but also have high self-esteem tend to be influenced in various dimensions, such as relationships with others and personal growth, which are directly related to the decisions they make about their future studies (Cnen et al., 2020).

We do not have studies that relate the self-esteem of high-level athletes to their choice of future career, their training decisions or their educational aspirations, although there is evidence that sporting success has a direct impact on high self-esteem, which promotes optimal moods when making vital decisions (Molina et al., 2017).



In the context of the professionalisation of women's sport, social support and self-esteem can act as interrelated factors influencing both the personal development and academic and professional decisions of female athletes. There is scientific evidence supporting the link between these two components showing that when people receive social and family support, their self-esteem increases (Mastrogianni et al., 2020; Shi, 2022).

The professionalisation process does not depend solely on economic or institutional resources, but also on the perception of support and the self-concept that athletes build through their experiences. Greater social support, especially from family, the sporting environment and peers, can reinforce self-esteem and the perception of self-efficacy, which in turn can facilitate decision-making geared towards continuing education and planning a dual career.

Therefore, the relevance of this work lies in the need to deepen our understanding of the relationship between academic training, social support and self-esteem in female athletes, an area that remains largely unexplored despite its importance in the field of women's sport.

Thus, the main objective of the study is to determine the academic training of professional and semi-professional female athletes in Spain, observing the relationship between this choice and the social support they receive, as well as their self-esteem. Complementarily, the athletes' perspective on their inclusion in the labour market and what this support should look like, especially when they stop competing professionally, will also be taken into account.

The research hypotheses are:

Hypothesis one (H1): "The education of elite female athletes is high, but not sport-related".

Hypothesis two (H2): "The social support received by female athletes influences their choice of training".

Hypothesis three (H3): "The self-esteem of female athletes influences their training decisions".

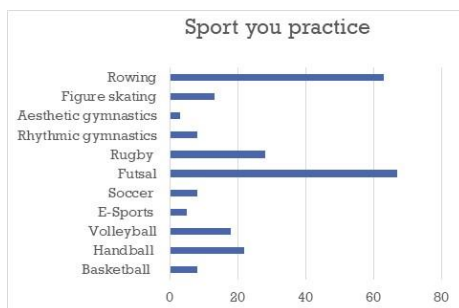
Method

A cross-sectional observational design was used with a non-probabilistic purposive sample of active female players from various sports, in national categories and with economic conditions relative to professional or semi-professional athletes, in order to determine their academic training in terms of their social support and self-esteem, as well as to establish its association with sociodemographic and personal variables.

Participants

The sample collected consisted of 243 female athletes from all over Spain, with a mean age of 23.89 (Min.=15; Max.=52), none of whom reported any specific conditions that could influence their perception of social support and self-esteem when completing the questionnaire. All of them compete in team sports at professional and semi-professional competitions in the following sports: basketball (3.3%), handball (9.1%), volleyball (7.4%), eSports (2.1%), football (3.3%), futsal (27.2%), rugby (11.5%), rhythmic gymnastics (3.3%), aesthetic gymnastics (1.2%), figure skating (5.8%) and rowing (25.9%) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Distribution of the sample population according to the sports practised



Procedure

The players completed the instrument sent by the respective sports federations by email or instant messaging (Whatsapp and Telegram) during the months of March to May 2021. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous and their informed consent was requested in compliance with all ethical procedures for data collection, following the deontological standards recognised by the Declaration of Helsinki (revision of Fortaleza, Brazil, 2013) and in accordance with the recommendations of Good Clinical Practice of the EEC (document 111/3976/88 of July 1990) and respecting the provisions of the Organic Law 3/2018, of 5 December, on the protection of personal data and guarantee of digital rights.

Instrument

In addition to the personal and training data sheet completed by the female athletes, two specific instruments were used in the data collection.

The instrument used for the assessment of perceived social support was the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support -MSPSS- (Zimet et al., 1988, 1990) adapted to Spanish by Trejos-Herrera et al. (2018). It is a 12-item Likert-type scale with 7 response alternatives that measures three factors: family members (items 3, 4, 8 and 11), friends (items 6, 7, 9) and 12) and significant others (items 1, 2, 5 and 10). The sum of the scale is the perceived social support. The scale shows a reliability by Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.84 similar to other studies (Dambi et al., 2018).

To measure self-esteem we used the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, a 10-item scale which aims to measure feelings of personal worth and self-respect (Rosenberg, 1965). Five of the scale items are formulated positively, with the other five formulated negatively in order to control the acquiescence bias. The values on the scale mean: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, and 4 = strongly agree. Negatively worded statements are assigned the reverse score. The positive ones are scored from 1 to 4 and the negative ones from 4 to 1 (Martín-Albo et al., 2007). Chronbach's Alpha was also used to measure their reliability, giving a result of $\alpha=0.871$, which implies high reliability. For the interpretation of the results, the following classification was used: less than 25: low self-esteem; between 26-29 medium self-esteem and >30-40 high self-esteem.

Data analysis

Firstly, the mean, standard deviation and minimum and maximum of the abilities, dimensions and sub-dimensions that make up the social support scale are calculated. To verify the parametric assumption of normality, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used ($p > 0.05$). To calculate the difference in means, Student's t-test was used for dichotomous variables and ANOVA for polytomous variables. Statistical analyses were performed with the SPSS v. 23 statistical software (IBM Corp., 2012). The significance level for all analyses was $p < 0.05$.

Results

The participants in the study compete at a professional or semi-professional level and are aged between 18 and 28. In relation to their area of residence, the majority live in an urban environment (towns with more than 50,000 inhabitants): 63.6%. A minority live in a semi-rural environment (populations between 10,000 and 50,000 inhabitants) (16.9%) and 19.5% live in a rural environment (populations under 10,000 inhabitants).

As can be seen in Table 1, 37% have higher education (Bachelor's degree, Master's degree), 44.4% have intermediate education (Baccalaureate or higher vocational training) and 18.5% have basic education (primary education, school-leaving certificate or intermediate vocational training).

With regard to the branch of knowledge in which they specialise, the field of Health (21.8%) and Education (18.5%) are the fields in which the participants are most interested, even more so than the field of sport (11.9%).



The female athletes consider that it is mainly the State (43.6%), through its different employment offices, which should help the athletes in their integration into the labour market. They also give the federations a high percentage of responsibility in terms of labour market insertion (31.3%), but not the Clubs (11.9%), the Institution in which they were trained (7%) or the Olympic Committee (6.2%).

With regard to the possibilities that should be offered to them when actively looking for a job, almost half of the female athletes (45.3%) think that offering training possibilities parallel to their sporting career would be the most appropriate option. They also value very positively the offer of agreements with companies that allow for a percentage of female employees who have been top female athletes (40.7%). On the contrary, offering incentives for further training does not seem to be as appropriate (14%) (Table 1).

Table 1. Results of the profiles of female athletes with regard to studies, branches of knowledge, labour market insertion and possibilities in the active search for employment

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percentage
Level of studies attained	Basic studies (former General Basic Education)	8	3,3
	Graduate in Compulsory Secondary Education- Intermediate	37	15,2
	Vocational Training	108	44,4
	Baccalaureate- Higher Vocational Training	86	35,4
	Graduate	4	1,6
What branch of knowledge or speciality have you studied?	Master's Degree	53	21,8
	Health field (Medicine, Nursing, Physiotherapy, Psychology, ...)	29	11,9
	Sports field (Sports Sciences)	45	18,5
	Educational field (Teaching, Social Education, Social Work, ...)	12	4,9
	Humanities (Language, Literature, History, ...)	28	11,5
Who do you think can help an elite athlete in finding a job?	Technological field (Engineering, Mathematics, ...)	154	63,4
	Vocational training	29	11,9
	The Club	15	6,2
	The Olympic Committee	106	43,6
	The State itself through its employment offices	76	31,3
Which of these possibilities do you think you should be offered for an active job search?	The sports federation	17	7,0
	The institution in which you were trained	110	45,3
	Providing possibilities of training parallel to the sports career	99	40,7
	Offering agreements with companies that allow a percentage of workers who have been elite sportsmen and women	34	14,0
	Offering incentives for further training		

There are no differences in social support according to the level of studies completed, but there are differences in self-esteem. Female athletes with university studies have a higher level of self-esteem than those with only an intermediate or primary level of study ($F=12.77$; $sig.=.0001$) (Table 2).

Table 2. Differences between means of social support and self-esteem according to the level of studies completed

		N	Mean	SD	F	Sig.	Bonferroni
Social support	CSE or equivalent	47	69,8723	3,97611	1,426	,242	No difference
	Baccalaureate or higher vocational training	106	69,8491	4,03743			
	University studies	90	70,7556	3,99244			
MSPSS Family	CSE or equivalent	47	23,3830	5,08003	2,336	,099	No difference
	Baccalaureate or higher vocational training	106	21,4717	6,26283			
	University studies	90	22,9000	5,67480			
MSPSS Friends	CSE or equivalent	47	24,7447	5,25633	2,453	,088	No difference
	Baccalaureate or higher vocational training	106	23,5566	4,03338			
	University studies	90	24,7333	3,50858			
MSPSS Other persons	CSE or equivalent	47	25,0851	5,14921	1,994	,138	No difference
	Baccalaureate or higher vocational training	106	23,2830	6,71850			
	University studies	90	24,7556	6,07687			
Self-esteem	CSE or equivalent	47	27,0426	4,54904	12,770	,000	CSE- University =,000 Bac- University =,000
	Baccalaureate or higher vocational training	106	27,8302	5,60862			
	University studies	90	31,0556	5,12399			

MSPSS: Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support; CSE: in Compulsory Secondary Education; Bac: Baccalaureate



There are no differences in the level of self-esteem or social support with respect to the field of knowledge where the female athletes carry out their studies, except in the social support of other people, where female athletes who study educational qualifications have a higher self-perception of support than those who study in other fields such as sports, technology, or the humanities (Table 3).

Table 3. Differences between means of social support and self-esteem according to the branch of knowledge chosen

		N	Mean	SD	F	Sig	Bonferroni
Social support	Humanities	12	71,4545	4,27466	1,912	,093	No difference
	Technological	28	68,6786	4,07389			
	Health	53	69,4906	3,65125			
	Educational	45	71,0889	4,43038			
	Sport	29	70,3793	3,50931			
MSPSS Family	Vocational training	76	70,4868	4,01495	,983	,429	No difference
	Humanities	12	25,1818	3,84235			
	Technological	28	20,7143	6,96476			
	Health	53	22,3208	5,74046			
	Educational	45	22,4000	6,43993			
MSPSS Friends	Sport	29	22,2759	4,82476	2,008	,078	No difference
	Vocational training	76	22,6447	5,78666			
	Humanities	12	22,6364	5,66167			
	Technological	28	23,7857	3,60408			
	Health	53	24,7170	3,80474			
MSPSS Other persons	Educational	45	23,8889	3,61953	3,415	,005	Educational - Humanities=.045 Educational - Technological=.023 Educational - Sports=.012
	Sport	29	23,0690	5,50928			
	Vocational training	76	25,1579	3,22925			
	Humanities	12	21,8182	7,87170			
	Technological	28	21,9286	7,87837			
Self-esteem	Health	53	23,2453	6,66479	1,124	,348	No difference
	Educational	45	26,1778	4,58896			
	Sport	29	22,4483	6,93122			
	Vocational training	76	25,4211	4,99937			
	Humanities	12	30,0909	6,78903			
	Technological	28	29,0000	5,91921			
	Health	53	29,0377	6,07632			
	Educational	45	28,8667	5,35809			
	Sport	29	30,4483	3,36565			
	Vocational training	76	27,8553	5,39062			

MSPSS: Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

No differences were found between social support or self-esteem with respect to the entity they consider to be responsible for their labour market insertion.

With regard to training possibilities, we found differences of opinion, so that those who perceive themselves as having greater family support consider the possibility of using agreements with companies that allow a percentage of workers who have been elite sportsmen and women as an alternative to parallel training as a way of finding employment (Table 4).

Table 4. Differences between means of social support and self-esteem according to training possibilities

		N	Mean	SD	F	Sig	Bonferroni
MSPSS Family	Parallel training	110	20,745	6,788	6,142	,003	1-2=,003
	Offering agreements	34	24,727	4,900			
	Offering incentives	99	22,565	5,499			
MSPSS Friends	Parallel training	110	24,02	3,964	1,748	,176	No difference
	Offering agreements	34	25,303	4,398			
	Offering incentives	99	23,656	4,804			
MSPSS Other persons	Parallel training	110	23,618	7,07	1,303	,274	No difference
	Offering agreements	34	25,63	3,533			
	Offering incentives	99	23,747	6,571			
Social support	Parallel training	110	68,390	11,62	4,627	,011	1-2=,008
	Offering agreements	34	75,666	11,76			
	Offering incentives	99	69,967	12,59			
Self-esteem	Parallel training	110	28,290	5,364	2,439	,089	No difference
	Offering agreements	34	27,939	5,926			
	Offering incentives	99	29,767	5,392			

MSPSS: Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support

Discussion and conclusions

The total number of students enrolled in the Spanish University System (SUE) in the academic year 2020-2021 was 1,679,518 (*Ministry of Universities, 2021*). This figure illustrates the high competitiveness that exists in our society when it comes to accessing a qualified employment. For this reason, it is necessary for female athletes to have studies that can subsequently facilitate their access to the labour market.

In this study, Spanish female athletes who compete at a professional or semi-professional level are aged between 18 and 28. Most of them live in an urban environment and have medium and high education. Those who go to university mainly choose the health and educational fields in their studies. Hypothesis one (H1), which stated that the female athletes' education was high, but not related to sport, is therefore confirmed. Moreover, they consider it the responsibility of the State to help them integrate into the labour market, like any other citizen through employment agencies. Likewise, they perceive that the most appropriate way to facilitate labour market integration is through the compatibility of studies and sport (dual career), although they also highly value the offer of specific agreements with companies. As Castellanos et al. (2018) point out, the dual career is the most appropriate way to facilitate the labour market integration of high-level athletes, who could benefit from this choice, contributing to their well-being and the optimal development of their potential. In this sense, (Vilanova & Puig, 2013) emphasise that combining a sporting career with an academic career is a question of strategy and that if this strategy is not carried out, it will not be possible to succeed in this matter. They also indicate that in this process the athlete has an awareness of the future, mainly thanks to the positive influence of socialising agents, and that this entails carrying out different actions during their sporting career that will allow them to develop and achieve this goal. Recently, Vidal-Vilaplana et al. (2025) concluded that dual careers are emerging as a key differentiating factor in the development of resilient and innovative future professionals, and that they are a crucial tool for facilitating their transition to professional life.

In terms of social support, no differences were observed based on the studies pursued, and regarding the field of knowledge chosen, only athletes pursuing studies in the field of education reported a greater perception of support from others. In this regard, hypothesis two (H2), which stated that the social support received by athletes influenced their choice of studies, cannot be confirmed. Therefore, although social and family support remains an important factor in the development of female athletes' professional careers (Bowes et al., 2021), it does not significantly influence the choice of studies.

This finding can be interpreted from various perspectives. Firstly, educational decisions tend to be influenced by structural and contextual factors rather than individual psychological variables. Aspects such as the availability of educational programmes compatible with sports practice, the academic guidance received, or economic constraints can have a more decisive influence on the choice of field of study or level of education attained. Likewise, high-level athletes tend to develop high levels of self-determination and planning, which make educational decisions depend more on their own life project or perceived opportunities than on external support or assessment. Borrás-Roger et al. (2009) argue that this choice seems to be more related to personal interests than to a future in sport.

Thus, female athletes view education as a deliberate life choice and a guiding principle when it comes to finding a job once they finish their professional sports careers. In fact, they do not demand that the federations or clubs take care of their future employment, and they understand that it is the direct responsibility of the State, as it is for the rest of the citizenry. Nor do they have a special interest in continuing their studies in a field of sporting knowledge.

There is no direct link between the sport they play and the professions related to it (be they coaches, physical trainers or sports psychologists). Indeed, it is those fields related to health that seem to attract this group the most.

On the other hand, the data analysis revealed that women who perceive greater family support are more likely to believe that job placement can be achieved through the use of agreements with companies, rather than through dual training or other incentives.

Finally, hypothesis three (H3), which stated that the self-esteem of female athletes influences their training decisions, cannot be confirmed. There are no differences in the self-esteem of the players with respect to the branch of knowledge chosen for their studies, the entity they consider to be responsible for



their labour market insertion or the training possibilities. This fact may be explained by the fact that self-esteem is related to self-confidence, and the choice of studies may depend to a greater extent on pragmatic variables such as compatibility with a sporting career or perceived professional prospects. However, it is true that in this study the female athletes with university studies have a higher level of self-esteem, but there are no differences with regard to the other educational variables.

In relation to university women who practise high-level sport, Álvarez et al. (2014) indicate that they experience greater difficulties in organisation, study, and social relations, as both fields are not related in most cases.

Therefore, we can conclude that there is no direct relationship between the professional sports career of the women under study, regardless of the sport practised, with the choice of specific studies or a particular branch of knowledge. Also, that a large number of these women have medium and high level studies that are not directly related to sport, which indicates the need to address this issue from a gender perspective, delving deeper into the barriers that these female athletes have to finding employment and developing strategies to provide solutions. Although, social support and self-esteem are important elements for female athletes, they do not seem to be determinants for their academic and training possibilities.

It is possible that there is no need to make demands on Federations or the State in terms of job opportunities, due to the fact that women's sport in Spain still lacks the social and professional recognition that men's sport enjoys. Women female athletes do not perceive that they can have a future in sport, which is so absorbed by men, and a large part of them consider their future strategy in their studies. Perhaps this is a key objective to be addressed in greater depth by institutions, the media and other agents of interest: greater social and professional recognition for high-level female athletes.

In this regard, it should not be forgotten that other European countries have implemented specific policies and programmes to promote the labour market integration and professional transition of elite athletes, and there is recent research of great interest in this area (Capranica et al., 2022; Hernando et al., 2024).

In the Spanish context, where the lack of a coordinated national policy limits professional transition, it is necessary to promote specific employment and training programmes for athletes, as well as career guidance systems adapted to women's sport, in order to reduce the existing gap with their male counterparts (Stambulova & Henriksen, 2025). It should be noted that we have limited information on the results of support programmes for female student-athletes in Spain (Sánchez-Pato et al., 2018), and these initiatives are proposed with minimal or no coordination with sports federations.

We hope that in the near future, labour reforms and the inclusion of sports agreements designed to facilitate continuity in competition and training for female athletes will become a reality.

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