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The Mediating Role of Gratitude in the Relationship Between Life Satisfaction and Positive Future Expectations in Athletes

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Abstract

Due to structural uncertainties such as athletic careers, performance fluctuations, injury risk, and inevitable career transitions, athletes' current subjective well-being and cognitive assessments of the future have become a psychologically critical area of development. This study aims to examine the mediating role of gratitude in the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations among athletes. The sample of the study consists of 229 athletes (age $\bar{X}$=21.86; 149 men, 80 women) who are actively involved in sports in the Erzincan province of Turkey's Eastern Anatolia Region. Data were collected using the Life Satisfaction Scale, Gratitude Scale, and Positive Future Expectations Scale. The hypotheses were tested using Hayes' (2018) SPSS process macro (Model 4) with a bootstrapping method based on 5000 resamples. The findings showed that life satisfaction significantly and positively predicted positive future expectations both directly and indirectly through gratitude (indirect effect=.060; 95% CI [.018, .117]). The results reveal that gratitude functions as a fundamental psychological mechanism that transforms athletes' current life evaluations into more optimistic cognitive representations of the future. These findings, framed within fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, emphasize the contribution of positive psychological states to the construction of long-term cognitive and motivational resources. The study offers important implications for the development of gratitude-based interventions aimed at supporting athletes' psychological resilience and future-oriented cognitive structures in sports psychology applications.

Keywords: Athlete, broaden-build theory, positive future expectations, positive psychology, sports psychology

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INTRODUCTION

In sports psychology, well-being has become a central concept with a growing awareness that athletic performance cannot be understood independently of athletes' psychological functioning and overall quality of life. While traditional approaches have primarily addressed sport through performance outcomes, contemporary perspectives position athletes' psychological well-being as a fundamental component of development, sustainability, and long-term participation (Mack et al., 2020). In this context, athletes' subjective assessments of their lives play a decisive role not only in terms of psychological health but also in terms of maintaining motivation, commitment to sport, and career continuity. Indeed, recent systematic reviews have revealed that positive emotions and well-being form the fundamental psychological foundation of sustainable high performance (Peris-Delcampo et al., 2024). In this regard, recent studies with large samples confirm that regular physical activity increases individuals' levels of happiness and mental well-being while significantly reducing negative psychological outcomes such as stress and depression (Zekioğlu et al., 2024).

Life satisfaction is a fundamental subjective well-being indicator that reflects individuals' cognitive and holistic assessments of the overall quality of their lives. Studies conducted in the context of sports show that athletes' life satisfaction is closely related to their levels of burnout, psychological resilience, and emotion regulation skills (Ivantchev & Stoyanova, 2019; Schmid et al., 2025). However, life satisfaction largely reflects an assessment of past and current life conditions. However, athletic careers are inherently future-oriented and involve numerous uncertainties, such as performance fluctuations, injury risk, and mandatory career transitions. Therefore, focusing solely on current life satisfaction is insufficient for understanding athletes' psychological functioning.

At this point, positive future expectations, which reflect an individual's perceptions of the future, emerge as a critical psychological resource for athletes. Positive future expectations are closely related to sustainable motivation, goal-oriented behaviors, and the capacity to adapt in the face of adversity. Indeed, group-based physical activities have been found to positively affect athletes' exercise motivation and coping strategies (Akyol, 2025). Findings revealing the impact of athletes' career planning and injury experiences on post-retirement life satisfaction show that cognitive assessments of the future play a central role in athlete well-being (Perna et al., 1999). However, the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations has been addressed in most studies through direct effects; the psychological processes underlying this transformation have not been sufficiently explained.

One of the fundamental constructs that may play a role in this transformation process is gratitude. Gratitude is a multidimensional psychological process characterized by an individual's recognition of the positive aspects of their life and conscious appreciation of these gains. Positive psychology literature emphasizes that gratitude is not merely a transient emotion; it is a functional mechanism that supports cognitive reappraisal and meaning-making processes (McCullough et al., 2001; Alkozei et al., 2018). High levels of gratitude have been shown to be positively associated with psychological well-being, hope, and optimism, and negatively associated with symptoms of psychological distress (Elosúa, 2015).

Studies on gratitude in the sports psychology literature are limited in number and have mostly been examined in the context of outcome variables such as burnout, stress, and team cohesion (Gabana et al., 2017; Kubo & Sugiyama, 2023). However, the role of gratitude as an active psychological mechanism that transforms athletes' life satisfaction into positive future expectations has not been directly examined. Yet, athletes' experiences are embedded in intensely relational contexts such as coaches, teammates, and organizational structures, which provide fertile ground for gratitude-based meaning-making processes.

The temporal limitations and high uncertainty inherent in athletic careers make athletes a theoretically unique sample for examining such mechanisms (Gabana, 2019). Even athletes who are satisfied with their lives may experience vulnerability when faced with career uncertainties if these assessments are not accompanied by psychological processes that transform them into optimistic expectations for the future. In this context, gratitude takes on a regulatory function, transforming athletes' current well-being into future-oriented cognitions that include hope and optimism.

Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to examine the mediating role of gratitude in the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations among athletes. This study aims to reveal that well-being is not merely a current state but a dynamic psychological process extending into the future; it aims to contribute to the sports psychology literature theoretically and practically with a mechanism-based approach.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on approaches that assume subjective well-being in athletes is not merely an assessment of current life conditions; it is also a dynamic psychological process that shapes cognitive expectations for the future. In this context, the study argues that the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations cannot be explained by a linear effect; rather, this relationship is shaped by how the individual makes sense of their experiences. Gratitude is positioned as a central psychological mechanism in this process of meaning-making.

Life satisfaction is a cognitive well-being indicator that reflects an individual's holistic evaluation of their life according to their own criteria. For athletes, life satisfaction is related to fundamental self-evaluations and corresponds to a multidimensional assessment process that is nourished not only by sporting success but also by social relationships, academic or professional balance, and personal development (Baudin et al., 2014; dos Santos, 2015). However, this assessment is, by its nature, oriented towards past and present experiences. The uncertainty, performance pressure, and time constraints inherent in athletic careers make it difficult for life satisfaction to automatically determine future expectations. Therefore, the question of how life satisfaction translates into future-oriented cognitive representations in athletes requires an explanatory psychological mechanism.

Positive future expectations refer to an individual's optimistic and positive cognitive representations of their future life. In the context of sports, this construct is considered a critical psychological resource in terms of maintaining academic and athletic satisfaction, preserving motivation, and the capacity to adapt to stressors (Gaudreau et al., 2015). Although

the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations has mostly been addressed through direct effects in the literature, recent studies reveal that this process is related to mechanisms such as ‘‘resilience outcome expectations’’ and requires a strategic intervention area (Hephsebha & Deb, 2024). This situation increases the need for mechanism-based models, especially in sports environments characterized by high uncertainty.

At this point, gratitude is considered a fundamental transformative mechanism that links to life satisfaction and positive expectations for the future. Gratitude, as an individual-based trait, is a cognitive-emotional process that involves noticing the positive aspects of life and attributing value to external sources (Wood, 2008). Longitudinal studies show that there is a reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationship between gratitude and life satisfaction (Unanue et al., 2019). Research conducted specifically on adolescent athletes proves that gratitude directly supports well-being (Chen & Kee, 2008). Positive psychology literature emphasizes that gratitude is not just a momentary emotion; it is a functional structure that supports cognitive reappraisal processes.

The theoretical basis of this study is grounded in cognitive appraisal approaches, particularly the Broaden-and-Build Theory developed by Fredrickson (2001). According to the Broaden-and-Build Theory, positive emotions support the long-term construction of physical, intellectual, and psychological resources by broadening the individual’s momentary thought-action repertoire (Fredrickson, 2001). Life satisfaction provides the necessary groundwork for building these resources for athletes, while gratitude enables this groundwork to be processed through cognitive awareness and transformed into psychological resilience (Kardaş & Yalçın, 2021).

From a cognitive appraisal perspective, gratitude is an interpretive process that allows individuals to reframe their experiences. Athletes with high life satisfaction use gratitude to make their resources and supportive social networks more explicit; this cognitive framework supports the development of more positive expectations about the future. This approach also explains why life satisfaction does not always consistently translate into positive future expectations: When the gratitude mechanism is not functional, positive life evaluations cannot translate into a cognitive advantage for the future.

In conclusion, this study conceptualizes the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations in athletes as a psychological transformation process mediated by gratitude. This model proposes that well-being is not merely a present state but a dynamic structure extending into the future through processes of meaning-making. Thus, the study contributes to the sports psychology literature by offering a mechanism-based theoretical explanation of how subjective well-being relates to future-oriented cognitive functions.

Hypothesis Development

H_1: Life satisfaction is positively related to athletes’ positive future expectations.

Life satisfaction is a fundamental indicator of subjective well-being that reflects an individual’s cognitive evaluation of their life in general (Diener, 2000). This construct has been consistently associated in the literature with hope, optimism, and future-oriented adaptive goal orientation. Individuals who are satisfied with their lives tend to perceive their

current circumstances as meaningful and valuable; this cognitive perception facilitates the construction of more positive expectations for the future and the development of protective strategies against negative outcomes, particularly in situations where individual control is limited (Bailis et al., 2005).

In the context of sports, athletes with high life satisfaction may evaluate their past investments and ongoing efforts as precursors to future success and development. This perception of cognitive continuity may support more optimistic future expectations regarding performance, career continuity, and personal development. Accordingly, it is expected that as athletes' level of life satisfaction increases, their positive future expectations will also increase.

H_2: There is a positive relationship between gratitude and athletes' positive future expectations.

Gratitude is a functional psychological resource that reflects individuals' tendency to notice and appreciate positive experiences in their lives and shapes their cognitive assessments of the future (Friedman, 2015). Positive psychology literature reveals that gratitude plays a decisive role in an individual's psychological and physical well-being by strengthening optimism, hope, and meaning-making processes (Elosúa, 2015).

In sports environments characterized by uncertainty and performance pressure, gratitude can contribute to a more constructive interpretation of experiences by enabling athletes to focus on available resources, social support, and opportunities for development. This cognitive-emotional orientation supports the development of more hopeful and positive expectations about the future. Therefore, athletes with high levels of gratitude are expected to report stronger positive future expectations.

H_3: Life satisfaction is positively related to athletes' gratitude.

Life satisfaction reflects a global cognitive evaluation of one's life circumstances and is closely associated with positive emotional functioning and adaptive cognitive appraisal (Diener, 2000). Individuals who evaluate their lives positively are more likely to recognize and appreciate the beneficial aspects of their experiences, relationships, and personal achievements. This positive appraisal process facilitates the development of gratitude by increasing awareness of available personal and social resources (Chen, 2017). According to the Broaden-and-Build Theory, positive evaluations broaden individuals' cognitive and emotional repertoires, thereby fostering enduring psychological resources such as gratitude (Fredrickson, 2001). In the sporting context, athletes who are satisfied with their lives are more likely to appreciate the support they receive, the opportunities available to them, and the experiences gained throughout their athletic careers. Therefore, athletes with higher life satisfaction are expected to report higher levels of gratitude.

H_4: Gratitude mediates the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations among athletes.

It is assumed that the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations is explained not only by a direct effect but also indirectly through gratitude. Athletes with high levels of life satisfaction are more inclined to appreciate their resources and experiences at a

cognitive level; this tendency strengthens their level of gratitude (Chen, 2017). Within the framework of the Broaden and Build Theory, it is understood that positive subjective assessments such as life satisfaction reinforce gratitude experiences by expanding the individual's psychological resource repertoire (Fredrickson, 2001).

Gratitude is defined as a functional meaning-making mechanism that transforms these positive life evaluations into optimistic expectations for the future. In this process, athletes can interpret their past and present experiences as indicators of potential future gains through gratitude (Gabana et al., 2017). Cognitive reappraisal processes facilitate the transfer of general well-being to future-oriented strategic projections by enabling hope-based thoughts to transform into goal-directed cognitive expectations and concrete behaviors (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2002).

Therefore, it is expected that the effect of life satisfaction on positive future expectations is partially mediated by gratitude. This mediation model is consistent with the expansion and construction theory and cognitive appraisal approaches.

METHOD

Research Model

The primary aim of this study is to empirically examine the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations among athletes, focusing on the psychological mechanism underlying this relationship. In line with the theoretical framework presented in the previous sections, the study focuses on the mediating role of gratitude as a fundamental process explaining how athletes' evaluations of their lives translate into future expectations. In this context, the proposed model conceptualizes life satisfaction as the antecedent variable, gratitude as the mediating variable, and positive future expectations as the outcome variable (Life Satisfaction → Gratitude → Positive Future Expectations).

A quantitative and cross-sectional survey design was adopted in line with the research objectives. This design allows for the statistical testing of theoretically guided relationships among psychological constructs within a specific population and the examination of indirect effects through mediation analysis (Hayes, 2018). Since the focus of the study is to reveal the underlying psychological process explaining the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations rather than merely describing its existence, a cross-sectional mediation framework was considered an appropriate approach. This approach, in line with contemporary methodological trends in social and sports psychology, goes beyond correlational analyses and emphasizes mechanism-based explanations.

The original contribution of the study lies in adopting a mechanism-focused modeling approach in the sports context. While life satisfaction and positive future expectations are treated as parallel indicators of well-being in most studies, this study explicitly models gratitude as an active psychological process that transforms athletes' current life evaluations into optimistic expectations for the future. In this respect, the research goes beyond superficial relationships between variables and offers a theoretically grounded explanation of how general well-being contributes to future-oriented functioning in the context of sports.

In this regard, mediation analysis has been adopted as the primary analytical strategy of the study. Mediation analysis provides a robust statistical framework for testing whether the effect of an independent variable on the outcome variable is mediated by a theoretically meaningful intermediary variable, thereby facilitating a more nuanced understanding of complex psychological processes. This approach is also consistent with calls for greater focus on explanatory mechanisms in well-being research. In this context, the study aims to contribute to both theoretical development and the sports psychology literature by examining whether the observed relationships are consistent with the theoretically proposed psychological pathway linking life satisfaction, gratitude, and positive future expectations among athletes. However, given the cross-sectional and correlational nature of the research design, the proposed mediation model is intended to test whether the observed relationships are consistent with the theoretically proposed indirect effect rather than to establish causal or temporal relationships among the variables. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as providing evidence for the plausibility of the hypothesized mediation model within the study's theoretical framework, rather than as confirmation of causal mediation. The theoretical model tested in the study is presented in Figure 1.

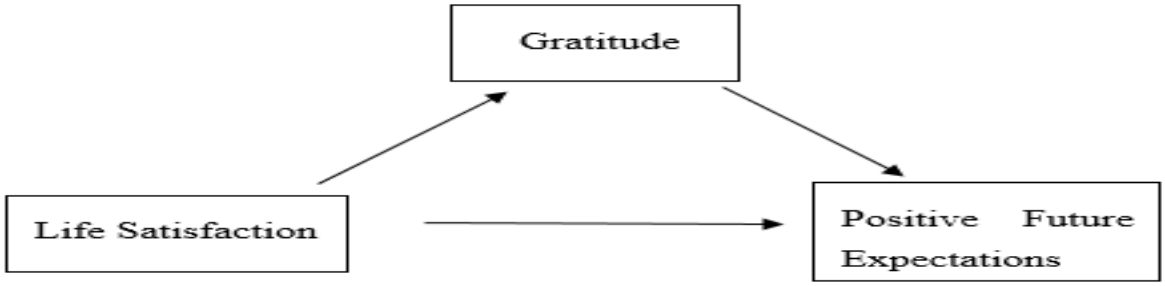

Figure 1. Research Model

Research Group

Although life satisfaction and psychological concepts related to the future have been extensively studied in general population samples, empirical evidence from athletes is relatively limited. Athletes constitute a unique population due to the structural requirements of sport, such as constant performance evaluation, uncertainty about career trajectory, risk of injury, and the need to make critical life decisions early on. These contextual characteristics make athletes particularly suitable for examining the psychological mechanisms underlying life satisfaction and positive future expectations. Therefore, focusing on athletes provides an opportunity to examine how gratitude functions as a psychological resource in performance-oriented environments in a more ecologically valid manner.

In line with this rationale, the study was conducted with active athletes residing in the province of Erzincan, located in the Eastern Anatolia Region of Turkey. Erzincan represents a developing sports ecosystem where young athletes pursue their sports careers under conditions characterized by limited resources, strong institutional ties, and close coach-athlete interactions. This context provides a valuable natural setting for discovering how internal psychological resources contribute to well-being and future-oriented cognitions beyond metropolitan and elite sports environments.

Data were collected from a total of 229 athletes competing in various sports. Of the participants, 149 were male (%65.1) and 80 were female (%34.9). The mean age of the sample was 21.86, indicating a predominantly young athlete population at a critical developmental stage where future expectations and life satisfaction are particularly pronounced.

Focusing on this age group is theoretically meaningful because the transition to adulthood is a period of heightened sensitivity to psychological resources such as future orientation, identity exploration, and gratitude. Moreover, athletes at this developmental stage typically evaluate their current life satisfaction in close relation to expected athletic and non-athletic career outcomes. Therefore, the sample characteristics are consistent with the conceptual framework of the study.

Purposive sampling increases contextual relevance and theoretical consistency, but also requires caution regarding the generalizability of findings. Accordingly, results should be interpreted within the limits of the sample population and cultural context.

Data Collection Tools

Gratitude Scale: The Gratitude Scale, developed by McCullough et al. (2002) and adapted into Turkish by Yüksel and Oğuz Duran (2012), was used for the assessment. The scale consists of six items designed to measure individuals' general tendencies to feel and express gratitude in daily life. It is a unidimensional tool with no subscales. Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Total scores range from 6 to 42, with higher scores indicating a greater tendency toward gratitude. The scale is widely used in positive psychology research to measure gratitude as a stable psychological resource associated with well-being and adaptation. In the Turkish adaptation study, the scale showed acceptable internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient reported as .77 (Yüksel & Oğuz-Duran, 2012). In the current study, the internal consistency reliability of the Gratitude Scale was found to be α=.877, indicating satisfactory reliability within the athlete sample.

Life Satisfaction Scale: Life satisfaction was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), originally developed by Diener et al. (1985) and adapted into Turkish by Dağlı and Baysal (2016) under the title "Yaşam Doyumu Ölçeği". The Turkish adaptation largely adheres to the original scale structure, and its validity and reliability have been comprehensively established. The scale consists of five items and has a unidimensional structure reflecting individuals' global cognitive assessments of their overall quality of life. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Total scores range from 5 to 25, with higher scores indicating greater life satisfaction. In the Turkish validity study, the scale demonstrated excellent psychometric properties with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .88 and a test-retest reliability coefficient of .97 (Dağlı & Baysal, 2016). In this study, it was found to be .845.

Positive Future Expectations Scale: Positive future expectations were measured using the Positive Future Expectations Scale developed by İmamoğlu (2001). The scale is designed to assess individuals' levels of optimism and positive orientation toward their personal futures.

The instrument consists of five items and has a unidimensional structure. Responses are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Total scores range from 5 to 25, with higher scores indicating more positive expectations about the future.

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated the scale's strong psychometric properties. Reported Cronbach's alpha coefficients range from .85 (İmamoğlu, 2001) and .93 (İmamoğlu & Güler-Edwards, 2007) to .87 (Eryılmaz, 2011). These findings indicate that the scale shows high internal consistency across various samples and contexts. In this study, it was calculated as .806.

Procedure

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University Human Research Health and Sports Sciences Ethics Committee (Meeting Date: February 27, 2026; Protocol No. 02/19). The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Before participation, all athletes were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and informed consent was obtained from each participant. Participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous, and participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

Data were collected between March 2026 and April 2026 using paper-and-pencil questionnaires. No financial or material incentives were provided to participants for taking part in the study. Only athletes aged 18 years and older were included in the study. Therefore, parental or guardian consent was not required.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, descriptive statistics were calculated and basic assumption checks were performed using SPSS Statistics 25 software. In this context, the data set was examined for missing values, univariate outliers, normality, and multicollinearity. The normality assumption was evaluated based on skewness and kurtosis coefficients; the possibility of multicollinearity was controlled by examining tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) values. The findings showed that the data met the statistical assumptions required for regression-based analyses.

In the second and main stage, mediation analysis was performed using Hayes' (2018) SPSS PROCESS macro to test the theoretical model of the study. The PROCESS Macro Model 4 was preferred in the analyses; life satisfaction was included in the model as the independent variable, positive future expectations as the dependent variable, and gratitude as the mediating variable. This approach was adopted as the study's fundamental analytical strategy because it allows for the explanation of the underlying psychological mechanism of these relationships rather than merely testing the direct relationships between the variables.

The statistical significance of the indirect effect was tested using a nonparametric bootstrapping method based on 5.000 resamples, and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals (CI) were calculated. The indirect effect was considered statistically significant if the confidence interval did not include the zero value. The bootstrapping method is considered a

robust and reliable method recommended for mediation analyses, particularly because it does not rely on the assumption of normality of the indirect effect distribution (Hayes, 2018).

FINDINGS

Table 1. Correlations between variables and descriptive analyses

Variables	LS	PF	GR	X̄	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach's α
LS	1	.470**	.379**	16.33	4.28	-.484	.233	.845
PF		1	.365**	18.68	3.14	-.573	.998	.806
GR			1	25.30	5.11	-.871	1.83	.877

Note: LS=Life Satisfaction; PF=Positive Future Expectations; GR=Gratitude; X̄=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation; Skewness=Skewness coefficient; Kurtosis=Kurtosis coefficient; Cronbach=Cronbach's alpha; p<.01

Table 1 shows that there are statistically significant relationships between the variables of life satisfaction, positive future expectations, and gratitude. According to the results of the Pearson correlation analysis, there is a positive and moderate relationship between life satisfaction and gratitude (r=.379, p<.001). Similarly, a positive and moderately significant relationship was found between gratitude and positive future expectations (r=.365, p<.001). In contrast, the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations is positive but relatively low (r=.047, p<.001). These findings indicate that gratitude may play a role as an explanatory psychological mechanism in the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations.

Table 2. Regression Analysis Results for Mediation Test

Predictors Model 1 (H1)	**Gratitude**				**Positive Future Expectations**			
	b	**t**	**SE**	**95% CI**	**b**	**t**	**SE**	**95% CI**
LS	.451***	6.14	.073	[.306, .596]	.284***	6.27	.045	[.195, .373]
GR					.134***	3.52	.038	[.059, .208]
R^2		.143					.262	
Indirect Effect	**LS→GR→PF** b = .060, 95% CI [.018, .117]							

Bootstrap sample size=5000; LL=lower limit; CI=Confidence interval; UL=upper limit; ***p<.001; *p<.05

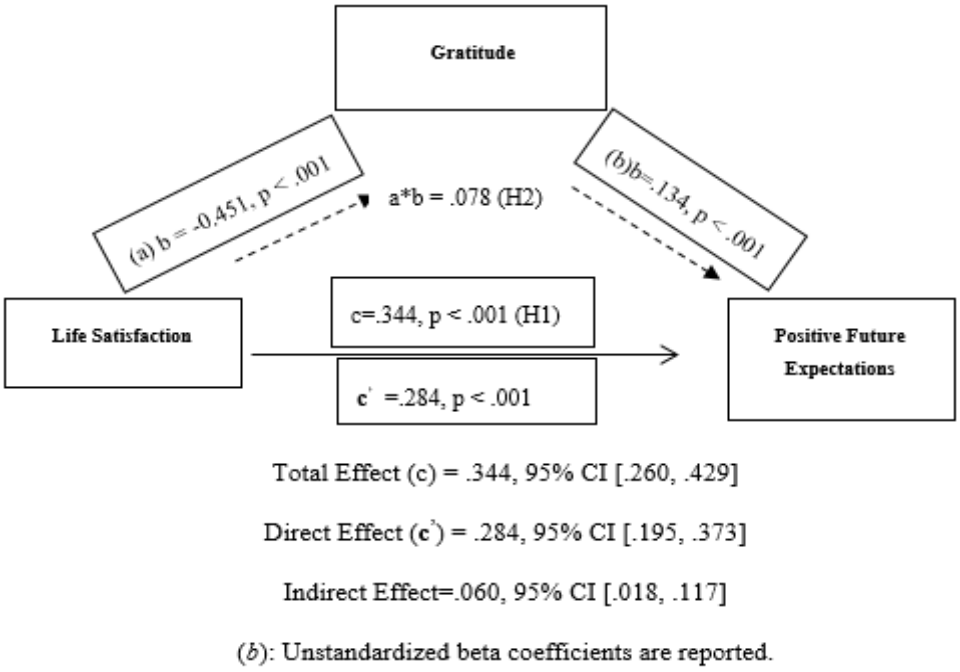

Figure 2. Mediated model of the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations through gratitude

Table 2 and Figure 2 present the results of the bootstrap mediation analysis conducted using PROCESS Macro Model 4 to test the working hypothesis. The findings reveal the mechanism by which life satisfaction influences positive future expectations through the feeling of gratitude. First, the analysis showed that life satisfaction is a significant and positive predictor of the feeling of gratitude (b=.451; p<.001; 95%CI [.306, .596]). Second, when gratitude was controlled for, life satisfaction continued to be a significant predictor of positive future expectations (b=.284; p<.001; 95%CI [.195, .373]), indicating a significant direct effect. Furthermore, gratitude has a significant positive effect on positive future expectations (b=.134; p<.001; 95%CI [.059, .208]). Most importantly, bootstrap analysis confirmed that life satisfaction has a significant indirect effect on positive future expectations through the feeling of gratitude (Indirect effect b=.060; 95%CI [.018, .117]). These results empirically support the proposed mediation model by showing that the feeling of gratitude partially mediates the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to examine the mediating role of gratitude in the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations among athletes. The findings revealed that life satisfaction significantly predicts positive future expectations; however, this relationship is partially explained by gratitude. In other words, as life satisfaction increases among athletes, positive expectations for the future strengthen; however, this effect becomes more meaningful through the cognitive and emotional processing of life satisfaction via experiences of gratitude. This finding contributes significantly to mechanism-based approaches explaining the temporal continuity of well-being in sports psychology.

The Direct Relationship Between Life Satisfaction and Positive Future Expectations

Research findings reveal that life satisfaction directly and significantly predicts positive future expectations in athletes. This result parallels the literature emphasizing the correlation between hope for success in a sports context and life satisfaction (Minda, 2020). Approaches that consider life satisfaction as a general cognitive assessment of an individual's life argue that this construct shapes cognitive representations of the future by interacting with fundamental self-evaluations and sports satisfaction (Baudin et al., 2014). In the context of sport, life satisfaction functions not only as an indicator of current psychological well-being but also as a fundamental psychological foundation upon which athletes structure their future-oriented assessments within career structures characterized by uncertainty.

However, the effect of life satisfaction exhibits a more complex structure when considering the unique limitations and transition processes of athletic careers. The variability of athletic identity and life satisfaction among elite athletes depending on circumstances such as career termination proves that this satisfaction is not a static determinant under all conditions (Martin et al., 2014). In particular, the performance pressure, selection processes, and risk of injury that athletes are exposed to make it difficult for life satisfaction to automatically translate into future expectations. These findings support the explanations presented in the theoretical framework of the study, which suggest that intermediary mechanisms are needed to carry life satisfaction into the future.

The Mediating Role of Gratitude: The Process of Carrying Life Satisfaction into the Future

The main finding of the study is that gratitude plays a significant mediating role in the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations. This result shows that life satisfaction is conveyed to future expectations not only through a direct line but also through cognitive processes that enable individuals to recognize the positive aspects of their lives and make sense of these experiences. Positive relationships identified in the literature between adolescent athletes' levels of gratitude and their overall well-being support findings that gratitude is an adaptable psychological resource in the context of sports (Chen & Kee, 2008). Similarly, a study by Zekioğlu et al. (2024) indicated that psychological well-being plays a central role in the relationship between negative emotions and happiness. This supports the view that positive psychological outcomes are generally shaped through different cognitive and emotional mechanisms rather than direct effects.

Gratitude, in this context, functions as a transformative mechanism that enables life satisfaction to undergo a cognitive reappraisal process. Athletes who are satisfied with their lives process their current resources, social support systems, and past achievements within a more distinct framework through gratitude; this cognitive structure supports the construction of more optimistic and sustainable expectations for the future. Current research highlights the sequential mediating roles of gratitude in athletes on future-oriented constructs such as hope, confirming this phenomenon's capacity to carry psychological outcomes into the future (Dong et al., 2024). In conclusion, gratitude is not merely a result of subjective well-being but

also an active psychological process that transforms current well-being into positive cognitive projections for the future.

Integration of Findings with the Theoretical Framework

The findings are consistent at the theoretical level with cognitive appraisal approaches, particularly the Expand and Build Theory. Within the framework of the Broaden-and-Build Theory, gratitude contributes to the construction of long-term psychological resources such as psychological well-being and resilience by expanding the individual's cognitive repertoire (Kardaş & Yalçın, 2021). The fact that individuals with high levels of gratitude also have high levels of life satisfaction is explained by the positive resource construction process predicted by this theory (Xiang & Yuan, 2021). In this study, life satisfaction formed a cognitive basis, while gratitude functioned as a mechanism that enabled the processing of this data through conscious awareness and interpretation. This process supports the development of lasting cognitive resources that strengthen athletes' expectations for the future. From the perspective of cognitive appraisal approaches, gratitude is considered an interpretation process that allows individuals to reframe their experiences (Gabana, 2019). In the context of sports psychology, such cognitive appraisals play a decisive role in the relationships between sports satisfaction, perceived social support, and mental health (Gabana et al., 2017). The variation in the effect of life satisfaction on future expectations among athletes can be explained by the variability of these gratitude-based cognitive appraisal processes. The findings empirically validate the aforementioned theoretical assumptions and provide data for functional mechanism analyses that have been lacking in the sports psychology literature.

Contributions Specific to the Sports Context and Comparison with the Literature

In the sports psychology literature, the phenomenon of gratitude has often been examined in the context of interpersonal and situational variables such as stress management, team cohesion, and prosocial behaviors. Research has shown that gratitude, particularly among young athletes, increases life satisfaction and supports social processes through perceived team cohesion (Chen et al., 2015). This study fills a theoretical gap in the literature by positioning gratitude as an intermediary mechanism that transforms athletes' general life evaluations into future-oriented cognitive expectations. Indeed, Kaya and Onağ (2024), in their study on sports club employees, found that emotional intelligence is an important protective factor in reducing perceptions of mobbing; however, they determined that a prosocial emotion such as sensitive caring has no significant effect on this perception. When this finding is evaluated together with the results of the current study, it suggests that pure emotional tendencies (such as sensitive caring) may not be sufficient in coping with uncertainty and stress factors in sports environments. Instead, mechanisms that reframe experiences and involve cognitive awareness, such as gratitude, may play a more functional role.

The high sensitivity of athletes' career structures to uncertainty, systematic performance feedback, and factors beyond their control explains the functionality of gratitude in this population. Studies with elite athletes show that experiences of gratitude both support developmental outcomes and play a critical role in managing systemic challenges encountered

(Howells & Fitzallen, 2020). Furthermore, it has been found that the climate of gratitude created in sports environments creates a longitudinal effect on the development of psychological resilience by reinforcing athletes' individual levels of gratitude (Chen et al., 2024). The findings go beyond studies based on general population samples, revealing that life satisfaction for athletes may not sustainably strengthen future expectations unless it is supported by gratitude-based processes. This highlights the central importance of gratitude-focused cognitive mechanisms in ensuring the temporal continuity of well-being.

Practical Implications

The findings of this study also offer important implications for sports psychology practice. Interventions aimed at increasing life satisfaction, supported by gratitude-based practices, can strengthen athletes' psychological resilience toward the future. Coaches, sports psychologists, and sports organizations can design interventions that encourage athletes to develop awareness not only of their performance goals but also of their resources and achievements. Such practices can contribute to athletes developing more hopeful and sustainable future expectations under conditions of uncertainty and pressure.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has some limitations. First, the cross-sectional research design limits causal inferences. Future studies are recommended to examine the role of gratitude over time using longitudinal or experimental designs. Additionally, studies considering different sports disciplines, competitive levels, and cultural contexts will increase the generalizability of the findings.

Furthermore, future research examining the role of gratitude within regulatory or serial mediating models could reveal how well-being in athletes is carried forward through more complex psychological processes. Such studies would contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamic and multi-layered nature of well-being in sports psychology.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that the relationship between life satisfaction and positive future expectations in athletes is not merely a direct connection; rather, this relationship is significantly shaped through gratitude. The findings indicate that life satisfaction is necessary for athletes to have optimistic expectations about the future, but it does not constitute a sufficient basis on its own; this basis becomes more functional when it is carried into the future through gratitude-based cognitive and emotional processes. In this respect, the study offers a unique contribution to mechanism-based approaches explaining the temporal continuity of well-being in the sports psychology literature and positions gratitude as a process that supports athletes' psychological sustainability. The findings reveal that in career contexts characterized by uncertainty and high demands, not only athletes' current levels of well-being but also how they interpret and process this well-being are decisive for future psychological adaptation.

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Statement of Ethics Committee	
This research was conducted in accordance with the protocol decision numbered 02/19 and dated 27/02/2026 of the Human Research Health and Sports Sciences Ethics Committee of Erzincan Binali Yıldırım University.	
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Generative AI Use Statement	
An artificial intelligence tool was not used for data analysis, interpretation of results, or creation of scientific content.	

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