

Elite Sport and Leisure Sport in Hungary: The Double Trouble

Andrea Gál

*Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Sciences, Semmelweis University
Budapest, Hungary*

ABSTRACT

The main purpose of this study is to give insight into the current status of two big areas of sport in Hungary: elite sport and leisure sport. As the expression 'double trouble' in the title indicates, in Hungary there are several problems in both areas.

Hungary is a small country, but its Olympic teams were traditionally very successful in the Games. However, at the 29th Olympic Games in Beijing, Hungarian athletes performed below expectations, winning only three gold medals. The sport's political leaders and the public were very disappointed, therefore many experts tried to analyse the main reasons for the failure. They suggested that there were four problems in the background: the continuous disintegration of the sport clubs system; the low prestige of coaches and professionals working in sport; insufficient financial support and its inadequate timing; and the deficiency of sports science and its health care background. The second trouble concerns the sporting habits of Hungarian society. The country has faced the same problem for many decades: only a very low percentage of the Hungarian population takes part regularly in leisure sport programs. The latest empirical research shows that more than 60% of Hungarians do not do sports with suitable regularity. In comparing previous research results, there are a few changes among Hungarians according to gender, age and status of residence.

How can this double trouble be resolved, or at least, how could both areas be somewhat improved? In Hungary, it is not really an easy task.

top sport, leisure sport, sport participation, sport strategy

KEYWORDS

Introduction

For both its size and population, Hungary is considered a small country. However, the successes of its Olympic athletes made the country a true sports empire in the 20th century. We were especially successful in the summer Olympic Games. Of the twenty-six Olympic Games held in modern times, Hungarian athletes have participated in twenty-three, and have won one hundred and sixty Olympic gold medals. Of these, one hundred and nineteen were individual, and forty-one were team medals. Our most successful sports have been water polo, fencing, kayak-canoe and swimming.

Elite sports have always enjoyed priority treatment from political leadership in Hungary, receiving outstanding financial and moral support. Top athletes, coaches and sports managers have all

enjoyed above average social prestige in a society that has levelled off in low living standards. Due to its special role in the struggle between the two world orders, elite sport was one of Hungary's most successful operating sectors prior to the 1989-1990 political and economic transition. Hungary, as a member of the socialist bloc, also wanted to demonstrate the competitiveness of the country through its international sporting results. Therefore, talent care, which was regarded as the basis of elite sport, was given special attention, not only in terms of political support, but financial support as well. Other fields of sport, such as leisure sport, student sport, university sport, and sport for the disabled, were all pushed to the background. Although the importance of leisure sport has always been declared, the sporting habits of the Hungarian population continuously reflect the opposite. Only for a few people does sport play a decisive role in their leisure time activities. In addition, mortality and morbidity rates have become worse and worse in Hungary (especially in the case of middle-aged men). Many people die because of coronary heart disease, different kinds of cancer, while more and more people suffer from diabetes mellitus, osteoporosis, locomotor disorders and clinical depression. The average life expectancy of Hungarian men and women is much lower than in the populations of various Western countries. In spite of these facts the Hungarian government has never stepped forward in the practice, although sport is indeed immensely important in the field of health promotion. Sport plays a role in the prevention, treatment and after-care of diseases, and is therefore part of the modern health policy.

As Földesi (1991) wrote, the absolutely centralized one-party political power could have been favorable for the development of the populations' physical activity through intervention in the private life of the people, but the mandatory mass sports, an initiative imposed by the communist party did not really make leisure sporting attractive. In addition, the successes of elite sport were always more important for political leadership. Real voluntary sport organizations could not conduct their activities in sports either, as all state and non-state owned institutions had to execute tasks as ordered by the Party in its sport conception. In the years of the erosion of the state-socialist regime, the Hungarian leisure-time sport made contact with international Sport for All institutions, but the idea of this movement did not take root in as wide a range as it could have (Földesi, Nagy & Jakabházy 2002). Unfortunately the facts mentioned below have affected the current sporting habits of Hungarian people, since only a very small percentage of the population regularly takes part in leisure sport programs

In addition, no sports model or concept was outlined that would offer solutions to the new problems created by the demands of democracy and a market economy.

The situation of elite sport in Hungary

As a result of the 1989-1990 political and economic transition, elite sport in Hungary has gone from being one of the most successful and prioritised social sub-systems, to being one of the sectors most affected by problems, and one that faces severe difficulties in adapting to changed economic circumstances. Reform processes have either been delayed in many areas of social life in Hungary or they have taken far too long. One of these areas is sport, where real reforms have not taken place even after the 15 years following the transition: radical structural and functional changes have not been executed, and the economic environment surrounding sport is rather adverse due to the partial withdrawal of the state and the small share of the business sector (Földesi 2006).

Sport associations and sport clubs faced economic difficulties after the seizure of state support, forcing many of them to close. As a result, several national athletes lost their jobs, together with the financial stability with which they could pursue their sports careers. The fact that after the transition, one of the biggest rates of unemployment occurred in the field of sports (Földesi 1996) tells a lot about the situations of those involved. Top sports became increasingly business-oriented, working according to - and adjusting themselves to - the ruthless laws of the market. In this situation, sports clubs tried to concentrate their financial resources on those branches of sport in which their athletes were most successful in the national or the international arena. A major exception is football, which has managed

to remain one of the most popular sports in Hungary despite the fact that its quality has fallen lower and lower in the past decades. This is the reason why male football teams are often over-financed, to the detriment of other sports sections.

In spite of these tendencies, both the sports leadership and the general public expected Olympic success, which was pretty much delivered in 1992 in Barcelona (11 gold, 12 silver and 7 bronze), in 1996 in Atlanta (7 gold, 4 silver and 10 bronze), in 2000 in Sydney (8 gold, 6 silver and 3 bronze) and in 2004 in Athens (8 gold, 6 silver and 3 bronze). But at the 29th Olympic Games in Beijing, Hungarian athletes performed below expectations, winning only 3 gold, 6 silver and 2 bronze medals. Many people believed that only the Hungarian water polo team saved the honour of the country, claiming their third consecutive and ninth overall Olympic gold medal.

In the period since the last Olympic Games, many experts tried to analyse the reasons for the failure at Beijing. They suggested that there were four problems in the background: the continuous disintegration of the system of sport clubs; the low prestige of coaches and professionals working in sport; the insufficient financial support and its inadequate timing; and the deficiency of sports science and sports healthcare. These problems did not only occur in elite sport, but also occurred in talent care. Considering all the problems, sports professionals and a portion of the public interpreted the Olympic team's results as realistic.

As Földesi and Gál wrote in 2008, economic capital has become a defining factor in elite sport, now a global industry. In this circumstance, Hungary cannot compete with the richest countries in the world. Therefore, more modest results should also be appreciated, providing the opportunity to eliminate the huge gap that exists between elite sports facilities and leisure sport facilities. Instead of the overall priority given elite sport, sports policy has to declare solidarity with the other areas of sport, such as recreational sport.

The problems of leisure sports

Hungarians are known as a sporting people, but this opinion was obtained by the international results of the elite athletes, not by the sporting activity of Hungarians. Considering the sporting habits of the Hungarian population, it can be said that few people are active, and even fewer are active regularly. Previous research results (e.g. the 'The Use of Time' 1999-2000) showed that only 29.7% of the population did some kind of physical activity, but not necessarily on a regular basis¹. The percentage of the inactive is already high in the 15-29 age group; as the results of the Youth 2004 survey indicate, only 41% of this age group did sport regularly in their free time². The gap between sporting and less sporting groups can be identified clearly in both surveys: typically more active groups were the younger aged groups, men, students (as opposed to those already working), higher educated, and those living in more urban settlements. The survey conducted among the youth had an important conclusion, that the financial conditions of families have a significant influence on sporting habits: the ratio of the physically active was much higher in more fortunate groups than among the needy. Social distances and inequalities have increased definitively during the last two decades, thus more and more social groups have become excluded from leisure sports. It is clear that the future of recreational sports depends mainly on the socio-economic development of the country and the sport policy as well. A concrete strategy was needed for reaching those who have become excluded from sport and for decreasing their number.

¹ Secondary analyses of 'The Use of Time' research in Gáldi, G. (2004). Szabadidőstruktúra és fizikai rekreáció Magyarországon 1963-2000 között, életmód-időmérleg vizsgálatok tükrében. PhD értekezés, Semmelweis Egyetem Doktori Iskola.

² The 'Youth 2004' research was carried out among 8,000 people aged 15-29 years. Reported in Bauer, B. – Szabó, A. (2005): Ifjúság 2004. Gyorsjelentés. SZMM Mobilitás, Budapest.

The Sport XXI National Sport Strategy

In 2007, one year before the Beijing Olympics, the Sport XXI National Sport Strategy was published in Hungary. The strategy contains Hungary's sports goals and plans for the next one and one-half decades. It is the country's first long-term strategy for sport, formed to guarantee the continuity of sports development and to filter the actual political effects. Thus, it was not accidental that the strategy was welcomed by all stakeholders; however, the question was raised whether it is worth making plans for the long term in the midst of an unstable economic situation. A portion of the professionals working in sport reflected that there were too many generalizations in the sport strategy, and that a number of more elaborated and detailed plans would have been a better idea.

In the area of competitive sport and talent care, the paper's aim is to maintain the country's previous successes, especially at the Olympic level, and to improve the results found in spectator team sports. In grassroots sports, the establishment of a social base, the operation of a unified system and nurturing talent are the main tasks.

The strategy outlines different aspects for development in the area of elite sport. Among them there are priorities such as state support in accordance with international success and tradition; social significance of sport and the extension of its social basis; and the establishment of a balanced sport-portfolio³. Concerning state support, there are many problems that have been identified. The first is that successful Hungarian sports are neither popular nor marketable internationally; we haven't had outstanding results in tennis, golf, football and so on. Consequently, to decide about the social significance of a given sport is not an easy task. Which are the important sports for the public? What should be the criteria for rating importance (the number of athletes/ the popularity of the given sport/ the individual interest of sport leaders)? Another problem is that while in Western countries the great international competitions are mainly financed by private investors, sponsors and sport organizations, in Hungary state financing is expected, which again means a huge burden on the sport budget.

Currently it is planned that the sponsors of five team sports (football, handball, basketball, water polo and ice hockey) are going to get some allowances to improve financing, if such plans do not violate EU regulations. The five spectator sports defined in the act are the ones which are the most likely to attract the stakeholders of economic life in Hungary, as well as internationally, thus enhancing the involvement of private capital. In reality, of the five sports only the national men's water polo team achieves outstanding international results. Hungary is more prolific in individual sports (e.g. swimming, kayak-canoe, modern pentathlon). In addition to this, it might be a cause for conflict between the representatives of individual and team sports.

In talent care there are successful programs. Nevertheless, the number of those involved is decreasing (except for water polo), which undermines the potential success for top sport in Hungary in the future. Furthermore, grassroots sports are facing other problems as well, such as the continuous transformation of the system of institutions as well as the economic crisis and its financial consequences for sport, which hinder the development in all areas of sport.

Can Hungarians truly become a sporting nation?

In the Sport XXI National Sport Strategy, the most important goal concerning leisure sport is to make Hungarians a sporting nation. This seems to be an illusion; however, real action cannot be postponed further, as the threatening mortality and morbidity data of the population project serious economic and social problems. Therefore, it is a goal of the strategy to make people more active and improve public health. Yet there are several issues to be resolved, such as the lack of facilities and the fact that most households cannot finance leisure sport. Another difficulty is that there is no accurate data on participation in different sports, so potential change cannot be monitored. Another aim of the

³ *Sport XXI Nemzeti Sportstratégia*. Retrieved May 10, 2008 from <http://www.sporttudomany.hu/dokumentumok/Sportstrategia.pdf>.

strategy is to contribute to strengthening family and community networks through sport; in Hungary, however, the social value of sport is rather low and so is the cooperation of the humane sectors; moreover, the under-development of the leisure-economy hinders the increase of sport supply. The opportunities for sport to decrease social inequalities have not been utilized yet, as a concrete strategy is missing for both reaching those who have become excluded from sport as well as for decreasing their number.

Unfortunately, recent research results also indicate that there has been no positive shift in leisure sport participation. As the latest 'Youth 2008' research showed, the rate at which young men and women participate in leisure sport has decreased recently, and the relationship between the sporting habits and the financial conditions of families has become more significant⁴. The tendency is roughly similar in the whole population. An important result of the research showed that the age at which young people stop doing sport has also decreased, and today the time of abandoning sport comes earlier than the time of abandoning the educational system. According to the Eurobarometer Report (2009), Hungary is one of the 15 countries where more than 50% of the population does not do any sport (53%). According to the research, regular physical activity (5 times a week) is only characteristic of 5% of Hungarians (EU average = 9%), whereas the number of people of doing exercise on at least a weekly basis is 18% in Hungary (EU average = 31%).

All in all, it can be said that political decisions relating to sport can only be efficient and trigger fundamental development if the perception of, and the attitudes towards, sport change.

Conclusion

How could this double trouble be resolved, or at least how could both areas be improved somewhat? Is there a solution that would help the situation of both areas? A good example can be the case of Great Britain.

Concerning top sport, Britain faced the same situation in 1996, after surprising the whole world by their very low medal tally in the Atlanta Olympics. This was a warning that triggered serious sport policy actions on the part of the British sport management. They not only sought a way out from the crisis through increasing financial support, but also started to lay the foundations of their elite sport by developing school and leisure sport. The British saw the enhancement of their sporting culture through the increase of citizens' sport participation, so the main direction of the strategic program was the popularization of leisure sport and the inclusion of the widest number of social groups. During the realization of their sports program, the British introduced a uniform registration scheme which monitors the number of those involved in physical activity, and the partial results of the realization of programs, in order to be able to make targeted intervention based on the information obtained⁵. Launched in 2002, the strategy produced significant results in a few years, while the number of participants steadily increased in nearly forty kinds of sports and physical activity.

It was not only a long-term strategy, but included short-term, concrete sports plans as well. An important aim was to involve private capital in sport, which was ensured by the assistance of the sponsors of leisure sport through (tax) allowances. Institutional reform was carried out by the foundation of an independent organization that was backed by sport's political decision-makers. Other important steps included the filtering of political influences, increasing the demand mainly for leisure sport, and decreasing the number of those excluded from sport – by preparing concrete programs. The efficiency of the strategy was further promoted by a system of monitoring.

The development of school sport and leisure sport can be expected to enhance the social recognition of sport, which would trigger the improvement of talent care and then elite sport. And perhaps better results would be achieved in elite sport, such as in Great Britain, whose Olympic team

⁴ Reported in Bauer, B. & Szabó, A. (2009). Ifjúság 2008. Gyorsjelentés. FSZH, Budapest.

⁵ Sport England Strategy 2008-2011. Retrieved August 11, 2009 from <http://www.sportengland.co.uk>.

finished in 4th place in the medal rankings in Beijing 2008 with 19 gold, 13 silver and 15 bronze medals.

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AUTHOR'S ADDRESS:

Andrea Gál
Semmelweis University in Budapest
Faculty of Physical Education and Sport Sciences
123. Budapest, Alkotás u. 44, Hungary
Email: gala@mail.hupe.hu