Cypriot Olympians' Socialization into Sport

Authors' contribution:

- A) conception and design of the study
- B) acquisition of data
- C) analysis and interpretation of data
- D) manuscript preparation
- E) obtaining funding

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ABSTRACT

Since the mid-20th century, and parallel with the devaluation of the classical Olympic idea, the classical Olympic amateur status has been modified: Olympians have been permitted to earn money legally via their sport performances. They have been legally defined as employees, and they have become to be regarded as "Olympic professionals". The Cypriot elite athletes, who joined the Olympic family in 1980, did not follow international trends regarding this special kind of professionalism. Their start in sport also was to be different from the beginning of most professional Olympic athletes' sporting careers.

The objective of this article is to present information on the particular characteristics of Cypriot Olympians' socialization into sport based on the findings of an empirical research carried out by the author. The investigation was carried out by quantitative (standardized questionnaire) and qualitative (in-depth interviews) methods among Cypriot Olympians, their coaches, and managers. The quantitative data were summarized by Microsoft Excel 2003 program. Qualitative information was analyzed according to the special criteria.

The results deal with the following topics: the athletes' age at the start and at the specialization, their motivations, their socializing agents, and their parents' sporting experiences. In the conclusion the impact of the Cypriot sport culture and the ambivalent Cypriot sport politics on the athletes' early sport socialization is emphasized.

KEYWORDS

amateur status, elite athletes, sporting career, socializing agents

Introduction

Over the last decades the nature of the elite athletes' status in the Olympics went through enormous change. According to the Olympic Charter, only true amateur athletes were originally allowed to participate in the Olympic Games. Since the mid-20th century, and parallel with the devaluation of the classical Olympic idea, the amateur status has been modified step by step. Answering to the challenges of the changing situation, in 1971 the International Olympic Committee (IOC) eliminated the term "amateur" from Article 26 of the Olympic charter and defined athletes' status in terms of eligibility. In 1981 the IOC shifted the emphasis away from defining an amateur to defining a professional, and recommended that the athletes determine their status. The meaning of amateurism was reconsidered and the Olympians were permitted to earn money legally by their sport performances. Olympic athletes were legally defined as employees and they were regarded as "Olympic professionals" (Foldesi 2004).

The Cypriot elite athletes, who joined the Olympic family as late as 1980, did not follow the international trends regarding this special kind of professionalism. Over 20 years the majority of the athletes had amateur status in sport and they made their livings off sport. Their philosophy differed significantly from the view of elite athletes from sporting nations: they highly appreciated being recognized more nationally and less internationally.

There have recently been some changes in elite sport in this respect. Since the 1990s several elite athletes were given financial support, therefore less of them worked full-time, but they have part-time jobs or work occasionally. Just a few of them did not work at all. However, even today the Cypriot Olympians are not professionals in the same way as other Olympians, who are living and competing in countries with long sporting traditions. Money does not play a crucial role in their sporting career. In Cyprus most Olympians do not earn their living exclusively from sport; the majority of them are more amateur than Olympic professionals. Most of them combine sport with education and even with working activity. Their philosophy differed significantly from the view of elite athletes from sporting nations: they highly appreciated being recognized more nationally and less internationally. Like true amateur athletes, most of them were not interested in earning money through their Olympic participation; financial reward has come to the forefront only recently.

With full knowledge of the Cypriot elite athletes' special amateur status, it can be rightly assumed that their start in sport was also to be different from the beginning of most professional Olympic athletes' sporting careers. Since relevant literature did not exist that could verify or deny this assumption, when we carried out an investigation about the Cypriot Olympians' social background recently, we made an attempt to also reveal the process of their sport socialization. We wanted to find answers to the following questions: How and when did the Cypriot Olympians begin practicing sport? How and why did they select their sport? What were their most important motivations? Who supported them at the start? The objective of this article is to present the information on the particular characteristics of the Cypriot Olympians' socialization into sport based on the findings of our research.

Methods

The research was designed for the total population, that is, to each member of the Cypriot Olympic teams participating in the summer Olympic Games between 1980 and 2008 in 11 sports ($N = 93$; males = 66, females = 27). This investigation was carried out by quantitative (standardized questionnaire) and qualitative (in-depth interviews) methods among Cypriot Olympians, their coaches, and managers. Data were collected by standardized questionnaire personally. The number of responses was 74 (males 52; females 22). In-depth interviews were conducted with active and retired athletes ($N = 9$), coaches ($N = 7$), and key actors in the decision-making process ($N = 4$), a television reporter, and a newspaper journalist. Additionally, relevant documents were also analyzed.

The quantitative data were summarized by Microsoft Excel 2003 program. Qualitative information was analyzed according to the special criteria.

Results

Age at the start

It is largely accepted that it is important for the children to start practicing physical activity at a young age. Sporting activities for young children are organized in kindergartens, at sport clubs, and in elementary schools after school hours in many countries. Knoppers et al. (1988) referred to the works of Berlage (1982) and Miller (1983), saying that many Americans believe that the participation of children in sporting activities help them learn and understand values and while they gain physical skills. Sport is a free-time activity for the children (Weber 2009). Children should be involved in sport activities through games and play for their own benefit. Through the play, children learn social skills, such as discipline, respect for the others. At the same

time, they train and improve their physical skills (Brackenridge 2008). Weber (2009) referred to the work of Telama (1999), who said that sport could be exercised under different conditions.

More than the half of the Cypriot Olympians began regular exercise outside of school at a young age. One-tenth of them started early, at the age of 5 years. Almost half of them started between the ages of 6 and 10. It is surprising that a large number of Cypriot Olympians started sporting activity between the ages of 11 and 15 years. One-tenth of them started even later: between the ages of 16 and 20 years (Figure 1).

These days it seldom happens that young children aged over 11 years start exercise and then become members of their national teams (Shippi 2006). It is, of course, more rare that youngsters get involved in sport activity for first time at the age of 16 years (Foldesi 1999).

Figure 1. The athletes' age at their involvement in sport activities (N = 74)

Some Cypriot athletes changed their sport a few times at the beginning of their careers, and others chose at the start the same sport in which they became Olympians.

The results of this research also show that the athletes started their sporting career without financial support. They even bought their sports clothing and equipment themselves. Only 2% of them said that they were sponsored during the first steps of their career.

Age at specialization

Some decades ago, the athletes had the opportunity to choose more than just one sport, and they had the opportunity to choose any sport in which to specialize in a relatively later period in their youth. For instance, during the Olympic Games in London (1948) there were athletes competing not only in one sport but also in several others. Such a phenomenon can no longer be seen due to the gigantic competitiveness and high expectations of today's sport. Over the past decades the age of specialization decreased. The selection of the sport nowadays does not follow the same procedure as seen in older times. The sport specialization is particular and special (Brackenridge & Kirby 1997). The age of specialization depends on the sport, and there are big differences between sports in this respect. It is a common knowledge, for instance, that swimmers and gymnasts specialize much earlier than players in various sport games.

Sport sociologists and psychologists express certain concerns about the early involvement of children in high performance sport (Donnelly 1997). Sport specialization at an early age may cause many problems for children. Specialized intensive training and high-level competition during early childhood are neither advantageous nor necessary and may determine future athletic potential and performance (Donnelly, 1997). For example, a child specialized in tennis in a very young age has high chances to develop scoliosis, or in weightlifting a child could have degenerative bones, etc. Many other problems can appear as a result of early specialization due to the long training, such as competitive stress, anxiety, increased aggression, and high dropout rates (Donnelly 1997). Psychological pressure, which can be applied by parents, coaches, agents, peers, the media or by health care providers, is also a factor that could have negative effect during early specialization (Weber 2009). Some authors discussing this phenomenon try to protect children and recommend changes in the international and national regulations about the limit of working age (Donnelly 1997, Weber 2009).

In Cyprus, half of the Olympians do not seem to be specialized into sports at an early age. Only 1% of them were under the age of five years, immediately after their involvement in sports such as rhythmic gymnastics and swimming. One-quarter of them were specialized in their sport between the ages of six to ten

(in track and field, judo, swimming, wrestling, and tennis). On the other hand, it is more than surprising that one-fifth of them chose the sport in which they became member of the Olympic team after the age of 16 years, and it is almost unbelievable that almost 1 in 10 Cypriot Olympian chose his/her sport over the age of 21 years (e.g., in shooting) (Figure 2). Late specialization occurred frequently in the 1980s and in the early 1990s.

Figure 2. The athletes' age at their specialization into their sport (N = 74)

The situation in Cypriot sport is not the same nowadays as it was 2-3 decades ago. For instance, the first shooters were specialized in sport later because they used to be hunters. Since they were excellent hunters, they were asked or they decided themselves to get involved in shooting when this sport became part of the Olympic Games.

Parents sporting experiences

Similar to the international trend seen in the 2000s, specialization started earlier in Cyprus in all the sports (including shooting) but not as early as was observed in the international arena, where parents encouraged their children to become heavily involved in professional and prolympic sports at early ages. Many of them also believed that supporting a child to become a sportsman/woman at elite levels can be financially beneficial to them and to their families (Weber 2009). Moreover, there were some parents who were athletes, then maybe lost their dreams, and they expressed their own former ambitions through their children (Donelly 1997).

This situation does not exist in the same form in Cyprus. Two-thirds of the parents of Olympians never were athletes, (10% of them participated in recreational sport; the rest were competitive athletes, mostly at lower levels (Figure 3). Some parents expressed their wish to see their children as winners, at least at local or regional competitions. They believed that it would not be necessary for their children to become international champions but it was enough to be good at national level.

Figure 3. The Sporting Activity of the Olympians' Parents (in numbers) (N = 148)

In addition, in Cyprus role expectations towards women were rather traditional 30 years ago. A great number of mothers were never active in sport. In the last 15 years this situation changed due to migration and to the spread of satellite television. As a result, the role models for women have changed. Women in Cyprus gradually started to get involved in sporting activities both at the recreational and competitive levels.

Socializing agents

As it is known that not only the parents can promote their children's specialization in sports, there are many other socializing agencies, such as teachers, coaches, peer groups, the media and the health care providers (Weber 2009). In India, for instance, in addition to their family, female students are encouraged by their coaches and teachers to participate in sports (Gupta 1987).

The answer to the question, who might be the most probable socializing agent, depends on the sport in which a child is involved. For example, in gymnastics and in swimming most frequently it is the parents who motivate their children to participate. In other sports, such as sailing, judo and shooting, other socializing agents play a more important role in the young athletes' specialization.

In our research the socializing agents in sport could be categorized in five groups. More than one-quarter of the athletes were invited by coaches, and about 20% of them were advised equally by their families, their teachers, and their friends to choose their sport. The media influenced 10% of the sport specialization of Cypriot athletes (Table 1).

The data presented in table 1 are somewhat surprising. Since the age of sport specialization became lower, the role of the families increased and the influence of sport clubs decreased in this area worldwide. This is not the case in Cyprus. Although it looks like that the sport system in Cyprus is not active enough to invite young children into sport and it appears to be very poor at offering open opportunities, coaches are the number one socializing agents. They do not play a more radical or important part in the athletes' early sport socialization than the other agents, but they take precedence over all of them. The relatively considerable contributions of physical education (PE) teachers and other teachers to the children's choice of sport are equally amazing. All the more so because PE teachers in Cyprus are not employed in primary schools.

Table 1. The socializing agencies that recommended/ the athletes to chose their sport (N=74)

Socializing agents	% of the athletes
Sport (coaches)	27%
Peers (friends)	22%
School (teachers, PE teachers)	21%
Family (father, mother)	20%
Media	10%

In principle one of the major links that would connect children to sport clubs would be the PE teachers who are actually missing from primary schools. The Cypriot government does not help to solve this problem and the sport organizations' hands are tied. Elementary school teachers do not agree with inviting PE teachers to their schools; they believe they are able to teach PE, despite the fact they do not have the appropriate education for that. The government pays their expenses to attend 3-6 month courses about school games. As a consequence, children until the age of 13 years do not have teachers holding degrees in physical education in schools, and the prestige of PE classes is low. Under these circumstances it is really unexpected that one-fifth of Cypriot Olympians were advised to become an athlete and were helped to select their sport at school. Even school teachers without proper qualifications in PE seem to have felt responsibility for children when they identified their gift for sport and they oriented them toward the kind of sport they supposed would be suitable for them.

There are no research findings from earlier periods for comparison, therefore it is not an objective way to state whether the parents' role in their children's choice of sport has changed over the last decades or not.

The size of our research population is not large enough for that either. However, it can be ascertained that the impact of the fathers and mothers on their children's selection of sport is low, especially in the mirror of international tendencies. Even the peer groups exert a somewhat higher impact on the orientation in sport of their friends. The major reason of this phenomenon can be rooted in the traditional value system of the Cypriot-Greek families, in which sport has had a peripheral place, if any. Although the family ties had been very strong, the majority of the parents did not direct their children towards (elite) sport because they were hardly familiar with it or they were not really interested in it.

The importance of the media in the athletes' choice of sport also appears to be lower than in many other countries. This situation can be explained by the fact that there are relatively few internationally successful elite Cypriot athletes who are present in the mass communication as magnetic patterns to be followed. The achievements of other nations' sport heroes are too far from the Cypriot reality. They rather push young children away from elite sport instead of attracting them since they appear too difficult or even impossible to reach or over fulfill such extremely high performances.

Motivations

The above results are not completely consistent with the information given by the research subjects about their motivations or choosing their sport (Figure 4).

There are, of course, several reasons that have inspired Cypriot children to be involved and choose their sports. It can be observed that the majority of the athletes answered that they were interested in the particular

sport or they wanted to become champions one day. A little less than one-third of them wanted to become famous and about one-third wished to have good body shape. Almost one-fifth of them confessed to not having their own motivations; instead, their parents selected the sport for them. Moreover, several children were inspired by the fact that one of their parents was also an athlete.

Figure 4. Reasons that motivated the athletes to choose their sport (in numbers) (N = 74)

It is quite characteristic that the majority of the motives of the Cypriot athletes were connected mainly to sport or to personal ambitions. It has to be admitted that it was not only their merit that very few of the athletes were motivated to start sporting activity for money. In the 1980s, when the desire to become famous and champions was the most important motivation, the athletes were exclusively interested in sports because it was out of question to receive money for their sporting performance. The Olympic movement in Cyprus was truly amateur longer than in the most other members in the Olympic family. The majority of the Olympic sports in Cyprus still operate in a different way than in many other countries.

At the beginning of 1990s there was a turn in Cypriot sport: money slowly started to become a part of sports. Consequently, money became a motivating factor for some sportsmen/women. However, Cypriot Olympic athletes do not earn high amounts of money, not even today.

According to the relevant literature one of the most important inspirations can be the family in general and towards sports in particular. The parents can influence the behavior, habits and values of their children towards the right direction, when they themselves live rational lives and take care of their health, fitness, and

appearance (Fialova 2004). More precisely, the father and the mother play an important role in their children's involvement in sports. The children consider their mothers and their fathers as role models. The role model of the mother in today's society has been reformulated but less so the fathers'. In the past women regarded their bodies as instruments of survival: they maintained the house and raised the children. Today's woman regards her body as an object that others evaluate and which she can form and influence (Fialova 2004). In Cyprus this phenomenon can also be observed in connection with sport but to a lesser extent. Not too many Cypriot athletes stated that they were inspired to start their sport because their mothers and their fathers were athletes.

It is largely accepted that it is important for the children to start practicing physical activity in very young age. Many countries have organized activities for different ages and levels, such in kindergartens, in sport clubs, in schools during after-school hours, etc. Knoppers, et al. (1988) referred to the works of Berlage and Miller, saying that many Americans believe that the participation of children in sports activities will help them to learn and understand values and at the same time gain physical skills. Sport is a free-time activity for the children (Weber 2009). Children should get involved in sport activities through games and play for their own benefit. Through play, children learn social and physical skills, such as discipline, respect for the others, and at the same time, they train and improve. Weber (2009) referred to the work of Telama, who said that sport can be exercised under different conditions.

Conclusions

The findings of our research proved that the Cypriot Olympians' socialization into sport had particular characteristics. Contrary to international trends, a relatively large number of them started sporting activity between the ages of 11 and 15 years. One-tenth of them started even later: between the ages of 16 and 20 years.

About half of the Olympians did not specialize in the sport at an early age in which they later became team members. Just the other way around: several of them selected their sport surprisingly late.

Although the family ties were very strong, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, etc., did not play an outstanding role in the Olympians' sport socialization. Other socializing agents, such as coaches and PE teachers, had more important or similar impacts on their decisions to start practicing, to choose their sport, and to become elite athletes.

The Olympians' motivations for choosing elite sport were mainly connected to enjoying sport or to personal ambitions, for instance to become famous and champions. Just a few of them were motivated to start sporting activity for money.

The major reasons the Cypriot Olympians' special sport socialization process can help to be explained are many-sided but most of them can be classified into two interrelated groups. The first one is connected to the Cypriot sport culture, which is rooted in the fact that sport history is short in the country. The grandparents and parents of today's elite athletes were never athletes; many of them never practiced sport. Moreover, Cyprus is a very small country and its size determines her position in the world of sports. These circumstances contributed to the fact that in the Cypriot sport culture the philosophy of winning at any price has not gained ground to the extent seen in many countries that are known as sports nations.

The second group of reasons can be related to the ambivalent Cypriot sport politics. Since elite athletes were not financed, and it was out of question to receive money for sporting performance for long, sporting careers did not become attractive for the children or to their parents. The conditions for becoming internationally recognized athletes also were limited in terms of sporting facilities and sport-related health care. People were aware of their country's contradictory attitudes towards elite sport, which also discouraged them from becoming involved or initiating and supporting youngsters to starting on the way to becoming top athletes.

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