

**SOCIAL INEQUALITIES  
AMONG SKILLED YOUNG ATHLETES**

Thesis

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## **1. Introduction**

Micro- and macro-level analysis of social opportunities is still one of the most popular areas in social scientific research. In welfare states, it was typically the 1960s and 1970s, when extensive large-scale research was conducted in order to reveal how open a society was, what kind of chances there were for individuals to change their social status, and how the structure of a given society could be described in general. At present, the attention of researchers is not devoted to presenting the existence of unequal opportunities, since there are inequalities present in every society and this cannot be considered as a state of anomie. A more relevant conception is the equality of opportunities, and this is what needs to be considered in modern social redistribution. Based on the the result of the international research the Hungarian scholars try to reveal the reasons for the inequalities and examine, which groups are affected.

The sport is a subsystem of the society. The examination of the link between sport and social stratification is not wide-spread. Scholars could find only few relevant research (Papai and Szabó 2003, Egressy 2005).

Nowadays the changes of the micro- and macro structure are in the negative directions (Szabó 2001, 2002, 2003, Suba 2002, Szegedi 2004). Although the aims of the state sponsored sport talent care programs are to reduce the social inequalities, we need to answer a simple question: Which athletes are in the state sponsored programs, where are they, when were they born, and where are they practicing their sport. We should not answer some basic questions, like what is their social background, or when and how they started the sport.

The selection of the topic under scrutiny was personally motivated. I have worked in this area for 10 years. Further, I have taken part as an active member in mechanism of the programs so I know the system from the “inside”.

## 2. Objectives

The social position of youth is defined by that of their parents, thus, when examining the social chances of junior athletes, the consideration of their parents is inevitable. The main objective of my research was to investigate that in an especially important period of becoming a top athlete, what kind of opportunities the parents have, and thereby to explore the social environment of the athletes entering the talent care system.

Furthermore, my aim was to examine if the social differences revealed in a research work conducted on a similar population more than 30 years ago. Did they change? If yes, to what extent? Are there differences between the social milieus of the athletes selected in the talent-care program these days and 30 years ago?

In accordance with previous studies, the research context, and the objectives set, the study is focusing on the following questions:

- Is it true that similarly to the results 30 years ago, young people in a more favourable financial and cultural situation stand a better chance to become a top athlete, than their less fortunate counterparts?
- Is it true that as opposed to the results of 30 years ago, there is a difference between the sports included in the present-day Integrated Sport Talent Care System regarding the social background of the entering children?
- Is it true that with the advance of sports career, from Level 1. (Heracles Champion Program) to Level 2. (Heracles Star Program) of the Integrated Sport Talent Care System, the social status of participants increases? and
- Is it true that the athletes participating in the Integrated Sport Talent Care Program tend to regard sport as a professional activity?

### **3. Hypothesis**

In harmony with the literature, the objectives of the current work, and the empirical questions begging for answers, I have formulated the followings hypotheses:

- It is assumed that (1) the choice of the sports is influenced by self-interest as well as by the parents' enthusiasm, (2) there are great differences in the length of training and the number of the coaches and (3) the negative effects of the sports are more frequent among the more senior athletes than the younger athletes.
- It is assumed that the young athletes with excellent social background have better chances to become professional athletes than youngsters with unfavourable social status.
- It is assumed that there are great differences between the social backgrounds of the athletes in various sports.
- It is assumed that there are great differences between the social backgrounds of the athletes who are at Level 1. and at Level 2.
- It is assumed that the young athletes who are living in economically developmental area are over-representative in the state sponsored programs.
- It is assumed that those athletes who are in the Level 2 view their sporting activity as a perspective in their professional and career development.

### **4. Methods**

From the methods of available data collections, primarily the survey method was applied, nevertheless, to draw comprehensive conclusions, the analysis of documents and in-depth interviews were also performed.

#### *4.1. Population and sample. The survey methods*

In the research, the athletes involved were from the Heracles Program in the year 2008 and from KSI in the year 1976 and 2007; therefore, the population of the study is complex. Perhaps the most interesting and most complex part of my research was the re-processing of the data gathered 30 years ago, their proper interpretation, and their comparison to the present-day data. The data of 1976 were collected by the predecessor of our Institute. The results of the Heracles sample could be compared with the sample of the survey conducted by our Institute and “Szonda Ipsos” (a Hungarian market research company); it consisted of 1500 people and was representative to the Hungarian adult population. Since in the state-financed sport talent care program all the participating athletes were registered, it was reasonable to include the total population in the sample, thereby minimizing the inevitable distortions and shortcomings resulting from sampling. In the database, there were 1201 registered athletes on Heracles Champion (Level 1.) and 301 on Heracles Star (Level 2.) of the programs, all of them were given the questionnaires (most typically in training camps of the national team). The ratio of returned questionnaires was 70.2% among the athletes at Level 1., and 60.1% among the athletes at Level 2. The data from the KSI questionnaire of 1976 can be regarded as complete, since at that time all students participating in the trial year were obliged to complete the questionnaires. 618 KSI’s athletes have sent back the filled-out questionnaires in the year 2007 (74.5%). According to the list of names and addresses, in the given year, 660 athletes started their sporting careers at KSI, and we could find a total of 551 questionnaires in the archives (meaning an 85% return rate). 618 KSI’s athletes have sent back the questionnaires in the year 2007. For data analysis and statistical tests, the SPSS 14.0 software was used.

#### *4.2. Document-analysis*

First of all I analysed those basically paper, which influence the development of the area. These documents are in the sports-acts (1996. LXIV., 2000. CXLV., 2004. I.). All of them mention the professional sports and the talent care system. Beside of the rules, I have analysed the publications comprising the official propositions for the ministry. Since my research has a retrospective dimension, I have analysed the personal data sheets reported by the different sport-sectors.

#### *4.3. In-depth interviews*

We also have conducted structured in-depth interviews with the leaders of sports and the directors of the programs. Thus, a total number of 32 interviews were analysed. I have used this method in the first part of the research. I asked from everybody the same questions therefore I could compare the answers. I have taken part in more than 50 matches competitions and trainings after that I have had a long conversation with the coaches and the athletes. I have noted the main and important ideas.

### **5. Results**

We could examine the social background of young athletes in the state sponsored programs from different perspectives. I have examined closely the following dimensions: (1) age of the sponsored athletes, (2) regional features (where are they living, sporting etc.), (3) the influence of the social position of their parents on their sporting-carrier.

After these points of view, I have separated the (1) sports and (2) the level of the programs. Using these dimensions, I performed a “deep-plotting” and shed light on the main tendencies.

### *5.1. The structural context of Hungarian talent-care*

Until the 1920s, the manifestation of fundamental physical ability was enough for successful results (Harsanyi 2000). The development of the results and the changing role of sport lead to the systematic establishment of talent care systems, especially in the great sport-powers (with GDR in the front of the list). At that time, the idea began to spread that seeking and managing the sport-talented youth should be an important area of science. The increasing significance of sporting achievement, the spread of the Olympic Spirit, the propagation of professionalism in sport lead to the increasing number of athletes in the different international competitions. Sport has become inspired by the expectations about the results, “simple talent” was not enough anymore, only those talented young athletes reached the top level, who got the optimal and suitable training-load. The successful participation at the international competitions was very important in many countries (we have to emphasise the socialist states), these countries developed unique talent care systems.

In Hungary the basis of the sport-system is the sports club, this did not change after the transition. In 1963 the first “children and youth” sport-club was founded, where the imagined talent-care system (the official name of the system was Unified System of the Sport Talent Care - USSTC) started to emerge. The main part of the system was constituted by the sport-schools.

The Heraklesz programs were founded in 2001. The aim of the program is to develop the physical and mental skills in sporting performances of the athletes to help them reach an international level. The programs finance the training camps, the coaches, the equipments etc.

The first level of the Heraklesz is the Champion program (Level 1), More than 1.300 talented children (between 14-18 ages) get financial assistance at this level. The second level is the Star program (Level 2.), The age group in this case is 19-23 years. The individual sponsoring is mainly a feature of the Level 2. The Heraklesz Basic program is different from the Level 1 and Level 2. The main purpose of the Basic program is to establish the Level 1 and Level 2, bring to the surface the talented children and get wide-ground for the sports.

### *5.2. The beginning of the sport carrier of the talented children*

The average age of the sponsored children at the time when they started their sport is 8.6 year (SD=2.42). In swimming, wrestling, and gymnastics this age is less than 6 year, so the selection process is starting very early. The average age of start in shooting, rowing and volleyball is more.

Few years ago it was popular to study the factors that may influences of the choice of sports (Bicsérdy 2008, Géczi 2005). The researchers unanimous opinion was that in the micro milieu, the effect of the parents was at the first place in the selection of the sport by the child. Indeed, 53% of the Heraklesz's athletes said, that they have chosen their branch of sport by modelling their parents and I have not noticed differences between the KSI 1976's subsample and KSI 2007's subsample.

### *5.3. The fulfil of the sport carrier of the talented children*

The good and harmonic connection between the coach and athlete is essential. Sometimes when the athletes change club or coach, their sports-carrier may be broken. More than 2/3 part of the talented athletes have 3 coaches in their carrier, this tendency is less in the individual sports (boxing, tennis, swimming and fencing) and more in the team sports (ice-

hockey, handball, volleyball and water-polo). The international level demands that the athletes train every day. We know, that:

- swimming, gymnastics and pentathlon are in the “more-training” group, in which case the athletes training more than 22 hours a week;
- in the case of judo, rowing and kayak-canoe the training hours are 14-18 hours per week; and
- the training hours a week are around 8-12 among the ball-games.

#### *5.4. The dimensions of the inequalities*

##### Educational Level of Parents

When answering about the education level of their parents, the athletes had to select from six given categories. It seems that today every parent of an athlete participating in the programs has at least finished primary school; nobody was included in the sub-samples with lower qualification. The number of parents with only primary education is also relatively low on both levels of the program. The percentage of parents with vocational qualification is between 10 and 27%, the highest ratio can be found among the oldest athletes of Level 2. The ratio of those finishing secondary school with a final exam is between 26.8 and 42.7%, and the ratio of university and college graduates is almost equal in the subsamples (41.3 – 47.9%).

From the results of the 2004 representative survey it can be observed that in the total adult population, the ratio of those not having finished primary education is below 10%, 21.1% of the population finished primary school, slightly more than a quarter (27.4%) of the population had vocational qualification, one-third have completed the final exam of the secondary school, and the ratio of people with a degree was below 15%. When comparing the Heracles and the 2004 Hungarian data, it can be seen that the parents of the athletes have much higher

education level than the Hungarian adult population ( $\chi^2=885.764$ ,  $df=16$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). This was not different in the mid-seventies, either, as then, according to the data of the KSH (Central Statistical Office), almost one-fifth of the adult population had not finished the 8 grades of primary school, whereas the corresponding percentage among KSI parents was below 1%.

### Employment status of the parents

In the athletes' sub-samples, the employment ratio is over 82%, in case of Level 2, 9 out of 10 parents were under continuous employment. In 2004, nearly 70% of the adult population were economically active, 23% were inactive, the unemployment rate was around 7.0-7.5%, and a small number of dependants were also registered. These data show that among the parents of the athletes, the employment ratio is at least 14% higher than the ratio for the entire population, the employment status of parents is much more favourable than the population average ( $\chi^2=285.764$ ,  $df= 16$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

The 1976 KSI sub-sample could not be compared to the official KSH (Central Statistical Office) statistics of the time, since owing to a particularity of the political system there were no registered unemployed in Hungary. The database of the athletes' parents shows that almost all the parents were in employment.

### Occupational status, income and wealth of the parents

In the questionnaire, we also asked about the occupational status of the parents of athletes participating on the talent care program. It can be observed that based on the descriptive statistics, the tendencies on the wider society can also be marked among the parents in the sport sphere. The number of agricultural and unqualified workers is decreasing on a societal level. The percentage of the top three categories has increased from 25.9 to 37.4%, and the size of the group of entrepreneurs, which was a missing category 25 years ago,

has almost doubled in the past decade. At the analysis of the athletes' data, it was revealed that compared to the population figures, almost twice as many Heracles parents do at least routine intellectual work (Heracles: 65.9%/KSI 67.0%, Hungarian adult population: 37.4%), among them, the ratio of entrepreneurs is also higher, and there are hardly any unqualified, or agricultural workers. As a result of the statistical test, we can conclude that this is not accidental ( $\chi^2=863.59$ ,  $df= 12$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

The questions referring to the income of the parents have been transformed, while 33 years ago the parents wrote their exact salary into the questionnaire, in the Heracles questionnaire, the children were asked to categorize their parents' wages; thus, a diagram similar to the previous ones cannot be presented here. Nevertheless, the majority of the Heracles athletes think that their parents have average, or above-average income, and there are hardly any talents who have claimed that their parents' income was well below average.

As it can be seen, the empirical qualitative data is correspond with the quantitative ones, since the majority of the parents are in a managerial position, which is over-represented among them compared to the Hungarian population. The managerial position is accompanied by higher wages; therefore these families are more keen sport-consumers as well, which is reflected in the youngsters' relations to sport.

These results are in accord with the ones published in international studies, which reflect that the popular reputation of sport being an open and democratic environment does not hold in reality (Coakley, 1997). The research results also show that among elite sport athletes, the ratio of those with a middle-class, or higher social background is greater than that of their lower class counterparts (Coakley, 1997; Eitzen & Sage, 1997), in the current study, this has also been revealed in a different segment of sport that is talent care.

## The regional differences

### Inequalities among the athletes in the Talent Care System

I have also examined if there were differences between the educational level, the employment status and the occupational status of the parents of the children involved in the different sports. As a result, 24 tables were obtained with the corresponding  $\chi^2$  and significance values; the most important results can be summarized as follows:

- There were differences between the sports concerning both the mothers' and the fathers' educational level. The lowest figures of education may be seen among the parents of boxers (30.1% of the fathers finished only the 8 years of primary school, 7.9% of the mothers had an even lower schooling) and wrestlers (40.5% of the fathers had maximum vocational qualification), whereas two thirds of the parents of fencers, water polo players and swimmers have a university or college degree ( $\chi^2=463.19$ ,  $df=85$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).
- Among the parents of fencers, the ratio of high-level managers and intellectuals is extremely high (fathers: 59.2%, mothers: 25.9%), and similar figures appeared at the parents of water polo players as well. The ratio of entrepreneurs is considerably high (41%) among the parents of ice hockey players, while among the parents of handball players (28.6%), wrestlers (32.4%) and boxers (31%), the ratio of qualified blue-collar workers is above the population average ( $\chi^2=505.77$ ,  $df=170$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).
- Only in the case of boxers and wrestlers did at least 8% of the athletes claim that they could not make ends meet from the parents' wages, whereas among water polo players the ratio of those well off is above 50% ( $\chi^2=341.33$ ,  $df=51$ ,  $p<0.001$ ).

In the questionnaires, the athletes also shared their views about the importance of sporting success, learning, and a successful civil life after the sporting career. The evaluation scales are

appropriate tools for observing deeper relationships; here we tried to reveal these inside relations with the help of factor analysis. During the analysis, 5 factors could be separated.

The factors are the followings: (1) Competitive career, (2) Sport-preparation background, (3) Civil environmental background, (4) Civil career and (5) Intrinsic motivation. The total variance explained is more than half (54.6%), thus, the groups emerging after data reduction could also be accepted. The KMO index is 0.822, which indicates the correctness of the calculations.

The factor scores are adequate indicators of the differences between the participants on Heracles Champions and Stars. In case of all the five factors, a two-sample t-test was applied to answer the question whether there are noticeable differences within the talent care system, and if yes, what are these.

The statistical test showed differences between the groups in two dimensions. According to the results, for the athletes on Stars, that is the older generation, the successful sporting career is much more important; they would like to become famous athletes, win competitions, and thereby earn a lot of money ( $t=2.038$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). They think that to their success, a great contribution is made by their environment, they value civil environmental support higher than their younger counterparts ( $t=2.038$ ,  $p<0.05$ ). Both groups regard the adequate sport-preparation background to be important, would like to attend good schools and make a lot of money, and they think that talent and hard work are necessary ingredients of sporting success.

It seemed a reasonable decision that I examine how the participants of the different sports can be characterized along the different factors. In order to investigate this, ANOVA was applied, and among the post-hoc tests, we relied on Tukey-test. As a result of the test, it may be concluded that:

1. in case of the “competitive career” factor, it was revealed that the values of tennis players and wrestlers are considerably different from the participants of the other sports; for them it is particularly important that they win a lot of competitions, make a lot of money and travel a lot to tournaments abroad ( $F=13.811$ ;  $df=17$ ;  $p<0.001$ ),
2. it is the tennis players who appreciate the sport-preparation background the most, they find the role of training partners and coaches crucial ( $F=5.896$ ;  $df=17$ ;  $p<0.001$ ),
3. the swimmers know that they have to give credit to their social environment (family, friends), and according to them, the supportive school also plays a part in the formation of their careers ( $F=16.473$ ;  $df=17$ ;  $p<0.001$ ),
4. for the fencers recruited from the highest social strata, learning and a good financial background is fairly important ( $F=5.804$ ;  $df=17$ ;  $p<0.001$ ),
5. in accordance with the first remark, tennis players regard talent, hard work and endurance to be the main ingredients of success ( $F=10.895$ ;  $df=17$ ;  $p<0.001$ ).

### Sport career or learning?

The athletes look forward to the future with high expectations, they find the successful sporting career important; however, many of them are also preparing for a civil life not related to sport. Considering the fact that the future Olympic participants are recruited from the participants of the talent care programs, it was worth examining if sport was present in their lives as a profession, and how they reflected on the financial income provided by sport. We can see that a large percentage of the youngsters would like to become professional athletes; there is no difference between the age groups, but the younger ones think that it is more likely. The question if competitive sport provides enough income for them, the answers diverge, moreover, nearly two thirds of the 18-23 age group think that they cannot lay the foundations of their life on sport.

The Heracles athletes were also asked if they had any permanent income from sport, and who financed their sporting activity. Nearly one third of the athletes had regular income from sport. A significant difference could be spotted between the two age groups, since among Star athletes, nearly two thirds had regular income from sport, as opposed to the 20% among the participants of level 1 ( $\chi^2 = 195.013$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

In addition to exploring the social background of young sport talents, the other main pathway of my research was to identify sport as a possible factor of life-orientation. These talents often train 4-5 hours a day and achieve outstanding results at international competitions. Thus the question emerges: if they invest so much energy, how do they see the prospective revenues. Do they think that they can make a living on sport? The results published in the relevant international literature confuted the previously existing common belief that competitive sport is one of the most favourable forms of making a career and a living (Eitzen & Sage, 1997). This idea is also apparent in the views of the participants of the Hungarian talent care programs; the athletes entering adult-age competition do not tend to think that they will make a living on sport and support their families from this income.

## **6. Conclusion**

Research on the social position of top athletes has serious traditions. In Hungary, researchers have also tried to investigate the social environment which the Olympic participants (the elite) are recruited from (Földesiné, 1984, 1999, 2000). From the results we can conclude that social inequalities are not only reflected in this sphere, but they are reinforced as well.

The examination of social chances appearing in sport talent care has escaped the researchers' attention until now; with this work we tried to fill this gap. We were in a

fortunate position to be able to compare the social environment of the most talented athletes with not only the current Hungarian social indicator-averages but also with the trends and situation before the 1989-1990 transition. With this retrospective approach we could also get an answer about how open sports as a social subsystem was before and after the political-economic transition, how great was and is the chance for a socially disadvantaged child to get into their sport's elite.

I believe that an extremely important result of my work is the proven fact that sport in Hungary is not able to reduce the social disadvantages children start with, in fact, it is exactly the opposite. The narrow social environment holds a determinant role among the talent care elite. We can see contradictory dynamics here: along with the decreasing number of children doing sport on a regular basis, children from good financial and life conditions fill up the ranks in almost all branches of sport, the socially disadvantaged are superseded more and more or are already excluded. There are certain branches of sport (we can comprehensively call these as martial-worker branches of sport) into which children from socially lower strata are recruited. An inverse exclusion is to be observed in this case, a certain type of sports-selection spiral is formed: martial-worker branches of sport are only practiced by people arriving from the lower(-middle) classes, people living among better circumstances tend to avoid them more and more.

It has also been proven that with the progression of a sports-career these inequalities do not increase, concerning social background, no interpretable differences can be found among the participants on the two levels of the program, the selection criterion is not family background anymore. According to the interviews with experts the biggest drop-outs are experienced during school changes (primary-secondary school, high school-university). If the talents are assisted in overcoming these burdens, there is a good chance for them to form the next generation of adult competitive sport.

Supporting their children's sporting practice is a heavy expenditure for parents (practice and competition costs), they are the ones who mainly keep junior-age sport alive. Certain sports try to lower these expenses (with the support of buying equipment or with the introduction of equipment-rental) but there is no existing overall concept, we can only meet ad-hoc solutions.

Among young adult athletes, sport-related income has emerged, and there are major differences between the different sports. One of the most important decisions of young adults is the preparation for their future, how present well-grounded decisions (investments) serve their future interests. Whether sport is such an investment for them is not certain, however, results tend to show that it is not. Sport offers a social leap for very few of the participants (they do not need to „leap” from anywhere), a „we will see”-like approach is becoming more and more typical. They have a good (in certain cases excellent) social background, they study well, are preparing for university studies or are already attending university. Of course they do everything to have good results in sport, but they are surprisingly realistic: they are aware that that very few of them will ever get the chance to make a living out of sport. It seems that they are not willing to risk, and they choose a civil career considered to be safe instead of the uncertain, demanding, and always fragile sporting career.