

# SOCIAL INEQUALITIES IN COMPETITIVE SPORT. THE CASE OF SWIMMING.

## **1. Introduction. Rationale for the Choice of Topic**

Research on equality of chances in competitive sport has appeared relatively late in sport sociology there are relatively few results in this field even today. This topic has been partly studied in leisure sport, partly in elite sport both at national and international level.

In Hungary research of elite athletes, more specifically the social status and role of Hungarian Olympians in the Olympic games between 1948-1996. was carried out by Gyöngyi Földesi (1983,1984,1999). Moreover, examining the social origin and background of top athletes she contributed to the subject of equal chances in competitive sport as early as the late 1970's. However, still this subject hasn't raised the interest of Hungarian research so far. Descriptive and explanatory analysis of the differences in chances during sport careers are still missing not only concerning swimming in other sports, as well. I intend to minimize this deficit with my paper.

The choice of my topic can be justified by another reasons. Hungarian sport sociology since its rising has aimed at analysing of the position of future generation of elite athletes, more specifically of relations between elite sport and recruitment for it reasons for young talented athletes' dropout from competitive sport. I also would like to emphasize the importance of this subject by started that there is a need thorough analysis of the elite swimmers' future generation, subject that has been investigated so far.

Swimming is traditionally a success sport in Hungary, but the social and economical changes of the last decades have left their traces on this sport as well. The present research pays attention these changes, as well, although their systematic analysis is beyond the research presented in this paper.

Swimming is respects a specific sport in many respects. However, it is hoped that some conclusions drawn from the results of this theses are valid for Hungarian sport as a whole.

## **2. Objectives**

The aim of this theses is to examine the major social factors determining the equality of chances in swimming. Sport as a subsystem creates and sustains inequality (Bourdieu, 1989): theoretically all children start with equal chances, but in practice they face objective social conditions that hinder them from participating in swimming on an equal basis.. My paper's aim is to investigate this problem.

I intend to identify those factors that have an impact on children's chances for choosing swimming and on their career in elit sport. I analyse these factors from both macro and microstructural perspectives. These factors are of different types: they include the political and economical characteristics of broader society, elements of social stratification, organizational and infrastructural requirements of swimming.

My research enquires into two problems:

- In what dimensions does inequality of chances appear in the process of engaging with competitive swimming, and later in becoming an elite athlete?
- To what extent do these inequalities work?

## **3. Hypotheses**

The character and measure of unequal chances are separately analyzed. In the following, I will enumerate my empirically tested hypothesis regarding the dimensions of inequalities. It is supposed that:

- Swimming as competitive sport is chosen mostly by children of middle class families;
- Financial background of the family determines the circle of children and youth who start competing.
- Sporting tradition in the family subserves for taking up swimming and becoming a top sportsman.

- The future generation's presence in swimming is strongly influenced by the economic and infrastructural level of certain regions and number of sportin facilities and establishments that swimming requires.
- Youngsters who live in the capital start with higher chances then all the others coming from other region of the country.

The above mentioned hypotheses are important from the point of view of taking up swimming as sport. Concerning unequal chances in competitive sport, the following three hypotheses are tested: It is asumed that

- the most frequent reason for dropouts is to studying instead of swimming;.
- more girls retire prematured before time from competing than boys.
- many teenager competitors give up swimming for more trendy sports.

#### **4. Methods**

Equal opportunities in sport may be determined by several factors, the analysis of which requires different methods. In my work I used the following research methods:

##### ***Document analysis***

I study with this method all those economical, political and macro-social factors that are relevant –according to related literature and to my own experience- to the functioning of sport system in general and different sports in particular. These are the following: the effect of the 1989–1990. economic and political- change of system on structural relations in society, changes in social stratification, the character and measure of social inequalities and globalization- on young people's lifestyle and on their system of values. Documents related to the organizational and financing system are also analyzed.

### ***In-Depth Interviews***

In order to prepare the study relying on questionnaires we needed a few interviews, made with different actors of swimming society, that marked the direction and contents of the questions.

Moreover, further interviews were needed in order to interpret well the research data.. I used this method primarily to study differences between genders and willingness for continuing their studies.

### ***The Survey Method***

The theses is based on a research carried out by the author with the help of survey method among children and youngsters who took up competitive swimming since the 1980's (N=496). The questions asked during this research were inspired partly by related literature, partly by in-deth interviews with coaches, sport officials and parents that helped identify the problems.

### ***Population and Sampling***

Initially my intention was to discover the society of the swimmer's generation. I studied with the survey method all of the active children and junior competitors, aged 9-16, a total of 266 persons.

As my primary aim was to reveal into the major social conditions of becoming a top sportsman, I necessarily had to study all those who became successful adult competitors. This sub-sample consist of 37 swimmers.

The third sub-population consists of those former swimmers, who because of some reasons quit swimming while still were in juniors category. They were chosen on

basis of their best sports achievements and availability (snowball-method, by the recommendation of their former coaches n=94).

I also considered important the regional representativeness, so I questioned at least 1-2 former swimmers per sport clubs, who had already withdrawn.

I was not less curious about the changes in which the system of conditions for becoming a top sportsman has undergone in time. So comparative research includes two further categories. I carried out the survey in the available group of the swimmers who are members of the national team 10-15 years prior to the change of regime. This sub-sample includes 43 persons. On the other hand, I also involved into the sample those who gave up swimming as junior swimmers a few years before the change of regime. This includes 56 persons on basis of junior champion lists, achievements and availability (snowball-method). I tried to invite to this investigation former swimmers from all over the country.

This way the sample of my research consists of 496 persons; it incorporates all the champions of the last quarter century and the majority of those successful junior swimmers who could have reached an elite athletes' status.

Before studying the social factors having an impact on unequal chances, I also studied what talent in swimming means, what the criteria for becoming a swimmer are and the methods for selecting talents.

## **5. The Results of the Research**

### ***The Value System of Swimmers***

There is only one value in respect of which obvious changes have occurred in the past decades. Traveling abroad had in the 1980's, despite the relative liberalization and openness of socialist regime, a considerable motivating effect upon athletes. By today, the possibilities to travel have grown, and according to this, there is less swimmers who by 20-25% think the opportunities of traveling abroad seriously motivate them in doing sport of high performance.

There are significant differences with respect to some values between adult athletes and those who had retired as juniors. In the latter group, values such as defeating the enemy, improving one's own records, becoming famous through sport are present to a lesser extent. The moderated presence of these values among retired swimmers might provide a partial explanation to their early withdrawal from competitive sport.

Unlike most sports (Földesiné 1999), there is no statistically significant rise in the „material” values, not even in the youngest age group. It is highly probable that relative to the more professionalized sports, swimming is rather an autotelic value for most swimmers even at an elite level. An additional proof for that might be that the high rank of sporting-love in the value hierarchy has not altered at all in the past twenty-five years.

### ***Popularity of Swimming***

Swimmers generally consider their sport popular. However, the loss of popularity of competitive sport after the change of the regime has not left the perception of athletes unchanged. Today's adult swimmers tend to be most skeptical about the social prestige and popularity of swimming. They are currently experiencing the difficulties inherent in the life-style of elite athletes, as well as – in many cases – the lack of social and material rewarding.

Even among the youngest athletes there is a significant increase in the number of those undecided, unable to create a clear picture of the popularity of their sport. In my view, the loss of social prestige and popularity of competitive sport beside the transitory social and economic conditions, as well as and the difficulties of and the unclear relations swimming it that contributed to this phenomenon.

### ***Gender Differences***

Gender differences in the group of children and youth related to the participation rate in swimming to be found sport are similar to those encountered in society at large: 50, 8% of young swimmers are girls, 49,2% are boys. This early equality is later replaced by higher rate of male swimmers. As age increases, so does the difference between the number of male and female swimmers, at the expense of the later.

In the early teenage years of biological transformations, the temporary decrease of performance (Sós 1993: 35) often results in an early retirement from competition. However, early retirement is not exclusively a matter of biological differences.

The main difference in the chances for becoming elite athletes between the genders is caused by the different social expectations vis-à-vis girls and boys, by the roles prescribed to them and by the gender-specific social norms. In public opinion, competitive sport is often associated with excessive physical effort, with the roughness of competition and with its straining character – both physically and psychically; shortly, the stressful and straining way of life. Competitive sport therefore appears as opposed to the attributes of effeminacy, since it demands from young ladies characteristics opposed to traditional female role concepts.

### *Social Origin of Swimmers*

There has been a significant increase in the level of education of the parents of swimmers since the 1980's. This phenomenon is not exclusively due to some structural changes in society, such as the expansion in high education – i.e. the average increase in the level of education of the Hungarian population. This indicates that swimming is (once again) becoming a socially closed sport, privilege of upper or upper-middle social classes.

In recent years has been the massive presence of the children of the entrepreneurship in competitive swimming has meant novelty. This comes, however, as no surprise. The characteristics of the personality which are necessary for competition – independence, assuming risks, long-term planning, and acceptance of deferred gratification – are precisely overlapping with those elements of the life-style which children and youth growing up in an entrepreneurial culture are socialized in.

The rate of parents doing physical work has decreased in the past decades, and parallel to that, there has been an increasing presence of children of originated from white-collar workers' families.

The data of the survey evidently justify the hypothesis that the social status of families from where the swimmers originated is one dimension of inequalities encountered

in competitive swimming. This sport is chosen mostly by the children of upper-middle class people.

The collapse of the socialist regime brought about important changes in sport as well. The financial situation of sport worsened to such an extent that the families of young athletes are necessarily overtaking the financial burden of sporting careers. This led me to formulating the hypothesis that today more swimmers come from financially better-off families than with the earlier generations.

I examined the indicators of financial situation: the possession of automobile, the living conditions and the swimmers' subjective judgement on the standard of living. Based on all three indicators it can be concluded that the life standard living of the young swimmers' families has constantly improved in the last twenty years.

### ***Sporting Capital of the Family***

According to my hypothesis, one further dimension of inequalities in competitive sport is the so called sporting capital of the family: the sporting traditions of the parents and of the large family are beneficial for getting involved with competitive swimming and for becoming an elite athlete.

My research data reveal that during the past one and half decades the impact of the of the parents' sporting past on the engagement of their children with competitive sport has grown. It is first of all children whose parents were of former athletes in swimming and children of former elite athletes in other individual sports who are getting engaged with competitive swimming, mostly on the initiative of their parents.

This reveals the high degree of self-reproduction of sport society, a tendency which is expected to continue in the future as well.

### ***Regional Inequalities***

According to my hypotheses, regional differences are another dimension of the inequalities within competitive sport. In this context I tested two hypotheses:

The level of economic development of the regions, as well as their infrastructural endowment (i.e. the existence of in-door swimming pools) determines the presence of future generations in swimming.

This presumption was not justified. Apart from the outstanding economic development and infrastructural endowment of Budapest, and the over-representation of the youngest generations from here, the regional distribution of recruit swimmers is not in direct relationship with the different levels of economic development and infrastructural endowment of the regions.

However inequality of chances is also present along the „establishment slope”: youth from the capital city have higher chances from the very beginning than those coming from all the other settlements.

Inequalities with respect to the type of the settlements were proven significant. The starting inequalities are intensifying along the sporting career. Adult swimmers both from the period before and after the change of the regime grew up in a town or a city.

### ***Conciliating Studies and Sport***

A growing tendency for studying has characterized adult elite sportsmen in the last two decades. Most swimmers in the national team's (85%) started studying at higher educational institutes while still competing. Before the change of political regime only a minority of swimmers had the same possibilities (17, 5%) and their studies were strictly linked to sport.

Since the political system change active sportsmen have had better chances for studying. Swimmers in Hungary they mostly study sport-related subjects, and Hungarian students at colleges/universities in the United States are major “fashionable” subjects, such as management, marketing and communication.

When comparing the carriers of swimmers in time, it appears that today's sportsmen delay their secondary school or college studies (mostly one semester) more often than those before 1990. I consider that the fall of the previous sport school system and the lack of cooperation between schools and sport clubs are responsible for that.

If we take a closer look at the reasons of teenagers for giving up swimming, the first one is their wish for higher education. They drop out in bigger proportions when starting secondary school, mostly for promoting the possibility to study at universities some time later. It seems that the swimmers' environment considers competitive swimming as an obstacle of learning.

All the other reasons for giving up competing can be somehow linked to the aspiration of studying at university. I heard several similar arguments to the following quotations: "he would have liked to take up other sports", "there were too many trainings", "his teachers advised him to give it up", "competing took him back from learning".

### ***Inequalities During Sporting Careers***

The method I used for analyzing all those factors that lead to dropout was a logistic regression model. My aim was to look into and explain the differences possibilities for becoming elite athletes. So I took into account all those variables in my explanatory model that have been proven (by descriptive models) important in my dissertation's previous chapters.

The type of settlement, the material background of the family and the education of parents determine only the starting inequalities and influence therefore only taking up competitive sport. They do not work during the sports career. These days the most important inequalities in the chance of becoming a adult top athletes are caused by the sporting tradition of the family. Those swimmers whose one or both parents were elite athletes themselves, are seven times more likely to stay in sport, than those whose parents have no such past.

Besides the family's sports traditions there are two further variables that have significant influence on becoming a top sportsman: the first is being able to conciliate learning and sports and the second one is gender. Before 1990 I could only identify two of these: sporting traditions in the family and gender.

The parents' sporting past was a very important factor in children's chances for becoming competing swimmers also prior to 1990.. A swimmer whose one parent was a

an elite athlete had four times higher chances to become a swimmer than those lacking such tradition.

Conciliating high school studies with a sporting career is a new factor that defines chances for staying in competitive sports. I would explain this by some macrostructural changes in Hungarian society, namely by: the growing importance of studies in the first place. On the other hand, changes in sport as a social sub-system also contributed to this phenomenon. I refer here to the collapse of the so-called sport school system.

### ***Transfer to Other Sports***

After giving up their swimming career early, much more of today's teenagers take up other sports than those of the past years. This is explained either by the objective possibilities of the family (schedule, conciliating sports and future plans) or by the personal interest of the former swimmer. It is not a complete withdrawal from competing, for most of the former junior swimmers compete in the newly chosen sports as well. Sports that require a swimmer's past have been becoming popular: water-polo, triathlon, kayak-canoe and extreme water sports.

The most frequent reason for changing sports is the fact that the new sport can be conciliated easier with learning. This also emphasizes the aspiration for further studies. Another reason for finishing swimming career is the monotony of trainings. A most cheerful atmosphere of team sports' was also mentioned as an advantage, while swimming was regarded as a "lonely" sport.

## **6. Conclusions**

It is for the first time that social inequality of chances in Hungarian swimming is studied and a research has been made to reveal the major factors influencing this phenomenon. Comparing the social background of two societies of swimmers, the

present one and that of the 1980's made it possible to discover the impact of the 1989-1990. political system change on children's chances in becoming competitive swimmer and elite athlete.

Selected swimming as a sport is initiated by parents with a high socio-economic status and is inspired by the will to lead a healthy life and build a harmonic personality. Competitive sport thus becomes a ground for social stratum-specific socialization.

However, these same parents rarely encourage their children to become elite athletes. Sports career in swimming lasts in childhood and in the teenage years. Later, generally when entering secondary school, learning becomes more important than sports career many swimmers quit their sport which are less challenging and choose another sport which are easier to do together with learning.

One of the most important results of my empirical research is that I succeeded to prove the growing tendency of self-reproduction of Hungarian sport society. Sport-friendly environment is a factor which determines the selection of sports and sporting careers; it plays an outstanding role also in swimming. It seems that today inequalities in selecting swimming and becoming elite athletes in this sport are caused by structural factors (determined by social origin, economic background, type of settlement) and by the sporting tradition in the family. The proportion of former sportsmen's children both among contemporary elite athletes and the future generation in swimming has been growing. Sporting traditions of the family work as a double "filter", they determine the circle of those choosing swimming and later of those who have more chances for becoming an adult athlete.

## **8. Recommendations for further research**

In this thesis it was not possible to take a deeper look into a few problems that are related in a more or less direct way to the question of equal chances. These are the following: personal relationship between coach and athlete, possibilities of earning money as a motivating factor for playing sports, the prestige of Hungarian swimming and its place in the hierarchy of sports, the economic and organizational circumstances of sport clubs. I intend to study these topics in the future.

These subjects point out guidelines for further research.

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