

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF CROATIAN ELITE ATHLETES

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Abstract: *The aim of this paper was to discover certain characteristics of top athletes for a better understanding of their career, life and function, and to rid oneself of widespread prejudices and stereotypes about athletes. The sample encompassed 301 athletes (154 F and 147 M), medal winners in top competitions: the Olympic Games, World and European Championships, World Cups and European Cups, and the Mediterranean Games from 1992 to 2012. The participants in the survey were those athletes who were available and who willingly joined the survey, including athletes from 39 sports (22 Olympic, 15 non-Olympic and 2 associated). The answers to 27 questions, out of the total of 81 from the questionnaire used in the doctoral thesis by G. Bjelić, Ph.D. (2018), were analysed. Research has shown that athletes are unhappy with the support by the state, the alliance and/or their club. Most believe that they received too little support and have invested in sports more than their sport has given to them. What attracts them most is success, socializing and travelling, and gaining discipline, working habits and organizational skills. Most of them are also attracted by great efforts and sacrifices. As for public exposure, most respondents are indifferent. Yet, double is the number of those deterred by it than those attracted by it. What deters athletes from sport is mostly neglecting other activities and a lack of time for socializing and entertainment outside sports. It was further determined that most athletes are satisfied with themselves as persons.*

Keywords: *top level sport, socio-demographic characteristic, Croatian athlete*

1. Introduction

The top (elite) athletes are differently defined by different authors. These can be: academic or university competitors,

national or international competitors, medallists, winners, Olympians, professional athletes, world class athletes, world record holders [7]. As a universal definition is sought [8] proposed a

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framework for assessing elite status claims involving five variables (competitive standard, competitive success, experience, sports competitiveness in the athlete's country, global competitiveness of sports); whereas each variable is worth a point, and the accumulated score classifies elitism. However, this remains a topic for debate.

Croatian athletes are categorized into 6 categories. Category 1 includes medallists at the Olympic Games (OI); world championships (SP) involving at least 15 countries from 3 continents; Masters, Grand Slam and Grand Prix tournaments with a minimum of 10 countries from two continents; European Championships (EP) involving at least 12 countries; and European cups (EC) involving at least 10 countries. Category 2 includes athletes participating in international "A" competitions. Category 3 includes national winners in competitions with a minimum of 8 contestants from 5 clubs or 6 teams from 4 different clubs. Category 4 includes top athletes, coming 2nd or 3rd at national competitions. Categories 5 and 6 include gifted athletes, medallists at national junior or cadet competitions.

Categorization of Croatian athletes is a legally established public authority of the Croatian Olympic Committee. The criteria for sorting athletes in the categories (1 through 4) are rankings or scores achieved on the SP, SK, EP, EC, Masters, Grand Slam and Grand Prix tournaments. By winning the Olympic medal, an athlete becomes the 1st category athlete. The basis for categorization is the criteria for each sport individually (both Olympic and non-Olympic). Olympic sports are sports whose international federation has been recognized by the International Olympic Committee (MOK), or whose sports are at

least some sports branches or disciplines in the Olympic Games program. The non-Olympic sports are not in the Olympic Games program, but are recognized by SportAccord, or the umbrella organization of all international sports federations, regardless of whether it is an Olympic or non-Olympic sport. Associated or temporary sports that have just emerged under the authority of National Sports Associations (NSS), have no developed sports competition system and are not recognized by either the International Olympic Committee or the SportAccord.

Top athletes of all sports (Olympic, non-Olympic, Associated or Temporary, Individual, Team) share sports career. According to the European Federation for Sports Psychology and Physical Activity (The European Federation of Sport Psychology, FEPSAC, 2000) and [10]; Cević Erpić *et al.* 2004, sports career means multi-year sports activities aimed at the high level of sports achievements of individuals and their own improvement in sports.

Doupona Topič [4] defines sports career as a multi-year sports performance of an individual directed towards achievements in top-level competitions and improving their own sports abilities. It is a long-lasting training process in which time is invested, all the talent and above-average physical and mental efforts are guided by a whole team of experts from different areas [1]. A sports career lasts from entry into to exit from sports. Namely, athletes are beginning to engage in sports at the age of about 8 to 12 years of age; a year or two years later, they begin to compete at the level of their club; three to four years later, at the national level; the first selection for the national team takes place between 17 and 19; the first Olympic

selection during the early twenties; and finally, the athletes stop competing at a high sporting level at about 30 years of age. In fact, athletes go through several developmental stages of sports career: the initial, the developmental, the stage of mastery and the stage of sports career termination [11].

The aim of this paper was to discover some of the characteristics of top athletes for a better understanding of their career, life and functioning, and to rid oneself of certain widespread prejudices and stereotypes about athletes.

2. Methods

The sample encompassed 301 athletes (154 F and 147 M), medal winners in top competitions: the Olympic Games, World and European Championships, World Cups and European Cups, and the Mediterranean Games from 1992 to 2012. The participants in the survey were selected by chance, among athletes who were available and who willingly joined the survey, including athletes from a total of 39 sports (22 Olympic, 15 non-Olympic and 2 associated).

The answers to a number of questions used in the questionnaire from the doctoral thesis, University of Zagreb, by G. Bjelić, [2] were analysed. The questionnaire contained 81 questions, 27 of which were selected, related to sociodemographic and socioeconomic status, the support by the society and sports organizations, reasons for the termination of sports careers and to what athletes find the most/least attractive about sport.

Statistical data processing is defined by response frequencies and descriptive statistics.

3. Results and Discussion

The age range of the athletes completing the questionnaire at the time of the survey was 59. The youngest athlete (kayaking) at the time was 22, while the oldest athlete (bowling) was 81. The average age of athletes at the time of completing the questionnaire was 38 (38.67) with a deviation of ± 8.5 (8,604) years.

The age of top athletes who ended their sports careers ranged between 21 and 71, spanning 50 years. About one third (34.5 %) of the athletes retired by the age of 30. The majority (91.82 %) returned by the age of 40 and almost 98 % by the age of 45, whereby only slightly over 2% were active beyond the age of 45. The sample included two athletes who ended their competitive careers at 50+ (sea sport fishing and bowling). Another two athletes retired at the age of 21 (kickboxing and kayaking), while the average retirement age was 33.43, with a standard deviation of ± 6.367 years.

The survey included calculating the time between the end of one's career and the time of participating in the survey. It amounted to 20 years with an average of less than 9 years (± 4.93).

As for the sociodemographic status, the following issues were covered: *Completed degree of education, Marital status, Number of children, Employment (in sports, out of sports, unemployed), Current incomes, Current status in top sport.*

Sample structure with regard to completed education

Table 1

Completed education	f	cf	%f	c %
Elementary School	1	1	0,33	0,33
Medium three years	15	16	4,98	5,32
Medium four years	103	119	34,22	39,53
Higher (two year or three year)	55	174	18,27	57,81
High School - Faculty	111	185	36,88	94,68
Scientific master's degree	14	299	4,65	99,34
Doctorate	2	301	0,66	100,00

Legend: *f* = frequency, *cf* = cumulative frequencies, % = percentages, *c %* = cumulative percentages

Table 1 shows the education level of our top athletes. It can be noticed that our athletes did not neglect education. Everyone, except for one, has at least a high school degree. Over one third of the athletes (36.88%) graduated from university, while over 5 % hold a master's and doctoral degrees. Hence, over 42 % of the athletes hold a high education degree. Unlike them, the general population in Croatia has not reached their education level. As many as 1.7 % is illiterate, about 30 % have a primary school degree at most, while 16.4 % has finished higher education, 10.5 % having a university degree (Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011).

Almost two thirds (66.45 %) of the athletes (200), live with a partner, mostly a spouse. 28.57 % (86) athletes are single,

while less than 5 % are divorced. There is a single widow.

41.20 % (124) of the athletes have no children, while out of the 58.80 % (177) who have children, 49.83 % (150) have one or two children, and 8.97 % (27) have three to five children. No survey participants have more than 5 children (just 1).

At the time of the survey, 56.81 % athletes (171) had ceased competing, while 43.19 % (130) were still competing, 7.64 % (23) of which were considering ceasing. It is important to note that some of the active athletes were competing in lower ranked sports.

Most athletes were employed, as many as 83.06 % (249), equally in sports and out of sports – 41.20 % (124): 41.86 % (126).

Structure of sample with respect to source of income

Table 2

Current Revenue	YES		NO	
	f	%	f	%
Professional contract	65	21,59 %	236	78,41 %
Partly a sports fee and a partial job	60	19,93 %	241	80,07 %
A permanent job	151	50,17 %	150	49,83 %
A casual job	56	18,60 %	245	81,40 %
Mostly funded by others (parents, partners)	14	4,65 %	287	95,35 %
Earnings from a private job started with money earned during a sports career	34	11,30 %	267	88,70 %

Current Revenue	YES		NO	
	f	%	f	%
Money earned during a sports career or sports retirement	35	11,63 %	266	88,37 %
I get along (should be settled)	68	22,59 %	233	77,41 %
Something else	31	10,30 %	270	89,70 %

Legend: *f* = frequency, % = percentages

Table 2 shows the source of athletes' income. The majority (one half) of the athletes has a permanent job. More than one third of them either have occasional jobs (18.60 %) or just get along (22.59 %). As student athletes were included in the survey, a small percentage of them (about 5 %) depend on other people's support. It can be said that not many top athletes can live from sports. The majority shares the destiny of general population who find having a regular job a necessity. About 20 % of the athletes have a sports contract, while there are also those with a partial sports fee and a partial job. Some managed to start a business using the money earned during their sports careers (11.30 %), while others got a sports retirement (11.63 %). It should be noted that there are athletes with multiple sources of income.

As for the *economic situation*: over 85 % of the athletes own a vehicle, 65 % own a real estate. 70 % of them travel for their summer holidays. Two thirds go on tourist trips and one third doesn't have financial problems dining privately in restaurants. Of all the travels, the least number (less than a quarter) travels for winter holidays. Looking at those habits, top athletes are far above the average of the general population. For example, over 60 % of Croatian population can't afford a week away during summer holidays, while only less than 5 % can afford travelling for winter holidays (Eurostat list, 2017).

The research also aimed at discovering *how athletes evaluate the support by the state, the alliance, their club*; the achievement of their set goals in sports; the relationship between the invested and gained in sports; and care and attention received. Only slightly more than a half of the athletes (54.48 %) believe they received the material support promised, only 11 % of whom believe they received everything promised. As many as 41 % of the athletes believe they received less (27.91 %) or just a little something (12.96%) of what they were promised, while about 5 % think they never received anything.

The athletes believe they received even less social than material support. Less than half of them (46.84 %) believe they received the promised social support, while only about 4 % believe they received the whole social support promised. Approximately 40% of the athletes believe they received less (14.29 %) or just a little bit (25.25%) of the promised support, while as many as 13.62 % of the athletes believe they never received any social support.

The results of the subjective assessment of the received deserved support show that the majority of athletes (72.09%) believe that they received less than they deserved from the state, the alliance and the club; one quarter (25.91 %) think that they received what they deserved; some athletes think they got a little more than they deserved (1.99%); while no athlete thinks he/she got much more than he/she deserves.

The results of the subjective experience of their own achievement show that hardly more than one half of the athletes (59.47 %) believe that they achieved most of their goals in sports. Only 10 % believe that they achieved all of their set goals. About 20 % think they achieved more goals than they didn't, while about 10 % think they achieved just something (5.32 %) or almost no goals (4.98 %). Some of the athletes participating in the survey won but a single medal, which possibly didn't satisfy their ambitions, while it is also possible that the medal was won on any of the World or European Cups insufficiently attractive in their eyes.

As for the subjective estimates of social attention, the results show that almost two thirds of the athletes (61 %) believe they receive as much attention as needed. One third believes to be getting too little or almost none (21% and 13% respectively), while there are also those who think they get too much attention – slightly too much (4 %) or way too much (0.66 %).

The popularity of certain sports, their representation in the media and financial support contribute to the responses to these questions. The survey encompassed top athletes from different sports. Regardless of the fact that Croatia is a sports nation – watching sports, rooting for & identifying with top athletes, perceiving the success of an individual or a team as one's own success – not all sports are followed. There are sports that an average Croatian has not even heard of, let alone know about its representatives, regardless of their success at the World and European competitions. Hence, it's hardly surprising to observe the gap and polarity in the responses.

The things that most attract to/deter from sports were also established. Sporting success is what attracts most athletes to sports (97.67 %), while there are still those who find sporting success repelling (1%) and those who are indifferent to it (1.33%). They are attracted by Socializing and travelling (92.69%) and by Gaining discipline, working habits and organizational skills (89.37 %). Sports earnings attract almost two thirds of the athletes (61.46 %), but the number of those finding Sports earnings somewhat attractive (35.88 %) is higher than those being highly attracted by it (25.58 %). The situation is similar as regards Social status which attracts over one half of the athletes (56.81 %), among which the percentage of those slightly attracted is higher (32.89 %). Great efforts and sacrifices neither deters nor attracts somewhat less than one third (29.24 %) of the athletes, while it attracts almost one half of them (46.18 %). What most deters athletes from sports is the Neglecting other activities (44.85%) and a Lack of time for socializing and entertainment outside sports (40.86%). A small percentage is attracted to those (7.64 % and 6.64 % respectively), while most find it neither attractive nor deterring (48.5 % and 51.50% respectively). As regards Public exposure, the percentage of athletes deterred by it (27.24 %) is double the percentage attracted by it (14.62 %). Yet, the majority of 58.14 % claimed that public exposure neither attract nor deters them. Overall, athletes love sports and sports life. They are used to investing efforts. They don't find it hard, moreover, they like what they do. Sports earnings are attractive, yet not the imperative for engaging in sports.

Table 3 presents reasons for the termination of sports careers. Stating more than one reason was allowed; hence N and the % are higher than the actual number of participants. The results indicate that about one third of the athletes terminated their sports careers due to their age (31.56 %),

one fifth due to injuries (20.27 %), followed by continuing education or getting a permanent job (17.61 %). Even though these are elite athletes, some terminated their careers because of not joining the selection (1.66 %).

Demonstration of reasons for termination of sports career

Table 3

Variables	N	N (%)
Age	95	31,56
Exclusion from selection	5	1,66
Injury	61	20,27
Family reasons	45	14,95
Satiation with sports	45	14,95
Material reasons	25	8,31
Unsatisfactory relations (with coach, team, administration, politics)	24	7,97
Continuation of education, permanent work	53	17,61

N = number of respondents; N (%) = number of respondents in percentage

With 108 out of 130 active athletes opting for *I am still professionally active* might explain the opinion of 23 athletes who consider retirement; hence 22 athletes might have given their reasons for termination.

The athletes were asked whether they would choose the career of a top athlete had they been given another chance. Almost 95 % of the athletes responded Yes.

Another issue looked into whether the athletes were satisfied with themselves as persons. Almost 95 % of the athletes claimed to be happy with themselves or happy at all times (76.41 % and 18.27 % respectively). Only 5 % of the athletes were more satisfied with themselves at the peak of their careers, while one of the athletes has never been satisfied. The responses show that our top athletes are stable and flexible, ready to adapt to life.

4. Conclusion

The survey showed that top athletes are by far more educated than the general population. The lowest education level is primary school (a single respondent). Most of the athletes are employed, either in sports or out of sports, and just a few can make living from competitive sports. At the time of the survey, most athletes who had stopped competing were engaged in sports recreationally, while one third of the athletes who stopped competing were coaches.

The research has shown that athletes are unhappy with the support of the state, the federation, and/or the club. The majority believes that they received insufficient support and that they invested more than their sport gave back to them. What attracts them to sports most is not sporting earnings or social status, but sporting success, socializing and travelling,

and gaining discipline, working habits and organizational skills. The majority is attracted by great efforts and sacrifices while being indifferent to public exposure. Yet, public exposure is repulsive to twice the number of athletes compared to those attracted by it. What deters athletes from sport is mostly neglecting other activities and a lack of time for socializing and entertainment outside sports. It was further determined that most athletes are satisfied with themselves as persons.

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