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Is sports system fair?

ABSTRACT

When it comes to ethics and fair play in sport, it mostly refers to training process and competition through respecting the game rules, opponents, organizers, managers and referees, through the implementation of standards related to means, equipment and kits used in competitions and avoidance and prevention from using illegal stimulants, i.e. doping.

The following question arises: is the sports system itself in its core established fairly and morally? Is there inequality and discrimination among certain sports associations, federations, clubs or athletes? This refers to the sports system in general, hierarchy of sports, i.e. federations within the whole sports community in local and regional government and on national level and within international sports federations and presentation of those sports to a wider community through different activities, programs and media coverage. We must not forget the economic side of sport as an activity which directly or indirectly ensures existence of a large number of people. Sports system is not fair and it is also often cruel. Discrimination can be seen through many factors: sports federations, media coverage of sports, division into "great" and "small" sports, Croatian Olympic Committee, money...

Establishment of sports system based on those foundations results in reduced number of young athletes, use of illegal stimulants, more violence, bigger health problems of young population, their lack of sociality and communication.

Key words: sport, sports system, fairness, discrimination

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Introduction

When it comes to ethics and fair play in sport, this mostly refers to training process and competition through respecting the game rules, opponents, organizers, managers and referees, through the implementation of standards related to means, equipment and kits used in competitions and avoidance and prevention from using illegal stimulants, i.e. doping.

However, this topic imposes another issue, which is the base of all cases involving avoidance of rules, cheating and fixing.

The question is: is the sport system itself in its core established fairly, justly and morally, is it fair?

Is there inequality and discrimination among certain sports associations, federations, clubs or athletes? This does not refer to a system within a specific branch of sport, nor to sport as a social activity whose aim is physical training of different social groups in order to improve their health, competitions, testing one's own ability in comparison to opponents', the satisfaction coming from competitions themselves, socializing and friendships, but it refers to the sport system in general, hierarchy of sports, i.e. federations within the whole sports community in local and regional government and on national level and within international sports federations and presentation of those sports to a wider community through different activities, programs and media coverage. We must not forget the economic side of sport as an activity which directly or indirectly ensures existence of a large number of people.

Relations among sports

A position of particular branches of sport in the sport hierarchy is visible through numerous examples and manner of their treatment in a particular community.

- **Division** into "great" and "small" sports is made according to affinities of media editors, money involved in a particular sport, athletes' earnings, and not according to accomplished results.
- **Media** follow "great" sports in all their unimportant, personal details and juicy stories related to family lives of athletes, so even international leagues are given a large amount of space, while "small" sports take up only a few lines printed in small font even in specialized sports newspaper, sometimes they are not even mentioned, regardless of the results. This fact is best depicted in daily paper *Sportske novosti* (*Sports News*) which dedicates its first half to football, sometimes even a few pages more than that. It is followed by two or three

pages of basketball and handball and after two pages dedicated to betting places and several pages of advertisements, all other sports together are given a page or two. It is clear that that amount of space would be insufficient to follow a sport even superficially, not to mention its promotion or presentation to a wider public. Who can become interested in, for example, bowling, if the entire first men's and women's league are given not much more than a quarter of a page, and reports from certain games are reduced to the listing of last names of the players and a number (result) next to them which does not have any significance to anybody outside that sport since the reader has no opportunity to get acquainted with the sport itself so he or she could make his or her own judgment and follow the value of the result both nationally and internationally. Information about lower levels of "small" sports is possible to find only in some local papers, not before the middle of the week for games which took place the previous weekend, naturally, only if the editor has good will and some empty space to fill.

This leads to the question who in the media decides what interests people and who manipulates them? (for example, Croatian Television broadcasts USA hockey league footages and reports. For whom? Who follows that, except, perhaps, bookmakers?)

- **Government** - provision which regulates rewards for achieved sports results greatly underestimates non-Olympic sports. They anticipate rewards only for gold medals in particular non-Olympic sports and in amounts fifty percent smaller than those for Olympic-sports.
- **Counties, cities and municipalities** have selective approach when it comes to financing sports so "small" sports receive only a few thousand kunas annually, whereas "great" sports receive millions.
- **Politicians** are generally engaged in sports which are given large media attention and in which a lot of money is involved so they could be even more exposed, which additionally adds to discrimination.
- **Croatian Olympic Committee** awards Olympic stipends to Olympic Games candidates, which is the only secure financial stimulus for athletes regardless of their results. Athletes who are in non-Olympic sports do not have that possibility even when they achieve top results, i.e. win medals in European or international championships.
- **Rijeka Sports Federation** – executive committee consists exclusively of Olympic sports representatives, each of them looking primarily out for their own sports branch, often even only for their own club, and sport itself is of minor importance. Professional coaches paid by the City through Rijeka Sports Federation are exclusively those from Olympic sports and from clubs which have

the largest amounts of money, but the achieved results do not correspond to the invested funds.

- **Sports Act** treats different sports differently, while the athletes themselves, for whom the entire system has been established and who should be central figures of both sports system and the Act, are in the background. This issue shall be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Professional work and organization of sports practices and competitions

The aforementioned examples imply that in those sports with greater media coverage, so-called "great sports", there is a higher concentration of quality athletes and money and professionals and power and there is also a greater number of children who want to be like their sports idols. However, all these do not guarantee success, in fact I would say it is the other way around. I shall exemplify this through examples of two clubs from Zagreb, *Dinamo Football Club* (men) and *Zagreb Bowling Club* (women).

There is a large number of national team players who have passed through *Dinamo*, a large amount of high quality coaches, their executive co-manager has high influence in football hierarchy as well as political influence in the City of Zagreb and beyond, despite all his tantrums and gaffes in public. Dozens of millions of kunas mean only a trifle for them. Nevertheless, for years they have not been able to pass the first, or sometimes second, qualifying round of the Premier League. Even though he supposedly protects the Club's interests and supposedly manages clubs politics successfully, it is an undeniable fact that his first and foremost priority is his own profit gained through players' transfers, which brought him enormous wealth.

The women bowlers of *Zagreb* have in recent years regularly participated in finals of international cups and yet two years ago they had to organize major-league home games at other club's facilities because their bowling alley did not meet the new technological standards even though it would have taken only approximately half a million kunas for its reconstructions. It should also be mentioned that the function of a coach, secretary and a manager in the Club is performed by a single person.

When it comes to performances of national selections, it would be normal to have logistics consisting of a selector, a coach, a conditioning coach, a kinesiologist, a maintenance technician for the equipment, a nutritionist and possibly also a cook, a doctor, a physical therapist or a masseur, psychologist and a sports manager.

However, the way in which this functions in a "small" sports shall be shown through the example of bowling. Both men and women bowling national teams participated at the 2009 Bowling World Cup in Germany. The 850 km long journey was traveled in a van driven by coaches and the hotel was approximately 30 km away from the bowling alley. Teams were accompanied by four persons – chief coach-selector, assistant coach, conditioning coach and the secretary general of the Federation who was also in charge of the diet, but due to schedule of games and returns to the hotel, both quality of food and time of meals were completely inadequate.

Since the women team won a silver medal, I shall analyze their performance in more detail.

Seven games took place in the period of nine days. Both semi-final and final games took place in the same days (semi-final at 8am and final at 8pm). There was not a lot of time to relax and rest between the games so either a physical therapist or a masseur would have been invaluable, but there were none so the conditioning coach took their role, which was both improvised and symbolic. The results of fatigue and psychological tension were most obvious in the final game when at the very end there was no more strength for the finish and the opportunity to beat the German national team was missed and they won gold supported by loud cheering of home fans.

Men's and women's sport

Although sex equality is guaranteed even by the Croatian Constitution, in real life and society in general, there are differences in treatment of men's and women's sports through both the approach to sports and the income of male and female athletes.

There is no difference in treatment between sexes in kindergarten, schools and even faculties. However, following the completion of education and employment, and particularly after entering marriage, drastic changes arise in treatment of female and male athletes in society and, unfortunately, even in families.

What is the issue?

When a young man stumbles upon difficulties at school and even fails a year, this is not treated as a big issue, but rather as allowed and justified consequence which follows his obligation related to practices, competitions and other sports duties.

However, when something similar occurs to a young female athlete, it is treated as a result of her laziness, lack of seriousness, infatuation with childish behavior and

playing. She is pressured into quitting this foolishness, starting reasoning maturely and thinking about her future with almost unfailing advice that it would be wiser to learn how to cook, iron, clean, etc. because she would need these skills once she marries. By this time nobody in a family considers sport as a way of keeping healthy, gaining self-esteem and building personality as well as a way of earning income, but it is considered as a crazy idea which should be driven out of her head.

In this period a girl is also frequently faced with the ultimatum set by her boyfriend: Either sport or me! This attitude is usually supported by both his and her family. If the girl insists on playing sport after she had completed her education, it usually results in remaining single because a typical male reaction, no matter how modern and emancipated they may be, is that he does not need a girlfriend to wait for to return from practice and who will not put him first on her priority list or, later, that he does not need a wife who will wander around and leave him with household chores, not to mention looking after children. Because, what would his friends' reaction be? Would they call him henpecked husband? Ask him how he could allow his wife to hang around other men? What kind of a woman leaves her husband at home alone? These and similar observations are often made by the family itself, and they usually result in a woman giving up her activities outside working hours and house or the relationship, i.e. marriage breaks. Therefore, a woman is expected to abandon sport, settle down, perhaps get a job and turn to her husband, family and chores after work and keep the sport as a nice memory. The situation is similar with women coaches, referees and other women in organization of sports activities so there are only about ten percent of women active in sport in relation to men.

On the other hand, a young male athlete is encouraged to train even when he is in a serious relationship or married because this status is precisely what he needs in order to have optimal conditions for achieving top results. In other words, while he was in his parents' home, his mother did not have time to dedicate herself sufficiently to his athletic needs because she had her own husband and possibly other children, all with particular needs to satisfy. Now, his wife will be able to dedicate all her attention only to his needs and requirements, i.e. requirements of his sports engagement (daily timetable of meals, type of food, sufficient amount of clean underclothing and clothing, sport kits, personal hygiene products, organization of spare time, ensuring conditions for rest).

If she follows him on his competition, she ensures conditions he is used to at home so he could achieve best possible results and that is normal, that is understood. Her frequent absences result in her leaving her own job and career so she could dedicate herself to her husband and his career.

If the relationship or marriage is between a female and a male athletes, the result is often very similar. The woman gives up her sport career so her husband's could develop without distractions, even if she is the more successful one in her sport. One such example are tennis players Andre Agassi and Stefi Graff, or, in Croatia, a handball player Zvonimir Bilić and a basketball player Danira Nakić.

Career of a woman athlete in most sports lasts up to the age of 25, i.e. until she gets married. Very rarely it lasts longer and as a rule this applies to unmarried women. On the other hand, career of a man athlete improves after the age of 25 and usually lasts for 5 or 10 more years.

The family supports a male athlete and, as a rule, they believe that a woman should be happy to have found a husband who is so engaged in sport so he does not drink with his friends, play cards all night, but instead trains and earns well.

On the other hand, families believe that it is the last minute for a female athlete to get serious and begin taking serious care of her home and husband who patiently endures her whims, and that she should stop chasing some ball despite the fact that even her sports income may be a lot higher than that of some employees in other fields of economy.

All this results in ratio of active male and female athletes being from 1:5 to 1:7 in favor of men. It is almost understood that their active sports career will be followed by training, judging or organizational jobs within sports, while this is very seldom with women. If they do come back to sport, it can be up to ten, or even twenty years after their career had finished, usually as assistants in organizational and administrative jobs, very rarely professional jobs.

I shall conclude this part with some data to illustrate the representation of women in sport. The data refer to entire Croatia and is related to bowling, which is a sport in which a career can last even 20 years longer than in other sports, but ratios are not much different than in other sports: out of 3400 registered bowlers there are only 540 women or approximately 16%, and out of 215 clubs there are 30 women clubs or approximately 14%.

Sports Act

Sports Act favors "great" professional clubs. Its coming into effect created a precondition which allows football clubs' debts of millions of kunas to be written off, i.e. to redirect their debts, ownerships, financing and responsibilities to local governments. In contrast, athletes are very weakly or not at all protected.

Professional clubs

- Sports facilities are owned by local government, players are owned by managers, and what about a club? A club consists of two mobile phones, a fax-machine and notorious debts which the government generously renounced and gave to local governments as a gift so they could start from scratch. No money – no responsibility. And as if nothing happened!
- And what about the obligations of a club, i.e. the owner in the future? What about contractual obligations towards the players. Does this imply that the local government will, if it takes over the club, in future take on club's commitments? Will there remain, and how much, enough funds for normal functioning of the particular local unit?
- Several years ago *Kamen Ingrad Football Club* case led Požeško-slavonska County to bankruptcy.
- Where are the younger age groups within professional clubs? What is their status within the corporation. These issues are not covered by the Act and that is why clubs improvise and that is why clubs improvise and it is no wonder that clubs' transformations lead nowhere.
- Manager's financial obligations are not mentioned anywhere.

Status of top amateur athletes

- **Sports stipends** are only a declarative right because the Act does not set minimal amount and does not obligate anybody to make the payment. Today, cities of Zagreb, Rijeka and Osijek have stipends. This results in quality athletes leaving smaller areas, closing of clubs, concentration of quality in big cities whose clubs frequently have greater ambitions than real possibilities which again leads to debts.

Additional limitation of the right to receive stipend for the third category for athletes up to the age of 28 in Rijeka or 30 in Zagreb, was implemented because sports budgets of those cities, considering the number of categorized athletes, cannot bear the total burden of stipends for their athletes.

Possible solution to this problem would be to make changes in the Act in which state would provide funds for the first category, counties for the second, and cities or municipalities for the third category.

- **Health insurance and social security** for amateurs who are not insured otherwise, as well as the health insurance for work related injuries or professional illnesses was thrown out from the finally adopted Act, so the athlete is completely uninsured in case of an injury or illness related to his sports activities. Furthermore, his existence is endangered after he or she ends a sport career.

- This issue could also be relatively easily solved by making a change in the Act which would ensure that the state should provide funds for health insurance and social security for the first category, counties for the second and cities or municipalities for the third.
 - *Slovenian example: top athlete is entitled to social security and disablement insurance, health insurance, injury insurance and a maternity leave pay if the income is not more than three times as high as an average personal income in Slovenia. Income is received by the particular Ministry as its employee.*
- Only an Olympic medal winner has a right to a university **scholarship**, paid by the government budget. World championship medal winners do not have that possibility. Considering the number of students Olympic medal winners, that amount is negligible.
- This condition is why only rich clubs in rich sports are able to financially meet the needs of their athletes and reward their achievements so this is another type of discrimination of other branches of sport, athletes, their efforts, results, health and dignity.

Coaches (professional jobs in sport)

- The Act proscribes relatively high standards for professionals working in sport, but it neglects the fact that the clubs of the lowest rank are often the only possibility for young people living in small, rural areas to organize their free time. Their ambitions are mostly reduced to entering the competition system, and the work is based on the enthusiasm of a few individuals who also cover the main part of the club's costs. As a rule, people who work there are volunteers or in the best case scenario, they work for a symbolic fee and they even invest their own resources (transportation, food, equipment) and there are no prospects that anything will change in the near future. What could attract educated coaches to these areas, how to ensure their income, benefits, housing? So, they are either forced to work illegally or shut their door.

Financing sports

- The Constitution and the Sports Act define sport as an activity of a special national interest, but the funds they set aside from the government budget for the public needs related to sport (0,7 %) do not support that statement.

Athletes' health insurance

- In Croatian health system there is no athletes' health insurance.
- The last analysis of the state of athletes' health insurance from 22 years ago showed that only 7 centers (Zagreb, Osijek, Rijeka, Split, Karlovac, Zadar and Šibenik) had athletes' security partially solved through out-patient clinics or

sport clinics which employed sports medicine specialists. When Croatia became independent, the conditions worsened because the old model was gone, and the new one was not established. Today, there is a small amount of places, primarily thanks to cities and sports federations, with private sport clinics that employ specialists, whereas in most places that work is done without supervision and unprofessionally. Athletes' are examined by different profiles of physicians, usually physicians in private practices, which is extremely expensive, and furthermore they do not have the proper equipment for quality examination of athletes. Additional tests (laboratory tests, eye-sight control, chest x-ray, orthopedic examination, etc.) are usually done through referral slips obtained by their primary care physicians, which includes long waiting lists at the specialists' so in order to expedite the procedure they go to private specialist practices, which presents a significant additional cost for the club or athletes themselves.

- And now follows the most amazing fact:

In 2006 there were 9 doctors specializing in sports medicine and approximately 50 physicians who have completed their graduate studies in sports medicine.

The number of active athletes in Croatia surpasses 400000. 250000 of them are required to go through regular medical examinations, which is an alarming number when compared to the number of qualified doctors.

What is encouraging is the fact that in 2003 a proposition to establish a new specialization called **Occupational and sports medicine** which lasts for 48 months was adopted, and it was established 33 years after **Sports medicine** specialization was abolished.

The Act has not predicted an alternative for smaller areas where there are no occupational and sports medicine specialist. For example, in Primorsko-goranska County there is only one sports medicine specialist and several occupational medicine specialists who are located in Rijeka. Therefore, all athletes from the County should be examined in Rijeka.

- The national health development strategy 2006–2011 does not mention athletes' health care.
- Considering these conditions, one should not be surprised by a large number of athletes' injuries, including those with permanent or even fatal consequences.

Elements which appeared in some versions but were left out from the final version of the Act

- difference between top amateur athletes and professional athletes
- amateur – compensation for working on sports improvement, right to a paid leave because of national league obligations, social security and health insur-

ance provided by a government budget, obligations of individuals and clubs related to national team performances

- conditions for performing the duties of managers, the registry of managers
- professional sports associations (coaches, referees, athletes, delegates, instructors, delegates, etc.)
- sport in pre-school institutions
- sports school within clubs (cooperation between clubs and school sports federations)
- health care of animals participating in competitions
- supervision on local and regional levels
- supervision of professional work
- Sports Bureau (professional work and supervision)

Crime and immorality in sports

Game fixing, doping, referees' partialities, bribe, violence with permanent and tragic consequences are becoming more and more frequent.

We have witnessed failures or Rijeka's candidacy for the organization of Mediterranean Games because rich candidates managed to buy with their "gifts" the votes of the committee members who make that decision. The committee members were little or not interested in the success of the organization and the course of competition of certain games, the numbers of flaws and failures. We witnessed catastrophic failures during the Games in Pescara. And there were no consequences nor sanctions.

The system sanctions the violators of the sports behavior code and fair play when a doping control shows positive results, when referees are showing partiality and aggressive behavior on fields. Unfortunately, these are only the attempts to alleviate the consequences but the core of the problem, i.e. the causes remain intact. In fact, it is as if the patient is given aspirins to lower his temperature, and the cause of his high temperature is not treated. The main cause is money, i.e. profit and earnings, which is closely followed by power, prestige and authority. And nobody wants to deal with the power and authority partly because of fear and partly because it would mean cutting one's own throat.

Final thoughts

Development and the amount of population involved in particular sport greatly depends on the media, I even dare to say, primarily on the media.

Only the small number of children can succeed in a particular sport, and the others should look for their chance in a different, more appropriate sport if they wish to remain in the world of sport. However, a great number of them abandons sport at an early age because they have not succeeded in a particular sport, and there is no systematic approach which would acquaint both children and their parents with other sport in which they might find themselves.

It is unnecessary to emphasize that with this treatment of some sports, it is a great achievement to attract young people to "small" sports. How can parents be expected to choose "small" sports with no money in which their children might be successful when they see millions of Euros in football, basketball, handball...? Children remain at home, they are not encouraged to socialize, be active, communicate, have a sense of community and sports spirit so they are often faced with obesity, asocial behavior, drugs, alcohol, violence. There are less and less children in sport and their communication is reduced to virtual communication (facebook, e-mail, chat).

Athletes have no security regarding their existence following the end of their sports career, unless they had secured future for themselves and their families with their earnings, but only a small amount of athletes manages that.

Looking at the length of sports career, one can observe that it is shorter for top athletes in profitable ("great") sports in comparison to athletes in less unprofitable ("small") sports. It usually ends by the age of thirty, and this is most frequently explained by fatigue, injuries or statements such as "I gave all I could", however information on how much they took is rarely or never available. Lack of motivation can be understood after earning millions, frequent travels, numerous performances, but it is pity that money earned in this way mostly ends in luxury or entrepreneurship and very small amount comes back to sport through educational work or support of sports schools or camps.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the sports system is not just and prone to malversations, frauds, transgressions, crime and violence. The core approach to the organization of sports system should be altered and this essay could serve as a basis for a more detailed analysis and a foundation for system alterations.

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