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## SPORT AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

### ABSTRACT

Sports have the unique ability to unite fervor and vigor for a common goal. For his universal value, sport has the enormous potential to create a more positive and sustainable future for all. Sport is inseparable from society, and it's also inseparable from the national feeling and national identity. Politics and sports are so closely related that it is difficult to imagine that they could be kept separated, with politics remaining unrelated to sports. There are various perspectives from which this association might be evaluated. Every national sports organization bases its operations on regional aspects and recognizes and uses regional social structures and cultural identities. In turn, the national association members refer to certain types of regional identity. The identity creation and expression process contributed to contemporary sports' historical development and global dissemination. Sports can have different aspects on social life, and in this paper, we fundamentally focus on positive and negative aspects.

**Keywords:** sport, national identity, positive aspects, negative aspects.

## INTRODUCTION

Sport is considered one of the most universal activities of modern civilization (Tiessen, 2011). Such a view is justified given that sport is an activity of almost universal value. Attali (2021) points out that this is primarily reflected in the sports competition, i.e. certain rules guaranteeing equality within the competition itself. It is not possible to start a football game unless both teams have the same number of players on the field. So the basic premise is that within the numerical framework, both teams have the same chance to win. Of course, it's the skill of performing some athletic discipline that determines the winner. Vallerand et al. (2008) suggest that the premise of equality is what makes sport, along with other activities, equally appealing around the world. Forde and Kota (2018) write that the passion for football (or some other sport) is almost identical in a poor village in Africa just like in London or Paris. All the other predispositions of these two angles are dissimilar. A young person in Africa has nowhere near the same opportunity as someone in Europe or America. Moreover, in all aspects of life, the differences between certain parts of the world, whether we're talking about economics, education, living conditions, civilization and society, health, etc., are clear. Sport, on the other hand, provides a small framework in which everyone can have the same or very similar rules and the possibility of victory. This is an important view because from it we can clearly make other results produced by sports.

Since sport is inseparable from society, it is also inseparable from the national feeling of each individual, whether he is an athlete or a fan (Maguire, 2011). Although modern nations are largely the product of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century (Phalet et al., 2015), the relationship between sport and the state-ethnic dates back to the very beginnings of organized sports competition. Hugh (2012) reminds on the ancient Olympics as one of the most important precursors of modern sports, one will find clear outlines and identify social communities with athletes and sports. Namely, it is a historical fact that at the time of the Olympic Games, the City-States concluded war peace

during the games to enable a smooth competition and travel of all spectators to the venue of the games. Also, the games served as a training ground for demonstrating the superiority of certain City-States over others. The fans themselves participated in this, who sought the verification of their social and other superiority through sports. If we translate it into modern times, the motives and instincts haven't changed much. Cha (2016) wrote that even today, nations are looking for their verification through sports. We can see this in major sporting events when there are masses of people who carry the insignia of their countries. This kind of thing doesn't happen every day. We won't see tens of thousands of people with English flags on Tuesday morning on a normal day. Then, the sport has the power to gather people under a single framework called a state or a nation. This often has very beneficial effects on a society's state of mind. As a social being, man also finds through sports some purposes that are "lost" during the daily struggle for prosperity. Sam and Jackson (2017) remind that the possibility of winning the small over the great, David versus Goliath, is one of the most appealing things in sports. Many nations see only sport as an opportunity to win, and that is why sport is a driver of national sentiment in billions of people around the world.

Developing national pride through sports can have countless faces. Bairner (2009) suggest that when we have that kind of nation-sport identification, then it's quite realistic to expect the negative effects of this phenomenon. First of all, we are talking about nationalism in the narrow sense of the term. Vallerand et al. (2008) analyse that a sense of superiority that produces intolerance and even aggression is something that is not uncommon at sporting events. Also, many historical contexts breakthrough sports. Alabarces et al. (2001) suggest that example of this phenomenon could be find in the football "relationship" between Argentina and England, which cannot escape the consequences of war for the Falkland Islands. Each meeting of these two teams also gets a political context that goes well beyond the sport itself. But why be surprised if George Orwell also said that "sports is war mi-

nus weapons” (Bairner, 2009). It was clear to him, therefore, that sport is not only a sport but also a battlefield of ideas, ideologies, and national pride.

## POSITIVE ASPECTS

Bairner (2009) points out that sports can have various effects on social life within communities in a country. One of the most obvious influences is the sense of belonging. There is a close link between sports and national identity. Sports can gather various layers of society around a national team. Topič and Coakley (2010) remind that one sports team or individual athlete becomes a symbol of a nation. It should be emphasized that this phenomenon is mostly reflected in large sports competitions where the best national teams compete with each other. The team’s victory is the nation’s victory. The power of victory is very tempting precisely from the effect of identifying the nation with athletes. Athletes’ success in national jerseys equates to personal success. That is precisely why in sports we have a strong presence of national sentiment in a large part of the population. In this section, we will analyse the positive effects of this phenomenon through several important frameworks.

**The unity and development of patriotism** are one of the basic features of this phenomenon. Hawkman and Van Horn (2019) suggest that creating unity within a social framework in modern times is challenging. Many topics divide society on various political, value, religious, and other issues. Still, sport often transcends these divisions. This can especially be felt in parochial small nations (Ward, 2009). The success of such teams greatly enhances this effect. The recent successes of the Croatian national football team won two medals at the last two World Cups. That particular sporting success has brought together a highly divided society in many respects. This thesis is also evidenced by the welcome of Croatian footballers in 2018 after winning the silver medal at the World Cup in Russia, where around 500 thousand fans dressed in Croatian flags were found on the streets of Zagreb. Such unity in Croatian history

is not remembered (Tomic, 2021). Tomic (2021) further clarifies that the beginning of solid patriotism in sports is related to the Croatian national football team. At the beginning of the 1990s, Croatia fought a bloody war for its independence. Three years after the war, this small country came to the world map by winning a bronze medal at the 1998 World Cup in France. This outstanding achievement has defined numerous generations, and they still follow every national team game in iconic checkered jerseys.

A nation’s **cultural expression** is often seen in sports. Many cultures are fond of their traditions and want to project them in sports competitions. An excellent example of this practice can be seen in the case of the New Zealand rugby team, where we strongly influence indigenous cultures to create the identity of the national rugby team. In New Zealand, team sports, particularly rugby, have often been a few cultural sites where Māori have achieved equality. With them is a related popular pre-game show where all players produce the Haka dance that is part of Māori culture. Rugby’s mythical and popularized role in defining New Zealand’s identity and uniting Māori and Pakeha helps explain the significance of the Haka. It may be because the Haka, one of New Zealand’s most identifiable national sporting rituals, is performed and displayed during heightened moments of national significance, i.e., when facing foreign opponents (Jackson, 2002).

**Sports tell inspirational stories** through the successes of a national sports team or individual athletes. Tomic and Tomic (2021) suggest that such stories also serve as a general inspiration both within a nation and globally. Malesevici (2017) uses the example of Novak Djokovic, the most successful tennis player ever. He comes from a country that does not have the luxury of winning in tennis. Serbia does not have prominent academies or conditions to have one such historically significant athlete. However, Djokovic demonstrated with his fantastic achievements another image of Serbia than one burdened by the weight of wars at the end of the 20th century. His sports journey is still a national inspiration in Serbia and worldwide.

Developing **sports culture and general conditions** for athletes has proved to be another effect of developing national identity through sports. The success of national sign sports teams has often also catalyzed development policies to improve the conditions of athletes across the country. Tomic (2008) reminds us that under pressure from national unification, governments began investing funds to enable new successes on the world scene. Irak (2020) reminds us that the success of the Turkish national football team at the 2002 World Cup launched a series of infrastructure projects in the country and increased investments in sports organizations, which significantly improved the conditions for all new players.

The **international recognition** of countries through sport closely connects sport and national identity. The appearance of a national team in a sport on a large stage necessarily brings greater attention to these countries by the world public. Let us return to the achievements of the Croatian national football team. Namely, one study proved that the success of the “Vatreni” at the World Cup in Russia brought a historic number of entries of the term “Croatia” on the Google search engine. Promoting Croatia as a state on such a vast scale was also calculated to cost hundreds of millions of euros under normal conditions. This is an important fact because, besides sports, Croatia does not have many ways of promoting its most important economic branch – tourism. It is no coincidence that 2019 was the record tourist season in Croatian history. Even today, there is a solid national opinion that athletes are the biggest promoters of Croatia as a tourist destination, which is an essential segment in the lives of many Croats (Tomic, 2021).

## NEGATIVE ASPECTS

At its core, sport is a noble activity that benefits all societies. However, as in everything, there are deviations in sports that cast a negative light on all stakeholders. It is also true of the relationship between national identity and sport. Brubaker (2010) writes that it is well-known that the line

between patriotism and negative nationalism is fragile, and many negative social phenomena stem from this source.

When analyzing the negative aspects of the impact of sport on national identity, it is not easy to circumvent some obvious examples. Sly (2021), as a first and obvious aspect, suggests **hooliganism**, which is closely tied primarily to football. Incidents and violence by football fans have been a problem for decades. Frosdick and Marsh (2005) recognize that this topic has become a global mainstream through various cases of English hooligans, and the phenomenon is often mislinked primarily to English football teams. Hooliganism itself exists in a large number of countries, especially in Europe and South America. Since hooliganism does not stop at the level of football clubs, conflict between hooligans from different countries is common when large sports competitions are held. Such images have a very negative impact on the image of the countries but also bring a negative relationship between many individuals in society and national enthusiasm for sports.

**Racial excesses** are one of the burning problems of modern sports. Jackson Jr. (2017) reminds us that it should be understood that they are not only now formed but that societies worldwide have decided to tackle this problem more actively. Racial insults, such as fans hurling racial slurs or making discriminatory gestures, can damage the reputation of a nation. Kassimeris (2009) warns that this is a particular problem for extremist cheering groups of Eastern bloc countries, which, due to various geopolitical and historical circumstances, have a small or no number of racially different athletes. Such conditions can always be fertile ground for the development of racial hatred and the creation of a sense of racial supremacy, which is closely linked to the national identity of a country.

Given the strong power of unification and positive aspects of national identity in sports, this phenomenon is also subject to several **political manipulations**. Politicians have always tried throughout history to use fans as an instrument

of political messages, which may be related to national interests or ideas. For example, Tomic (2021) brings the case of the unplayed match between Dinamo Zagreb and the Red Star Belgrade, which, according to many in Croatia, was also an announcement of war conflicts in the early 1990s. Red Star fans and Dinamo clashed with strong national tensions at that time. The behavior of the then police and state bodies hinted that Croatia faced a difficult and bloody struggle for independence. Police enabled Red Star fans to attack others, while on the other side, they used brutal force to fight Dinamo fans.

Duval (2017) writes about the following example that is closely related to the problem of political manipulation. Some governments have proven to use state appliances to facilitate the systematic **doping** of their athletes, all in the interest of achieving great successes that would also be portrayed as the success of a nation led by a certain leader. We have an example of this in Russia, where the World Anti-doping Agency (WADA) has proven the systematic doping of all Russian Olympians, which is why Russia has been expelled from several major sports competitions.

## CONCLUSION

Sport is deeply rooted in society. Ward (2009) points out that it is impossible to separate sport from the problems and virtues of one society. It is clear that the national identity that wakes up through sports has its complexity and several backgrounds and that this phenomenon has both positive and negative determinants. Not all societies are the same, but the relationship between sport and national unity differs in all countries. Still, rare occasions and phenomena can bring people together quickly and firmly under the same colors. The power of sport should be respected but also treated with caution. Although unity and positive feelings toward the national aspect benefit society, there are many dangers to fight. Developing nationalism and all its products, such as hooliganism, violence, racial supremacy, and political manipulation, is something that must not have a place in the

sports world. It is impossible to expect the complete eradication of these problems. That would be utopia. However, as long as this is not accepted as part of a fan culture, sports will have a dominant positive impact on the development of national identities in societies worldwide.

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## SPORT I NACIONALNI IDENTITET

### SAŽETAK

Sport ima jedinstvenu sposobnost ujediniti žar i snagu za zajednički cilj. Zbog svoje univerzalne vrijednosti sport sadrži ogroman potencijal za stvaranje pozitivnije i održivije budućnosti za sve. Sport je neodvojiv od društva, a neodvojiv je i od nacionalnoga osjećaja i nacionalnoga identiteta. Politika i sport toliko su blisko povezani da je teško zamisliti da bi mogli biti razdvojeni, a da politika ostane nepovezana sa sportom. Različite su perspektive iz kojih se može ocjenjivati ova udruga. Svaka nacionalna sportska organizacija svoje djelovanje temelji na regionalnim aspektima te prepoznaje i koristi regionalne društvene strukture i kulturne identitete. S druge strane, članovi nacionalne udruge pozivaju se na određene vrste regionalnoga identiteta. Proces stvaranja i izražavanja identiteta pridonio je povijesnome razvoju i globalnome širenju suvremenoga sporta. Sport može imati različite aspekte društvenoga života, a u ovome se radu temeljno usredotočujemo na pozitivne i negativne aspekte.

**Ključne riječi:** sport, nacionalni identitet, pozitivni aspekti, negativni aspekti.