

The inspirational function of role models for sport participation and development

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Introduction

In most countries, sport policy is directed towards two aims: on the one hand to increase the level of sports participation for the wider population and on the other hand to increase the success for a few athletes at elite level. Traditionally, mass sport participation and elite sport and are seen as interrelated and mutual dependent.

Mass sport participation provides a breeding ground for elite sport because of the continuous supply of young talents who can later excel as elite athletes. In turn, elite sport is regarded as one of the vehicles for attracting young children into sport because of the inspirational function of elite athletes as role models towards youth and the effects of international sporting success on the increasing public interest in sport (De Bosscher & van Bottenburg, 2011). This is the origin of the often noted but rarely analyzed pyramid analogy (Green, 2005; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Sotiriadou, Shilbury & Quick, 2008; van Bottenburg, 2003).

However, evidence obtained from current available data, makes it difficult to assess the validity of these claims. Many authors confirm that the literature on this catalyst effect of elite sport for a wider population is scarce, fragmented and evidence is anecdotal (e.g. De Bosscher & Van Bottenburg, 2011; Grix & Carmichael, 2012; Hanstad & Skille, 2010; Houlihan, Bloyce & Smith, 2009; Sotiriadou, Shilbury & Quick, 2008; Van Bottenburg, 2003).

The lack of evidence for the causal relationship between elite sport and mass sport participation did not prevent the 'wide spread acceptance' of the claim that the 'creation of national heroes would 'inspire others to emulate them' (Steward, 2009).

Aim

In this research aimed to find out if role models had an influence on the motives of elite athletes (a) to start with their sport, (b) to stay in the sport, (c) to increase commitment for training and competition to become an elite athlete and (d) to change their behavior.

Methods

Using a retrospective analysis, a total of 164 (55%) elite athletes, who receive direct or indirect funding from the National Sport Agency (Blosol), and their coach (n=138, 83%) completed a written online survey about the inspirational role of elite athletes.

Results

This research shows that only 10% of the elite athletes have been inspired by other elite athletes in order to start with their current sport. Mostly they were encouraged by their parents (59%) and friends (28%) to practice their current sport. This is different during the talent development stage where 62 percent indicated that elite athletes had inspired them to train more. There is no significant difference between gender, social statute and the international level of the elite athletes.

Talents have drawn inspiration from their "idols" mainly to train more intensively and at a higher level to become an elite athlete. Elite athletes turn out to have less influence on behaviors such as inspiration to buy specific branded clothing, to use a specific type of equipment, to live in a specific way or the inspiration to start training for a particular sport.

Also a majority of the coaches (71%) consider elite athletes as a role model for young athletes. In addition to train more intensively or at a higher level to become an elite athlete, more than 75% of the coaches are also convinced that their elite athletes inspire young athletes to start training for their particular sport or to choose to live in a specific manner.

Conclusion

In public policy of many countries, the increasing investments in high performance sport are justified on a process by which it is claimed that people are inspired by elite sport, sports people or sports events to participate themselves.

This research indicates that –according to elite athletes– role models did not have a large influence on their sports participation as young children. However, while they have an influence on the development of young people in sport by training more intensively and at a higher level to become an elite athlete, role models have less influence on behaviors.

References

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