



## IS COMPETITIVE SPORT STILL APPEALING?

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Certain societal developments that can be tracked on a global scale suggest the need to examine the attractiveness of competitive sport for young people. Reports from different parts of the world address issues related to the changing lifestyles of young people and emphasise growing gaps between interest in sport, participation in sporting activities of various kinds and involvement in competitive sports. Analysing the current situation and trends allows us to identify new opportunities and to make recommendations for the sports movement and, in particular, the Olympic Movement.

Although sport is a very popular leisure-time activity among young people all over the world, their interests and lifestyles may differ a lot, so they cannot be seen as a homogenous group. Cultural, gender, religious, access, ability and other issues result in differences between levels of sporting participation.

Scientific research has continuously contributed to an improved knowledge base. Among the issues and topics that have been addressed to date in youth research from different scientific perspectives are:

- violence prevention through sport;
- intercultural learning and sport;
- integration through sport;
- disadvantaged young people and sport;
- young people with a disability and sport;
- sports participation and modern technology;
- informal practice of sport; and
- “trend” sports.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) has recently initiated a study to analyse the physical activity behaviour of adolescents in several countries. The analysis of participation in competitive sports is an ongoing task as it is closely linked to developments in other areas of society.

#### 2. CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS

##### 2.1 Dynamic developments in life planning and leisure behaviour

In the current debate, concerns are being expressed that young people are facing numerous challenges in their development and education, with a strong need to pursue a competitive and economically fulfilling career. Many options and choices exist, resulting in sport being just one of the elements competing for the time and commitment of young people. In many cases, interest in sport is twofold: an interest in practising sport or watching sport in the arena or – even more often – on TV and on the internet.

##### 2.2 Global health problems

An ever-growing percentage of young people is already experiencing health problems due to lack of physical activity and consumption of unhealthy food. Levels of overweightedness and obesity continue to rise, and the prevalence of Type 2 diabetes also continues to grow. These are just a few of the resultant health concerns. Relevant governmental institutions and sport organisations are developing and implementing strategies to fight these problems, such as the World Health Organisation’s Global Strategy on Diet, Physical Activity and Health.

Experts have identified an enormous disconnection between the sports system and the physically inactive. For example, even intensive watching of sports events does not lead to a change in individual behaviour, as is sometimes assumed. Studies have shown that there are several barriers to participation, including time, cost, coaching, gender differences, ethnicity and study. These trends need to be analysed and new approaches need to be found to establish or re-establish this connection.

##### 2.3 Public awareness and media

The role of the media cannot be underestimated, not only in raising public awareness of positive aspects of sport and highlighting particular sports to increase their popularity, but also in portraying sport’s negative aspects. This, too, may influence not only participation in sport, but also perceptions of particular athletes. There have been recent examples of athletes behaving in ways that have affected not only the sport, but the individuals themselves. Could the pressure of being a role model be a reason why young people avoid competitive sport?

In addition, sports policy in many countries concentrates strongly on competitive and elite sport. Public funding is being made available for high-performance sport, while commercial relationships between athletes and companies in the private sector are currently growing. There is a need for continual monitoring of these developments to ensure that inappropriate exploitation is avoided. This is also another area in which pressure to act as an appropriate role model – not just as a champion athlete – can be brought to bear. Sponsorship agreements can be impacted by the off-field behaviour of athletes.

Whether elite sport, sport for all or any other form of sport is concerned, sporting activities are closely connected to the availability of facilities and a healthy environment.

The collaboration of sports organisations and governmental institutions at national and international level is of crucial importance to ensure



that people have opportunities to participate in competitive sport, as well as to practise physical activities with an emphasis on quality of life and well-being. In order to achieve these goals, more investment in grass-roots level sport is required.

#### 2.4 Lack of quality physical education

The school system can play a crucial role in developing interest, attitudes and behaviour. Introduction to sport in the school system can generate a healthy interest in participation, whether at the informal level of play or at a more competitive level.

International surveys have shown that physical education and sport in schools are lacking time allocation, qualified staff, facilities and, more generally, recognition and appreciation.

Physical education and sport in schools – both as lessons and as extra-curricular activities – need to be understood as essential and indispensable elements of education, contributing to the holistic development of each individual.

Quality physical education is the most effective and inclusive means of providing all children, whatever their ability/disability, sex, age, and cultural, ethnic, religious or social background, with the skills, attitudes, values, knowledge and understanding for lifelong participation in physical activity and sport. This can be a vitally important strategy in the reduction of the health problems previously mentioned.

Once engaged in sport, those young people who have chosen to participate at competitive levels – in school and in the sports system – need to be encouraged, empowered and trained by highly qualified teachers and coaches, and supported by their personal entourage, families and friends.

#### 2.5 Globalisation, universality and individualisation

For many young people, choosing a sport in which to participate, from an array of different sports, is not easy.

Very often, new sporting elements are developed within the youth culture that have strong elements of individualism, e.g. BMX, snowboarding and beach volleyball. Some people prefer to take part in these individual competitions, while others practise their sport “just for fun” and as a way of socialising with their peers. Though we agree that competition is an essential element of high-performance sport, competitive sport can also be practised without reaching the performance levels of elite athletes, whether in structured forms or informal settings.

In this context, it is important to emphasise the specific role of sports organisations at local, national and international levels. The sports system needs to adapt sensitively to the culture of young people and address the needs of the social and competitive athlete alike. Remaining flexible and adapting to ever-changing trends can keep a sport “in the spotlight” for both potential participants and potential supporters and spectators. An example of a sport that has adapted to generate and attract different audiences is rugby union. The game has reduced the number of players on the field (from 15) to competitions for 10 or seven players, both formats creating a faster-paced game. The sport requires the same skill set as the original game, but the tactics and style of play mean that a different set of participants (players and spectators) can be attracted.

#### 2.6 Young people and competition

Competition is an essential part of an athlete’s development, but it should not be the only focus. As role models, athletes can deliver a message to young people of how sport and competition are connected to teamwork, and to respectful, inclusive and tolerant behaviour. They can demonstrate qualities like perseverance, dedication, ethical behaviour and fair play, as well as the pleasure that is derived from winning, and the self-confidence that often stems from success.

These positive aspects of the role of champions are, however, contrasted with other perceptions of athletes’ lives: restricted social involvement due to strict training regimes, economic sacrifices, physical sacrifices, the limited duration of a sporting career, and so on.

Within youth sport, there is a tendency for programmes to become more serious and less playful, sometimes led by coaches and instructors who give victory the first priority. This may not be what attracts young people to participate in the first place, so their experience can be a negative one, resulting in a departure from the sport.

And there are other threats that might influence young people to keep away from or drop out of competitive sport. The use of dietary supplements and performance-enhancing drugs, and the negative impact of doping and sexual harassment, may influence parents not to enrol their child in sport. It is therefore crucial to disseminate basic educational material to ensure that the use of supplements and doping is reduced or preferably eradicated, and to promote clean sport! The main focus is placed here on prevention and on a positive perception of sport. This is closely linked with the work of the media in raising public awareness.

### 3. NEW OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the past, strong tendencies have been developed that link high performance and Olympic sport, as well as the Olympic Movement, to other areas of society, e.g. the cultural and educational sectors. The education programmes planned as part of the upcoming Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games in Vancouver and the Summer Games in London are intended to address the interests of young people and contribute to intergenerational demands.

From the various papers that were prepared for this section, a clear consensus can be identified: the Youth Olympic Games (YOG), initiated by the IOC, are seen as a tremendous new platform to inspire today’s young people. The sports competition, in conjunction with an educational and cultural programme, offers new opportunities to attract young people. Understandably, there are no data available yet on what impact the YOG may have on participation. This should be added to the research agenda of the future, as it would be helpful to know how the Games will influence:

- the beginning of training;
- sporting careers;
- athletes’ health;
- physical, psychological and educational development;
- social and cultural awareness;
- retirement from high-performance sport;
- the out-of-sport careers of athletes;
- athlete education and training (non-sport); and
- the impact of role models on children and adolescents.



There is a need for scientific research in this field from different disciplinary perspectives.

Recommendations include:

- Ensure quality physical education and sport for all in schools.
- Intensify collaboration between the school and the sports system.
- Establish connections between the physically inactive and the sports system.
- Closely link education and a sporting career, and provide social, medical and psychological care for young athletes.
- Develop talent identification programmes based on a holistic approach.
- Create new and innovative opportunities for competition and take youth culture and sporting interests into consideration.
- Promote clean sport and disseminate awareness and education programmes via different communication channels and the media, with a focus on prevention and the fight against doping.
- Cooperate with athletes who are champions and role models, showing perseverance and dedication and setting good moral standards.
- Invest in scientific research and use the findings to develop sports structures, programmes and initiatives and as a basis for critical reflection.

All members of the Olympic Movement have a key responsibility in encouraging and offering access to sport and to competitive sport for all ages and groups. Coordination with all sports organisations and governments is required to achieve this target.

Finally, it is important for the Olympic Movement and other sporting bodies at the international and national levels to involve and empower young people, and to contribute to intergenerational opportunities.