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## Ethical considerations in sports management: The involvement of children in competitive sport

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### Abstract

It was inevitable that with all the changes occurring in the modern sport, there has come a change regarding the involvement of children and young people in high-level and competitive sport. This is a very "hot" emerging issue that has drawn attention, and has sensitized people in the area of sport from all over the world, raising their concerns about the negative effects of intensive training on children and young people. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the various issues emerging from the participation of young people in high-level sport as there are mixed feelings about such involvement in highly competitive high-level sport programs. It actually outlines the basic problems in relation to this issue, suggests points and raises issues upon which discussion could focus. Such programs are widely supported on the one hand, and yet widely criticized on the other. Scientists have identified a variety of serious potential dangers that can emerge, that could definitely lead to deviations from the "Ethics in Sport" and the "Fair play" concepts. It is a very big challenge for sport management that has to be exhaustively examined for the benefit of sport and for the generations to come.

**Keywords:** Ethics, sport, sports management

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to set the ground for discussion and examination regarding the issue of "Ethical considerations in sports management: The involvement of children in competitive sport". This issue will be examined within the wider context of "sport ethics".

**Ethics in Sport: an evolutionary Concept:** It is very widely promoted by the mass media and people involved in the area of sport that ethics have disappeared in sports and the sporting world. It would be very important to try to provide a definition of "Ethics in Sport". Actually the term "ethics" has been very widely used, with different meanings and purposes. Dr. Jacques Rogge (2005), President of the International Olympic Committee in one of his presentation on ethics and Olympism, stated that "It is in style to say that ethics have disappeared in sports; ethics are an indefinable concept, and the base is respect for others. However, sport might be a universal language that is approached from very different angles by different cultures and nations. The vision of ethics is not universal therefore let us be very careful in approaching ethics".

**The Code of Sports Ethics:** According to the Committee of Ministers, of the Council of Europe, the Code of Sports Ethics includes the notion of the right for children and adolescents to participate in sport and derive satisfaction from it, and the notion of the responsibility of bodies and adults seen as the promoters of fair-play and guardians of those rights. There are certain implications for people managing sport at different levels.

Sports and sports related Organizations have the following responsibilities when working with young people:

- To ensure that the structure of competition acknowledges the special requirements of the young and growing child and provides the opportunity for graded levels of involvement from the recreational to the highly competitive.
- To support the modification of rules to meet the special needs of the very young and immature, and to put the emphasis on fair play rather than competitive success.

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- To ensure that safeguards are in place to prevent the exploitation of children, particularly those who demonstrate precocious ability;
- To ensure that all those within or associated with the organization who have a responsibility for children and young people are qualified at an appropriate level to manage, train, educate and coach them, and in particular that they understand the biological and psychological changes associated development of the child.

Furthermore according to this, individuals have, among other things, the following responsibilities when working with other things, the following responsibilities when working with young people:

- To put as a first priority the health, safety and welfare of the child or young athlete and to ensure that such considerations come before vicarious achievement, or the reputation of the school, club coach or parent;
- To avoid treating children as simply small adults but to be aware of the physical and psychological changes that occur during maturation and how these affect supporting performance;
- To avoid placing on a child expectations unrelated to his or her capacity to meet them;
- To make the enjoyment of the participant a priority and never place pressure which impinges on the and never place pressure which impinges on the rights of the child to choose to participate;
- To provide the child and young persons and child's family with as much information as possible to ensure awareness the potential risks and attractions of achieving is of high performance.

Having all the above issues in mind in relation to modern sport we can now turn to the major theme of this discussion paper, Ethical considerations in sports management-The involvement of children in competitive sport. It was inevitable that with all the changes occurring in modern sport, these has come a change regarding the involvement of Young people in high level Sport.

### **Protection of children in high-level Sport**

"Worse than the physical risks in playing high level sports today is the possibility of creating a monster, prima donna, a kid who thinks he is a superstar... Whose world revolves around him and around sports".

Industrialized and developed societies emphasize achievement, success, the development of someone, potential and the successful setting of goals and large this reflects to the way adults organize the play activities of children and young people. Participation of children and young people in highly organized sport programs and high level — competitive sport has shown drastic increase. It should be emphasized though that drastic increase. It should be emphasized though that there are mixed feelings about the involvement of children and young people in highly competitive — high level sport programs. The programs are supported, yet widely criticized. On the one hand, the involvement of Young people in sport, and the benefits that can evolve from such involvement are widely known: building of character, socialization, a sense of personal involvement and achievement, reaffirmation of friendships and respect for other people, the health benefits of exercise are only some of them. However, when considering the involvement of young people in high level sport and highly organized sport programs, we can definitely identify

some very serious potential dangers that can emerge, that could definitely lead to deviations from the "Ethics in Sport" concept that was discussed in the introduction of this paper. Many specialists, like psychologists, sociologists and exercise physiologists have expressed their concerns regarding the involvement of young people in such programs. It would be important at this point to identify and analyze shortly some of the issues currently discussed in relation to the involvement of young people in high level sport.

The every individual should have the right to engage in physical activity whatever the mode of participation, intensity or level of performance, under optimal conditions (coaching, safety etc). High- level or top sport falls within this general framework, but top sport is characterized by:

- The specific requirement involved in the quest for performance both by the athletes themselves and by the members of the support teams.
- The physical and psychological risks involved.

“Problems of a moral order, when the excesses of "victory at all cost" are seen to overshadow the principle of sportsmanship, occasionally shine the spotlight on top sport. It is all the more crucial that those problems be dealt with when the athletes involved are young.”

### **High expectation/demands from parents and coaches**

According to many articles, research data, and available evidence, although parents and coaches never have bad intentions for their youngsters, involved in high-level sport, many times they make mistakes that can make their children unhappy and miserable. We are thus referring to cases were parents and coaches have and set unrealistic expectations for their boys/girls in high level sport with all the consequences and implications that could follow. They can definitely lead to the establishment of highly stressful situations for both parties involved. The ethical dilemmas that emerge are obvious, and the parents that have children involved in high-level sport are greatly concerned.

### **Involvement of young people in high level Sport can affect the relationships between parents and children**

Further to point one, discussed earlier, there is evidence supporting that involvement in high level sport can supporting that involvement in high level sport can definitely shape, affect the relationships between parents and children/athletes in various ways. For example, young athletes finding themselves in a double bind; if they perform well in their sport they are treated like "heroes", if not, they get negative feedback from their families. According to psychologists- and sociologists, the worse of the situations, or actually the most destructive, can result when the young/athlete, comes to the point to believe that his/her relationship with the parents depends on his/her involvement in sport, and actually on athletic performance.

### **Involvement in high-level sport can lead young people to value only winning, ignoring fair play and having fun**

The young people involved in high — level sport may develop a truly "professional attitude", with the result that they value only winning, "professional attitude", with the result that they value only winning, and they are ready to pursue all means required to achieve their goals. "The aims justify the means attitude". Such behavior and attitude can eventually lead to potential health dangers.

### **High-level sport involvement can lead to "dropouts" from healthy involvement in sport**

The involvement of young people in high — level sport denies them the opportunity to experience the "playful" aspect of Sport, thus "dropping out" after some failure on their sport, not becoming involved in any sort of physical activity and becoming involved in any sort of physical activity and sport again. Furthermore, involvement in high — level, highly specialized sprit programs can lead to "burnout". It is therefore very important that such programs, focus on the personal development of young athletes as well, not overemphasizing performance and ignoring personality and personal and development. The issue of "burnout" of young athletes from high level sport has been studied considerably extensively in the U.S.A. and it is stated that this is actually a phenomenon that deserves great attention as it is very upsetting for all parties involved (young athlete, parents, coaches). It involves the loss of investment of time, money and personal effort for many years of hard work and dedication.

### **High risk factors — overtraining dangers**

"A major issue for all concerned in sport must be the increased recognition of the possibility of performer abuse. Coaches (and parents) must recognize that physical abuse can result from overtraining or inappropriate training..... the Sports Council examine the due to the growing concern about the negative effects of intensive training on children. The aim was to increase the awareness, understanding and sensitize people involved in sport of the physical and psychological pressures faced by the elite Young athlete.

After discussing some of the major threats or dangers (in relation to the deviation from "Ethics in Sports") for young people involved in high — level sport, we can now turn to the issue of protecting Young People in high level Sport.

It would be important initially to clarify that when we talk of protection of young people in high — level sport, we can refer to many different definitions. Protection, in this case, where dealing with young promising, developing athletes, can be defined as the act of keeping these youngsters safe from physical or psychological injuries/damages that could result from abuse in involvement in high level sport. Having this protection definition in mind, we can proceed further and state that when talking of mechanisms of protection for young athletes in high — level sport, we should talk of a multifaceted approach, which would involve the athlete, the parent, the coach, and the school. These are the different levels that should be targeted in such "protection programs".

Firstly, starting with the athlete, it would be very important to educate young athletes, when starting their involvement with high-level sport, to know what their rights are, and to assist them in developing the personal skills and competencies that would allow them to take wise decisions regarding their personal lives and their careers. Therefore, young athletes should be provided with the appropriate training in developing skills (time management, coping with stress and pressure, facing crisis and failure, quitting sport and their sporting career) that would assist them in leading a well balanced life with or without sports. For this to be developed, a social care support network should be implemented that could provide all the means required for young athletes to cope with the increasing demands imposed to them by their involvement in high-level/competitive sport. Such social care support network should provide services having to do with career counseling, after career adjustment/ rehabilitation,

social life skills and other related concepts.

Moving to the second level in this multifaceted approach, we should focus on the coaches that train and support young athletes. Appropriate and specialized in serving training should be provided, not only in respect to the training methods but also in developing the healthy relationships required between the coach and the athlete. Coaches now a days need to know the basic concepts of psychology, sociology, and the social sciences in order to fulfill their roles as educators first and as trainers, preparing young people for high level competition.

Parents are very important, or actually crucial in this attempt. Through the social care support network, parents should be provided with counseling services in "parenting" the young talented boy or girl. They should be definitely aware of the excessive demands imposed on such youngsters and they should be ready to work with them in developing a healthy relationship.

The school has also to play a vital role when dealing with high level young athletes, as flexible and other support services should be provided in assisting the young athlete to cope with excessive demands. With the increasing training demands for high-level sport, it is imperative that young athletes are provided with the flexible school schedule, otherwise they could very easily run into trouble trying to cope with the so time demanding training schedules and school.

As it can be realized the protection of young athletes in highly competitive sport is not a simple concept to grasp, but involves a series of interventions at different levels. Many countries have developed Codes of Sports Ethics and good practice of children's involvement in Sport. Such Codes have the aim of protecting young people involved in sport from abuse, and in this respect they collaborate with sporting organizations at national, regional and local levels, and the individuals working with children and young athletes.

In addition it was decided that, for the protection of young people in sport, a Code of ethics and conduct should be adopted, disciplinary procedures should be drawn, provide specialized coaching education programs, educate all people involved in the provision to sport about acceptable and unacceptable practices to protect children and other measures. Provide the opportunity to practice sport under well-defined conditions, and refers the following statements:

- Methods of providing appropriate direct or indirect support for sportsmen and women who reveal exceptional sporting qualities shall be devised in cooperation with sports organizations, in order to give them opportunities to develop fully their sporting and human capacities, in the full respect of their individual personality and physical and moral integrity.
- The organization and management of professionally organized sport shall be promoted through appropriate competent bodies. Practitioners engaging professionally in sport should be provided with appropriate social status and protection and with ethical safeguards against all forms of exploitation.

The sport must be accessible to all, healthy and safe fair, tolerant and fulfilling, respectful of the environment. The Code' of Sports Ethics putting fair play at the centre of the intrinsic values of sport.

### **Conclusions**

However, the big question that arises, concerning the

protection of young athletes in high-level sport, is whether working within the rules (adopting the Code of Ethics developed, following guidelines, drawing constitutional laws and regulations imposing sanctions and penalties in cases of abuse) can really help resolve the problem. Definitely, such measures can assist in alleviating the problem to some extent, or actually assist in the protection of young athletes, but what else could be done apart from rules, laws, regulations and similar measures?

As professionals involved in sport we have to listen to these elite youngsters and to their needs, to their desires and to their concerns. It is their needs and desires that have to be met, not ours. Additionally it would be important to emphasize the cultural differences between the attitudes of people involved in the field of sport to the involvement of young people in high-level sport. There are major differences in attitudes between countries and this would be a very interesting issue to discuss.

There is a range of approaches when dealing with young people in high level sport. Bearing in mind this variation in structures, it cannot be guaranteed that the rights of these young talented people will always be respected. In view of this, sport management and good governance have to play a critical and crucial role in the attempt being made to develop young athletes in a healthy environment.

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