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## **SPORT AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON**

## **SPORT KAO DRUŠTVENI FENOMEN**

### ***ABSTRACT***

*Sport has become a global social phenomenon. Sport can be used as a platform for achieving many social goals and solving a number of social issues. If adjusted to meet the needs and idiosyncrasies of an individual, sport can, due to a wide variety of its means and forms, be taken up by people of all age groups – from the youngest age (almost from the birth) until old age. Sport is a powerful driving force behind individual actions and transformation and various social events and trends. Sport activities are very often a significant factor in one's personal growth and development and in finding one's place in the immediate environment, as well as in the pace and the direction in which a community or society is developing. By definition and level, sport can be classified as top or selective and mass or non-selective. From the economic standpoint, every type of sport stimulates the general level of consumption, as well as the production, while top sporting events directly boost all areas of economy, from the construction of sport facilities and the production of sport equipment, food and medications, to tourist and promotional activities. The impact of sport is reflected in cultural and political aspects of almost any society.*

**Key words:** sport, society, top-level sport, social significance

### **SAŽETAK**

*Sport je u današnjem društvu postao globalni društveni fenomen. Kao takvoga koristi ga se za postizanje različitih društvenih ciljeva i rješavanje brojnih društvenih pitanja. Ukoliko se prilagodi potrebama i karakteristikama pojedinca sport može biti na korist ljudima svih dobnih skupina – od najmlađe dobi (gotovo od rođenja) do starosti. Sport je snažno sredstvo koje stoji iza individualnog djelovanja kao i različitih društvenih događaja i promjena. Sportske aktivnosti su vrlo često značajan čimbenik u osobnom razvoju pojedinca, u smislu pronalaženja vlastitog mjesta u društvu. Također sport je značajan i u smislu smjera i ritma razvoja samoga društva odnosno određene društvene zajednice. Sport se može klasificirati u*

*dvije osnovne skupine, vrhunski ili selektivni sport te masovni odnosno neselektivni. S ekonomskog stajališta, svaka od navedenih skupina potiče određenu razinu potrošnje, ali i proizvodnje, dok vrhunski sportski događaji potiču brojna područja gospodarstva, od izgradnje sportskih objekata i proizvodnje sportske opreme, prehrane i lijekova do turističkih i promotivnih aktivnosti u društvu. Također, utjecaj sporta se očituje i u kulturnim i političkim aspektima gotovo svakog društva.*

**Ključne riječi:** sport, društvo, vrhunski sport, društveni značaj

## **1. Definition and characteristics of contemporary sport**

### **1.1. Introduction**

In the contemporary world, a number of new areas of life are being developed as a result of a reduced number of working hours, increased standard of living and the general democratisation trend. Sport has in the given circumstances become a global social phenomenon. As such, sport has been a subject of research of a number of scientific areas, as well as a target of ideological and practical misuse and business investments.

Sport can be used as a platform for achieving many social goals and solving a number of social issues.

A well-structured sport system encompassing all types and levels of sport activity can, on the national level, positively affect the ability to adjust to extreme demands posed by special situations (war, urgent and unpredicted situations) and increase general work ability.

If adjusted to meet the needs and idiosyncrasies of an individual, sport can, due to a wide variety of its means and forms, be taken up by people of all age groups – from the youngest age (almost from the birth) until old age. The system of school and club sport, engagement of children in sport clubs as well as top athletes serving as role models for the young can in many ways affect the adoption of a system of value in children and youth, especially with respect to the acquisition of some biological and social motivations applicable throughout one's life.

Top sport and top athletic achievements are in a way a reflection of human values of permanent significance. Each top athletic result is a product of three factors: the totality of exceptional qualities of the athlete, the most advanced findings of different scientific fields, and an exceptional expert guidance. These factors are also crucial for top performance and the achievement of notable results in any other area of human activity (Pyke, 1992).

Top sport therefore brings sport, in terms of its social role, on the same level with other socially important areas of activity.

From the economic standpoint, every type of sport stimulates the general level of consumption, as well as the production, while top sporting events directly boost all areas of economy, from the construction of sport facilities and the production of sport equipment, food and medications, to tourist and promotional activities. The impact of sport is reflected in cultural and political aspects of almost any society (Rushall, 1989).

The role of sport science and sport experts is to identify specific goals and methods for the achievement of sport results so as to ensure the best possible expression of all positive potentials of sport.

According to Heinemann (1995), from the sociological perspective, it would be especially valuable to gain a deeper insight into:

- the consequences and effects of sport on individuals, specific groups and social structures, particularly athletes, spectators, specialised institutions and society as a whole;

- personal and institutional value criteria concerning different types and models of sport activities, historical shifts, specificities of a country etc.

Insufficient research into the effects of sport activity and sport results on different groups of value criteria makes any attempt to address this topic vulnerable to the threats of ideologies and manipulation.

Contemporary sport is unquestionably one of the most interesting and most wide-spread human activities. People engage in it at all ages, in numerous ways and for different reasons.

Sport is a powerful driving force behind individual actions and transformation and various social events and trends. Sport activities are very often a significant factor in one's personal growth and development and finding one's place in the immediate environment, as well as in the pace and the direction in which a community or society is developing.

According to Milanović (2013) the main characteristics of the sport activity which set it apart from other human activities include:

- the predominantly motor aspect of its performance
- intrinsic personal motivation for the engagement in the activity and the achievement of results, focused on psychological gain, and, in case of professional athletes, secondary, material gain
- voluntary choice of particular sport activity, as well as the level and intensity of engagement in the activity
- differentiation with respect to a wide spectrum of possible motor activities and the tendency towards a narrow specialisation within a sport branch or field
- focus on the achievement of a result that is measurable either in terms of its quantity or quality
- pronounced directedness towards winning, regardless of the age or preparedness level
- a permanent drive to achieve ever better results, which makes every sport activity competitive, whether it refers to a competition with one self or with others.

It is the very competitive quality that makes sport a potential means of affirmation and as such interesting to almost any individual, group, culture and social structure. The interaction between the sport activity and the person engaging in it facilitates a number of changes conducive to growth and development of the person and society, as well as sport, both as a specific human activity and as a social phenomenon. Sport activities and their results are in a sense both a reflection of the quality of the participants as well as their social and material environments.

Contemporary sport was not organised with these ideas in mind. According to Breivik (1999), almost any nation and a major sport organisation were focused on developing sport as an independent and self-sufficient activity able to produce valuable moral and pedagogical effects. In this context, it was believed that there are a number of values common to all sports regardless of the respective social and cultural environment. These ideas opened the discussion on whether intrinsic values of sport (independent on the environment in which a sport activity takes place) exist or whether the values of sport are external after all (historically, socially and culturally conditioned). The reflection theory denies the existence of any intrinsic sport values and proposes the thesis that sport is only a reflection of a given society and its values. On the other hand, a platonic, idealistic idea is proposed, suggesting that the system of values in sport is unchangeable and inextricable from the key characteristics of sport.

Sport, as defined today (Sports Act, 2006), refers to different competitive motor activities of variable and dynamic quality which provide children, youth and adults with a possibility to meet the need for movement and play, develop sport abilities, characteristics and skills, to express themselves and their creativity in the context of sport, to maintain and promote their health, and achieve sport results on all competition levels.

## **1.2. Dichotomy in the approach to sport**

A study of the history of sport and physical exercise and various approaches to sport and identification of its numerous characteristics reveals two contrasting systems of values, which can be found under different names and criteria.

In his dichotomy model, Guttman (1987) compares two contrasting systems of values attributed to exercise and sport by comparing sport in ancient Sparta and Athens. While the education system in Sparta involved regular military training, the education in Athens was intellectual and physical. The Sparta-Athens duality has been preserved over time and passed on from generation to generation. The opposition was still around at the time of the conception of the Olympic movement. Although Pierre de Coubertin advocated the idealisation of amateur sport (Athens), the idea of professional sport (Sparta) has not been abandoned. To the contrary, this idea has not only persisted, it has also grown stronger, despite being rejected on the level of the world's largest sports event.

Sport is one of widely inclusive social phenomena, in which there is room for everyone and everyone's interests, opinions and attitudes. Herein also lies its weakness: the potential for trivialisation of sport activity and for reducing it to the level of personal, random and unregulated. In order to avoid such a simplification of sport, leading to inadequate utilisation of its potential (in terms of benefits for the participants) and erosion of its fundamental characteristics, it is necessary to emphasise the importance of an expert approach to, and an expert management of, sport activity as well as the need for a scientific and evidence-based approach to sport.

The other extreme in the approach to sport activity is a result of the very need to treat sport in a highly scientific and professional way, which in extreme cases leads to a kind of mystification in the treatment of sport and elitism in the engagement in sport. In order to avoid this extreme, sport education and appreciation of sport should be nurtured from the youngest age, the human and material resources should be ensured for that purpose, and a system of organisations and institutions should be put into place to provide individuals with a possibility to engage in an adequate sport activity.

Sport education includes a certain level of the acquisition of motor skills and motor information, adoption of attitudes to sport and athletes, attitude to competition, the opponent and oneself – one's body, abilities and personality.

The required human resources involve a sufficient number of experts and support staff of various levels and types of qualifications, whose knowledge and personalities ensure a professional and effective treatment of those partaking in a sport activity. The educational content is dictated by the type of sport activity as well as by the characteristics and needs of the individuals participating in the sport activity.

In addition to the funding system, the required material resources involve sport facilities where the sport activity takes place and the equipment (training accessories and machines) necessary for acquiring skills and performing and practicing a sport activity.

The organisation refers to the structure of the system and the methods of teaching, education, various types of sport engagement, sport practice, competition and evaluation.

## **1.3. Primary characteristics of sport in different systems**

According to the definition and the level, sport can be broadly classified into top or selective sport and mass or non-selective sport. Top sport employs special rules and training technology, which cannot be applied to the area of non-selective sport (sport for all). The reverse also applies: sport for all, regardless of the scope of its outreach, cannot guarantee top sport results.

Several systems exist in the area of sport (Milanović, 2004).

**Professional sport** refers to sport as a profession, the main occupation of the athlete. Depending on the performance level, athletes can make a significant financial profit. This type of sport serves an entertainment function as well, posing a challenge to the large number of spectators who visit sport competitions or games.

**Amateur sport** is separate from professional sport. It is, generally speaking, sport of a lower qualitative level, serving primarily as a means for meeting fundamental human needs and preserving or promoting one's physical and mental health. Many countries do not draw a strict line between amateur and professional sport, thus hindering both types of sport activity in reaching their full potential.

**School and university sport** hold a very important place in some countries, from the viewpoint of both financial investment and professional staff education. This type of sport activity involves sport activities with an elaborated selection system, systematic training of young age groups and a competition system providing each talented young athlete with a possibility to fully develop his or her talent within school or university sport.

**Recreational sport (sport for all)** is the field of sport involving adequate facilities available to any potential recreational athlete and staff that has adequate education to be able to choose and implement a high-quality programme. By engaging in this type of activity and exercising regularly, people maintain their level of abilities and health.

**Sport for people with disabilities** is intended for people with some physical, mental or health disabilities that pose a challenge in taking up regular sport activities. Many sport facilities are inaccessible to those individuals, many types of sport inadequate, and many exercise programmes harmful or intimidating. However, sport activity can, due to its characteristics, be very stimulating and beneficial for people with disabilities. Programmes which have been developed and managed by experts and which take into account the abilities and limitations of an individual can have a significant compensation and rehabilitation effect. These programmes, especially for children and youth, can be integrated in their overall rehabilitation and education programme or implemented separately, through a special system of exercise and competition. A large number of countries have very successful systems of preparation of athletes with disabilities for various competitions, which significantly improves their inclusion in their living and working environment.

The issue of humaneness of top sport, i.e. violence in top sport, is frequently discussed. These questions are made redundant and unfounded if athletes are selected in an objective way, if the training programmes are implemented by educated staff, if the training code of conduct is observed, and if the legislation addressing the relationship between the athlete and the sport club takes into account and promotes the fundamental human rights accepted in a lawful democratic country.

A sport activity, regardless of its potential benefits, does not always necessarily lead to positive effects. Its benefits can be fully expressed if it is conducted under expert supervision with fulfilment of material and organisational requirements, taking into account individual abilities and needs of the persons engaging in it. Furthermore, positive effects of a sport activity are not automatically transferred into all other areas of human activity. In everyday life, this activity is only one of significant factors of one's development. One's personal characteristics, background, school, social environment will, together with the engagement in a sport activity, play a role in determining the quality of one's life, as well as the quality of one's sport achievements.

## 2. Personal and social significance of sport

Regardless of the variety of sport activities and the different levels and methods of their implementation, it can be stated that, provided that it is professionally managed, embarking on any type of sport activity has a significant general and specific impact on the quality of one's life and on society as a whole. The reputation of a nation and a country is, among other criteria, measured and confirmed by sport achievements of its athletes.

A forward-looking society is aware of the values of sport. A sport system of a society creates possibilities for sport engagement for all of its citizens to the extent in which they are interested in, motivated and talented for a specific sport activity.

A regular sport activity shaped and conducted to meet the abilities and needs of an individual of any age group significantly affects their biological, psychological and social status.

**In terms of the biological status,** engagement in a sport activity stimulates, develops and strengthens the entire motor apparatus and positively affects the cardiovascular and respiratory functions, as well as other bodily functions. In early childhood and youth, such an activity stimulates the growth and development of bone structures and connective tissues, and, at an adult age, it is positively reflected in terms of increasing, maintaining and extending the work ability and preventing illnesses and injuries.

On the basis of several epistemological studies, scientists have agreed that moderate and regular physical activity has a very powerful protective effect, leading to a reduced risk of developing an illness at a young age and of premature death (Saltin, 1996). These findings primarily concern cardiovascular illnesses, but other conditions as well, such as diabetes. The effects of physical activity on the maintenance of functional abilities at an old age are unquestionable.

**In terms of the psychological and social status,** engagement in a sport activity allows every person the possibility to fulfil some of the basic human needs: the need for movement, play, security, order and hierarchy, belonging, self-respect and respect of others, and self-realisation.

Engagement in a sport activity involves a number of sensory and motor triggers activating different areas of the central and peripheral nervous system. The person engaging in a sport activity expresses itself in the motor sense, but also in a cognitive, emotional and social sense. There is a large body of data available on the ways in which specific structural personality components, such as the temper, character, conative regulatory mechanisms, cognitive abilities, motivation, emotion and the level of activation, affect athletic performance. However, less information is available on the ways in which specific personality components change as a result of long-term sport engagement. This shows that the motivation of sport scientists, as well as sport professionals – coaches and athletes – is to a large extent focused on collecting data which are useful in sport performance prognosis and the formation and management of the training process, rather than on the benefits of sport activity engagement for one's general development and growth. The statement pertaining to positive effects of sport engagement on one's psychological state and social status can thus be primarily corroborated by theoretical considerations, rather than scientific facts.

Any engagement in a sport activity involves the adoption and adherence to a certain number of rules that apply to one's behaviour in the process of learning and performing a motor activity (Milanović, D and Milanović, M.1992). Rules, depending on the level of sport activity, very often regulate other aspects of an athlete's life as well (especially in professional and top sport), which can be reflected as discipline in a positive sense. It seems that the dislike of youth for the rules, regulations, the type of management and the dress code, as well as the domination of adults has prevailed against their interest in sport. The opposition between the system of values of adults built into the system of sport and the needs of young athletes seem

to reveal contrasting motives, effects and consequences of the engagement in amateur sport (sport for all) and professional (top sport). In that respect, psychological values of sport also depend on the needs and objectives of those engaging in it as well as the organisation and the values of the system within which a sport activity is performed.

However, every sport activity abounds in emotional triggers and sport, despite its demand for a certain level of physical and mental discipline, is a human activity that in specific stages stimulates and tolerates authenticity and spontaneity.

**Sport facilitates interaction and communication among people** of different educational levels, age groups, sex and status. In that sense, sport greatly enriches social interactions and experience of an individual, indirectly affecting social events and shaping social awareness. The members of the team and the coach can provide great support to a young athlete (Čustonja et al, 2003). Besides his family, peers and school, the young athlete has another safety net, protecting him from negative influences and supporting him at times of personal crises associated with growing up. In that respect, engagement in a sport activity and the sense of belonging to a group of athletes can be an important factor in the prevention of all types of addictions and socially unacceptable behaviour.

Although sport can be considered a potential stressor, due to its competitive character and occasional need to push one's abilities and endurance to its limits, sport also builds one's capacity for coping with unpleasant and threatening events. Engaging in sport can recuperate a traumatised person and provide them with an opportunity to deal with uncomfortable or traumatic experiences. To those who have not been exposed to stress or trauma, sport activities can promote the development of self-awareness and mental health, so that the person is more likely to see any stressful situations in the future as challenges rather than threats.

### **3. Prospects for development of sport**

#### **3.1. Potential for development and interactivity – fundamental dynamic components of contemporary sport**

In order for a system to function autonomously it must have its own specific subject of interest and content, but it also must have the ability to develop in accordance with the existing potential, rather than only maintaining the existing state.

The potential for development of professional sport refers to timeliness, optimality and coherence of functioning of all of its components.

Timeliness of functioning is primarily related to the procedures of selection, inclusion in sport training, implementation of changes related to the type and level of training load and rest, the achievement of a timely peak sport performance, as well as the exposure of athletes to the competition environment. This is especially important in the procedure of selection of young athletes since a premature or a delayed introduction into the system of sport preparation can be an irreparable mistake and a permanent hindrance in the future development of an athlete.

Optimality of all the conditions in training implementation, adequate rest methods, and competition demands which correspond to the athlete's physical and technical-tactical potential are also important progress factors. Neglecting this demand can expose the athlete to a higher risk of injury, potentially stressful situations and failure. Inappropriate procedures in each segment of sport preparation can significantly demotivate the athlete and compromise the continuity in the achievement of desired goals.

Coherence of approaches in professional sport is a demand related to education of sport experts, research activity, planning of sport training, attitude towards professional athletes, and control of the conditions and the results of sport preparation. Incoherent approach to the

subject (related to scientific and professional field) and incoherent treatment of all abilities, characteristics and skills relevant to sport achievement and personal health lead to a failure with respect to the achievement of progressive transformation which results in continuous improvement of sport results.

Interactivity, as an important component of functioning, enables all relatively autonomous systems to communicate, at all levels, with similar and congenial systems and to contribute to other systems, as well as to be used, corrected and developed through other systems.

Taking into account the aforementioned, a strategy for the development of professional sport needs to be designed in such a way as to facilitate communication with the legal and normative aspect of the profession, providing its participants with an opportunity to be granted certain rights within the profession and in relation to other social subjects. The strategy should also support and facilitate the fulfilment of legally or contractually prescribed obligation undertaken by all of the stakeholders in the system. Also, it is important to ensure that social institutions fulfil their duties, which will result in obtaining certain rights for sport and a better position of sport in a wider social context.

A strategy is a goal-oriented, dynamically organised set of activities, interventions and actions with corresponding obligations, time frames and modes of implementation.

Development is a series of progressive changes that lead to the improvement of the current state, the level of achievement, the quality of the process and the efficiency of procedures.

A strategy for the development of sport is a dynamically organised set of activities, interventions and actions for which, if implemented in defined conditions, we can claim with a high level of certainty that it will produce positive sequence of changes.

#### **4. Conclusion**

If adjusted to meet the needs and idiosyncrasies of an individual, sport can, due to a wide variety of its means and forms, be taken up by people of all age groups – from the youngest age (almost from the birth) until old age. Sport is a powerful driving force behind individual actions and transformation and various social events and trends. Sport activities are very often a significant factor in one's personal growth and development and in finding one's place in the immediate environment, as well as in the pace and the direction in which a community or society is developing. By definition and level, sport can be classified as top or selective and mass or non-selective. Top sport employs special rules and training technology, which cannot be applied to the area of non-selective sport (sport for all). The reverse also applies: sport for all, regardless of the scope of its outreach, cannot guarantee top sport results.

Coherence of the approaches to professional sport is a demand related to the education of sport experts, research activity, planning of sport training, attitudes towards top athletes, and the management of the conditions and results of sport preparation.

Sport science is, on the one hand, a human science focused on the athlete, his or her potential for preparedness and the principles that govern the development of these potentials. On the other hand, sport science is an applied science with the task to study the interactions of the athletes and the coach during the training as well as the optimisation of these interactions in all stages of long-term sport selection and specialisation in accordance with the potentials of each athlete and the conditions for the implementation of sport preparation processes.

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