

Financial situation of student-athletes and division of duties among parties supporting athletes' education

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Introduction

Elite sport and simultaneous studies is a combination that puts great demands on the athletes' use of time, planning and finances. It also requires a great deal of the educational and study grant systems, which should identify and consider the special problems of athletes and support their education. It is also a challenge for the sports organisations, which, in all respects, should encourage athletes to study during their sports career.

Athletes may have even larger existential problems than other students. The study grant does not cover all study and living expenses and athletes do not have time to work in addition to the studies and sports training. The athlete's grant distributed by the sports organisations does not either necessarily cover the expenses arisen from sports activities and there are not enough athlete's grants for all elite athletes. Moreover, studies may get delayed due to an intensive elite level training and, consequently, the general study grant does not suffice for the whole study period.

Project

At the end of 2003, a working group was set up by the Finnish Ministry of Education to discuss the financial situation of student-athletes and the division of duties among parties supporting athletes' education. The working group examined all available grants and made proposals to improve the financial conditions of student-athletes. The working group also looked into the educational, examination and study grant systems and their present development proposals, and evaluated these from the standpoint of elite athletes. Furthermore, the working group examined the present study grant system and other support systems for education and sports training as well as taxation matters related to sports income. I will treat these matters more thoroughly in my presentation. For example statistics on the current situation in Finland will be shown.

Results

The working group decided to propose the following measures and division of duties to be made with regard to supporting athletes' education:

Educational system, authorities and establishments:

The educational establishments shall intensify student counselling for athletes and develop athlete-specific study opportunities as well as flexible educational arrangements. When planning the personal courses of study for student-athletes, the educational establishments shall further accept elite sport as a special reason to prolong the study time. If the proposals to limit university studies will be realised, universities shall accept a systematic elite sports training as a reason to prolong the study time.

Sports organisations:

The national sports federations shall appoint an official or a body to administer the sport-specific development work with regard to education. The organisations shall include basic information on athletes' career planning on all coach and instructor education levels as well as in the education of club management. Sports clubs shall, by means of a contract, guarantee young players the opportunity to complete a second-stage education (vocational or upper secondary school) during their sports career and create all players the opportunity to receive education during their sports career. Sports managers shall pay attention to athletes' career planning in their activity. Cooperation between sports academies and sports organisations shall be intensified and the national coordination of their activity shall be confirmed.

General study grant system and study grants for athletes:

The Ministry of Education and the study grant boards shall accept an elite level training as a special reason to receive additional study grants for the completion of studies.

The amount of study grants for athletes shall be increased. Study grants shall particularly be allocated to young developing athletes. Study grants may also, according to a means test, be given to athletes to complete their studies. The share of capital contributed by the Finnish Foundation for the Promotion of Athletes' Professional Education (Urheilijoiden Ammattienedistämissäätiö) shall be increased, the grant criteria shall be clarified and the information services improved.

Athlete's grant and athlete's income:

The Finnish Olympic Committee and the national sports federations shall reconsider the athlete's grant criteria in order to increase the number of athletes receiving support. The needs of young developing athletes shall particularly be considered as well as the application of a more personal means test than today.

An amendment shall be made to Article 116a of the Finnish Income Tax Act which allows individual athletes' international sponsor and competition income to be transferred to a fund on the same grounds as their national income.

Discussion

To combine full-time studies with a professional sports career requires independent and responsible planning of studies and training. On the other hand, the athletes also need a support network to encourage and instruct them in matters related to education and sports. This cooperation network includes actors from both the public and private sectors.

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