

Sport to inspire, inspire to sport. An analysis of the role modeling function of sporting champions

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Aim of abstract

This research aims to develop more knowledge in (a) the extend to which elite athletes were influenced by personal sporting idols or sporting heroes to take up sport, (b) the various ways these 'heroes' were inspiring in developing their sporting career and (c) the ways elite athletes perceive themselves as an inspiring role model for today's youngsters.

Theoretical background

There is a common perception that high-profile sports people are viewed as role models and that they have a correspondingly positive impact upon youngsters (Mutter and Pawlowski, 2014). Even though, the few literature reviews that exist, for example Lyle (2009) concluded that robust evidence and a systematic evaluation of the inspirational effects of role models on sport participation is largely missing. The available studies do confirm that sporting role models can be important and influential in the behaviour and values of (young) people. For example, Mutter and Pawlowski (2014) recently stated that the availability of a role model, the perceived relevance and similarity of an individual to the role model determines the inspirational effect on sport participation. Additionally, Lines (2001) found that the strength and scope of the influence are not only determined by the individuals' perception but also the athletes' interpretation of their role model function. Therefore, the main objective of this study is twofold: to determine whether or not elite athletes perceive themselves as inspiring role models and to find out in what ways the athletes themselves were inspired by their sporting idols, in process that eventually lead to an elite sport career.

Methodology

Elite athletes from 14 countries responded to a standardised online questionnaire, that was administered by a local research partner in each country. The surveys, called 'elite sport climate survey', were part of a large-scale project on the Sport Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS) (De Bosscher et al., 2015). In total 8495 elite athletes were retrospectively asked to answer questions related to (a) the extend to which they were influenced by their personal sporting heroes to take up sport, (b) the ways these 'heroes' influenced the development of the respondents' sporting career and (c) the ways the respondents perceive themselves as an inspiring role model. After data cleaning and omitting respondents that did not fulfil the criteria (e.g. non-Olympic sport disciplines or disabled athletes, or unreliable responses), 3,142 athletes (37.0%) representing 29 different sport disciplines responded.

Results

Descriptive analysis reveals that 71.3% of the responding elite athletes were influenced by personal sporting idols to take up their current sport. Only parents were more frequently stated as an influence, namely by almost 9 out of 10 (87.1%) athletes. Other actors who frequently influenced the choice of participating in their current sport were club coaches (68.0%), friends (66.9%) and teachers (41.3%). Moreover, more than 2 out of three (69.4%) respondents stated that elite athletes were a source of inspiration to them as a young talent. When asking about various ways these 'heroes' were inspiring in their developing sporting career, 83.4% were inspired to train more intensively; 4 out of 5 (79.9%) gained inspiration to train in their sport at a high level and to become an elite athlete; almost half of the respondents (45.2%) were inspired to live their life in a specific way; 45.1% won inspiration to start training thanks to a sporting champion. Additionally, sporting idols also influenced (28.2%) the respondents in using a specific type of equipment or buying specific branded clothing (20.8%). Finally, more than half (56.8%) of the respondents on their hand perceive themselves as an inspiring role model for today's youngsters.

Discussion

The descriptive results give notion to the assumption that youngsters' identification with role models can offer several positive spill-over effects for sport participation. This is promising because for policy makers, young people are a group of interest to increase sport participation and sporting idols seem to initiate a desire to participate in sports. The frequency of respondents who experienced inspirational effects of a sporting role model is high (71.3%). This supports the argument that the influence of role models depends on their perceived relevance to the youngster (Lyle, 2009). Furthermore, the results reveal that more than half of the respondents perceive themselves as an inspiring role model for today's youngsters. Nonetheless, Policy makers also need to consider surrounding parameters, like sport infrastructure and should implement campaigns with a good match between the youngsters' needs, the role model's characteristics and the nature of their interaction to capitalize on these positive effects.

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