

Elite sport in France: the end of a public service ?

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Introduction

French elite sport is known for the part taken by the State in funding and organisation (Green and Oakley, 2001; Barreau, 2001; Digel and Fahrner, 2003). Several aspects of sport could confirm this. This could be direct expenditures : subsidises are given to sport federation according to their objectives and results in international elite competition, funding of public establishment for education and training of athletes (INSEP, CREPS), financial assistance to top level athletes and coaches, civil servants employed directly by public structures or placed in sport bodies. This could be indirect interventions by law which delegates state authority to sport federations, regulation like the definition of certificates compulsory to train athletes or sponsorship or corporate patronage by public enterprises or creation of a fund to finance sport coming from a part of total sport bets. This defines a public system of elite sport with their funding and their members: “Directeurs techniques nationaux”, “Entraîneurs nationaux” and “Athètes de haut niveau” who are supposed to be amateurs. Actually this system is more complex: sport federations are autonomous bodies, clubs which are funding by their members and by local authorities have their own strategies, and money coming through medias has recently given more power to clubs in professional sports and changed status of amateurs depending of the level of media exposure of their sports.

Today, elite sport is a mix between public service and sport on the market place. This situation creates tension: between powerful professional clubs in football and rugby and federations which are well known everywhere in Europe. For our purposes, we will focus on tensions in so called amateur sports, among coaches and athletes, tensions which reflect the changes occurring in sport which put in doubt French elite policy.

Methods

Different researches have been conducted by LSS and GDEMS on elite sports. They take place in a project which aim is to analyse the French elite sport system in comparison with other countries. The paper will used different data coming from this researches: a qualitative research on athletes retirement (Irlinger, 1995), a qualitative and quantitative research, in progress, on career and socialisation of elite athletes and specially a recent research on coaches as professional group (Mignon et Lemieux, 2004) because coaches situation dramatizes the changes in sport. This research was based on quantitative and qualitative methods: forty “entraîneurs nationaux” have been interviewed on their career in coaching and the coaches recognized as elite by their sport federations, about 800 persons, have been sent a questionnaire with very few responses from coaches working in professional sports like football. In addition, different official data on “entraîneurs nationaux” have been used.

Analysis on legal and institutional aspects have been conducted on the French system and comparative studies with other European countries.

As a complementary indicator of the national policy in matters of high level sport, the paper will propose to observe how different countries deal with the elite sport group, in charge or potentially in charge of the national representation in the biggest competitions. The method is based on a comparative approach of the elite sportspersons classification in different countries. Are observed the rules of classification and the others ways to define the focused group of athletes.

Results

1) Some general elements could describe the group of coaches. 90% are male; their average age is 43; their incomes define them, in the French system of professional classification, as “intermediaries professions” but a quarter have income similar to working class; they are qualified in sport, and a quarter have the highest degree in sport and physical education; maybe more than half of them are civil servants; 90% have had a career in sport, national or international level and coaching is the logic continuation of

sporting career; for 60%, coaching is a full time job, but 30% has to do some general administration in sport and some 10% have another job.

2) It is possible to distinguish three kinds of professional identities among coaches. The first is coach as craftsman: it goes with older generation. The second is coach as bureaucrat: they are the product of the rationalisation of sport during the 1970's. They have degrees, they are civil servant and they see their career as defined in the Weberian model of bureaucracy. The third is coach as entrepreneur: it goes with sports which are becoming more mediatized and professionalised or new Olympic sports (triathlon for example).

3) These three identities mean three ways to be confronted to changes in sport which are: a more sophisticated division of labor in training of athletes among coaching staff with new hierarchical lines between coach, manager, assistant coach, etc., competition with well known professions like doctors, psychologist or physiotherapist and new professional groups like mental healer, physical assistant, or competition with foreign coaches; the needs to take care of administrative or logistic tasks; the confrontation to athletes' new identities.

4) Money coming through media has changed dramatically the socio-economic situation and athletes' self definition. The border between professionalism and amateurism is no longer relevant as every athlete has to train several times every day to gain the specific competencies he will need to compete at international level. Through different ways, athletes could get subsidies from public or semi-public sources and could have access to sponsorship if they compete in media exposed sports or get medals. It means that athletes have to be committed to their sport activity to have a chance to succeed and to take advantage of their success to cumulate gains from sponsorship and public subsidies. The result is also a huge difference between successful athletes and the others and between different sports linked to media exposure.

5) The result is also to question coaches' identities because the most successful athletes are able to create their own team or network for producing performance. It also questions organisation and values of the sport elite system for public subsidies go to the most successful athletes and because the State can't compete with media money to give a social position to coaches.

6) In Europe, most of the countries have adopted a classification process to namely identify the sportspeople. The classification process appears as a condition of effectiveness to cater the elite sportspeople for their needs: *Deportista de alto nivel* (Spain/Ley del Deporte 1990), *World Class Performance* (UK), *sportifs de haut niveau* (France/ loi relative à l'organisation et à la promotion du sport 1984), A or B statute (The Netherlands), A, B, C or D squads (Germany). The paper will present the main features of these systems.

Discussion

Two main points could be put in discussion.

1) French elite sport policy has been successful if one looks numbers of medals in Olympic games and World championship which have been gained for 1970's. But changes in sport put in danger the actors which helped to build the system, coaches, because they suppose a more collective action far from the traditional relationship between coach and athlete.

2) French elite sport confronts directly actors who define themselves in the frame of bureaucratic career and actors who depend of their reputation in the media market. The system lives on two logics of retribution. A new system should be found and it is maybe what could be a European model.

In complement can be also discussed, the elite sport classification evolution as a mark of convergence/difference in the sport policies in Europe.

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