

PROFILE OF CHAMPIONSHIP SNOWBOARDERS

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Context

Organised sport is recognized as a dominant leisure-time activity in most age-groups, no matter of what ethnic identities or cultural backgrounds. Snowboarding was introduced to the Olympic family in 1998 and will be represented by four different disciplines in the 2006 Turin Winter Olympics. The enrolment of snowboarding in World Championships dates back to 1996. In January 2005 the World Snowboarding Championships took place in Whistler, Canada. The main purpose of this study was to analyse the riders with reference to cultural background, sporting preferences and snowboarding characteristics. Snowboard consists of 5 disciplines at championship level, namely half-pipe, big air, snowboard cross, parallel giant slalom and parallel slalom. Except for big air, both sexes participate in all disciplines. Altogether more than 300 participants representing 37 countries took part at Whistler.

Methods

This study focuses on half-pipe and male participants only, where the number of riders was 61, representing 23 different nations. Data were collected via questionnaires during team captains' meetings throughout the championship week. Riders were asked to respond in English. 82% of the competitors responded. Bronfenbrenner's (1988) ecological model of human development was used as a theoretical frame of reference that regards a human being as a growing dynamic entity influencing and being influenced by the surrounding environment. This is a phenomenological view on development, and holds that subjective experiences and impressions could be of greater importance than the objective world. The environment is described through four different structures which directly or indirectly influence the individual – namely the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem.

Results

The mean age among the riders was 24, ranging from 16 to 34; 16% were aged 20 or less. 84% were involved with other sports besides snowboarding, with 51 % were engaged in 3 or more sports. This engagement involved in-season as well as off-season activities. Soccer, skiing and ice hockey were the most frequent second sports. Snowboarding was the second sport for 6% of respondents. Parents were the most common influence on snowboard sports. However, 20% of the riders responded that they were introduced to snowboarding through their own interest, whereas 13% were most influenced by their friends. 73% revealed they had dropped out from at least one sport. 39% of the drop-outs pointed out bad coaching, negative experiences from their interactions with coaches, or simply boredom as their main reasons for having done so. Skiing and ice hockey were the sports most common for drop-out. The great majority of the riders described themselves as highly competitive, eager to win, but also appreciated snowboarding for the possibilities to free ride just for the fun of it, and to learn new tricks. Most riders furthermore indicated that most of their friends were involved with snowboarding. Their main interests outside snowboarding were music and being involved with other sports. 90% of the riders had sponsorship contracts involving equipment and clothes to some extent. 57% revealed that also they had a contracted salary.

Discussion

Snowboarding has developed rapidly in recent years. One reason is that the sport meets common expectations from its practitioners and favours variations in physical growth. Even at world class level, riders indicated the importance of being able to meet new challenges and to improve their personal skills. This is well in line with earlier studies (Bredemeier & Shields, 1994:219; Gibson et al, 2003; Backstrom, 2005:286) pointing out the importance of favourable social interactive environments when performing in sport. The sporting environment is nature and the riders clearly expressed their appreciation of spending so much time outdoors. Numerous results in later research were similar (de Knop et al, 1996:276; Carlson, 2001a).

As indicated earlier, a great majority of the riders' sample was involved with other sports alongside snowboarding. This exemplifies the impact of the mesosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model inferring interaction effects between two or more settings. Many of them had dropped out from other sports in favour of snowboarding. Hence, snowboarding was often given priority. This is well in line with similar studies on the sport (Sisjord, 1998; Carlson, 2001b). An interesting finding – but not very surprising in a world championship competition – was the competitiveness and eagerness to win among the respondents. Of particular interest, however, is that fact that this personal trait was found in combination with non-competitive traits such as appreciating nature and the possibilities of free riding, and to have inherent fun in the activity. Competitiveness and international top performances are often linked (Carlson, 2001b; Draper, 1996).

Some nations have produced a number of world class snowboarders who to a great extent originate from urban or suburban areas where mountains and ski areas seldom are found. An example of this is the riders from Finland. In southern Finland a number of small hills and snowboard parks are found. This indicates the impact of the exosystem in Bronfenbrenner's model (settings in which the developing person is not an active participant, but where events occur that affect them). When the first snow of the season arrives, world Champions and Olympic medallists are sometimes found riding shoulder-to-shoulder with children and youths. The impact of 'snowparks' is obvious (Christiansen, 2001; Backstrom, 2005).

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