

# **SUMMER OYMPICS GAMES AND THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF THE INTERNATIONAL ATHLETES UNDER THE UMBRELLA OF THE REPUBLIC OF CYPRUS**

**Abstract of the PhD thesis**

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## **1. Introduction**

Elite sport has enormously changed during the last decades, from playful leisure time activity it became hard work. Top athletes who used to participate in games and sports just for fun became employees while training and competing. Even young elite athletes are regarded firstly as athletes and secondly as children. These days sporting activity is a special kind of work for high level athletes. It is considered to be their profession. For the majority of them it is the source of their income.

The Olympic movement and the Games have become globalized. The globalization and commercialization of the Olympics changed the pure amateur status of the Olympians to a so called prolympic status which means that Olympic athletes also have the right to earn money for their sporting activity. In most countries in the international arena sport is the basic source of the elite athletes' income.

Over the last decades the classical values of Olympics were devaluated in sport to such a great extent, that it is not anymore about sportsmanship, fair play, honesty, etc, but it is about winning at any price. According to the author's personal experience having spent a great part of his life as an elite athlete in Cyprus, this general tendency could not be observed in Cypriot top sport. He believed that the Olympic movement has developed here in a different way. In the Cypriot sport culture the philosophy of winning at any price has not gained ground to such an extent as in many countries which are known as sport nations, such as USA, Russia, China, and Hungary where the author has been studying for a decade. He supposed that the Cypriot athletes' sporting career have some similarities with the big sporting nations' athletes' but he also had the feeling that there are significant differences as well. He assumed that the differences are rooted in the fact that Cyprus is a very small country with less than three decades history in the world of high level sporting activity and her size determines her position in world sport. However, there had been only everyday experiences about this theme and not scientifically based knowledge. These issues had not been studied yet in this context from a sociological perspective. It was the major reason which motivated the author to deal with this topic and to carry out a research concerning the Cypriot Olympians sporting career from the time they got involved in sporting activities to their retirement from elite sport.

## 2. Objectives

The major objectives of this thesis are:

- to examine the major social, cultural, and political factors **determining sporting successes** in very small countries **at macro- meso-, and micro-levels** and to reveal the relationship **between these factors** through the example of Cyprus.
- to discover the equality of chances for becoming top athletes through the example of the Cypriot elite athletes who participated in the Olympic Games under the umbrella of the Republic of Cyprus between 1980 (the first time that Cypriot athletes participated in the Games) and 2008.
- to reveal the entire life-course of the athletes, from sport specialization to retirement including their social status, social mobility, and social role.

### 2.1 Research questions

In order to achieve the above mentioned goals an empirical research was carried out by the author with the purpose to give answers to the following questions:

- To which degree do macro-and meso-level factors determine the international success of Cypriots in elite sport?
- What are the determinants of sporting success at micro-level? Is there **equality of chances for becoming elite athletes in Cyprus?**
- What kind of factors are the best predictors of a **nations' performance in elite sport** in a small country like Cyprus?
- What similarities and differences can be observed in the social status, social role and social mobility of the Cypriot Olympians competing in different periods?
- What were the main similarities and differences between the Cypriot Olympians' status concerning amateurism and professionalism and the status of elite athletes living and competing in countries with long traditions in sport?

## 2.2 Hypotheses

- H1 It is assumed that since Cyprus is a very small country the major social, cultural, and political factors determine sporting successes there on macro- and meso-level in a special way.
- H2 It is assumed that Cypriot children and young people have no equal chances to become top athletes. Children coming from families with low income and low education or coming from rural areas have unequal opportunities.
- H3 It is supposed that although the Cypriot society does not give too much attention to it, the social status and social role of the Cypriot Olympians changed due to their participation at the Olympic Games. The mechanism of intragenerational and intergenerational social mobility with Olympians competing in different periods occurred differently.
- H4 It is assumed that most Cypriot elite athletes are not professionals in the same way as the Olympians living and competing in countries with long sporting traditions are. Money does not play a crucial role in their sporting career and most of them do not earn their living exclusively from sport.

## 3. Methods

During the investigation three methods were used: survey method, in-depth interviews, and analysis of documents.

### *Survey method*

The research was designed to the total population, that is to each member of the Cypriot Olympic teams participating in the summer Olympic Games between 1980 and 2008, altogether in 11 sports (N=93, males= 66; females= 27). Regarding some major characteristics (age, gender, sport) the research population represents the total population.

Data were collected by interviews, that is, by standardized questionnaires, personally. The questionnaire contained 64 items (19 multiple-choice questions, 13 semantic differential scale questions, and 12 open-ended questions) and covered the athletes' whole sporting career. The number of responses was 74 (males 52; females 22). The answering rate is 79.56% compared to the total population.

Although almost 80% of the total population was involved in the investigation, the size of the research population was relatively low; therefore the results can only be generalized with reservation.

The quantitative data were summarized by Microsoft Excel 2003/07 program.

#### *In-depth interviews*

In-depth interviews were made with active and retired athletes (n=9), coaches (n =7), and key actors in the decision making process (n=4), a television reporter, and a newspaper reporter. Qualitative information was analyzed according to the special criteria to help the author to identify whether or not the opinions of the athletes keep pace with the sayings of coaches, sport actors, and media.

#### *Document analysis*

Two groups of documents were analyzed. The one comprised the biggest Cyprus newspaper on its field. Its aim was to discover whether the articles published in the newspaper were supportive or not, and if yes, in which way. The other document analysis concerned the web page of the Cyprus Sport Organization (CSO) to find out elite sport policy.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1. Major social, cultural, and political factors **determining sporting success****

#### *4.1.1 Macro-level determinants: population, economy, geography, sport culture and tradition*

Analyzing the social and cultural context people have been living in Cyprus it seems that macro-level factors are responsible here for elite sport successes, more exactly for the lack of them, to a higher degree. Cyprus is not only a small country (9.251 km<sup>2</sup>) but more than one third (32.2%) of this territory is occupied by Turkey. Consequently, the small population (803.200) is also divided, only three quarter (75,5%) is Cypriot Greek, the rest consists of Cypriot Turks (10,0%), other foreign citizens and guest workers (4.5%).

Out of macro-level determinants not only the size of the population has been a relevant factor. It was found that while traditional economic and political factors are important, many inherent national characteristics such as geographical, demographic, and cultural factors have a significant and pronounced impact. The country's economy, in principle, would not have hindered sporting success but the geographical conditions were not too favorable, and the lack of elite sport culture and traditions meant a serious obstacle. The independent sport history in

Cyprus is short and the colonial legacy did not comprise sporting traditions related to elite sport.

The geographical conditions and the climate have not been in the favour of sport competition. In the lack of supportive sport policy, countryside without rivers, with bleak mountains, the dry, hot summers did not promote the people's ambition, not even the desire to be involved in competitive sport. Sport culture has been changing slowly; according to recent research findings, today only 6% of the Cypriot population participates in sport daily or at least frequently. Since not only the size of the population but also the rate of sporting people might have an influence on a nation's sporting success, the chances of the otherwise small Cypriot nation diminished further on.

On the one hand, there are several features (size of the population, lack of universities, emigration of young people, strong interpersonal networks etc.) arising from the smallness of Cyprus which have negative effect on the athletes' sporting success and their impact cannot be balanced. On the other hand, the smallness of the country has also some advantages: the classical sporting values survived longer here, and most elite athletes have preserved their amateur status until recently. Consequently, they have less health deterioration than the professionals, and their disengagement from elite sport caused less social and psychological problems to them.

#### *4.1.2 Meso-level factors: sport policy, sport politics*

Since out of the various factors leading to international sporting success only the meso-level ones can be unambiguously influenced and changed, national sport organizations in many countries focus on having effective impact on elite sport in this respect. According to the research findings outstanding sport performance had not been seen by Cypriot sport policies and politics as a resource valuable to help achieve a wide range of non-sportive objectives. The decision-makers had not assumed that the Cypriot athletes' modest results in international competition could generate social and/or political benefits and acted accordingly. Based on Green and Houlihan's model elite sport policy in Cyprus was studied in four areas:

- developing elite level sports facilities
- supporting the emergence of "full time" athletes
- developing coaching, sports science and sports medicine
- promoting competition opportunities for elite athletes.

The findings show that among the special considerations which were taken into account, the meso-level ones proved to be the most important. That is, under similar macro-level (and micro-level) conditions the Cypriot athletes' chances for performing at a higher level in the international arena could have been better if the national sport policy had been more supportive. The facts that elite level sports facilities were not developed, the emergence of "full time" athletes was not supported, sport science and sports medicine were not developed, and the competition opportunities for elite athletes were not promoted, limited the athletes' opportunities for reaching higher standard.

The factors affecting sporting successes at different levels are interrelated. For instance, national identity is generally stronger in small countries than in the larger ones, therefore the role of sport in its promotion is less significant here than in big states.

## **4.2 Socioeconomic background during the athletes' sporting career**

### *4.2.1 At the start*

The findings show that many Cypriot Olympians were not involved in sporting activity at a young age. Just a tenth of them started very early, at the age of five. About half of them began regular exercise between the ages of six and ten. A large number of Cypriot Olympians started sporting activity only between the ages of eleven and fifteen. One tenth of them started even later: between the ages of sixteen and twenty.

The specialization of the Cypriot Olympians into the sport in which they became members of their national team started late on an average. Only one per cent of them were under five when they became familiar with their sport (in rhythmic gymnastics and swimming). One quarter of them were specialized in their sport between the ages of six to ten (in track and field, judo, swimming, wrestling, and in tennis). One fifth of them chose their sport after the age of sixteen, half of them in the age of eleven to fifteen year, and almost one in ten Cypriot Olympians chose his/her sport over the age of twenty one year. Late specialization occurred frequently in the 1980s and in the early 1990s. In the 2000s specialization started earlier in Cyprus in all the sports but not as early as in the international arena, where parents encourage their children to become heavily involved in elite sports at an early age and where many parents used to be athletes.

The Cypriot parents' case is different. Two thirds of the Olympians' parents never were athletes, 10.8% of them participated in recreational sport and the rest were competitive

athletes (17.5%), mostly at lower levels. There were very few mothers who expressed their wish to see their children as winners.

In Cyprus role expectations towards women were rather traditional even twenty-thirty years ago. A great number of mothers were never active in sport. In the last fifteen years this situation has changed due to migration and to the spread of satellite television. The role models for women have changed; they started to get involved in sporting activities. However, just a few mothers acted as a socializing agent. According to the results more than one quarter of the athletes were invited by coaches, and about 20-20% of them were advised by their families, their teachers and their friends to choose their sport. The media influenced the 10% of the sport specialization of the Cypriot athletes.

Since the age of sport specialization became lower, the role of the families increased and the influence of sport clubs decreased in this area worldwide. This is not the case in Cyprus. Although the sport sphere in Cyprus is not active enough to invite children to sport, still the coaches were the number one socializing agents. They did not play a decisive role in the athletes' early sport socialization, but they preceded all the other agents. The relatively considerable contributions of PE teachers and other teachers to the children's choice of sport are amazing. All the more so it is, because PE teachers in Cyprus are not employed in primary schools.

Based on the findings it can be ascertained that the impact of the fathers and mothers on their children's selection of sport is low in the mirror of international tendencies. The major reason for this phenomenon is rooted in the traditional value system of the Cypriot Greek families, in which sport has had a peripheral place, if any. Although the family ties had been very strong, the majority of the parents did not direct their children towards (elite) sport because they were hardly familiar with it or they were not really interested in it.

The importance of the media in the athletes' choice of sport also appears to be lower than it is in many other countries. This situation can be explained by the fact that there are relatively few internationally successful Cypriot elite athletes as magnetic patterns to be followed. The achievements of other nations' sport heroes are too far from the Cypriot reality. They rather push young children away from elite sport instead of attracting them, since they appear too difficult or even impossible to reach or over fulfill such extremely high performances.

There are no gender differences concerning the socializing agents but there are differences according to the athletes' age. Younger athletes were influenced mostly by their



families and school and less by their friends. The older athletes were influenced mostly by their coaches and their friends, and rarely by the media.

The results also show that the athletes started their sporting career without financial support. They even bought their sports clothing and equipment themselves. Only 2% of them were sponsored at the first steps of their career.

#### *4.2.2 Equality of chances for becoming top athletes*

Out of the various factors which can be found at micro level, this thesis put a particular emphasis on the equality of chances for becoming elite athletes. The results underlined that inequalities has existed in Cypriot sport. Many Cypriot Olympians came from families with higher educational qualification and with more prestigious occupation than the families of the non-athlete children. The level of education of the non-athlete children's parents is lower than athletes' parents', especially as far as the rate of university graduates are concerned.

The data on the athletes who participated at the Olympic Games held between 1980 and 1992 and between 1996 and 2008 were compared because the Cypriot government changed elite sport policy since the mid-1990s, and it seemed to be essential to know whether it had an impact on the recruitment of top sport or not. The findings suggest that chances were not equal even in the pioneer stage of the Cypriot Olympic movement; the children whose parents had low education and who were living in villages were at a disadvantage. However, from 1992 onwards children whose parents graduated at colleges or at universities and were living in towns had even higher chance to become top athletes than earlier.

#### *4.2.3 Social status and intergenerational social mobility*

The findings show that the situation in Cyprus has been different from the international trends regarding professionalization of Olympic sport. The majority of the elite athletes had amateur status in sport and they did make their living out of sport. Nowadays many Olympic athletes are supported financially by sport spheres but the money they are given does not cover the cost of their living.

The amateur nature of their status can also be demonstrated by the fact that 13.5% of the Olympians had no coach at all. Athletes, mostly in the 1980s, trained themselves or each other. At that time coaching was seldom a paid job in Cyprus. The relationship between the athletes and their masters was based on friendship, the atmosphere was rather intimate. There have been recently some changes in Cypriot elite sport in this respect as well. Coaching

became a paid job, and the athletes-masters relationship became more formal than it used to be.

During their sporting career the Cypriot Olympians made efforts to combine high level sport activity with studying and working. The data show that there were much more Cypriot elite athletes who could combine sport with education and even with working activity than athletes who could not. The latter were active in the 2000s. In the 1980s and in the 1990s the elite athletes found it natural that they were involved in sport at a high level and they studied seriously at the same time. They also took it for granted that they had to earn their bread outside of sport, that is, they had to have a job. Most athletes from these periods used to have jobs during their high level career to earn their living. Generally they worked in full time, only a few of them were working as part timers. In the last decade more and more the Cypriot elite athletes worked only occasionally or did not have a permanent job at all during their top career.

According to the results, the educational level of the Cypriot Olympians was high. The majority of the Olympians graduated at universities (63%) or at colleges (16%). 11% of the athletes had even more education than just one university degree (they got certification from special courses). Only one tenth of them have only lyceum or secondary school degree. According to these findings the Cypriot Olympians' level of education is radically higher than that of their parents or the men and women of the same age in contemporary Cypriot society.

The occupation of the athletes does not reflect exactly how high their educational level is. It is probably due to the fact that the athletes focused on their sporting career and accepted jobs which did not require high education but could be easily combined with their high level sporting activity. However the majority of them have a higher socioeconomic status than their fathers had, and moved upward on the social ladder.

### **4.3 Retirement from top Sporting Activity**

The majority of the Olympians who participated in the research already retired from sport. Regarding the Olympians' age of disengagement one can see that more than the half of the athletes stopped their career between the ages of 26 and 35. Relatively many of them ended their career either later, at the age of 36 to 40 or earlier, between 21 and 25. A small minority ended their top sport career at a very young age, more specifically before their 21 years.

The late disengagement from top sporting career characterizes more the male athletes, the female athletes retired earlier. Many Cypriot Olympians could not afford to be active too long since they had to find better jobs to earn their bread.

On the other hand the Cypriot Olympians benefited from their earlier retirement since the vast majority of them have no health problems at all. Based on their self-evaluation most of them are in very good, or at least, in satisfactory health condition. Only a minority of them referred to bad or very bad health status.

The most important reasons for retirement were: psychological tiredness, physical tiredness, the athletes' age, and sport injuries, difficulties in finding time for education, looking for better job with higher income, improving the quality of their life, and feeling dissatisfaction with their training facilities.

In spite of receiving modest financial support, the former Olympians did not complain about their financial situation. Only few of them reported economic difficulties and none of them said that his/her economic status was very bad.

The disadvantageous situation in their active period turned to the athletes' advantage after their withdrawal from elite sport. Since they had to work parallel with their participation in top sport, most of them had a job after their retirement which covered the cost of their living.

The withdrawal of the Cypriot Olympians was smoother than it is generally in the world of elite sport. The majority of them did not have any problems after their disengagement, only about a quarter of them reported problems. The most important problems they confronted in their way were connected with socializing into a new way of life out of elite sport and with finding a good job. The other problems were of psychological and physiological nature or were connected to education.

The most important source of help to overcome the above mentioned problems was the athletes' family which, as always, was ready to give assistance under any circumstances. The former Olympians underlined how much they could rely on their wives/husbands', girlfriends/boyfriends' and even on their large family's support. Some athletes managed to solve their problems themselves, some others with the help of their former coaches. The athletes could not count at all on either the Cypriot Olympic Committee or the Cyprus Sport Organization when they were in trouble. A few sports federations were around but the majority of them were not interested to give a helping hand.

## 5. Conclusions

Analyzing the major social and political factors affecting sporting success, it can be stated that there are determinants which are distinctive only to small states, and there are ones which might arise in both small and large states, but are of greater importance in small countries. In the mirror of the findings of the research the first hypothesis (H1), according to which since Cyprus is a very small country, the major social, cultural, and political factors determine sporting successes there on macro- and meso-level in a special way, is justified. That is, macro-level determinants: population, economy, geography, sport culture, and tradition are responsible for elite sport successes, more exactly for the lack of them, to a high degree in Cyprus.

The size, geographical locations, economies, and cultures, including sport, of small countries vary widely. Beside their economic conditions, sporting traditions and culture their sporting successes are highly influenced by their elite sport policy. However, the case of Cyprus shows that there are several features (size of the population, lack of universities, emigration of young people, strong interpersonal networks etc.) arising from the smallness of states which have great effect on their sporting success and their impact cannot be balanced.

The strong interpersonal networks of small countries may cut both ways. On the one hand the closeness of interpersonal relations can cause considerable difficulties. On the other hand in countries with small populations daily life is usually more personal than in countries with large populations, and the knowledge of other people's backgrounds and personalities might facilitate the processes of planning and co-ordination in elite sport.

The results of this investigation also verified the second hypothesis (H2), which suggested that Cypriot children and young people have no equal chances for becoming top athletes. The findings showed unambiguously that inequalities to becoming elite athlete exist in Cyprus. The Cypriot Olympians' socioeconomic background in their childhood was much better than the average circumstances of non-athlete children of the same age. Children coming from families with higher education and higher income had higher chances for sport involvement and easier access to sports. The educational level of the Cypriot Olympians' parents was considerably higher than that of the Cypriot population of similar ages. Most of them had prestigious occupation with good income. The preponderant majority of the Cypriot Olympians' family was living in cities, especially in seaside cities where the sporting culture was rich and there were adequate sporting facilities. Cypriot children who were living in

villages had no equal access to sport, their dwelling place proved to be a barrier in front of them.

The third hypothesis (H3), according to which the social status and social role of the Cypriot Olympians changed due to their participation at the Olympic Games and the mechanism of intra- and intergenerational mobility with Olympians competing in different periods occurred differently, was only partly verified. The findings of the investigation showed that the Olympians' level of education is much higher than their parents' which might be a sign of intergenerational social mobility. However, their occupation does not reflect the very high level of their education and it was not proved that the latter is in relationship with their sporting career and especially with their participation at the Olympic Games. Regarding the changes in the social role of elite athletes in the Cypriot society and in the mechanism of intra- and intergenerational mobility in different periods, no sufficient information is available to make a statement and to draw reliable conclusions.

It was also assumed that the Cypriot Olympians are not professionals in the same way as other Olympians living and competing in countries with long sporting traditions. Money does not play a crucial role in the elite athletes' sporting career in Cyprus and most Olympians do not earn their living exclusively from sport (H4). The findings justified this assumption: the international trends regarding professionalism has not been followed in Cyprus. In the 1980s and in the 1990s most elite athletes had true amateur status in sport. They did not receive money for their participation in elite sport, on the contrary, they covered the cost of their sporting activity, and at the same time they worked for their living. There have been recently some changes in this respect. Since the mid-1990s several elite athletes were given financial support, therefore less of them worked full time, but they had a part time job or worked occasionally. One of the major conclusions of this research is that although the elite athletes' financial support has increased recently in Cyprus, the training conditions, sporting facilities, and health care system remained at such a level as if the Olympians still participated in amateur competitions.

Finally, it has to be emphasized that although not too many sports and no team sports at all were involved in the Cypriot Olympic teams the results are relevant. On the one hand the size of the research population is small, indeed; therefore conclusions should be drawn with certain reservation. On the other hand, the research population embraces all Cypriot Olympians. Their number is small partly due to the brief Olympic history of Cyprus, partly to the size of the country and her inhabitants. Notwithstanding, the findings presented in the

thesis might be interesting because the topics discussed here have never been investigated previously.

At the end of the thesis some recommendations are made and the necessity for further research is underlined.

### **List of the Author's publications related to the theme of the PhD thesis**

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