

ILO Contribution to the IOC 2009 Conference Copenhagen

(Giovanni di Cola¹)

Title:

Developing skills and competences for professional athletes:

Theme 1: The Athletes;

Sub-theme 3: The social and professional life of athletes during and after elite competition.

Sport is a value based sector directly linked to ethical leadership and to the development of professional skills.²

The entire Sport World and the Olympic Movement are supposedly based upon this assumption.³ It should therefore be obvious to build character and professional skills while practising (elite and non elite) sports. Though, the issue is not as obvious as it appears.

I. Sport for skills development: starting from the pitch

The IOC Athletes Commission recently gathered in Dubai, recommended among others to raise awareness of “the athletes, their entourage and the Olympic Movement and key stakeholders, including the governments and UN agencies (to the fact) that a balanced athlete will perform at a higher level, have a more productive and longer career and a smoother transition after sport”.

The Commission also recommended the “activation and coordination of a network to share knowledge and best practises” with the purpose of “educating about athletes support in their life and career during and after sport, using a holistic approach”.⁴

It is therefore time for the sport movement, in association with other stakeholders, including the athletes and their “entourage”, to refresh the above mentioned “*triade*” composed of values, ethical leadership and skills.

In fact, sport is a gold mine of occupational skills to access the labour market as one of the very unique assets in the present global economy.⁵ An athlete, apart from being a globetrotter, may acquire through its sport career, basic competences and skills (such fair-play, self-esteem, honesty, trust...) but also those specific to a job (such as sensitivity to diversity, client/environment awareness, generating synergies, teambuilding, taking care of people...)⁷

The above sets of skills are often taught in the best MBAs. Training is after all the “revolving fund” of all high qualified managers and employees who wish to upgrade their skills; either in their own position or to move to a better job.

The ideal situation for a sport professional would be to detect and streamline the above list of competences, while practicing sport at the highest level. The athlete should be perfectly aware of the importance of both sport training and best essential attitudes that lead to enhancing the development of skills for employability.⁸

The education of the athletes, as we can see now, does not start at school or after competition but rather in the pitch with a mentor and an opener: the coach.

To reinforce this point it is worth noticing that an athlete that has difficulties in integrating socially may be at risk for dependence from alcohol or doping, or violence just like any other “normal” human being.⁹ An organization and a coach that has no link with a given professional (ethical) environment damage sport and its best expression: the athlete.

The link between the pitch and the professional environment is fundamental and it goes through the coach, the sport federations and the Olympic Movement.¹⁰

II. Re-thinking sport education and training

“The great coaches recognize that there are ways to prepare people for their personally defining moments. It is done not just through physical instruction but through character development. These coaches hone both mind and body, and prepare their charges in both event skills and positive attitudes that begin with basic personality traits”. This sentence from a well known professional coach is key to acknowledge that education for professional athletes reside in a sport pitch or in a track field.¹¹

Coaching redefined?

Should coaching be redefined? It might not be necessary to go that far, but there is indeed a need to re-evaluate the coaching, for example, by recognizing strongly its social and professional value and by providing through the sport federations basic information on the professional skills that are required to enter the labour market. As we have seen what athletes learn out of their “job” is actually not far away from professional skills requirements.

A partnership IOC-ILO and GAISF aimed at concentrating on a training that would streamline the professional skills resulting from a sport training programme could be put in place with other sport partners (Adecco, WOA...).

Training university education and physical education

It would also be useful to collaborate with universities towards a modular training (masters or post graduate studies) based on the described specific skills and occupational skills developed through sport.¹²

The proposed training would complement other masters already in place, which concentrate on sport administration, management of federations and sport sciences. A multi-disciplinary approach is an asset for the athletes; because of their supposed capacity to adapt to changing (market) situations and opportunities.

It is worth mentioning that for young athletes, education could concentrate on life skills and soft skills rather than occupational skills.¹³

Inventorying sport related activities as a way to understand how the labour market works outside the sport sector

The present paper started with the assumption that values and skills are embedded in sport disciplines. Those skills are essential to identify job opportunities and related training. Apart from Europe, countries around the world lack of a structured classification of sport occupations and sport related economic activities.¹⁴ This should be systematically undertaken for knowing:

1. The environment in which the athlete (future labour market entrant and/or job seeker) would professionally evolve.
2. The sport sector and what lies beneath and around it, which would allow discovering potential jobs opportunities (in most cases not defined as sport activities i.e. like nurse, journalist, stadium manager, etc ...).

As a result, there is a need to forge an Alliance with the UE institutions on the above issue and the IOC and the Olympic Movement are urged to take action by requesting that the sport partners ministries to team up with the labour ministries (including their statistics bureaux) to undertake such an inventory in every singly country of the world for sharing information and knowledge among the athletes and for the youth, in general.

An initiative to conduct a similar work in developing countries would be most welcome and may be supported by the ILO social partners.

Building an International Centre for the Development of Skills through Sport

A project that would gather around the sport values, different partners starting with the IOC, Olympic Solidarity, the GAISF and IPC aiming at establishing an International Centre

for the Development of Skills through Sport, along the above described lines should be also put in place.¹⁵ The objective of the Centre is to boost the capacity of the coaches, of the technical staff, of the sport federations in favour of the athletes. The major outcome of such an initiative is that the athletes will no longer have the impression of investing their time “only” in sports; as opposed to learning/studying for a job after their sport professional career.

Potential partners should be ready to join in such a project that would also contribute to enhancing the positive effects of sport in a time where this is becoming a target or a way out for youth insertion policies that are failing to address the issues at stake.

In this respect, the appeal made to the sport world to also contribute to address some social issues would be properly framed for the benefit of the most but above all of the athletes.

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² These specific skills developed by sport are referred to in the Table 14-3 entitled *Sport-specific skills in the employability framework*, in *Beyond the Scoreboard: Youth Employment opportunities and skills development in the sports sector* (ILO, 2006) pp 179-184. Cf. also *Employment Skills for the Future* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002).

³ According to the Olympic Charter (Fundamental principles, paragraph 2) «Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles. »

⁴ The 3rd IOC International Athletes Forum gathered these athletes the 27th and 28th of October 2007. Cf. http://multimedia.olympic.org/pdf/en_report_1248.pdf for the Final Program.

⁵ Occupational skills can also be named as skills related to employability.

⁶ Cf. the table entitled *Skills and values learned through sport* in the UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace Report 2003, p. 8.

⁷ Soft skills are a set of skills that influence how we interact with each other whereas core skills for employability or occupational one are those contributing to reinforce workers training needs for labour market insertion. Definitions are developed in *Beyond the Scoreboard*, Op cit, p.188.

⁸ It its first winning marathon winning in New York in 1995, Tegla Lorupe was not able to address the crowd in English; when I met her in Macolin (Switzerland) in 2003, she was promoting “in English” her Foundation and the social women programmes run in region of Kenya.

⁹ In 2004, on the occasion of a conference in Yverdon (Switzerland) on a totally different topic, a well known (totally transparent) track and field champion explained how an athlete that feels isolated can be a prey of doping organized mechanism that may transit through the coach.

¹⁰ The agent has also a role here, but skills development is clearly the coach first role. Roger Bambuck explained at Saint-Cyr Coëtquidan in December 2006, individual sports and team sports trained to different skills, self-centred and self-started for the one, rather team-builder for the others.

¹¹ Cf. Mike Spino’s article (Sport, éthique et morale: la connection du mental et du physique) in *Ethique, Travail Décent et Sport* (BIT, 2008)

¹² Cf. Table 14-3 in *Beyond the Scoreboard*, Op cit, note 2.

¹³ Cf. *Code of Ethics*, Op. cit. in note 10.

¹⁴ *European classification of sport occupations and sport related occupations* (1998) and *European classification of sport and sport related economic activities* (1999) coordinated by Jean Camy and Nathalie Le Roux of the European network of sports sciences in higher education.

¹⁵ The Paralympian athletes are role model, showing every day the good mix necessary to move forward both in life and professionally. They should be associated to such a project as from its inception.