Social and political factors affecting sporting success in small countries: The case of Cyprus

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Summary

Study aim: To examine the major social, cultural, and political factors determining sporting successes in very small countries at macro, meso, and micro levels through the example of Cyprus.

Material and methods: The article is based partly on the analysis of statistics and documents and partly on a segment of a comprehensive investigation carried out by standardized questionnaire and in-depth interviews among all Cypriot Olympians participating in the summer Olympic Games (N=93). The response rate was 79.6%. Regarding some major characteristics (age, gender, sport) the researched population fairly represents the total population.

Results: Little investment has been made in building sports facilities, the training of coaches, the support for sport science, and in the development of sport medicine. Elite sport has been reluctantly promoted by sport policy. Elite athletes had limited competition opportunities. Cypriot children with lower socioeconomic backgrounds and from villages had higher chances for becoming top-level athletes. Young girls hardly had any access to competitive sport.

Conclusions: Based on the analysis of documents it can be stated that not only the smallness of the country and the small number of the population but also the poor sporting tradition and culture as well as inconsistent sport policy also contribute to the Cypriot elite athletes’ sporting results. From the findings by questionnaire it might be concluded that the Cypriot children had no equal chances to become top athletes.

Key words: Sporting equals - Sporting culture - Sport policy

Introduction

The relevant literature shows a somewhat inconsistent picture on the factors leading to international sporting success. On the one hand, research findings suggest that big and rich countries are considerably in an advantageous position in the Olympic Games and in other international competitions [15], and that this statement can be easily seen in their dominance on the medal tables. On the other hand, scientific evidence proves that there is not always significant correlation between the population sizes, the level of economic development, and success in elite sport. For instance, the number of the inhabitants in Hungary has been around 10 million in the last 50 years; in the same period this country always finished at the top of the official rankings at the summer Olympic Games [8]. Another example refers to states that participated in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. One-third of the 18 countries with delegations consisting of one or two members were not small; their athletes could not be qualified because of other reasons. Notwithstanding, small countries are in a special situation.

There are several criteria for assessing a country’s size out of which population, geographic area, and economy are discussed the most frequently. A state that is small according to one criterion is not always small as measured by another one. According to relevant literature, population is generally considered as the main indicator of a country’s size but the ways of grouping the population sizes may differ from one another. A widely accepted concept assesses states that have a population below 1.5 million as small [1]. According to statistics, more than half of the world’s sovereign states have populations below 5 million; 53 have inhabitants below 1.5 million.

This paper also regards population as the principal criterion of size but at the same time it looks at the other areas and features. It takes the example of a country, Cyprus, with a population below 1 million.

Like in their political, economic and cultural features, small states are also different in their sport. Out of these different features their chances for international sporting successes are discussed in this paper. Small countries’ athletes cannot be rivals to athletes from the majority of the other countries at big international sporting events.
To ensure the relative equality of chances for their athletes in international competition, in the mid-1980s the representatives of 8 small states of Europe decided to establish their own system of competition, called Games of the Small States of Europe, within the framework of the International, the European and their national Olympic Committees. The multi-sport competition, which was designed for the size of their countries, induced mixed emotions with the athletes: in part they were satisfied with the new opportunity, in part they retained the desire to compete with the most famous athletes in their sport. At the same time the obvious fact that they are not among the probable winners in the Olympic Games and in other mega sport events might discourage the decision makers to support their participation there and to develop sporting excellence in general. Consequently, the youth’s chances for becoming elite athlete in such small countries might be jeopardized in a twofold manner. First, sport policy might not be in favour of promoting elite sport. Second, just as around the world, low socioeconomic status can limit youngsters’ chances for reaching high levels in the specific sport in which they are talented.

The equality/inequality of chances for becoming elite athletes has been in the focus of research from the rise of sport sociology. Equal access to all areas of sport, including elite sport, constitutes a fundamental right for every people. It is regarded as an essential value, and it is legally recognized in all democratic states. However, many forms/aspects of social inequalities can be found in sport, especially at the start of sporting careers. The study of social equality/inequality in terms of performing their best in sport has a long history. There is much international literature on the economic, social, and cultural factors that prevent young athletes from achieving their rights [4,5,6,9,11]. A great amount of research has been carried out on the topic in various countries, but not in the very small countries.

Factors determining national and international sporting success have been in the centre of interest for 10-15 years. Several comparative studies were undertaken with the participation of states of different sizes [13,14]. However, no data concerning the situation in small countries in this respect were found in the available literature. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the major social, cultural, and political factors determining sporting successes in very small countries (less than 1 million inhabitants) at the macro, meso, and micro levels through the example of Cyprus. Based on the analysis of documents, statistics, and on empirical research data the following issues are discussed:

Out of the macro level factors which one had an impact on the achievement of Cypriot elite sport?

How did sport policy issues influence Cypriot elite athletes’ personal performance and the nation’s international sporting success?

Were chances for becoming elite athletes, as determinants of sporting success at the micro level, equal in Cyprus? Was sport equally accessible for all children in different periods of the national sport history?

Over the last decades several attempts have been made to elaborate theoretical models of factors determining national and international sporting success. Most of them distinguished three levels to classify the different factors: macro, meso, and micro levels. In this study the model by De Bosser et al. [2] was used. According to the authors mentioned above, the macro level refers to “the social and cultural context people live in” [2]: they cannot be controlled by political systems and policy-makers. The meso level includes sport policies and policy that, in principle, can be easily influenced. The micro level is connected to the individual athletes and their close environment; certain elements of it can also be controlled. This concept was considered as a basic theoretical framework. The results are analysed with the help of this theoretical model.

Concerning the macro-level determinants, the size of the population, the level of the national economy, the geographical conditions of the country, and Cypriot sporting traditions and culture were studied. Out of the meso level factors elite sport policy issues were examined in this study. Sport politics the defining concerns of which are: “who governs; how do they govern; and with what effects on the citizens” [7] were not dealt with. The conceptual framework for the analysis of elite sport policy factors leading to international sporting success was borrowed from Green and Houlihan [14]. It helped study elite sport policy according to 4 indicators: 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.

Out of the various micro level factors the equality of chances for becoming elite athletes was dealt with in this research. Sports equality is about equality of access to sport [12]; therefore, an attempt was made to reveal whether sport was as accessible to the Olympians in their childhood as to other children. Since sport involvement needed economic and cultural capital in Cyprus as well, two indicators of the parents’ socioeconomic status (education and occupation) were examined. Moreover, the dwelling place where the athletes were living during the period of their sport specialization was studied.
Material and Methods

The study is based partly on the analysis of statistics (on demographic data, sport participation, and sport organizations) and sport historical and sport political documents (strategies, projects, reports), and partly on a segment of a comprehensive investigation carried out recently (by standardized questionnaire) and in-depth interviews among Cypriot Olympians. The research was designed for the total population (n = 93, 66 males and 27 females); to each member of the Cypriot Olympic teams participating in the summer Olympic Games between 1980 and 2008 in 11 individual sports: archery (2), athletics (32), cycling (2), judo (10), rhythmic gymnastics (2), sailing (16), shooting (10), swimming (15), tennis (1), weightlifting (1), and wrestling (2). The athletes’ age at the time of the data collection belonged to five groups: aged under 20 years: 3; 21-30 years: 17; 31-40 years: 22; 41-50 years: 19; 51-60 years: 12; over 60 years: 1.

The number of the athletes according to Olympic years was the following: 1980, Moscow: 14; 1984, Los Angeles: 11; 1992, Barcelona: 16; 1996, Atlanta: 2000, Sydney: 22; 2004, Athens: 18; 2008, Beijing: 17. Cypriot athletes have never won any medal in the Olympic Games. Instead, their best achievements including the following in competition: one fourth, one fifth, one seventh, one eighth, three ninth and one tenth place.

The address of 9 Olympians could not be found, 8 of them stayed abroad for a longer period, and 2 athletes refused to answer. The number of responses was 74 (males 52; females 22). The response rate was 79.6%. Regarding some major characteristics (age, gender, sport) the research population fairly represents the total population.

Data were personally collected by standardized questionnaire, which contained 64 items (19 multiple-choice questions, 13 semantic differential scale questions, and 12 open-ended questions) and covered the athletes’ whole sporting career. In this paper only the answers given to questions relevant to this sub-topic were analysed.

The quantitative data obtained were nominal and ordinal; therefore, during their analysis descriptive statistics were used. Since the size of the research population was relatively low, the results can be only generalized with reservation.

In-depth interviews were conducted with active and retired athletes (n=9), coaches (n=7), and key actors in decision-making processes (n=4). Information gained by the in-depth interviews was very useful to interpret the quantitative findings and some documents as well.

Results

The results are presented according to the 3 major groups of factors determining national and international sporting success by De Bosser et al. [2]; that is, according to the determinants at macro, meso, and at micro levels. The factors at macro and meso levels are shown and analysed on the basis of statistics on demographic data, sport participation, and sport organizations as well as on the grounds of sport historical and sport political documents: strategies, projects, and reports. The findings in connection with the determinants at micro level are based on the investigation by questionnaire.

Macro-level determinants. The results of the analysis of the macro level factors show that the size of the population, the geographical conditions, and the deficient sporting traditions and culture had an unambiguously negative impact on sporting achievement of Cypriot elite athletes.

The national Olympic movement is based on the Cypriot Greek inhabitants; their size is even smaller than the size of the population of the country. Cyprus is not only a small country (9,251 km²), but also, more than one-third (32.2%) of this territory is occupied by Turkey. Consequently, the small population (803,200) is also divided: only three-quarters (75.5%) is Cypriot Greek, the remainder are Cypriot Turks (10.0%), foreign citizens, and guest workers (4.5%; [16]). Elite athletes are recruited just from the three-quarters of the otherwise small population.

The studied geographical conditions and the climate supported the assumption that such factors have not been in favour of sport competition either. Countryside without rivers and with bleak mountains, as well as the dry, hot summers, has not promoted people’s ambition to be involved in competitive sport. Seas around the inland were not regarded for a long time as sporting scenes.

The analysis of sport historical documents revealed that the lack of sporting traditions related to modern sport and the deficient sport culture also prevented elite sport from faster development. Sporting traditions in Cyprus preserved some elements of Greek culture, such as a close link between music, dance and movements, but they have not been related to modern sport, which was born rather late, as the inland was under British supervision. It gained its sovereignty from British colonial rule as late as in 1960. During the colonial period the British pattern was followed in a few sports, for instance in gymnastics and golf, but Cypriot athletes did not have the opportunity for participating in international sporting events independently from the rulers. Cypriot sport emerged after the liberation, but its institutionalization expanded only 1-2 decades later.
Promotion of elite sport was not at all among the political priorities of the new state in the many years following its liberation.

Sport culture in the country has been changing slowly; according to recent research finding, even today only 6% of the Cypriot population participates in sport daily or at least frequently [13]. 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 low sport participation by the Cypriot people further diminishes the chances of the otherwise small Cypriot nation.

In analysing some main indicators of the Cypriot economy, it turned out that this macro-level factor has not been responsible for the lack of elite sport successes. The Turkish invasion did not prevent the Cypriot economy from developing. In recent decades the macroeconomic policy has proved to be stable: average yearly growth and the GDP growth rate in real terms has been quite good; inflation and unemployment had been low. The standard of living has also been good enough; the life expectancy has been quite acceptable (82.4 years, women; 77.9, men). So, the national economy could have made it possible to promote sport to a higher degree in general and elite sport in particular.

Meso-level factors. Analysis of the relevant statistics and documents, as well as of the in-depth interviews, focused on four elements of elite sport policy: on the investment in top-level sporting facilities; supporting full time athletes; developing the coaches’ training, sports science and medicine; and on providing the elite athletes with competition opportunities. The results showed that the development of sports facilities adequate for elite athletes started later in Cyprus than the emergence of competitors with ambitions to participate in international sporting events. For instance, there is one Olympic-sized swimming pool, which is often used by foreign national squads and by tourists. Generally, little investment has been made in building top-level facilities in other sport as well. As elite athletes put it:

“We need proper facilities for training and improvement of the old ones because our levels can be higher.”
(Female Olympian in the 2000s)

“Even with the existing facilities we did not have the adequate equipment to work properly.”
(Male elite athlete in the 1980s)

Even less investment has been made in training coaches, supporting sport science, and in developing sport medicine. Most Cypriote coaches and physical education (PE) teachers received their degrees abroad earlier; only recently have they been able to graduate in sport-related majors in Cyprus. Several coaches complained about the lack of opportunity for their continuing education as follows:

“There are too few seminars and meetings for coaches, it would be good if the sport organizations and the federations started organizing and developing seminars by themselves for enlightening, improving, and developing the coaches for better future and results.”

“Due to the lack of money they do not give us the adequate opportunity to participate in international trainings to enrich our knowledge and parallel to work with our athletes among others.”

Scientific results known in various disciplines that were individually used by enthusiastic athletes and coaches have generally been neglected by sporting institutions, which were not really interested in improving athletes’ performance and/or to protecting their health. Even when the training of future sport experts was introduced to Cypriot higher education a few years ago, very few research laboratories or research centres were established. Young sport experts returning from foreign universities were hardly offered the possibility to carry out research. Similarly, young Cypriots who graduated in medical sciences abroad have not received any attractive alternative to specialise in sport medicine in Cyprus.

At first, the emergence of “full time” athletes was not supported by sport policy. At the rise of Cypriot elite sport, many of the best athletes with ambitions to reach a higher standard did not exercise within the framework of sport clubs. Several of them had no coaches, and they specialized in their sport much later than the majority of their rivals in international competition. They hardly received organized support for their sporting activity. The first Cypriot Olympic Games consisted of athletes with pure amateur status in sport. In the 1980s and 1990s most of them had jobs. Beginning in the mid-1990s a few of them became “part-time athletes.” Even in the early 2000s very few “full-time” Cypriot athletes emerged, and only in a few sports such as tennis and football. Beginning in 1992 there was a plan for “professional settlement,” which ceased to exist in 2006, because, according to the sport authorities, they could not include any more athletes and provide them with professional settlement.

At the beginning, the majority of Cypriot athletes in various sports – with the exception of soccer – had very limited competition opportunities at the top level. Participation in large-scale international athletic events was initiated more by individuals than by organizations. National plans concerning the promotion of broadening the competition opportunities for elite athletes were prepared several years later than the Cypriot athletes’ first participation in the Olympic Games. They were useful, but they didn’t seem to be effective enough; a few of them came to an end without good results.
Micro level factors. The findings of the research by questionnaire show that the Cypriot Olympians came from families with higher education and with more prestigious occupations than the families of non-athletes’ children. The level of education of the parents of non-athlete children is lower than the level of education of the parents of athletes, especially as far as the rate of university graduates are concerned (Table 1).

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

The picture on the equality of chances seemed to be more complex when another crucial status characteristic, namely the occupation of the parents of Olympians was examined (Table 2).

According to the results, in the 1980s none of the fathers of the athletes belonged to the social group of managerial or professionals, and just a few of them worked as a clerk. The majority of the mothers were housewives. At that time Cypriot elite sport was open, the early socializing agents into sport were not necessarily the parents or other family members: the athletes chose their sport themselves, at a relatively later age. Although comparisons can be made only with reservations – the population’s occupational categories of the data gained from the Census of the Cypriot Population were not exactly the same and they referred only to the employed people – a few tendencies can be noticed. When by the mid-1990s sport specialization unavoidably began at a younger age in Cyprus as well, the share of agricultural families in the recruitment of top sport radically diminished, while the rate of Cypriot people working in agriculture decreased to a much lesser extent in the same period. Although elite sport did not turn into the privilege of upper-class people or upper-middle-class people, as a social sub-system it became closer: it became the activity of middle-class and self-employed people.

The research findings also revealed that the young athletes from agricultural families did not necessarily come from villages, because at that time the towns were also the scenes of agricultural activities. Moreover, regardless of their birthplace, the athletes were already living in towns when they chose their sport, which generally happened at a later age than the athletes’ sport specialization in most other countries in the Olympic family. The pre-

Table 1. Educational level of Cypriot Olympians’ parents and the Cypriot population (in brackets) in different periods according to gender (%)

| Educational Level         | 1980-1992 Men | 1980-1992 Women | 1996-2008 Men | 1996-2008 Women |
|---------------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Less than 4th grade       | 0.0 (4.5)     | 10.5 (14.5)     | 0.0 (6.5)     | 2.5 (13.3)      |
| Primary school            | 34.0 (42.0)   | 42.0 (44.8)     | 20.0 (22.3)   | 23.0 (22.3)     |
| Secondary school          | 42.0 (38.0)   | 30.5 (30.0)     | 39.0 (47.0)   | 37.5 (40.8)     |
| University-college        | 24.0 (15.5)   | 17.0 (10.8)     | 41.0 (24.3)   | 37.0 (23.8)     |

Table 2. Occupation of the Olympians’ parents (%)

| Occupations                     | 1980-1992 Men | 1980-1992 Women | 1996-2008 Men | 1996-2008 Women |
|---------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Managerial/professional         | 0.0           | 0.0             | 5.0           | 2.5             |
| Clerks                          | 9.0           | 6.0             | 27.5          | 22.5            |
| Self-employed artisans, shopkeepers | 20.5       | 0.0             | 35.0          | 20.0            |
| Skilled/semi-skilled workers    | 23.5          | 6.0             | 27.5          | 12.5            |
| Agricultural workers            | 41.0          | 0.0             | 5.0           | 0.0             |
| Unemployed/dependent (housewives)| 0.0           | 82.0            | 0.0           | 42.5            |
| Other (not relevant)            | 6.0           | 6.0             | 0.0           | 0.0             |
ponderance of Cypriot Olympians was born and spent their childhood in the capital city, Nicosia (34%), or in the seaside cities (59.5%). Although 31% of the Cypriots were living in villages, less than one-tenth of the Olympians came from seaside or mountain villages. The dwelling place in Cyprus proved to be a barrier faced by people who wanted to be involved in sport.

In the mirror of statistics it could be seen that girls had much lower chance for becoming top-level athletes than boys. Cypriot elite sport was always less open for women than for men. Out of the 93 Olympians there were only 27 women. The number of women was especially low in the 1980s when, according to the dominant traditional value system, women had an unambiguously inferior position in society.

Discussion

Although researchers agree that big and rich countries are at considerable advantage in international sport, nowadays they attribute relatively less importance to macro-level factors in elite sport success than they did historically. They argue that the awareness of the high value of elite sport performance has been increasing among more and more governments who invest more and more money into the development of their elite sport system, and their efforts are crowned with success. It is estimated that in contemporary Olympic sport the macro-level determinants account for only 50% for success or failure [3]. Analysing the social and cultural context in which people have been living in Cyprus, it is supposed that macro-level factors are responsible for elite sport successes here – more precisely, for the lack of them, to a higher degree. In the case of Cyprus, 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. From amongst macro-level determinants, the size of the population has not been the only relevant factor. The country’s economy, in principle, would not have hindered sporting success but the geographical conditions were not too favourable 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 elite sport.

Among the special considerations 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.

Since from the various factors leading to international sporting success only the meso-level determinants can be unambiguously influenced and changed, national sport organizations in many countries focus on having an effective impact on elite sport in this respect. It was not the case in Cyprus. Top-level sport performance had not been seen by Cypriot sport policy 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. Although elite sport policy started changing in the mid-1990s, it has remained contradictory up to now.

Most problems faced by small countries in connection with micro-level factors affecting sporting successes are similar to the ones that also arise in large states. Social inequalities according to socioeconomic status, gender, and dwelling place might have some special forms in states with different sizes, but the basic tendencies are the same.

The children’s dwelling place can also be linked to their exclusion from sport. Sport has also been an urban phenomenon in Cyprus: villages have lacked both sporting culture and adequate sports facilities. The settlements they lived in proved to be a barrier faced by people who wanted to be involved in sport.

Despite formal recognition, gender equality in everyday life is still not a reality in the country. Cypriot women and men do not enjoy the same rights in practice. Various social, political, economic, and cultural inequalities persist (salary disparities, political under-representation, etc.) including sport involvement. These inequalities are the result of social constructs built upon numerous stereotypes present in all social institutions: family, education, culture, the world of work, and even the media. In an attempt to promote gender equity, policies in national sports organizations should become more inclusive.

It seems that the smallness of Cyprus has also provided some advantages. For instance, the classical sporting values survived longer here, and most elite athletes have preserved their amateur status until recently. The amateur athletes had less health deterioration than professionals, and their disengagement from elite sport caused less social and psychological problems for them.

Finally, 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 that have had decisive effects on their sporting success. Their impact can be diminished by sport policy friendly to elite sport, but cannot be fully balanced.
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