

**Original scientific paper**

## **PERCEPTION OF ATHLETES REGARDING MOBBING IN SPORTS CLUBS**

*UDK 796.01:316.62 ; 796.011.1:364.634*

**Snežana Lazarević<sup>1</sup>**

Faculty of Physical Culture and Sports Management,  
Singidunum University, Belgrade, Serbia

**Ana Krstić**

College of Sports and Health, Belgrade, Serbia

**Maja Sobek**

College of Sports and Health, Belgrade, Serbia

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**Abstract:** Mobbing, as a very widespread negative social phenomenon, represents one of the key stresses of the working environment. The aim of this research is to define the existence of certain types of mobbing in sports organizations, i.e. in their production parts whose focus is on the most critical human resource- athletes of all categories. By using random sample of sports clubs and by specially designed questionnaire, athletes as examinees (N=250) have given their opinion about the types of maltreatment, harassment and pressure in their closest environment. The results have confirmed the existence of some types of mobbing for which it is assumed to be able to significantly affect the health and development of young athletes (the pressure to raise endurance during trainings, which can affect the health of an athlete, sexual harassment of female athletes and the sense of psychophysical problems as a consequence of these types of behaviour).

**Keywords:** *types of mobbing, health, athletes, gender*

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<sup>1</sup> ✉ slazarevic@singidunum.ac.rs

## INTRODUCTION

By the end of last century, and especially by the end of last decade, numerous authors have shown great interest in studying mobbing as a current phenomenon which affects business of contemporary organizations. It is necessary to approach the concept of mobbing, its characteristics, types, phenomena, consequences, prevention and education on a multidisciplinary level, as this social phenomenon is in the focus of many scientific areas, and above all, in the focus of organizational behaviour, organizational psychology, sociology of work, legislation and health protection.

Scientist Konrad Lorenz has introduced the term 'mobbing' in the sixties (Lorenz, 1963), wishing to explain the behaviour of certain types of animals, i.e. small units, when they team up against other, bigger member, attack it, throw it out from the group, and sometimes even bring to death<sup>2</sup>. Later on, Peter Paul Heinemann (Heinemann, 1972) studied aggressive behaviour among children, explaining the form of group behaviour where a stronger child bullies a younger peer. In professional work, in the 80s, doctor Heinz Leymann was the first one who started using the term mobbing in order to define and explain the pressure, aggression, violence and maltreatment in the working environment, as well as their effects on work productivity (Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996; Niedl, 1996).

Mobbing includes psychological and emotional terror, i.e. maltreatment and harassment of an individual in the workplace, supported by hostile and unethical forms of behaviour, verbal and/or physical attack, with the aim of discrediting, humiliating and violating a person's individual and/or professional integrity, reputation and honour (Leymann, 1990; Zapf, & Einarsen, 2001; Hacicaferoglu, et al., 2012; Hacicaferoglu, & Gundogdu, 2013). Mobbing is a complex process which begins with seemingly naive and simple activities and interactions, which eventually have consequences that can significantly affect not only organizational and individual performances, but health of the victim of mobbing as well (Salin, 2001). Authors of psychosocial studies claim that, if an individual is exposed to all least weekly maltreatment in longer period of time, longer than six months, then there are high chances of this individual having professional, emotional, social and health issues (mental and psychosomatic), or even the syndrome of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which shows that mobbing, as a social phenomenon, is an extreme social stressor in the workplace (Leymann, & Gustafsson, 1996; Leymann, 1996; Zapf, et al., 1996; Zapf, 1999; Hacicaferoglu, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'mobbing' is accepted in the Serbian language. The root of this word comes from the English verb 'to mob', which means to attack, i.e. from the noun 'mob' which means crowd or myriad.

There are numerous forms of mobbing that can be found in working environment and they usually include the following actions directed at the victim of mobbing: gossiping, mocking, slander, insult; unfounded and often critique and devaluation of work; stricter work control; ignoring, underestimating, humiliating or depriving of right to express one's own opinion; not getting tasks or getting too many tasks; communication in high pitched voice or yelling; non-verbal communication (unethical gestures, provoking stares or other forms of negative eye contact); endangering one's right to use a break during working hours, holidays and days off; giving tasks which endanger health and safety at work; isolation from social life of organizational unit, team or group; verbal threats, physical attack, sexual blackmail or sexual assault (Leymann, 1996; Zapf et al., 1996; Koonin, & Green, 2005; Sloan, et al., 2010; Farmer, 2011).

Despite the fact that certain authors claim that there are no specific factors in the environment that promote maltreatment, but that there are organizational conditions which encourage certain types of this behaviour (Ferris, et al., 2007; Matthiesem & Einarsen, 2001; Salin, 2001, 2003; Van Heugten, 2010), the following issues fall under organizational risks of the phenomenon of mobbing: organizational structure, culture and design (the size of organization, bureaucratized organizational structure, low level of control and distance of power, insufficiently defined tasks and work division); insufficiently transparent policy and practice of top management; unacceptance of team concept which is founded on supreme human values- trust, understanding, empathy, cooperation, freedom to exchange opinions through dialogues and discussion, systematic and critical opinion, cooperation, open and two-way communication; leadership style which does not recognize participative style or style of delegating responsibilities and authorities to employees and team members; closed, non-porous and one-way communication channel with the consequence of having insufficient flow of information and knowledge; low level of moral and ethical standards and norms; ruined interpersonal relationships and not solving conflicts constructively; working environment where there is hostility, bigotry, envy, jealousy, group pressure and group opinion, high level of competitiveness among employees; lack of training or insufficient training and education of employees regarding these issues. The connection of causal factors that cause mobbing, its appearance and consequences is highly correlated. The consequences that come along with mobbing are numerous psychophysical disturbances for the victim of mobbing (anxiety, depression, insecurity, apathy, physical tension, insecurity, loss of concentration and appetite, insomnia etc) which can have a negative effect on: psychophysical and social and emotional balance

of an individual and behavioural sphere of his or her personality, which can also have a negative effect on working atmosphere, interpersonal relationship and lower productivity and work efficiency of a group, team and/or organization.

Even though there are no numerous scientific papers that deal with the issue of mobbing in sport, the questions that normally arise are: Is sport excluded from mobbing due to its nature and authentic motives and characteristics which are dedicated to nurturing and development of qualitative moral values and ethical principles? Can a sports organization also 'suffer' from this or similar phenomenon?

Sports organization consists of two parts: the first one is managerial and administrative (top management and all levels of management and other employees) which is based on the same principles as any other business organization, and the second one is production-functional, which includes the training and competing process whose focus is on athletes of all ages and sports experts (coaches) (Lazarević, 2006). Of course, managerial and administrative part of an organization suffer from all organizational phenomena, and mobbing is one of them. Still, the question of whether there are such forms of behaviour among athletes, or among athletes and coaches remains insufficiently researched sociopsychological issue. However, the fact is that the general goal is to achieve success in sports by commercialization of sport, which is far from moral and ethical principles and which creates opportunity for negative phenomena (corruption, doping, harassment and maltreatment of athletes by coaches and club management, ageism and sexual discrimination etc) (Lazarević, et. al., 2014). Although sports is an important segment and factor of development of contemporary society whose main mission is development, improvement and refining individuals in society, it seems that sports is allowed to neglect the same or similar ethical principles (DeSensi, & Rosenberg, 1996). Despite the fact that the role of experts in sports and in development of athletes is immense and that they are expected to teach athletes the highest socially acceptable values, it happens quite often that they are the ones who perceive athletes as an efficient tool for their own promotion and for achieving social goals or for achieving sports results and profits no matter what (Simon, 2013; Kavussanu, et al., 2008; Stanger, Kavussanu, & Ring, 2012; Bodin, Robène, Héas, 2007; Lazarević, 2009).

The aim of this research is to define whether there are certain types of behaviour characterized by maltreatment, harassment or mobbing in clubs and to identify forms of this behaviour that are thought to have a significant effect on health of athletes or psychophysical disorders of younger population. This is done by quantitative and qualitative data

analysis from random sample of active athletes. The paper also defines whether there are any specificities of this phenomenon affected by the gender of athletes as examinees.

## METHODOLOGY

Specifically designed questionnaire was used for the purpose of this research. In the questionnaire, athletes expressed their attitude whether they agree or disagree with statements which refer to the existence or recognition of some unethical forms of behaviour, and which basically represent a form of mobbing in their sports clubs. Before questionnaire, all examinees received instructions and explanation of the term which is the subject of the study, as well as the significance of their anonymous participations. Underage participants had parent consent about their voluntary participation and publication of results.

### Sample

The research includes N=250 athletes from various sports clubs in Serbia. Sample structure includes: 134 male examinees (53.6%) and 116 female examinees (46.4%) with different age structure, from 10 to 30 years old, differentiated by age categories: pioneers (10-12 years old), cadets (13-14 years old), juniors (15-17 years old), younger seniors (18-20 years old) and seniors (21-30 years old) and from various sports: taekwondo, karate, judo, aikido, swimming, waterpolo, football, volleyball, basketball, sport dance and aerobics (Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Structure of examinees according to gender and category of athletes*

<b>Category of Athletes</b>	<b>Male No (%)</b>	<b>Female No (%)</b>	<b>Overall No (%)</b>
Pioneers	20 (14.9%)	9 (7.8%)	29 (11.6%)
Cadets	24 (17.9%)	15 (12.9%)	39 (15.6%)
Juniors	20 (14.9%)	31 (26.7%)	51 (20.4%)
Younger seniors	25 (18.7%)	23 (19.8%)	48 (19.2%)
Seniors	45 (33.6%)	38 (32.8%)	83 (33.2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>134 (53.6%)</b>	<b>116 (46.4%)</b>	<b>250 (100.0%)</b>

In accordance with the defined research goal and subject, eight characteristic predictor variables which describe typical forms of mobbing in training and competing cycle are defined, and gender of examinees (male

and female) is used for criterion variables. These variables by their content point at the existence of some forms of harassing, pressures or maltreatment in sport, i.e. forms of unethical behaviour and mobbing in sport. Examinees shared their opinion about whether there are requirements for training in a certain sport if that training could harm not only health, but also psychophysical development of the youth (I1); whether there are excessive demands (forcing) during trainings and competitions (I5); whether there are suggestions to take prohibited medicines in order to achieve better results (I4); whether there are any forms of physical violence in clubs (I3) and sexual harassment (I4); whether unethical behaviour by club managers or organizers of trainings and competitions can cause some inadequate psychological condition of athletes (e.g.fear, anxiety, depression, fall of motivation etc) (I6) or the feeling of psychophysical difficulties (headache, chronic fatigue, nausea etc) (I7); and whether there is awareness and knowledge regarding the forms of mobbing such as maltreatment, harassment, abuse, compulsion etc. (I8).

This paper uses nonparametric methods, while nonparametric statistics was used for counting relative value of responses regarding statements based on sample and for defining statistical difference according to criterion variables of gender. For independent samples, Fisher's exact test was used.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for test variables based on the whole sample is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentage and absolute value by statements based on the whole sample

	I t e m s							
	Item 1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6	Item 7	Item 8
No (%) - Yes	200 (80%)	3 (1.2%)	1 (0.4%)	63 (25.2%)	199 (79.6%)	213 (82.2%)	136 (54.4%)	86 (34.4%)
No (%) - No	50 (20%)	247 (98.8%)	249 (99.6%)	187 (74.8%)	51 (20.4%)	37 (14.8%)	114 (45.6%)	164 (65.6%)

Table 3 shows descriptive statistics results and statistical significance of test variables based on athletes' gender, where it is visible that statistical significance based on gender exists for all statements, apart from statements I2, I3, I6 and I7.

**Table 3.** Absolute and percentage value, statistical significance of test variables based on gender of the whole sample

Items	Female		Male		p
	No (%) Yes	No (%) No	No (%) Yes	No (%) No	
Item 1	82 (70.7%)	34 (29.3%)	118 (88.0%)	16 (12.0%)	0.001
Item 2	3 (2.6%)	113 (97.4%)	0 (0.0%)	134 (100.0%)	0.099
Item 3	1 (1.0%)	115 (99.0%)	0 (0.0%)	134 (100.0%)	0.464
Item 4	63 (54.3%)	53 (45.7%)	0 (0.0%)	134 (100.0%)	0.000
Item 5	65 (56.0%)	51 (44.0%)	134 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0.000
Item 6	96 (82.8%)	20 (17.2%)	117 (87.3%)	17 (12.7%)	0.373
Item 7	68 (58.6%)	48 (41.8%)	68 (50.7%)	66 (49.3%)	0.252
Item 8	22 (19.0%)	94 (81.0%)	64 (47.8%)	70 (52.2%)	0.000

Statement which should define whether a coach demanded from an athlete to continue training or competing despite potential danger of ruining his or her health (I1) shows that 80% of examinees confirmed that they were forced to train despite the dangers regarding their health issues. Gender structure of the sample shows that male athletes also found the demands from their coaches threatening (88%), while this percentage for female athletes is a bit lower (70,7%) (Table 3). These gender differences are statistically very high.

The variable which refers to the question of whether athletes suffered from some form of physical violence in clubs (I3) did not show results of mobbing based on the whole sample (98.8%).

The experience of sexual harassment (I4) as a form of maltreatment that happens often is also present in sport with 25% based on the whole sample, and it showed the percentage of 54.3% for female athletes, while it was not present for male athletes, which causes significant statistical differences among genders.

The percentage for variable which refers to the sense of having pressure by the coach to train more than one can endure (I5) is 79.6%. From the aspect of gender structure, there is significant statistical difference between genders

of athletes. All male athletes experienced the pressure of training too hard, even above their level of endurance. For female athletes, the percentage is a bit lower and it is 56%. This difference in responses of males and females was statistically significant.

Test variables which refer to the question of whether athletes feel some consequences from maltreatment or bad relationships in clubs, such as psychological or physical issues, based on the whole sample, we can conclude that 213 athletes of both gender have some psychological issues, which is 85.2%, while 136 athletes (54.4%) suffer from physical issues. When it comes to gender structure, there is no significant statistical difference, i.e. almost the same percentage of male and female athletes feel some kind of psychological issues (82.8% i 87.3%), while 58.6% of female athletes and 50.7% of male athletes feel some physical issues as a consequence of this type of behaviour in their clubs.

Based on the statements of examinees regarding using doping offered for the purpose of achieving better sports results, the results show that 98.8% of examinees have never been in such a situation, while only three female athletes confirmed being offered such a thing.

The variable which refers to the attitude of athletes regarding knowing the phenomenon of mobbing in sports (I8) shows that 65.6% of the whole sample of athletes think that they are familiar with the concept of mobbing well enough. When it comes to gender structure, there is significant statistical difference, as 19% of female athletes and 47.8% of male students think that they are aware of this social and psychological issue. This difference in male and female responses is statistically significant.

## DISCUSSION

This paper is part of the authors' research of mobbing in sports, whose results refer to a certain number of statements defined as forms of mobbing in sports clubs, and which are presented and discussed in the paper of Lazarević et al, (2014). Studied forms of mobbing in this paper refer to those forms of behaviour that can significantly affect the health and development of young athletes.

The results gained based on the opinion of athletes about the demands of coaches to train and compete above endurance if their health is ruined show a widespread pressure, harassment and maltreatment in sports facilities. All 79.6% of examinees claim that they have suffered from or are currently suffering from pressure by coaches during the training process which lead to their exhaustion, or even ruining their health. This is a worrying phenomenon which shows insufficient care of coaches and clubs about health, especially



about the health of young athletes. Achieving sports results no matter what and prioritizing results over health care and development represents a certain type of maltreatment of athletes and leaving them without rights to see sport as a means of development and satisfying their personal needs. There are at least two reasons for this behaviour: the first one is the fact that coaches are not educated enough to work with athletes, especially with younger categories, and the second one is the fact that they do not understand that sport is an activity whose purpose is personal development of young people, and not its neglecting. Both of these reasons indicate insufficient knowledge of coaches about pedagogical work with athletes.

In addition to the previous attitudes of examinees regarding the attempts of coaches to affect the increase in their sports performances and competing abilities by ruining their health, the results regarding the usage of forbidden substances are basically very encouraging. Almost the whole sample, 98.8% of examined athletes, claim that coaches and team management do not stimulate them to use doping. The assumption for explanation of such results is the awareness of clubs, coaches and public of Law on doping prevention in sport (Sl. Glasnik RS, no. 111/2014), permanent seminars in the organization of Antidoping agency of the Republic of Serbia (ADAS) and awareness of very rigorous sports, legal and criminal sanctioning (Mandarić, Delibašić, 2014).

The forms of physical and sexual harassment belong to typical forms of aggression and abuse, i.e. mobbing, which is why the results from this research are interesting. Namely, physical harassment as a form of mobbing in sports clubs is not present in our research sample, which could be interesting from the aspect of contemporary analysis of competing in sport where aggressive forms of behaviour are more and more visible. The analysis of these results regarding gender indicates that female athletes do not suffer from physical violence, while male athletes do. There is a clear explanation for male athletes that sports in which they participate demand more aggression, strength, contact etc, which is why their trainings have to contain elements of behaviour described as 'controlled aggression', and quite often the behaviour of athletes grows into some forms of violence. After all, this is the tendency of contemporary sport where behaviour in the training process and competition moves to area of unethical behaviour. For female athletes, the results show that there is no physical violence and that they do not regard sport as violence. The explanation for such results could be found in pedagogical work of coaches and other factors in clubs and organizations, but in the traditional stereotype that sport for women should not be based on strength, aggression, violence etc.

Sexual harassment is often in sport, especially for female athletes, although it is rarely said in public. The results from this research clearly point at this phenomenon, especially for female athletes (54.3%). These results

are worrying, having in mind that sport is an area where educational and pedagogical activity of experts is vital for development and expression of young people, and when this form of harassment decreases the value system of sport and sports clubs and the role of athletes in sport and their experience in sport as a form of satisfaction and necessity of men, changing it into a source of frustrations, doubts and fear.

The results regarding psychological and physical issues experiences by athletes show that this phenomenon in sport which was neglected until recently needs more attention, as 85.2% of athletes have negative psychological symptoms such as lack of motivation, bad mood, fear etc, while 54.4% of athletes also suffer from physical symptoms such as headaches, chronic fatigue, increased heart rate etc. Based on the subsampling, the results show equal level of expressing consequences: on psychological level, 87.3% of males and 82.8% of females suffer from psychological symptoms as a consequence of harassment, threats, too demanding trainings etc, which means that there is no significant statistical difference.

When it comes to negative physical symptoms as a consequence of various types of mobbing, female athletes have a higher percentage (58.6%) when compared to male athletes (50.7%). This difference was not statistically significant. Having in mind significant appearance of negative psychological and physical symptoms as a consequence of behaviour of the environment (coaches, club staff, other athletes), this issue need special attention, as it can affect motivation of athletes or lead to negative results. The worst effect can be on psychophysical development of athlete, or even on amotivation which can lead to leaving sports.

The opinion of athletes on awareness of mobbing shows that even 65.6% of athletes think that they are not familiar enough with this concept and that they do not have specific knowledge about mobbing in sport. When it comes to those athletes who think they know and understand this phenomenon, the problem is the fact that we cannot define the quality of this knowledge or whether they understand what types of behaviour are characterized as mobbing, or what its consequences can be. When we analyze gender differences, we can see that 47.8% of male athletes think that they are familiar with mobbing, while only 19% of female athletes think that they are aware of this issue, which shows significant statistical difference.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results and taking into consideration the previous study results by the same authors (Lazarević, et al., 2014), we can conclude that there is mobbing in sports clubs. Based on the defined goals, this research

has shown that there are some forms of mobbing in sport, especially when it comes to the demands of coaches for athletes to train above endurance level, which is against medical, sports and moral, ethical principles and values.

The most obvious example of mobbing is sexual harassment and maltreatment of female athletes. As a consequence of this and similar forms of behaviour, examined athletes claim that they do suffer from certain psychological symptoms (fear, anxiety, bad mood, lack of motivation, frustration), which can have negative consequences on the development and health of an athlete. One might think that contemporary sport regards these forms of harassment and maltreatment as 'justified and desirable' instrument, especially if it is used for achieving great results. Athletes are quite often unaware of being victims of violence during trainings and competition, so unethical behaviour of their coaches and/or experts in sports is often justified by their 'good intentions', and culprits are athletes themselves, thinking that they deserved to be punished, humiliated and maltreated.

A few facts can be suggested as paper limitations: first of all, the number of research dealing with mobbing in sport in Serbia is very low, as many studies refer specifically to qualification of maltreatment in sport without terminological usage of 'mobbing in sport' and all its forms which appear in other working environments; secondly, in order to interpret given results and relevant conclusions, it is necessary to approach this problem interdisciplinarily; thirdly, it is necessary to implement more valid methodology (bigger sample of athletes- according to gender, competing level, type of sport, creating valid and adequate instrument for defining wider scope of mobbing in sport).

With the aim of avoiding and minimizing consequences in the form of violence in sport, it is important to define and sanction all forms of unethical and mobbing behaviour by using legal acts. Also, a well organized sport system demands permanent education of all its participants (athletes, sports experts, social sports workers), but of the whole public as well, regarding the importance of prevention, recognition and sanctioning all deviant forms of behaviour in sport, with the aim of promoting and development of sport and promoting its authentic values.

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