

Professional paper

SURVIVAL AND FUTURE OF SPORTS FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED IN SERBIA

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Abstract: Sports for people with disabilities and special needs in Serbia have two main challenges: 1/ monetary destabilizations, economic crisis, the fall of national indicators such as GDP and income, transition etc, which decrease expenses for this purpose, and 2/ stronger solidarity with people who alleviate their frustrations through sport and who find the new sense of life in affirmation of advantages that they own and with which they can make progress in certain areas of their interests. The aim of this paper is to study and highlight those aspects of issues in working with the blind and visually impaired which are relevant for creating long-term strategy of sports development, which can be used and which are the object of great interest for being included in sports system. Serbia is a country which does not have great financial potential to help these sports. However, tradition, infrastructure, educational system and achieved sports results in the world are a great foundation on which solid system for supporting people with disabilities and special needs can be based. Openness, enthusiasm, professional structures and volunteer sector can certainly make a bigger contribution. Sport for people with disabilities and special needs has to be discussed more in all aspects of sport and society in order to introduce scientific community to problems and opportunities and to connect those participants who want to take part in similar projects in practice. Professional help refers to: analysis of current situation, defining goals and special strategy, defining activity holders and fundraising.

Keywords: *sports for the blind and visually impaired, building and promotion of IT support, education of people for working with the blind and visually impaired, adjusting infrastructure to sports for the blind and visually impaired*

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INTRODUCTION

In order to achieve great results in this area of sports activities, it is necessary to introduce all participants to the nature, diagnostic and therapy of these dysfunctions. Thorough research which would be the foundation in the decision making process regarding enhancing those sports which can enable interest and affirmation of participants is necessary. Studying the existing needs of potential participants and situational indicator of society (the network of existing sports clubs, associations and the quality of their inclusion) should be the starting basis for the research. This means that including participants with the blind and visually impaired in sports system relies on ophthalmology support, check ups, counselling and diagnostic regarding opportunities to do certain sports activities. This support corresponds with professional help of psychologists, while persons dealing with technology of the training process for the blind and visually impaired are of special significance. This implies including a great number of qualified persons who would provide support to these athletes and sports which would spark the greatest interest in the research process. The best results in paralympic games were achieved by those athletes trained by coaches who also belong to the category of people with special needs or who are informed about this category due to family issues. However, unlimited opportunities in this field of work are available to anyone who is willing to become familiar with the nature of the handicap, or the ways of achieving desired goals in specific and more complex way.

Based on the experience in working with people with special needs from national and international sports practice, we can have insight into successful results as these athletes own unlimited persistence, desire, motivation, dedication, love for sports and other characteristics which are the guarantee of future success in pedagogical and scientific work with people. These people also need professional support in creating programmes of education for people who would voluntarily be included in working with sports for people with special needs in order to encourage their inclusion in society.

METHODOLOGY

The paper presents historical, comparative and case study methods as the most appropriate methods. Data collection regarding the experience of world sports associations which have a long tradition in sports organization and sports management for the blind and visually impaired can help focusing on what is relevant for these sports and what could be implemented in national sports. Historical method helps to create awareness of sports and sports

database, as well as the information about equipment and circumstances under which these sports can be organized. Comparative method enables us to perceive the state and position of Serbia when compared to other countries, especially the neighbouring countries with similar demographic and economic potentials. Case studies encourage all potential athletes, coaches and sports managers who are not familiar with these sports (or who have no idea about these sports or who have prejudices thinking that it is impossible to accomplish results). There are numerous examples from the world which show results of the blind and visually impaired above average, even in competitions with other athletes who do not belong to this category, which is explained by well-developed senses and abilities of the blind and visually impaired (especially intellectual ability, sense of touch and sense of hearing) as a result of natural giftedness or higher dedication, persistence and family support, which certainly leads to a successful result.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The research of sports for people with special needs should be directed towards: the analysis of the existing state, international standards and existing legislation in Serbia. In almost all countries of the world, there are national associations founded with the aim of giving support to people with special needs who do sports activities and who are given budget and financial support, but there are also associations which are self-financed and which lean on voluntary work and donations. What is encouraging is the fact that athletes who fall under the category of people with special needs can be sports promoters or the promoters of the nation they belong to. For example, we offer a list of extraordinary results achieved by these athletes in international competitions:

1. The example of Great Britain which has British Blind Sport, sports organization for the blind, which promotes Noel Thatcher who has won 5 golden medals in athletics in paralympic games from 1984 till 2004. He broke the world record in Barcelona in 1992 and in Sydney in 2002, and he was the proud carrier of the British flag at the opening ceremony of the Olympics in Athens in 2004.
2. There are similar impressive examples in our country as well: successful results were achieved by a Serbian visually impaired javelin thrower Miloš Grlica (Grlica, 2015), who has won even seven medals in world championships and paralympic games in athletics from 2004 till 2014 (two gold, two silver and three bronze medals). He was the sportsman of the year in Serbia in 2004 and 2005.

3. Draženko Mitrović, discus thrower and promoter of College of sports and health, achieved the following success: he won four silver medals in world championships for the disabled in athletics, he also won silver medal at the Olympics in Beijing in 2008, and he carried the Serbian flag at the opening ceremony of Summer Paralympics in London, where he broke the world record (32,97m) and won a silver medal (Mitrović, 2015).

At the last Paralympic games in London in 2012, Serbia won five medals: gold medal by Tanja Dragić, with the world record in javelin throw of 42,51m, and Željko Dimitrijević in club throw from the distance of 26,88m. Other silver medals were won by table tennis players.

Borislava Perić Ranković and Zlatko Kesler. Since 2000 up till now, Serbian paralympics have won 10 medals (Serbian Paralympic Committee, 2015). Serbian Paralympic Committee coordinates its work in the following sports: athletics, archery, table tennis, swimming, seated volleyball, cycling, wheelchair basketball, goallball, judo, skiing, wheelchair dance and shooting.

National sports association for the blind and visually impaired takes care of sports interests of the blind and visually impaired in Serbia, and it works under the patronage of Ministry of education, science and technological development. The results achieved by this association are significant, but it needs more professional support. The association needs to be included in international associations regarding sports which cause a lot of interest, and those sports in Serbia are: chess, bowling, goalball, athletics, martial arts, swimming etc. The association has 13 club members and has a very hard time doing business. Decrease of actions of former state regulations and bankruptcy have had a huge influence on national investment in sports, which affected the quality of work of all sports clubs. However, the association for the blind and visually impaired has suffered more than others by the fall of demographic indicators and decreased investments. Apart from this, the association also has the problems of adjusting IT and sports infrastructure to the users' needs. Even when instructors' services and sports infrastructure are present and sports facilities are available to people with special needs, they make sports activities more expensive.

Sports infrastructure, legislation and the current state

In Sports law (2011), article 4, there is a declarative statement that anyone has the right to do sports activities... under equal conditions regardless of... the level of physical abilities, the level of potential disability... Furthermore, the following items are mentioned in the section General interest in sports (article 114, page 12): promotion of recreational sport, encouraging sports for all citizens of the Republic of Serbia, especially children, women, the youth and people with disabilities.

The new draft of Sports law predicts organizing the work of Serbian Paralympic Committee. This sports organization is established in accordance with Paralympic Charter and relies on the work of International Paralympic Committee. Serbian Paralympic Committee does business which ensures the provision of: following, development and promotion of sports for the people with disabilities, organization of international sports competitions which are held under the supervision of International Paralympic Committee, establishing interstate and international sports cooperation and realization of programmes and projects regarding sports for people with disabilities which have national interest for the Republic of Serbia, as well as other tasks in accordance with the law. Serbian Paralympic Committee is obliged to develop general programmes for the development of paralympic sports, with time limit of four years and based on their legal framework. The Olympic Committee of Serbia, Paralympic Committee and Sports Council of Serbia determine the codex of professional ethics for professional work in sports by mutual agreement.

The Rule book regarding more thorough conditions for sports and sports activities (2013) in section 4: Conditions regarding facilities, article 9, says: 'Sports facilities where a national competition, professional competition or international sports competition is held have to be well equipped in order to ensure the same service to people with disabilities as to all other participants. People with disabilities have to have the following items: 1) separate entry gate with appropriate wheelchair ramps in the spectators' area, 2) seats which provide a good view, 3) provision of accommodation for the escort of the disabled, 4) at least 10 seats for the disabled have to be provided in each 3 000 seats of a sports object.' So, this article only refers to spectators with disabilities, while legislators have planned similar adjustments and conditions for athletes with special needs. Since sports and recreation have a huge significance in the overall process of rehabilitation of the disabled, apart from sports associations for the disabled, legislators are obliged to provide equal rights to the disabled and to enable them to do sports activities by adjusting specific infrastructure (sports facilities) and other support (IT, counselling, organization etc).

DISCUSSION

New Sports strategy development in the Republic of Serbia for 2014-2018 does not define sports for people with special needs as a specific area of social responsibility, even though Sports law claims that this category is entitled to do sports activities under the same circumstances as anyone else. Therefore, initial support is missing in this strategy. However, in Action plan for sports strategy development in the Republic of Serbia for 2014-2018, this problem is defined in article 7.2. Enhancement includes sports activities for

citizens through development and promotion of sports recreation. General goal is defined as: 7.2.1. Increased sports activities in all segments of population, especially children, women, people with disabilities, the youth and the old, as well as: 7.2.1.2. Improved material and technical conditions with the aim of availability to all citizens for sports activities. The activity which provides this goal is: Adjusting sports facilities and development of the plan for the usage of sports infrastructure by: Providing access to sports facilities for the disabled. The special goal in article 7.2.1.3. is: Encouraged participation of the units of local self-government in financing programme activities in the area of sports recreation and sports for the disabled. The activities are: adequate positioning of recreational sport and sport for the disabled in programmes for sports development on the level of local self-government as a priority. Suggested measures and tasks are:

- 1) Developing analysis of the current state of sports recreation and sports for the disabled on the level of local self-government; Indicators of activities are the analysis of the state, deadline: 2016, resources planned from the budget.
- 2) Development of recommendations and defining priorities for sports for the disabled regarding the programme of sports development in units of local self-government. Indicator of implementation is the number of recommendations, deadline: 2016, resources planned from the budget.
- 3) Including units of local self-government in systematic project development and following the development of sports recreation, especially the youth, women, the old and the disabled. The activity for goal achievement is: Development of necessary mechanisms for plan and programme realization in the field of sports recreation and sports for the disabled on the level of units of local self-government. The measures are: Providing institutional capacities in sports organizations for everyone and sports for the disabled for adequate application of programmes and projects.

Based on the above-mentioned, it is necessary to create a long-term strategy for development of sports for people with special needs. The strategy should be supported by: goals, activities, activity holders and sources of financing. The first step which should be taken by the Ministry in charge is: to provide database about people with disabilities who do sports activities. The records should include current data about the type and level of disability, about gender, age and educational structure and social status. The existing sports facilities are mostly unavailable to athletes with disabilities, primarily because of architecture barriers, so Serbian Paralympic Committee would have to strive more to arrange systematically and give support to sports for the disabled. Therefore, with the aim of improving conditions for mass

participation of people with disabilities and increasing social awareness of the significance and role of sports for the disabled, it is necessary to:

- do a detailed analysis of current state of sports for the disabled based on which the number of athletes and recreation sports for the disabled will be defined and sports organizations and institutions as partners in the process of promoting sports for the disabled will be identified;
- work continuously on the education of parents, representatives of units of local self-government, educational institutions and citizens about the significance of sport for the disabled and about the fact that these people are equal participants of sports activities;
- equalize special criteria for (co-)financing programme of the top paralympics sports, mass-recreation sports for the disabled, such as special olympics, sports for the deaf and visually impaired;
- provision of optimal conditions for preparations and performances of these athletes at Paralympic Games 2016 in Brazil: to identify and test candidates, create programmes for preparation and performance of candidates in the four years period and adjust the financing programmes.

Sports strategy development for people with special needs would have the following goals: creating conditions for mass participation of the disabled in sports activities, as well as continuous cooperation of Sports Council of Serbia with sports organizations and their associations, participation of a large number of sports experts in working with these athletes, enhancing inclusion in schools by sport etc. Based on these goals, the following activities could be projected: analysis of current state of sports for the disabled; defining the number of athletes with disabilities; organizing meetings and round tables with representatives of sports organizations of the disabled and representatives of national sports associations; organizing educational activities for sports experts for the disabled; developing recommendations for the usage of sport with the aim to promote inclusion in schools etc. In any case, the contribution of the state in defining the activity holder and the sources of financing of this strategy would be more than welcome.

The task of National sports association for the blind and visually impaired in the following period is to create a long-term strategy of its development which would be in accordance with Sports development strategy in the Republic of Serbia for 2014-2018 and with the accompanying action plan. This strategy should base future development of sports for the blind and visually impaired on the following steps:

1. Increasing the number of participants and clubs;
2. Including new sports in accordance with world trends or regional interests;

3. Regional expansion and appropriate schedule which is in compliance with statistical data;
4. Adjusting existing sports facilities or finding opportunities to build new ones which would be in accordance with standards defined by professional sports organizations, especially those registered for working with the blind and visually impaired;
5. Professional support to those clubs and associations by association of sports coaches and managers, on voluntary basis;
6. Helping clubs to find similarities between target group and potential sponsors and donors and finding resources for realization of new goals;
7. Inclusion in the education process for the blind and visually impaired (both sports coaches and managers), who would be completely or partially exempt from expenses;
8. Creating a network of volunteers, contemporary and former athletes, with the aim of offering professional, financial or advisory support to sports for the blind and visually impaired;
9. Analysis of legal implications which can improve the position of this category of athletes in society (protection, legal regulations, tax reliefs, incentives etc);
10. Classification of athletes in accordance with diagnosis and sports in which they train and compete; the classification would be unique for Serbia and liable to evaluations by numerous experts, and it would be supplemented by experiences from conferences or networks;
11. Developing the system of competitions (rules) in accordance with the rules of international associations, paralympic committee, etc, having in mind the necessity to include all aspects regarding presence of the blind and visually impaired;
12. Defining the way of maintaining medical check-up and control of participants.

Also, apart from the Rule book defined by National sports association for the blind and visually impaired, it is necessary to create a guidebook which would help participants and which would primarily give instructions about:

1. Advertising adjusted to this category of people;
2. Timetables for trainings and competitions during the day, as well as the venue (sports facilities) supported by public transport system, especially for people with special needs;
3. Providing guide dogs for all interested people, both as a personal property or as a support from other organizations;
4. Creating a network of coaches, personal assistants and volunteers willing to support these sports projects without financial rewards;

5. Encouraging communication between coaches and athletes and offering professional help by exchange of experience, sharing advice etc.
6. Developing system of safety measures during arrival at sports facilities, trainings, competitions and leaving sports facilities;
7. Instructions about advantages of sports for the blind and visually impaired in order to help them take the first step and continue training;
8. Detailed description of the nature of sport, its facilities and equipment that are used in order to develop further instructions, rules, safety measures and dynamic;
9. Creating guidebook or instructions about necessary psychophysical state in order to be included in sports system, with precise explanation about what a coach can ask for or accomplish when working with the blind and visually impaired.

CONCLUSION

Based on the previous statements, we can conclude that the issues regarding sports for people with special needs are very complex, and that society has very limited resources. This paper offers legal assumptions, sub-legal acts, Sports development strategy in the Republic of Serbia and action plan, which are the starting point in the development of Rule book, Rules of procedure and strategy of individual associations which are interested in working in this area. What can be done in current situation is reliance on sports experts and volunteers who would support these sports and athletes in their countries and regions.

Apart from their own long-term sports development strategy, these associations should develop guidebooks for supporting the blind and visually impaired and kids in order to include them in the training process as soon as possible. The benefits that society can indirectly have from using resources to include these athletes in training and competing process can be numerous: satisfaction with the achieved sports results can compensate other losses and disadvantages and give the disabled a sense of equality and belonging to social community. Sports experts, as well as volunteering sector, can also be a strong factor of integration and support, in order to facilitate the obligations of parents or custodians in a humane mission which offers the feeling of satisfaction by winning European or world trophies in these specific sports to the whole society.

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