



THE SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE OF ATHLETES DURING AND AFTER ELITE COMPETITION

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My experience, after first being a top level athlete in alpine skiing and then having the privilege of working with the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as an athlete representative for eight years, is that the athletes are and should be at the core of every sport organisation.

Why is it then that the “big book”, the Olympic Charter, which is the governing tool for all the sporting bodies attached to the IOC in one way or the other, does not have any particular message encouraging the Olympic Movement to support athletes both during and throughout their transition period?

This is one of the outcomes of the IOC Athletes' Commission Forum in Marrakech in May this year. All athletes, gathered at this forum, felt strongly about this and were very much in favour of an amendment to the Olympic Charter to include a more athlete friendly language.

Athletes give most of their best years of life to sport and would therefore have a disadvantage when getting out into the “real world” and looking for a job. As we have heard from Mr El Guerrouj, the IOC has started a very good project, the IOC Athletes' Career Programme (IOC ACP), together with Adecco, which is a very good step in the right direction.

I have here some quotes from athletes and some officials who were introduced to this programme in seminars over the past year:

“The seminar was good because it got me thinking of what I could do now to help myself in the future.” Chris Rolf, US Men's National SoccerTeam.

“The concept and some of the content is great but there could be the potential to integrate it into existing programmes such as the Oceania Sports Education Programme (OSEP) and to incorporate other programmes in its delivery that look at life skills beyond just public speaking.” Joanne Fern, Oceania National Olympic Committees (ONOC), Fiji (NA)

“Altogether, the programme was interesting insofar as it gave inputs. It helped us in outlining a vision of our professional future; in other words, this seminar helped us to prepare the future.” Alioune Cisse, basketball player, Africa.

This is a good step that the IOC has made and more could be done especially on a national and regional level.

To be able to prepare the athletes for life after their sporting career, all Olympic Movement constituents should try to endorse the importance of combining education and sport (so called “dual career”). Secondary schools, universities, technical institutes, sponsors, state companies should be made “athlete friendly”, which means for example that when attending a school it must be made possible to have free access to training camps etc. and not be punished for it in any way. To be able to make the athletes themselves aware of the importance of a “dual career”, it is important to educate their trainers/coaches and even parents. For that, we already have a very good channel: the Youth Olympic Games. The first Youth Olympic Games, that will be held in Singapore in 2010, is a perfect platform for spreading this important message.

Learning different life skills is as important as education. Being in a team, as an athlete you are often quite protected from the outer world and from learning even simple things such as booking your own trip. This should also be recognised and endorsed by all stakeholders as early as possible during an athlete's active career. When signing contracts with sponsors, it should be ensured that they can contribute to an athlete's different life projects, not just in terms of money. An athlete's emotional health during the transition period would be another point to look into further. Many athletes feel like their life and social sphere end with their career in sport and become depressed. What is more lamentable than having one of a country's most celebrated and most decorated athlete taking his or her own life?

Olympic stakeholders can also be of great help to athletes in the area of agents/managers. We all have examples of athletes who have been deprived of all their earned money after ending their career.

“My name is Martin Dahlin. After being a professional soccer player at the highest level, I have now turned my career into helping other athletes. Being a licensed agent of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), my athletes and I can work under some ethical and practical rules. I think this is a good way to prevent athletes from falling into the hands of crooks. Nevertheless, there are still some issues that can be improved.”

FIFA's agent license system is really a step in the right direction. Of course, no system is so good that it does not have to be improved but it shows the good will of one International Federation (IF) that wants to improve the situation.

The athletes of the world need a voice and they definitely have it through the IOC Athletes' Commission. The fourth IOC Athletes' Commission Forum in Marrakech made some really good recommendations, the amendment of the Olympic Charter being one of the strongest.