Motivation of Young Elite Speed Skaters

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According to Scanlan, Stein and Ravizza (1989), enjoyment appears to be a key motivational factor in sport. In this study, the sources of sport enjoyment for elite speed skaters were studied in a sample of 32 speed skaters (17 female and 15 male). All subjects had been members of the Dutch youth speed skating team for at least one winter season in the period between 1987 and 1991, while 14 subjects were still in a national junior or senior speed skating team when they participated in this study. Subjects were interviewed in the spring of 1991 and, amongst other things, were questioned to determine the reasons why they were prepared to invest in much time in speed skating (‘What does speed skating have which makes it worthwhile doing, as intensively as you do it?’). The answers could be reliably categorised into four main categories, identified by Scanlan et al.: (1) social and life opportunities; (2) perceived competence; (3) social recognition of competence; (4) act of skating.

‘Act of skating’, ‘perceived competence’ and ‘social and life opportunities’ appeared to be, in that order, the most important sources of enjoyment for the elite speed skaters. ‘Social recognition of competence’ was a factor of very low importance for the speed skaters.

It is concluded that elite sport performers are not primarily motivated by factors related to the achievement aspects of sport and that the ‘act of skating’ and the ‘social and life opportunities’ afforded by skating are important motivational factors.

Key Words: Enjoyment, Speed skaters, Sport motivation.

Introduction

According to Scanlan, Stein and Ravizza (1989), enjoyment appears to be a key motivational factor in sport. Several studies, discussed in some detail by Scanlan et al. (1989) demonstrate the role of fun or enjoyment in youth sport participation (Passer & Scanlan, 1980; Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986; Wankel & Kreisel, 1985a,b). In an overview of motives and reasons for participation in recreational and competitive sports, Bakker, Whiting and van der Brug (1990), briefly discuss 11 studies on motivation for participation in sport. Seven of these studies explicitly conclude that intrinsic pleasure is a major motivation for participation in sport. Bakker et al. (1990) conclude that one of the answers to the question as to why people participate in sport is that the activities in which people are involved have intrinsic value (joy, pleasure) and consequently are worth pursuing.

Recently, Scanlan et al. (1989) published findings of a study which investigated the sources of sport enjoyment for elite figure skaters. In their study, 26 former elite figure skaters were interviewed and answered an open-ended question asking them for their sources of enjoyment during the most competitive phase of their skating careers. By means of inductive content analysis, 418 quotes which drawn from the interviews were categorised into four major themes. These four themes — ‘sources of enjoyment’ — were labelled: ‘social and life opportunities’, ‘perceived competence’, ‘social recognition of competence’ and ‘the act of skating’. In addition, a fifth theme was distinguished, which was labelled ‘special cases’.

Social and life opportunities were defined as forming relationships with peer and adult significant others and/or having broadening experiences outside the routine of sport life. The feeling of being close to other people who share the same interest and common goals, meeting other people, watching other talented skaters are examples of quotes which were classified in this category.

Perceived competence was defined as personal perceptions of competence derived from one’s autonomous and/or social achievement in sport. Subthemes in this category were mastery, competitive achievement and performance achievement.

The act of skating was defined as ‘the sensations, perceptions and/or self-expressiveness associated with the act of skating itself’.

Social recognition of competence was defined as ‘receiving recognition, even acclaim, for having skating competence through others’ acknowledgement of one’s performance and achievements’.

The findings of Scanlan et al. (1989) showed that 92% of the participants in the study made at least one statement which was coded into the category social and life opportunities. For the remaining three major themes, these percentages were 88% (perceived competence), 81% social
recognition of competence) and 65% (the act of skating). One of the important conclusion drawn from these data is that enjoyment is related not only to the achievement aspects of sport (perceived competence and social recognition of competence), but to the social (social and life opportunities) and movement dimensions (act of skating) as well (Scanlan et al., 1989, p. 81). Evidently, athlete’s sources of enjoyment are of a multi-faceted nature.

The aim of the present study was to replicate Scanlan et al.’s findings, if possible, for a different group of elite athletes — speed skaters — and to extend these findings for sport performers who were still involved in competitive sports at national or international level. Using the four major themes, identified by Scanlan and her coworkers as a priori categories, the answers of elite speed skaters to an open-ended question asking them for their sources of enjoyment were coded into these four major themes.

Method

Preliminary remarks

The research reported here is part of a longitudinal study into the determinants of a successful career as a speed skater. For subjects selected at least once for the Dutch national youth speed skating team, physiological, anthropometric and psychological data and data with respect to speed skating, technique were regularly collected, depending on the type of the variable being measured, one to four times a year. The study was commenced in the 1986/1987 season. Data were collected for the last time at the end of the 1990/91 season. Once speed skaters had participated in this longitudinal study, they were asked to continue their participation, regardless of whether or not they continued as members of the national youth speed skating team. All but two of the speed skaters agree to this. For some speed skaters, membership in the national youth team ended because they were selected for the national senior team. Others dropped out because their performances no longer met the criteria for membership in the national youth team.

Subjects

A total of 32 (17 female and 15 male) elite speed skaters participated as subjects in this study. All subjects were members of the Dutch national youth speed skating team for at least one winter season. To be selected as a member of the national youth speed skating team, a speed skater must belong to, roughly speaking, the best five skaters in the Netherlands in his or her age group. When subjects were interviewed, their mean age was 19.9 years (SD = 1.11; age range 18-22 years) for female and 20.3 years (SD = 1.30; age range 18-22 years) for male speed skaters. All but of the subjects who were interviewed were involved in speed skating at national and/or international level; 14 of them were still in the Dutch national junior or senior speed skating team when they were interviewed, while the remaining subjects were members of provincial skating teams. On average, they spent about 25 hours per week on speed skating, speed skating training and activities directly related to speed skating (ranging from roughly 15 hours to over 40 hours weekly). The experience of the subjects at national level ranged from at least three seasons up to six seasons.

Procedure

At the end of the 1990/1991 season, subjects were interviewed by one of two interviewers. For most of the participant, the interview took place in the laboratory where they were invited to come for the regular measurements taken during the longitudinal project. Seven participants were interviewed at their own homes. After several biographical questions, questions related to school achievement and cooperation, subjects were asked for their average time investment in speed skating. Following this, the interviewer introduced the question related to enjoyment and pleasure in speed skating: «So you are devoting a lot of time to speed skating. What does speed skating have which makes it worthwhile doing, as intensively as you do it? I mean, what do you like about speed skating; what makes it pleasurable for you? I am not only referring to performance aspects of speed skating, but also to practice, competitions, travel, etc. When talking about «pleasurable», I am referring to feelings such as enjoyment, pleasure, fun and related feelings which you might have about skating. What causes that kind of feelings of pleasure?»

The interviewer wrote down the statements of the participants. Speed skaters were encouraged to mention aspects which they like or enjoyed in speed skating, but were not cued for any possible source. For example, if a speed skater stopped after giving one or two statements she was encouraged by the interviewer, who said, for example: «You mentioned ..., but are there other things which make it pleasurable? Think quietly about the things which cause feelings of pleasure and related feelings».

Categorisation of the statements

One of the interviewers coded each statement, on the basis of the description of the themes and examples of quotes provided by Scanlan et al. (1989), into one of the four major themes developed by Scanlan et al. (social and life opportunities, perceived competence, social recognition of competence, and act of skating). Those statements which could not be coded into one of these major categories were coded into a «remaining» category. A reliability check was performed by asking the second interviewer to code 100 randomly selected statements into the five categories. Agreement was 93% (93 of 100 statements were coded into the same category).

Results

The 32 participants gave 158 statements which were coded into one of the five categories. The mean number of statements for each participant was 6.2 (SD = 2.26; range 4-12). Examples of the statements for each of the categories are presented in Table I.
TABLE I
Examples of responses coded into each of the five categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I Social and life opportunities</td>
<td>training with other talented skaters, watching other talented skaters, travelling and experiencing new things, other people, making friends, being with other, related people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II Perceived competence</td>
<td>performing well, sense of accomplishment from achieving, being the best speed skater, learning/improving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III Social recognition of competence</td>
<td>being someone; not being lost in the grey mass, the interest in speed skating in Holland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV Act of skating</td>
<td>moving fast, feeling exhausted, speed-training during training, feeling of a perfect movement, feeling of skating, feeling your smoothness, power push-off, feeling fit after practice, gliding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V Remaining case</td>
<td>working individually, diversity of summer and winter training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Table II the number of statements which were coded into each of the five categories are presented. As is clear from this Table, the majority of the statements were coded into the category the act of skating (almost one-third of the statements). Evidently, the feelings directly associated with the activity of speed skating (for example, moving fast, feeling your push-off, feeling the smoothness of your movement, feeling exhausted after practice, etc.) are important sources of enjoyment, or at least aspects which come easily to mind when asked about what makes skating pleasurable. Another striking results in Table II is the relatively low frequency of statements coded into the third category (social recognition of competence).

The results are presented in a slightly different way in Table III. In this Table, for each of the five categories, the number of participants who gave at least one quote which was coded into that category is presented. Roughly, the findings presented in Table III agree with those presented in Table II. Social recognition of competence appears to be a relatively unimportant source of enjoyment for the majority of the speed skaters (only one-quarter of the participants made at least one statement which could be coded into this category). For the remaining three major categories, about 75-80% of the speed skaters mentioned at least one source of enjoyment which could be coded into these categories.

Discussion

The results of the study reported here clearly demonstrate the multifaceted nature of an athlete’s sources of enjoyment and support the findings reported by Scanlan et al. (1989). Important sources of enjoyment for speed skaters, as well as for former figure skaters, appear to be the social and life opportunities afforded by skating, perceived competence, the act of skating, and social recognition of competence (although the latter seems to apply less for speed skaters than for figure skaters).

The findings also complete Scanlan et al.’s (1989) study by focusing on athletes who are still involved in sport at a high level. The similarity between the findings of both studies clearly demonstrates the potential of Scanland et al.’s major themes of sport enjoyment. Scanlan et al. used inductive content analysis, which allows themes and categories to emerge from
the quotes. In this (replication) study, these themes or categories were used as a predetermined set to deductively categorise the statements. The themes used proved to be quite applicable: the majority of the statements of speed skaters, spontaneously made in response to the question why they enjoyed speed skating, could be reliably coded into one of the four major themes. Less than 20% of the statements did not fit into one of these major categories. Several of these quotes (coded into the category remaining cases) appeared to be very specific to speed skating (for example, «diversity of summer and winter trainings»).

Not only the highest level themes, but also the lower level themes from the inductive content analysis seem to be applicable to deductively categories the answers to the question of sources of enjoyment. For examples, in the inductive content analysis, the category social and life opportunities emerged from three lower level themes, namely «friendship through skating», «opportunities afforded by going to competitions and touring» and «family/coach relationship». These themes were also clearly represented in statements of the speed skaters. A typical example of the first theme is «I like to be with other skaters in the group. Sometimes they are opponents and I try to beat them, but they are also friends who share the same interests». An example of the second theme is in the following quote: «You travel a lot and meet several people at all kinds of places». The special bond, particularly with the parents of the subjects, is mentioned several time (e.g., «My parents are very sympathetic; that gives a very special feeling of solidarity».

Addressing the quantitative results, the categories social and life opportunities and perceived competence appeared to be reflected in the responses of roughly 80% of both skaters and figure skaters. The feeling of being close to other people who share the same interests and common goals, meeting other people, watching other talented skaters, statements which are classified under the category social and life opportunities, evidently represent important values for (former) elite sport performances. The category perceived competence emerged from the subthemes mastery, competitive achievement and performance achievement, which are clearly related to the opportunities provided by sport to gain feelings of competence. The relative importance of this category is in agreement with the findings on motivation for sport. In the overview of motives and reasons for sport participation by Bakker et al. (1990), this appeared to be an important reason for people to participate in sport.

The act of skating appeared to be the third important category for both former figure skaters and speed skaters. In particular, for the speed skaters, this seemed to be an important category, since the greatest number of statements (one-third of the total quotes) were coded into this category. However, it cannot logically be concluded that the high frequency with which these sources of enjoyment were mentioned is indicative of their importance. It could be argued, for example, that statements within this category come more easily to mind than those from the other categories. Future research should aim at solving this problem of the relative weight of the sources of enjoyment. One possible approach might be the development of rating scales based on the categories which were identified in Scanlan et al.'s study.

The last category — social recognition of competence — appeared to differ between speed skates and figure skaters. For speed skaters, this proved to be a relatively unimportant category. The theme was indicated in the responses of only 25% of the sample (compared to 81% in Scanlan et al.'s study). The explanation that there is less public interest in speed skating (compared to figure skating) seems to be inadequate. In the Netherlands in particular, speed skating is an extremely popular sport. Differences between the American and European culture might explain some of the differences between figure skaters and speed skaters. In addition, it might be proposed that the differences are related to the active involvement in sport of the speed skaters compared to the figure skaters, who had not participated at the top level for, on average, 10 years (Scanlan, Ravizza & Stein, 1989). Either this source of enjoyment becomes more important in retrospect, for example because the issue of social recognition is often discussed when talking about one's career, or skaters who are still involved in top-level skating feel uncomfortable about referring to social recognition of their performances and achievements. Another related point is that the figure skaters had their whole career over which to receive recognition. The current sample of relatively young elite speed skaters had a shorter time in which to receive this much recognition. Finally, figure skaters depend upon judges to determine outcome — social recognition is inherent in figure skating. In addition, figure skaters are »show« people — they like the stage performing aspects of sport associated recognition. This show element and the subjectivity of outcome is quite different from speed skating.

The findings in the study reported here seem to demonstrate the relevance of reinforcing a variety of potential motivations. As findings of research into youth sport participation motivation have shown, it is essential for coaches, and other «important others» to show a broad interest in children's activities, not only in their achievements, in order to maintain motivation in sport (Cohn, 1990; Gould, Horn & Spreeman, 1983;
Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1988; Van den Auweele, 1992). It might be speculated that this is also true for elite sport performers, since they do not derive their feelings of joy, pleasure and fun only or primarily from aspects related to performance competence and the social recognition thereof. The act of skating and social and life opportunities also afford important feelings of pleasure. These motivations should also be reinforced by coaches and parents in order to strengthen them.

In conclusion, the findings in this study supported and extended the findings of Scanlan et al., and seem to prove the potential of the categories of sources of enjoyment in sport. The similarity between sources of enjoyment for speed skaters who are still involved in sports and for figure skaters who ended their career many years ago is striking. In addition, the sources of enjoyment appear to a large extent to be the same for people involved in quite different sports (Figure skating and speed skating) and from different cultural background (American vs. European culture).

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The authors would like to acknowledge Rob Piippers for his work with the interviews and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions.

RESUMEN

De acuerdo con Scanlan, Stein y Ravizza (1989) el gusto puede representar un elemento de motivación indispensable. En este ensayo efectuado sobre un modelo de 32 patinadores de alto nivel (17 mujeres y 15 hombres) se buscaron los factores que determinan el gusto en el deporte.

Todos los sujetos tomaron parte — por lo menos por la duración de una estación invernal — en la Nacional Juvenil Holandesa en el periodo 1987-1991 y 14 de aquellos atletas jugaban todavía en la Nacional Juveniles o Seniores durante el desarrollo de esta investigación.

Los sujetos fueron entrevistados en la primavera del año 1991 y se preguntó a ustedes, entre otras cosas, las razones necesarias para decidir de destinar tanto tiempo al patinaje (.¿Qué tiene la velocidad en el patinaje de tanto importante para que se ejercite tan intensamente?) Las respuestas fueron introducidas en cuatro clases, determinadas por Scanlan et al.: 1 oportunidades sociales y de vida, 2 percepción de competencia, 3 reconocimiento social de la competencia, 4 acción de competencia y las oportunidades sociales y de vida resultan, en esta misma orden de importancia, las principales fuentes de gusto para estos atletas de elite.

El reconocimiento social de la competencia en este equipo resultó el motivo de menor importancia.

Se concluye que los atletas de alto nivel no resultan provocados principalmente por aspectos de resultados positivos en el deporte, y que la acción de patinar y las oportunidades sociales y de vida representan factores de motivación importantes.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG


Es wird gefolgt, dass die Eliteesportler nicht primär durch Faktoren motiviert sind, die mit dem Leistungsspektrum des Sports zusammenhängen und dass «Bewegung des Schleitschuhlaufens» und «soziale und andere Erlebnisse», die der Eisschneilauf bietet, wichtige Motivationsfaktoren darstellen.
RIASSUNTO

In accordo con Scanlan, Stein e Ravizza (1989) il piacere nello sport sembra costituire un fattore motivazionale chiave. In questo studio, condotto su un campione di 32 pattinatori (velocità di alto livello (17 femmine e 15 maschi) sono stati ricercati i fattori che lo determinano. Tutti i soggetti hanno fatto parte per almeno una stagione invernale della nazionale giovanile olandese nel periodo 1987-1991 e 14 fra questi atleti erano ancora nella rappresentativa nazionale juniores o seniores durante lo svolgimento di questo studio.

I soggetti sono stati intervistati nella primavera del 1991 e fra le altre cose è stato loro richiesto di determinare le ragioni che li avevano portati a dedicare così tanto tempo al pattinaggio ("Che cosa ha la velocità nei pattinaggio di così interessante, tanto da essere praticato così intensamente?"). Le risposte sono state inserite in quattro categorie, identificate da Scanlan et al.: 1. opportunità sociale e di vita, 2. percezione di competenza, 3. riconoscimento sociale della competenza, 4. azione di pattinare.

L’azione di pattinare, la percezione di competenza e le opportunità sociali e di vita sono, in questo stesso ordine d’importanza, le principali fonti di piacere per questi atleti di elite. Il riconoscimento sociale della competenza, in questo gruppo, era la ragione meno importante. Si conclude che gli atleti di alto livello non sono principalmente motivati da aspetti di successo nello sport e che l’azione del pattinare e le opportunità sociali e di vita sono importanti fattori motivazionali.

REFERENCES


