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THE MOTIVATION OF PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES AND THE
INFLUENCE EXERCISED BY THE MEDIA

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to research the way in which the motivation of high performance athletes is influenced by media accounts on themselves and their activity. If classic theory says that performance is a system of internal impulses, drives and wishes reported to a system of values, modern theory should add that in addition to all this, there is a pressure exercised by the public via the media. The media has become part of the sports industry and the life of athletes, so it plays a determining role in the construction or deconstruction of athletes' motivation. The paper herein is an empirical research based on a series of interviews with female professional athletes and psychologists, aimed at discovering the role played by the media in this. They answer open-ended questions that establish the way in which their performance on the field is altered or triggered by the media. The conclusions of the paper will be the basis of an ampler study determining the influence of the media on motivation in team sports, especially handball. The main conclusion is the fact that athletes do not see the media as a catalyst of motivation or a demotivating factor, but they do see it as the main factor in building their relationship with the public. Thus, motivation is influenced through the media, by the public.

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1. Introduction

The former Manchester United trainer, Alex Ferguson, says in his autobiography, entitled specifically *My Autobiography*, that there are only two ways in which an athlete can be convinced to switch clubs: “1. For glory. 2. For money” (Ferguson, 2013, p. 339). This is Ferguson’s way of reducing down to the absurd a complicated conversation in sports everywhere. And Ferguson can draw this conclusion based on his almost 40-year experience as a trainer. But which are the complex mechanisms that lead to this simplification?

1.1. Which are the mechanisms that push athletes forward when they are successful, when they are not, or when they are tired or injured?

And another question: To what extent does the exterior world, the world of the media, influence their decisions? Is there a media influence over the actions of valuable athletes in the first place?

Theory says that motivation is a system of internal impulses, drives, pulses, energies or triggers, tense states or reasons behind actions and behaviour. Yet all these internal aspects are and must be reported to a system of values that the athlete builds inside. This system has a causality that is built in time, is replicated in their psyche and is based on learning.

And we can add to some extent, accordingly to Pânișoară and Pânișoară (2005, p. 97) that “those who are driven by that reasons should achieve excellence standards. Even there is no recognition, praises or fulfilment, the need to achieve is strongly sustained in the inner self and those persons are working hard for the results.”

1.2. But there are authors that consider there is a strong relation between, results, motivation and confidence.

The confidence being the foundation of good results and excellence in professional sports.

Loy (1991, p. 42) says that “it is obvious that the emotion we seek in sports is related to a general desire of sensual satisfaction; it can also be deduced that the pursuit of excellence in sports is related to a general wish of maintaining or increasing confidence.” So what we have to answer today I that the consequences of diminishing the confidence of professional athletes because of the media critics or spotlight.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. All human experiences contribute to the establishment of motivation.

Things that we add in time contribute to the formation of psychological values and then to a motivation that will carry us forward. The mechanism applies to athletes also, but we believe part of them are biologically gifted with an emotional baggage that helps them in this regard.

There are several definitions accepted for the motivation. Pânișoară and Pânișoară (2005 p. 16) use three of them:

- ”Motivation energizes, directs and sustains the behaviour. (Steers & Porter, cited by Saal & Knight, 1988, p. 256)

- Motivation refers to the dynamics of the behaviour, initiation process, direction and sustaining of body activities. (Goldenson, cited by Coon, 1983)
- Motivation aims to the internal factors of the individual person, which stimulates, maintain and direct the behaviour towards a goal. (Huffman, Vernoy, Williams, & Vernoy, 1991, p. 381)”

Thus, the main issue is related to self-image. All these influences on motivation and the way in which they work are related to self-image and how athletes relate to it. And this shows up most often in relation to the media.

2.2. None of the top athletes, professional or amateur, will succeed in determining their work without proper motivation.

Motivation certainly is the triggering factor, but equally true is that this factor is not enough for building a career.

And, definitely, that factor is not enough in maintaining a career. Or, today, professional athletes cannot live outside the new industry of media-sport and all that implies. “Unique individuals partially create the barriers and the value objects, and those should be defined, in the terms known by the organism. There is no way to define or to describe a domain in a universal manner, as the description is independent from the organism within.”

2.3. So how does media influence these relations in an athlete's life?

Sports have turned into a modern industry working to a good extent because of and through the media. The two influence each other and support each other. Both have developed adjacent businesses, and athletes’ lives have become part of these businesses. Today, an athlete must be and is connected to a series of factors that used to be absent in the past. We refer here to the permanent media exposure, to the 24/7 presence of television broadcasters in all places where they conduct their business and to the possibility for the public to have direct access to athletes via the media.

How do athletes regard these notions that study the way in which high-performing athletes operate? We spoke to several professional athletes who shared insights into their experience, on the field and in their daily lives. (Table 01)

Table 01. Interviewees

Interviewee	Sport	Position	Years of activity
Alexandru Dedu	Handball	President of the RHF	16
Nicoleta Alexandrescu	Handball	Federal Trainer	16
Mihai Covaliu	Fencing	President of the RSOC	13
Ana Maria Popescu	Fencing	Vice-President of the RFF	16
Florentina Tonița		Sports Psychologist	

3. Research Questions

For conducting the research, we used a set of open-ended questions addressing matters related to intrinsic motivation, as well as motivation in relation to the media. Their role is to establish the way in

which athletes individualize motivation as such, and also whether there are media-related matters that can affect athletes' motivation on a long and short term.

- What is the triggering phenomenon of a career in sports?
- Is motivation individualized as such in your career?
- Can there be a distinction between trophies, recognition and money?
- What is the role of the media in the occurrence of motivation?
- Can motivation determine a certain attitude towards the media?
- What is the role of the media in the discussion of external motivation?
- What is the role of the media in establishing external pressure?
- How does demobilization occur?

4. Purpose of the Study

The paper herein aims to find out how motivation is built in the career of professional athletes and how motivation maintains their career trajectory. It reveals the motivating factors, as seen by professional athletes--both internal and external in nature. The paper is part of a larger study that will provide sports managers with an instrument that will allow them to help athletes, and which will allow athletes to no longer be demotivated in their relationship with the media. It aims to develop the mechanism that may lead to the destabilization of an athlete when there is a relationship between sport, media and the public.

5. Research Methods

The research method used for the paper herein is the interview. The research is empirical and does not aim to establish definitively the way in which athletes' activity is influenced by the media. Yet it is a starting point for an ampler study on athletes' perceptions regarding the media. The following stage will be a study among handball players, showing how motivation operates in relation to media.

6. Findings

They will be presented in the following lines, as resulted from the series of prior questions.

6.1. What is the triggering phenomenon of a career in sports?

“In retrospect, I think it was passion. At the beginning I didn't even have the satisfaction of playing.” Apparently, his motivation was rather internal: the pleasure of being in a team and playing all the time. Alexandru Dedu started playing handball in adolescence. And because he was not technically proficient, he was on the bench for many games. That is where his internal motivation came from.

Yet apparently it was built on an external motivation, also. One concerning material valorisation, as well as social recognition.

Nicoleta Alexandrescu identifies his choice to stay in handball for all these years first by means of external motivation: “At the beginning, it was a source of income, because it was the only thing I was good at. And then, as you start winning, you are more and more drawn to results. And my greatest challenge was winning a European cup.”

In both cases, it is very interesting to see that motivation was firstly built on an external desire and only then it became internal and the main engine behind the athlete's development.

Mihai Covaliu shows from the beginning that his motivation is internal. "I loved it. I still do. And that's how I got to a degree of awareness that tells me I like performance. I feel like this is my internal formation. I like to play. I like to compete. With myself and with others."

Ana Maria Brânză finds an internal motivation, but it relates to external factors, not necessarily material in nature: "There are two things that motivate me, namely there are always more medals to win, you can't be an absolute champion, there's always a trophy you don't have, and second, I believe that if I gave up while I could still bring results, I would be ungrateful."

6.2. Is motivation individualized as such in your career?

Yet she can identify the concept of motivation in her career. Has she used it? Has she thought of it, tied it to a certain phenomenon or state? "I think we're talking about duty and paying your dues", says Alexandru Dedu. "We're not talking about an assignment given by someone, but about a task that has been undertaken and internalized." In this process we can see an external factor turning into an internal dimension. Duty is a factor that comes from a person's education. Education that they receive either at home, or at school. In time, it can lead to the internalisation and undertaking of several ideas.

Nicoleta Alexandrescu has not used the word "motivation" as such. "I said I wanted this. First, I wanted to be part of the national team. There were times when I was part of a club team, on the same position as the best player in the world. And I said, I want to be better than her. And then I became better than her."

Mihai Covaliu says he's thought about motivation many times. That this is how he worked as an athlete. "My motivation was being better than others. All those who compete have the same drive."

Ana Maria Popescu says that "motivation, as such, comes up in times when I can't or I don't want to go to practice. And that's when I have to find a solution".

It must be mentioned that all these things we have talked about are external factors, but what is interesting is that they come together in an internal factor that fuels the athlete's performance. This confirms one of the observations frequently used by the coaches. "Motivation is strongly connected to the human body. Motivation is given by the nature. If one considers that an athlete has a lower motivation, he/she could be dropped." (Glyn, 1992, p. 4).

6.3. What is the role of the media in the occurrence of motivation?

Motivation is an extremely complex process. Each personality is influenced differently by their education, environment, by moral or aesthetic interests, the things that carry an important weight in their behaviour. To what extent can a negative or positive external factor influence it? Is media such a factor? Can the media contribute to this motivation process, both from a negative and from a positive standpoint?

Athletes also lead a moral career. In most cases, these people are extraordinary, in the strictest sense of the word. That is why the development of their moral career and self-image is one of the most complex.

Generally, athletes follow the media--radio, TV as well as online. They are curious to read about themselves. Sports psychologist Florentina Tonița, trainer of national handball teams, says that there is a massive focus of these athletes on the relationship between the media and the public. More specifically, athletes are interested in the attitude that the public will have regarding them. A very interesting detail is that performers are more affected by what the media says when they are on tour abroad, and not so much when they are home, in a more stable environment.

Alexandru Dedu: "I feel frustrated when I read negative things about me. I can't say it gives me motivation, but it ruins my day. Things that are not true, or strange interpretations of things ruin my day. But the next day I'm fresh. I have a feeling of guilt because I care."

Nicoleta Alexandrescu describes in her turn a defence mechanism against things published by the media: "I stopped reading some publications after untrue things about me were written. I look at who signed the article and I can tell immediately whether the information reported is of value to me or not. Half of the things written there are untrue and worthless. I know this for a fact."

6.4. Can motivation determine a certain attitude towards the media?

It is interesting that the first tendency we see here is for them to contact the journalist. An attempt to stop or rephrase the information. "I spoke to the journalists a couple of times. But I didn't get anywhere, so I stopped", says Alexandru Dedu.

"Great performers have insights on the game. They are the first to know whether something's off. We try to analyse what the media says, but only related to the actual sport", adds Nicoleta Alexandrescu.

One of the interesting aspects regarding relevance is relates to the fact "that there is a humanization of the athlete. Once attacks are launched against them in the media or negative reviews appear, the image presented in the field crumbles. Yet I don't think the public is influenced that much. As an athlete, the public gives you mitigating circumstances, if you mind your own business", says Alexandru Dedu.

6.5. The role of the media in establishing external pressure

A sensitive topic for athletes is the relationship between the public and the media. Nicoleta Alexandrescu believes that "the public is 100% influenced by what the media writes. Especially if you have an educated audience, who reads, you can hear their comments in the stands. While I was playing for Rapid we had a group of supporters who would come to see us train and who knew everything about us."

Actually, the focal point of the relationship is here, and that's why it can be seen as demotivation: "Yes. It bothers me. Because you know how much you've worked, and then you see random people telling you off for what they read in the paper", says Nicoleta Alexandrescu.

The most delicate issue in the relationship with the media comes when we talk about athletes who believe the criticism brought to them is unjust or untrue. There is a generalized perception among athletes that many journalists write things that are untrue, especially about their private lives.

Florentina Tonița: "Older athletes reach a point where they can overcome these things or just ignore them, but the younger ones are affected strongly, so we must work together".

The fact that it is the public who matters for athletes and not the media is evident from another statement also: “The players read the article, but what interests them is the direct comments below it.” (Florentina Tonița) “Young players are especially affected by this.” Thus, esteem and valorisation do not come from the group of peers, but rather from an anonymous audience with a great power to influence athletes.

Public valorisation also occurs in individual sports. Ana Maria Popescu says she reads articles, as well as comments. “I always read media articles, including comments. I think I had media exposure, which comes with comments that you don’t always like. I take whatever’s good from it and I let go of the rest quite fast.”

She says she also uses this type of communication as motivation, especially when criticism comes from other professional athletes: “If it is criticism coming from other athletes and it isn’t fair, then I find motivation in it; I try to meet my goals, which I believe allows me to respond.”

How does demobilization occur? What mechanism pushes these great performers to be more attentive to the comments of regular people than to the general atmosphere or to what they know they can do?

“Certainly, these things create negative emotions and demobilization occurs. Most of them feel frustration. Because when you read things about you that are untrue, you can’t respond to that”, says Florentina Tonița. Frustration will lead to a higher degree of pressure already felt by the athlete. Many athletes already put pressure on themselves. This additional pressure can create problems. “Many people wonder how come there are errors or mistakes during the game. People wonder how I got this wrong. It only takes a flash-back. Remembering someone’s words”, says Florentina Tonița.

The reaction to negative media depends on how people are built. Florentina Tonița: “Some athletes will be motivated. They’ll say, I’ll show you. Others can be hurt. It’s a disturbing factor.”

Yet athletes react positively to a positive media. The marketing campaign of the RHF which, during the past two years, brought people to the arenas and brought the media closer to the national senior female team is felt by the players. “The girls like what is happening in the media, and you can see that in the national team.”

This conclusion is opposite to one we frequently read in theory: “One of the most known misunderstandings related to motivation is that motivation is synonymous with activation. The trainers think that speeches in the locker room or different procedures motivate the athletes for better results. Thus, the coaches use bizarre tactics to over motivated athletes before the games.” (Glyn, 1992, p. 4)

We must add a nuanced answer in the case of the Olympic fencing champion who says that she has always learned more from failures than she has from successes. Also, as a source of motivation, she keeps home a photo of herself kneeling and crying after a defeat in London, 2012.

Mihai Covaliu makes a distinction between media’s criticism and the information presented by it that athletes consider untrue. “This can trigger all sorts of emotions that drag you down. He is one of the athletes who do not read the media during competitions, but only after, in order to see through other people’s eyes what you saw from the court.” The athlete does not believe that press coverage puts pressure on him, but that “it has an effect.” “It depends on how you are built. If you’re more emotional, it

drags you down. But if you feel you did a good job, then you do everything in your power to meet your objective.”

Covaliu rejects the idea of a media influence on the training of the athlete. “What is written in the paper cannot influence your training or your daily activities.” Yet there is a clear connection between the attitude of the public and what the media says. That is why he attempted to apply a filter over the public's relationship with the public, asking it to protect athletes during sensitive times.

These thoughts confirm one of the pieces of theory highlighted by Pănișoară and Pănișoară (2005, p.98): “the persons with a high standard of achievement target untouchable goals but realistic. Living the success, those want continuously high standards, and if they fail, they are not really angry because they know that have done everything possible to succeed.” This explains the main part in the relation between professional athletes and press. Obviously, the press can put pressure on the athlete, but it will not be the main reason to succeed or fail.

7. Conclusion

Based on the interviews and the theory studied we can reach a series of conclusions.

In the case of the champions we have spoken to--athletes, trainers or managers--motivation is first and foremost internal. The first and most important signs are those related to their desire to win and compete, which come from the inside. There is also external motivation, but it feeds a system of values and perceptions that have already taken shape in the athlete's mind.

The media in and of itself is not a factor that can destabilize athletic performance to a large extent. Experienced champions weather criticism well and accept it easily if it is justified and concerns strictly what happened on the field. Athletes accept it when journalists are tough if their performance was indeed weak.

Yet professional athletes have a great sensitivity to the relationship that the media creates between them and the audience. Major conversations arise regarding comments coming from the public and what they mean. Athletes will give more importance to direct comments on the game than to the article itself.

The main issue with this relationship has to do with the athlete's self-image. This delicate construction is a lasting one, yet it can be damaged and shaken by criticisms that the performer believes to be unjust. When they read that people they know, such as acquaintances, trainers or friends, come to their defense in comments or, on the contrary, attack them, this self-image is strengthened or damaged. In fact, the athlete is looking to consolidate an image or find excuses in a certain case. The mirrors they get from the outside can sustain a self-image that is already formed or can raise a series of question marks regarding their person.

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E-mail interview

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