Role Modelling of Olympic Athletes: Perceptions of Aspiring Sport Managers at Selected South African Universities

Johannes Van Wyk, University of Pretoria

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Sport role models often inspire young athletes to become or stay involved in sport. Symbolic issues such as personal qualities, physical attractiveness and achievement are built on the traits of those perceived as successful and famous athletes, and are therefore imitated by others seeking validation. The Olympic Games as a mega international sport event epitomises the ideal athlete and provides opportunities for people to identify role models.

South Africa's political and spiritual past was characterised by racial discrimination enforced through the Government's policy of apartheid. This resulted in international sanctions against South Africa in every facet of society. South African sport in particular was boycotted from international participation in events such as the Olympic Games. A whole generation of South African sportspeople therefore lacked Olympic sportsmen and women to identify with as role models. South Africa was reinstated into the international sporting arena through its participation in the 1992 Barcelona Games, providing the first opportunity for a democratic nation to identify and imitate Olympic role models. It is against this background that the status of perceptions regarding Olympic role models of aspiring sport managers as future decision makers has not been determined before in South Africa.

The primary objective of the present study was to determine the collective perceptions of aspiring sport managers regarding Olympic athletes as role models. The Olympic Questionnaire and procedures for research, developed by the International Council for Sport Sciences and Physical Education (Telama, Naul, Nupponen, Rychtecky & Vuolle; 2002), was administered to a population of 621 (365 male and 256 female) undergraduate students studying in sport, fitness and recreation fields at two South African universities. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse data.

Results were analysed according to four variables, namely the identification of (1) any Olympic athlete; (2) the most admirable male Olympic athlete; (3) the most admirable female Olympic athlete and (4) the Olympic athlete most disliked. Collective results of the first three variables indicated an overwhelming preference for male and female role models from track and field and swimming events. Performance, patriotism, personal qualities and status of Olympic athletes, and interest in them were listed as the most important factors influencing respondent's perceptions. Gamesmanship, substance abuse and athletes' image were identified as reasons for aversion to Olympic athletes.

Role models are athletes of good moral standing who display exceptional athletic achievements and untainted public images. It is concluded that Olympic athletes are indeed perceived as significant role models amongst South African sport students due to a positive value system. Role models have certain responsibilities towards their protégés and fans that must be upheld at all times. As such, Olympic athletes may exert significant influence on all sport stakeholders.

This study focused on the perceptions of aspiring sport managers only. It is recommended that a more comprehensive population should be included in future studies to attain further insight into role modelling practices in the diverse South African sport environment. There is a definite need to explore the status of role modelling in youth sport in particular because of its educational value in the developmental process of childhood. Life orientation as a learning area in the South African education system presents opportunities to facilitate a value system that can enhance the attitudes, knowledge and actions of young athletes based on the examples of Olympic athletes.

References:


ICSSPE International Sport Studies. Schörndorf, Germany: Karl Hofmann.