Understanding the Financial Needs of Canadian High Performance Athletes

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Socio-cultural Abstract 2010-193
June 5, 2010 1:25 PM
Poster (Audubon)

Athlete requirements to train and compete at the international level have become more demanding both in terms of financial resources and time commitment. The need to financially assist athletes with their training and competition costs has been an important topic of debate over the past decades in academic and popular press (cf. Beamish & Borowy, 1987; Gatehouse, 2003; Macintosh, 1996; Munro, 1970; Owens, 2004). Canadian athletes have relied on traditional sources of funding originating from the federal government (i.e., Athlete Assistance Program) the Canadian Olympic Committee (i.e., Athlete Excellence Fund) and from corporate support (e.g., Petro-Canada, Investors’ Group, RONA, RBC Financial). These sources have helped athletes in their quest for success in international sport competitions however, they have not covered all expenses related to training and competitions. As a result, athletes have sought alternative sources of funds. The purpose of this study was to examine the financial needs of athletes who applied to receive funds from a nonprofit organization called Charitable Fund for Athletes.

Using a neoliberalism framework, we examined how Canadian governments shifted to market mechanisms where fiscal restraints and reduced involvement in public affairs has affected sport programs and athlete funding (Albo, 2002; Levy, 2004, Panitch & Swartz, 2003). Panitch and Swartz (2003) define neoliberalism “in terms of free capital flows, and the ascendency of financial capital, and the spread of commodification into every aspect of social life” (p. 183). As a result of the neoliberal trend in Canadian governments, the private sector has stepped in to satisfy the gap. In the context of Canadian sport, the Charitable Fund for Athletes is a nonprofit organization that is helping high performance athletes reach their goals. For the purpose of this study analysis of secondary quantitative financial data provided by 398 Canadian high performance athletes were undertaken as well as the analysis of qualitative statements written by these athletes to explain their need for funds.

The results of these analyses indicated that on average Canadian high performance athletes average yearly expenses ($30,000) were greater than their yearly income ($26,000). As such, most athletes were living with zero net income or are incurring a deficit in order to compete at the international level and represent Canada at major competitions. Most athletes (nearly 80%) were relying heavily on the funding provided through the federal government’s Athlete Assistance Program (AAP). At the time of the study, AAP funding represented an average of approximately $14,000/year for athletes while less than 35% of the athletes reported receiving wages/salary from work sources (part time, seasonal) representing approximately $11,000/year. With respect to expenses, nearly 63% of athletes reported the majority being attributed to housing costs (approximately $7,300/year). Other important expenses included transportation and food, each representing approximately $4,500/year. Qualitative data analysis revealed athletes’ reasons for needing charitable funding. Training and competition expenses were identified by all athletes – in particular, training and sport equipment costs, coaching, and costs to attend competitions. From this research, it is clear that all athletes are training, and pursuing the dream of representing Canada to the best of their abilities, but their capacity to reach their potential appears to be severely limited as a result of their financial status.

References


Owens, A.M. (2004, August 30). Canada told to buck up: IOC head coming to tell governments to spend more on sports. The Vancouver Province, p. A3.