

## **THE EUROPEAN MODEL OF SPORT**

### **Or: how the powerful lobby of organized sport appropriated itself the benefic effects of physical and sport activities for all**

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In a declaration included in the treaty of Amsterdam, the institutions of the European Union are invited to consult sport organizations when important questions regarding sport are concerned.

This is what the European Commission has done by gathering the principal actors of European sport on several occasions, as recently, in June 1999 in Olympia, Greece, for the First sport Sessions of the European Union (EU). The works of these sessions expressed the conviction that European sport, as diversified as it might be, possesses common characteristics that must be protected from the possible derivations of commercial nature. "Sport, and in particular 'sport for all', is, for European society, an excellent instrument of social cohesion, as well as an activity which goes beyond the strictly economical frame. Two principles define European sport: democracy and solidarity. It is the public authorities', as well as the sport organizations' interest to preserve it."

During these Sessions, the representatives of the EU countries' public authorities, as much as those of the national and international sport organizations, especially European, debated on three major themes: 1. the European model of sport, 2. the relations between television and sport and 3. the struggle against doping in sport. The detailed conclusions on these three themes may be consulted on the Commission's internet site (<http://europa.eu.int/commm/dg10/sport>).

Our purpose, within the limited frame of this article, is to briefly revert to the European model of sport and to bring some specifications and comments to it, partly critical.

### **Characteristics of European competition sport**

European sport organization presents a series of characteristics common to all States. Thus, sport is (still?) practiced more within sport clubs, grouped in territorial sport federations, framed by national federations. These are organized under the umbrella of a European federation, directly under the authority of a world federation. It is the famous pyramid of European sport competition. The role played in it by clubs is fundamental. Although, depending on the countries, one may participate, within a same club, to different sport disciplines, always in the form of a competition, with the promotion/relegation system. As a principle, the teams may start at the lowest step of a regional competition and, through mere merit, reach the top and play the European competitions.

In some European countries, it is possible to practice, within the same sport club, beside the competition sport of one's choice, also 'leisure-type' sport activities, in a competitive or non-competitive form adapted to the possibilities, interests and availability of each one, and this without having to submit to the constraints normally inherent to any practice at the level of official competition (obtainment of a license, and, in Luxembourg for instance, passing a mandatory sport-medicine exam for any sportsman/sportswoman holder of a license with a sport federation).

### **What about the specific functions of 'sport'?**

In an internal reflection document on the situation of sport in Europe elaborated as a preparation of the Helsinki summit in December 1999, the Commission mentions, for the first time, the specificity of sport. It declares:

**“Sport fulfills five functions which constitute its specificity:**

**\* an educational function: sport activity is an excellent instrument for balancing the human formation and development at all ages;**

**\* a public health function: physical activity offers the opportunity to improve the health of the citizens and to fight efficiently against certain diseases, such as cardiac lesions or cancer; it may contribute to maintaining a good health and quality of life at an old age;**

**\* a social function: sport represents an appropriate instrument for promoting a more inclusive society, for fighting against intolerance and racism, violence, alcohol abuse or drug use; sport can contribute to the integration of people excluded from the work market;**

**\* a cultural function: sport practice enables the citizen to have stronger roots in a territory, to know it better and to integrate itself better, and, as far as environment is concerned, to protect it better;**

**\* a playful function: sport practice represents an important component of free time and of individual and collective entertainment.”**

Here, the Commission speaks about sport, about physical activity in general, about sport practice, as if sport existed, as if, to obtain certain determined effects by means of a sport practice as, e.g., the improvement of personal health, it would not make a difference to practice a leisure physical activity, e.g. a foot-walk of approximately ten kilometers at a normal or sustained pace, or a competition sport at the highest level, e.g. a 10,000 m run in a European or world competition. But sport as such doesn't exist! From a pedagogical point of view, one can't speak of sport in general. It must be specified which sport, in which form, at what realization level and with which repercussions on the organism of children, youths, or of adults, or even elderly people one deals with. We know indeed that certain physical charges are too weak to have salutary effects on the human organism, whereas other charges are, for a determined person, too strong and may therefore not only not profit, but even strongly ruin health! Therefore, everything is a question of dosage, of measure, of modalities to obtain the expected effects!

### **Negative effects of exhibition-sport**

As to what concerns high-level sport and professional exhibition-sport, recent data of sport sciences show that **it is not the competitive form of sport that best allows to fulfill these five functions making the specificity of sport.**

Thus, high competition sport does not have an own educative value.

As to its 'health' effects, it suffices to cite a recent study of the Center for hazard and risk management of Loughborough University, United Kingdom, to know that in

professional soccer, for instance, the injury rate is one thousand times higher than that of industry.

On the other hand, we know that for adult people and particularly for elderly people, low, long and regular activity has numerous salutary effects, and not the often much too fast movements of most competition sports!

To the negative effects of exhibition sports on the health of sportsmen and sportswomen, one must add the use of national teams' victories for ideological propaganda purposes or hooligan violence in stadiums and around stadiums in Europe, but unknown for example in the United States.

In this context, one must ask oneself why Public Authorities support, or even privilege this form of sport to the detriment of other forms of physical and sportive practices, less eye-catching, but much healthier and more attractive for each and everyone?

The Commission, speaking in a very general manner of sport within the frame of the European sport model, that is of sport organized in clubs and sport federations, as of a true universal remedy for the growing requirements of a more and more differentiated society, eased the job of the very powerful European organized sport lobby. Indeed, the latter simply appropriated itself these much too general affirmations concerning the potential educative, social, health, cultural functions of sport and now proclaims the high intrinsic values of ITS sport. Now, the least one could say is that, if sport federations really want to go on monopolizing 'their' sports, then they must diversify them and not limit their offers to competition sport, strictly organized, regulated and codified, susceptible of interesting, at the best, a minority of highly gifted and motivated youths and 20 to 30 year-old adults. In order to concern and attract the majority of the youth and particularly adults of all ages, federations must offer 'their' sports also on a much more elementary, more playful, less structured level, therefore better adapted to the great mass of virtual practitioners. This is what national European gymnastic federations do, which also, and above all, in their clubs, offer freer, less or not regulated sport activities, in forms adapted to different needs, to different possibilities and availability, to different ages, from the small child to the 4<sup>th</sup> age.

**For an open approach of sport**

In order for the five functions constituting the specificity of sport to play fully, the comprehension cannot limit itself to the mere notions of performance and success, as is the case in competition sport. To the contrary, we need a very open approach of sport. Only such an open approach allows to realize the multitude of the values and objectives of sport and is susceptible of satisfying the often very different motivations inherent to the multiple as varied as diversified sport practices. Only such an open comprehension of sport can realize the “sport for all” cliché and is in a position to ensure the integration, in the sport structures, of marginal groups, as the handicapped, elderly people, or even of the average adult not or not very gifted for competition sport demanding high motional and physical qualities and a constant engagement.

In this context, one should have knowledge of the exact data on the percentage, in relationship with the total population, of men and especially of women older than thirty years practicing a competition sport within an authorized sport organization, as well as the evolution of the number of **adult** licensed sportsmen and sportswomen of sport federations during the last 2-3 years? As far as the motivations for ‘making sport’ are concerned, serious studies performed in several European countries teach us that with children and adolescents and particularly adolescent females, only a minority of barely 10% is interested in sport practice in the form of a competition organized in the clubs and federations. A large majority, as well of the youth as also of the adults of all ages is more attracted by non-competitive, alternative, simple forms of attractive physical and sport activities, to be practiced in a convivial atmosphere, deprived of the stress inherent to competition.

### **Competition sport and social integration**

Integration in and through sport is very closely linked to the problems related to competition in sport. Here, we must seriously ask ourselves if competition, hierarchy, domination of the others, knocking down the adversary, victory at any price are the only possible ideals?

With the French sport sociologist and professor at the Sorbonne Pierre Parlebas, President of the Scientific Section of the FIEP, we must recognize that “(competition) sport does not represent, in an obvious manner, the ideal of physical activity. It is only a sub-group, among others, of the group of possible motional practices; free activities, body expression, traditional games, quasi-games, leisure treks... One would have to be blind not

to have noticed that during these last thirty years, young practitioners rebelled against sport conformity by refusing, for instance, to sign a license. A great number of them have turned their back to federations to search for playful motional activities which allowed them to live their physical passion with a feeling of freedom”.

If it is true that we live in the most cooperative, most interdependent society that the world has ever known, must we really continue, in sports, to favor an exclusively competitive attitude, must we teach the youth to rival, to compete in order to succeed, so as to enjoy (sport) education, thus also supposing that a non-negligible number of youths inevitably fail? Can we continue to justify this central component of sport, saying that we live in a competitive society, that competition is a powerful motivational force, that competition represents a useful, or even indispensable stratagem to control and improve the quality of a performance, of a work? Especially because with an increased, exaggerated, excessive competition, as is obviously the case in high-level and exhibition sport, arises the temptation of taking shortcuts to knock down the adversary. Indeed, we know that in high-level sport, certain shortcuts, as doping, are decidedly completely unacceptable, to such point, as a matter of fact, that the Commission and the European Council had to express their preoccupation in front of the amplitude of this phenomenon and invite the member States “to examine the measures that could be taken to fight against the doping plague in the sport environment”.

Therefore, if the Commission and also the European Union Council really want to search for tracks “allowing to conciliate the economical dimension of sport with its popular, educative, social and cultural dimension” and integrate more European citizens, first of all children and youths, but also men and women of all ages, the handicapped, elderly people, in adapted sport practices, then they must first invite the established sport organizations to open, to widen and to differentiate their sport offers, as is already partly the case in the Nordic and German-speaking countries, as well as in the Netherlands. On the other hand, they must encourage local authorities, in the first place the communes, to persevere in their efforts to create, within the established structures or in parallel, more sport offers for the great majority of people who are not concerned by sport regulated, codified and structured to the extreme, such as it is organized precisely in and by sport federations.