

Childrens` Perceptions of Olympic Champions: „good example“ as a personal role model?

Introduction

As a third part of an European study on physical fitness and active lifestyles of 12- and 15-year-old boys and girls in six different countries, their knowledge about the Olympic movement, attitudes to Olympic Ideals, teaching experiences in Olympic Education, assessment of Olympic Champions and their personal aspirations to become an Olympic athlete were investigated (cf. Telama et.al. 2002). In this short paper, results of childrens` perceptions of self-identified Olympic Champions and their respective personal aspiration to become an Olympic athlete are reported.

Methods and Sample

An “Olympic Ideal Questionnaire” was developed (cf. Telama et.al. 2002, appendix C), which includes quantitative and qualitative items of measurement, e.g. open-ended questions for self-reporting, given multiple-choice items and items to complete on personal views and comments, giving individual answers to certain “why”- and “what-questions”.

For the assessment of Olympic Champions the questions were:

1. “Which male/female Olympic Champion do you admire?”
2. ” Which male/female Olympic Champion do you dislike?
The students listed Champions they knew. After Champions had been listed the next question was:
3. “ What are the reasons for you to like/ dislike the Olympic Champions listed?”
For their personal aspiration to become an Olympic Champion the questions were:
4. “ Would you like to become an Olympic Champion?” (Yes/No) and
5. “What are your reasons to become / not become an Olympic Champion?”

The sample included 4,442 boys and girls aged 12 and 15 years representing six European countries (Belgium, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany and Hungary). The 12-year-old Estonian children did not participate in this part of the study.

Table 1: Sample

	<i>BEL</i>	<i>CZE</i>	<i>EST</i>	<i>FIN</i>	<i>GER</i>	<i>HUN</i>	<i>Total</i>
12-year-old girls	185	95	---	307	259	116	962
15-year-old girls	261	120	328	290	214	111	1.324
12-year-old boys	186	111	---	254	251	99	901
15-year-old boys	240	113	312	257	221	112	1.255
Total	872	439	640	1.108	945	438	4.442

Results

1. Perceptions of Olympic Champions

The responses to the questions varied between the countries (e.g. 50% of the sample in CZE and only 20% of the sample in FIN which in both cases are approximately 220 students each). In each country, except Belgium, well known national Olympic Champions were listed along with biographical references e.g. Zatopek in the Czech Republic or Nurmi and Viren in Finland. Belgian children admired only international heroes e.g. Carl Lewis and Linford

Christie, who were also listed in other countries. With the exception of Belgium, it seems that national Olympic Champions were admired more frequently than other international champions and national Olympic Champions represented a variety of sports (track and field, swimming, skiing, figure skating) whereas admired Olympic Champions from other countries represent in particular “track and field”, which suggests a higher ranking or popular assessment of track and field as an Olympic discipline.

There was also a list of Olympic Champions who were disliked by the students but the response was smaller than for admiration. In some countries (FIN / GER) also national Champions were listed more frequently than other international Champions (e.g. Nykänen, Nieminen or Krabbe, Becker, v. Almsick). In all countries except Germany, some international Olympic Champions were listed that students did not like: Ben Johnson, Bonaly, Harding and Bubka amongst others. Interestingly, some Olympic Champions were listed by some students who admired the athlete and by others who disliked them. The reasons why the Champions were selected individually are important. Reasons for selecting admired Olympic Champions and disliked certain Olympic Champions are given in figures 1 and 2:

Fig. 1: Reasons for selecting male Olympic Champions (valid percentages)

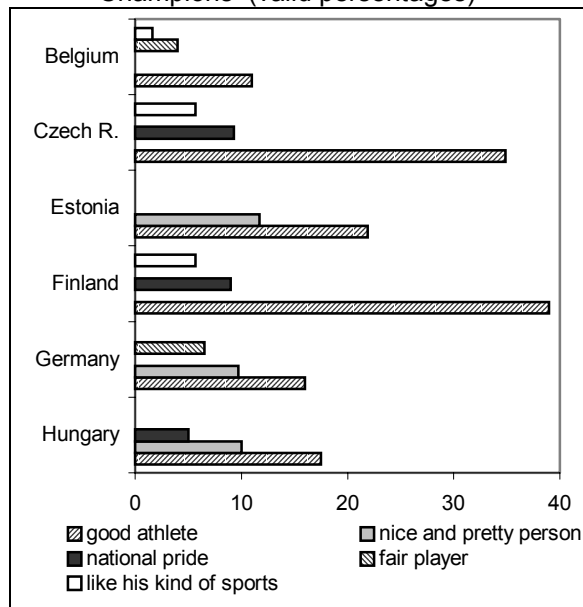
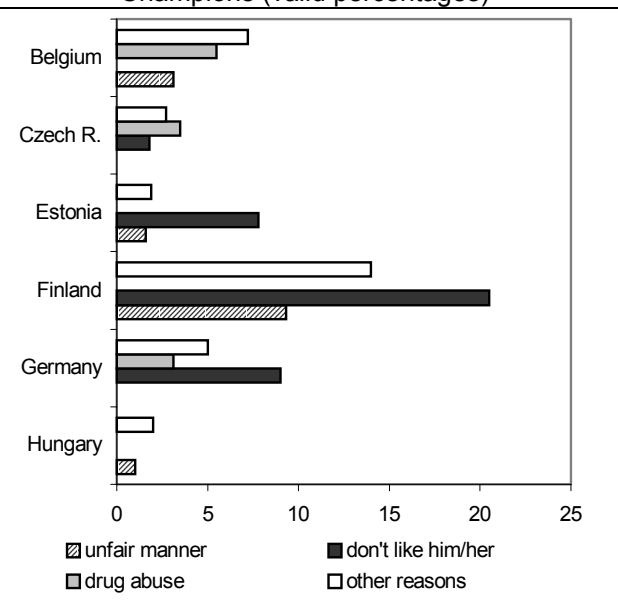


Fig. 2: Reasons for disliking certain Olympic Champions (valid percentages)



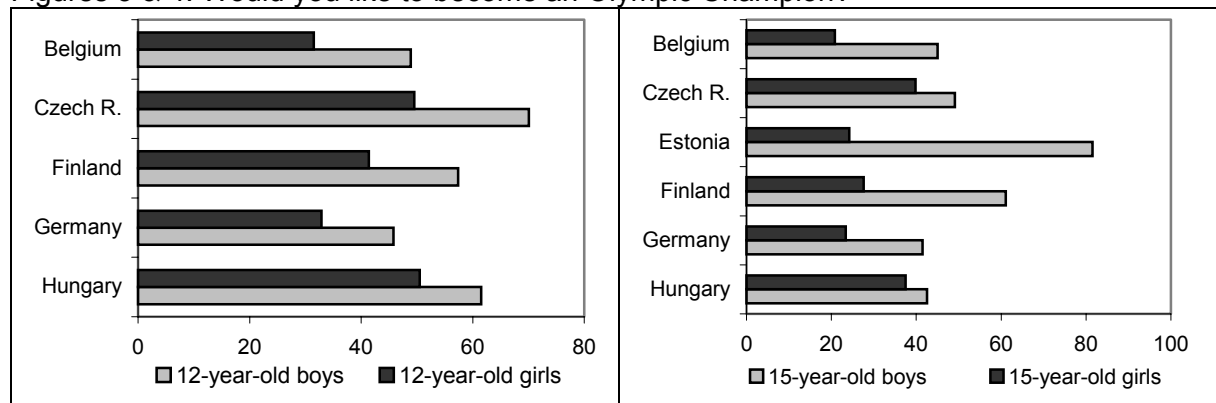
The most important reason why children in each country admired their selected Olympic Champion was performance as a “good athlete”. The second most important reason for Estonian, German, and Hungarian boys and girls is their very personal assessment of the Champion as a “nice and pretty person”. But in the Czech Republic and in Finland “national pride” of the athlete is listed as the second most important reason, an item, which was not mentioned once by any German student! If we look to any Olympic Ideal, fair play is the one mentioned, but only at a minor level as the third important item by Belgium and German children and youth. Czech and Finnish students mentioned the athlete’s type of sport as their third most important criteria why they admired their selected Olympic Champions.

Personal assessments like “nice and pretty person” were the second important criteria in expression of admiration of an Olympic Champion. Dislike of a male or female Olympic Champion was very often linked with the athlete’s appearance and social behaviour in public life, in the media etc., which represents “not a good example” in the Olympic spirit. For Estonian, Finnish and German boys and girls, that was their most important reason in disliking an Olympic Champion. “Drug abuse”, which also includes “cheating” as an issue, was the most important reason for disliking Olympic Champions amongst the Belgian and

Hungarian participants in this study. But “drug abuse” was also mentioned as the second most important reason for disliking Olympic Champions by Czech, Finnish and German students. 2. Aspirations to become an Olympic Champion

The majority of the boys and girls in this study had no aspiration to become an Olympic Champion. However, some gender, age and cultural related differences were found.

Figures 3 & 4: Would you like to become an Olympic Champion?



Only the majority of boys aged 12 from CZE, FIN, and HUN and boys aged 15 from Estonia and Finland agree. There is a clear tendency that boys agree more frequently on aspiration than girls do, sometimes significantly more in one age group.

A significant cross-cultural difference ($p < 0.001$) exists between countries of the West (BEL, GER) and countries of the East (CZE, HUN) for the personal aspiration to become an Olympic Champion (boys and girls aged 12, boys aged 15).

Reasons for wanting to become an Olympic Champion are: first of all the self-assessment to have the physical potential/capacity and the willingness to compete; secondly “joy and fun”; and thirdly the pursuit of “glory and fame” of an Olympic athlete’s career. There were less differences in ranking of these reasons between the countries.

Some more cross-cultural differences were found for the sets of reasons why most of the boys and girls do not aspire to become an Olympic Champion. “Fear of consequences of fame” e.g. no time or opportunities for other leisure activities, meeting friends etc. was ranked first by Belgium, Finnish, and particular German (up to 60%) boys and girls whereas “too much effort” because of training and competition was the first reason for not aspiring to become an Olympic Champion for the Czech boys and girls.

Conclusions

Olympic Champions are admired more by younger boys (12-years-old) who also have a stronger personal aspiration to become an Olympic Champion than older boys and girls in general. In this study, the majority of all girls in each country did not aspire to become an Olympic Champion. The reasons why Olympic Champions are admired by young people are mixed. Very personal reasons (like personal appearance, kind of sports etc.) are almost as important as performance level. Olympic Ideals (e.g. “he /she is a fair player”) are really of minor importance for admiration. The aspiration for students who want to become an Olympic Champion is partly embedded in Olympic Ideals (joy in effort, competition), but also partly linked with the personal outcome of an Olympic athlete’s career: financial benefits, glory and fame. Finally, the role model of an Olympic Champion as a “good example” according the fundamental principles of the International Olympic Charter seems to be a

minor reason in admiration of Olympic Champions but it is secondary to other reasons if an individual student wants to become an Olympic Champion.

References

Telama, R., Naul, R., Nupponen, H., Rychtecky, A. & Vuolle, P. (2002): Physical Fitness, Sporting Lifestyles, and Olympic Ideals: Studies on Youth Sport in Europe. Schorndorf: Hofmann.