

Developing the Albanian NOC strategic plan to enhance young athletes' participation for the Youth Olympic Games

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Abstract

This study is an attempt for the NOC of Albania to adapt and adjust its actions and policies in compliance with new trends in the Olympic Movement. Youth Olympic Games is a new world event in the Olympic Movement and for that reason the NOC of Albania should review the strategies and priorities, bearing in mind changes, challenges, and/or opportunities which might be taken into consideration. This is a new approach to establish a new culture for the young generation related to sport, by fostering and activating the proper resources, creating new ways to support involvement of the youth through a synergy of sport institutions and sport organizations. This study is an endeavor to identify the pathway of how the Albanian NOC should work on displaying a better perspective to support young talented athletes as crucial source to build a sporting career. Through this study, the NOC of Albania brings into focus the importance of closer attention for young athletes using the Olympic events as high peak targets to seek for, and also to explore what can be enhanced in our sporting system in order to have well trained and healthy athletes. In this study the main objective was to identify through methodological approach (questionnaires, interviews focus group etc.) which are the problems for better results of young athletes in international competitions, therefore this would allow the NOC of Albania to have a better perspective of representation in Olympic events in quality and quantity. The aim of this study is to contribute to the development for a long term strategy, which touches the importance of YOG, the awareness of it and the education of the Albanian young generation to bring the YOG spirit to youth and promoting the Olympic Values.

Keywords: NOC, strategic plan, youth Olympic

Introduction

Nowadays there is a worldwide urge for motivation of young generation to have an active life. The society is challenged everyday with threats which derive from lifestyle, technology, value issues, environment, society, etc. The IOC President Rogge stated: "Today we observe a widespread decline in physical activity and an increase in obesity among youth" (IOC 2007a). Thus, it is widely accepted concern that the importance of raising the awareness about engaging young people through promotion of values, education and sport activities it is strongly supported by the Olympic Movement. The new trends and the continuous development of the Olympic Movement have presented a need for a more professional approach toward the policies related to youth involvement in sport activities, and to be adopted and implemented also by the National

Olympic Committees as well. Now, Youth Olympic Games is a concrete event, and probably this is the best initiative of the IOC to keep the Olympic spirit alive by taking into consideration the sustainable development of the athletes, starting the preparation for the Olympiad since they are young. Moreover, YOG is not just a competition in nature, it includes culture and education programs for young athletes, coaches and their surroundings teaching Olympic values and helping them for the challenges in terms of social issues. In addition to this G. Felli states: "Whether they go on to become sporting champions or end up mapping out careers in other fields, we want the YOG participants to go back and be ambassadors in their communities, embodying and promoting the Olympic spirit and values" –(IOC 2009).

In the 1990 the European Olympic Committees launched the "European Youth Olympic Days" (EYOD), now called "European Youth Olympic Festival" (EYOF), which was the only multi-sport event in Europe. This event is based on summer and winter edition, and it is held every other year. EYOF is a biennial sporting event for talented young participants from all over Europe. The EYOF was founded on the basis of the Olympic legacy, a philosophy that elevates the qualities of the body, determination and spirit, and combines them to culture and education, leading to the Olympic Values.

Albania has been participating regularly in the EYOF summer and winter. This has been based on the spirit of participation without having a strategic objective of seeking results. It was mostly to motivate young athletes to continue, gaining the hope that tomorrow they could be next Olympians. The NOC was fully committed to select the best athletes suggested from the NFs, but in a specific point of view, sometimes it was conditioned to select the best ones because of age group limitation and the sports participating at EYOF do not fit with the sports that are more developed in Albania based on sport results and popularity. Indeed, Albanian participants yet have not received any medal in EYOF meetings. The Albanian National Olympic Committee has been operating in an atmosphere of dynamic change in the attitude toward the adoptions with the new reality of the International Olympic Movement and its structure, as well as facing with the restrictions and challenges that the reality in Albania indicates. (Gjoka, 2006). The sport has a crucial role because of its holistic learning approach in the optimal growth, learning and development of young people from infancy through to adolescence (Brettschneider, Die DSB-Sprint-Studie, 2005). YOG adds challenges concerning the performance of young athletes. The reasons can be various, such as regarding the selection of sports, team or individual, traditional or new, but the question relies also on terms of high performance that elite sport requires. (Allender, et al, 2006) state that, there are two factors motivating young people to take part in sport and they are to discover unusual activities. Some authors have seen the YOG as a motivational tool for the young people and some others have objected to it. Following there is a list with the advantages and disadvantages concerning the YOG. (Stevens, 2011)

"A new and real emphasis needs to be placed on grassroots' sports development and mass participation in sport. This should be done by everyone, In-

ternational Sports Federations, National Associations, governments and especially schools.

Where better to lay the foundation for a better world than in schools? Where better to create awareness? Indeed the purest form of development through sport is found in schools. Just as sport is a pure form of education when taught and practiced properly, learning about life through sport takes time. It will be necessary to emphasize the elements of fun, fair play, team success and communication. Sport for school children is vital". (Craven, 2009). The Youth Olympic Games, initiated by the IOC, are seen as a tremendous new platform to inspire today's youth. The sport competition, in conjunction with an educational and cultural program, offers new opportunities to attract young people. (Doll-Tepper, 2009)

Methods

The aim of this study was to enhance the work of the NOC of Albania related to young athletes and place it to the priority of the NOC and its strategic stakeholders. Yet Albania has not taken any Olympic medal in the Olympics. Earning a medal in the Olympic Games is a big challenge for us; so the YOG is an opportunity to make our dream come true. It has been shown that our young athletes have good results at international competitions, but the problem is that we had only a few athletes who participated in the YOGs held in Singapore 2010, and this opportunity was not used as needed to be.

Nevertheless, there is still an opportunity for Albania to build a new sport culture based on values which are promoted through the YOG. The problem is that national federations generally have short term vision and plans and are not able to offer a sustained development for young athletes which would guarantee the athletes the possibility to qualify for the YOG. Increasing opportunities of potential athletes qualifying for the YOG, it is needed an effective coordination of resources and closer collaboration between sport institutions and strategic partners.

This study addresses some questions attempting to figure out the concerns, issues, and finding ways for a better approach related to young athletes and YOG.

The questions to be addressed:

1. What can be done to gain the awareness about the YOG at NFs levels and key stakeholders?
2. How to identify the needs, resources and risks, to perform at the best and to better manage the preparation of the Albanian Youth Olympic Team?

3. How to generate more resources from our stakeholders in order to achieve our goals?
 - a. What kind of resources the stakeholders would provide?

The selection of the NFs that were part of the main focus group, it was on the bases of the level of representation and results at the international competitions, and also in accordance with the OG sports program.

The interviews were conducted in person, individually; was chosen a quiet environment in order to avoid distraction, and making the interviews focused on the subject. This type of exploratory research, which uses a personal opinion from people, in our case those selected people are deeply involved in sporting system, and can give also a significant contribution considering their experience. In addition, the interviews were developed to help to investigate the research questions and were divided into sections.

Results

Research question: How do individual NSF's perceive the YOG?

Purpose of data collection:

- Feedback on the perception which exists among NFs related to YOG
- Assessment for the vision on young athletes and Program interest

The result of the research showed in general that the NFs see the YOG as very interesting and very motivating event for young athletes. For those federations that participated at Singapore 2010, the impact among their sport community was positive. Some NFs consider the YOG a drive for their NF, because the majority of their athletes belong to that age and others consider YOG an incentive to grow the focus on young athletes. All participants (NFs, Coaches and Athletes) consider the YOG a motivational tool to continue the sporting career and putting real objectives to achieve the qualification.

Communication issues:

Evaluating the delivery of the information related to YOG Singapore 2010 from NFs to sport clubs, there was a question on how each NF had informed its members about YOG 2010 and its qualification system.

According to NFs responses different approaches were used to inform their members like:

- Information letter by post
- Email information
- During national competitions
- General assembly
- Through mobile/phone, too.

The results from NFs regarding the communication and the information given from IFs related to the qualification system for Singapore 2010. (Fig. 1)

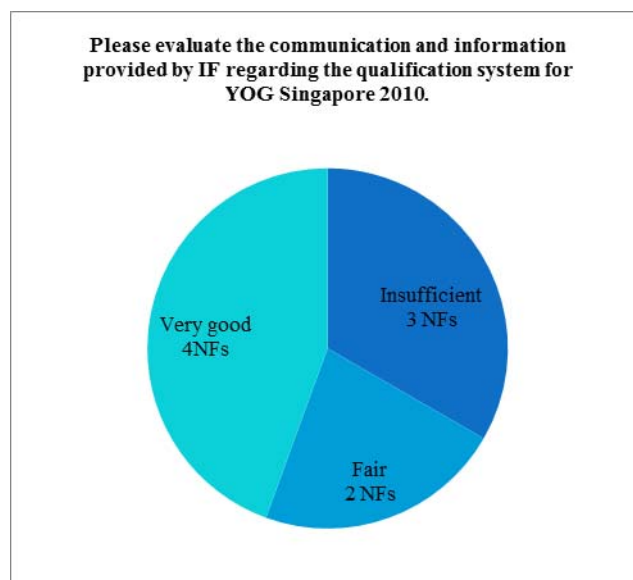


Figure 1. NFs results regarding the communication and the information given from IFs.

Another result derived from NFs indicating if they had created any specific preparation program for young athletes related to YOG Singapore 2010, and 7 out of 9 NFs responded (NO), while 2 responded (YES). (Fig. 2)

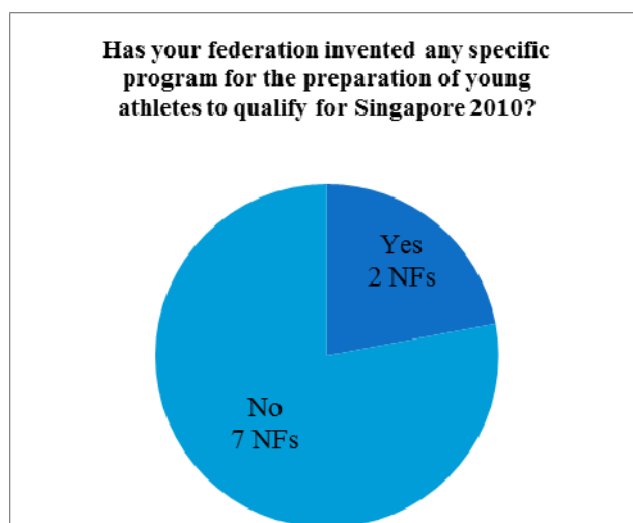


Figure 2. NFs results about the invented programs for YOG 2010.

However, from all the results, either from questionnaires, interviews, or focus group analysis, all agreed that more promotion is needed to be done in order to gain the awareness for the YOG.

Is participation in 2014 YOG an objective for NFs, coaches and athletes?

A similar question was addressed to NFs, athletes and coaches in order to understand their vision and intention for the participation to the next YOG. (Fig. 3 – NFs; Fig.4 – Coaches, Fig. 5 – Athletes)

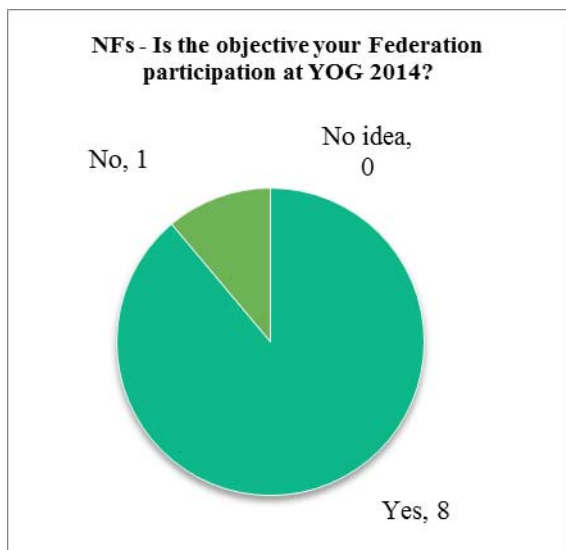


Figure 3 – NFs answers

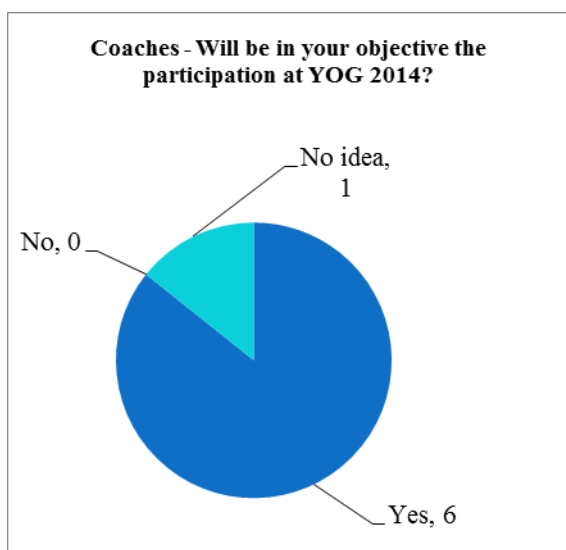


Figure 4 – Coaches' answers

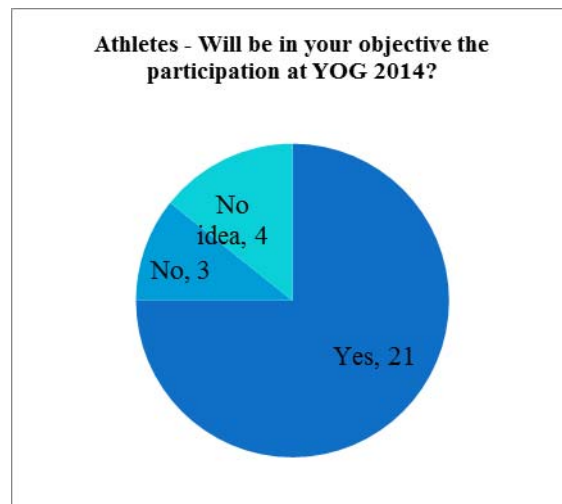


Figure 5 – Athletes' answers

Discussion

Taking into account that main stakeholders for a NOC that are responsible for developing an Olympic Sport Organization such as NFs, they are responsible as well for the preparation and qualification of the athletes for the Olympic Games or Youth Olympic Games. As such we sent out a questionnaire to 9 individual sports federations that take part in the Olympic sport program which have the potential to qualify athletes for the YOG. The NFs were selected under the criteria of sport tradition, results, and the potential for qualification.

The tradition is referred to the history of participation of the NOC of Albania at the Olympic Games, while for the results was taken into consideration the sports that have had good results in international competitions in these last two decades and the potential for qualification is referred to the probability which new sports have like judo, taekwondo, etc. As mentioned earlier all NFs have full financial dependence from the government. Even though there is a policy that 5% of the budget granted by the Ministry responsible of Sport to NFs should go for young athletes, in reality the grant allocated by Ministry is not specified how much money should go for elite and how much for the young athletes, so there are no tools how to measure it. By this we wanted to figure out the importance in the annual budget for the young athletes and which of the events do NFs consider more important, in other words how they spend their money? There is a ranking related to events to see which of the event is considered more important from NFs for both categories senior and juniors. A consideration was taken also from athletes and coaches.

For sure, the most important event for all NFs was considered the Olympic Games and World championships, following with continental, regional and open tournaments. Tactically some NFs do avoid taking part in such events because of the high level of competition existing there. So, they usually neglect to be represented in such events. Regarding the participation of young athletes the situation is worst in terms of the participation, justifying non participation with the expenses the NFs have to cover.

Following the causes related to young athletes, different NFs had various approaches in terms of the annual budget dedicated to young athletes. Other important statistics were asked to the NFs about the number of the athletes divided by age categories and genders belonging to NFs. What was interesting is that, NFs do not have real statistics for the athletes participating in their sport, and this brings a big confusion for their sport development. Consequently, there is not a good evaluation for the potential athletes that each NF could have to achieve the qualification for YOG, and also it does not allow the future for their development. It is obvious that the participation of young girl athletes is too low comparing to boys, but it is slightly comparable in sports like swimming, athletics and martial arts like judo and taekwondo. While in weightlifting, wrestling, shooting, boxing and cycling there are none young girl athletes.

However, for the questions why NOC Albania had only 4 athletes in Singapore 2010 and could we have participated with more athletes, a very interesting feedback was from these questions which could include all we discussed above. Some of the answers from NFs were:

It was the first time; new experience and next YOGs more attention will be on it; a barrier was the age limit and NFs were not prepared for that; lack of funds; not participating in international competition; lack of experience; not real evaluation; lack of institutional collaboration; no funds for preparation and in some cases lack of quality young athletes.

In conclusion the Albanian NOC experience in 2002-2005 related to the development TID program was the start to see the future of Olympic athletes. Although this project was short, sought to identify some athletes that later became part of the Olympic team. However, the time of these young athletes to join the Olympic team is a long path, also taking into accounts the economical challenges and risks of injuries. Therefore, YOG is a good motivation for all young athletes and broaden the opportunities to touch and feel the inspiration of Olympics. The implementation of these programs brings to

attention the importance to give priority to young athletes. This is linked with the support of federations by qualifying and training their coaches in order to create the required capacities to insure that next generation of young athletes will have a better training quality. Youth Olympic Games, now is the temple of the best athletes from around the world who compete with each other. However, what is essential and important apart from the competition aspect in the Youth Olympic Games, is the aspect of educating young athletes. So, for this reason the IOC has created Culture and Education Program. Participating in the YOG, athletes not only compete among each other, but they learn and educate through cultural activities, breaking cultural barriers, racial, religious, economic, by sharing with each other Olympic values of respect, friendship and success. The Albanian National Olympic Committee believes that with a little more attention from all stakeholders, the YOG should be considered as a golden opportunity for Albanian athletes that we all can benefit from. For this to happen it requires a synergy of all sports institutions and this is possible!

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