

**Marta Bon****A SPORTS CAREER AND EDUCATION:  
CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS IN  
SPECIALISED HANDBALL CLASSES****ŠPORTNA KARIERA IN IZOBRAŽEVANJE:  
ZNAČILNOSTI DIJAKOV, VKLJUČENIH V  
SPECIALIZIRANE ROKOMETNE ODDELKE****ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the study was to examine the characteristics of the sports careers of young handball players in relation to their education. The social structure and sports aspirations of participants after high school was examined. A pilot study was carried out on a sample of 56 participants attending handball classes at the Šiška Gymnasium high school in Ljubljana. Data were acquired with the use of a questionnaire; the differences among the groups were analysed with variance analysis and an  $\chi^2$  test. The results of the research revealed that the participants included in the handball classes mostly come from areas and schools with a strong handball tradition. In line with that tradition, they have become enthusiastic about the game of handball. More than half the participants already play in a senior category although, according to their biological age, they belong to the youth category. At the beginning of their high school education, almost half the participants aspire to play professional handball at the end of high school, whereas in higher years they increasingly prefer socialising and entertainment. In the fourth and final year of their high school education, almost half of the participants intend to end their career when they finish high school.

While the study is limited to one school and a single sport discipline, the conclusions could provide a model for further researches.

*Key words:* handball, specialised classes, sports career, education

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**IZVLEČEK**

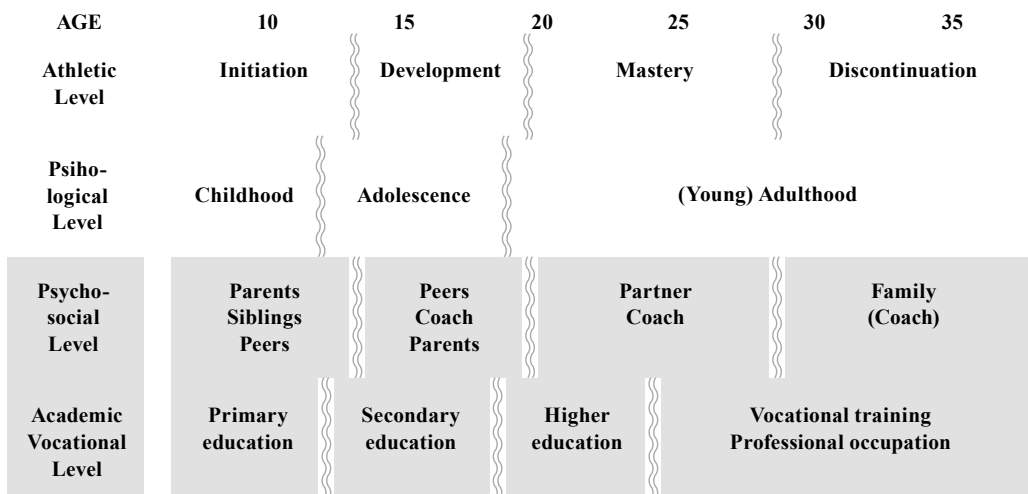
Z raziskavo smo želeli ugotoviti značilnosti športne kariere mladih rokometnešev v povezavi z njihovim izobraževanjem. Ugotavljali smo socialno strukturo dijakov vseh štirih letnikov gimnazije in njihove športne ambicije po končanem šolanju. Raziskava je bila izvedena na vzorcu 56 dijakov rokometnih oddelkov Gimnazije Ljubljana Šiška, kjer poteka edini specializirani rokometni oddelek v Sloveniji. Podatke smo pridobili s pomočjo anketnega vprašalnika. Razlike med skupinami smo z analizo variance in hi – kvadrat testom. Rezultati raziskave kažejo, da dijaki rokometnega oddelka večino izhajajo iz krajev in šol z močno rokometno tradicijo. Skladno s tradicijo okolja so se večinoma sami navdušili za igranje rokometne. Več kot polovica dijakov prvega letnika že igra rokomet v članski konkurenci, čeprav po starosti sodijo v kategorijo kadetov. Na začetku šolanja si skoraj polovica dijakov želi po končanem šolanju profesionalno ukvarjati z rokometom, v višjih letnikih nato postopno dajejo prednost druženju in zabavi. Veliko dijakov želi po zaključku srednješolskega izobraževanja zaključiti z rokometno kariero. Študija je omejena na eno šolo in na eno športno panogo; zaključki so lahko model za sledeče, še obsežnejše študije.

*Glavne besede:* rokomet, specializirani oddelki, športna kariera, vzgoja

## INTRODUCTION

### Sports career

A sports career can be viewed from two aspects; namely, in terms of sports results and the influence of a sports career on an individual's development and life. A sports career is defined as a long-term sports activity of an individual directed at achievements of the highest level, improving one's highest level and enhancing one's sports abilities (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). Using research data on the career development of participant-athletes, student-athletes, professional and elite athletes, along with former Olympians, Wylleman and Lavallee (2003) presented a developmental model which includes the normative transitions athletes face at athletic, individual, psychosocial and academic/vocational levels (see Picture 1).



Picture 1: A developmental model of transitions faced by athletes at athletic, individual, psychosocial and academic/vocational levels (Wylleman and Lavallee, 2003).

The transition from elementary to secondary education particular to this career stage is when talented (junior) athletes enter an elite sport club or elite sport school. At the end of the development stage, 16- to 18-year-old talented athletes encounter the transition from junior level/league to senior level or (semi-) professional sports and thus into higher level (national or international) competitions. While having been at the top end as a junior elite athlete, first-year senior athletes will generally be at the lower end in terms of their athletic prowess and/or achievements. In fact, one out of two novice seniors will find this transition difficult (e.g., financial problems, illnesses, injuries, self-doubts) and will possibly experience a career-high injury rate). Many first-year seniors may also move away from home (e.g. to a professional football academy, own private accommodation). Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavallee (2004) also explain that it is no surprise that, on average, only one out of three junior elite athletes actually makes a successful transition to the senior elite ranks. It takes novice senior athletes an average of 2.1 years to successfully complete the junior–senior transition, which involves not only having a coach to provide supportive and transition-related assistance to first- and second-year seniors, but also a supportive family and financial support (Wylleman et al., 2004).

According to Cecić Erpič (2002), a sports career consists of six levels, with each defining a set of specific requirements an athlete must satisfy, with transitional periods between the separate levels of a sports career. Other research findings have shown that athletes encounter different stages and transitions throughout their athletic career, and hence a more “holistic” approach to the study of transitions faced by athletes has been advocated (Wylleman et al., 2004). While this approach should take a “beginning-to-end” or lifespan perspective covering one’s athletic and post-athletic career, it has also been deemed important that the transitions athletes face in other domains of development should be included. The rationale for this is based on research findings showing the strong concurrent, interactive and reciprocal nature of the transitions occurring in an athletic career (athletic transitions) and those transitions occurring in other domains of athletes’ lives (e.g. academic, psychosocial, professional) (Wylleman et al., 1999).

The possibilities of young people staying in sport increase when a sport is more accessible and suited to children with a relationship to the education system. Sports classes in schools can be an important step for making sport more accessible.

### Sports classes

In 1996 the status of sport talented athletes in elementary and secondary schools was identified for the first time, becoming adopted in 1998. Today’s school system offers students/athletes a few adjustments to *who* are learning (the organisation of sports departments, scholarships and a number of system solutions in the legislative field (Kovač & Jurak, 2010)).

The systematic identification of sport talents and securing the conditions for their development is one of the basic foundations for successful work in a high level and elite sport. Experimenting with and introducing school sports classes have been known around the world for more than three decades. The most typical is the so-called American model where the training and education process are equal and integrated in both pedagogic and quantity terms, and the Eastern European model which has been built on the total isolation of sport talents (Cankar & Kovač, 1995; Pitts, 1992; Güllich, 2004).

These days some other countries provide their own interesting models (e.g. in Austria, Norway, Hungary, Germany). Sport classes with special models are also known in Finland, Israel, Poland and Sweden (Güllich, 2004). According to Wylleman and Leval (2004), in Flanders talented young athletes in 13 different sports can be selected for one of six “topsportschools.” A topsportschool is a secondary school providing extensive flexibilities in education (e.g., fewer contact hours, the possibility of frequent and long periods of absence, self-study materials, tutoring), daily (multi-) training sessions organised by the sports federation’s elite-level (youth) coaches, and a boarding school).

Taking into account the possible significance of the transition from talent to the selected athletes, a focus group method was used (Wylleman, Kahan, & Reints, 2007) to investigate the perceptions of 16 tennis players and 35 swimmers of the changes occurring (at athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic levels) when entering the topsportschool, and of their ability to cope with these changes. The results showed in the first instance that both groups perceived similar changes when making the transition, including in their living environments, friendship relationships, and after-school activities. Yet, in the second instance, specific inter-group differences were also found: while the tennis players perceived most changes at the athletic level (e.g., more training sessions, higher intensity training), the swimmers generally perceived them at the academic level

(e.g., receiving assistance from a tutor during as well as after school hours). Further, the way in which these talented athletes were able to cope with these changes also differed: the tennis players perceived changes in contacts with friends, the choice of tournaments, and an increase in the number of matches played as having been more easy to cope with than the changes that had occurred in the way they now combine tennis and school, the reduction of after-school activities, changes in their living environments (i.e. boarding school), and the change of coach(es); the swimmers perceived the changes in coaching and in the way they now combine swimming and school to have been more easy to cope with than those changes in their after-school activities, in their home environment, with their friends, and in the concentration required during practice sessions (Wylleman et al., 2007).

Sports classes in Slovenia emphasise the flexible harmonisation of school commitments and a systematic training process and achievements. These sports classes are available to promising young athletes who train and compete on a regular basis, are included in junior sports programmes and for their age are achieving extremely good sports results. The selection of participants is based on deliberate monitoring and testing of candidates (requirements for entering gymnasium programmes, sports results, the evaluation of talent on the basis of a sports-educational chart, coaches' assessment of the potential, the interest of the child, parents and the club, their health status etc. (Cankar & Kovač, 1995).

A project of handball sports classes at a particular gymnasium high school started for the basic purpose of creating conditions for combined development in both handball and education fields. Another of the goals, although not a primary one, was to offer a path into elite handball. The sport requires people with positive experiences of participation in handball, adults who can at the end of their education creatively participate in running the sport at various levels (as coaches, organisers, doctors, journalists etc.) (Bon, 2005).

Even though there are many elite players in Slovenia, it is undisputable that foreign players hold the leading positions in the most successful Slovenian clubs. Therefore, the initiation of handball sports classes was a step toward the development of players for the purpose of local elite players successfully combining their education and sport.

### **Handball sports classes at the Šiška Gymnasium in Ljubljana**

Handball sports classes started in 2002 at the Šiška Gymnasium in Ljubljana with the support of the Slovenian Handball Association. The Slovenian Handball Association's main purpose in the project was to actively participate in a complex sports and education process of talented handball players and at the same time to strengthen handball activity in Slovenian high schools. The Slovenian Handball Association primarily wished to help provide the participants with the possibility of well-organised and expertly managed activity.

The training of participants is divided into morning and afternoon sessions. In total four morning sessions are held during the time of school lessons, consisting of two handball trainings, a track and field session and a session of acrobatics or ball games in the first and second years of high school. In the third year of education the participants still have four trainings in the morning. Two of them are handball trainings, on one occasion they work on their strength in the track and field hall and on another occasion they have training in a sports hall intended for the development of co-ordination, balance and explosive strength. When necessary or agreed with club coaches, participants can also train in the school fitness room. In the afternoons they train

at their clubs, whereas for those participants who are boarding the school organises training in a local club according to their age category.

To improve general basic work and expert support, many different systematically measurements (e.g. morphological status, basic motor abilities, the prevention of damage, sociological status) are organised.

The purpose of the study is to examine the motives of the participants when commencing the handball sports classes, the participants' satisfaction with the work of their teachers and coaches in the handball sports classes, any differences in the evaluations of coaches and aspirations of the participants after they finish their education in the sports classes.

## METHOD

### Participants

The sample of participants consisted of 56 participants (80% of everyone included in the handball sports classes) who in the 2007/2008 academic year attended handball sports classes at the Šiška Gymnasium in Ljubljana; an average age of 16.9 years (min=15.6; max=19; SD=1.128). The sample consists of 23 boys and 33 girls. Their learning results are particularly good (M=2.79; SD=1.0).

### Instrument

The sample of measured variables was obtained with the use of a standardised questionnaire for top-level athletes (Doupona Topič, 2002), adapted to handball. The questionnaire generally contains 47 questions which a respondent must answer using a five-level scale (Cronbach's Alpha=0.85). In this article the following variables are used:

- Characteristics of a sports career;
- Years of study;
- Quality of handball players;
- Motives for playing handball;
- Education, training and playing of handball; and
- Participants' plans after they finish high school

### Procedure

The majority of questions were of a closed type. All of the data in the questionnaire were anonymous. The questionnaire was conducted separately for each class. Instructions for completing the questionnaire were given by the official teacher and her assistant (a student from the Faculty of Sport).

Descriptive statistical parameters of the variables were calculated and used for the data analysis, while a variance analysis and an  $\chi^2$  test were used to measure the differences.

## RESULTS

### Characteristics of a sports career

The results reveal that the participants began their handball path at the most favourable age, which is between the ages of 9 and 11 (Šibila, 2004). It is generally agreed that the career of a handball player begins very early, with Šibila (2004) stating that ages between 8 and 12 are the most advantageous for children to begin handball. Šibila (2004) also suggested that this particular age is most suitable for learning and perfecting the technical skills of handball, for understanding the key phases of the handball game and for the psycho-social integration of individuals into a handball team. This theory is in line with the study by Wylleman and Lavallee (2003) where a development model for sport in general is thoroughly described. At the beginning of their handball career, children are usually taught the main points of the game and teamwork through a game of mini handball. This age period is also used to identify sportingly talented children (directing talented children to sport, to a suitable sports discipline and a suitable playing position) and monitoring the development of certain anthropologic, training and playing characteristics that are important for sport (selection).

The results show that 45 out of the 56 participants (80.4%) began their handball career in a local club and only 11 at school (19.6 %). This reflects the specific organisation of handball which in the school sports system does not play as strong a role as some other sports. In general, the most widespread activity can be noticed in towns with a strong handball tradition and strong clubs which play in the first Slovenian league. The towns of Celje and Velenje deserve particular mention when it comes to men's handball, and Ljubljana when it comes to women's handball. Schools carry out handball activity only to a smaller extent.

Most of the measured participants ( $n=25$ ; 44.5%) became enthusiastic about playing handball on their own accord. The influence of their parents ( $n=12$ ; 21.4%) and friends ( $N=11$ ; 19.6%) is also recognised, noting the latter could be explained by handball also being seen as a way of socialising and entertainment, particularly in smaller towns and younger age groups. It is interesting to compare the results with a study on the sports careers of elite athletes (Doupona Topič, 2005)

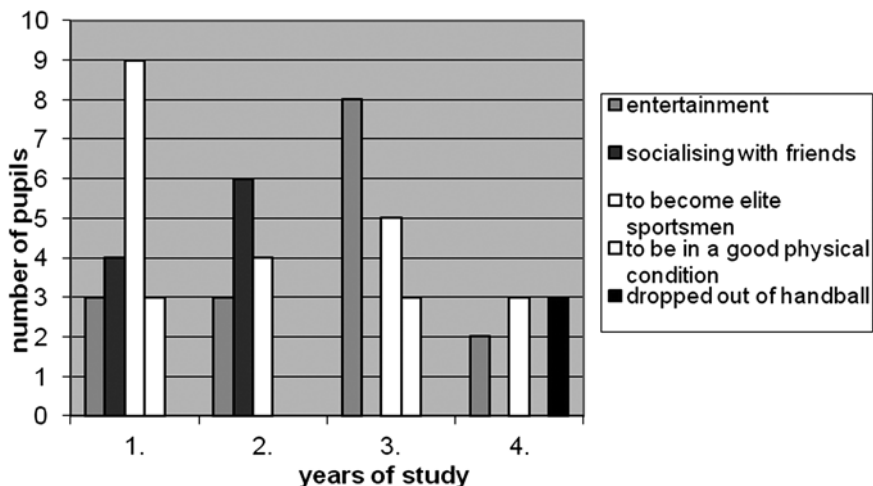


Figure 1: Motives for playing handball

carried out on a sample of 210 Slovenian elite athletes who were categorised according to the criteria of the Slovenian Olympic Committee. Similarly, these results revealed that the majority of athletes ( $n=25$ ; 42.6%) did not require anyone for them to be directed into the sport, 11 participants stated that their friends were a deciding factor (19.6%), whereas others mentioned their parents as a factor for starting the sport.

The majority of participants aspire for an elite sports career. Some consider it as a primary focus which occupies most of their time, whereas others also set other life priorities. Although for the latter participation in sport is an important value, they nevertheless focus on several areas in their lives.

The results of the present study show statistically significant differences in the motives for participation in handball among the participants from different years of study ( $\chi^2=36.343$ ;  $p=0.00$ ). 37% of all participants desire to become elite athletes, with results for separate years of study being 47% in the first year, 38% in the fourth year and 30% in the second and third years of study. In a similar study (with an identical questionnaire, but adapted to football), Zemljarič (2005) examined the participants of football sports classes and found a much higher share (86%) of participants wishing to become elite football players.

### **Competition experiences of the participants of the handball sports classes**

In Slovenia, handball competitions for senior men are held in the 1<sup>st</sup> A, 1<sup>st</sup> B and 2<sup>nd</sup> divisions, whereas senior women only play in the 1<sup>st</sup> A and B divisions. The junior national leagues and youth national league are further down the list.

The majority of participants ( $n=23$ ; 41.1%) plays in the 1<sup>st</sup> A league, 28% of them play in a youth league, 13% in the 1<sup>st</sup> B league, whereas 7% play in both the junior and 2<sup>nd</sup> senior league.

The results also revealed that 58% of first-year participants play in senior divisions, although they could have played at the youth level throughout the first and second years of high school. A high share of participants (38%) play in the 1<sup>st</sup> A league where there is no age limit and which is primarily intended for seniors. Obviously, a characteristic of Slovenian handball is that players, particularly girls, often play in a team with older team mates. The results also revealed statistical differences among the participants in different years of education ( $\chi^2=31.03$ ;  $p=0.009$ ;  $p<0.005$ ).

The present study also examined whether the participants believe that their inclusion in the project of handball sports classes gives them a special status in a club (e.g. a more important, higher playing role in the team). The results show statistically significant differences in the answers of participants in different years of study ( $p<0.005$ ;  $p=0.001$ ;  $\chi^2=6.545$ ); in particular, participants in the last two years of education believe that attending the handball sports classes does not help them when they are not on form. They assessed that club coaches decide on the selection of a team according to the current playing quality of individual players and in accordance with the needs of the team. The participants do not feel they have an advantage due to them being included in the handball course groups. The measured participants also do not think that other players expect more from them, with the differences in answers among participants in different years of education not being statistically significant.

There are in total only 16 members of different national teams. The highest number of national team members was detected in the first year of study ( $n=8$ ) as being members of a 1992 year of

birth national team. Statistically significant differences can be noticed among the participants in different years of study ( $p=0.000$ ;  $\chi^2=50.572$ ); the higher the year of study, the stronger the selection and more limited the numbers. In the fourth year of study, there were only two members of the Slovenian A national team and one in the youth national team.

### **Education and training in handball sports classes**

Clearly, a very important decision in life is choosing one's high school. The introduction of general and specialised sports classes in Slovenia has proven to be an advantage. Already the seventh generation of handball players is currently being educated in specialised handball sports classes.

One-half of the asked participants ( $n=28$ ) preferred to attend handball sports classes on their own accord, 25% consider their friends as responsible for commencing this type of education. Exceptions are the participants in their fourth year of study who stated that their parents and coaches had influenced their decision to start the handball sports classes.

Several authors (e.g. Pitts, 1992) quote the theory of the American sociologist Adler who states that athletes assume three main personal roles during the time of their education: to be an athlete, to be social and to be an academic. The organisation of special handball sports classes follows the same theory and attempts to satisfy all three roles of young people. The participants evaluated the organisation of handball sports classes (on a scale from 1 to 5). The results show that those who are most satisfied with the organisation of the handball sports classes are the first-year participants ( $M=4.1$ ;  $SD=0.737$ ). The average value of satisfaction decreases with the length of study as the fourth-year participants are the least satisfied and are, due to the length of their stay at the school, also the most critical. There are no statistically significant differences among the participants ( $M=3.77$ ;  $SD=0.934$ ;  $p=0.136$ ;  $F=1.934$ ). The results are comparable with the mentioned similar study by Zemljarič (2005), carried out on participants in football sports classes, as their satisfaction with the organisation of the latter also decreases progressively with the length of their studies.

The quality of the relationship between the coach and an athlete influences the motivation of an athlete and consequently also achievements in competitions. Therefore, the degree of mutual understanding between the participants and the coaches in the school and clubs was examined. The first-year participants demonstrated the best relationship with the coaches, whereas the third-year participants had the worst relationship. Nevertheless, the total average value is 3.7 (on a scale from 1 to 5), indicating a generally good relationship between the participants and coaches. Statistically significant differences can be noticed among the participants in different years of study ( $M=3.77$ ;  $SD=0.85$ ;  $p=0.009$ ).

The results do not reveal statistically significant differences in the answers of participants from different years of study ( $p=0.143$ ;  $\chi^2=9.598$ ) about the quality of the work of coaches in clubs and at school. Almost one-half of the participants ( $n=27$ ; 48%), particularly those in the first and third years of study, do not notice any differences between the coaches at school and in the clubs. Moreover, seven (36%) first-year participants believe that the school coaches are better than the club coaches. The percentage of participants who regard the club coaches as better is the highest among the second-year participants.



Training conditions are another important factor for good and continuous work. The Šiška Gymnasium provides very good conditions in a track and field stadium, in a specialised gymnastics facility, in a sports hall; the participants can also use a fitness room. All of the trainings can be supported with above-standard equipment (audio-video equipment, heart rate monitors, tensiometric plate, computer equipment and professional literature) (Čulibrk, 2008).

The participants are satisfied ( $M=4.13$ ;  $SD=0.81$ ;  $p=0.19$ ) with the conditions available at the school and there are no statistically significant differences in the answers of participants from different years of study ( $F=0.858$ ;  $p=0.469$ ). Satisfaction with the training conditions in Slovenia varies from one sport to another, as some sports are more represented than others and consequently receive more funding. Nevertheless, a study by Doupona Topič (2005) revealed that 61% of Slovenian elite athletes considered their training conditions as satisfactory.

Most of the first-year participants ( $n=16$ ; 84%) consider school trainings to be dynamic and diverse, whereas the figure for the fourth-year participants is 36%. Although the difference is not statistically significant ( $p=0.592$ ;  $\chi^2=1.908$ ), presumably the differences arise from the longer education time at the school as the participants in higher years of study are already familiar with the system of trainings and the type of work involved.

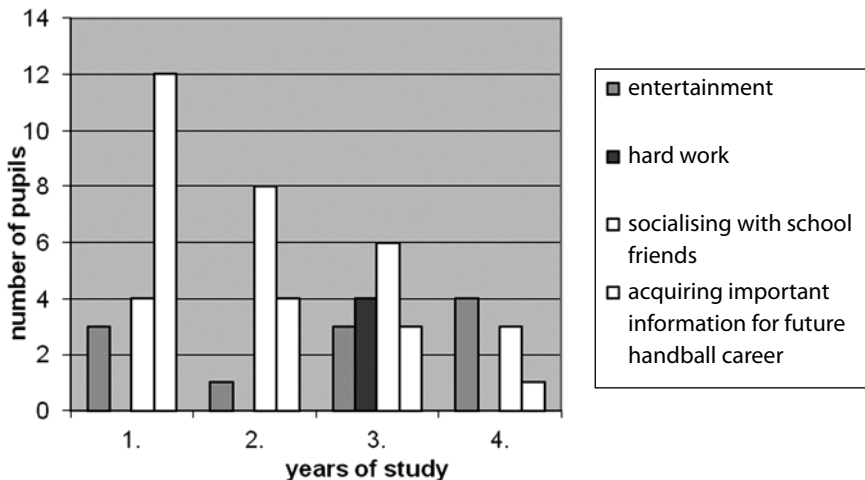


Figure 2: The purpose of education in handball sports classes

The  $\chi^2$  test revealed statistically significant differences in answers ( $p=0.003$ ;  $\chi^2=24.815$ ) about the purpose of education in specialised sports classes. The majority of participants ( $n=21$ ; 38%) see education in a handball sports class as a way of socialising with school friends and acquiring important information for a future handball career ( $n=20$ ; 36%). Eleven of the participants see attending the handball sports classes as a type of entertainment, most of them being in the fourth year of study, which can be linked with the fact that only in the last year do students intend to end their handball career after high school.

### Goals of participants after they finish high school

On the basis of the analysis of several questions one can conclude that handball represents an important area of life for the majority of the participants in the handball sports classes. Use of

the  $\chi^2$  test revealed no statistically significant differences in answers ( $p=0.27$ ;  $\chi^2=14.36$ ) about the purpose of education in specialised sports classes. Nevertheless, not all of the participants' goals relate to handball.

In particular, the fourth-year participants have different goals, which can again be linked to the fact that nearly half (3 out of 8) of the participants in this year of study are intending to end their sports career. However, the results show that participants in other years of study also consider handball as not so important. Other things are important as well and their goals for the future are focussed on many other areas. Considering the age of the participants, presumably their goals are directed at education and gaining a profession. There were no statistically significant differences among the participants from the different years of study and their answers ( $p=0.054$ ;  $F=2.174$ ).

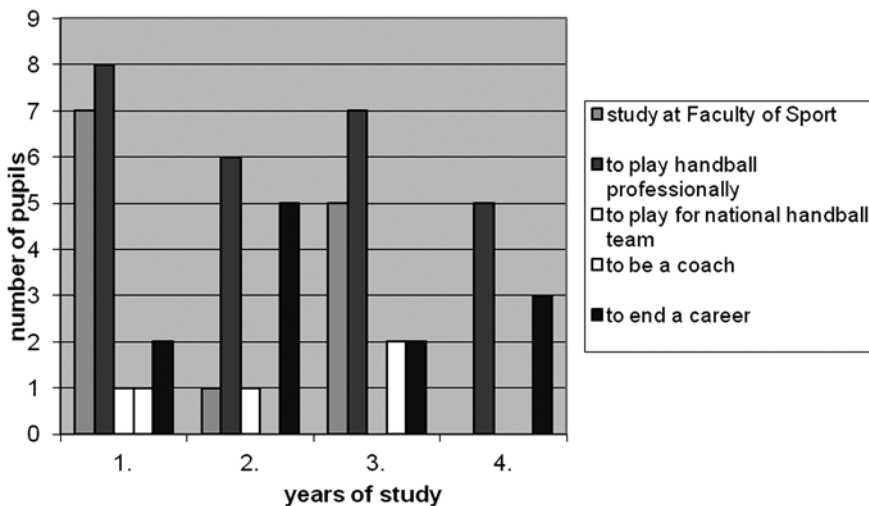


Figure 3: Where to go after high school ends?

Figure 3 reveals that the largest proportion ( $n=26$ ; 46%) of participants wishes to play handball professionally. This result also tallies with the finding by Doupona Topič (2005) that most elite athletes decide to continue their education after the end of their sports career.

The results for the fourth-year participants are interesting yet understandable, as almost two-thirds (62%) of these participants wish to play handball professionally, whereas the remaining one-third of them (38%) intends to end their career. It could be argued that at this age players already have a realistic idea of their playing abilities. As a result, less successful participants realise that their limits have been reached and decide to end their handball path. Further, there could also be other reasons for young people ending a sports career, such as injuries, which may be considered one of the more important ones. The data analysis also revealed that there are no statistically significant differences among the participants ( $p=0.278$ ;  $\chi^2=14.368$ ).

## CONCLUSION

According to Wylleman and Reints (2010), the development of an elite athletic career generally consists of 10 years building up the experience needed to become an elite performer and 5 to 10 years of competing at the highest level. The period of high school education is important for one's

study and sport career as young people between the ages of 15 and 19 experience drastic physical and emotional changes; in addition, this is a period of decisions which guide an individual in their future life. Besides education, young people must make important decisions about the priorities in their lives. Sport often plays an important role; other important factors include the need of an individual for socialising and entertainment. The creators of the handball sports classes project wished to bring these three factors together in the one place. Šiška Gymnasium has a tendency to include as many sports talents as possible, yet it still considers educational merit in order to fulfil the entry conditions demanded by the Ministry of Education and Sport. As the national governing body, the Slovenian Handball Association is an important partner that desires to create encouraging conditions for young and talented handball players (Bon, 2005). Parents and young players like the idea of having the possibility of education and sport at an organisationally and spatially closely located place as well as having above-average conditions in some areas. Based on these interests, the first and at the moment also the only project of specialised handball sports classes in Slovenia sprang to life. The work of this “model” was evaluated in the present study on a sample of 56 participants from all four years of education.

The participants included in the sports classes come from towns and schools with a strong handball tradition; in line with this tradition, they have also become enthusiastic about playing handball, if that was not started by their parents. Already in the first year of study, the majority of participants are playing in the 1<sup>st</sup> national leagues, and 38% of them in the 1<sup>st</sup> A league. The period between the ages of 15 and 19 is characteristic of major changes in physical, emotional and psycho-social development and the difference of one year represents a major developmental change in an individual. The first-year participants playing in senior leagues play alongside players who are four or more years older. Experts advise against such an early selection unless where there are exceptional individuals who stand out in terms of a higher level of physical, emotional and social maturity.

In contrast with some other specialised sports classes in Slovenia (e.g. football), where more or less all the participants are also members of national teams, handball reveals a different picture. The main criterion for entering the course groups is academic ability. The majority of participants are not members of any national team. Almost half of the participants wish to play professionally after high school, most of them being first-year participants, whereas the fourth-year participants prefer socialising and entertainment. 38% of the fourth-year participants wish to end their active handball career after they finish high school. Ending competitive sport is a normal process among young people in all sports and the numbers increase with age. Brettschneider and Sack (1996) stated that the proportion of players giving up sport in German clubs stands at 16% among 8-year-old children, 24% among 10-year-olds and 47% among 18-year-olds. Some other studies (Laakso, Talema & Yang, 1996) as well as practice show that the numbers of children who give up sport increases drastically at the age of 14 and after three to four years of participation in competitive club systems.

Undoubtedly the numbers of children giving up sport increases along with the competitiveness of a sports activity. Practice in Slovenia shows that the first uneven decline in the number of young people in sport occurs in the transition to high school (at the age of 14) and particularly by the end of it (at the age of 19). According to some studies (Škof et al., 2007), up to 75% of athletes end their competitive career at that age.

The Slovenian Handball Association wishes to include the participants in the handball sports classes within the “Handball sports classes in gymnasium” project in various professional/organisational, managerial, medicinal, media and other areas (Bon, 2005). These areas are important for the development of subsystems of the discipline, and a prerequisite for the sport to become well-organised and successful. Elite results are often a consequence of the developmental level of these areas.

The present study also examined evaluations of the quality of the professional work of the coaches delegated to the project by the Slovenian Handball Association. The sport will serve young people’s purposes when led by educated coaches with a healthy authority that can only be possessed by people with character (Gough, 1998). Half of the participants did not notice any differences between the quality of the work of their coaches in clubs and at school. The first-year participants evaluated the work of the coaches the highest, while the fourth-year participants were the most critical of their work. The participants are generally satisfied with the involvement of the Slovenian Handball Association, which is a co-founder and partner in the project. Apart from the coaches, the Slovenian Handball Association also provides equipment and partly finances participation at various international matches. There are currently two players with important roles in the Champions League, which is the strongest club league in Europe, and nine temporary or former participants (six women, three men) playing for the Slovenian national team. The women’s national team attended the European championship in December 2010.

Data analysis of the pilot study leads to the conclusion that the presented gymnasium handball sports classes represent a suitable model of co-operation for education and a sports career. It must be made clear that not all of the participants will become elite handball players; nevertheless, it is possible that the carefully planned work in the handball sports classes will result in a number of professionals from all areas of society who will contribute to the sport and indirectly also to society and a successful national governing body. Generally speaking, the results of the present study reveal that the project has been fulfilling its main goals and aims.

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