



The El Dorado of Handball? Foreign Female Players Stay, while Domestic Players Return from Abroad

by

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The main purpose of this research was to study the characteristics of migration in European women's handball based on the Slovenian example and to find the differences between the foreigners coming to Slovenia and the Slovenians transferring to foreign clubs. The research was based on 16 open face-to-face semi-structured interviews (8 Slovenians (age 29.5 ± 6.2 years) and 8 foreigners (age 35.5 ± 8.7 years)). We found out that the most powerful factor in foreigners was the financial one, while within Slovenian players it was their personal desire for progression within their sport, the club's reputation and poor conditions in their previous club. The results confirm that when making a decision on transfer, all players had the support of family and friends, while the clubs of foreign players were not as supportive. Most interviewees considered their careers successful and did not regret going abroad. The research indicates that the largest differences discovered between Slovenians and foreigners were that foreign female players chose to stay in the new country (Slovenia), while domestic players returned home after few years playing abroad. In conclusion, the results show that in top-level handball there are important differences between migration models which are based on nationality and also that the migration models change throughout time, which is largely connected with the socio-economic events in the country of origin or transfer.

Key words: migration, characteristics, women, top-level handball.

Introduction

Globalization and human migration are evident in many areas, among them sports. Migration is present in all countries around the world (Eliasson, 2009; Maguire and Pearton, 2000). These countries can be the cause of emigration or immigration, or simply a travel destination, but most often, it is all three. Migration is a way for people to search for better living conditions. There is a distinction between internal migration, when people move within a country, and international migration, when people move between countries. If we overlook forced migration resulting from wars, natural catastrophes and greater social unrest, the most important factors for all other types of migration are economic. In addition, geographic, demographic, social, cultural, psychological and

other factors are also present in other cases and function in various ways. In general, it can be said the migrants strive to improve their living standards and well-being as well as those of their families, and are thus focused on regions with better economic opportunities.

An increase in the number of migrants in a global sense is also influenced by changes in the workforce market, especially by increasingly more flexible employment methods. That is why it is not an overstatement to say that, especially over the last decade, migration has become one of the most important elements for the formation of the economic and social politics of the European Union. In fact, some athletes experience migration every day when they leave home to go train; most often, the case is that athletes live in one town and

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train in another. When athletes live close to the border, they often also live in one country and train in a neighboring one. Sports have thus become very interesting from the viewpoint of international migration research.

According to Tomlinson (1997), migration has been above all most influenced by globalization, which in this framework can be understood as a process that "shortens distances", brings individuals closer together and is thus making the world smaller. While several experts (Cukut Krilić, 2009; Freedman, 2003) have focused on studying migration in general, migration of athletes has not been researched that much. In recent times, globalization, which has been one of the main topics of discussion in society, has also been a reason behind key changes in modern society. Globalization has had an influence on employment, and work migration has become a routine around the world, which is also the reason why it has had an important influence on sports. Over time, as the sports industry has commercialized and globalized, more and more athletes and coaches have started to cross borders in search of better living conditions. Sports migration has become a living phenomenon of globalization as well as a form of employment. It has also brought the attention of researchers (Carter, 2007; Darby, 2007; Agergaard, 2008; Maguire and Stead, 1998), especially in Europe and all over the world (Poli and Besson, 2011).

Based on intensive globalization, sports have become a commodity, which is a consequence of international investments. Before, sports were deeply rooted in politics and were the subject of social discussions and nationalism; now it has developed into an entire industry. Athletes are bought and sold, similarly to other products as sales and transfers take place across the entire world. Developed countries with higher economic standards are perhaps more attractive targets for athletes' migration (Lee, 2010). Maguire (1996) developed a typology of sports migrants, which consists of five types of athlete-migrants: pioneers, settlers, mercenaries, returnees and nomadic cosmopolitans. After the introduction of the Bosman ruling, this typology was expanded in research by Magee and Sugden (2002) who studied foreigners in the British football league and established 7 categories based on interviews with football players: mercenaries (their transfer

was motivated by money), settlers (they remained in the country for 4–5 years, often also after their sports career had finished), ambitionists (interested in their personal sports career), nomadic cosmopolitans (interested in experiencing another culture), the exiled (those who left a country due to personal or political reasons), celebrity superstars (for media attention; e.g. Beckham).

Migration models in sports are not unified and differ depending on the sports discipline, gender of the athletes, a country and even a continent.

According to research of Doupona Topič and Bon (2008), the number of international transfers in men's and women's handball doubled in only three years (1999-2002) and in the next two years it further increased by more than 10%. The number of transfers thus increased from 3.579 in 1999 to 8.597 in 2004. In general, there is a large migration tendency in handball from Eastern and Southern Europe to Central and Northern Europe, where the organizational quality of the discipline is at a higher level. The migration of Danish female handball players is an interesting example. The first handball players to emigrate from Denmark were Anja Andersen (to Bremen, Germany) and Camilla Andersen (to Oslo, Norway) in the early '90s (Agergaard, 2008). In 2006/07, there were 69 foreigners registered in the Danish female handball league, of which 41% were from Scandinavian countries, the second largest group were players from Eastern Europe (32%), 23% of players came from Central Europe and the final 4% from East Asian countries. The number of foreign Danish players – 30% of the total – indicates the globalization of handball as a sports discipline (Agergaard, 2008). The increase of foreign female handball players in the Danish national team consequently caused a diminishing success rate for Danish players, as well as the fact that the results of the Danish national league severely regressed. Based on the demands of the head coach Jan Pytlich, Denmark strictly limited the number of foreigners per individual club so that today Danish players mostly remain at home; this is also characteristic of other Scandinavian countries (e.g. Norway, Sweden).

The purpose of this study was to establish general characteristics and reasons for migration in Slovenian women's handball, characteristics of

the integration of handball players into a new environment and the differences between foreign handball players in Slovenia and Slovenian players with emigration experience. On the basis of handball tradition in elite handball (Bon and Doupona Topič, 2013), it would be expected that paths of migration were nearly the same in different countries, however, our study explained some specific aspects such as that foreign players, most of them coming from Russia and Ukraine, stayed in Slovenia after their handball career terminated, many of them together with families, they built new social life in Slovenia. On the other side, till now only two Slovenian ex-players (Cuderman, Ilic) stayed abroad after termination of their handball career.

Material and Methods

Participants

Sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted (8 Slovenians (age 29.5 ± 9.2 years) and 8 foreigners (age 35.6 ± 8.7 years)). Initially the results were analyzed for all handball migrants together and then, through analysis and interpretation, differences between the Slovenians and the foreigners of various nationalities who played in Slovenia were studied. The sample of foreigners included: three Croatians, one Ukrainian, two Russians, one Dane and one Austrian. This group was further divided into two subgroups, one of which was foreigners who played in Slovenia until 2005, then adopted Slovenian nationality and still lived in Slovenia. Four of them obtained a university degree before coming to Slovenia (in Russia and the Ukraine), three in sports and one in law. All of them had already finished their active careers and remained in Slovenia. The second subgroup included foreigners who came to Slovenia after 2005 and were from various geographical parts of Europe (Croatia, Denmark and Austria) (Table 1).

The studied Slovenian players who had been or were in the national team had emigration experience and were divided into two subgroups. The first group consisted of former players who had already finished their careers (average age 37.5 years); only one of them had a university degree (economics). The second subgroup was composed of still-active players (average age 25.5 years) who had lived abroad for a period of 1 to 6 years. One of them returned home after a year in

Spain and then played in Slovenia. The other three subjects played in the 1st or 3rd leagues in France. All of them were in the Slovenian national team that placed last at the European championships.

Measures

All sixteen interviewees were asked seven questions that were categorized into the following groups: 1) reasons for emigration; 2) manner of transfer; 3) socialization in their new environment; 4) education and training abroad; 5) change in social environment; 6) career success estimate; 7) reasons for not returning home. We asked interviewees to come to the Stožice sport hall, Ljubljana. Qualitative research was based on semi-structured interviews, which were carried out in June, 2012, after the end of the sports season. All the players were in Ljubljana at that time and willing to participate in our study.

Procedures

Potential participants were informed about the character of the research and that they would be asked to take part in an interview conducted by the first author, lasting between 30 and 60 min, after completing a short questionnaire (socio-demographical characteristic). Among the interested respondents, a selection of participants for the interview was made according to their age, gender and time spent abroad. All the interviewees gave their consent to be part of the research. During the in-depth interviews, the participants' habits and experiences during transfer and playing abroad were analysed and the influence on the participants' lifestyles was established.

Based on the participants' different experiences when playing abroad, the influence of migration on their lifestyles was investigated.

Results

First, common characteristics of sports migrants in top-level handball were analyzed. Then, differences between the answers of the Slovenian migrants (Slovenians) and the group of players of other nationalities (foreigners) were analyzed and interpreted.

Reasons for migrations in top-level handball

The most common reason why players decided to leave their country and continue their career abroad was money (Picture 1). Other reasons that had a strong influence on the

decision were professional progression, the club's reputation and poor conditions in their previous clubs. Among the key reasons, the Slovenians especially talked about their desire to prove themselves in sports, progress in handball, their ambitions and a new challenge (Picture 2). Some of them emigrated because they were dissatisfied with the relationships in the team or with their status in the team. The reasons for leaving were largely connected (money, progression, challenge, renowned club, etc.).

Transferring to a foreign club

The results of the analysis show that 56.3% of interviewees used managers to facilitate their transfer to a new club, while others managed their transfers independently or with the help of their family members. In some cases, their home club made the transfer more difficult for the players (25.2%). However, all players mentioned support from their home environments. Most interviewees did not have contracts with particular managers when going abroad. In the past, it was typical to communicate directly: a coach or a president contacted the player or the player contacted the coach or former team-members. Early in their careers, especially younger players were contractually bound to a managing agency that took care of their transfer to another club; the communication was done indirectly. In general, it was established that in the previous decade (according to the group of former players), direct communication was more common, while in recent times nearly all transfers were taken care of by managers or managing agencies. Some players also mentioned that their managers offered them social support when integrating into a new environment.

Support during transfer

All of the interviewees indicated the support of their families and a close social circle. For the Slovenians, families, especially fathers (it can be explained by a strong role played by fathers in planning a sports career in Slovenian society; especially for girls/women; in: Doupona Topič, 2010), were typically heavily involved in the process.

Players who had recently transferred to Slovenia mentioned skepticism on the part of their family regarding the general social situation in Slovenia. However, we can't interpret the attitude of the family as a lack of support but rather than a

general concern about living conditions.

Socialization in the new environment

The interviewees had various experiences after arriving at their new clubs. Most (87.5%) interviewed players had no problems socializing (when asked directly); nevertheless, they mentioned quite a number of problems later on (like being poorly accepted by their teammates, language barriers, and pressuring the "foreigner"). The Slovenians emphasized more that they were well received, they appreciated that the clubs' managers handled everything needed regarding their living arrangements and details given in the contract while foreigners took this for granted. Players who had no problems with communication were more of an exception than the rule. Some clubs offered language classes to players, but they mostly learned the foreign language on their own initiative, also because they wanted to increase the number of languages they knew passively and actively. Problems in communication were also a result of a lack of knowledge of a basic foreign language (like English) in the environments they entered.

Most athletes playing abroad (81.3%) indicated that their social life changed. Some foreigners mentioned many more problems with adapting to a new work system (organization of training sessions, a coach's managing style during a game) and integration into their immediate and broad environments, which included grouping within the team, pressuring foreign players, competition for the same playing positions, as well as problems with journalists and fans.

Possibilities for education abroad

Half of the interviewees decided to learn a foreign language in an organized, systematic way, while the other half did not or studied the language "on the go".

The ratio is similar concerning questions about university education (on-line, visitation of their home countries due to their studies, etc.). In addition to training and matches, Slovenians and also foreigners of the younger generation devoted a lot of their time to studying and education in general. Some players decided to quit studying with the intention of continuing after their return.

The foreigners who remained in Slovenia after their active careers had university degrees gained in Russia or Ukraine. They complained about the amount of training and the lack of

leisure time.

Changes in social life

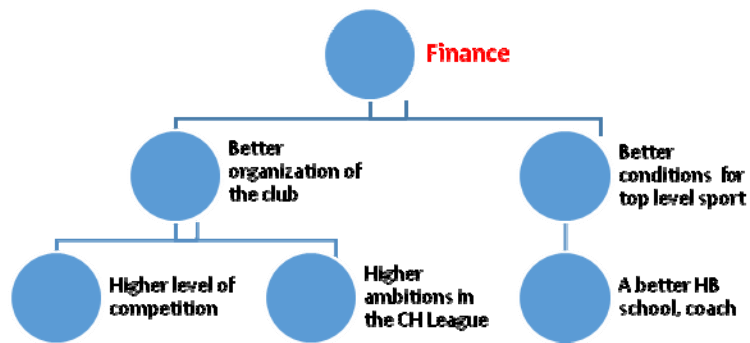
Thirteen interviewed players (81.3%) confirmed that their social life changed due to moving abroad. Most of them did not perceive that as something negative, but more as enrichment of their social lives (they met a lot of new people, made a great number of friends, etc.) and a valuable life experience (as they were left to themselves; they found this to be a great life lesson); they learned how to work under pressure and live with criticism under the weight of great expectations. The interviewees also listed negative social changes i.e., losing touch with friends, breaking up with their partners, alienation from their families, etc.

Reasons for (not) returning home

Most of the interviewees indicated their partners as the main reason for their return home; this was followed by homesickness, studies and being disappointed. Players who returned home had no problems looking for a club; quite the contrary, playing abroad “increased their price” and was an important starting point for their negotiations at home. However, some players (foreigners before 2005) had no intention of ever returning to their home countries, which is the key difference between them and the Slovenians. Until now, only two Slovenian female handball players remained abroad, one of whom was among the interviewees; she married a Spaniard and built a family in Spain.

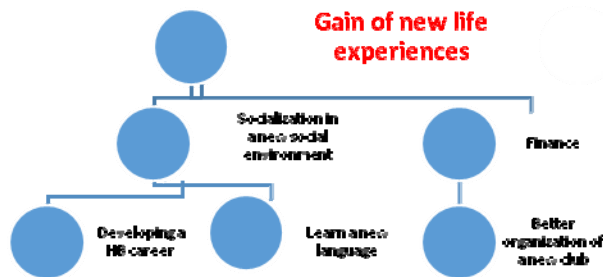
Table 1
Characteristics of the runners in the interview (not real names)

Name of the player		Nationality	Age	Transfer IN country
Andreja	1	SLO	21	HUN, FRA
Sanja	2	SLO	22	SPA
Benja	3	SLO	26	SRB
Lenka	4	SLO	23	SPA, FRA
Nina	5	SLO	28	FRA
Simona	6	SLO	41	CRO
Angelika	7	SLO	38	DEN, SPA
Branka	8	SLO	37	SPA
Angela	1	CRO	27	SLO
Ljuta	2	RUS	34	SLO
Ajda	3	DEN	26	SLO
Bronja	4	AUT	27	SLO, DEN
Beti	5	UKR	46	SLO
Stela	6	UKR	39	SLO
Olivia	7	RUS	40	SLO
Nada	8	CRO	46	SLO
SD			8.50	
average		age SLO	29.5	
average		age FOREGINERs	35.6	



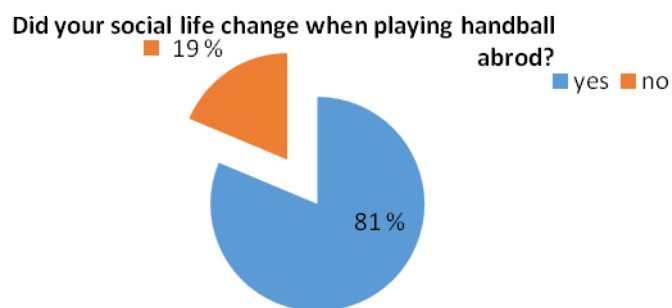
Picture 1

Foreigners – reasons for transfer to new (Slovenian) clubs



Picture 2

Slovenian players – reasons for transfer from Slovenia



Picture 3

General changes in social life

The Slovenians who had already finished their careers remained abroad for an average of 2.5 years and then returned. All of those who were active abroad during the investigation intended to return to Slovenia. However, it is interesting that the foreigners who have finished their sports careers often remain in Slovenia, most from ex Soviet–Union counties; no one from Western Europe or Scandinavia.

Discussion

The main purpose of this research was to analyze some characteristics of handball migration based on the Slovenian example and to find the differences between the foreigners coming to Slovenia and the Slovenians transferring to foreign clubs. The research was based on 16 open face-to-face semi-structured interviews (8 Slovenians and 8 foreigners). The interviews helped investigate reasons for moving abroad, indicated who was of assistance to the players regarding their transfers to a foreign club, how they gained education during their time abroad, what their socio-demographic status (partnership, relationships with their primary family) was, what models of assimilation existed (learning a language, socializing, culture, etc.) and what models of socialization were present. We were also interested in how the athletes rated their handball careers and what the main reason for returning to their home countries was. The obtained results consisting of answers to the same seven questions were quite diverse, which points to important differences between Slovenian athletes and foreign athletes working in Slovenia:

- Foreign handball players decided to play abroad for financial reasons. Even though their answers were sometimes more indirect and included the club's reputation, a good coach, etc., it was clear that the main reason for emigrating was to earn more. They chose Slovenia as it was the best offer. For Slovenians, in addition to the financial aspect, there was also a desire to prove themselves.
- In recent times, the transfers of players were mostly managed by sports managers. However, 9 out of 16 of the players interviewed handled their transfers on their own or with the help of their family members.
- Both Slovenian and foreign players had the support of their families when going abroad, and foreigners less often the support of their clubs. Players from Russia and Ukraine also mentioned that their clubs had strictly opposed their transfers.
- During their sports careers abroad, half of the interviewees studied at a university. Most players who decided to play abroad lost their social contacts with their partners, friends and families after leaving.
- Foreigners from Eastern Europe entirely changed their social environments and completely assimilated in the Slovenian political, cultural and linguistic environment.
- With the exception of two female handball players, Slovenians did not stay abroad, but returned home, most often because of homesickness or partners.

There are general differences between Slovenian and foreign handball players (Bon et al., 2010; Bon and Doupona Topič, 2013). In the past and still today, Slovenians have almost always returned home. However, one may also observe differences regarding migration models among the foreigners depending on the country they come from. The foreigners from the Soviet-Ukrainian block, who played in Slovenia at the height of their careers for about 5 to 10 years, remained in Slovenia, even if they did not have families or jobs. It is important to highlight that the interviewed foreign athletes played in Slovenia in the period when the Krim Handball club was one of the most successful clubs in Europe, and was at the same time very well organized.

The results of our study show that until 2011 foreigners were more likely to assimilate into the Slovenian environment than Slovenians were abroad. Although, nowadays we face with new trends in Slovenia that sometimes foreign athletes leave Slovenia even after six months, most often because of unfulfilled financial obligations or due to their club's instability. More Slovenian handball players migrate every year, but in general, they are nearly always coming back home.

However, over the past few years new

trends may be observed. On the level of labor and sport migration, we are following extreme expansion (Nurmi, 2014). According to the research of Agergaard (2008), in Danish woman's handball migration from Northern and Eastern Europe prevails. Agergaard and Ryba (2014) investigated migration in women's football and reported that by combining psychological and sociological aspects, they identified three normative career transitions for transnational athletes. First of all, transnational recruitment that drew on social networks as well as individual agencies. Secondly, establishment as a transnational athlete that was connected to cultural and psychological adaptation as well as development of transnational belonging; and thirdly, professional athletic career termination that for transnational athletes was connected to a (re)constitution of one's transnational network and sense of belonging (Agergaard and Ryba, 2014). On the other hand, in handball we can follow an interesting study, which explores the relationship between domestic talent development and the immigration of players from abroad through a comparative multiple-case study of Danish and Norwegian women's handball (Agergaard and Ronglan, 2015), with a conclusion that it is not a high number of players from abroad, per se, that may block the development of local youth talent, but first and foremost structure of training and match practices in the clubs and national leagues. In the last years a new trend has emerged, indicated in many studies (Magee and Suden, 2002; Maguire and Falcous, 2011; Lee, 2010; Magee and Sugden,

2002), called *the World is at their Feet*. In the field of handball, we could say *the World is at their Hands*. Besides very intensive migration in Europe observed for the last three decades, in recent years many players have moved too some less developed handball environments, but economically very rich countries, especially in the Middle East (f. ex. Qatar). Many athletes have taken over the nationality to get the right to play for the national team of Qatar. Qatar hosted the Men's World Championship in 2015. In this context, one might pose a question regarding prospects of the women's handball championship in a Muslim world like Qatar. Generally, we can state that women's and men's handball are not in an equal position.

To conclude, transfers in sport have become more dynamic, also in women's top level handball (data from the European handball federation - base of the transfer) (Doupona Topič and Bon, 2008; Bon and Doupona Topič, 2013) and new trends are expected to appear in the future (Agergaard and Ronglan, 2015). At the time of our study (till 2011), it was obvious that Slovenia was a *dream country* for ex-top level handball players. However, nowadays we are following changed trends again. From players who came in the previous five years (totally eleven elite players), no one stayed in Slovenia. Similar research to the one presented should be carried out systematically every 5-10 years as the geography of elite handball changes significantly and the globalization trend continues.

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