



Children's rights and sport

Children and adolescents in competitive sports

Children are among the most important contributors to the success of sports today, both as observers as well as practitioners. At an early age, children begin to play and compete in sports. In general, sports are considered highly beneficial to the physical and mental development of the child. They help to learn rules and respect them, to enhance concentration capacity, to learn to take responsibilities and to build self-confidence.

In the 1970s, sports at the elite level changed drastically - amateurism died and professionalism took over. The significance of winning also changed. A victory was no longer just a symbol, but had concrete financial, commercial and political consequences. With the accent on making money, sports professionals focused less on the game and more on satisfying the public's appetite for better performance and more spectacular sports events. To meet the rising expectations of spectators require improved and more sophisticated preparation of athletes. Children were some of the first victims of this new trend, with sports trainers no longer asking how sports could benefit children but rather how children could benefit sports. A child with some talent was viewed more and more as an ideal candidate to be moulded into a champion. Subsequently, there was a signifi-

by Paolo David*

cant rise in the number of children enrolled in professional sports training programmes.

There is a wealth of research that exists today which studies the impact of competitive sports on young athletes. Sociologists, psychologists, pedagogues, and

medical doctors have added to the understanding of the effects of competitive sports on children and adolescents. By denouncing the excesses and abuses, both practitioners and researchers have certainly made an important contribution to improving the treatment of children in professional sports. Nevertheless, only in very rare instances has anyone tried to understand the link between the practice

of competitive sports and the fundamental human rights of children and adults.

History has shown that sports can bring out the best and the worst in human beings. As said earlier; the many unique and positive aspects of sports for children and adolescents should not be challenged. But when the child is not properly guided by adults in his/her sporting activity, sports can enter the realm of abuse and exploitation. Is four hours of daily training for a five-year-old child truly beneficial? How much stress can a child take? Should a young adolescent be traded between teams for thousands of dollars? Is it good for a 15-year-old swimmer to have turned his shoulder 1.5 million times? Is it normal for a 16-year-old gymnast? who trains seven hours a day, to be only 1m30 and weigh less than 30 kilograms? Is it real support when a 12-year-old boy's parents urge him to knock out his opponent, which is medically equivalent to a brief coma? In other words, is the reality of



Sport for all.



The joys of sport.

competitive sports always following the best interests of children. or are some narrow-minded and overly ambitious adults putting children's human rights into jeopardy in this way?

The human rights of each child

Children, even the youngest ones, are human beings. Therefore, they also are given the possibility to enjoy fundamental human rights. This might sound like a statement of the obvious, but until 1989 both at legal and political levels, states only recognized children as passive subjects of law. The human rights of children were not recognized comprehensively by international law, and states were not inclined to fully accept the specificities of children and adolescents in their legislation, policies and programmes. Children were simply the invisible side of society only perceived as an object of protection. This old-fashioned perception of the role of the child in dai-

ly life has been drastically challenged by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, (hereinafter "the Convention") a legally-binding international human rights treaty adopted in 1989 by the United Nations and today ratified by 191 states.

Children's rights during sports activities

As any activity undertaken in society, sports functions within a recognized legal framework. Whether it is the payment of a membership, the construction of a stadium, or the payment of a salary, all sport-related actions need to respect the established rule of law. This might seem obvious, but in reality sports have until recently often succeeded in functioning in a legal loophole. This is possible simply because local, national, regional and international sports federations have their own rules, administrative bodies and courts. There is nothing wrong with this,

on the condition that those rules are defined and implemented in accordance with domestic and international law-. But this is not always the case.

In the case of children, this means that their rights, as recognized by the Convention, have to be fully taken into account by all partners involved in sports: parents, trainers, federations and especially public authorities. This is certainly not the case today.

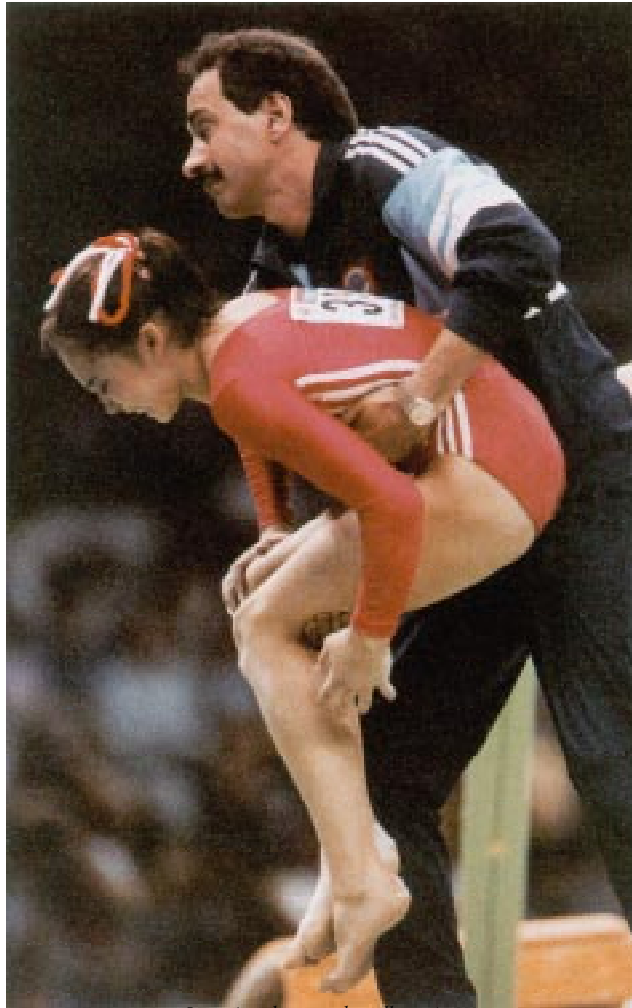
Many rights of children, as recognized by the Convention; are of direct relevance to children practising sports. They are: the right to non-discrimination (article 2); the principle that the best interests of the child should always be a primary consideration (article 3); the right to be provided appropriate direction and guidance (article 5); the right to development (article 6); the right not to be separated from his/her parents (article 9); the right of the child to have his/her opinions duly taken into account in all deci-



sion affecting him/her (article 12); freedoms of expression and of association (articles 13 and 15); protection from abuse and neglect and other forms of violence (article 19); the right to health (article 24); the right to education (articles 28 and 29); the right to rest, leisure, recreation and cultural activities (article 31); the right to be protected from economic exploitation (article 32); the right to be protected from illegal drugs (article 33); the right to be protected from sexual exploitation (article 34); the right to be protected from abduction, trafficking and sale (article 35); the right to be protected from other forms of exploitation (article 36); and the right to benefit from rehabilitation care (article 39). Following the principle of the cascade, the state has the primary responsibility to implement these rights, but also sports federations, especially in countries where they are public or subsidized institutions and adults, including coaches, sports officials, parents and others.

Intensive training: the risk of physical and psychological abuse

When properly practised, there is no doubt that sport is one of the most recommended activities for any child's physical and mental development. Sport is a healthy leisure activity, but the considerable public interest in many competitive sports has far too often distorted this reality. In fact, in many popular but extremely demanding sports, such as gymnastics, tennis, skating and diving, children are pushed into intensive training programmes at a very young age, usually between four and six. Is three to four hours of training a day healthy for such a young athlete? Many trainers still perceive child athletes the same way they look at adults. But children are not



Learning how to handle pain.

miniaturized adults, they are by essence in perpetual physical and psychological development, and therefore often vulnerable. Any intensive training programme, whether in sports, arts, education or any other activity, should respect the child's biological clock.

The limits of a child's body

"The biggest sacrifice I made for gymnastics is my body", said US athlete Kim Zmeskal after the Games of the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona in 1992. "We have no pleasure training" stated another US gymnast, Shannon Miller, when she was 15 years old. The only pleasure are the results, the medals". Gymnastics,

together with figure skating, are probably among the most questionable sports since the age of participation for women has fallen drastically. In 1965, the average age of the three best gymnasts in Europe was 25; 20 in 1969 and 18 in 1973. At the Games of the XXI Olympiad in Montreal in 1976, Romanian Nadia Comaneci (1m50, 39 kilograms) earned a gold medal at the age of 14. Following the Games of the XXVI Olympiad, the Centennial Games, in Atlanta in 1996, the minimum age to participate in the Games was raised from 15 to 16, but a clause was written into the new regulation allowing 15-year-olds to compete if they turned 16 during the year of the Games. For the World Skating Championship, the minimum age is 15, and even younger for championships at the national level. United States skater Tara Lipinski won the highest national competition at

12 and became Olympic champion at the XVIII Olympic Winter Games in Nagano in 1998 at 15. But to bring an athlete to the perfection required to qualify for the Olympic Games, child athletes must begin to train soon after they learn to walk. "When I was one year old, my father suspended me by my feet to a bar fixed in our door", explained Dominique Monceanu, Olympic champion in gymnastics in Atlanta,

Psychological abuse of athletes

Intensive training at an early age can also be psychologically damaging. Young champions, besides their own natural

will to play and win, are also obliged to perform to satisfy adults' ambitions and desires for financial rewards, be it from their parents, their trainers, sponsors or federations. Pressure also comes from the media and political authorities. Finally, pressure can come from the school system. For those athletes who do not drop out.

For highly professional and visible sports, such as gymnastics, skating and tennis, pressure to win is immense and often completely overwhelming for the child. As a result, victory does not necessarily bring what it should: happiness and self-esteem. Tiffany Chin, after winning as expected the US championship in skating in 1985, was asked how she would have felt if she had not won. "Devastated. I don't know. I'd probably die", she answered, before adding "I didn't feel happiness winning. I felt relief. Which was disappointing."

Children who train intensively might also be verbally and/or mentally abused by their trainers. "My relationship with the young girls is like master-slave until 14; then it is like general-soldiers until 16. After that, we enter into a partnership". explains Irina Viner, a Russian gymnastics trainer, Children who train intensively often end up spending more time with their trainers than with their parents. A situation which reinforces their emotional binds with their coaches. but which might make them vulnerable in those cases where their coaches are abusive. Evidence shows that some trainers, anonymous as well as well-known ones, use insults and other forms of humiliation to provoke anger which from their point of view is a powerful "motivator" for athletes, "My coach's desire to win seemed stronger than mine at times" wrote Danielle Herbst, a top US gymnast, in a paper for high school. "In times of pressure, which not a day passed without [...] I was yelled at, screamed at, and had things thrown at me [...]. Somehow, my coach had convinced himself, and constantly reminded me, that I was a fat

imbecile, a bloody idiot, no good and worthless."

Eating disorders

For all top athletes, it is essential to keep a close eye on their diet and stay physically fit. In some sports which include an artistic dimension (gymnastics, diving and figure skating), athletes, and especially female athletes, need to learn to be attractive and to smile constantly in order to charm judges. In addition to learning sporting skills, young champions also need to keep focused on their appearance and beauty. This is particularly difficult, as both do not necessarily go together.

Anorexia is an extremely complex mental disorder, and it is difficult to identify the real cause of this phenomenon, but research has clearly demonstrated, that in some women's sports, and especially gymnastics and skating, but also tennis, the strict diets imposed on the child and adolescent athletes, generate far higher levels of eating disorders, in particular anorexia, among girls. For example, a research study undertaken in 1994 by the University of Utah (USA). found that 59% of US female elite gymnasts training for the Olympic Games admitted to some form of eating disorder. Another study, by the University of Washington in 1992, which comprised 182 US college athletes, concluded that 32% practised at least one form of anorexia (vomiting or the use of laxatives, diuretics or diet pills). Among college gymnasts, the percentage nearly doubled to 62%.

Motivation vs. the burnout syndrome

Though research and practice have shown that success is not just a question of number of hours spent training, many coaches still privilege quantity instead of quality. The risks of such an approach are well-known: young athletes, even extremely gifted ones, suffer mental burnout or become chronically injured. In modern sports, skills do not suffice to reach the top. Motivation is a key ele-

ment, although it is often neglected. The sad consequence is that young athletes who were pushed too hard by adults quit sports often with serious emotional or physical problems.

The cases of tennis players Tracy Austin, Andrea Jagger and Jennifer Capriati are well-known, as are those of French football talents Laurent Roussey and Laurent Paganelli, who all burnt out at very young ages. Who can tell today whether the new generation of young tennis prodigies - Hingis, the Williams sisters, Kournikova, Lucic, Majoli and others - who all became professionals before the age of 16, will not burn out at an age where Evert, Navratilova or Novotna had not even reached the peak of their careers?

The basic problem is that children and adults do not necessarily share the same factors of motivation. If parents, managers and trainers often focus on victory, children, but also adolescents, may have different factors of motivation. For a young child, aged under 9 to 11, it is essential to play and to participate in the game. Most research shows that approximately 90% of children under 9 to 11 prefer to play with a losing team than to win but sit on the bench as a substitute player. Another important factor of motivation for young athletes is their individual progress. The first question parents often ask is if their child won; but a child is much more interested in improving his or her game and participating as much as possible on a team or in a competition, than in winning or losing.

Children and work

In most countries of the world, labour laws and regulations do not allow children to work below a certain age. Strict rules are defined for those adolescents allowed to work a restricted number of hours a day. When a teenager works during his or her vacation or weekends, such activity is strictly regulated by law. But in the case of a ten-year-old child who trains six to eight hours a day, six



days a week, for which he or she might receive some money, nobody questions if this practice is a form of child labour “likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development” (article 32.1 of the Convention). The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention N. 138 regarding the minimum age for access to work, prohibits light work for children under 13 years old and prohibits work for adolescents under 15. One should seriously consider if over 30 hours, and sometimes as many as 40 hours a week of intensive training, during which violent efforts are frequent, and risk of injury is high, should be considered child labour. If intensive training is recognized as a form of child labour, then sports authorities should adopt strict regulations to comply with existing internationally recognized norms.

Doping: a serious threat for children and adolescents

For decades, the issue of doping was such a taboo that sports authorities, trainers, media, sponsors, managers and athletes all denied its existence. Each recognized case was said to be an isolated one. But today, one starts to have a clearer understanding of the phenomenon of doping, though many aspects remain unknown.

It is obvious that child athletes are not spared from doping. In many countries and in different sports, athletes under 18 years old have tested positive for illegal performance-enhancing drugs. In 1995, a South African athlete, aged 14, tested positive for steroids during a junior national championship. Many under-18



Time out.

Chinese swimmers have also failed doping tests since the early 1990s. The same happened with Bulgarian gymnasts and a 17-year-old weightlifter. In France, a 16-year-old rower was suspended for doping, despite her claim that she had been doped against her will. In 1996, US swimmer Jessica Fische, 15 years old, was suspended from competition for two years for testing positive for steroids. It would be naive to think that those involved in the business of doping wait until the child’s 18th birthday to offer him or her some miracle remedies. Children and adolescents are usually more easy to manipulate than adults. Therefore, it is quite tempting for trainers, in whom young athletes have put all their trust, to abuse them by pushing them to take performance-enhancing medicines that are illegal, pretending

they are simply vitamins, and most likely harmful to the child’s health. This is exactly what happened for over one decade in East Germany. Young swimmers were asked by trainers and doctors to take “vitamins”, which in fact were illegal and highly sophisticated drugs. Of course, doping organized by governments disappeared with the collapse of East Germany, but a few countries are still suspected to have the same type of practice.

Many adolescent athletes decide themselves to take illegal drugs to improve their results. Research in Australia, France, Canada, and the United States all show alarming rates of doping among adolescents. In the USA, one study revealed that nearly 3% of all school children had taken a performance-enhancing drug on at least one occasion by age ten. In the same country,

another study showed that at least half a million adolescents took illegal steroids regularly, mainly in weightlifting and body-building. A 1995 study indicated that one of four young US athletes is tempted to take illegal drugs to earn a scholarship or to qualify for the professional leagues. A 1993 Canadian study showed that 83,000 adolescents aged between 11 and 18 took steroids at least once during the year the study covered. In the region of the Midi-Pyrénées (France), one research team found that 2.2% of children under 18 admitted to having taken illegal performance-enhancing drugs, 7.7% said that they took produces “which might be doping”, and 10.4% declared they had “friends who doped”. In New South Wales (Australia), where Sydney is located, it is estimated that 4% of students aged between 11 and 17 take steroids. A 1993 World

Health Organization (WHO) report documented the widespread use of illegal drugs in sports, including among young athletes and declared that doping had become a real public health problem. The Australian government took very seriously this public health threat and, in 1995, drafted a bill to authorize the testing for illegal performance-enhancing drugs among athletes from the age of 12 up. Taking illegal drugs is not only a violation of existing rules of most sports federations, but when administered by an adults to a child, it is a blatant violation of his or her right to health and it is against his or her best interests, even in those cases where the child is informed and aware of the nature of the drugs. States, and indirectly sports federations, trainers, managers and parents, have the responsibility to protect young athletes from the use of illicit drugs, according to the Convention (article 33).

The impact of money on young athletes

Very few sports are completely free from the influence of money. The most popular sports draw such enormous financial interests that young children are also affected by this phenomenon. Top gymnasts under the age of ten are sometimes approached by managers wanting to commercialize the child's image in advertising. Gifted football players are often approached between the ages of 12 and 18 by professional clubs to sign contracts. Adolescent elite tennis players have their managers to take care of the financial aspects of their career. "Kids have agents now before they

even make it into their teens" said Mary Lou Retton, Olympic champion in gymnastics at the Games of the XXIII Olympiad in Los Angeles in 1984. Jimmy Connors, the US tennis star, rightly stated that "playing at 14 in professional championships is totally ridiculous". In the United Kingdom, a five-year-old football player, Kene Jackson, was offered a contract by a local football club paying the equivalent of US \$20,000. The contract stipulated that he was to play with the club until the age of ten. Kene Jackson was approached after being seen by recruiters in a training camp for seven-year-olds. His parents were wise enough to refuse.

Though a child or an adolescent may at an early age already be a sports champion, one can never fully predict the real

potential he or she will develop in adulthood, precisely because the process of maturation is not complete. Researchers have proved that gifted athletes may lose some of their natural skills and motivation as they grow older. Similarly, many adult champions were not among the best during their teens.

Sponsors or sports clubs investing huge amounts of money in very young athletes might be harmful to these children. It will certainly increase the pressure on the child's performance and, in the case of failure, heighten the sense of abandonment and isolation as sponsors lose interest. Money also puts children in a situation for which they are not necessarily ready. Parents, as well as trainers and managers, often have their own interests and ambitions. Does a 14-year-old

have enough maturity and experience to assess and make a commercial or a financial decision which will have an impact on his or her life? Can a child athlete fully trust and rely on adults when it comes to signing contracts with sponsors or sports clubs? Child athletes are all too often treated as commodities and not appropriately advised, guided and involved in the decision-making process.

Sale of athletes: a form of exploitation

The world of professional sports can be excessively generous or ruthlessly exploitative with regard to athletes' labour rights. Some adult champions earn millions of dollars a year; many make a decent living, and the least fortunate finish their career broke and in some cases even homeless. But sports remains a domain where even the most desti-



Young tennis players learning to serve.

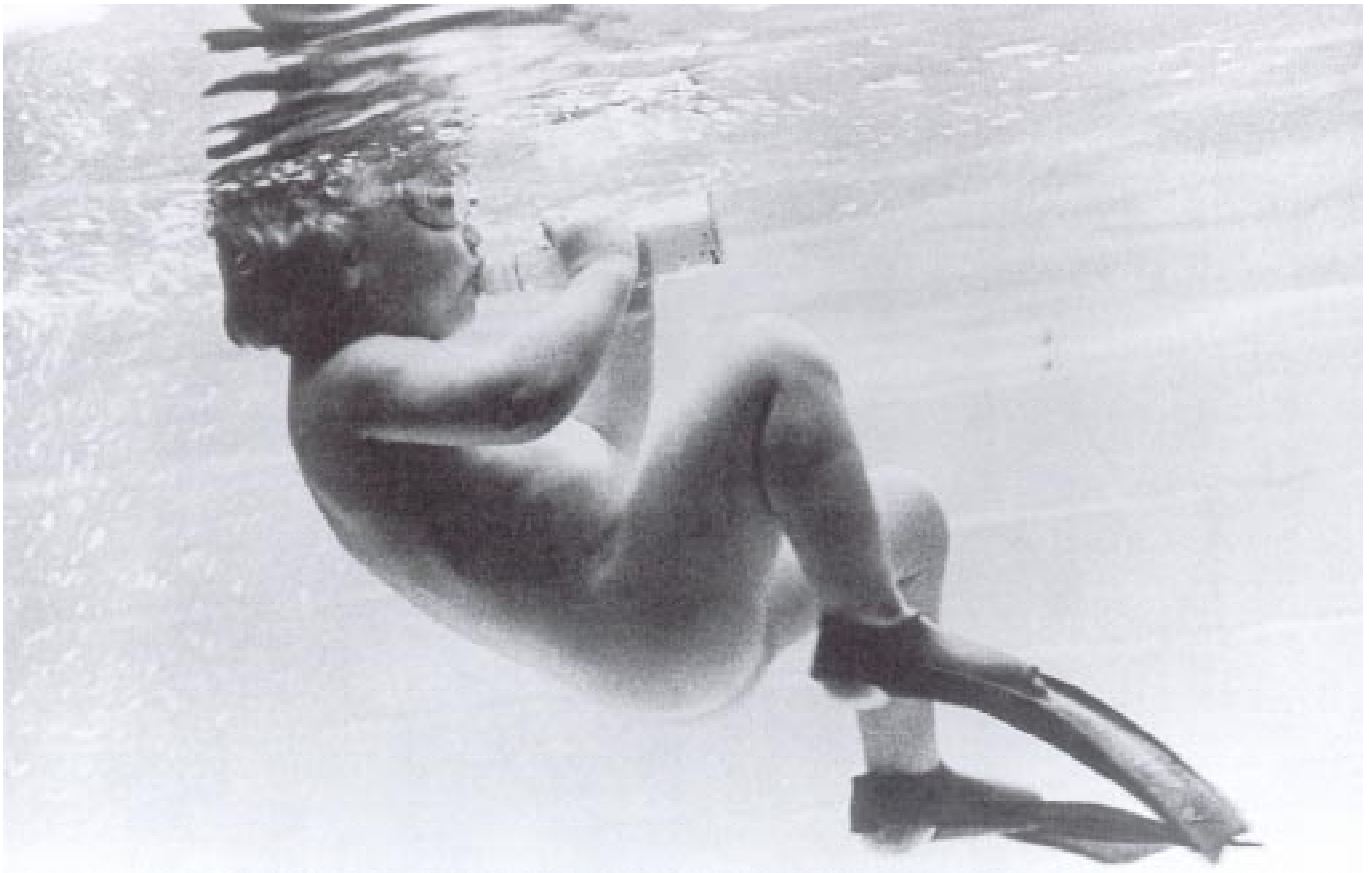


tute can aspire to be successful and become rich, if they have the talent. This possibility is, of course, extremely attractive to many children and parents, both in the South and in the North. But the trade and commercialization of young athletes is a tough business often ruled by greedy intermediaries or managers. In Brazil, managers search in remote areas for talented 11-to-14-year-old football players. They offer a US \$10,000 contract, an enormous amount for those living in poverty, to the parents of the ones

three years with no prospects for the future. Africa is another region where many such uncontrolled transactions take place. Young teenagers, usually between the ages of 14 or 15, are offered money and brought to Europe to train with top-level football clubs. But again, most of them will fail, and will sometimes not even be provided the money to return home. This was the case for Marc-Hervé Cissé, a young football talent from Côte d'Ivoire. He was recruited in the early 1990s by Paris-St.

French football star in the 1990s. Rarely do managers discover a player who will become the next sensation, but if they do find that one, the money they make will pay many times over for the time spent on all the unsuccessful investments. And that is just what children are in the eyes of many traders: commodities to be traded with no regard for their human development.

If football clubs give no consideration to the developmental needs of the child, especially with regard to education and



Some can swim before they can walk.

they identify as the most promising. The children are sent to train with professional clubs, often living far away from their families in big cities. Nearly all of them will never qualify for the professional teams and will be rejected from the training programme after two or

Germain, but fired in 1993 without receiving any form of compensation for his time with the team, and without a residence permit.

“Children, bought with money given to the families, is a practice that must be denounced”, said Bernard Pardo, a

social integration, then one could call this buying of children a form of economic exploitation as defined in article 32 of the Convention. When traded as commodities and in an environment of pressure, coercion and exploitation, children could be considered victims of a

form of trafficking and sale as understood by article 35 of the Convention. They might even be victims of a contemporary form of slavery.

Children's right to freedom of association

Millions of children around the world are involved in organized sports and are playing in official sports clubs to which they have generally paid a membership fee. When a talented young athlete wishes to move to another club, the club of origin often requests a payment to release the child, which also rewards it for its efforts in having "moulded a champion". But in this type of trade, the interests and wishes of young athletes are not systematically respected. There are many examples in which young athletes were not allowed to leave their club to join another because the amount of money requested by the club of origin was too high for the new club. In such instances, the right of the child to freedom of association, as recognized by article 15 of the Convention, is violated. In basketball and football, several cases have been brought to the courts in Belgium and Luxembourg with judges consistently recognizing the right of the child athlete to freely choose his or her team. In a famous case, which set a legal precedent, a Belgian judge went as far as to declare that children are not "negotiable commodities" and the "slavery has been prohibited in our country for centuries".

Young athletes also have opinions

One of the four underlying principles of the Convention is the right of every child to express his or her views "freely in all matters affecting the child, the view of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" (article 12.1). Through this principle, the Convention challenges traditional attitudes and policies which usually regard the child as a passive object and therefore not one to be seriously

involved in the decision-making process. The Convention promotes participation of children in all aspects of their lives, including in competitive sports. To properly implement this principle, the Convention also recognizes the "responsibilities, rights and duties of the parents [...] to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance" in the child's exercise of his or her rights (article 5).

It is fundamental that children involved in competitive sports be given the freedom to express their views, and that these views be given due weight. Children involved in intensive training have a very particular lifestyle, often isolated and marginalized from other children. At an early age, they are faced with career-defining options, and it is crucial that they be fully involved in the decisions which affect them. In this regard, it is essential that young athletes be provided the "freedom to seek, receive and impart information" (article 13.1) and that states and sporting authorities ensure "that the child access information [...] aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health", as recognized in article 17. When Elodie Lussac, a top French gymnast, fell from the balance beam and injured her back so badly that she had to end her career, she remembered repeatedly complaining the day before about her back, which still hurt from a previous injury. But her coaches did not take her comments seriously and pushed her to compete despite her pain. "They told me that I had to compete", she recalls. Clearly, this is an instance where the child's opinion was not given due weight, with tragic consequences.

The right to learn

Education and competitive sports are not easy to combine for young athletes who train several hours a day. For that reason, special school programmes for top athletes exist in most Western countries,

although their quality varies. Since the 1970s, residential training centres where young athletes live, train and learn, have been established. These centres have been severely criticized for the very poor scholastic performance of students, and, despite a gruelling training programme, the relatively small number of champions they "produce".

According to the Convention, states are obliged to make primary school compulsory and available for all children free of cost (article 28.1). But in gymnastics, as



Triumph and disappointment

well as other sports, many child athletes drop out of primary school. Often, they try to continue their education through correspondence courses, but this solution frequently appears to be an illusion. Top athletes devote all their energy and concentration to their training pro-



A budding fencer.

grammes. How can they also manage the pressure of school and maintain acceptable grade levels, a situation which is difficult for most children?

Education is obviously a vital right for every child. Though many top athletes have succeeded in life thanks to sports and without finishing secondary school, even primary sometimes, this fundamental right should not be neglected by parents, trainers and sports federations. It must be remembered by everyone involved that, among the thousands of children enrolled in intensive training programmes all over the world, less than 5% will succeed and win the big prizes

and lucrative commercial contracts. The other 95% will never earn a living from sports, despite considerable sacrifices, and will have to choose another career path. If they lack a good education they can very quickly find themselves at a dead end.

The influential role of parents

Intensive training programmes in many sports, such as gymnastics, skating, football, tennis are often a considerable financial burden for parents. In skating and gymnastics, a top child athlete might cost up to US \$30,000 a year in coaching, equipment and travel expenses. Tom

Rusedski, the father of Greg, a top-ten Canadian-British tennis player, admitted having spent all his money on his son. US \$400,000 over five years (or US \$80,000 a year). This money is not of course necessarily lost, as it may help the child to succeed in his or her career. At 18, Martina Hingis, the Swiss tennis star, has made nearly US \$7 million in official prizes, not including her million-dollar commercial contracts. In other sports, children might earn scholarships to prestigious schools and universities thanks to their sport performances. Parents going into debt to pay their child's sports training is not an exceptional situation. It is a problematic one when it increases the pressure on the child to perform, and creates guilt feelings when he or she does not succeed.

Assaulting officials

Sport is more about fun and less about scores for young children. But parents do not always share this innocent motivation. In the adult world, winning is often more important than how you play the game. Parents' urge to win can be a stressful situation for young athletes, already dealing with the expectations of their friends and trainers. When children feel that the interest and/or pressure placed upon them by their parents is too much, they express the need to train far away from them.

In some instances, the obsession of parents to see their child win has proved so strong that they behave violently. Hysterical parents insulting umpires, officials or other children and parents from opposing teams, seems to be an increasing trend, though there are no official records of these types of incidents.

Sportsmanship or war?

During the Greek civilization and since the renaissance of the Olympic Movement at the end of the 19th century, sports has been the vehicle for strong universal values, such as peace, tolerance, and friendship. The Olympic ideal,

as formulated in the *Olympic Charter*, defines sports in a noble and generous spirit, which does not necessarily correspond to reality. For children, sports can be a wonderful educational tool. When adequately taught and practised, competitive sports can achieve the educational aims set by the Convention, which “shall be directed to [...] the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential [...] The preparation of the child for a responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes and friendship among peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups, and persons of indigenous origin” (article 29). In all societies, adults - whether they are parents, teachers, politicians or government officials - have a tremendous responsibility in educating children. This is also the case in sports. Though competitive sports generate winners as well as losers, they still can be a framework for a good education, as long as the rights of the child are fully respected by adults and children alike. When money, doping, cheating, nationalism, excessive pressure, abuse and exploitation take over, then sportsmanship is seriously threatened.

Sportsmanship is not an obstacle to reaching the top; rather, it is a moral barrier to the many deviant and unhealthy aspects of competitive sports. Many Olympic champions are recognized for their integrity and sense of fair play. But not all adults create an environment that favours the spirit of sportsmanship among young athletes.

Enjoy, win and bloom

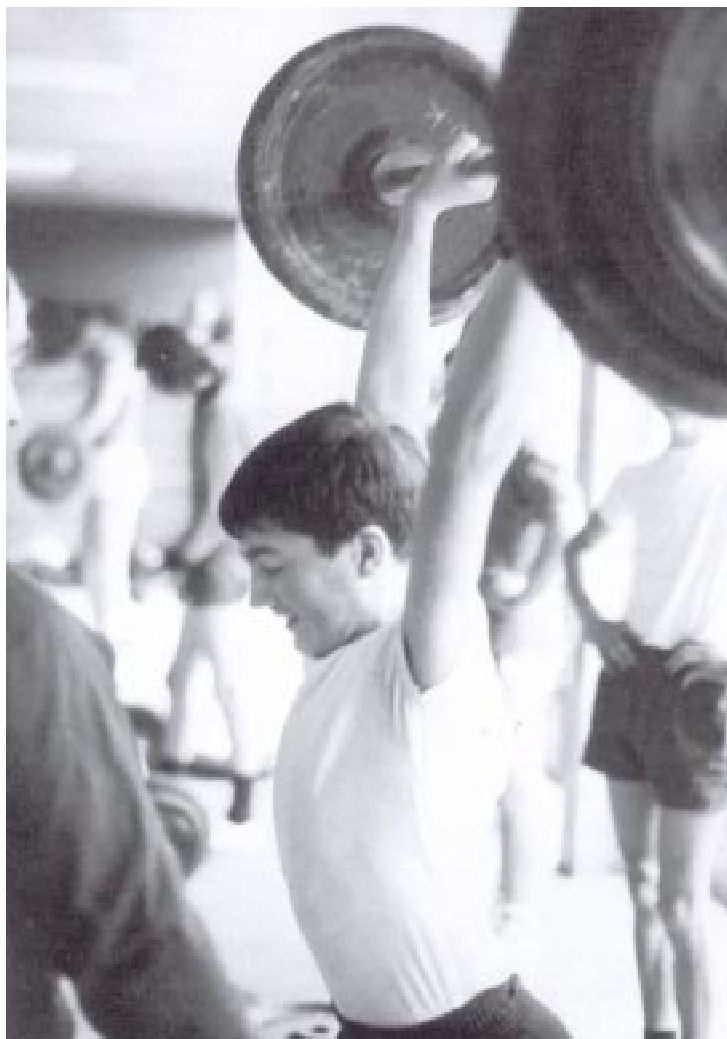
In view of the extremely positive role competitive sport can play, it can therefore serve as a unique implementation tool of the principles and provisions set by the Convention. For example, sports has proved to be a strong inclusion activity for vulnerable children, such as those with disabilities, those in poor

communities, children from immigrant families, and those belonging to indigenous or minority groups.

Sports is generally a wonderful activity for the development of the child. But the perversions of competition, especially the practice of intensive training, can turn the qualities of sports into human rights violations. If approximately 70% of children derive only benefits from competitive sports, 20% are at risk, and roughly 10% are abused or exploited. The objective of the Convention is to recognize rights by setting minimum standards to be respected by states for the benefit of all children.

Competitive sports are also an excellent instrument for children to reach their full potential. But winning does not always go along with this. Adults, whether parents, coaches, or state or sports officials, have the moral and legal obligation to enforce the human rights of children involved in competitive sports. Winning cannot be set as a legitimate objective if it implies any forms of abuse, violence or exploitation.

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Giving it your best effort.