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Sport and social entrepreneurship in Germany: exploring athlete perspectives on an emerging field

Athlete perspectives on an emerging field

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Abstract

Purpose – Athletes are increasingly perceived as important drivers of entrepreneurship and social change. As a result, increasing research and activity has attempted to engage athletes in both entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. Against this backdrop, the authors aim to provide insights on how high-level athletes in Germany understand entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship and their perceptions of (social) entrepreneurship as a potential career pathway.

Design/methodology/approach – A survey was designed for athletes to assess their social entrepreneurship-related skills and attitudes. This survey is based on Capella Peris *et al.* (2020) who developed and validated a social entrepreneurship questionnaire for use in the physical education sector. To deepen the authors' understanding of the initial survey results, a structured focus group was conducted with an additional set of five high-level German athletes.

Findings – Both the survey results and the focus group indicate that athletes have reservations about starting businesses or social enterprises, and that formal support on the topic is limited.

Research limitations/implications – This paper suggests numerous possible avenues for future research, both related to athletes and sport social entrepreneurship more generally. The authors also suggest that athlete career programmes need to provide more support for athletes who wish to venture in entrepreneurial activities.

Originality/value – This study answers numerous calls within sport entrepreneurship literature to further integrate athletes into research in the area.

Keywords Sport, Social entrepreneurship, Athletes, Dual career, Entrepreneurship

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as an important area of activity within Germany and elsewhere. Over the last 20 years, research on the topic has grown (Rey-Martí *et al.*, 2016), and numerous social entrepreneurship initiatives have arisen, including within Germany (Scheuerle *et al.*, 2013; Birkhölzer, 2015). Though there is no common, universally accepted definition of social entrepreneurship, social enterprises are hybrid enterprises concerned with identifying and solving societal problems, as opposed to being focused solely on profit-making (Dees, 1998).

As social entrepreneurship has grown, an increasing number of research and programmes have begun exploring the connections between sport and social entrepreneurship (Ratten, 2020; Maier, 2019; Constantin *et al.*, 2020; Peterson and Schenker, 2018b; Bjärsholm, 2017). Indeed, sport is, on its own merits, recognised as a potential vehicle for social development. Numerous individuals and organisations recognise that sport has the power to promote education, social integration, peacebuilding and healthy living (Beutler, 2008; Dudfield and



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Dingwall-Smith, 2015; Ratten, 2020). As such, there has been an increasing emphasis on social entrepreneurship in sport in order to capture sports' potential societal impact (Ratten, 2020).

In particular, athletes are seen as important drivers of sport-based entrepreneurship (Ratten, 2015, 2018; Nauright and Wiggins, 2020) and are viewed as potential agents for social change (Pelak, 2005; Miller and Laczniak, 2011; May, 2009). Against this backdrop, entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship have been increasingly linked to the concept of dual careers of athletes. The notion of a dual career "involves engagement in the sports domain and the domains of work" (European Commission, 2012, p. 8). The topic of dual careers has emerged along with the increasing recognition of the challenges athletes often face combining their sporting careers with education or work (European Commission, 2012). Many athletes dedicate significant time to their sporting pursuits, yet sports careers are generally short, and athletes need to plan for their non-sporting careers concurrently. In that regard, entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship are seen as increasingly viable options for athletes (Ratten, 2011, 2020; Constantin *et al.*, 2020). Numerous European projects have also begun linking these topics (Furim Institut, 2019; TwIn, 2019; FH Joanneum University of Applied Sciences, 2017).

Despite this emerging connection between sport, athletes and social entrepreneurship, there is limited academic literature focusing on athletes and their perceptions of entrepreneurship or social entrepreneurship (Ratten, 2015, 2018; Maitland *et al.*, 2015). And, more generally, sport and social entrepreneurship remains an understudied topic limited to few authors (Bjärsholm, 2017). Therefore, our study aims to add to this emerging area of enquiry and present exploratory results of a survey and focus group discussion with high-level athletes from Germany. Specifically, we focus on how the selected athletes understand entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship and their perceptions of (social) entrepreneurship as a potential career pathway.

The following paper proceeds in three steps. First, we will present an overview of the current literature on social entrepreneurship and sport entrepreneurship, focusing on the German context in which the athletes are situated. Then, the methodology and results will be outlined. Finally, the implication of the results will be discussed, focusing both on future research and practice.

Social entrepreneurship in Germany

The idea of social entrepreneurship was used for the first time by Howard Bowen in 1953 (Bowen, 2013) and was arguably popularised by Bill Drayton, the founder of Ashoka, in the 1980s (Constantin *et al.*, 2020). Despite this history and increasing attention given to the topic, a standard definition of social entrepreneurship has yet to emerge. This is due, among other reasons, to the diversity of organisations that can be viewed as having a social orientation and can thus be credibly described as social enterprises. Broadly speaking, though, social entrepreneurship can be understood as hybrid enterprises concerned with identifying and solving societal problems, as opposed to being focused solely on profit-making (Dees, 1998).

In recognition of this definitional diversity, a study commissioned by the German Federal Ministry of Economics and Energy places social enterprises on a scale, ranging from purely non-commercial welfare groups to profit-maximising commercial operations (Unterberg *et al.*, 2015).

Elsewhere, Scheuerle *et al.* (2013) take a narrower view of social entrepreneurship in Germany. Rather, they view social entrepreneurship as defined by three main components: social objective, innovation and market-based income. Following this definition, over 1,000 social enterprises were identified in Germany (Scheuerle *et al.*, 2013).

Indeed, the social entrepreneurship sector is becoming more recognised and coordinated within Germany. For instance, the German Federal Government explicitly mentioned the

importance of social entrepreneurship in their multi-party coalition agreement. And, in 2017, Social Entrepreneurship Deutschland e.V. (SEND e.V.) was established to represent the interests of social entrepreneurs in Germany ([Social Entrepreneurship Deutschland e.V., 2020](#)). Today, over 350 organisations from the business and social sectors are now members of the platform. However, despite this increased activity and support, no literature has been located assessing the sector’s overall impact in Germany.

Sport and social entrepreneurship in Germany

Sport is seen as a potential vehicle for social development and can confer numerous societal benefits ([Ratten, 2020](#); [Dudfield and Dingwall-Smith, 2015](#); [Beutler, 2008](#)). As such, sports-related social entrepreneurship can potentially contribute to goals related “to poverty alleviation and sustainable development” ([Ratten, 2020](#), p. 9).

Much like social entrepreneurship itself, sport and social entrepreneurship is a diffuse field and is subject to numerous interpretations ([Bjärsholm, 2017](#); [Peterson and Schenker, 2018a](#)). Looking at cases from Sweden, Peterson and Schenker identify some of the defining characteristics of sport social entrepreneurship there. They argue that sport is used as a means, not as a goal, that profit is used as a means, not a goal, and that activities cross boundaries between different societal sectors ([Peterson and Schenker, 2018a](#)) (see [Table 1](#)).

Within Germany, there has been little empirical work done on sport and social entrepreneurship. Most notably, [Maier \(2019\)](#) has sought to define and map out the German sport social entrepreneurship sector. However, many of the 28 organisations identified, such as Right to Play or Skateistan, are more appropriately defined as nonprofits or charitable organisations. Nonetheless, some organisations meet the criteria set by [Scheuerle et al. \(2013\)](#), namely social objective, innovation and market-based income. A sampling of such organisations is presented in [Table 2](#) below.

	Non-commercial organisation			Commercial organisation		
	Welfare Group	Welfare Group incl. acquisition elements	Nonprofit social enterprise	Profit social enterprise	Social responsible organisation	Commercialorganisation
Purpose of enterprise	Social Mission	Social Mission	Social Mission incl. little profit	Social Mission incl. profit	Social responsible maximising of profit	Maximising of profit
Legal form	e.V., gUG, gGmbH	e.V., gUG, gGmbH, gAG	eG, UG, gGmbH, gAG	eG, UG, gGmbH, AG	UG, GmbH, AG	UG, GmbH, AG
Financial sustainability	Little commercial sales, depending on donations and subsidies	>50–75% cost recovery by commercial sales	cost-effective	(potentially) commercially viable	(potentially) commercially viable	(potentially) commercial viable
Profit distribution	No	No	Typically no, exceptions possible	Typically yes	Yes	Yes
Statutory mission	Yes	Yes	Yes	Typically no, exceptions possible	No	No

Table 1.
Typology of social enterprises in Germany ([Unterberg et al., 2015](#))

Company	Field of work	Location
yoganect	yoganect is a social network and technology developer for the yoga market. The platform allows users to find, book and pay for their personalised yoga offer in a mobile and convenient way	Berlin
RE-ATHLETE	Sportswear designed to help protect wildlife and protect the oceans from the plethora of plastic garbage and nets that have been raging for centuries and are a deadly trap for many marine creatures. Their sportswear is made from ECONYL nylon fibre, which is recycled from old fishing nets and other plastic waste that is recovered directly from the oceans and industry	Braunschweig
SUPR Sports	A nonprofit social enterprise focused on social sports projects, offering an open platform for qualification, networking and visibility. The goal is a fairer, healthier and more peaceful society through social sports projects that work more efficiently and effectively	Hamburg
Fairplaid	A crowdfunding website, on which a single person or a club can raise money for various projects, regardless of the sporting level or the fundraising goal	Stuttgart

Table 2.
Sample of sport-related social enterprises in Germany

Dual careers, athletes and entrepreneurship

The notion of a dual career for athletes involves engagement in both sports and work-related activities, such as employment or training (European Commission, 2012). However, athletes face significant challenges successfully combining these two strands. The topic of dual careers has emerged along with the increasing recognition of the challenges athletes face combining their sporting careers with education or work (European Commission, 2012). Successfully combining a sporting career and vocational training is something very few athletes achieve and more than a third describe their financial futures as not being secured (Breuer and Wicker, 2010).

In response, numerous countries and sporting organisations have begun developing and implementing dual career support programmes (Aquilina and Henry, 2010). For example, the German Olympic Sport Association (DOSB) established a programme improving the coordination of academic studies and competitive sport as well as fostering the cooperation between sport associations and elite sport schools (Deutscher Olympischer SportBund, 2013). As part of this programme, the DOSB offers numerous services to elite athletes, including assistance with finding educational opportunities, internships or employment. However, there is currently no discernible entrepreneurial component. Nonetheless, on the European-level, we see increasing recognition of the merits of connecting athletes with entrepreneurial support or education. Numerous actors have called for the integration of entrepreneurship-related offers as part of dual career programmes (EU Athletes, 2015; Hakkers, 2019), and many pan-European projects have emerged on the topic (Furim Institut, 2019; TwIn, 2019; FH Joanneum University of Applied Sciences, 2017).

Method

Survey

First, a survey was designed for athletes to assess their social entrepreneurship-related skills and attitudes. This survey is based on Capella Peris *et al.* (2020) who developed and validated a social entrepreneurship questionnaire for use in the physical education context. This survey includes a set of 30 questions measuring 17 features relevant to social entrepreneurship. Questions were presented as a series of statements (e.g. "I have seriously considered starting my own business") for which participants had to indicate their agreement on a five-point Likert scale (1 = I do not agree at all to 5 = I agree completely). For this study's purposes, the questionnaire was translated into German by the second author and revised by the first author.

The survey was distributed through a convenience sampling approach and was shared via online groups and Facebook pages typically associated with high-level German athletes. Given the small sample size and cross-sectional nature of the survey, only descriptive analysis was performed.

Focus group

To deepen our understanding of the initial survey results, a structured focus group was conducted with an additional set of high-level German athletes (see [Table 3](#)). In total, five professional and semi-professional German athletes took part. The discussion took place online in June 2020 [1], was led by a single interviewer (the second author) and was digitally recorded. At the outset of the focus group, each participant was explained the purpose of the discussion. Verbal consent was obtained to record the discussion and use content from the discussion in publication.

The focus group began with a short introductory round to make participants feel more comfortable with the setting. After that, the interviewer asked the group a set of eight questions to understand the athlete's knowledge, perception and interest in entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. The interviewer took notes during the discussion, and participant responses were then selectively transcribed for each question. Both authors then reviewed transcription, notes and recordings.

Results

Survey

The social entrepreneurship survey was completed by 29 high-level German athletes (15 male, 14 female, $M = 22.4$ years old). Of that group, three athletes described themselves as competing on the regional level, ten on the national level and 16 on the international level. Most athletes ($n = 24$, 82.8%) reported both working and competing in their sport simultaneously.

In terms of survey results, the participating athletes reported the lowest average scores on the features related to creativity ($M = 3.07$) and initiative ($M = 3.28$) and highest in the features concerning cooperation ($M = 4.34$) and goal-oriented motivation ($M = 4.54$). The individual statement "I have seriously considered starting my own business" received the lowest average agreement ($M = 2.31$) whereas "I am a person determined to achieve my goals" generated the highest average agreement ($M = 4.66$). Full average results for each of the 17 features can be found in [Table 4](#).

Focus group

The focus group participants have a reasonably clear notion of entrepreneurship and can name numerous examples from their immediate environments. For the athletes, the term entrepreneurship means to be your own boss and independently manage your working time. Given this, they see aspects such as "managing your time" (KF) and coming up with "the right

Initials	Gender	Sport
KF	F	Professional Basketball Player
MB	F	Semi-professional Basketball Player
LS	F	Professional sailor
LH	F	Semi-professional handball player
AS	F	National Sepaktraw athlete

Table 3.
Overview of focus
group participants

Feature	Description	Average
Creativity	Ability to form new ideas or projects	3.07
Initiative	Ability to start new things	3.28
Leadership	Ability to take lead of a group of people or project	3.47
Belonging to well-informed social networks	Access to groups that can lead to knowledge or opportunities	3.55
Ability to identify opportunities	Ability to recognise and take advantage of occasions or situations	3.59
Social awareness	Awareness of situations that require attention and actions to improve society	3.69
Ability to change	ability to modify and adapt their position or behaviour based on existing needs	3.74
Ability to create ideas	Ability to form and generate ideas, concepts or opinions	3.88
Ability to take risks	Ability to accept and take risk	3.93
Resilience	Ability to endure and persist despite negative results	4.00
Ability to learn and evolve	Ability to acquire and assimilate knowledge through study or experience	4.05
Commitment and coherence	Consistent effort and performance on tasks	4.07
Responsibility	Recognition and acceptance of consequences	4.09
Confidence	Belief in one's abilities and opportunities	4.26
Coexistence and respect for public affairs	Respect for different people, ideas and beliefs	4.28
Cooperation	Ability to work with others towards a common goal	4.34
Goal-oriented motivation	Ability to intrinsically set and pursue goals	4.53

Table 4.
Average results
($n = 29$) for social
entrepreneurship
features

Source(s): Adapted from [Capella-Peris et al. \(2020\)](#)

product” through “innovative ideas” (LH) as highly important in the entrepreneurial context. This understanding primarily reflects common definitions of entrepreneurship, which encompass ideas of independence, innovation and invention.

The athletes are also familiar with entrepreneurship in different ways. Many of them know coaches or fellow athletes who have started businesses or engage in freelance activities such as coaching or sport equipment maintenance. The focus group participants themselves also frequently register themselves as business entities (for example, as a German private partnership, GbR): “we as athletes have to establish our own GbR to save taxes and acquire sponsors” (LH). And KF is already engaged with social entrepreneurship to some extent. She has her own logo, produces t-shirts and donates the money to hospitals or other facilities. She plans to create hoodies and bags as well, but for now, she only has shirts due to her capacities as an elite athlete.

There are mixed feelings within the group about pursuing entrepreneurship or social entrepreneurship. Though three of the athletes wish to become independent entrepreneurs after their sporting careers, the other two feel that the insecurity associated with entrepreneurship is too high. One athlete mentioned that it would be terrifying to have so much responsibility not only for herself, but also for other employees: “I would rather go to work, do my job and go home” (LH). Another athlete even drew parallels between the risks associated with professional sport and the risks associated with entrepreneurship: “being an athlete comes with the same risks. You have no guarantee to have a contract next season, you might get injured and you cannot plan for the future” (KF).

As with within the current literature, social entrepreneurship is much less clearly defined for the group. Some associated social entrepreneurship with charitable organisations such as German Sport Aid or the Red Cross. Others understood it as organisations that “emphasise social aspects rather than profit” (MB). The interviewed athletes have only a nascent

understanding of social entrepreneurship. However, as the interviewer provided additional clarification on social enterprise, there was considerable interest in the topic. Some even felt this area was relevant for them and their futures: “we clearly need more information on the topic, for now, none of us had heard about social entrepreneurship before, although it is super important for us athletes” (LH). Other also connected their sporting experiences to the development of skills, such as teamwork or mental strength, that could be beneficial in a (social) entrepreneurship context: “we should mobilise these experiences and use them for a future job that is beneficial for society” (LS).

Overall, it was a consistent theme that more information and support are needed for both entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. Though many athletes are quite familiar with or even engaged in entrepreneurial activities when it comes to establishing a business entity or entrepreneurial skill development, support is limited and “it is rather learning by doing” (LS).

Discussion and conclusion

Athletes are increasingly perceived as valuable drivers of entrepreneurship and social change (Ratten, 2015, 2020; Nauright and Wiggins, 2020; Pelak, 2005; Constantin *et al.*, 2020; May, 2009). As a result, increasing research and activity has attempted to engage athletes in entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship (FH Joanneum University of Applied Sciences, 2017; Furim Institut, 2019; Hakkers, 2019; EU Athletes, 2015). Against this backdrop, this paper aimed to provide insights on how high-level athletes in Germany understand entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship and their perceptions of (social) entrepreneurship as a potential career pathway.

Our work is exploratory and could certainly benefit from additional data collection or different research methods. Nonetheless, these findings indicate that there are certain contradictions between athlete responses and current dual career activities. As indicated by both the survey results and the focus group, the participating athletes have reservations about starting businesses or social enterprises. Indeed, research might overemphasise the potential entrepreneurial role of athletes. After facing so much uncertainty in their sporting careers, it is conceivable that many athletes would instead seek out stable, regular employment.

On the other hand, it is possible that these reservations come from the limited awareness of the nature and opportunities presented by entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. Athletes in the focus group mainly reported getting in touch with business or entrepreneurship via acquaintances or because they had to secure funding for their sporting activities. At the German level, entrepreneurial support does not seem to be part of the athlete dual career support offering, and entrepreneurship is also not mentioned within the EU Guidelines on Dual Careers (European Commission, 2012). These absences could explain some of the reservations noted in this study.

The above suggests numerous possible avenues for future research and practice. The skills developed by high-level athletes are often perceived as highly suitable for entrepreneurial contexts (Ratten, 2015). More research is needed to understand the perceptions, skills, role and impact of athletes within social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship in general. Our results indicate that athletes have significant reservations about both entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship. In fact, in the survey, the respondents averaged under 4 in eight of the thirteen categories. The lowest self-assessment scores came for critical entrepreneurial skills such as initiative and creativity. This echoes other literature, which also finds comparably low values for such traits (e.g. Capella-Peris *et al.*, 2020; Matsangos *et al.*, 2020). More work needs to be done to understand better athletes’ (social) entrepreneurial skills and where gaps exist. By doing so,

dual career and sport entrepreneurship programmes can focus on the skills most needed by athletes, in turn encouraging more athletes to take up social enterprise activities. For instance, our findings suggest that areas such as creativity, innovation and opportunity identification are potential gaps. More broadly, it is clear that dual career programmes should provide more support for athletes who wish to start businesses or social enterprises. Indeed, as the responses indicated, some German athletes must engage in some form of entrepreneurial activity to support their sporting careers. This shows that the need for further support is not only theoretical but a lived reality for many.

Outside of this athlete-centred perspective, there are also abundant research avenues surrounding sport and social entrepreneurship's utility and outcomes. Though sport is appealing and seen as possessing qualities that make it a potentially powerful vehicle for social change (Ratten, 2020; Beutler, 2008; Dudfield and Dingwall-Smith, 2015), we would caution against assuming that sport confers automatic, positive social benefits. Sport can reproduce existing power structures or reinforce dominant neoliberal narratives (Hartmann and Kwauk, 2011; Darnell and Hayhurst, 2011). Therefore, it is crucial to effectively design and evaluate sport and social entrepreneurship initiatives whilst being mindful of the broader socio-cultural context underpinning those initiatives.

Finally, as illustrated by the diverging responses regarding social entrepreneurship, it is clear that more work needs to be done to better define and conceptualise sport and social entrepreneurship. As Bjärsholm (2017) notes, little research (including this paper) defines "the concept of sport and social entrepreneurship, giving rise to potential misinterpretations and diffuse and imprecise research" (p. 202). For the field of sport and social entrepreneurship to progress, such definitional clarity is sorely needed.

Note

1. Due to the situation regarding COVID-19 at the time of the focus group, the authors decided against hosting the discussion in a physical setting.

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