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PROFESSIONAL ATHLETES  
AS A SOCIAL GROUP: STATUS,  
PROSPECTS OF POST-SPORTS LIFE

Specialty: 22.00.04 -  
Social structure, social institutions and processes

**Abstract**

Dissertation for a Degree of  
Candidate of Sociological Sciences

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*The relevance of the research topic* stems from the fact that studying the social status, socialization, as well as prospects for post-sports life of professional athletes as a social group is of paramount importance in identifying and further resolving social contradictions in the development of Russian professional sports. The consideration of these issues determines the setting and development of directions for solving the key problems of the development of professional sports and professional athletes.

From the point of view of sociological theory and methodology, the problematics of professional sports consists in identifying the distinctive group characteristics of professional athletes that they acquire in the process of socialization. The image of a professional athlete in modern society is determined by the influence of sports social practices on the nature of professional development, as well as on forming a special configuration of the professional athlete's personality within the framework of the institute of professional sports, during intensive body-oriented practices, participating in training (camps) and competitions, concentrating on producing competitive results, as well as regular and stable demonstration of high achievements. The identification of group features is associated with a number of methodological difficulties caused by the closed nature of the social group of athletes, the actual manifestations of the "totality of institutions" (E. Goffman), as well as the lack of public recognition of the very fact that an acute problem of resocialization of professional athletes exists. The perception of professional athletes is often determined by media figures, whose image demonstrates only certain aspects of such activity, and this distorts both the understanding of the state of professional sports in general and the assessment of the number of professionals from sports.

From an applied, socially oriented point of view, the importance of sports - including professional sports - in society is high. Through sports, many issues are resolved, including the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, maintaining the status of the state through victories in international competitions, and, as a result, ensuring the solidarity of the population - its positive civic identity. In addition, it is possible to



note the receipt of profit from paying for attending competitions to the sale of sporting goods.

The need to study athletes as a social group stems from the fact that, first, in modern Russian sport complex and contradictory processes are taking place that are associated with the expansion of its representation and its increasing integration into various types of social relations: political, commercial, media, etc., starting from government policy to the fully commercialized entertainment industry for many Russians.

Second, the issues of social "legalization" of professional sports in Russia and its public recognition have not yet received full institutionalization. Life in sports ends at a certain period, and a difficult stage of entering a new life begins that is associated with a new profession, realizing oneself as a member of new social communities, and defining new life prospects.

The standard filling of the stage of a sports career and subsequent activity in another professional sphere often turns out to be so different that it sometimes determines the insurmountable difficulties of resocialization and the adaptive period itself. The peculiarities of this process are largely determined by the trends taking place in the sport itself and in the social spheres and environments in which a former athlete is included, which, in turn, causes an increase in the level of requirements for the training of a modern athlete as a professional in their sport, as well as for the future types of working and social life.

Former athletes solve the problems of post-sports resocialization and adaptation themselves, without any help from the state or society, and not always successfully. There is a need for an in-depth sociological analysis of social characteristics and the most effective ways of adapting professional athletes to the conditions of post-sports life.

Third, the formation of a system of former professional athletes' social adaptation should be aimed at creating the conditions necessary for their establishment as professionals in new spheres and types of working life, as well as inclusion in new social environments, searching for not only external but also

internal resources of supporting a group of professional athletes.

Engaging in professional sports is becoming similar to many types of work in the field of show business and professional art, especially ballet or circus, where artists retire at a certain period of life (rather early). Therefore, the problems of inclusion in the post-professional phase of their life are in many respects similar to those of professional athletes. However, athletes experience these problems far more acutely due to the lack of social resources sufficient for successful and painless adaptation to post-sports life.

The foregoing convinces one that studying the problems of the social formation of athletes, the development of professional athletes as a social group, as well as social prospects and difficulties associated with the end of a professional career requires a separate sociological study. The identified problems require theoretical comprehension and empirical verification. The sociological analysis allows the authors to consider athletes of a high (international) level as a professional group whose activity is to produce a certain sports result in exchange for meeting their needs, including acquiring a social status corresponding to achievements, providing material benefits, social and personal self-realization, as well as to analyze problems and the factors influencing the development of the social group of professional athletes, to outline the tendencies of its development, including the reduction of the negative consequences of post-sports socialization and adaptation.

***The purpose of the research*** is to study professional athletes as a special social group defining their status and prospects of post-sports life.

In accordance with this purpose, the following ***tasks*** were posed and solved in the dissertation:

- 1) to conduct a sociological study of the professional group of athletes, its characteristics in the context of implementing sports social practices and the functioning of the institution of professional sports;
- 2) to consider the socialization of a person within the framework of professional sports, to highlight the sports personality type and its subtypes



depending on the sport, as well as to highlight the resulting elements of the post-sports life strategies of professional athletes;

3) based on the empirical research, to identify the structure and nature of the axiological and normative complex of a professional athlete, status and role attitudes and standards; to test the selected criteria for designating an athlete as a professional; and to correlate the above with the existing ones that are formally recognized in the current legislation;

4) to analyze the social prospects and difficulties of leaving professional sports based on the results of a mass survey and group discussions;

5) to offer a number of practical recommendations aimed at increasing the efficiency of the process of socialization and post-sports resocialization and adaptation of professional athletes.

*The object of the research* is a social group of athletes whose activities are carried out within the framework of the institute of professional sports.

The *subject* of the research is socialization, social status, and prospects of post-sports life of professional athletes.

*The theoretical and methodological basis of the dissertation* research is based on the activity, institutional, axiological, or interactionist approaches.

Based on the activity approach, it was possible to determine and substantiate the specificity of the professional athletes' activity both during the realization of a career and during the period of post-sports socialization.

The institutional approach made possible identifying the influence of formal and informal institutions on the vital activity of a professional athletes' group - from its formation to post-sports adaptation and socialization.

The axiological approach made possible identifying the transformation of the values of a professional athletes' group at different stages of their sports and post-sports careers.

The interactionist approach provides a basis for characterizing the interaction of all actors involved in creating the product of the activity of professional athletes, identifying the roles of each group of actors (athletes themselves, coaches, sports

officials, employers, etc.), determining the influence of the these actors' statuses on the process of activity of a professional athletes' group in building a sports career and post-sports adaptation.

*Scientific results obtained by the author and their novelty.* The dissertation is the first sociological monographic study of professional athletes as a social group in the context of analyzing their social status and prospects for post-sports life. The author's approach to selecting a set of features of a social group of professional athletes is proposed; the sports personality type and its subtypes are highlighted depending on the kind of sport; the characteristic elements of post-sport life strategies of professional athletes are distinguished; the model of a professional athlete's personality is presented that contains the environmental and individually-interactive components of socialization and 11 structural elements; social prospects and difficulties of leaving professional sports are analyzed based on the results of a series of mass polls and group discussions; a number of author's recommendations are proposed, aimed at increasing the efficiency of the process of socialization and post-sports resocialization and adaptation of professional athletes.

The scientific novelty of the study is as follows (the following **provisions submitted for the defense**):

1. The social group of professional athletes and its main characteristics are determined within the scope of the intragroup activity forms. Significant joint activity - engaging in various sports - creates the basis for the cohesion of its members, for building a special hierarchy of relations, and determines the forms of social control.

2. Based on the theoretical and empirical research, the characteristics of the personality of a Russian professional athlete are proposed that reflect the structure of the axiological and normative complex of professional sports, as well as the status and role attitudes and standards of a professional athlete.

3. During the socialization of the personality of a professional athlete in its axiological and normative structure, there is a one-sided orientation towards constant readiness to fully realize the potential of vital and bodily forces to achieve



the highest sports result. This orientation is self-sufficient and does not require that an athlete possess the skills to independently design and implement their own life strategy, as well as using necessary communication technologies for this. Within the framework of the institute of professional sports, life independence and the strategic (adaptive) personality of a professional athlete are considered as a factor that potentially distracts an athlete from maximum concentration on sports. A professional athlete, thus, turns out to be limited in functionality in the social, communal, and even everyday terms, and often has no practical experience of solving pressing problems outside the sphere of sports.

4. For a professional athlete, the sports model of relations serves a universal picture of the world from where they take the methods, ways, and logic of constructing their own reality and from the standpoint of the norms and values □□ of which they evaluate their own behaviour and the behaviour of others, interpret certain situations, and form relations. According to the author's survey, athletes are sure that sport determines their whole life. The main activity steers athletes to a greater extent on achieving a sports result, and not on constructing their own life strategy. This mainly predetermines the difficulties of their post-sports resocialization and adaptation, which, in turn, requires an individual to be able to manage his or her own life, formulate and implement a life strategy, navigate the "political situation" in the industry, be flexible, sociable, be in the centre of events, have the necessary information, and position him- or herself in a certain way, etc.

5. The thesis shows a high level of differentiation of athletes. Membership in the national team opens up the main prospects for career development: the opportunity to participate in status competitions, receive remuneration, be able to fully devote oneself to sports, and train intensively, taking into account all the necessary conditions and means. This is not available for many other promising athletes, which prevents them from achieving high results. In a number of sports, there are professional clubs that employ athletes for professional sports; representatives of other sports are invited to work in various organizations, where they are employed not in their sports specialty, but de facto defend the employer's

“sports honour” by receiving wages for demonstrating sports results (the phenomenon of “snowdrops”).

6. Difficulties in post-sports resocialization and social adaptation are also determined by the specifics of high-performance sports as a professional sphere. The professional sports in Russia have not been “legalized”, and the institutionalization has not been completed. Athletes solve the problems of post-sports resocialization and adaptation independently, without any assistance from the state and society - and not always successfully.

7. The risks of post-sports resocialization and social adaptation were identified: first, the effectiveness of these processes due to the total-institutional specificity of professional sports (closeness, combination of work, rest, and personal life); second, maintaining a high social status after the end of a professional sports career; third, the possibilities of realizing the accumulated social capital (“sports baggage”) in a new field of activity.

8. It has been substantiated that the formation of a system of social adaptation of former professional athletes should be aimed at creating the conditions necessary for their formation as professionals in new spheres and types of labour activity, as well as at integrating in new social environments. It is necessary to formally secure a professional and labour status for athletes of a certain level in order to ensure a well-being corresponding to their social status, as well as the necessary set of social rights and guarantees in terms of their professional work, including pensions. It is necessary to create conditions for establishing a system of post-sports resocialization and adaptation of professional athletes - institutions of psychological assistance, educational institutions, and programs of additional professional education for advanced training and retraining of former professional athletes.

***The theoretical relevance of the research.*** When analysing the social group of professional athletes, the characteristics of personal development in various sports, as well as empirically confirmed problems of post-sports life (socialization, professionalization, adaptation), institutionalized practices of narrowing the life experience of professional athletes in the course of their socialization were



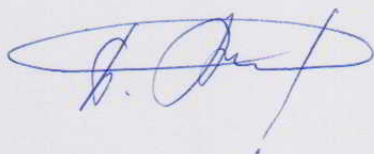
identified. Based on the results of a group discussion with experts (athletes of the Master of Sport, International Class level, and above), it was established that such experience is associated with the artificial isolation of athletes from many life problems and situations, which ultimately makes them less adapted to these problems when their careers are finished, and creates a simplified personality structure and its motivational parameters. The research clearly demonstrated both the existence of this sociological problem and its connection with the post-career fate of professional athletes. Within the scope of this central theoretical conclusion of the research, the following was carried out:

- analysing the essence and identifying the attributes of the social group of professional athletes, taking into account the specifics of the phenomenon of sports, as well as the functioning of the institution of professional sports;
- analysing the socialization of an athlete within the framework of professional sports, identifying post-sports life strategies, presenting a matrix of parameters of a professional-sports social personality type;
- the social prospects and difficulties of leaving professional sports are described based on the results of the author's group discussions;
- recommendations for improving the efficiency of socialization and post-sports resocialization of professional athletes are proposed to government bodies, sports organizations, athletes.

***The practical relevance of the research.*** It has been established that the status of an athlete demonstrating the highest sports result is not professional in our country in the strict sense of the word: at the state level, his or her status as a professional is not fixed. Several proposals have been formulated to optimize the process of social adaptation of professional athletes in the early period of entering post-sports life activities, related to creating conditions for the formation of a system of professional athletes' post-sports adaptation (institutions of psychological assistance, educational institutions, and programs of additional professional education for advanced training and retraining of former professional athletes),

recognizing sports activities, conditions of implementation, remuneration, labour rights, obligations, and guarantees, etc. in an employment contract.

The research topic **corresponds to** the passport of specialty 22.00.04 – “Social structure, social institutions and processes”.

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Ryskin, P.P.