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FUTSAL FOR THE BLIND: A NEW OPPORTUNITY FOR HUNGARIAN PEOPLE WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENTS TO GET ENGAGED IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

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Abstract: The proportion of Hungarian citizens involved in regular physical activity is extremely low and rates are even lower amongst people with disabilities. It is, however, undoubtedly easier to stimulate physical activity if a wide variety of different sports is accessible for them. Blind futsal was introduced by an NGO, Sports and Leisure Association for the Visually Impaired and it has been played in Hungary for only a year.

The present work, by introducing this special sport through document analysis and semi-structured interviews, aims at calling sport professionals' attention to the unexploited opportunities of adapting sports to blind people's special needs. The author also wishes to highlight the power of a civil initiative and the immense effort people with visual impairments themselves make for improving their own sporting opportunities.

Key words: disability, social inclusion, adapted sport, football

Introduction

People who do sports on a regular basis not only experience an increased level of physical fitness, they also become more self-sufficient and are able to perform more focused efforts than before (Szekeres, Dorogi, 2002). The concept of becoming self-sufficient via sport may not make sense in all contexts. However, as regards people with disabilities, self-sufficiency, the mental and physical ability to look after yourself autonomously, is a key to social inclusion and equality. Furthermore, the means of sport raise awareness about disability and therefore contribute to social inclusion (Dorogi et al., 2006). Regarded the huge amount of benefits (physical, mental and social) that sport participation provides for individuals with disabilities, it tends to be easy to accept that 'Sports for people with disabilities are a great investment' as Dorogi et al. say (2006). Participation in regular sport activities helps the individual accept the fact of a disability, and success in sport is rewarding for the person, increments self-esteem and adds to general well-being. It is therefore important to involve the highest possible number of individuals with disabilities in physical activity. The target group's activity levels can, among other factors, be raised by providing a wide, colourful range of accessible sports which are fully adapted to their special needs. The more varied the

sporting opportunities are, the more possible it is that an individual finds the particular sport which most suits his or her character, physical abilities, skills, lifestyle etc.

In Hungary sparetime sports are poorly accessible for people with visual impairments, and disability sports in general fail to have a long tradition. The concept of adapted sport is not known and widely accepted by sport professionals (Gombás, 2011), and future sport experts get no in-depth education on sport and disability (Osváth et al., 2007). As a consequence of the lack of professional attention, an extremely limited amount of literary resources tackle the field of accessible sport. The difficulties listed above are clearly explained by the historical fact that during the decades of state socialism (before the 1989-1990 change of the political and economic regime), disability was considered a deviation, for which the 'treatment' was segregation (Földesi et al., 2009).

The aim of the present work is to call sport professionals' attention to the fact that if the necessary adaptations are provided, even sports like football can be accessible for blind people. Through analysing the small amount of documents related to futsal for the blind, the article introduces the sport, which is almost unknown in Hungary. It examines how the game has been presented by visually impaired activists as a new adapted sport, and investigates challenges of spreading the game. A set of semi-structured interviews were conducted

(N=11) with players, the purpose of which was to gather practical information that serves as a solid basis when taking future action concerning the sport.

What Is Futsal for the Blind?

Terminology

In Hungary disability sports are a field full of question marks, and are almost unknown for a high number of experts. When entering this particular field one may feel uncertain about what to call it and what proper expression to use when referring to the individuals concerned. However, uncertainties concerning the most appropriate terms can be observed in numerous languages. The adapted version of football is referred to with several different terms, and it is debated which one is politically correct and which of the different terms reflects most properly the particular game. On the official website of the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) it is mentioned as football 5-a-side – the name refers to the number of team members. Similarly, the homepage of the Spanish Paralympic Committee mentions the game as ‘fútbol-5’ (football-5), whereas in a Spanish-speaking video on the preparation of the best squads for the London Games it is simply named ‘fútbol para ciegos’ (football for the blind) (Paralímpicos TV, 2012). On the official International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA) homepage details of the game can be found under the name ‘futsal for the blind’ or ‘blind futsal’. The prevailing rules of futsal for the blind were defined by IBSA, and adaptations are based on the FIFA futsal rules. Therefore the most precise name which also offers flexible use might be futsal for the blind. The official, though really informal sounding Hungarian name is ‘vakfoci’ (blind football). Debates on terminology may be endless as wording is a matter of political correctness, ethics, theory and so on, and therefore the present work cannot offer an ever best term either. It is, however, important to point out that 5-a-side football is the term that best meets the requirements of political correctness, as it determines the type of football by pointing out the number of team members, and not by focusing on the fact that players are people with a certain disability. On the other hand, a weakness of the term is exactly the fact that it communicates no additional, clear information about the game and why it is special.

The History of Blind Futsal

Although football is played with long traditions all over the World, futsal for the blind is a new adapted sport. The first World Championship took place no earlier than 1998 in Brazil. The following milestone was the recognition of the sport as a paralympic sport at the 2004 Paralympics in Athens. The most successful squads are those of Brazil, Spain and Argentina, however, at the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games China won the silver medal in the finals.

Rules

The game is played by two teams, each with four outfield players and a goalkeeper. Differently from football played by sighted people, matches are played with no throw-ins and no offside rule (www.paralympic.org). Several conditions must be met in order for the game to be accessible for blind users:

1. Ball: futsal for the blind is played with a regular football with a sound system, e.g. tinny metal balls or bells located inside it.
2. Rebound walls: The game is played on a rectangular pitch of 40X20 metres and the two touch lines (the longer boundary lines) are marked with rebound walls which extend one metre beyond the goal lines on both sides and both ends of the pitch. The rebound walls are 1-1,2 metres tall and fulfil multiple functions: on the one hand, they help orientation. Moreover, the rebound walls provide safe playing conditions for the blind players. The height of the rebound walls is crucial: a smaller size would be extremely dangerous as the players might fall over it. Higher rebound walls, however, would hurt players’ face or head knocking to them and would also modify the acoustics of the pitch. Last but not least, the rebound walls must be strong enough to remain solid even if players of higher body mass bang to them with great impetus.
3. Equipment: accidents in blind futsal do not occur with outstanding frequency. However, beginner teams report more injuries. In order to prevent injuries on the head, players may optionally wear a protective headband.
4. Sighted guidance: blind players’ orientation on the pitch is promoted by sighted team mates. One of them is the goalkeeper who may also act as a guide. The goalkeeper is either fully sighted or partially sighted. Although according to the IBSA rules the goalkeeper may be a low-vision (B2) player, experience shows that most B2 players do not have a visual acuity that would enable them to be goalkeepers. A further important member of a team is the guide or caller who is standing behind the opponents’ goal. The guide’s duties are to signal the position of the goal and to instruct offending players of his or her team. As the composition of teams shows, futsal for the blind is actually an inclusive game, played by sighted and non-sighted people together.

Futsal for the blind in Hungary

A civil initiative

As mentioned in the introduction, the vast majority of Hungarian sport professionals are far from being well-informed about adapted sports. As a consequence, the sports which are considered accessible and appropriate for people with visual impairments are the ones perhaps known from press and media: judo, tandem biking and goalball (a game images of which many Hungarians have come across but have no idea what to

call). This limited list of options is definitely unsatisfactory for the people involved. The initiative of arranging regular blind futsal trainings was taken by blind and partially sighted members of a non-governmental organisation, Sports and Leisure Association for the Visually Impaired, LÁSS. Since it is an adapted sport played by a minority group, namely people with visual impairments, the questions the pioneers had to find answers for were of various natures:

1. Are there any coaches in Hungary who are open and enthusiastic to start working with blind players, and who are also willing to face the challenge being aware that no professional guidance from experienced coaches is at their disposal?
2. Since blind futsal is not only unfamiliar to sighted people but also to people with visual impairments, what is the most effective way of spreading information about the game and recruiting players?
3. What are the rules of the game and how could the team get in-depth information about how matches are played in real life?
4. Is there a football pitch that fulfils all requirements of the adapted sport, so is equipped with rebound walls and is suitable in size?
5. Where can special bell balls be purchased?
6. How can the team find volunteer sighted goalkeepers and callers?
7. Most importantly: what resources can the costs of the coach and the special pitch be financed from?

As a result of several months of research, the instigators of the Hungarian blind futsal project discovered that blind futsal coaching and refereeing seminars were held in Telki (Hungary) in 2010 in the framework of the IBSA Futsal Development Project Europe. The project is supported by UEFA and at the Telki seminars representatives of six Central and Eastern European countries got a first insight to the game (IBSA Futsal Technical Delegate). It must be noted that information on the Hungarian seminars was scarcely spread, and the news in Hungarian did not reach the target group at all. However, an English summary of the seminars published on the IBSA futsal technical department website lead the LÁSS team to one of the participants of the Telki seminar, their future coach, Richárd Benedek. The weekly trainings were started in the gym of the Kindergarten, Primary and Vocational School for the Blind (Budapest) in the Spring of 2011. Being much smaller than a futsal pitch and lacking rebound walls, although the gym was perfect for a start, it was incompatible for playing matches. Therefore, the first months of the training were dedicated to practising kicking techniques and to developing players' spatial orientation.

A further step towards real blind futsal was taken, when the team started training on an outdoor futsal pitch at the beginning of 2012 with the financial support of the Hungarian Football Federation, MLSZ, and the UEFA Grassroots Programme. Playing on the pitch meant new challenges to face for the players:

- as the pitch was significantly bigger than the gym, further progress in orientation was essential,

- a more focused endurance training proved to be necessary, as players quickly got tired of the increased distances they had to run,
- due to the increased distances among players, the goal and the guides, and the different acoustics of the outdoor pitch, players needed time to get used to the new auditory conditions,
- team members had to learn to cooperate, define roles and communicate more efficiently in the open space,
- the coach was facing the challenge of creating exercises through which blind players' safer and more self-confident movement on the pitch could be achieved.

Interviews with players

Data collection

As a part of investigating the status and future perspectives of futsal for the blind in Hungary, semi-structured interviews were made with the whole population of players (N=11). It is clear that data gathered from such a small sample may serve merely as the fundament of further comprehensive empirical research. Players' answers, however, call for the importance of spreading blind futsal in Hungary and, in the broader sense, for creating new sport opportunities for people with visual impairments. The interviews were conducted with the aim of gathering information on

- players' motivations for getting involved in the sport,
- challenges they face as pioneers of futsal for the blind in Hungary,
- benefits of joining the team.

The sample

As for their age, all respondents are between 18-35. 10 players were male, 1 female player takes part in the trainings with varying frequency. All respondents live in the capital city, Budapest, or in the agglomeration. As for their visual acuity, 5 players are totally blind (B1), 5 low-vision (B2) and there are no partially sighted players in the teams.

Results

Respondents take part in trainings with varying frequency, 6 of them take part in almost all weekly trainings, 4 reported to appear on the pitch on average twice a month, and 1 respondent on even less occasions. As for their motivations, differences can be detected among congenitally blind players' answers, and those of players who used to have better visual acuity. A congenitally blind player explained:

'Independently from being sighted or blind, children like running around and are attracted by balls. Football is therefore the most natural sport for them; it is not an artificial thing like golf or goal ball (a ballgame invented for blind people). When I was a child, we used to play football

with my blind classmates. We had no bell ball, so we simply put the ball in a plastic bag the noise of which could be heard during playing.'

Players who used to see perfectly or much better than at present, with no exception say that as they loved to play football in the past, the opportunity to play again overwhelms them. A respondent however also expressed his disappointment saying:

'I'm glad I can play again because I love team games. But I must admit that when I started playing futsal for the blind, I was really shocked and disappointed how hard it was – I often didn't find the ball or kicked in the air, and the game in general is much slower than sighted football.'

Players without exception stressed that futsal trainings are a perfect time for socializing: 'The trainings are a great beginning of the weekend. Meeting my friends and teammates helps me forget about the problems at work and so on.' Another respondent points out: 'I knew most of the guys before, but playing together is what has made us friends.' 'Football for the blind is so new in Hungary, that most blind people haven't heard of it, not to speak about sighted people. That's why it is our joint task with the guys to make it more popular, to advertise it I could say. And this is something the team can do and not individual players.'

Among the greatest challenges they mention orientation on the pitch:

'Players are moving around, often not slowly either. You really need to concentrate where you are and yes, sometimes we are lost if we don't concentrate.'

A further challenge is getting used to being blindfolded. According to the official IBSA rules, blind (B1) and low-vision (B2) players, meaning those who have some sight, should play in separate teams. However, in many countries, e.g. in Germany and Hungary, the two categories play together due to the low number of either totally blind players or players in general. It means players who use their sight in everyday life must learn to move on the pitch without seeing.

'It's really hard' says one B2 player 'and I'm not as brave as B1 guys. But the game is only fair if no one can see.'

When asked about the reasons for choosing futsal, visually impaired players' answers are supposedly not significantly different from answers which sighted players would give: 'I love playing in a team. I find sports like running really boring as there's no tactique or nothing, it is just a monotonous movement. In football you need to think and cooperate with your team.' However, answers show that for players with visual impairments there are additional benefits: 'Yeah, it's sometimes hard to get orientated on the pitch as it's so huge. But I'm sure in the long run this can help blind people's orientation in the street, too.' Another player stressed: 'With a white cane you must be considerate, you can't hurry in the street as fast as you want. Now on the pitch, of course you shouldn't run over the others, but you can finally move more freely.'

Discussion

In Hungary blind futsal is currently played on a regular basis only in Budapest, the game is not played in other parts of the country yet. LÁSS, with the moral and financial support of the Hungarian Football Federation, is making efforts to introduce the game all around the country. In the Spring of 2012 blind futsal festivals were organised in Szeged and Budapest, in December 2012 in Debrecen, and further similar events are foreseen in the Spring of 2013. Although the festivals give participants a taste of futsal for the blind and also serve purposes of popularising the game, it can only have a strengthened status amongst blind sports in Hungary if the number of players and that of regularly training teams is multiplied. Lacking opponents, the currently existing 2 teams cannot improve as much, as if training matches with various squads were available for them. An outstanding obstacle in spreading the sport is the high cost of constructing or renting football pitches with rebound walls. Moreover, the number of suitable pitches is quite low and many of them are located in distant, for blind people poorly accessible places. Since finding a suitable pitch is problematic in the capital city, it may nevertheless be even more of a challenge in the countryside. Finally, the necessity of trained coaches must be emphasized. As Nádas (2003) investigated, the number of qualified trainers amongst those working with people with disabilities in sport is remarkably low. Experts have no information and specialisation on how to train people with disabilities, and therefore many of them would never get engaged in disability sports. Futsal for the blind, as well as other adapted variations of football (e.g. powersoccer for wheelchair users), should be introduced to future coaches during their studies. Blind futsal cannot become widely acknowledged without sport experts' moral and professional support, therefore all possible platforms must be used for calling the attention of stakeholders, coaches, P.E. teachers to the importance of widening the perspectives of disability sports and, in particular, to the fact that adapting sports has almost endless prospects.

Conclusion

Engaging in regular physical activity improves people's quality of life. Futsal for the blind provides players new social contacts, a great amount of unforgettable experience and, of course, increased physical and mental fitness. Several players of the two Hungarian teams report that no other sport has ever been as attractive for them as futsal. It is worth pointing out that although the Hungarian teams appeared in press and media on several occasions, according to the paralympic news published on the HPC homepage on July 23, 2012, the Hungarian Paralympic Committee is unaware that futsal for the blind is regularly played in Hungary. It is therefore essential that the sport and the squads get more publicity, as a pillar of the sport may be the extent to which it is recognised and supported by public bodies. It is also remarkable that the

number of members with visual impairments in the Hungarian paralympic movement is decreasing. The reasons for the decline are definitely numerous and of a complex nature. It is, however, worth considering that attention paid to new adapted sports, futsal for the blind amongst others, may boost blind sports and as a consequence, a new talented generation with visual impairments may be able to prove their capability on both national and international scenes.

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