



Role models in sports – Can success in professional sports increase the demand for amateur sport participation?[☆]

Felix Mutter ^{a,*}, Tim Pawlowski ^{b,1}

^a Institute of Sport Economics and Sport Management, German Sport University Cologne, Am Sportpark Müngersdorf 6, 50933 Köln, Germany

^b Chair for Sport Economics, Sport Management and Sport Media Research, University of Tübingen, Faculty of Economics and Social Science, Institute of Sports Science, Wilhelmstraße 124, 72074 Tübingen, Germany

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 February 2013

Received in revised form 29 July 2013

Accepted 29 July 2013

Available online 25 September 2013

Keywords:

Role models

Demand for sport

Sport participation

Professional sports success

Ordered logit

ABSTRACT

The determinants of the demand for sport participation have been extensively analyzed. This study intends to complement these determinants by examining the question of whether the success of professional athletes can spill over on the demand for amateur sport participation. A theoretical framework of sporting role models was developed and subsequently tested with a stated preference approach and primary data of $N = 1413$ amateur soccer players from Germany. The results show that past success of both the female and the male German national soccer teams had increased the demand for amateur soccer only slightly. However, present (hypothetical) success of the national teams considerably increases the demand for the frequency of soccer participation of already active players. The estimation of ordered logit regression models validates the constructed framework. Availability and relevance of the role models as well as similarity to the role models are the main predictors of their motivational effect.

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“Reject doping. Respect your opponents. Remember that you are all role models. If you do that, you will inspire a generation.” – Jacques Rogge²

1. Introduction

Raising the level of mass sport participation is one of the main issues in sport science (Green, 2005). Active participation can lead to both better physical (Humphreys, MacLeod, & Ruseski, 2011) and better mental health (Downward & Rasciute, 2011; Pawlowski, Downward, & Rasciute, 2011; Rasciute & Downward, 2010). In addition, increased participation in sport can produce positive monetary effects for governments and sporting industries (Pawlowski & Breuer, 2012). Consequently, prior research has analyzed the demand for sport participation extensively (e.g., Breuer, Hallmann, & Wicker, 2011;

[☆] Previous versions of this article were presented at the 9th Conference of the European Association for Sociology of Sport (EASS) in Bern and the 16th Annual Meeting of the German Association of Sport Economics and Sport Management (AK Sportökonomie) in Magglingen. We would like to thank Michael Lechner, Marijke Taks, and conference participants for their valuable comments and suggestions. Special credit is due to two anonymous referees, who significantly helped to improve the article.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 0221 4982 6120; fax: +49 0221 4982 8141.

E-mail addresses: f.mutter@dshs-koeln.de (F. Mutter), tim.pawlowski@uni-tuebingen.de (T. Pawlowski).

¹ Tel.: +49 7071 29 76544; fax: +49 7071 29 5031.

² This quotation is part of the speech of IOC President Jacques Rogge at the opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London.

Downward, 2007; Garcia, Lera-Lopez, & Suarez, 2011). This paper intends to complement the determinants of the demand for participation in sport by examining the influence of professional sports success. The case of application of this paper will be the successes of the female and male German national soccer teams (GNSTs). Soccer is one of the most popular sports worldwide. In Germany, over ten million people participate in soccer (Hansen, 2003). They participate in club settings, through commercial suppliers or unorganized hobby teams. In addition, the two national teams have been very successful in recent years. The female team won the World Cups in 2003 and 2007, accompanied by three European titles in the last ten years. The male team finished second in the World Cup in 2002 and third in 2006 and 2010. They were also second in the European Championships in 2008.³

It is a well known assumption that the success of professional athletes increases sport participation in their home country. However, the theoretical support for such a relationship, as well as the empirical evidence, is shallow. Consequently, this paper intends to identify the potential spill-over effects of professional sports success on the demand for amateur sport participation. According to the model of sports consumption (Downward, Dawson, & Dejonghe, 2009), the demand for sport can be separated into the decision to participate, and subsequently, decisions about the frequency of participation. The effects of professional sports success on both demands are considered in this study. Firstly, there is some analysis of how the past success of the two GNSTs had attracted non participants to soccer. Furthermore, the question of whether the current success of the two GNSTs can increase the frequency of sport participation of already active soccer players is examined.

To answer these research questions, a stated preferences (SP) approach is applied. Rather than observing actual behaviour with a revealed preference (RP) approach, the SP approach analyses the responses to hypothetical questions (Wardman, 1988). This research design, which is widely used in economics (Adamowicz & Deshazo, 2006), has some considerable advantages in this context. A complex behaviour like sport participation may be determined by numerous influences. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to attribute a behavioural change (RP approach) distinctly to a certain professional sports stimuli (Lyle, 2009). Instead, the SP approach only analyses the first step towards sport participation, namely the motivational effect of professional sports. Moreover, prior research has analyzed different types of professional sports stimuli, such as the influences of star players, of sporting success, of attending events, of sport media behaviour, or of the hosting of sporting events. Since these stimuli often overlap, a distinct attribution of a behavioural change to one certain stimulus is difficult. Due to its hypothetical nature, the SP approach could circumvent this problem and attribute motivational effects to one certain professional sports stimulus.

A better understanding of potential spill-over effects is important for sport policy implications. Decision makers are currently faced with a trade-off decision between promoting (and funding) either professional sports or mass participation (Green, 2006; Green & Collins, 2008). In the UK, for example, there have been first attempts to combine these forms of sporting development (DCMS/Strategy Unit, 2002). Greater knowledge of the interactions between these manifestations of sport could optimize decision making considerably.

This study broadens the existing literature on spill-over effects of professional sports considerably. A theoretical framework of sporting role models is derived that explains the motivational effect of professional sports on sport participation. Subsequently, for the first time, ordered response regression models were estimated to test this framework.

The paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, the theoretical framework of sporting role models is derived. Section 3 reviews the empirical evidence of sporting role models and their motivational effect on sport participation. In Section 4, the applied research methods are outlined. Section 5 presents the descriptive and analytic results. Finally, in Section 6, the results, their limitations and implications are interpreted.

2. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this study is derived from the concept of role models and explains how professional sports can influence amateur sport participation. Broadly speaking, a role model is “an individual perceived as exemplary, or worthy of imitation” (Yancey, 1998, p. 254). The role model concept is founded on different theories, namely social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963), role theory (Biddle, 1979), theory of role identification (Foote, 1951; Kagan, 1958), and the theory of social comparison (Festinger, 1954). Furthermore, the role model concept has many applications in the field of economics. It has been used to explain the influence of significant others on decision making in general (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000; Manki, 1993; Wood & Bandura, 1989) and on decision making concerning vocational behaviour (Chung, 2000; King & Multon, 1996; Nauta & Kokaly, 2001; Weeks & Porter, 1983), and especially entrepreneurship (Boissin, Branchet, Delanoe, & Velo, 2011; Bosma, Hessels, Schutjens, van Praag, & Verheul, 2012). Furthermore, the influence of role models on the performance of students has been investigated (Evans, 1992; Klopfenstein, 2005; Lyle, 2007). Role models have also been said to influence learning (Clark, Martin, & Bush, 2001; Cordes, 2009), socialization (Moschis & Churchill Gilbert, 1978), and the behaviour of consumers (Latif, Saleem, & Abideen, 2011; Martin & Bush, 2000).

Although widely accepted, the concept of role models lacks conceptual clarity (Addis, 1996; Jung, 1986). Its intuitiveness makes it popular for scholars and practitioners, but an unreflecting use diminishes its value critically (Jung, 1986). In order to overcome the conceptual issues, both Jung (1986) and Gibson (2003, 2004) provide a modern approach to role models. In a vocational context, Gibson (2004) defines a role model “as a cognitive construction based on the attributes of people in social

³ Chronologically, the research was conducted before the European Championship 2012.

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