

Concerning eligibility for the Olympic Games

by *Milan Ercegan*
President of the FILA



In accordance with the powers conferred by the IOC on the International Federations with a view to their drawing up the eligibility code for their sport, allow me to define a few notions, bearing in mind the fact that the term "amateur" is not used in the wording of Rule 26. Thus it is difficult to present the elements needed for the definition of eligibility without using a word as explicit and appropriate as the word "amateur", which for our athletes signifies a universal model and an ideal.

I shall endeavour therefore to use a descriptive terminology while having to resort, from time to time, to the word amateur, which I shall use as a "working term" Disregarding the notion of professionalism in sport, which is a very precise social class, we shall have to determine as rigorously as possible two new categories :

1. *Active participants*, whether in competitive sport or recreational sport, are athletes who enjoy a social right owing to their practice of sport, and who thus achieve one of their personal aspirations towards happiness. In referring to sport, I am thinking too of all the related activities of physical education within the framework of teaching. In fact, and here I am going to use the "working term" for the first time, these "active participants" form the family of athletes hitherto known under the name of amateurs.
2. *Top level competitive athletes with a particular status*, whose performances, according to objective judgements, constitute universal human, cultural and social values. These athletes nevertheless remain eligible.

Just as it is easy to define the first category, so it is hard to determine the status of top level

athletes, even though the principles are very clear. There is however the possibility of a devaluation of the objective criteria, a danger of inflation so to speak, which might lead us to consider the relative value of performance as being very high in a given setting, which would compromise the conception of the fundamental ethics of sport, considered as an important social activity.

For this reason we shall have to be realistic, adopt a line of conduct and propose definitions for all the phenomena caused by the present evolution of sport. If our attitudes are not sufficiently clear and firm and if we do not lay down fair standards on which to base our judgement of the performances that will serve us as parameters in establishing the particular status of top level athletes, we risk, in our capacity as officials, being faced with serious problems. In my opinion, this dividing line between active participants and top level athletes is fixed according to the level of the best national performances, in the different sports, by athletes who take part in regional, continental, world and Olympic Games. In saying this I am touching more on the anatomy of the problem of top level athletes rather than offering concrete solutions towards a definition of their eligibility. I should be making a big mistake if I were to look for a universal answer to the drafting of an eligibility code applicable to all sports and all national federations. It is not possible to have a single model for all national or international federations. On the other hand, it is possible to have only one approach to the problem, in view of the fact that the fundamental conception of the ethics of sport is also unique. In this way, the status of top level athletes is governed by this conception of sports ethics. By this I mean of course that we are talking of athletes who,

according to the eligibility code, definitely do not belong to the category of professionals. Nor are they situated exactly half way between the so-called classical amateurs of sport for the masses, on the one hand, and professionals on the other. Top level athletes are active participants in « amateur » sport, their dynamism is fed by interior motivations and personal options; but because of their tremendous involvement in sport, they quite lawfully receive what they have lost from the point of view of their social advancement.

This being so, the wording of the eligibility code will differ according to the different sports. It could not be the same for wrestling, football, basketball and athletics, for example. Moreover within each sport its application will be adapted. It will be designed to provide the form most suitable to each national federation. If we wish to be realistic in speaking of sports ethics, we shall have to see the position, the trends and the phenomena as they really are. We must not lose sight of the fact that within the framework of the International Federations and the national federations which have to apply the standards adopted to define the status of top level athletes, a number of very complex factors are involved, such as : the situation and degree of development of sport in the world, the state of progress of national sport, the interest the general public takes in a sport, the position, priorities and the policy with regard to expansion of certain sports within the national framework, economic factors, that is to say material independence, the intensity of the involvement of the athletes in training and competition, the relationship between team sports and individual sports, involvement in causes favouring certain sports within the national context, etc.

We must take these facts into consideration not only when drafting the eligibility code but also in its concrete application and in the search for the most suitable solutions, based on the principles laid down by the IOC as well as on the fundamental conception of sports ethics. The International Federations and the national federations (their associations, the governing bodies of sport and the NOCs) will thus be able to set about achieving this phenomenon which depends on the present trends in sport.

I should like once again to stress the idea that the particular status of top level athletes originates in an essential conception of the ethics in which sport is neither an obligation nor a profession, but a right that contributes to the education, health, vitality and longevity of man. This same idea leads us to sport for the masses which originates in this possibility of participation (amateur sport). Although for the moment our efforts are concentrated on drafting an eligibility code for top level athletes, we are also bound to encourage and maintain massive participation in all sports. Moreover it is once again the national federations that have the greatest responsibility in this field. There can be no peak sports performances without a wide base on which to build.

On the other hand, high level sport paves the way for sport for the masses by stimulating it, and enriching it with new training methods and new techniques.

In the search for solutions to the status of top level athletes, our definitions of the eligibility code (Rule 26) must not cause any split in sport. The whole formed by physical education and the two categories of sport (sport for the masses and top level sport) constitutes a unique fact and a definite asset for mankind. It is a question of two closely connected and interdependent aspects of the same phenomenon. In order to give some idea of the scale, the number of top level athletes represents a thousandth of the number of active participants.

A participating athlete (an amateur) devotes the major part of his time to his work or his studies, and only part of his leisure time to the sports activity that satisfies one of his aspirations. This is not the case with top level athletes; and for this reason, these two categories do not enjoy the same sports status. Admittedly in certain countries a much larger number of athletes could benefit from the status of top level athletes. But neither the federations nor the national associations nor the NOCs are in favour of this move.

For national sports movements, limiting the number of top level athletes, in this way putting a brake on wholesale admission to this status,

is not a material problem but mainly a consideration of an ethical and an educational nature, depending on the role that sport should play in the national system of education and public health.

It is for this reason that our definition of the status of top level athletes could not conceivably result in the devaluation of the standards based on objective parameters.

Profound changes brought about by national emancipation and the involvement in public life of continually wider social structures have had considerable effects in the field of sport. The democratisation of sport is one of the characteristic features of modern life and an important manifestation of our civilisation. Sport has become a leading sociological factor.

The active growth of sport during the course of this century has given rise to a group of athletes who, thanks to their efforts and the application of new techniques developed by



specialists, have raised sports performances to the level of universal human values. Within the framework of this sociological phenomenon two dominant elements are visible :

- The athlete, with his personal motivations and the problems of his social and economic status,
- Extraneous influences such as club, coach, officials, spectators, public opinion, the press and even political structures.

While feeling that the personal motivation of top level athletes is the essential driving force behind a sports feat, I also believe that external pressures should not be neglected. In

a complex situation in which different desires and interests are mingled, sport and its athletes are often at cross purposes. Athletes submit to a special personal and professional regime accompanied by great sacrifices in order to achieve the goals they have set themselves. Until now they have always been obliged to do this as amateurs, that is to say completely on their own, without any outside help as regards either their material situation or their social advancement.

The level reached by sports performances today no longer requires only the talent of an athlete but also a total dedication of his whole person for a period of his life. A survey carried out on this subject shows that top level athletes spend from four to six hours a day on training, that is to say eight hundred to one thousand three hundred hours a year, plus one or two hours a day travelling. In addition, on average they spend sixty to a hundred days a year actually competing and from sixty to a hundred days training with the other members of their team. Their actual active participation in sport, from the start to the finish of their career, spreads over several years, from eight to fifteen, depending on the sport practised and personal choice. This being so, it is obvious that the time they spend training and competing is equal to the time spent working by any fulltime employee. The problems facing these athletes are not only of a sporting nature, they are also social and material in character. The economic position of these athletes is further aggravated when they come from economically underprivileged backgrounds, which is often the case. Under such circumstances, it is obvious that a young sportsman of this kind is in no position either to work towards his future in society or to achieve his full potential in sport. Things being what they are, a top level athlete is faced with two alternatives :

- a) to sacrifice his social career and compromise his health,
- b) secretly to accept the indispensable aid or obtain it himself in violation of the rules of strict amateurism.

The major problem facing top level athletes are :

- a) of a social order (such athletes wish to have training for a career and a situation in society),

b) of a practical nature (to enable them to achieve peak sports performances, they have to be given the required technical conditions and the time needed for the practice of their sport).

In the light of what we have just explained, we note :

- a) That there is general interest in peak sports performances,
- b) That the social and economic instability of top level athletes is the result of their intense practice of sport,
- c) That their sports and social advancement is bound up with their economic situation, their social status, the conditions offered them for their improvement in general and their improvement in sport in particular,
- d) That it is necessary to find effective and suitable solutions capable of ensuring social success as well as proper sports training for these athletes.

In order to solve these problems, we must give these athletes effective human aid to save them jeopardising their health and their re-insertion in everyday life.

Conclusion

In view of the fact that the International Federations are responsible for drafting their own eligibility codes, based on Rule 26 of the Olympic Charter, they must take into consideration the following :

- Each IF has to draw up its own definition without using a universal model, but based on the IOC's principles.
- In this draft, it will have to define as exactly as possible the indispensable objective criteria required to determine the special status of top level athletes, these criteria being designed to prevent the dissolution of the general conception of ethics on which is based sport in general and sport for the masses in particular.
- Top level athletes spend as much time training and competing as workers and employees do working. Suitable solutions could be chosen to reconcile their sports advancement with their studies and/or their work.
- Solutions involving material aid for sportsmen enjoying such status do not represent a

step towards professionalism but rather compensation for the loss of earnings and lack of vocational training suffered by these athletes owing to their commitment to sport.

- The IFs must try and find for these top level athletes real human, social and practical assistance, in this way contributing to the sporting and social progress of this sports elite.
- These athletes must understand that sport is not the whole purpose of life, that it is not an end in itself, that it cannot represent the whole of their existence or fill their lives as men. While doing everything in their power to improve their sports performance, these athletes should at the same time receive in a precise context an education and training designed to further their chosen career, by following courses for example, or if not then they should be allowed to work under certain clearly defined conditions.
- These athletes should be granted the status of producers of important social values, by giving them the best conditions for achieving their full development.
- The sources and conditions of material aid in the technical field and the social and economic spheres are quite different. In the present instance, we shall have to consider :
 - compensation for lack of professional earnings, health and accident insurance,
 - material improvement of athletes in a poor state of health,
 - scholarships, extending over longer periods to help with their vocational training,
 - the creation of technical conditions which would help improve their sports performances,
 - the creation of a special fund destined to enable athletes at the end of their sports career to finish their studies and get a job.

Top level athletes should be allowed to benefit from these special conditions only through their clubs, the national federations and the International Federations.

M. E.

