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FOREIGN PLAYERS IN POLISH TABLE TENNIS CLUBS: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SPORTS CULTURES AND COACHES' PERCEPTION OF THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN PLAYERS ON POLISH TABLE TENNIS[1]

Abstract. The paper presents results of empirical study on elite international athletes and Polish coaches working in the Polish top table tennis clubs. It focuses on foreign players and investigated Polish the perceptions of coaches with regard to the differences between sports cultures in foreign players' countries of origin and Poland, and their consequences for efficiency of sport training and competition results. Major research findings concerned Chinese athletes. Another issue analysed in the paper concerns on-going discussion on the limits, costs and benefits of introducing international players into national sport leagues. Based on the research results and literature review, we analyse the perceived impact of foreign players on the table tennis training system in Poland, relationships between Polish and foreign players and the role of international players in club competition. Applying qualitative research allowed the authors to present the insights and views of the investigated athletes and coaches, and to analyse problems occurring in the sport careers of international sport migrants a sport discipline that has hitherto not received much scrutiny.

Keywords: sport migration, athletes and coaches, sport career, sports cultures, table tennis.

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[1] The work is as part of a research project of the Social and Humanistic Research School of Physical Culture (Research School no. 2) of the Faculty of Physical Education at the Józef Piłsudski University of Physical Education in Warsaw (formerly DM 36 "Sport migrants in Polish table tennis leagues" project).

Introduction

Mobility is one of key features of the contemporary globalized and technology dominated world. This relates to the rapid circulation of information, capital, cultural patterns and people. Migration, meaning physical and relatively long-term changes in the place of residence, is one form of social mobility. Migration, along with its political, economic and cultural causes and consequences, is now a very important area of scientific research and everyday political discussion. Migration analyses also include also domain of sport and involve attempts to assess the social integration potential of sport for migrants, with respect their adaptation and assimilation in their country of destination and socio-cultural conditions. Such research, analysis and application projects are currently carried out in many European countries (especially Germany, Austria and the Scandinavian countries) due to strong immigration pressure, in recent years mainly from the residents of the countries of the Middle East and the many war zones in this region. Another phenomenon analysed in the context of sport and migration concerns professional athletes as sports migrants, the internationalisation of national and international club sports competitions, and the labour migration of coaches. Because contemporary professional sport is an important branch of the economy, the results of these analyses are often of practical importance for the activities of professional sport clubs, sport federations regulating the sport labour market they control, media companies, and state institutions regulating and supervising the labour market.

Issues related to the migration of athletes are also often entangled in national discourses. The Qatar men's handball world championship in 2015 and the multinational host Qatar handball team (largely composed of very well-paid former citizens of European countries) provoked numerous questions about limits on the players' personal freedom, their national or state loyalty, and the acceptable limits and freedom for creating national teams of athletes who easily change their citizenship for practical professional reasons.[2] This concerns the majority of commercialized sports disciplines, also in Poland. Polish athletes and coaches have been present in international leagues for years, attracted by higher salaries, better working conditions and professional development opportunities. But at the same time Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 and the increasing standard of living in Poland have increasingly made Poland also a target of both non-sport-related and sport migration. There are many foreigners employed in Polish sport. Though there have been few social studies devoted to them so far, foreign players in sports like speedway, football, volleyball and other team sports often attract the attention of journalists and are often featured in the media.

The pioneers of migration research on athletes were John Bale and Joseph Maguire (1994). They noticed that the migrations of sport people (i.e. mainly

[2] More on this issue e.g. in Lenartowicz (2016).

athletes and coaches) are becoming more and more frequent, concern more and more disciplines, and occur within local, regional and – increasingly – global scales. Most of the publications on the movement of athletes or other professionals connected with sport focused on highly commercialised and globalised disciplines like football, rugby, basketball and handball. In 2011, Maguire and Falcous attempted to present a global picture of sports migration in a comprehensive book *Sport and Migration: Borders, Boundaries and Crossings*. Whatever the intentions of the editors may have been, analysis of this publication shows that most of its authors belong to Anglo-Saxon culture and do not present a really comprehensive and international perspective on sport migrations. Of the 23 authors of chapters, only two were from outside the Anglo-Saxon cultural circle. All the others either came from and work in Anglo-Saxon countries (Great Britain, New Zealand, USA, Australia), worked at British universities (Hungarian Molnar), or were very involved in the Anglo-Saxon education and research system (e.g. the Danish researcher – Agergaard). In addition, the whole migration analysis concerned sport labour flows only for football, American football, baseball, ice hockey and rugby, with the only exception being snowboard, described by Thorpe (2011: 112–126). This indicates the limited geographic and cultural coverage of these analyses and shows the need of further research in the field of sport migrations. Expanding the analysis of sports migration to the less commercialised and media-popular sports disciplines in a transit-destination country like Poland can thus enrich the current knowledge of this subject. We have focused table tennis, an individual sport discipline that is less popular in the media, and on foreign players working in Polish table tennis clubs. A specific feature of the project, when compared to other sport migration research (which is mainly quantitative),[3] was also its mixed qualitative-quantitative methodology, with the dominance of the qualitative approach. The research included several items, including the sports life trajectories of the investigated foreign table tennis players in Poland, their motives of coming to Poland, their professional and private plans for the future, and the adaptation and assimilation process in Poland. For the purpose of this paper we have focused on the differences between the sports culture and coaching styles in the athletes' country of origin and Poland, and on the perceived impact of foreign players on Polish table tennis. Research data showed that such differences were especially evident in case of Chinese athletes and therefore they became the focus of the article.

[3] Some exceptions to such quantitative approach in sport migration research are some recent works of Agergaard, such as: Agergaard (2008) or Agergaard, Ungruhe (2016).

Material and methods

The research sample included a sample of foreign table tennis players in the two highest Polish table tennis leagues and the Polish coaches cooperating with them. A sample of 24 international athletes and three players of Chinese origin with Polish citizenship (27 persons in total) were interviewed. All respondents played in the best table tennis leagues in Poland, i.e. in the Wschodzący Białystok Men's Superleague (twelve best men's league teams at the time of research) and in the Women's Ekstraklasa (ten teams). In the sport season 2014/2015 covered by the research, the teams of both tested leagues included a total of 32 male and female players without Polish citizenship. This accounted for over half of all foreign players in Polish table tennis leagues in Poland (63 players), which is 0.64% of the total [n = 9803] registered in the PZTS as contestants in the 2014/2015 season.[4]

The study included athlete migrants living in Poland permanently or temporarily while working at their club, and those who only travelled to matches (so-called circulating migrants) and then returned to their country of permanent residence in another European country. In total, 27 people were examined: 11 female players (41% of the sample) and 16 male players (59% of the sample) from abroad. Of the 11 investigated female players, 6 were from China. Two Chinese-origin female athletes had Polish citizenship (interviews 8 and 11), and 1 had German citizenship (interview 9). The mean age of the investigated female players was 27 (the oldest was 39 years old, while the youngest was 19). The majority of the investigated female players (73%) lived permanently outside of Poland and travelled in for training sessions and matches.

In the case of investigated male athletes, there were 5 Chinese competitors, including 1 Polish citizen, 1 Japanese citizen and 1 Slovak citizen. Interviews were also conducted with one UK citizen, a South Korean, a Swede, a Belorussian, a Russian and an Indian, and two Italians and two Czechs. The mean age of the male respondents was 29.6 (the youngest was 18 years old and the oldest was 48). Five of the investigated male athletes had children. Forty-four percent of the investigated male table tennis players lived in Poland during the league season or permanently, and 56% travelled in exclusively for matches. The respondents had very significant experience with table tennis training. The average training period for women was 21 years, while for men it was 23 years.

[4] In the case of the top two leagues, there were 20 foreign players registered in the Men's Super league (and one player from China with Polish citizenship), and 12 in the Women's Ekstraklasa (two players of Chinese origin with Polish citizenship, granted in 2007). Foreign players (without Polish citizenship) in the squads of Women's Super league and Men's Super league Men (n = 32) in the 2014/2015 season came from Europe (21) and Asia (11). The most numerous were players from China (7), the Czech Republic (4) and Belarus (4). There were also a few players from Italy, Sweden, India, Slovakia, Great Britain, Ukraine, South Korea, Russia, Austria, Hong Kong and Lithuania.

Table 1. Interviewed male table tennis athletes with their country of origin and nationality information

No.	Interview no.	Country of origin	Nationality – country
1.	2	South Korea	South Korea
2.	3	Great Britain	Great Britain
3.	4	China	China
4.	5	China	China
5.	6	Russia	Russia
6.	7	Belorussia	Belorussia
7.	12	China	Slovakia
8.	13	China	China
9.	14	Japan	China
10.	15	Czech Republic	Czech Republic
11.	16	Czech Republic	Czech Republic
12.	23	Italy	Italy
13.	24	Italy	Italy
14.	25	India	India
15.	26	China	Poland
16.	27	Sweden	Sweden

Source: Authors' own study.

Table 2. Interviewed table tennis female athletes with country of origin and nationality information

No.	Interview no.	Country of origin	Nationality – country
1.	1	China	China
2.	8	China	Poland
3.	9	China	Germany
4.	10	Czech Republic	Czech Republic
5.	11	China	Poland
6.	17	China	China
7.	18	China	China
8.	19	Slovakia	Slovakia
9.	20	Belorussia	Belorussia
10.	21	Ukraine	Ukraine
11.	22	Belorussia	Belorussia

Source: Authors' own study.

Eight Polish table tennis coaches working with foreign athletes took part in the research, including one coach of Chinese origin with Polish citizenship (interview 3). In this paper we present data from coaches with the longest coaching experience, i.e. respondents from interviews 2, 4 and 5, and a Chinese coach (of Polish citizenship) with a different career development path from interview 3. The average age of coach respondents was 46 and the average length their coaching career was 18 years.

The research involved direct interviews with foreigners playing in Polish table tennis leagues (and three players of Chinese origin with Polish citizenship) and Polish coaches. In the case of the players, the interview was divided into two parts: a qualitative one (a face-to-face, individual in-depth interview) and a quantitative one (a standardized questionnaire on respondents' social and sport characteristics). The qualitative part of the interview was divided into three thematic groups:

1) sports training and sports competition,
2) reasons for going abroad or emigration,
3) sports and non-sports biography.

The quantitative part included 45 questions on the general characteristics of the respondents, their sports careers and travel or emigration motivations. A Polish and English-language version of the interview tool addressed to players was used. In a few cases, the interview was supported by the use of Russian, or (e.g. in case of interview 12) a Chinese-Polish translator was needed for some parts of interview. The statements of all the respondents were recorded and transcribed. The output text from the in-depth interviews was coded using a previously constructed list of codes within each of the abovementioned groups of themes, and new codes were added during the analysis of interview texts. Coding was followed by theme-based qualitative analysis.

In order to get the most comprehensive picture of the situation of foreign players in Polish table tennis leagues as possible, we also interviewed Polish table tennis coaches working with foreign players (face-to-face interviews; 23 open and semi-open questions and three questions about demographic data).

A pilot study with two foreign table tennis players and a table tennis coach from the AZS University of Warsaw club was carried out. The final field research was conducted during the table tennis league season of 2014/2015, from September 2014 to May 2015, in 12 Polish cities hosting league matches or in the players' places of residence. The face-to-face interviews with 27 athletes in total lasted 19.4 hours (with an average of 34 minutes). The interview transcription took about 120 hours, and resulted in 309 pages of written interviews with foreign players and Polish coaches, which were then subjected to coding and qualitative analysis based on the order of issues arising from the research questions. Interviews with coaches were conducted during the same league season. Eight Polish coaches working with foreign players were interviewed, including one Chinese-origin coach with Polish citizenship (interview 3). The duration of the interviews ranged from 25 minutes to 1 hour.

Results

International differences in sport training and coach-athlete relations

In-depth interviews provided an opportunity to learn about the foreign table tennis players' opinions on sports training in Poland, and to obtain information on what table tennis training is like in their country of origin, as well as more general information on sports culture and coach-athletes relations. According to the respondents' opinions, table tennis training (at both early and advance stages) in Poland is clearly different from that in China. In the case of other respondents from European countries, such as England, Ukraine, Belarus, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and India, table tennis training and athlete-coach relationships in Poland were considered to be similar to those in their country of origin. In the European respondents' opinions, the initial period of table tennis training was usually dominated by play elements, after which some technical exercises with the ball followed, and then competition tactics were introduced. As our respondent from interview 7 (from Belarus) noticed:

> It all starts with play and fun. We let children play and evaluate their coordination and game "feeling". We encourage them in this sport. The technique training comes later.

From the very beginning, young athletes had contact with the ball and the bat and could bounce the ball on the tennis table. Training sessions lasted usually one to two hours. Table tennis training depicted by the investigated international players from outside China had, from the Polish perspective, the character of standard training and standard athlete-coach relationships in this sport discipline. But our respondents from China indicated numerous differences between training and table tennis sports culture in China and Poland. Eleven (out of 27) surveyed players were born and trained in China. Seven of them have changed their citizenship during their sporting career. When talking about their training sessions in China, our athlete respondents of Chinese origin strongly stated that they differed significantly from those they observed in Poland and other European countries where they had played and trained. From the interviews we learned that in China training time, training methods, as well as player and coach relations and the players' attitudes towards training are clearly different from what the surveyed Chinese competitors observed in Poland. The female respondent from interview 11, born and playing table tennis in China by the age of 22, who moved to Poland in 1997 and received Polish citizenship, mentioned the low competence level of Polish table tennis coaches with regards to early stages of table tennis training:

> I'm not saying there are no good table tennis coaches in Poland. But to my knowledge, there are no good coaches who are competent in coaching children. And then, as a consequence, young players cannot reach Chinese level of technique for such age groups. And it is very difficult to change it later on.

The same respondent, when asked about her first experiences with table tennis in China, said:

> First half a year of table tennis training you do not see the tennis ball. It was not allowed. We had practices movements without the ball. We were doing many different exercises. But the coach never gave us the ball to play on the table. When you started your training at the age of 5, was there no play and fun element in the training? No, not at all. At this time, you learn and repeat movements. And if you exercise with the ball, it is never on the table.

The same picture of early stage table tennis in China emerges from interview 1 (also a female athlete):

> In China it is simply a different type of training. When you enter the club, the first 3 months you just practice basic movements. There is no playing on the table, because this may easily disturb movement patterns.

The male player from interview 26 (who was born and trained in China, came to Poland in 2001, and in 2004 received Polish citizenship) also reported the differences between the early training stages in Poland and China:

> My first weeks was just collecting balls and observing other children playing. Then I got the bat from the coach to practice against the wall. It was not like in Poland, where it immediately bounces on the table and it does not have to be fun and play.

The Chinese respondent from interview 5 (already 8 years in Poland) noticed with surprise that in Poland every day they have practiced another technical element, while in China it could be weeks spent on one element, e.g. a backhand hit. Our Korean respondent in interview 2 also reported using this Asian style of early training:

> Shadow play, practicing movement without the ball, keeping a proper silhouette. These are the primary elements of early training.

As we can see, the training methods for the early stages of table tennis in Poland and China (and presumably other Asian countries) vary significantly. Instead of introducing he sport through fun and encouragement, through play, as is the case in Poland, the Asian system includes a strong component of the disciplined, slow teaching of correct movements leading to correct technique, being the basis for the further development of table tennis skills. The female respondent from interview 11, who already coaches Polish children, when asked if copying the Chinese methods in Poland would help talent development in table tennis, commented:

> It might help… But on the other hand, I do not really know. Children here are different. Relationships between young and older, players and coaches are different than in China. And children are not so keen to train hard in Poland.

The Chinese athletes from interviews 5 and 11 also reported the rigid daily schedule of table tennis players in China:

> In China, in my club, we train all day long. I wake up at seven, then the first training session, breakfast, then the second training session till the midday. In the afternoon young athletes have time for school learning, and in the afternoon there is another training session. The day ends with late preparations for next school day (interview 5).

> When we started going to school, training sessions were scheduled once a day, just after school classes. We were at school from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. and then we had a 2- or 3-hour long training session. But starting from the third grade we had two sport sessions per day: one between 6.30 and 8.00 a.m. and then after 5 p.m. We were training at the weekends as well. Actually, I may say that I spent all my childhood at sport facilities (the female athlete from interview 11).

The interviewed Chinese athletes assessed the differences in the organization of the training sessions and their frequency and duration, which are also significantly different in Poland and in China. All the Chinese athletes were generally used to long and intensive training sessions, a highly disciplined sport environment and very formal relationships with coaches. The player from interview 1, who said that when she was 14 (in 2007) and arrived in Poland, she cried after being faced with the Polish-style sport training she encountered after arriving from China,

> because in Poland there are so few training sessions and they are so short. Polish women cannot play.... I was so bored at training sessions.

She has added that in Poland she trained only three times a week, the training lasted two hours a day, of which 30 minutes was spent on unfolding and folding tables, while "my training in China was every day from 14.00 to 19.00". Another area of our research interest was the relationship between athletes and coaches. This part of research proved to be one of the most interesting and revealing differences between Asian and European sports cultures and coaching styles. We asked the players whether they perceive differences between the players' and coaches' relationships in their country of origin and Poland. Opinions differed, depending on the respondent's country of origin. The Asians unanimously agreed that everything is completely different in Poland in comparison to their countries of origin. In Asia, the player's attitude to the coach was reported to be completely different. Respondents reported that athlete-coach relations are very formal. The coach is treated like a saint whose word is sacred. Most of the athletes from China indicated the weaker authority of the coach among players in Poland, and clearly less distance between players and coaches. Maybe this is unfortunately linked to the corporal punishments given to players by trainers. The athlete from interview 1 reported that "In China, the coach is a holy person, children listen to him, and there is little respect in Poland". The athlete from interview 18 mentions that she went to training sessions "even though the coach screamed and beat her". When assessing the coaching practices reported from a European perspective, we could say that some practices are more connected to a regime than to sports training.

Furthermore, we asked respondents to evaluate their relationship with the coach in Poland on a scale from 1 – very good, to 5 – insufficient. The majority of twenty-three players described the relationship with the coach as very good. Three respondents said they had a good relationship with the coach, while one of the respondents rated the relationship as sufficient.

We complemented the investigated players' statements with coaches' knowledge of Chinese training methods. As many as five out of eight of the surveyed Polish trainers previously had the opportunity to observe or participate in Chinese training sessions. According to them, the differences between training in Poland and China are vast. In China, the training system is more coherent, well thought out and focused on competition than in Poland. To start with, we quote the statement from interviewer 3, who was born, raised and trained in China. He came to Poland as a 12-year-old player. Currently, he is a coach in a Krakow club. This coach pointed to differences in the actual technique of table tennis. He said that in Poland every coach teaches a different technique, while in China

> [...] there is a system that if a national team coach sets certain things, it is done everywhere. In Poland, parents have their own technique, and a coach from the club has his own [...].

In addition, he added that in China only a former player can be a coach, which in his opinion makes for a much better quality of teaching. The coach, when asked about the differences in training children, said:

> In Poland, the child immediately goes to the tournament and plays. In China, technique is practiced for a year or two before entering any, even informal competition [...].

The investigated coaches' statements show that in China, unlike in Poland (in their view), there is a coherent, orderly and largely unified table tennis training system. For the Chinese, "training is all about science", as interviewee 4 put it.

The perception of coaches regarding the role and consequences of foreign athletes' presence in Polish table tennis

In the interviews carried out with coaches we also asked them to provide their views on the role and consequences of introducing foreign players to Polish table tennis clubs. All the investigated coaches stated that players play a positive role in the Polish table tennis league and their presence is beneficial to the development of individual Polish players and the level of competition in all Polish table tennis. The coach from interview 5 said:

> This fits the club's development strategies. Foreign players strengthen clubs and increase the level of the sport. If it was not the case, no one would bother hiring them.

The coach from the interview 4:

> Their presence is beneficial and it may be good for both sides […]. The Chinese have a lot to offer. They come from a culture where table tennis is the number one sport and they are highly competent. They spread their knowledge and competences. And our players, younger players, kids and sport fans have a chance to see how they practise and play at competitions in Poland.

Some coaches (e.g. the coach from interview 6) admitted that foreign players helped to bring the mass media and sponsors to table tennis:

> We have started to be broadcast on television. First it was Orange, then Sport Club. All matches are also available on Internet TV. This attracted sponsors. But weaker clubs are not really happy with this. If they do not get serious sponsors, they are against introducing more foreign athletes to the league and support having at least two Polish players in the match. There was even an idea that it should be Polish players alone. But it would change too many things and it has stopped.

Another coach (from interview 4) added that also because of being open to foreign players.

> The Polish league is one of the best in Europe, considering the level of sport, the quality of organisation, the number of fans and the salaries for athletes.

Some investigated coaches (from interviews 1, 4, 5 and 8) reported that the actual impact of foreign players on Polish clubs and players depends heavily on the forms of cooperation and type of agreement between international players and clubs. As the coach from interview 1 explained:

> […] It all depends on how a player actually functions in the club. There are some solutions that serve only immediate goals and the present-day position of the club. But there are also other forms of cooperation serving long-term goals. In the case of short-term solutions, one pays the athlete just to come to the match, play and go back home. And this brings hardly anything to the table tennis world. The foreign athlete is not attending training sessions and is not becoming a positive example for others. On the other hand, when the player lives in Poland on daily basis and keeps in touch with the other players, his presence brings very positive results. First of all, our athletes have excellent training partners. Secondly, our young players aged 14–15 have perfect role models, because these foreign players are very often top world cup or European championships players.

The coach from the interview 4 put more emphasis on negative "short-term solutions":

> These agreements with foreign players are constructed in such a way that national interests are not taken into account. Just a few Polish clubs have introduced rules that, for example, once a year foreign player is also obliged to take part in children's training sessions or workshops. In most cases in the agreement it is assumed that international athletes live and train outside Poland and come here just for one or two training sessions and matches.

We also asked coaches about their perception of the attitudes of Polish players towards their foreign colleagues. Not all our investigated coaches responded

to this question, but three coaches who did comment on this issue said that, in their opinion, the majority of Polish players do not really consider foreign players' presence as an additional opportunity for training and sparring. For many, they were perceived as immigrants taking the job that could be otherwise taken by Polish players. The coach from interview 8 asked if Polish players are unenthusiastic about foreign table tennis players in the Polish league competition, and answered:

> It may be indeed the case. But it concerns only weak Polish athletes. Those who strive to develop their skills and are serious about their sport careers treat foreign players as offering a chance for further development. I'm glad to see more and more Polish players with this attitude. International players create tough and demanding competition environments and thus a chance to excel. But of course – there is a group of coaches, club workers or athletes who have a negative attitude. They just don't like challenges and would like to keep going and work with no additional effort required. But sooner or later they will have to change this anyway.

The coach from interview 6 stated that relationships between Polish and foreign table tennis players are positive and he "recently" has not observed any tensions or conflicts. Yet, when asked about the problem of them taking jobs that could be done by Polish athletes, said:

> […] Certainly, Polish athletes are not too happy about this. But our league grows. It is a super league now. We have TV broadcasts, Internet broadcasts. We want to maintain a strong position in Europe…, and we do now have an abundance of very good Polish players. Most of our athletes represent a solid average level and without support from abroad we would not have the European recognition we have now.

Summarising the interviews with table tennis coaches, one can indicate four basic advantages of foreign players being present in the Polish league:

1. The opportunity to improve the Polish players and coaches' skills through play and training with foreign table tennis players. Polish players have the opportunity to play with opponents with different backgrounds, which undoubtedly increases their experience and the level of their game.
2. Raising the level of sports competition in the entire league, which creates greater media, sponsor and fan interest, and this in turn increases the popularity of the discipline in the country.
3. Increasing the diversity of cultural sport rivalry, which has a positive effect on the ability of Polish players to function and compete in the international environment, and favours the personal development of players.
4. Foreign players are role models for younger players.

The surveyed coaches did not report any major negative effects of employing international players. However, they mentioned a few problems related to their employment, of which the most important were difficulties in communicating with players, with the player's access to matches and arranging employment formalities; lack of identification of foreign players with the Polish club and problems related to cultural differences, which sometimes lead to conflicts between the

international athletes, coaches and club authorities. The latter was mentioned for example by the coach from interview 8, who reported problems with managing Chinese athletes using European coaching style:

> In early years of employing Chinese players, when we looked for and hired foreigners just to fulfil the quotas and to improve our competition impact, we had positive experiences. I mean positive in terms of competition effectiveness. But their impact on the team and all our tennis community was very negative. Some Chinese players who were used to external control and rigid training organisation and discipline being imposed of them relaxed completely in Poland, where relationships with athletes are more partner-like. They did not adapt to this new context. And I'm not going to introduce Chinese training methods like special punishments, beating or fines. It is not acceptable in European culture. […] So, in conclusion, in the early days this impact was kind of mixed. On the one hand we were effective in international competition, but on the other we had to let go of those players who had a negative influence on our team and players, even if they were very good players.

Discussion and summary

In the highest Polish table tennis leagues, i.e. the men's Super League and women's Super League (Ekstraklasa) in the 2014/15 season there were thirty-two foreign athletes listed in the leagues' club squads. They constituted 23% of all the players in these table tennis leagues. Even if table tennis in Poland is not a top sport in terms of media coverage, the percentage of foreign players in the highest Polish table tennis leagues was similar to that of foreign players in other Polish team sport leagues like football (18.7% of all players on a similar level in the 2009/2010 season) or volleyball (16% of players in Plus League in the 2009/2010 season; Smoleń, Pawlak 2010: 490, 492).

Interviews with coaches indicate that Polish table tennis clubs do not conduct formal talent searching and scouting; in the case of table tennis players it is mostly informal or semi-formal. It is based on social networking, personal knowledge and the contacts of coaches and players who have spent some part of their careers abroad. It is about acquiring players through direct contacts with athletes or coaches. Such informal methods for acquiring players (described e.g. by Bale 1991 and Elliott, Maguire 2008 or Agergaard, Ungruhe 2016) used in table tennis differentiate this discipline from more commercialised disciplines such as football or basketball, where formal scouting mechanisms are key elements of the club's functioning (Pawlak, Smoleń 2015), but of course this is not specific to table tennis. Agergaard and Ungruhe (2016: 71) have emphasised the role of informal social networks in hiring foreign athletes in the case of early-career transfers to less-established clubs and – in the case of soccer – reporting also other research (e.g. Agergaard, Tiesler 2014; Elliott, Gusterud 2018) with similar conclusions.

As reported by the surveyed coaches (and some athletes), the growing number of international players in national leagues creates new challenges for sport club managers and coaches, and creates a new working environment for local athletes. The language barrier is often a challenge for effective cooperation, and it was also the case with our athlete respondents, because the majority of the surveyed players who came to Poland struggled, at least initially, with communication problems. Some of the players from Asia (e.g. interview 1) did not speak English at a communicative level, which led to major difficulties, not only in everyday cooperation and training, but also in out-of-work assimilation. In addition, a situation in which not all athletes speak Polish, and the working language becomes English, leads to atypical, highly contextualised leadership formation processes in the group (Du-Babcock, Tanaka 2017), which undoubtedly affects the position and authority of the coach.

One of the most interesting observations from our research were the significant differences reported by the athletes and coaches between the training process and coaching methods used in Poland and Asian countries (China and South Korea). In this regard, players impressions and comments focused on two issues: (1) the training content and parameters (volume, intensity) and (2) the status of the coach in the sport team and the club, and the resulting authority and relationships with athletes. Foreign players, especially those from China, often expressed their surprise (and even disappointment) with the small volume and low intensity of their training sessions in Poland. Some competitors also complained about the low level of Polish players. It may be interesting that of the surveyed foreign female players, one was so disappointed with the low frequency and intensity of training that she admitted to crying due to her dissatisfaction (interview 1). The investigated athletes from Asian countries (China and South Korea) emphasized the differences in technical training in Poland and their country of origin, which mainly result from the great pressure to develop appropriate techniques at the initial stage of training in Asia (very often through isolated mundane one-player exercises), while in Poland coaches focus more on the young players' development through play. Many of the interviewed athletes from China were also surprised by the friendly relations between Polish players and coaches, and by the non-authoritarian and "soft" (for many – too soft) coaching style of Polish coaches. Regardless of their very often high level of competence, these athletes were not used to discussing and negotiating the training process with coaches, as was expected in Poland. They were used to following the orders of the coach in an extremely competitive and goal-oriented environment.

This interesting issue of differences in sports culture, athlete-coach relations and coaching styles is not very well covered in the literature. In general, it is assumed that sport, due to standardised and universal world-wide rules of competition (at least in globalised sport disciplines) is one of the domains of culture and work that is less dependent on cultural context than many other activities. This

universality of sports rules, along with the proliferation of the British concept of sport around the world, due to British colonial expansion (Magee, Sugden 2002; Maguire 1999) made international sport migrations possible. They do not require formal qualifications or certificates from athletes (and still in many cases even from coaches), and so far, sport achievements, health status and professional experience (plus economic cost-benefit ratio) are key factors in hiring the sport labour force. The mediatisation of sport, along with its commercialisation and professionalization, turned it into a valued media product and well selling show; one which many (for many different reasons) miss so much in the time of the 2020 COVID-19 situation. Yet, regardless of the above-mentioned globalisation and standardisation of sport, there are still many local cultural context issues within sport and within sport disciplines that require further analysis. Some of these differences were observed in our research on table tennis, and many are also confirmed in (still quite scarce) research analysing Asian and European or American sports culture and differences in coaching style. In the case of specific differences associated with table tennis, many of our observations are confirmed by Fullen (2003), the European Table Tennis Federation coach. On the basis of his 50 years of coaching experience in Europe and China, Fullen presented the differences in the Chinese players' game, which he explains results from the system and training methods used in China, and from the fact that there is fierce competition in China in order to take top position in any sport discipline, including table tennis, which is extremely popular. Therefore, in China, only the sports results count. Even the best player is vulnerable to a pursuing pack of successors and if the best players do not take advantage of their chance, there is little probability that they will get a second one. Due to the large supply of very good players, we can observe that players can experience a great deal of vertical social mobility (both upward and downward), as well as horizontal mobility, which also results in international migration. Fullen (2003) underscored the very well designed, rigid and very hierarchical training system in China. His observations are in line with information from our respondents. The sport training "pyramid" in China has a strong basis in the school system. Schools provide candidates for numerous table tennis clubs which send their best players to regional "development centres". From these centres come future national team members. Apart from the huge scale of the system, it is not so different from other countries. Yet, as Fullen (2003) mentions, this is just the formal structure. Real differences concern the way training is organised and carried out, the scale of public financing and the work ethic of coaches. Larcombe (2012) mentions that a professional table tennis career in China develops earlier and in a different mode than in other countries. Chinese children start table tennis training (but not really playing table tennis) at the age of 5. A talented player of nine or ten years old is offered a full-time table tennis education that will dominate his or her future life. Fullen (2003) and Wu, Su (2010) also confirm the coaches' focus on technique and mundane play in the training sessions of young table

tennis athletes that our interviewed Chinese athletes mention. Another important feature of Chinese table tennis is the coaches' perception of athletes participation in competition. According to Fullen (2003), while in Europe coaches analyse the quality of the athlete's performance, for Chinese coaches, the result and winning are of key importance. Playing under the pressure to get good results, and living with the risk of quickly losing their position in the team or club, are important elements of the Chinese training system and results in strong performance in competition. This is also confirmed by non-table tennis specific analyses of sports training in China and United States made by Yu and Wang (2008), who compared youth sports training in both countries. They concluded that Chinese programs aim to improve the sports achievement, whereas the U.S. programs consider the athletes first and competition second. Overall differences between sports cultures and coaching styles in Chinese sport and the Euro-American cultural domain were also mentioned by Wang and Calloway (2011), who analysed the problems of foreign coaches working with Chinese Olympic Teams. They noted that many foreign coaches working in China have faced significant challenges and obstacles, and many of them failed to achieve their goals. Foreign coaches' problems did not usually result from a lack of their technical and sports competence, but from lack of their knowledge of cultural differences, political structures, customs, language, communication, style of administration and "coaching philosophy". In the global sport workplace, the multicultural competences of coaches and athletes are of primary importance, while they seem to be insufficiently incorporated into educational programs and professional practice in elite sport (Gill, Kamphoff 2010).

The surveyed Polish coaches' opinions about players from abroad were positive. All coach respondents reported that the presence of foreign players in the Polish league is beneficial for the league development and its recognition abroad, and that it improves Polish players' skills and raises the sport level of the entire league. The impact of foreign athletes on the sport system in the host country was analysed by Maguire et al. (2002: 39–43). The authors pointed out that the impact assessment of recruiting international players and entering them into league matches in a given country depends on decision-makers' point of view and the criteria by which they are guided. If well balanced and organised, it may be considered as a positive stimulus for the development of the league and players, but it may also alienate top leagues from lower league clubs and players, threatening the development and promotion of national athletes, alienating athletes from the club community (foreign athletes' instrumental attitude towards the club as an employer) and having a negative influence on their negotiating positions with regard to salary and working conditions. The risk of such a negative impact of foreign players on national athletes was mentioned by some of our athlete respondents.

To sum up, the interviewed athlete migrants to Polish table tennis clubs faced cultural differences not only in everyday life, but also in sport practice. In the case of their sport activity, two main areas in which there were significant differences

between their country of origin and Poland were the organisation and course of the training process, as well as relations between coaches and players. These differences concerned especially players from China, and were much less frequently reported by athletes from other countries, which may be the result of the uniquely enormous popularity of table tennis in China, the focus on competition results and the instrumental treatment of players in China, as well as the strong institutionalisation and centralization of the training system and hierarchical character of Chinese society, which is also mirrored in sport and traditional coaching style. All together this creates a China-specific sports culture, which must be seriously taken into account when collaborating with athletes or coaches from China. Since Poland is increasingly attractive as a relatively well-off member of the European Union for sport immigration, we recommend further research on foreign athletes and coaches in Polish sport, especially in disciplines and lower leagues do not receive much coverage in the media.

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ZAGRANICZNI ZAWODNICY W POLSKICH KLUBACH TENISA STOŁOWEGO: RÓŻNICE KULTUR SPORTOWYCH I TRENERSKA OCENA WPŁYWU ZAGRANICZNYCH ZAWODNIKÓW NA POLSKI TENIS STOŁOWY

Abstrakt. W artykule przedstawione są wyniki badań empirycznych zagranicznych zawodników zatrudnionych w najwyższej męskiej i kobiecej lidze tenisa stołowego oraz współpracujących z nimi polskich trenerów dotyczące dostrzeganych przez respondentów różnic kultur sportowych, w tym szczególnie relacji zawodników i trenerów oraz stylów kierowania procesem szkoleniowym przez trenerów w krajach pochodzenia zawodników i w Polsce oraz konsekwencji tych różnic dla szkolenia i wyników rywalizacji sportowej. Różnice kultur sportowych dotyczyły w szczególności zawodników i zawodniczek pochodzących z Chin i miały one swoje podłoże w różnicach społeczno-kulturowych pomiędzy krajem pochodzenia zawodników i Polską. Drugim wątkiem artykułu jest analiza ograniczeń, kosztów i korzyści wynikających z zatrudniania zagranicznych zawodników w polskich klubach na przykładzie tenisa stołowego. W badaniach zastosowano wywiady pogłębione z zawodnikami i trenerami, które pozwoliły na spojrzenie na wybrane problemy karier zawodowych sportowych migrantów w mało zbadanej pod tym względem dyscyplinie sportu.

Słowa kluczowe: migracje sportowe, zawodnicy i trenerzy, kariera sportowa, kultura sportowa, tenis stołowy.