

Runners as Sport Tourists: The Experience and Travel Behaviors of Ljubljana Marathon Participants

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ABSTRACT

The study analysed the experiences of participants on mass sport events, and explained the influence of such sport events on the lifestyle of runners. The study sample consisted of 664 participants of the 15th Ljubljana Marathon. The TRPS questionnaire was adjusted to establish the tourist roles. The role of sport tourists was assumed by 29.8% of all participants. Sport tourists who take various trips mainly for sport purposes (66.7%) participate more often in mass sport events at home and abroad and are more physically active in their leisure time. Moreover, 13 in-depth interviews were conducted with selected marathon participants. It was established that different travel behaviour and experiences from earlier sport events have influenced on their lifestyles.

Key words: mass sport events, travel behaviour, sport tourism, marathon

Introduction

The concept of tourism is often coupled with the concept of leisure. Leisure as such has acquired an extremely important role in people's lives¹. The past decade has seen a steady expansion of marathons and similar endurance running events providing for the needs of distance runners². Marathon events participation relates to tourism because it mainly involves travelling to sport events away from home³. But participants, although event tourists, were certainly not »on holiday« and their activities could not be viewed in terms such as casual, escape, or relaxation but rather as serious, committed, and activity driven, thus fulfilling the criteria by which Stebbins⁴ distinguishes serious from casual leisure. Also Green and Jones⁵ found that sport tourism can provide participants with opportunities to engage in serious leisure.

Sport tourism in all forms, including different participation at sport events, is attracting researchers' ever greater attention. They suggest focusing on the interaction between the features of sport and tourism as unique element, suggesting that sports tourism is a social, economic and cultural phenomenon arising from the unique interaction of activity, people and place⁶⁻⁸.

Gammon and Robinson⁹ distinguished between »tourism sport« where sport is incidental and is not the prime reason for a trip and »sport tourism« where engagement in sport activities is the main reason for a trip. Probably, the latter most successfully describes a general understanding of the term sport tourism. Sport tourists can be divided into those whose primary motive for travelling is sport and those whose sport activities are a complementary or incidental tourist activity. What many definitions of a sport tourist have in common is undoubtedly the notion of people taking a trip, travel or holiday associated with sport¹⁰.

It is particularly interesting that, despite the importance of the relationship between sport events and tourism, there is a paucity of research examining the participants of sport events and their travel behaviours⁷. The most of researches focus on the economic effects of sport tourism in relation to sport events, with little coverage of the participants' themselves⁸. Some of them delve into mass sport event participants although they mainly investigate their sociodemographic characteristics¹¹. They not only involve a sense of »who« attends sport events

but also »why« they attend mass events. Only a limited number of studies address the experiences of mass sport event participants¹². Therefore our study focused on finding an answer to the research question of »why« people attend marathon events.

As Green and Jones⁵ pointed out sport tourism can provide serious leisure participants with different manner: (1) a way to construct and/or confirm one's leisure identity, (2) a time and place to interact with others sharing the ethos of the activity, (3) a time and place to parade and celebrate a valued social identity, (4) a way to further one's leisure »career«, and (5) a way to signal one's career stage. Using the serious leisure framework it is able to describe the »social world« of runners. The unique ethos was strongly related to the »social world« of runners. A group identity of runners was evident in the homogeneity of behaviour, appearance and language among participants that separated them from non-runners¹³.

Previous research distinguished between the participants of events and their tourist role given that all individuals who attending mass sport events were automatically considered as sport tourists^{8,14}. Chen and Funk¹⁵ divided sport event participants according to their purpose of travelling; thus sport tourists consisted of people whose primary reason for travelling was to attend an organised sport event and visitors to the destination with primary purpose other than participating in the sport event. Sport tourists are looking for comfortable accommodation, quality food and a feeling of safety, whereas »non-sport« tourists are more interested in the historical and cultural attractions of the destination. Kaplanidou and Vogt¹⁶ established that repeat participants of an event had a positive attitude because participation on the sport event was the prime reason for them taking the trip. McGehee, Yoon and Cardenas¹⁷ investigated the participants of different recreational running events and divided them according to their level of involvement in a sport activity or their relation with it. They established a correlation between a higher level of involvement and the frequency of sport activity and, consequently, more frequent participation in sport events. Filo, Funk and Hornby¹⁸ examined the reasons for attending sport events in relation to sport involvement, travelling motives and destination popularity. They found that the motivation to participate in a sport event stems from previous connectedness with sport activities, the desire to participate in an organised event, social interaction in terms of socialising during the event and not least the popularity of the destination.

Mass sport event participants in correlation with sociodemographic characteristics

It is due to the fact that sport engagement and consequently mass sport event participation can reflect human needs and desires that a tendency has emerged in the scientific area to identify the stratification dimensions of sport event participants¹⁹. To facilitate understanding of the reasons for participation on various mass sport events the age structure, gender ratio, family sta-

tus, family size, profession, education level and social structure should be known²⁰. The participants' age is clearly an important factor as research shows that the most of sport event participants are middle-aged people who prioritise comfort and quality^{6,11,16,21–23}. Human longevity is helping to expand the number of vital people of their third age who want to engage in sport and whose interests differ completely from those of the young and middle-aged²¹. Family status is mainly related to the motives and/or reasons for participation. Single people seek company and communication, whereas families with children look for contents suitable for children²⁴. A number of earlier studies confirmed that education and the related feeling of belongingness to specific social groups are extremely important factors for including individuals in different sport activities²⁵. Education level often correlates with income level. It hence follows that people with a higher education level more frequently participate in sport events and are interested in increasingly demanding, attractive and out-of-the-ordinary (extreme) sport events which are more abundant and original in terms of their content²⁶.

Sport events have become more than a passive or active spending of leisure time⁵. Besides the already known motives of relaxation and social interaction, they also invigorate the feelings of ability, capacity, happiness, freedom and authenticity. These are the things people strive for the most in their leisure time²⁷.

The purpose of our study was to establish the reasons for the growing participation in mass sport events and to answer the question of whether participation in such events is connected to travelling. Based on the participants' travel habits and different experiences during previous mass sport events we tried to explain the influence on their lifestyle and the meaning they attach to this.

Materials and Methods

The study was conducted in October and November 2010. The sample of subjects consisted of participants (runners) of the 15th Ljubljana Marathon. The survey was based on a specially designed and adapted questionnaire by Rauter and Doupona Topič²⁸. Adaptations were made according to the Tourist Role Preference Scale²⁹. The questionnaire consists of 30 items which a respondent must answer using a five-grade scale (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.76). Moreover, the survey questionnaire also verified the subjects' stratification characteristics (gender, age, education, income, marital status, number of children), their frequency of engaging in sport activities in leisure time and of attending mass sport events as well as their related habits. A link to the on-line survey was sent via e-mail to all registered participants of the 15th Ljubljana Marathon (11158). The study subjects were first divided into those who assume the sport tourist role and those for whom this role is not typical. The article discusses only the former – those taking on the sport tourist role; they were divided into two groups. The first group included marathon participants – sport tourists

who during their travels ascribe primary importance to sport activities. The second group included marathon participants – sport tourists for whom sport activities during their travels are an incidental, complementary activity. The data were processed using the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences, Inc., Chicago IL). The data so acquired were first analysed using descriptive statistics methods. The connections between individual categories of tourist roles and other variables were verified by way of a correlation. The statistical significance of the differences was established using an analysis of variance and the chi-square test. Further, a qualitative approach was used. Recruitment criteria for in-depth interview specified that all participants must be active participants – runners. Potential participants were informed that they would be asked to take part in interview that lasting between 20 and 30 minutes, after fulfilling the online questionnaire. We made the selection among interested runners according to their: age, gender and frequency participation on mass sports events. A total of 13 runners were included in the interview. During these in-depth interviews the participants' habits and experiences in mass sport events were analysed and their influence on the participants' lifestyles was established.

Results and Discussion

The study subjects were all active participants of the 15th Ljubljana Marathon and constituted a specific population for whom sport activities were an important element of their way of life.

The sample encompassed 664 subjects, of whom 50.5% were men and 49.7% women. The study subjects' age structure, with an average age of 36.18 ± 9.91 years, reflects the actual age structure of active participants in different mass sport events, as has already been found in some earlier studies^{16,23}. The results of earlier research show that the most common sport event participants are middle-aged people who priorities comfort and quality^{6,22}. Namely, more than one-half (52.7%) of them regularly (more than three times a week) engage in different sport activities, dedicating 5.69 ± 3.55 hours a week to them on average.

The results show that our marathon participants assume different tourist roles on their travels (Graph 1). The study subjects were first divided into those who assume the sport tourist role (29.8%) and those for whom this role is not typical (70.2%). Hence it is not surprising that these people largely assume the role of sport tourists on their travels. In the earlier studies, mass sport event participants were automatically categorized as sport tourists^{8,14,16}. Such generalization raises the question of how to classify more than two-thirds of our study subjects as all of them were active participants in the marathon and did not assume the sport tourist role.

Namely, 11.9% of them play the role of a tourist/ »anthropologist« that is keen on getting to know the locals and their customs. Strictly speaking, one cannot claim that people travel for only one reason and take on only

one role since their travels can involve a combination of several activities. An example of this is participant N.N. (48 years) who often attends sport events on all continents; she said: »I have been able to organise my travels in such a way that I spend one week getting to know the country and one week seriously preparing for the competition at the venue of the event«. While travelling, nearly one-tenth (9.9%) of the participants play the role of a tourist »sunlover«, who enjoy relaxing in warm places with lots of sun. Some runners enjoy warm places, but not only to lie on the beach all day long. K.J. (33 years) described what she expects about the holiday's destination: »A warm destination which suits my taste. There are always some activities available there. I am not the kind of person who would go on holidays only to lie on the beach«. Some runners enjoy holidays to explore unknown, such as M.P. (42 years): »It is more of an active holiday where you rent a car, drive around the place and explore new things. My motive is to discover new cultures and see different types of nature. If I can combine this with some activity, be it skiing, surfing, tennis, golf and another, so much the better.« The marathon participants who assume the role of an »explorer« on holidays and enjoy discovering more marginal places accounted for 7.5%. The results also show that, among the marathon participants, there were practically no »high-class tourists« who enjoyed luxurious trips or those who prefer organized and guided tours.

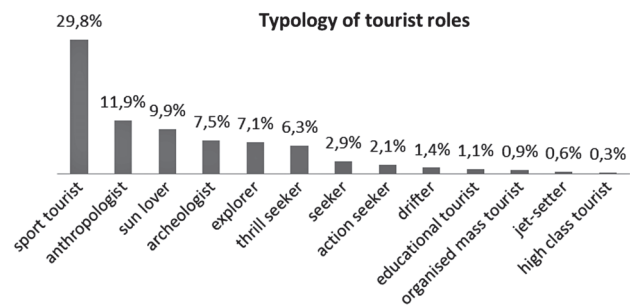


Fig. 1. The roles assumed by people while travelling or on holidays. Legend: % of those who defined themselves as one of the tourist types.

The results showed (Table 1) that among those who assumed the sport tourist role there were no gender-related differences and that those who take on the sport tourist role are older than those without a sport tourist role. The education structure of the marathon participants does not differ in terms of whether they assume the sport tourist role. One would also expect that the mass sport event participants, especially sport tourists, had a higher income, yet there were no differences in terms of their net monthly income. These results do not completely tally with earlier studies which defined sport tourists. Gibson¹⁰, for example established that typical sport tourists were in fact rich, highly educated men. What sport tourists had in common was the fact that they travelled long distances to engage in their favourite sport activity^{8,14,30,31}.

TABLE 1
SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS ACCORDING TO SPORT TOURIST ROLE

		Non-sport tourists (N=466)	Sport tourists (N=198)	
Age		35.28±10.49	38.31±9.52	p=0.000*
Gender	Male	50.6%	50.0%	$\chi^2=0.023$; p=0.879
	Female	49.4%	50.0%	
Education	Low	32.7%	36.7%	$\chi^2=1.008$; p=0.315
	High	67.3%	63.3%	
Income	<1100 euro	45.7%	41.5%	$\chi^2=0.837$; p=0.360
	>1100 euro	54.3%	58.5%	

$\bar{X}\pm SD$ and statistical significance ($p<0.05^*$), Education: low – secondary school or less, high – at least college education

Further only those marathon participants who assume the sport tourist role will be discussed. Weed and Bull³¹ (2004) proposed classifying sport tourists in terms of the significance of sport activities during travels, and this will be considered in the interpretation of the results (Table 2). The first group includes those sport tourists whose sport activities during travels represent their prime reason for travelling (66.7%), whereas the second group (33.3%) encompasses those whose sport activities on travels are only incidental or who passively attend sport events during their travels. Among men there are more sport tourists whose primary reason for travelling is sport activity than among women (Table 2). Male runner (M.B., 43 years) explained the importance of sport activities during his travels: »These are mainly one-day trips. They are combined with sport whenever possible; in fact, they are mainly of a sporting nature«. One-third (33.3%) of all runners considers sport activities not to be their prime reason for travelling. With reference to this, B.C. (60 years) said: »We do not take holidays to engage in a sport but we do include it in our everyday activities«.

This study revealed no statistically significant differences between the two groups of sport tourists as regards socio-demographic characteristics (Table 2). Some earlier studies delving into different types of sport tourists and their socio-demographic characteristics^{7–8,22}. Gibson¹⁰ be-

lieves that a person's age and the fact of whether they are married or single significantly affects their decision on the choice of sport-active travels. The participants i.e. sport tourists for whom sport activities are the primary reason for travelling, are slightly younger compared to other group of sport tourist. No differences were established between groups of sport tourists in terms of income, education structure and marital status (Table 2). However, there is a small difference, as M.O. (36 years) puts it: »Before you have a family you choose a location where all you do is skiing. When you have your own family you choose a location which is suitable for different people and children. This is skiing, in a way. But here is the difference«. The factor whether the participants had children or not (Table 2) did not influence their decision to travel for the purpose of spending their leisure time in a physically active way. N.N. (48 years) commented on her earlier travels: »While travelling, sport activities are of prime even later, when you have children, you still travel but your travels are limited only to Slovenia, or you engage in sport activities only incidentally«. A less frequent participant of sport events M.B. (34 years) commented on his travels: »We always need some sport equipment. At the seaside, in the mountains, wherever we go sport is always there. I practically don't know anybody who would only lie on a beach«.

TABLE 2
SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS AMONG SPORT TOURISTS

		Sport tourist: »sport as a prime purpose«	Sport tourist: »sport as incidental activity«	
Age		37.72±10.09	39.47±11.33	p=0.274
Gender	Male	51.9%	47.0%	$\chi^2=0.431$; p=0.511
	Female	48.1%	53.0%	
Marital status	Single	20.2%	13.8%	$\chi^2=4.550$; p=0.337
	Married	43.4%	56.9%	
	In common-law	33.2%	22.4%	
	Divorced	2.3%	6.9%	
Children	Yes	58.3%	68.2%	$\chi^2=1.804$; p=0.175
	No	41.7%	31.8%	

$\bar{X}\pm SD$ and statistical significance ($p<0.05^*$)

Our study involves a specific population of marathon participants for whom sport activities are clearly an important factor of their leisure time. After keeping in the sample only those participants who assume the sport tourist role, the sample became even more specific given that no less than 65.7% of the subjects who take on the sport tourist role engage in sport more than three times a week. This was also confirmed by two highly active marathon participants. B.S. (43 years) answered the question of how he spends his leisure time as follows: »Predominantly with sport. I mostly play tennis. I play it nearly every day. Another sport is running, for example. I run three to four times a week. I run 10 km each time, and I also play hockey twice a week. My free weekends are dedicated to sport climbing«. N.N. (48 years) described her typical working day as follows: »Yes, my typical day. I swim every morning before going to work, from six to seven o'clock. Then I go to work. Well, after work, if the weather is fine I sometimes engage in a recreational activity or go for a walk«.

Differences were identified between both groups of sport tourists in terms of the frequency of their sport engagement in leisure time ($p=0.000$, $F=28.340$). Those whose sport activities during their travels are the prime purpose of travelling engage in sport activities more frequently compared to the second group of sport tourists. Due to the specificity of the sample (marathon runners) it is absolutely understandable and expected that running is the most popular sport activity for as many as 63.8% of them, which was also confirmed by K.J. (33 years) who described her hobby as follows: »When I have spare time I always run«.

The Ljubljana Marathon participants attend more than four mass sport events per year on average (Table 3). Sport tourists whose sport activities are the prime purpose of travelling attend sport events slightly more frequently compared to those for whom sport is merely an incidental activity ($p=0.094$, $F=2.827$). If sample is divided into those assuming the sport tourist role and the rest, then differences can be found between them ($p=0.000$, $F=27.830$). McGehee, Yoon and Cardenas¹⁷ arrived at similar conclusions in their study of recreational runners in North Carolina and their travel behaviours. They established that those who are more involved in the running community participate in 7.51 running events a

year, whereas the group of the less involved takes part in only 4.66 running events a year.

Most marathon participants (69.6%) never attend different mass sport events abroad. One of the reasons is undoubtedly the one provided by U.L. (73 years): »No, abroad is out of the question. Because there are so many events of this type in Slovenia that I find them sufficient. I am not that ambitious, my goal is not to place very high«. Others think that events organised abroad require better preparation; namely, M.B. (34 years) explained his lack of previous participation in events abroad as follows: »I haven't been abroad yet. The criteria to participate in a running event are always much higher there than they are in Slovenia. I would go and I know people who do this, but first I would have to dedicate more time to running so that I'd be able to take part in a running event. What I have in mind is the London Marathon«. The study results revealed that among sport tourists were no statistically significant differences in participating in a sport event abroad ($\chi^2=6.153$, $p=0.104$). Runner (M.B., 43 years) answered the question of how frequently he attended sport events abroad as follows: »Yes, I go abroad at least four times a year and in Slovenia I think about six times a year. It's not that much«. The results show that, in the group of sport tourists who consider sport activity as the prime purpose of travelling, only 7.8% of runners attend a mass sport event abroad more than twice a year. The percentage of those sport tourists who consider sport activities during their travels to be incidental is even lower, i.e. only 4.5%.

Of course, mass sport event participants have multiple motives and this was described briefly by M.B. (34 years): »2,000 participants, 2,000 stories I'd say... » However, B.C. (60 years) said: »The feeling that I can do it, is the most beautiful of all«. The results show that the achievement of one's own desires, under which the feeling mentioned above can be categorised, is one of the most important reasons for participating (Table 4). For U.L. (73 years) mass sport events have been the main goal of many of his travels. According to his words he said the following about the frequency of attending events: »Well, my wife and I used to participate a lot in running marathons and other sport events. Together, we won over 1,000 medals«. Also interesting is the statement by M.P. (40 years) explaining his motives for participating in the event: »I gave my word. In the sense of a

TABLE 3
FREQUENCY OF EVENT PARTICIPATION AND OF SPORT ACTIVITY

	Number of events per year:	Number of hours of sport activity per week:
Total sample (n=664)	4.16±4.33	5.69±3.55
Non-sport tourists (n=466)	3.59±3.56	5.22±3.29
Sport tourists (n=198)	5.51±5.54	6.80±3.88
Sport tourists – sport is the prime purpose of travelling (n=132)	6.02±6.38	7.36±4.29
Sport tourists – sport is an incidental activity while travelling (n=66)	4.60±3.22	5.65±2.55

$\bar{X} \pm SD$ of frequency of sport engagement

TABLE 4
REASONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN MASS SPORT EVENTS

Participation is for me...	Total sample (N=664)	Non-sport tou- rists (N=466)	Sport tourists (N=198)	ANOVA (p)	F
Escape from everyday life activities	2.42±1.36	2.43±1.37	2.40±1.35	0.830	0.460
Acquiring new friends	2.68±1.17	2.58±1.37	2.91±1.21	0.001*	10.738
Spending time with my family	2.35±1.25	2.25±1.20	2.57±1.34	0.003*	8.619
Helps me to refresh my mind and body	4.21±1.01	4.16±1.00	4.33±1.01	0.048*	3.920
Allows me to seek new and different experiences	3.88±1.10	3.82±1.15	4.01±0.98	0.047*	3.944
Enhances my status with my peers	1.88±1.01	1.85±0.99	1.96±1.05	0.249	1.332
Is a special kind of activity in my life	3.55±1.24	3.40±1.23	3.92±1.21	0.000*	24.373
Helps me achieve my dreams and fantasies	4.09±1.04	4.00±1.07	4.31±0.95	0.001*	11.290

1 – Don't agree; 5 – Completely agree; $\bar{X} \pm SD$ and statistical significance ($p < 0.05^*$)

challenge. If you go then I go, and so we both went«. For some people, also for one of the very regular sport event a participant, running at mass events is: »A way of life. Especially in summer when we go on vacation and the children have school holidays, we take this as a holiday, an element of holidays. For example, we go on a journey for 10 or 14 days and in the meantime I participate in sport event. Before the event and afterwards a little bit of tourism« (M.B., 43 years). Statistically significant differences ($p=0.000$, $F=24.372$) were identified between the sport tourists and non-sport tourist in terms of the statement that mass sport events are part of their way of a life. The importance of individual reasons for participating in such sport events is shown in table 4 where the less important motives were those associated with socializing, e.g.: »acquiring new friends« and »spending time with my family«. Nevertheless, the importance of the socializing motives in such events should not be overlooked. U.L. (73 years) described his vast experience and the importance of socializing at mass sport events as follows: »My experience is very good. My wife and I have made a wide circle of friends, particularly among runners and triathlon participants. If we weren't involved in this type of recreation we would never have become acquainted with so many people. At all events, the organizers have known us for many years now and they always ask: Ah, you're also here«. Some of the runners attend sport events for different reasons besides running as the main event represents a combination of different social activities of the day. A.K. (33 years) says: »This means for me that I put my running shoes or bicycle in the car and drive there to attend the event. It is a one-day event. Actually, it has to do with running or cycling but there are also some other complementary events, entertainment ...«

Conclusion

People different motives and needs are the reason for assuming different tourist roles while travelling or on holidays. Using the role theory, travellers' motives and habits underpin the classification of people into different

types which are determined by similar characteristics. It was found that nearly one-third of the runners engage in sport activities during their travels and assume the role of a sport tourist. Based on the above, the runners were divided into sport tourists who travel primarily for sport purposes and those for who sport activities during their travels are incidental. The differences between them mainly occur in terms of the frequency of spending their leisure time in a sport active way. Sport tourists who go on various trips primarily for sport reasons more often participate in mass sport events at home and abroad and are more physically active in their leisure time. The analysis also included the participants' opinions about their habits when travelling as well as their experiences and feelings regarding different running marathons or other mass sport events. It was established that different travel habits and experiences from past sport events influenced their way of spending their leisure time. They see their participation in an event mainly as a social event and consequently a motive for physical activity. The latter helps them spend their leisure time in a physically active way more often, be it in their home environment or while travelling. Previous research into mass sport events^{8,14,16,22–23} does not discuss and define the participants of mass sport events separately. While the existing typologies of the sport tourism are extremely useful, limitations lie in their inability to account for event sport tourists who cut across typology classifications, based on the unique aspects of their chosen activity, be it distance running or any other form of event sport tourism activity¹³. By separately discussing a marathon participant in their role of a sport tourist from that of a participant who did not assume this role, we were able to better explain the characteristics of sport event participants.

In order to understand the social world of event sport tourism future research into mass sport event participants should reasonably address in a more qualitative way, why and to what extent people build their travels around participation in mass sport events. The meaning and the inclusion of mass sport events in a person's life-style also deserves further research and attention.

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TRKAČI KAO SPORTSKI TURISTI: ISKUSTVO I PUTNIČKO PONAŠANJE SUDIONIKA LJUBLJANSKOG MARATONA

SAŽETAK

U ovoj studiji analizirala su se iskustva sudionika na masovnim sportskim događanjima te je objašnjen utjecaj takvih sportskih događaja na životni stil trkača. Uzorak se sastojao od 664 sudionika 15. Ljubljanskog maratona. Upitnik TRPS je prilagođen za utvrđivanje turističke uloge. Ulogu sportskih turista preuzelo je 29,8% svih sudionika. Sportski turisti, koji uzimaju razne izlete uglavnom u sportske svrhe (66,7%), češće sudjeluju u masovnim sportskim događajima u zemlji i inozemstvu te su više fizički aktivni u svoje slobodno vrijeme. Također, provedeno je 13 dubinskih intervjua s odabranim sudionicima maratona. Utvrđeno je da su različita putnička ponašanja i iskustvo iz ranijih sportskih događaja utjecala na njihov stil života.