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2019-20 Status of the High Performance Athlete

Summary

Prepared for Sport Canada, Department of Canadian Heritage

Supplier: EKOS RESEARCH ASSOCIATES INC.

Contract Number: C1111-180883/001/CY

Contract Value: \$69,938.98

Award Date: December 13, 2018

Delivery Date: July 30, 2020

Registration Number: POR 091-18

For more information on this report, please contact Canadian Heritage at por-rop@pch.gc.ca

Ce rapport est aussi disponible en français

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This public opinion research report presents the results of an online survey conducted by EKOS Research Associates Inc. on behalf of Sport Canada (Canadian Heritage). The research study was conducted with 846 Canadian high performance athletes, as well as 84 National Team Coaches and High Performance Directors and 13 Presidents and Athlete Service Managers of Canadian Sport Institutes between March 2019 and February 2020.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : La situation de l'athlète de haut niveau en 2019-2020 : rapport final.

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Public Services and Procurement Canada
Portage III Tower A
16A1-11 Laurier Street
Gatineau QC K1A 0S5

Catalogue Number:

CH24-50/2020E-PDF

International Standard Book Number (ISBN):

978-0-660-35418-7

Related publications (registration number: POR 130-16):

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A. BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

This report represents the sixth study of high performance athletes since the early 90's. As was the case with the previous studies in 1992, 1997, 2004, 2009, and 2014 the primary goal is to gather information from various sport stakeholders in order to paint a current picture of the characteristics of high-performance athletes. The original 1992 study provided a comprehensive examination of athletes' sport, social and economic characteristics and was a key contributor to the development of athlete support policies at Sport Canada. Each report has drawn upon multiple lines of evidence collected from carded athletes, coaches and National Sport Organizations, updating information collected from previous research. A key objective of the research is to provide a picture the costs of sport and the needs of athletes with respect to assistance through Sport Canada's Athlete Assistance Program.

This survey of high performance athletes builds on much of the data from the earlier studies. The specific areas of investigation include:

- Training, competition and other sport-related activities;
- Adequacy of support services available to athletes;
- Social and economic characteristics; and
- Satisfaction with the Athlete Assistance Program (AAP)

B. METHODOLOGY

This project involved three individual lines of evidence with different target populations. The employed methodologies included:

- An online survey of AAP carded high-performance athletes;
- Online survey of Presidents and Athlete Service Managers of the seven Canadian Sport Centres; and
- Online survey of National Team Coaches and High Performance Directors.

In each case, a census approach was taken (i.e., attempts were made to include all members of the population). Since no sampling was conducted, a margin of error is also not applicable to the results. In each survey, sizable and representative proportions of the population were captured in the survey, and results are therefor considered projectable to the broader population.

Online Survey of High Performance Athletes

The survey of athletes was designed as a self-administered, web-based survey. All 1,955 high-performance athletes carded at the time of the survey were invited to participate and every attempt was made to reach as many of these athletes as possible. Specifically, Sport Canada circulated advance communications to athletes, National Sport Organizations and Canadian Sport Centres, and communicated with National Sport Organizations at several intervals throughout the data collection period. National Sport Organizations and Canadian Sport Centres were also sent an announcement to distribute or post on their social media feeds. EKOS, who conducted the study under contract for Canadian Heritage, also offered a cash lottery draw as an incentive to respond. Additional e-mail reminders were issued over several months, as well as reminder calls made to more than 1,000 non-responding athletes by telephone at two separate intervals (July 2019 and February 2020 prior to the close of the survey collection). The survey was conducted between March 2019, and end of February 2020, collecting 846 completed interviews. The overall response rate for the survey, out of the athlete pool for which there was full, valid contact information is 44%, which is lower than the 51% achieved in 2014, but similar to the 46% achieved in 2009.

Over the course of the 12 months a total of seven attempts were made by email to remind all non-responding athletes.

The survey instrument relied on previous questionnaire (2014), although some revisions were made to reduce the overall length of the survey. The questionnaire focused on the areas of investigation already cited and included some of the questions that were asked of athletes in the 1992, 1997, 2004 and 2009 surveys of high-performance athletes in order to track changes in status and experiences. Prior to the survey start-up, the instrument was tested with 15 athletes in English and French and changes were made to the wording, programming, and language as needed. The average time to complete the interview was 25 minutes.

Based on a review of the complete set of records (1,955 carded athletes as of February 2019), a weighting scheme was applied to increase the representativeness of the final sample of 846 athletes, based on type of sport (team/individual), by card level, and by gender.

Online Survey of National Team Coaches and High Performance Directors

The second component of the study involved an online survey of 84 National Team Coaches and High Performance Directors (of the 143 that were invited to participate from a list provided by Sport Canada). The online survey required an average of 25 minutes to complete. The survey data was collected during the same data collection period as that of the CSC Presidents/Service

Managers and athletes. All respondents received an e-mail invitation as well as several reminders. Calls were also made by telephone to all non-respondents in the month prior to the close of the survey. The overall survey collection took place between March 2019 and late February 2020. The response rate for the survey was 59 per cent.

Survey of Presidents and Service Managers of CSCs

The third data collection activity for this project was a small survey conducted online with the seven Presidents and 11 Athlete Service Managers of the four CSIs (Quebec, Ontario, Calgary, and Pacific) and three CSCs (Atlantic, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan). All contact information on potential respondents (name, organization, and telephone number) was provided by Sport Canada, who also helped determine which staff to survey. Some of the questions in the survey questionnaire were qualitative, open-ended in nature and others were closed ended. Each questionnaire took an average 25 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was administered over the same data collection period as that of the athletes and coaches. Of the 18 individuals invited, 13 responded (i.e., 72 per cent).

C. KEY FINDINGS

Motivation and Satisfaction

According to survey results most athletes are motivated largely by enjoyment of their sport, pursuit of excellence, and a sense of personal fulfillment, rather than by recognition or monetary gains. Desire to win, however, is also a strong motivator. Only 18% of athletes said that they are in it to pursue a professional career in sport which is in line with the 13% to 15% found in 2009 and 2014.

As seen in previous years, high performance athletes continue to exhibit high levels of satisfaction with their career as a high performance athlete. Virtually all athletes said that they are content with the level of enjoyment they get from their sport, and nine in ten are satisfied with their confidence in experiencing a sport that is safe, and free of both performance enhancing drugs and violence. Over eight in ten are satisfied with their level of performance and an environment that is free from abuse. Only slightly fewer are content with the respect with which they are treated and satisfied that their sport environment is fair and inclusive. Satisfaction with recognition received is modest with only six in ten saying they are satisfied, although it has climbed significantly from 2004, and remained steady since 2009. There is considerable dissatisfaction, however, with regards to income/material rewards, where fewer than four in ten

are satisfied and a higher proportion is dissatisfied than satisfied. That being said, satisfaction levels with income/material rewards have climbed since 1992 when only 16% were satisfied.

Training, Training Plans and Coaching

As found in 2009 and 2014, findings from the athletes' survey show that although the majority of athletes (two in three) have individual, formalized plans for their development, there is a sizable proportion that do not. Of the respondents who have a written plan, one in three were drawn up by the national team coach, one in four were created by a personal coach and in nearly one in ten cases (9%) athletes developed their own plan. Six in ten athletes indicate a high degree of satisfaction with their involvement in their development of the training and competition plan. Just over six in ten athletes indicate high levels of satisfaction with their plan overall, although athletes without personal coaches are also less often satisfied with it.

Nearly half of athletes have a principal coach who is employed by their National Sport Organization (NSO) on a full-time basis. One in four athletes follow the direction of a personal coach who is not employed or contracted by their NSO. Athletes spent an average of 19 hours per week with a coach out of the 34 hours a week that athletes spend in training. Findings point to a reasonably high level of satisfaction with both the overall quality of the coaching and the technical expertise demonstrated by their coaches, although satisfaction with the overall quality of coaching has declined since 2009 (68% and 67% in 2019 and 2014 respectively, versus 74% in 2009). Results are marginally weaker, in terms of satisfaction with the time the coaches spend with their athletes with only just over half of athletes expressing satisfaction with this indicator.

CSC Services and Supports

The majority of athletes (two out of three) feel that they are adequately supported in terms of the training experience, quality of training and type of competition experience. Six in ten rate the adequacy of access to training facilities high, an increase to 61% from 54% in 2014. Over half rate the amount of competition they are getting or the sport science and medicine they are getting highly. The financial support that athletes receive is rated much lower, with only one in four saying it is adequate and half saying it is moderately adequate. Results are largely on par, however, with those found in 2014 and 2009. Coaches provide generally lower responses than athletes, particularly in the areas of access to high quality training facilities and the amount of competition experience.

Similar to 2014, just over half of athletes say they have been able to access all the needed sport science and sport medicine services from their CSC. CSC sport science services rated most

important by both athletes and coaches surveyed are strength and conditioning, nutrition, and sport psychology. The importance of skill and technique analysis increased to 66% from 57% in 2014. Coaches largely place a higher importance on each service, particularly strength and conditioning, and sport psychology. When asked about services in need of improvement, as with 2014, there is a diverse response across a range of services, with no one or two standing out strongly. Among coaches, far fewer identify the need to improve sport psychology as reported in 2014.

Athletes report that of sport medicine services provided by CSCs, massage and physiotherapy are the most highly valued.

Financial Picture

Carded athletes reported an average annual income of \$28,858 for 2018. The largest proportion of this income is derived from Federal and/or Provincial athlete assistance. The average is \$13,613 annually from Sport Canada's Athlete Assistance Program (AAP) and \$3,689 from Provincial Assistance. Smaller proportions of athletes' incomes are derived from employment income (\$10,074 annually), sport-related sources (\$5,218), and sports awards (\$1,264). Only a small proportion is derived from the National Sport Organization (\$864) or other sources combined (\$1,143 annually). The 2018¹ annual average personal income for high performance athletes is exactly the same as the 2013-14 annual income and lower than reported in 2009 when these income figures are adjusted for inflation to 2019 constant dollars.

Expenses, on the other hand, are close to \$4,400 per month and have increased more than 15% since 2013-14, and nearly 30% since 2009. In particular, shelter costs have increased considerably (over 35%), followed by both living expenses and sport-related expenses, which have gone up by about 15% since 2013-14. Overall, athletes are spending over \$600 a month more in 2018 than they were in 2013-14, which is nearly double the \$300 increase between 2009 and 2013-14.

This picture of increasing expenses but stable income leaves athletes facing a deficit of \$1,800 per month, or close to \$22,000 a year. This is a considerable increase in the deficit athletes reported in 2013-2014 (\$15,300 in 2019 constant dollars), and in 2009 (\$6,100 in 2019 constant dollars).

¹ Because of some very large incomes reported by a few respondents new ceilings were set for outliers in each income source in 2013-14. As a result these same outliers were applied to the 2009 data for the purposes of comparing results in the current study. As such 2009 numbers may vary from those cited in the 2009 report.

In terms of personal debt, almost one in five athletes said that they have incurred some level of repayable debt in the pursuit of their athletic career, which is on par with 2014 and lower than the 24% in 2009. Loans from family and credit cards are at the top of the list, followed by loans to financial institutions and then student loans. When loan amounts are added together they amount to an average of just under \$4,300 in repayable debt across all athletes, which is lower than reported in 2013/14 (closer to \$8,000), suggesting that non-repayable support has increased from parents, spouses and other family members.

Athletes reported that they rely heavily on Sport Canada's AAP as the most prevalent source of financial support; according to three in four athletes, as was also the case in 2014 and 2009. This is followed at a distance by a reliance on family and/or Provincial AAP; key sources for just over four in ten athletes in each case.

Although athletes are operating in the red, money is typically not a large barrier to accessing most of the basic necessities and things that athletes need to concentrate on and excel in their sport. That being said, some athletes (about one in five) see money as a strong barrier to international competitions and sport medicine services.

Views about AAP Support

Over four in five athletes agree that the AAP has made it possible to achieve higher levels of athletic performance. Coaches were in relatively similar agreement at 86%. Less than half of athletes report that the AAP is assisting (or has assisted) them in pursuing post-secondary education. Three in four coaches, however, agree. A less strong, but still relatively positive result: two in five athletes agree that the funding by AAP is sufficient to meet living and training needs, which has continually increased from just under one in four in 2004. It is interesting to note that one in four athletes say that they received their funding too late in their career. This level of agreement has decreased steadily over time, however, from 38% in 2004.

Most athletes are aware that Tuition and Deferred Tuition support can be applied to coaching courses (just under three in four). Only about six in ten athletes are aware of the three supplementary support measures that have been changed in AAP benefits (allowance for Paralympic athletes, excellence living and training allowance, and child dependent allowance). Further, only one in four are aware that the tuition and deferred tuition includes \$5,500 per carding cycle and a lifetime maximum of \$26,500.

Satisfaction with AAP Client Services

The main contact for athletes receiving AAP support is their NSO, however, from time to time athletes contact AAP staff for information about the Program or questions regarding the benefits of the Program. Similar to 2014 results, one in three athletes have contacted this part of Sport Canada in the past 12 months, primarily for financial issues (primarily tuition or payments), which has remained higher than the 22% reported in 2009. When contacting AAP staff, email is the most prevalent method of contact (by nearly nine in ten). Satisfaction with service is very high among athletes that have contacted Sport Canada's AAP staff in the recent past. Virtually all athletes (88%) indicate that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall quality of service they received when contacting Sport Canada. Similarly, nine in ten coaches were satisfied or very satisfied with the overall quality of service from AAP staff.

D. NOTE TO READERS

Detailed findings are presented in the sections that follow. Overall results are presented in the main portion of the narrative and are typically supported by graphic or tabular presentation of results. Bulleted text is also used to point out any statistically and substantively significant differences between sub-groups of respondents. If differences are not noted in the report, it can be assumed that they are either not statistically significant² in their variation from the overall result or that the difference was deemed to be substantively too small to be noteworthy. The programmed survey instruments can be found in the appendices.

Results for the proportion of respondents in the sample who either said "don't know" or did not provide a response may not be indicated in the graphic representation of the results in all cases, particularly where they are not sizable (e.g., 10% or less). Results may also not total to 100% due to rounding.

² Chi-square and standard t-tests were applied as applicable. Differences noted were significant at the 95% level.

E. CONTRACT VALUE

The contract value for the POR project is \$69,938.98 (including HST).

Supplier Name: EKOS Research Associates

PWGSC Contract Number: C1111-180883/001/CY

Contract Award Date: December 13, 2018

To obtain more information on this study, please e-mail por-rop@pch.gc.ca

F. POLITICAL NEUTRALITY CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify as Senior Officer of EKOS Research Associates Inc. that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research.

Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed by:



Susan Galley (Vice President)