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Sport Tourism Centres from Top Athletes' Perspective: Differences among Sport Groups

Anže Polanec
Faculty of Commercial and Business Sciences, Celje, Slovenia & Unior d.d. Tourism Programme, Zreče, Slovenia

Abstract

Background: Sport tourism plays an important role in the tourism industry and consequently in the economy. Sport tourism centres as providers of sport services need to be familiar with the basic needs of their customers and tailor their services accordingly. **Objectives:** The aim of the paper is to determine the models for customizing sport tourism services to address the needs specific for an individual sport. **Methods/Approach:** A questionnaire has been created and sent electronically or physically to top athletes from Slovenia, Central and Eastern Europe. Respondents were mainly from Slovenia and mostly representatives of national sports federations. The Mann Whitney and the Kruskall-Wallis tests were applied in order to test differences among sport groups. **Results:** The conducted Mann-Whitney non-parametric tests show that representatives of different sport groups have different perspectives on sport tourism services. **Conclusions:** The results of the study can be used by sport tourism centres in the process of tailoring their services, planning marketing activities or developing strategic projects.

Keywords: sport tourism centre; top athletes; tourism offer; perceived value; customer satisfaction; sport service

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Introduction

Sport tourism represents one of the largest growing industries across the world in the global economy (Weed, 2008). Sport tourism is considered to be the concept that has the biggest growth in the tourism industry (Homafar et al., 2011). Sport tourism

products delivered by sport tourism centres and destinations are very important tourism products. Such products are offered to amateur sportsmen and top athletes. Possible services provided by sport tourism centres include: providing sport recreation, enabling the use of sport facilities, providing special services for top athletes and disabled athletes, and organizing sport events. Another important service for top athletes is physical activity and therapy for immediate rehabilitation after injuries and surgeries (Berčič et al., 2010). The abovementioned services may be delivered to numerous types of tourists such as recreational sportsmen (children, youth, and adults) or professional athletes. Social media plays an important role in today communication (Roblek, et al., 2013), which is also true for sportsman.

Sport teams usually prepare for the season in sport tourism centres. Top athletes can also be considered as ambassadors of certain sport tourism centres / destinations since their activities are often followed by media representatives and therefore they contribute a lot to the image, credibility and media exposure of certain sport tourism centres. Core services for top athletes offered in sport tourism centres are more or less the same, but the importance of specific services or elements differs among sports. Hingham (2005) mentions the following elements as very important in the decision-making process regarding sport tourism centres and top athletes: (i) Gym and sports halls; (ii) The infrastructure for water sports (pools, springboards, lakes); (iii) The infrastructure for athletic sports (athletic tracks, marathon tracks); (iv) Training fields and medical infrastructure; and (v) Supply service and the personnel in sports complexes.

The hypothesis of this research is that in the context of professional sports, there are different perspectives among sport groups on the perceived importance of the elements in a sport tourism centre's offer. Consequently, sport tourism centres should be aware of these different perspectives and should adjust their marketing activities, service performance and development as well as future investments in sport infrastructure and personnel's knowledge and skills accordingly.

Literature review

Overview of service quality in tourism

Researchers (Žabkar, Makovec Brenčič, Dmitrović, 2010; Murray, Howat, 2002) claim that service quality is based on the mechanism of emotional processes. In regard to tourism, there are many empirical researches which confirm the thesis that quality has an influence on satisfaction (Žabkar, Makovec Brenčič, Dmitrović, 2010; Shonk, Chellandurai, 2008; Ko, Pastore, 2004; Cronin, Brady, Hult, 2000). Ferrand, Robinson, Valette-Florens (2010) claim that there is a positive connection between satisfaction and the intention to repurchase. Based on the ASCI model, Makovec Brenčič et al. (2007) developed a model which measures the degree of satisfaction in tourism. The key elements of the model are the general image, price, quality, value and satisfaction. Smith (2008, p. 237) lists three key principles for quality service marketing: (1) service quality, (2) customer relationship building and (3) customer satisfaction.

Service quality is a multi-dimensional construct which can be divided into tangible and intangible determinants that are noticed, paid for, used or experienced (Shonk, Chellandurai, 2008). Quality can be divided into 8 dimensions (Garvin, 1988): performance, features, reliability, conformance, durability, serviceability, aesthetics and perceived quality. Performance refers to a product's key characteristics and related services. It is very difficult to define quality, since it is a complex construct and a part of a multi-dimensional and dynamic category. That is why authors use different dimensions of quality in research. Shonk and Chellandurai (2008) present a collection of certain models; such as the Grönroos' two-dimensional model isbased

on technical and functional quality, while Lehtinen and Lehtinen (1991) discussed process and output quality and in 1991 devised the three-dimensional model including physical, interactive and corporate quality. Dabholkar, Thorpe and Rentz (1996) used the three-dimensional model which included physical aspects, reliability and personal interaction. Brady and Cronin (2001) created a three-dimensional model of service quality as a construct of interaction quality, physical quality and outcome quality. Žabkar et al. (2010) suggest that the quality in tourism is created by the processes of service delivery (friendliness, courtesy, efficiency, reliability and staff competence) and outcomes of services (accommodation, food, leisure facilities).

The most widely used instrument for evaluating service quality is SERVQUAL, which was developed by Parasuraman in the 1980s (Žabkar et al., 2010, Smith 2008). Lately, SERVQUAL has been adapted to several different industries including tourism. SERVQUAL is based on the evaluation of five determinants (reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy, responsiveness and objectified basic means) but does not include factors which are relevant at the destination level such as sights, cultural legacies and entertainment (Žabkar et al., 2010). At the destination level a model of a tourist product was developed by Buhalis (2000) who expanded the 4a model (attractions, access, amenities and ancillary services) by additionally including available packages and possible activities at a certain tourist destination (Žabkar et al., 2010).

Overview of service quality in sport tourism

In regard to the satisfaction in the field of sports, Thamnopoulos, Tzetzis and Laios (2012) claim that sport enthusiasts reach a certain level of satisfaction which represents an experience in the process of participation in sports. This model is based on a thesis that the level of satisfaction has its bias on the relationship between expectations and service performance. Other researchers claim that the customer satisfaction in sports has a positive impact on intention to repurchase and on mouth-to-mouth communication (Ferrand, Robinson, Valette-Florens, 2010; Theodorakis, Alexandris, 2008) as well as on tourism (Murphy, Mascardo, Benckendorf, 2007).

In order to measure the quality of services within sports, several authors have researched the quality of services as a part of sport events and sport recreation. There is not a generally accepted model for the evaluation of service quality, but most of them use SERVQUAL as a basis. Sports' researchers have examined service quality in different contexts. Shonk and Chellandurai (2008) mentioned instances of research in which gym members (Alexandris, Zahariadis, Tsorbatzoudis, & Grouios 2004), golfers (Crilley, Murray, Howat, March, & Adamson, 2002) and spectators at sports events were analysed (Theodorakis and Alexandris 2008 quote Theodorakis et al. 2001, Kelley and Turley 2001).

Using the SERVQUAL technique, Theodorakis and Alexandris (2008) have developed a 5-dimensional SPORTSERV scale for measuring service quality as perceived by spectators of professional football games. They used 22 units which represent the following 5 dimensions: responsiveness, access, security, reliability and physical objects. However, they found that only responsiveness and reliability have a significant impact on satisfaction. Based on a SERVQUAL model, Howat, Murray and Crilley (1999) developed the CERM-CSQ (Centre for Environmental and Recreation Management – Customer Service Quality)questionnaire. This model is based on three dimensions: core services, personnel and peripheral services. Howat and Murray (2002) used it in the context of recreation centres in Australia and New Zealand. Alexandris et al. (2004) suggested a five-dimensional model (perceived outcome, responsiveness, tangibles, reliability and personnel) and used it to assess the quality of gyms in Greece.

Lam et al. (2005) suggested a SQAS model (Service Quality Assessment Scale) which includes six dimensions of service quality on the basis of structural equation modelling: staff, program, locker room, physical facility, workout facility and child care (Theodorakis and Alexandris 2008). Ko and Pastore (2004) used a SSQRS model (Scale of Service Quality for Recreation Sport) that included 49 items, which evaluate 4 dimensions: program (range of program, operating-time, information), interaction (client-employee, inter-client), outcome (physical change, valence, sociability) and physical environment (ambience, design, equipment). The authors (Lam et al. 2005) conclude that the abovementioned 11 dimensions influence further 4 dimensions of the second degree: quality of the program, quality of interaction, quality of results and physical quality of the environment.

Top athletes' demands for a sport tourism centre's services depend on their specific training processes. It is therefore mandatory to understand the perspective of top athletes and the basic needs of the specific sport industry. To our best knowledge, currently there is no "top athletes focused" model which deals with service quality in sport tourism centres. The perspective of top athletes as sport tourism customers varies depending on the sport industry and the category of athletes, since there are different levels of top athletes from medium levelled to world-class champions. Service performance refers to the degree of the quality of the delivered service. The goal of our research was to determine the importance of individual elements in a sport tourism centre's offer.

Methodology

Survey research

In order to fulfil research goals, a questionnaire survey method was used to collect the responses of the athletes and sport officials from sports teams, national sport federations or national Olympic committees. In the period from November 2012 to July 2013 questionnaires were distributed to sportsmen from Slovenia and countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The main source of data was the database of the Olympic Committee of Slovenia. The questionnaire was sent randomly to national federations through an online web survey tool or distributed physically to top sports guests of Rogla (mountain sport resort) and Terme Zreče, (wellness & spa resort). For the purpose of the research, we grouped sports logically (Table 1), according to basic facilities needed when visiting sport tourism centres (Olympic indoor sports using a ball, Olympic martial arts sports, Olympic winter sports, Olympic summer sports, Olympic water sports, Non-Olympic Sports).

Table 1

Grouping of sports

Olympic indoor sports	Olympic martial arts sports	Olympic winter sports	Olympic summer sports	Olympic water sports	Non-Olympic sports
Basketball	Wrestling	Alpine skiing	Mountain biking	Canoe Kayak Slalom	Paralympics Sports
Handball	Boxing	Cross country	Track Cycling	Swimming	Non-Olympic Sports
Volleyball	Judo	Snowboarding	Athletics	Water polo	
		Nordic combined			
		Figure skating			

Source: Author's work

Sample

The sample consisted of the athletes who were representatives of sports teams, national sport federations or national Olympic committees (athletes and sports officials) and who completed the survey in the period from November 2012 to July 2013.

The survey included 73 representatives, while 256 persons were asked to complete the survey, implying a 28.5% response rate (Table 2). The study included athletes and sports officials of Olympic and non-Olympic sports. Also, the study included 5% of representatives of national Olympic committees, 9.6% of athletes, 34% of representatives of sports clubs, and 51% of representatives of national sport federations. Most of the respondents, i.e. 78.1% were representatives of Olympic sports and 21.9% were representatives of non-Olympic sports. Thereof, 63% of respondents are from Slovenia and 37% from Central and Eastern Europe.

Table 2
Profile of respondents

Characteristics of respondents	Number of respondents	Percentage
I. Role of the respondents		
Athletes	7	9.6%
Coaches & Managers	66	90. 4%
II. Sport industry		
Olympic indoor ball sports	24	33.3%
Olympic martial arts sports	7	9.7%
Olympic winter sports	7	9.7%
Olympic summer sports	11	15.3%
Olympic water sports	7	9.7%
Non-Olympic sports	16	22.2%
III. Client segmentation		
Preparatory period	60	82.2%
Pre-competition period	32	43.8%
Competition period	14	19.2%
Active rest / Regeneration period	15	20.5%
IV. Average stay		
Up to 5 days	29	39.7%
From 6 do 10 days	17	23.3%
From 11 to 14 days	13	17.8%
More than 14 days	10	13.7%

Source: Author's work

Research instrument

When measuring the perceived importance of elements of a sport tourism centre's offer for top athletes, we created a five-dimensional model that included infrastructure, core services, accommodation infrastructure, climatic factors and flexibility of the staff. Dimensions of infrastructure included four categories (indoor sports facilities, outdoor sports facilities, wellness facilities, conference facilities). Core services within the training process included four categories (measurement, hypoxic rooms, nutrition, and services of a diagnostic and rehabilitation centre). Accommodation infrastructure referred to the type and classification of accommodation, while microclimate referred to the favourable weather conditions. The last dimension referred to organizational services of the centre such as flexibility of staff and feasibility of friendly matches / sparring partners. Table 3 presents all used multi-item measures, that were based on 5-point Likert scales from 1 (the element is

totally unimportant) to 5 (the element is very important). Table 3 also presents the data of the mean values of the importance of each element in the sport tourism centre's offer for top athletes. According to the mean values the most important element of service quality to all sport groups is indoor sport infrastructure (4.59) and the least important is the conference infrastructure (2.44).

Table 3
Research instrument description

Construct	Code	Item	Mean values (St.dev)
Sport Infrastructure	**INF1**	Indoor sport infrastructure importance (Likert 1-5)	4.59 (.833)
	INF2	Outdoor sport infrastructure importance (Likert 1-5)	3.98 (1.221)
	INF3	Wellness infrastructure importance (Likert 1-5)	3.96 (.928)
	INF4	Conference infrastructure importance (Likert 1-5)	2.44 (1.195)
Services for elite athletes	**SEA1**	Measurements and tests importance (Likert 1-5)	3.54 (1.448)
	SEA2	High altitude rooms importance (Likert 1-5)	3.50 (1.336)
	SEA3	Nutrition and preparation of food importance (Likert 1-5)	4.45 (.757)
	SEA4	Services of health centre importance (rehab and diagnostic)	4.14 (1.190)
Accommodation infrastructure	**AI1**	Categorization of accommodation importance (Likert 1-5)	3.94 (.861)
	AI2	Type of accommodation importance (Likert 1-5)	4.17 (.769)
Climate	**C1**	Microclimate importance (Likert 1-5)	4.33 (.790)
Organizational services of the centre	**OS1**	Friendliness of the people (Likert 1-5)	4.43 (.620)
	OS2	Possibility to organize sparring partners (Likert 1-5)	3.52 (1.312)

Source: Author's work

Results

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics of the elements for specific sport groups. The data are presented according to the differences in perception of specific elements in the offer for various sport groups. Indoor sport infrastructure is the most important element for Olympic water sports (4.86), Olympic indoor (ball) sports and Martial arts sports (the mean value is 4.83 for both sport groups). Olympic winter and summer sports perceive outdoor infrastructure as the most important element of an offer, while Non-Olympic sports perceive nutrition and preparation of food as the most important element.

Table 4
Descriptive statistics of items for different sport groups

Construct	Code	Sport industry					
		Olympic indoor ball sports	Olympic martial arts sports	Olympic winter sports	Olympic summer sports	Olympic water sports	Non-Olympic sports
Sport Infrastructure	INF1	4.83 (.383)	4.83 (.408)	4.00 (1.414)	4.18 (1.328)	4.86 (.378)	4.58 (.669)
	INF2	3.06 (1.389)	3.60 (1.140)	4.80 (.447)	4.91 (.302)	4.14 (1.069)	4.10 (.994)
	INF3	4.20 (.862)	3.80 (1.304)	3.50 (1.000)	3.91 (1.044)	3.86 (1.069)	4.00 (.667)
	INF4	2.87 (.915)	2.40 (1.140)	1.75 (1.500)	1.36 (.674)	2.71 (1.380)	3.10 (1.101)
Services for elite athletes	SEA1	2.93 (1.163)	3.60 (2.608)	3.50 (1.000)	3.45 (1.809)	4.43 (.787)	3.90 (.994)
	SEA2	2.67 (1.496)	3.00 (1.414)	3.50 (.577)	4.45 (.820)	3.86 (1.345)	3.70 (1.059)
	SEA3	4.67 (.488)	3.80 (.837)	4.00 (.816)	4.30 (1.059)	4.43 (.787)	4.80 (.422)
	SEA4	4.29 (.825)	2.80 (2.387)	4.25 (.500)	3.70 (1.252)	4.86 (.378)	4.56 (.726)
Accommodation infrastructure	AI1	3.77 (.832)	3.80 (.447)	3.25 (1.500)	4.30 (.949)	3.86 (.690)	4.22 (.667)
	AI2	4.08 (.760)	4.00 (.000)	3.75 (1.500)	4.80 (.422)	3.83 (.753)	4.11 (.601)
Climate	C1	3.92 (1.038)	4.00 (.816)	4.25 (.500)	4.50 (.527)	4.67 (.516)	4.67 (.707)
Organizational services of the centre	OS1	4.38 (.650)	4.25 (.500)	4.25 (.957)	4.60 (.516)	4.33 (.816)	4.56 (.527)
	OS2	3.38 (1.261)	3.50 (1.000)	3.75 (1.893)	3.20 (1.814)	3.67 (1.033)	3.89 (.928)

Note: Mean values of the importance estimate of the item (1- Totally unimportant, 5-Very important), standard deviations in parenthesis
Source: Author's work

When the Kruskal-Wallis test leads to statistically significant results, then at least one of the samples is different from the other samples. Table 5 shows that the importance of outdoor infrastructure and the importance of conference infrastructure are statistically significant with 1% probability, the importance of measurements and tests and the importance of services of a health centre are statistically significant with 10% probability, while the importance of high altitude rooms is statistically significant at 5% probability. The type of accommodation infrastructure is statistically significant at 10% probability.

Table 5
Kruskall-Wallis test for different groups of sports

Construct	Code	Kruskall-Wallis		
		Different groups of sports		
		Chi-Square	df	Asymp. Sig.
Infrastructure	**INF1**	4.405	5	.493
	INF2	19.723	5	.001***
	INF3	2.197	5	.821
	INF4	16.356	5	.006***
Services for elite athletes	**SEA1**	9.575	5	.088*
	SEA2	12.191	5	.032**
	SEA3	8.693	5	.122
	SEA4	9.359	5	.096*
Accommodation infrastructure	**AI1**	4.899	5	.428
	AI2	10.135	5	.072*
Climate	**C1**	7.275	5	.201
Organizational services	**OS1**	1.694	5	.890
	OS2	1.206	5	.944

Note: *** statistically significant at 1%, ** 5%, * 10%
Source: Author's work

In order to test the paper research goals, a Mann-Whitney non-parametric test was conducted (Table 6). A number of differences were found. For example, the test results show there is a statistically significant difference in the following data regarding the *outdoor sport infrastructure importance*:

- outdoor sport infrastructure importance for the Olympic indoor sports (ball) and the Olympic water sports with 1% probability (Mann-Whitney U=9.000; p-value=0.008);
- outdoor sport infrastructure importance for the Olympic indoor sports (ball) and the Olympic summer sports with 1% probability (Mann-Whitney U=15.000; p-value=0.000);
- outdoor sport infrastructure importance for the Olympic indoor sports (ball) and the Olympic water sports with 10% probability (Mann-Whitney U=31.000; p-value=0.066);
- outdoor sport infrastructure importance for the Olympic indoor sports (ball) and the non-Olympic sports with 10% probability (Mann-Whitney U=46.000; p-value=0.066);
- outdoor sport infrastructure importance for the Olympic martial arts sports and the Olympic winter sports with 10% probability (Mann-Whitney U=4.000; p-value=0.055);
- outdoor sport infrastructure importance for the Olympic martial arts sports and the Olympic summer sports with 1% probability (Mann-Whitney U=7.000; p-value=0.005);
- outdoor sport infrastructure importance for the Olympic indoor sports (ball) and the Olympic summer sports with 1% probability (Mann-Whitney U=15.000; p-value=0.000);
- outdoor sport infrastructure importance for the Olympic summer sports and the Olympic water sports with 10% probability (Mann-Whitney U=24.000; p-value=0.070);
- outdoor sport infrastructure importance for the Olympic summer sports and the non-Olympic sports with 5% probability (Mann-Whitney U=30.600; p-value=0.030).

Table 6
Post-hoc Mann-Whitney test for different sport groups

Construct	Sport groups		Mann-Whitney U	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Infrastructure	**INF1 - Outdoor sport infrastructure importance (Likert 1-5)**			
	Olympic indoor (ball)	Olympic winter	9.000	.008***
	Olympic indoor (ball)	Olympic summer	15.000	.000***
	Olympic indoor (ball)	Olympic water	31.000	.087*
	Olympic indoor (ball)	Non-Olympic	46.000	.066*
	Olympic martial arts	Olympic winter	4.000	.055*
	Olympic martial arts	Olympic summer	7.000	.005***
	Olympic summer	Olympic water	24.000	.070*
	Olympic summer	Non-Olympic	30.500	.030**
	INF4-Conference infrastructure importance (Likert 1-5)			
	Olympic indoor ball	Olympic summer	18.000	.000***
	Olympic indoor ball	Olympic water	31.000	.087*
	Olympic indoor ball	Non-Olympic	46.000	.066*
	Olympic martial arts	Olympic winter	4.000	.050*
	Olympic martial arts	Olympic summer	7.000	.005***
	Olympic summer	Non-Olympic	30.500	.030**
Services for elite athletes	**SEA1 - Measurements and tests importance (Likert 1-5)**			
	Olympic indoor ball	Olympic water	15.500	.007***
	Olympic indoor ball	Non-Olympic	40.000	.045**
	SEA2 - High altitude rooms importance (Likert 1-5)			
	Olympic indoor ball	Olympic summer	27.000	.003***
	Olympic indoor ball	Olympic water	28.000	.078*
	Olympic indoor ball	Non-Olympic	45.000	.088*
	Olympic martial arts	Olympic summer	10.500	.036**
	Olympic winter	Olympic summer	8.000	.049**
	Olympic winter	Non-Olympic	32.500	.088*
	SEA4 - Services of health centre importance (Rehab and Diagnostic)			
	Olympic indoor ball	Olympic water	27.500	.066*
	Olympic martial arts	Olympic water	5.000	.022**
	Olympic martial arts	Non-Olympic	10.000	.071*
	Olympic winter	Olympic water	5.500	.055*
	Olympic summer	Olympic water	16.500	.070*
Accommodation infrastructure	**AI2 - Type of accommodation importance (Likert 1-5)**			
	Olympic indoor ball	Olympic summer	30.000	.016**
	Olympic martial arts	Olympic summer	4.000	.018**
	Olympic summer	Olympic water	9.000	.011**
	Olympic summer	Non-Olympic	18.000	.013**

Note: *** statistically significant at 1%, ** 5%, * 10%; only pairs that are different with statistically significant levels are presented in the table
Source: Authors' work

Discussion

Based on the conducted tests presented in Table 5 and Table 6 we can conclude that the test hypothesis is confirmed, meaning there are differences in the perception of the importance of elements in a sport tourism centre's offer among sport groups. The collected data provide information on elements which are the most important for specific sport groups. The obtained information is very helpful for sport tourism centres as they can adjust their marketing communication activities

and investments according to the most important elements of an offer. Most of the top athletes visit sport tourism centres in the preparatory period and stay there for up to 10 days (63%). The price has a strong impact on the decision-making process about a sport tourism offer. More than ¾ of the top athletes' representatives indicate that the price is important or that it has a significant impact regarding the offer of sport tourism centres. The following text provides models for tailoring services for top athletes in tourism sport centres according to different types of sports.

Olympic indoor "ball" sports

Indoor sports infrastructure is the most important element from the perspective of top athletes in the mentioned sport group and should include a modern sport hall/gym, sport equipment, a fitness room and an appropriate wardrobe. Services related to the indoor sport infrastructure should be delivered in a maximum quality, meaning that there should also be a possibility to choose the schedule of trainings in the indoor sport infrastructure and personnel has to be able to provide sport equipment at short notice (gym equipment and possibility to customize the set-up in a sport hall for specific needs).

"Measurements and tests" and "high altitude rooms" are the least important elements, which we find strange. However, these elements should be considered as additional services and sport tourism centres should market them on-site. The competition season for these sports men usually lasts from fall to spring. They may demand services of a sport tourism centre in summer for physical endurance or technical training and else when during the competition phase for technical training or an active rest.

Olympic martial arts sports

Olympic martial arts sports include sports that need a sport hall for technical trainings, while physical endurance might be practised indoor (a gym) or outdoor (athletic fields, cross country tracks). That is why sportsmen from this sport group perceive "indoor sport infrastructure" as the most important element in an offer. Their representatives claim that "conference infrastructure" the least important element, furthermore they find a "health and diagnostic centre" as a peripheral service in a sport tourism centre's offer.

A sport tourism centre should focus on providing a modern sport hall and delivering some added values, especially providing proper flooring material or surfacing (tatami) or boxing-rings. This group of athletes demands services of sport tourism centres for the purpose of competitions such as European or world championships.

Olympic winter sports

Olympic winter sportsmen logically perceive outdoor sport infrastructure as the most important. When a sport tourism centre wants to target winter sports, it should provide superb training polygons, according to the needs of a specific sport industry (skiing, cross-country, snowboarding, and biathlon). Polygons should be built with the help of specialists, the regular maintenance of the polygons is mandatory and the microclimate is essential. Winter sports resorts also need snow assurance and good weather conditions without wind, drizzle, etc. Winter sportsmen find services of a health centre important as well. These sportsmen demand sport tourism centres' services usually in summer for physical endurance trainings or for practice or competitions at winter events requiring appropriate snow conditions. Sports such as hockey and figure skating differ because sportsmen usually train at their home centres and require sport tourism services for physical training in summer.

Olympic summer sports

Representatives of this sport group perceive outdoor sport infrastructure as the most important. When tailoring services for them, the quality of the core service – the use of outdoor sport infrastructure (an athletic stadium, cycling routes, etc.) is essential. The directions to follow are similar to those for winter sports, with a few additions. Summer sports are focused on endurance; therefore those sportsmen find high-altitude rooms important. The type of accommodation is very important as well. These athletes demand sport tourism centres' services mostly in the summer, with exceptions of an active rest and a physical training.

Olympic water sports

Representatives of the Olympic water sports group perceive indoor sport infrastructure as the most important. When discussing swimmers (swimming, synchronized swimming, water aerobics & water polo), this is logical, as their trainings are held in indoor swimming pools and in fitness facilities as well. Outdoor and indoor water sports should be sub grouped as there are key differences between "indoor water sportsmen" and "outdoor water sportsmen". Outdoor activities in water such as lakes and rivers include canoeing, kayaking, rowing, sailing, etc. Indoor activities in this sport group may be practised at any time; therefore the demand depends on their training process. Representatives of the outdoor Olympic water sports usually demand the services in the period from spring to fall, with exceptions of an active rest and physical training in the winter time.

Non-Olympic sports

This group presents lots of sport industries and disciplines that in fact have the same basis as some of the Olympic sports, but are not on the Olympic Games list. Any generalizations in this context would be incorrect as there may be numerous models in this group, depending on the exact sport. Representatives of karate and jiu-jitsu for example may have similar needs as representatives of Olympic martial arts sports, while representatives of golf may have needs similar to Olympic outdoor sports.

As seen in our research, when targeting top athletes overall, the most important element of an offer is **"**indoor sport infrastructure**"**, followed by **"**nutrition and preparation of food**"**, „friendliness of the people**"** and **"**microclimate**"**. **"**Conference infrastructure**"** seems to be the least important element, but it is still important in cases of hosting press conferences before important competitions and the start of the season. Sport tourism centres may have most demands of the athletes in the period of summer, but should be able to market their centres throughout the year.

Conclusion

According to Smith (2008, pp. 109-110) **"**it is always important to understand the main need that the consumer has, or the primary benefit that they get from using the product**"**. Needs of sport consumers depend on the purpose of their visit to a sport tourism centre, therefore the core benefit, the actual product and the augmented product are, according to Smith (2008), key variables of the sport product. Top athletes visit sport tourism centres mostly to train, according to our survey only 21% of them visit sport tourism centres to relax (Active rest/Regeneration period). Therefore the core benefit of products for top athletes is the improvement of their sport performance (technical training or physical endurance). Optimal conditions in a sport tourism centre are necessary for that. The development of modern sport has become increasingly associated with new technology, professional, scientific and organizational methods in the training process. Top results today can no longer be expected on the basis of experience, intuition and other random factors. Procedures

and decisions during training have to be extremely rational and effective. Product development of sport tourism centres has to be on an appropriate level in all the three categories of key variables of the sport product. Nonetheless, this paper emphasises that priorities of sport groups differ in relation to elements of the sport product meeting their basic needs in sport tourism centres.

The limitation of this research is the small number of the respondents and the limited timeframe and it should be taken into account when using these results for future research or practical implementations. Recommendations for future research would be to design a research framework of top athletes' perceived quality, value, satisfaction and loyalty. The framework would provide a very useful insight to sport tourism centres as top athletes have an important role in their business.

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About the author

Anže Polanec graduated Entrepreneurship from the Faculty of Economics and Business in Maribor, Slovenia with diploma thesis Creativity and innovativeness are key factors of entrepreneurial growth. He was employed as Young researcher and Head of marketing in Unior Programme Tourism Company and is currently working in insurance company Adriatic Slovenica d.d. as Project Manager for target group of elite and recreational athletes. His main research interests are relationship marketing, advocacy and sports marketing. He is currently a doctoral student at Faculty of Commercial and Business Sciences, Celje, Slovenia. Author can be contacted at **anze.polanec@gmail.com**