



MARS – MEDIA AGAINST RACISM IN SPORT

Media, Diversity & Racism in Sport

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Ethics & Editorial Management

Guest of the Day

Interview with **Zbigniew Rytel** about racism and chauvinism in sports, and sensitivity of Polish journalists to those phenomena, by Błażej Torański.

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Ul. Foksal 3/5 00-366
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Zbigniew Rytel is a historian, journalist, and film director. Zbigniew graduated in history from Catholic University in Lublin, Poland (KUL), and in journalism from Texas Tech University, USA. He received a scholarship from the United States Congress. He also completed many journalism courses and workshops in Poland, the USA and the United Kingdom. Zbigniew is an editor working for TVP, the national broadcaster in Poland, and an author and director of documentary films. He also publishes articles. In 2006-2008, he had a column in *Gazeta Bankowa* daily and was the editor-in-chief of *Pieniądz* monthly (Money Magazine). As a reporter, Zbigniew prepared releases for CNN. He sits in the Board of the Association of Polish Journalists (SDP).

Just a few years ago, in Poland coloured football players used to be hurled insults and thrown bananas at. Martins Ekwueme, a player from Jeziorak Iława, was flung oranges at by the hooligans from Jagielonia Białystok. When John Carew from F. C. Valencia was leading the ball in a game with Legia, the fans of the Warsaw-based club shouted *ku-klux-klan*. Are racism and chauvinism still so strong in sports in Poland?

We at Association of Polish Journalists don't have precise data. As a journalist and author of films about sports I feel that it is marginal phenomenon and becoming less and less important, although it still exists. It seems to me that Poland is not much different in that regard compared to our neighbours or other countries in Europe. Our racist ways are not very different than theirs. Perhaps the situation in Western Europe is slightly better because of years they have been taking various initiatives that are turning effects today. Let's just remember that the phenomenon is present in Poland, but let's not exaggerate it – there is always a margin of idiots both in Poland and anywhere else.

There are also teams of quasi-professional racist and fascist hunters, often financed by public grants and donations. They always know how to find racist behaviour or fascist symbols on the stadium, and if not, they know how to create them. Contrary to them, I believe that it is not a problem by which Poland stands out in any way against the rest of the world; it is not the kind of threat that would haunt Poland all the time.

As a sports journalist and a former runner in the Polish national team, have you experienced acts of chauvinism or racism?

No, of course not. Why 'of course'? Track and field sports are a discipline where all human races, religions, cultures and beliefs have been mixed around for years. Except for the shameful event at 1936 Olympic Games when Adolf Hitler publicly refused to shake hands with a coloured winner of many medals, Jessie Owens, except for that there has not been any racial segregation for many years. It would be rather difficult as coloured athletes are currently the best in track and field. Our fans are also different, they respond and support athletes more like volleyball or basketball spectators. Those fans are very motivating and this can be experienced during every game of the Polish volleyball team, for example. This is also the proof for the power of sports today.

And the powerful emotions sports trigger.

Sports are among the most significant phenomena of the modern civilisation, triggering powerful emotions. Those emotions naturally build a very strong commitment to a given social group. It could be commitment to a city district, like Widzew in Łódź, or the city of the football club, or the country of the national team. That commitment might have a very positive effect, it helps develop the national identity based on traditions, and more and more often based on the religion, as well.

The fans play a role in that process.

Fans, especially the football fans more and more often join various initiatives of patriotic or religious nature. The best examples are annual festivities celebrating the Warsaw Uprising and the fans pilgrimage to the Częstochowa sanctuary led by priest Jarosław Wąsowicz. Then and there everybody joins and creates one big community regardless of personal club strings. Those are examples of the positive effects sports have. Others include the values which the ancient Greeks had brought into sports: the fight for the victory as the ultimate reward in itself, obedience to the rules of the fight, fair play on the path to the victory, and defeat accepted with dignity. Regardless of all the negative phenomena in sports today, the ancient values are still there. This is how sports contribute to our civilisation.

Quite an idealistic point of view.

It is not idealistic. All this is present in today's sports, without a change for hundreds of years, although certain negative effects have evolved, as well. Sports are the key link in the modern civilisation and as such sports can help develop a healthy identity of the society, but powerful emotions that sports trigger can lead to negative behaviour, as well, for example chauvinism. In the saying "my team above all others", the "others" are not sports rivals, they become an enemy to be fought using all power and means.

Why there are scandals breaking out one after another? In 2008, Arkadiusz Mysona from ŁKS football club wore a shirt saying "Death to the Jewish wh*re Widzew".

I keep saying that this phenomenon is becoming increasingly marginal. I am by no means a psychologist of the football fan circles, but such behaviour – except in pathological communities – usually results from poor knowledge. The more open we are to people from other cultures or of other skin colours, the less we encounter such behaviour and the more it is condemned by the public. We have two Israeli players in Wisła Krakow football club. When one of them, namely Maor Melikson, was thinking about joining the Polish national team because of his mother's roots, he was attacked very brutally, but not in Poland – in Israel. I cannot imagine any Polish mass media reacting in such way to a Polish player playing for a foreign national team. Many Poles play in foreign national teams.

Perhaps financial penalties are the best method to counteract racism? In the case of Mysona, he was imposed a fine of 15 thousand złotych and suspended for five consecutive games.

I am not sure whether it is the best method. Certainly, such scandalous behaviour must be subject to a penalty. And the financial fines are truly very painful. Perhaps in extreme cases those penalties should be even more hard? After all, professional athletes enjoy high privileges, including financial ones, and so they have certain obligations to perform because all eyes are on them.

The role of the mass media in the dialogue about racism was discussed by sports journalists during MARS Journalist Workshops, organised by Association of Polish Journalists (SDP).

Yes, the workshops financed by the Council of Europe were organised jointly by the CoE, European Federation of Journalists and our association, and they gathered dozens of journalists from various mass media in Poland. We managed to invite very reputable representatives of the sports media. The workshops were attended by, to name a few: Stefan Szczepek from Rzeczpospolita daily, Janusz Basałaj – long-lasting editor of the sports section in Canal Plus, Paweł Wójcik – assistant director in Polsat Sport, and Tadeusz Olszański. There were also present representatives of the Council of Europe

(Reynald Blion), European Federation of Journalists (Secretary General Stephen Pearse, and Yuklan Wong), and the community of athletes - Yared Schegumo from Ethiopia, who currently represents Poland.

We didn't have any doubts that such phenomena as racism or neo-fascism should be and in fact are condemned in the mass media. Journalists from all of Poland, from different newsrooms, small and large, shared their experience in that area. They discussed the mechanisms to prevent exposure of negative phenomena in sports. They also gave some examples where it was the media people who forced the local host to remove abusive content, such as Nazi symbols.

What are the mechanisms?

There are the codes of ethics. The code of Association of Polish Journalists was appreciated, because it stands against such phenomena and enforces sensitivity among the journalists. But the discussion demonstrated that the reality of the newsroom could be different. Just like in majority of newsrooms around the world, in Poland there are no codified dos and don'ts of journalism. We lack stylebooks where such rules would be set. Among Polish journalists there is no room for such phenomena, but not all newsrooms have such rules defined clearly. I believe that our history has made the journalists in Poland particularly sensitive to such negative phenomena.