



MARS – MEDIA AGAINST RACISM IN SPORT

Media, Diversity & Racism in Sport

NATIONAL MEDIA ENCOUNTER

Media Cross-Production for Inclusive Coverage

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BONUS

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MARS - Media Against Racism in Sport

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Right now you are the top athlete in your sport discipline. Did you ever think that you would be able to reach such a distinction and what were the hardest obstacles you had to face along the way?

Through great sacrifice, hard and strenuous efforts as well as patience and perseverance I managed to remain on top of the world in my sport discipline for the last 9 years. When I first started my professional career as an athlete, I never imagined that I would ever make it to the top of the podium in all the big sporting events I participated in within the course of the last decade! And what's more, I stood on the highest level of the podium for the most prominent sporting event in the field of competitive sports (i.e. the Paralympic Games) not only once, but actually twice (Athens 2004, Beijing 2008) and I heard the national anthem being played to my honour! Of course, no one has ever managed to reach the top easily, quickly or without having to make any sacrifices on the way. It goes without saying that I also had to face certain difficulties and problems. Some of these are known – these are the few, while others, the majority of them, remain unknown. Injuries, surgeries, painful and long periods of rehabilitation, lack of funding and support, dispute, ingratitude and racism.

- There are resolutions at European and international level equating athletes with disabilities with able bodied athletes. You have spoken publicly in favour of equality among all athletes. In your opinion, what is the reason for this unequal treatment?

The biggest problem that I had to face as an athlete with a disability has been the unequal - in every level - treatment and attitude by all the state bodies and government official as well as certain sections of the mass media in Cyprus, despite the fact that there are relevant resolutions of the European Union, the United Nations and, of course, the International Olympic Committee, which equate disabled athletes with able bodied athletes. Mind you, all this is happening in a country, which is actually a member-state of the European Union. It is also worth mentioning that an official document drafted by the International Olympic Committee was sent to all the competent bodies with regard to this issue. Besides, it is no secret that a disabled athlete "naturally" has to try even harder and has to make double the effort in comparison to an able bodied athlete. He/she is expected to "overcome" his/her disability and participate in competitive sports. Cyprus, not only as a state, but also as a society has been a pioneer in other matters but has fallen behind when it comes to such issues. The local media are also responsible for this situation. Having personally received preferential treatment as an athlete with a disability, I can't help but think of how we treat disabled people in Cyprus would change, if we attempted to sufficiently highlight the sporting movement of persons with disabilities, by putting the faces of such young people on the front covers of printed mass media or on the internet or by making frequent references to this issue and highlighting it on TV or on the radio. I think that in this way many children with disabilities would find the courage and attempt to "tear down" the wall of exclusion.

- Has the attitude of the relevant authorities changed in the last couple of years? If so, what is the reason for this change?

In spite of the dynamic presence of some Cypriot reporters with a modern way of thinking in the press and in the field of sports in particular, we still have a long way to go until we reach the point where we can succeed in achieving all that is considered, at least at European level, a common and an evident goal, i.e. equating athletes with a disability with their able bodied co-athletes. And if this can help in any way, the fact is that this equation in Greece has existed for quite some time now!

- You are participating in competitions against athletes from all over the world. How would you describe the experiences of these athletes when it comes to the issue of discrimination?

One of the "gifts" that competitive sport has given me has been the happiness and the opportunity to spread my wings and travel to those places where disabilities are considered to constitute a mere "technical" problem, seeking to find solutions through the privileges, which distinguish the modern western civilization. It is a coordinated, programmed and practical type of effort and it does not include any donations or benefactors. On the contrary, it is done on equal terms and without any sort of pity and without others thinking of these disabled athletes as "those poor fellows".

- You were awarded for your contribution towards the campaign "Stop Discrimination". What were the activities that you were engaged in against discrimination in the field of sports?

I had the huge honour and responsibility of being appointed by the European Union as the Ambassador of Cyprus with the intention to promote the fight against discrimination ("Stop Discrimination"). Through my public engagement and my actions I attempted to carry on an effort, which I initiated alone back in 2003. This was a struggle, which I personally considered at the time to be quite mistimed and in vain. Nevertheless, the few people who understood my actions and provided me with support then gradually started increasing in number. In the meantime, Cyprus became a member of the European Union and therefore, I have more reasons for which I can smile.

- How do you assess the coverage of sports for disabled athletes in Cyprus and how would you define the level of interest of the average Cypriot? What role do the mass media play towards the effort of reducing discrimination and promoting diversity in the field of sports? Do you think that the media play a positive or a negative role in promoting such issues?

I owe a lot to the mass media or at least to those that all this time wished, decided and managed to escape the regressive stereotypes and successfully embraced my own efforts as well as the efforts of the people close to me. I still remember the year 2002 when I participated in a sporting event for athletes with disabilities for the first time. I was awarded the silver medal at the World Championship in Argentina and yet nobody knew about it and nobody cheered for me. And then came the pleasant "reversal" of the whole situation when I participated in the Paralympics of Athens in 2004. I and the entire sporting community of disabled athletes in Cyprus owe all those people from the Mass Media, who stand by me without having any personal gain. The fact that I won the gold Paralympics medal acquired a sense of value and importance. It projected and highlighted diversity among athletes and thus, the first step was made towards equating all athletes to each other. Equality is yet to be achieved and the media will still have to play their part. In fact, exposing this issue to the public is what is going to bring us, the athletes with disabilities, the much desired sponsors we need. In spite of all, I remain optimistic for the future.