

## **Star athlete ambassadors of sport for development and peace**

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### Abstract

It is not uncommon for star athletes to be involved in sport for development and peace (SDP) initiatives as role models, be it a long-term ambassadorship or a short-term commitment. As the SDP sector has been continuously growing in the past two decades, scientific interest in the field has developed as well. Nonetheless, there are still gaps in the literature regarding high-profile athlete endorsed SDP initiatives.

This article explores high-profile athletes' involvement in SDP, and its purpose is to identify the characteristics these athletes need to have in order to be successful as ambassadors in SDP.

Nine semi-structured interviews with SDP practitioners on athlete-ambassadorship are analysed, through the lens of Goodman and Barnes' 'development celebrity' and 'star/poverty space' concepts. The responses from the interviews revealed that celebrities used in SDP programmes need to be popular not only on a global level, but specifically in the local context, among the beneficiaries as well. These

ambassadors and mentors need to understand SDP in order to be authentic contributors to the programmes. Credibility is essential, but also fragile as the media attention, which is so valuable for promotion purposes, can backfire in the case of any scandals.

Keywords: sport for development and peace (SDP), development celebrity, high-profile athlete, athlete ambassador, role model

## **Sport for Development and Peace: a brief history**

Sport and other forms of physical activity have been purposefully used to reach social development goals and as tools in peace-building and peace-keeping. The definition of the so-called ‘sport for development and peace’ (SDP) concept refers to ‘the intentional use of sport, physical activity and play to attain specific development and peace objectives, including, most notably, the Millennium Development Goals’<sup>1</sup> and, since 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (UN).

The evolution of the SDP sector goes back nearly a century, but truly accelerated in the past two decades. The first partnership agreement between a UN-body – the International Labour Organization – and a sport-governing body – the International Olympic Committee – was signed in 1922 and over the following decades, it was succeeded by several further agreements. In the 1990s other milestones were reached in the building of the SDP sector: in 1993 the United Nations General Assembly (UN GA) accepted the Resolution about the Olympic Truce, while in another UN GA resolution, 1994 was declared to be the International Year of Sport and the Olympic Ideal, which meant that the United Nations was attributing more and more significance to sport on the international level.

In 1994, the hero of the Winter Olympic Games in Lillehammer, multi-time champion Johann Koss used his post-Games popularity to set up Olympic Aid, a fundraising organisation to support children in need. With this action, Koss started a journey that turned him into one of the

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<sup>1</sup> Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group (SDPIWG). Harnessing the Power of Sport for Development and Peace: Recommendations to Governments. 2008, SDPIWG: Toronto.

most active athlete ambassadors of SDP. Today, his establishment – now named Right To Play – is one of the most well-known SDP organisations and it works with more than 300 professional and Olympic athletes from 40 countries as ambassadors<sup>2</sup>.

### **High-profile athletes' involvement in SDP**

Until today, hundreds of non-governmental organisations have been founded, implementing SDP projects worldwide, many of them working with high-level athletes.

Involving athletes in SDP interventions has many benefits: athletes can boost their image, while organisations can boost their impact. This partnership is expected to result in resource-mobilisation providing necessary support for SDP projects. For instance, the aforementioned organisation, Right to Play, works with high-profile athletes because these sportspeople 'know firsthand the positive impact sport and play can have'<sup>3</sup>. The idea of promoting athletes as role models has a long history; Pierre Coubertin saw athletes as vehicles for sharing and promoting Olympic values (Müller 2000).

Throughout history, athletes have been influential and actively engaged in social issues (Kidd, Donnelly 2000). Some of the most well-known athletes were also considered celebrities. For instance, Billie Jean King and Muhammad Ali had a capacity to combine sporting excellence with their commitment to engage in various causes to have a sustainable impact within society (Zirin 2005). Nevertheless, at the peak of their career these personalities differed from today's

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<sup>2</sup> Right to Play: Athlete Ambassadors. Available from: <http://www.righttoplay.com/Learn/keyplayers/Pages/Athlete-Ambassadors.aspx> [Accessed 27 June 2018]

<sup>3</sup> Right to Play: Athlete Ambassadors. Available from: <http://www.righttoplay.com/Learn/keyplayers/Pages/Athlete-Ambassadors.aspx> [Accessed 27 June 2018]

ambassadors in terms of their social and cultural contexts, motivations, institutional involvement, and means of communication.

Nowadays, high-profile athletes are involved with various kinds of organisations delivering SDP projects, including development agencies, such as UNAIDS<sup>4</sup>, UNICEF<sup>5</sup> and UNHCR<sup>6</sup>, governmental organisations such as GIZ<sup>7</sup>, and non-sport NGOs, such as the Light for the World Foundation<sup>8</sup>.

Although working with athlete ambassadors is well-known in SDP, there are still gaps in the literature regarding this practice. So far, only sporadic research has been carried out on the attributes of athletes engaged in SDP projects. In the present paper, we attempt to explore this question and identify the characteristics that athletes need to have in order to be successful ambassadors in SDP and to be considered as ‘development celebrities’. The work is based on the qualitative analysis of interviews with a diverse sample of SDP practitioners about how they perceive this practice, through the lens of the ‘development celebrity’ and ‘star/poverty space’ concepts.

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<sup>4</sup> UNAIDS, the forerunner organisation to combat AIDS works with 25 Goodwill Ambassadors, among whom 3 are high-profile athletes. Available from:

<http://www.unaids.org/en/aboutunaids/unaidssambassadors> [Accessed 10 July 2018]

<sup>5</sup> The United Nations Children's Fund works with over 400 international, regional and national Goodwill Ambassadors and Advocates. 80 of them are athletes. Available from:

[https://www.unicef.org/people/people\\_ambassadors.html](https://www.unicef.org/people/people_ambassadors.html) [Accessed 10 July 2018]

<sup>6</sup> The UN Refugee Agency works with 22 Goodwill Ambassadors and 20 High Profile Supporters, three of them are athletes. Available from: <http://www.unhcr.org/prominent-supporters.html> [Accessed 10 July 2018]

<sup>7</sup> An interview for this study with a staff member of GIZ, Heidi Beha, revealed that the German Development Agency works with four high-profile athlete ambassadors: Haile Gebrselassie, Britta Heidemann, Nadine Kessler and Nia Künzer.

<sup>8</sup> Light for the World is an international disability and development organisation. Two members of their international board of ambassadors are world-class track and field athletes: two-time Olympic champion Haile Gebrselassie and Paralympic champion Henry Wanyoike. Available from: <https://www.light-for-the-world.org/international-board-ambassadors> [Accessed 10 July 2018]

In addition, as there is little known on the quantity of athlete ambassadors in SDP worldwide, in the following section we present some figures based on two databases listing star athletes who work in SDP.

### **Star athletes in SDP in figures**

In order to put our qualitative findings into context, we carried out two studies on the extent of the use of high-profile athletes in SDP; one on the organisational profiles that have been uploaded to the International Platform on Sport and Development (IPSD), sportanddev.org, and one on the webpage ‘Look to the stars’, the largest site on the web about celebrity charity news.

The International Platform on Sport and Development, sportanddev.org is a social website dedicated to the field of SDP and it has been used as a reference point by a number of researchers in the past (Akindes & Kirwin, 2009, Saavedra, 2009, Coalter, 2013).

Since its launch in 2003, 975 organisational profiles have been registered there and validated by the IPSD staff members by 1 May 2018. Even though it cannot be estimated how well the database represents the total population of SDP organisations, the data have been filtered and are therefore suitable for analysis.

Of the 975 organisational profiles, 917 were taken into further consideration after cleaning the dataset<sup>9</sup>. Since none of the 917 organisational profiles indicated whether the organisation used elite athletes as ambassadors, further investigation was necessary, either on the website of the organisation or – in case there was not one – on its Facebook page.

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<sup>9</sup> There were 30 profiles that were duplications and 28 profiles that could not qualify as SDP organisations in this research. A staff member of sportanddev.org was contacted in this phase, and he confirmed that these 58 organisations could indeed be duplications and irrelevant profiles that slipped through their verification system in the past 15 years.

At this stage, 220 organisations were excluded from further research, not having a currently functioning website or Facebook page<sup>10</sup>. The remaining 697 organisations made up the final database of currently functioning organisations, among which 62 organisations (11,2%) currently use high-profile athlete ambassadors<sup>11</sup>. 21 of the examined 62 organisations (out of which three were founded by and named after high-profile athletes) have one single ambassador (33.9%), 22 organisations are affiliated with 2-5 athlete ambassadors (35.5%), while 12 organisations work with 6-14 ambassadors (19.4%). 7 organisations use 30 or more athlete ambassadors (11.3%), out of which 4 work with 80 or more athletes (6.5%).

The other database that we used to get some quantitative data on high-profile athletes' involvement in SDP is the webpage 'Look to the stars', the largest site on the web about celebrity charity news, listing 4340 celebrities that support charities and 2289 charities with celebrity supporters<sup>12</sup>. The webpage has been referenced numerous times by scientific publications in the past (Littler, 2008, Thrall et al. 2008, Budabin et al. 2017).

The website's internal search functions were used to filter the registered celebrities based on their profession and based on the topic of charity work they are involved in, thereby searching for athletes that endorsed SDP-related initiatives.

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<sup>10</sup> We considered a Facebook page currently running if the last post on the page was not older than 3 years old, meaning that it was posted not before 25 June 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Here we define an athlete 'high-profile' if they have been involved in competitive sport on an international level, at least as members of the national team of their country. Using this definition allowed us to keep those athletes in the analysis who might not have been among the best and most well-known athletes on the international stage in their discipline, but could still be influential as the 'face' of an organisation when it comes to promotion and fundraising in the local context.

<sup>12</sup> Look to the Stars website. Available from: <http://www.looktothestars.org> [Accessed 29 November 2018]

Our search resulted in 523 celebrities from the field of sport (12.1% of all listed celebrities), out of which 102 are involved with organisations working for sport-related causes – not only in SDP topics. It means that 2.4% of all listed celebrities are athletes endorsing sport-related causes. Further analysis revealed that 87 currently living athletes are working with at least one charitable organisation that does some form of SDP activity. It means that 2% of the celebrities on the website are athletes who are ambassadors of SDP projects. We are certain that the website does not list all celebrities working for charitable causes, but our results can still be regarded as indications of the size of star-endorsed SDP interventions compared to celebrity-supported humanitarian work in general.

16.6% of the sportspeople – including athletes, coaches and managers - on the website are involved with SDP interventions. The reason for this relatively low percentage could be that organisations working in SDP compete for these star ambassadors with organisations working for other philanthropic causes, such as combatting world hunger, building schools and finding cures for diseases.

### **Approaches to stars' involvement in development**

There is a growing body of research on celebrity involvement in humanitarian work, but there are only a few studies that focus on high-profile athletes' involvement in SDP. First, we discuss the most significant pieces in the literature on celebrity involvement in development, then we turn towards those publications that deal specifically with athletes' involvement in SDP-interventions.

Cooper introduced the term 'celebrity diplomacy' and argues that celebrity diplomats contribute to international debates through promotional campaigns, influencing public opinion and



through their involvement in diplomatic circles (Cooper 2008:2). With regards to the latter, he invented the term the ‘Bonoisation’ of diplomacy, referring to the celebrities’ access to key circles of power. The term references Bono, the singer of U2, and refers to Bono’s lobbying power in humanitarian work (ibid., p. 3-4.). Dieter and Kumar (2008) take note of the downsides of celebrity diplomacy, marking the danger of oversimplification of development issues, questioning celebrities’ authority to talk about such issues and the non-democratic election of celebrities to these positions. Brockington (2014) outlines how the relationships between the celebrity industry and the development sector are forged and he points at the key tensions in this relationship. He explains the political economy of a ‘charity–celebrity–corporate’ complex that is the result of these interactions.

A collection of studies, edited by Robert Clarke (2009) explores ‘celebrity colonialism’, looking into how famous and powerful stars – from favourite Hollywood actors to celebrated political leader Nelson Mandela – have influenced the politics of colonial and postcolonial cultures. Critical studies of the collection point to the ambivalent role celebrities often have in the postcolonial world.

Goodman and Barnes introduced the term, ‘development celebrities’, referring to those celebrities that work in development in the ‘Third World’. They also brought in the term ‘star/poverty space’, referring to the stars’ ‘materiality of authenticity’, which includes images of them on location of the development work and textual presentations of their experience – distributed through traditional and social media channels (2011:74).

Since SDP is part of the wider development sector, and since we consider star athletes to be celebrities, we use Goodman and Barnes’ ‘development celebrity’ and ‘star/poverty space’

approaches as the conceptual basis of our study, and will therefore explore it further in the coming chapter.

One of the few examples of scientific work on high-profile athletes' involvement in SDP is Darnell's book (2012) in which a whole chapter investigates the 'celebritisation of development'. Darnell points towards different scholarly arguments about this practice. He notes the aforementioned view of the oversimplification of development (Dieter & Kuman, 2008) and that this practice maintains the colonial narratives of saving distant others (Magubane, 2008). On the other hand, Darnell points to Cooper's work which states that celebrities can raise awareness (Cooper, 2008). Darnell also raises the concern that celebrity athletes can draw attention towards sport and celebrity, rather than towards international development (Darnell, 2012:129).

Both Darnell (2012) and Giulianotti (2011a) argue that celebrity athletes bring media attention and funding opportunities to SDP organisations, which is definitely an advantage of their involvement in the sector. Among the disadvantages, Darnell argues that their involvement could in fact lead to unsustainable funding solutions and even increase development inequalities (Darnell, 2012). Furthermore, Giulianotti points out that those SDP-themed corporate social responsibility programmes that are endorsed by celebrities tackle 'mediatised social dramas', rather than long-term structural issues (Giulianotti, 2011b:764).

Apart from the critical works of Darnell and Giulianotti, some researchers focused on individual projects and specific elements of high-profile athletes' involvement in SDP. Wilson's study (2013) showcases the involvement of high-profile local runners in post-conflict reconciliation efforts in Kenya, informed by two strands of the social movement theory. Meier and Saavedra (2009:1171) researched the use of female role models in increasing women's participation in sport. They found that those role models who have affinities to the target

population could be the most effective in achieving impact. Their study concentrated on women's sport in Zambia, with a special focus on the female superstar boxer, Esther Phiri and her role model status in Zambian society.

Meier (2015) conducted further studies on female sporting role models, and created a typology of role models, on a 'continuum of interaction', where one of the three types of role models are famous athletes (with whom the target population has the least interaction). She suggests that all types of sporting role models have nine general characteristics, including leadership, advocacy, and giving back, which lead to their potential influence on the target population.

### **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual basis of our paper is provided by the concepts of 'development celebrity' and 'star/poverty space' developed by Goodman and Barnes (2011:74). We explore high-profile athletes' involvement in SDP, with the aim to identify the characteristics that athletes must possess in order to be impactful as ambassadors in SDP and to be considered 'development celebrities'. We do it so, because SDP is part of contemporary development and high-level athletes are involved in it by taking advantage of their fame and respect from the public.

According to Goodman and Barnes, development celebrities are celebrities that work for 'development' in the so-called 'Third World'. They do it by either working with a development-related organisation; working for their own foundation or making one-off appearances (2011:71). The activities of development celebrities are both about everyday events, emotions and consumer acts and about their well-documented and constructed spectacles, campaigning for different development goals (2011:73).

The key characteristics for the success of development celebrities are credibility, authenticity and expertise. Development celebrities' campaigns on social issues is part of their public persona, therefore their credibility as development celebrities can be straightforward if they are credible as public figures. Their credibility and authenticity can be established through association with credible NGOs and can be cemented by photoshoots, interviews and blog posts on their involvement in development work (2011:75). Their expertise comes from their first-hand knowledge – gained through visits to the site of development activity – and from the organisations they represent, which provide them with the information they repeat as 'para-experts' (2011:75). Goodman and Barnes also point out that creating a 'celebrity expert' has much to do with their power and authority as a celebrity, rather than their expertise in development topics. According to Goodman and Barnes, the two 'materialities of authenticity' of successful development celebrities are (1) images of them in the 'places' of poverty; (2) and in relation to it, their narratives about these places and the experiences of being in them<sup>13</sup>. These materialities make up and circulate in what Goodman and Barnes call, the celebrities' 'star/poverty spaces'. Through this star/poverty space, development celebrities must become rooted and must become known as 'ordinary' and 'extra-ordinary', as self-reflecting and reflectable in order to have an authentic and authoritative voice (2011:81).

We use the concepts of development celebrity and star/poverty space to better understand the perceptions of our respondents on involving high-level athletes in SDP interventions. Before doing so, we would like to raise some points on the use of this conceptual framework on our dataset.

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<sup>13</sup> Goodman, M. K. and Barnes C., 2011. Star/poverty space: the making of the 'development celebrity'. *Celebrity Studies*, 2 (1), p. 76.

Firstly, we admit that not all high-level athletes involved with SDP interventions can be considered celebrities. Many of them have a profile and media reach that is too low to be considered ‘famous’ on a national or international scale, but they can still bring some attention to SDP causes as they can reach some specific audiences.

Secondly, high-level athletes are expected to bring some expertise to SDP interventions through their vast experience in the field of sport. However, in some occasions, they even bring expertise in the development topic they aim to support. An example of this kind of ‘double’ expertise is that of the Olympic swimmer Yusra Mardini, who is a former refugee herself and now is a Goodwill Ambassador of UNHCR<sup>14</sup>.

Thirdly, our respondents were talking about athletes’ involvement in SDP work worldwide, nonetheless, Goodman and Barnes use the development celebrity concept for celebrities working in the ‘Third World’. As some development topics addressed by athlete-endorsed SDP projects are relevant globally, we believe that the development celebrity concept is relevant beyond the geographical regions labelled the ‘Third World’.

## **Methodology**

In order to have an in-depth understanding of the use of athlete ambassadors, we carried out nine semi-structured interviews via Skype with professionals who are involved in SDP in various roles, but not as celebrity role models. Our respondents hold different positions in the SDP sector and were asked about their perception on the involvement of high-profile athletes in SDP

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<sup>14</sup> Yusra Mardini fled the war in Syria in 2015 and used her swimming skills to save fellow refugees’ lives on their way to Europe. She was part of the first Refugee Olympic Team in 2016 in Rio de Janeiro and she is working with UNHCR since 2017. Available from: <https://www.unhcr.org/yusra-mardini.html> [Accessed 11 December 2018]

as ambassadors. The objective of the sampling process was to include professionals with different roles from different geographical regions. In the first round, convenience sampling was used, based on the professional connections of the researchers. At this stage, eight individuals were contacted for an interview, out of which six were included in the data collection. In the second round, snowball sampling was introduced, based on the suggestions of the respondents of the first round. At this point, ten interview requests were sent out, which resulted in three more respondents.

The interviewees represent various types of organisations, notably, funding organisations, implementing organisations, networking organisations and research organisations. They have been working in different continental regions, notably in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

All respondents agreed to allow the interview to be audio recorded. All interviews were conducted in English. Six of the respondents permitted us to disclose their name and their affiliated organisation, one permitted us to disclose the name of their affiliated institution, but not their name, while two gave the interview anonymously<sup>15</sup>.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data was then analysed based on the conceptual framework. The analysis was performed by the first author, and then reviewed by the co-authors. In case of debating opinions among the authors, further discussions took place until full consensus was achieved, ensuring reliability.

## **Results and discussion**

The analysis of the nine interviews through the lens of the ‘development celebrity’ and ‘star/poverty space’ concepts resulted in five themes. The opinions of the respondents on these

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<sup>15</sup> Those respondents who gave us authorisation to disclose their names: Vladimir Borkovic, Jutta Engelhardt, Janine Handel, Paul Hunt, John Sugden, Karine Teow. The list of respondents with their affiliated organisations can be found in Appendix I.

themes are examined in this section, drawing on the literature and some examples of athletes' actions as SDP ambassadors.

*Key characteristics of development celebrities: credibility, authenticity and expertise*

According to Goodman and Barnes the fundamental characteristics of development celebrities are credibility, authenticity and expertise. There was consensus for this statement from most of our respondents.

Respondent #3 (CEO of the Roger Federer Foundation) led us through the example of Roger Federer, who came second in the Reputation Institute's 2011 survey on 54 of the world's most visible leaders<sup>16</sup>.

'Roger has a very high credibility. This is among other things due to the fact that he takes full responsibility for everything he does, also when it comes to philanthropy. This is why he started a foundation with his own name, takes an active role as President and is involved in every strategic decision. He would not give his name for something he has no influence on the quality or where he cannot fully cope with an engagement.'<sup>1718</sup>

This statement about Roger Federer's credibility as 'development celebrity' is in line with what Goodman and Barnes claims about credibility, that it must be earned and maintained. Roger

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<sup>16</sup> Over 51 000 members of the public in 25 countries were asked to assess 54 individuals to measure their reputation in April-May 2011. Available from: <https://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/News/Mandela-still-worlds-most-trusted-20110921> [Accessed 13 July 2018]

<sup>17</sup> Roger Federer is the president of the Roger Federer Foundation, a non-governmental organisation funded in 2003 that supports educational projects in southern Africa and Switzerland. Available from: <http://www.rogerfedererfoundation.org/en/what-we-do/overview/> [Accessed 15 July 2018]

<sup>18</sup> After proofreading the text, the respondent asked for some changes in her quote to reflect her opinion more clearly.

Federer, by taking responsibility for everything he does, maintains this credibility. Also, in line with Goodman and Barnes' claims, layers are added to Roger Federer's credibility through his appearances on social media and traditional media as a development celebrity. One example of how much Federer's status as 'development celebrity' is part of his public persona is that the cover of his official Facebook page<sup>19</sup> is a photo of him with beneficiaries of his Foundation.

Respondent #8 (development manager at a funding organisation) emphasised the importance of knowledge about the development topic that the celebrity athletes work on, saying 'you have to have the right match between the celebrity and the programme that they are talking about, because you want that celebrity to be knowledgeable if they're talking to press'. Of course, this knowledge – or expertise, as Goodman and Barnes would say – and therefore authenticity can develop with the celebrities' growing experience in the development topic. Goodman and Barnes use the example of singer Chris Martin, who admitted that he has been on a journey as a development celebrity, initially feeling like a 'fourth-rate Bono', and gradually feeling more knowledgeable and confident speaking about his chosen development topic, fair trade (2011:79).

Respondent #7 (a former staff member of the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace) formed a critical opinion on those practices in SDP where the supporting athletes are not authentic to their role as ambassadors. In some instances, he cannot see the connection between the athlete and the development topic this person endorses. He says that 'there are some cases where you are just like "really, that's the person you're choosing to talk about this?"'

We posit that development celebrity athletes can only be authentic if they understand the topic that they work on and if they take their role seriously. This was pointed out in several interviews.

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<sup>19</sup> Roger Federer's official Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Federer/> [Accessed 21 June 2019]



Respondent #3 (CEO of the Roger Federer Foundation) emphasised that high-profile athletes should take a professional approach, a serious engagement when getting involved in humanitarian work:

‘Don’t take it not serious! [...] Helping people, creating change in a developing country is a very serious business. It’s a professional business, and the beneficiaries, they deserve a professional approach. It’s not hobby. It should not be hobby. [...] I think there is a lack of professional ambition, professional behaviour behind a lot of prominent people, which can cause damage.’

A lack of professionalism in development activities can harm the credibility of the celebrity as a public persona. An example of this is when football player Didier Drogba’s credibility was harmed when investigations found poor governance practices within his charitable organisations<sup>20</sup>.

Respondent #2 (former executive director at sportanddev.org) highlighted the importance of the depth of the athlete ambassadors’ involvement in SDP:

‘If somebody remains a sports person while you are using them as ambassador, it doesn’t help. [...] This person needs to really understand what sport and development is, needs to understand that it’s not about him- or herself, and it’s not about sport as such.’

This opinion is in line with the message behind Goodman and Barnes’ concrete example of a celebrity – namely actress Lindsay Lohan – who spread false information on social media about her extensive development work to raise her own profile as a development celebrity (2011:78).

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<sup>20</sup> More on the investigation into Didier Drogba’s charities: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ivorycoast-britain-charities/footballer-drogbas-charity-cleared-of-fraud-but-may-have-misled-donors-uk-watchdog-idUSKBN13R1O3> [Accessed 21 June 2019]

To do a meaningful job as a development celebrity, we agree with Respondent #6 (former international relations officer at Peace and Sport) who pointed out that ambassadors need to understand the situation of beneficiaries:

‘I think if they go to the field and see what can be done, [...] and if they can maybe even go through what the kids go through, and really understand what the education, what the method is, and spend the time, then I think it’s good.’

This line of thought resonates with what Goodman and Barnes see as a cornerstone of development celebrities: they posit that if ‘celebrities as “extra-ordinary” individuals can do something “ordinary”, then we as “ordinary” individuals can do something “extra-ordinary”’ (2011:72) – encouraged by their positive example.

*Famous athletes have an ‘amplified voice’ – also when they talk about development*

As stated by Goodman and Barnes, celebrities have an elevated position in society, which grants them an amplified voice to reach wide audiences (2011:75). This is true for famous sportspeople as well, which could be beneficial for the SDP sector. The advantage of high-profile athletes in bringing media attention to SDP initiatives was already acknowledged by Giulianotti and Darnell, and most of our respondents mentioned it as well. On the other hand, with the rapidly increasing penetration of web 2.0 technologies, athletes can directly disperse their (development-related) news through their own social media channels.

Respondent #2 (former executive director at sportanddev.org) summed up the opinion of many respondents saying ‘high-profile athletes have a big advantage. They generate media presence.’

Respondent #7 (former staff member of the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace) emphasised that through their media presence, high-profile athletes can raise awareness more effectively than other, non-famous people:

‘The most important part of their job is getting a message across. And as long as the message is good, then I’m happy that they use a global ambassador, because it saves the work of many other people [...] by being the face behind the information. [...] It helps an organisation to disperse a lot of information at once to a lot of people.’

What the respondent says about ‘saving the work of many other people’, is in line with what Goodman and Barnes refers to as the development celebrity’s ‘amplified voice’, that ‘grants them authority beyond “normal” citizens including, now, many scientists and development practitioners’ (2011:75).

Nonetheless, Respondent #7 was the only respondent who stated that bringing attention to the SDP cause is the only benefit of having an athlete on board, saying that ‘the ambassador is just an advertising board’.

The respondent’s statement may exaggerate slightly, as the depth of an athlete’s involvement in SDP varies from project to project.

Respondent #4 (senior project manager at sportanddev.org) shared his personal opinion on the media attention athletes attract, highlighting that it can benefit fundraising efforts.

‘I’m a bit sceptical of this type of marketing, which is about bringing bling to the organisation, but I think it actually works. I think as a fundraising mechanism it can be effective.’

This advantage is mentioned by critical SDP scholars, Darnell and Giulianotti. Giulianotti (2011a) developed three ideal-type models of SDP organisations, namely technical, dialogical and critical ones. He argues that ‘the largest technical agencies have elite social capital, and often secure patronage from international celebrities who attract media coverage and corporate donors’ (Giulianotti, 2011a:216), making the link between high-level athletes’ capability to generate attention from both the media and potential funders.

The fundraising potential of athletes in SDP resonates with what Goodman and Barnes call the ‘the compassion–celebrity–consumption complex’, through which development and care are ‘commodified through this growing market in emotions that is charity campaigns, foundations and development causes’ (2011:81).

Respondent #4 also raised the point that high-profile athlete ambassadorship could be beneficial in the promotion of the SDP sector at large as well:

‘Perhaps athletes [...] could help the sport and development sector to raise its visibility among the type of person who might just love sport and has never really thought about development [...], might not be that engaged in world affairs, but has the potential to realise that sport is being used in such a cool context.’

It is a valuable observation from Respondent #4, especially given that he has direct contact with people around the world who are working in SDP. As a member of the Operating Team of sportanddev.org, Respondent #4 examines registered personal profiles before they are published on the platform, reads and edits SDP articles written by these individuals, and monitors social media correspondence of individuals with the platform. He therefore has a good insight into what individuals’ relationship to SDP means and how it develops. His observation is also in line with

what Goodman and Barnes say about ‘relatively new’ development topics and the opportunity that development celebrities offer in drawing the public’s attention to them.

*‘Materialities of authenticity’ in the athletes’ star/poverty space*

Ambassador athletes’ experience in SDP interventions are presented in the star/poverty space through photos, videos and textual descriptions – in Goodman and Barnes’ words, these are the ‘materialities of authenticity’, that are disseminated through traditional media and – more increasingly – social media channels.

Respondent #1 (NGO co-founder and network director, streetfootballworld) is of the opinion that athletes can spread information through their (social) media presence in a very powerful way. He uses the specific example of one of the ambassadors of his organisation:

‘We have a world that is attracted by stars, too much, but this is reality. And if Juan Mata can reach millions of fans via a tweet, then the organisation should use that.’

To put this statement into perspective, it is worth noting that the midfielder of Manchester United and the Spanish national football team had 7.76 million followers on Twitter, while streetfootballworld had 13.8 thousand followers at the time of the analysis<sup>21</sup>. It is therefore obvious that Mata can communicate the organisation’s messages in the star/poverty space on Twitter to many more people at once than streetfootballworld can on its own.

According to Goodman and Barnes, it is important that the celebrities are self-reflective in their visual and textual accounts of their first-hand experiences on the field. The use of ‘I’ in their verbal accounts serves as ‘we/us’, the celebrities being the ‘para-selves’ of ordinary people in

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<sup>21</sup> Juan Mata’s Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/juanmata8>, streetfootballworld’s Twitter account: [https://twitter.com/sfw\\_tweets](https://twitter.com/sfw_tweets) [Accessed 19 June 2019]

understanding development (2011:80). To find a relevant example of such an account from a celebrity athlete, we used the global, online video-sharing platform, YouTube. Our keyword search on YouTube found that the most watched video of an athlete's visit to a development project's site is of Roger Federer's first visit to Malawi, where his foundation runs an early childhood education programme with local partners<sup>22</sup>. In the video – posted by his Foundation and watched more than 115.000 times – Federer speaks in first-person singular about his excitement to be on the site and meet the beneficiaries of the programme. He spends a day in the pre-school, attending classes, helping out in the kitchen, playing and dancing with the kids, and learning – and making us learn – about the local context.

*Relationship between the ambassadors' and their organisation's reputation*

Goodman and Barnes state that development celebrities reinforce their credibility through their association with credible NGOs and charities (2011:75). The effects on credibility are reciprocal between the celebrities and their organisation, however, the effects on credibility can be negative as well.

Being humans, high-profile athletes are not flawless. The mistakes they make in their professional and personal lives attract certain media attention, which in most cases affects their role model status and credibility. As Meier and Saavedra expressed, 'celebrity sports stars (...) are notorious for falling off their pedestals, and instead of providing inspiration they may illustrate the cautionary tales of negative role models' (2009:1170).

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<sup>22</sup> Roger Federer Foundation, Malawi visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfYin92D9G8> [Accessed 27 March 2019]

Respondent #4 is of the opinion that if the athlete ambassador's reputation is damaged, it can do harm to the reputation of the organisation he/she is associated with.

'The risk is obviously that you have Tiger Woods as an ambassador and there's a negative media story, it happens quite often to various athletes embroiled in scandal and that's a risk for any organisation that has a partnership with that ambassador.'

The example of Tiger Woods is a very adequate one: while in the peak of his career he was identified by TV-host Oprah Winfrey as 'an "antidote" to the anxieties weighing down America', (Cole & Andrews, 2001:70), but after his infidelity scandal in the media, he 'became the poster child for adultery and sexual addiction' (Kozman, 2013:214).

The fragility of the development celebrity's reputation, and therefore the associated organisation, is recognised by Goodman and Barnes as well. The celebrity's reputation is 'only one scandal, baby bump or poverty tour away from making or breaking them, their campaign and/or the charity, NGO or foundation with which they are associated' (2011:82).

### *Being well-known as a role model*

The fundamental principle of the development celebrity concept is that the ambassadors of the development projects are well-known by the programme beneficiaries and the general public. Nonetheless, it is not the case in all athlete-endorsed SDP projects, as many of our respondents pointed out. They believe that it is important to choose athletes that the programme beneficiaries – often children – know and acknowledge as role models. Respondent #5 (professor & co-founder of an NGO) recalled his negative experience of working with a former athlete that the beneficiaries did not know, and who could therefore not become a role model for them:

‘We, Football4Peace, we were given an opportunity to work with Manchester United and Sir Bobby Charlton. And he did come out and work with some of the children and communities [...] It was far more troubled than it was worth. [...] and the children [...] didn’t have a clue who Bobby Charlton was. Bobby Charlton was a star footballer in my generation. But for these children, if it was David Beckham, maybe they would know.’

Respondent #5’s opinion was backed by Respondent #7 (former staff member of the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace):

‘The people who they visit, most of the time don’t actually know who they are. (...) It’s like taking the Hungarian goalkeeper who wears trousers, I don’t remember his name anymore<sup>23</sup>, taking him and sending him to the United States to be raising awareness of HIV/AIDS. People don’t know him. But if you take him to Hungary, he’s a celebrity.’

Fame is therefore an essential feature of athletes working in SDP as ambassadors. Whether they are famous nation-wide and endorse a domestic programme or world-famous and philanthropically active on an international level – like Roger Federer and Juan Mata –, the public and the beneficiaries need to know and acknowledge them, in order for them to reach their potential as development celebrities.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>23</sup> The respondent referred to Gábor Király, former Hungarian national football team member, who became famous during the 2016 European Championships by wearing tracksuit trousers. <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2016/jun/18/hungary-euro-2016-gabor-kiraly> [Accessed 7 December 2018]



Overall the findings, although with limitations, provide information on the extent of high-level athletes' involvement in SDP and reveal some patterns on their effectiveness as 'development celebrity'. Our respondents agreed that athlete ambassadors must possess key characteristics in order to succeed as development celebrities – namely credibility, authenticity and some expertise. Regarding credibility, it was highlighted that an ambassador's negative behavior can have negative effects on the credibility of the organisation he/she is associated with. The respondents also pointed out that the athletes' 'amplified voice' certainly brings media attention to the organisation and, according to some, even to the SDP movement in general. Two specific examples of Juan Mata and Roger Federer were presented to showcase celebrity athletes' star/poverty space, in which these sportspeople communicate to the general public about specific development topics.

These points resonate well with Goodman and Barnes' concepts of the development celebrity and star/poverty space. The development celebrity concept takes it for granted that celebrities are well-known by the public. Our interviews however revealed that many SDP interventions work with high-profile athletes that are not necessarily known by the programme beneficiaries, which may mean that the athletes cannot contribute to the programme as ambassadors in a meaningful way. Therefore, we believe that organisations should choose athlete ambassadors that are well-known and acknowledged by the public as well as the beneficiaries. The first is important for awareness-raising about SDP in general, the latter is vital for increasing the impact of the specific programme on the local level, and both are essential for the athletes to reach their potential as development celebrities.

A more detailed analysis of the characteristics of athlete ambassadorship in SDP is beyond the scope of this article. However, in further research it would be interesting to examine the characteristics of athlete ambassadors from a gender or a discipline perspective. Disability-themed

SDP interventions would also be an interesting subject of research, in order to understand to what extent they are endorsed by fully able-bodied athletes or athletes with a disability. Several qualitative aspects of athlete ambassadorship are also yet to be examined. Athletes' motivations to take up ambassadorship and decision-making processes in selecting athletes for SDP causes could be a further two topics for future research.

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## Appendix I.

List of respondents [code – name – organisation – role within the organisation<sup>24</sup>]

1. Vladimir Borkovic – Streetfootballworld – NGO co-founder and network director
2. Jutta Engelhardt – Swiss Academy for Development - former executive director at sportanddev.org
3. Janine Handel – Roger Federer Foundation – CEO

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<sup>24</sup> Most of the respondents have been involved in SDP in multiple organisations and in various roles. Here we use the affiliation they preferred for this research.

4. Paul Hunt – Swiss Academy for Development – senior project manager at [sportanddev.org](http://sportanddev.org)
5. John Sugden – University of Brighton – professor & co-founder of NGO
6. Karine Teow – Peace and Sport – former international relations officer
7. Anonym #1 – United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace – former staff member
8. Anonym #2 – funding organisation – development manager
9. Anonym #3 – practitioner in Latin-America and the Caribbean