

## **What kind of social capital is generated through sport? The difficult, educational alliance between parents, children and the world of sport**

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*Abstract:* This work investigates the relationship between sports clubs for young people and the production of social capital. This article analyzes 34 interviews with people who work in some sport associations for young of the lower Friuli, such as: parents, kids, coaches and sports administrators. For this people the great difficulty of keeping original, solidarity and prosocial type motivations alive often emerges in a context in which the association's life is rigidly governed by bureaucratic rules and where associates and families do not always help and sustain each other. In spite of this, the world of sport that emerges from this analysis still seems to be perceived as being a place that provides an opportunity to meet and enjoy social commitment.

*Key words:* Sport; young people; families; sport associations; social capital; community; ludic expectative; educational expectative; professional expectative.

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This research work was conceived during the spring of 2012 within the scope of the association, "*La Viarte*" ONLUS, and the research sector activities coordinated by *dott. Cristian Vecchiet* and in which I also took part. *La Viarte* is a reception centre for minors that belongs to the Salesian, religious congregation and is located in *S. Maria La Longa (UD)*. In 2012, using some regional funds, the research sector undertook an investigation into the capacity of youth sport to be a vehicle for social inclusion and created potential for social bonding in the local community. The research presented herein – developed through the analysis of thirty-four interviews conducted with privileged protagonists, who take part in youth sport – attempted, therefore, to obtain some answers to the problem of educational relapses and in terms of sport's social interaction. To do this, the concept of social capital was used to guide the observations through a sturdy, theoretical framework, which has been briefly set forth in the first paragraph. We decided to summarise the theoretical approaches to social capital according to two perspectives, which are very much under debate in scientific literature: holistic assumptions, which perceive social culture as being the matrix of social interaction and relationship ones, which consider social capital as being an "added value of social relations" (Donati, 2001). From this latter point of view, taking part in prosocial associations – even of a sports type – generates new forms of interpersonal relations aimed at the creation of relational assets, which then also have positive consequences on the quality of social life.

Concerning the capacity of sport to create social and associational capital, we focused on the following points: 1) the expectations of those interviewed in relation to taking part in sport; 2) sport and satisfaction of the initial expectations; 3) sports associations and local community. With reference to each of these three areas, the contributions of the thirty-four interviewees were analysed, divided up into two groups (a. young people and parents; b. managers, coaches and P.E. teachers).

After having presented, in the second paragraph, the research design, we shall go ahead –in the third paragraph- and analyse the contents of the thirty-four interviews and our conclusions will be submitted at the end.

**A brief, theoretical introduction: the concept of social capital between holistic and relational assumptions**

When, from the beginning of the 1990's, Robert Putnam (1993, 2000) reused the concept of social capital, which was elaborated by Hanifan (1916) at the beginning of the twentieth century, there has been a vast and heated, scientific debate on the conclusions of the work conducted by the Harvard political scientist. What was interesting was the connection orientation that Putnam indicated between the level of a population's civic culture and the solidity of parliamentary democracy and economic development. Very briefly, Putnam believed the moral quality of the political class and the performance level achieved by public and economic institutions depends upon an independent variable, or rather, social capital, which, in Putnam's opinion, indicates a group of social components – diffusion of association networks, the strength of the provisions regulating the social fabric and levels of interpersonal trust and public institutions – which improve the overall efficiency of social organisations (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Tronca, 2007; Cecchi, 2008, 2011). The endowment of social capital at the disposal of a specific society depends, according to Putnam, essentially on structural conditions and, in particular, historical happenings. In fact, where forms of government have been experimented, such as in the Renaissance municipalities in Italy or in the communities set up in North America, where people had escaped from religious persecution in Europe, we find greater participation of the citizens in political and social life, greater respect for democratic rules and a solid work ethic. All this translates, in Putnam's opinion, into an overall improvement of democratic institutions and the economic system. Putnam is rather decided in claiming that the endowment of social capital cannot be immediately amended, in view of the fact that it is the product of historical dynamics, which is the fruit of a culture that tends to be handed down from generation to generation. Putnam, however, acknowledged that commitment in prosocial activities activates social capital strengthening processes, to the benefit of the entire social organisation. In fact, service performed in favour of the community is an opportunity to express one's own sense of solidarity and

to perceive that of others, to experiment cooperation and conflict settlement, to implement democratic, decision making processes, which will provide greater force for common, civic culture. Very briefly, prosocial type activities – amongst which those with sports-type aims – represent, according to Putnam, one of the main forms of the reproduction of civic culture rules, which remain as being the independent variable that explains the attitude directed towards citizens' public welfare and the quality of political and economic institutions. The density of prosocial activities can, therefore, be explained as being a phenomenon that depends on the quality of a specific population's civic culture and not as being a process that has its own autonomy, distinct from the cultural structure.

Without entering too deeply into the vast debate pursued by Putnam's studies, it should be said that Italian sociology has had a significant role in underlining some explanatory limits of social capital's culture theory, with an original, in-depth explanation into the role of intermediate, social formations – in particular, families and private life – in the production of social capital, itself stesso (Di Nicola *et al*, 2001; Rossi e Boccacin, 2011; Stanzani, 1998). Summarising some conclusions that the Italian studies have achieved, we can confirm that it appears that Putnam is right when he claims that civic culture – or rather, acknowledging, in the rules that regulate democratic life, commitment in favour of common wellbeing, respect for public assets – is also effectively connected to historical development, making it difficult to change in the short-term and making a citizen's characteristic, basic attitude difficult to amend. For example, it should be underlined how in Italy even those who are committed to performing prosocial activities express cultural models that are very similar to those who do not carry out volunteering, political or civil commitment activities (Donati and Colozzi, 2004). The widespread lack of faith in the political institutions and the State, in our country, and the common sensation of mutual lack of trust that all citizens have more or less in common with each other, whether they are involved in prosocial activities or not. It should, however, be said that the social capital conception proposed by Putnam does not seem to fully capture the importance of the generative action asserted by families and third sector organisations do not

clearly appear to emerge from the Italian studies. In fact, it would appear that more than the civic culture in our country – which is, amongst other things, rather weak in directing its citizens' action – it is the experience acquired in the family that mostly influences any, eventual prosocial orientation undertaken by their children. The parents' social commitment, their cultural orientation, but also the family's socio-economic status, appear to be three elements that are extremely important in influencing their children to perform activities in favour of the community. Furthermore, Donati and Tronca (2008) showed how a certain continuity existed between the primary (family) social capital, the secondary one (associational) and the generalised one (social). Differently from what Putnam sustained, the social capital produced in the family constitutes an important, social solidarity factor.<sup>2</sup> As Donati claimed (2007, p.18), public spirit is not individual adhesion to a system of politically orientated "values", but the fruit of reticular dynamics". Furthermore, the prosocial organisations emerge as being places where complex internal and external relations are built. Even if in Italy the social capital levels between associates in the vast, third sector and non-associates do not appear to change much, it is just as true that the investigations conducted show that some, third sector associations produce a particular form of social capital – the associational social capital - (Ibidem, p.62), which indicates the levels of trust, the kinds of help given and received from other associates and the intensity of associational commitment. The associational social capital is translated into broader civic commitment only "if the association is lived in a certain way (...), or rather, if there is reciprocal help available among partners and if there is faith that is extended outwards (...)" (Ibidem, p.73). This explains how the third sector is *overall* more effective in producing social capital: only some associative forms are effectively capable of doing

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<sup>2</sup> Just as the family's reticular structure is also important for the purposes of producing generalised social capital. Di Nicola, Stanzani and Tronca (2011) claimed that the data, from one of the research studies they conducted, showed that the increase in the number of components in the family is positively connected with the increase in willingness to get involved in prosocial activities and organisations. This fact puts Putnam and Banfield's assumption into discussion, that there is a contraposition between the intensity of commitment in favour of one's own family unit and prosocial orientation.

this, increasing the willingness of associates to carry out activities for the common good and this occurs, above all, when the associations operate on the exchange of help among its own associates. Instead, other associative types consume the social capital, discouraging the associates and weakening their faith in the prosocial action.

As we will see shortly, even in the analysis of the interviews conducted with people who operated in some sports associations in the lower part of the Friuli Region, the great difficulty of keeping original, solidarity and prosocial type motivations alive often emerges in a context in which the association's life is rigidly governed by bureaucratic rules and where associates and families do not always help and sustain each other. In spite of this, the world of sport that emerges from this analysis still seems to be perceived as being a place that provides an opportunity to meet and enjoy social commitment.

### **Research design**

The idea that has sustained this work is that taking part in sport and having sports, association experience contributes to producing associational capital open to social dimensions. To this end, we will go ahead to check the existence of the two dimensions of associational capital through the interviews: a) to understand if youth sport can provide a valid instrument in building friendly and/or collaborative relations between the various protagonists and b) if sports associations' activities produce any benefits for the local communities.

With reference to the first point (friendly and/or collaborative relations within the sports associations), we went ahead with analysing the various visions and expectations that the protagonists had towards taking part in sports. This appeared to be important inasmuch as the existence of a number of expectations among young athletes, their families and those who operate in sport associations can become an element of tension that has a negative influence on the quality of interpersonal relations, as confirmed by

a P.E. teacher remarking on the difficulties of those who operate free-of-charge in youth sports clubs:

The problems are that the volunteers are not always esteemed or acknowledged. A volunteer spends time and money and has conflict with the families. Very often, he is not acknowledged for what he does out of a sense of enthusiasm. Very often, it is unclear what expectations the parents or boys or girls have and, perhaps, it is due to this that there is conflict. Misunderstandings often arise.

From the bibliographic analysis performed in preparation for this work (Elias et Dunning, 1986; Dunning, 1999; Martelli, 2011; Farinelli, 2005; Isidori and Fraile Aranda, 2008), we constructed three ideal type visions of sport: I) an *educational* type vision, or rather, sports participation open to all and focused on the affirmation of the values of sacrifice and commitment, respect for one's adversary, collaboration with companions and sporting loyalty; II) the second vision was the *ludic* type, which envisages taking part in sport as an occasion to have fun and make new friends; III) the third vision that we expected to capture during the interviews was sport from a *professional* point of view, or rather, as an element aimed at selecting the best athletes and focused on victory. Referring to the analysis conducted by Elias et Dunning (1986), we could say that the professional dimension of sport represents an effective vehicle to control and release individual tension and aggressiveness, which is compressed on a daily basis by social practices and roles. From this point of view, it is clear that in modern society a sporting challenge is *also* a symbolic representation of a violent battle for victory within an imaginary set that imitates daily life. With reference, instead to the educational and ludic visions of sport, they include the motivation types for sports participation constructed by Martelli (2011, p.140-142), analysing ISTAT'S (*the Italian National Statistics Institute*) multipurpose, investigation data. Said motivations are connected to the: 1) desire to create important social relations through sport (the "relationists"); 2) desire to improve one's own physical form and psychosomatic balance (the "eudemonists"); and lastly, 3) desire to keep healthy (the "health maniacs"). Summing up, with reference to the aims of the research set forth in this document, we expected to see if there was any contrast in the three

visions of sport among the various protagonists taking part in sport (families, children, boys and girls, managers and coaches) and what the consequences are on an interpersonal, relations level.

With reference to the second point to be checked (the benefits for the local community acquired from youth sports' associations), the people interviewed were asked to express their opinions on the potential, positive consequences for the social fabric provided by the sport's presence and the sports association actions. At the level of small communities, sports organisations often represent one of the few occasions still available for children and boys and girls to meet and play together. For example, the sports coaches and managers often underlined that differently from a few decades ago, Italian children who start to take part in a sport have a low level of coordination and motor abilities. The low birth rate of Italian families together with reference to the reality analysed, the scarcity of areas and structures where young children can play freely and allocated especially for them are two factors that influence the few possibilities that there are of playing together and experimenting their potential from a motor point of view. As we will see, this further increases the expectations that families place in their children taking part in a sport, which are, contemporarily, seeking a place for social bonding and education, fun, competition and care, until their parents finish work. As we will see, it is very difficult to satisfy so many and different expectations.

The investigation was conducted by means of a series of in-depth interviews with two, focus groups concerning various individuals in contact with sports associations in the lower part of the Friuli Region: managers, coaches, municipal administrators, sports journalists, parents and boys and girls involved in sports activities. Overall, thirty-four people were involved, including: nine parents, six boys and girls aged between 14 and 18 years, three P.E. teachers and sixteen people associated with sports associations in their capacity of coaches or managers. The interviews were conducted during the spring of 2012. The choice of the associates to interview was made after a preliminary investigation into the lists of sports associations present in the municipal sport regional offices. With the objective of supplying a broad panorama, it was decided to invite the managers and



coaches, who are active in various types of sports' clubs: such as, football, basket ball, canoeing, ice dancing, dance and rugby. With reference, instead, to the young people and parents interviewed, a group of people was contacted, who take part in the "La Viarte" community activities. There were eleven, individual interviews, each one lasting approximately one hour, whilst those in the three, focus groups (which lasted one and a half hour's each) involved the remaining twenty-three people. The interviews, which were all recorded and then transcribed, were concentrated on the following eight questions: 1) What attitudes and expectations do young people and parents have today concerning the sport they take part in? 2) With reference to these attitudes and expectations, have any changes been observed with reference to the past? And, if so, which? 3) What are the expectations and reasons that sustain the actions of managers and coaches in youth sports clubs? 4) What are the positive and negative aspects about taking part in sport? 5) Does youth sport have any educational validity in practical experience? If yes, what kind of validity is it? 6) Does youth sport succeed in building friendships among young people and/or their families? 7) Does the mass media have any influence on the attitudes of parents and children with reference to sport? If yes, what kind of influence is it? 8) How do the different protagonists in taking part in sport judge the sport's professional components? Clearly, the answers supplied by the interviewees sometimes showed aspects connected to taking part in sport that were not always explicitly understood in the aforementioned, eight questions.

### **Analysis of the interviews**

#### *The expectations of those interviewed in relation to taking part in sport*

##### *a. The expectations of young people and parents*

The boys and girls interviewed<sup>3</sup> claimed that taking part in a sport is mainly an opportunity for fun and physical "release". An activity is very

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<sup>3</sup> Six young people took part in the research (four girls and two boys): one aged 14, two aged 16, one aged 17 and two aged 18. There were eight parents, six men and two women,

often started because there has been encouragement from a parent or friends or because that is one of the few places that can be used in the community by children to move about and play. What was once done outside – running, jumping and competing – can, today, only be performed for a few hours every week by taking part in sport. According to the boys and girls, who were interviewed, this is due, essentially, to the burdensome, scholastic commitment that must be dealt with both at school and during homework in the afternoons. Furthermore, young people acknowledge that, in Italian schools, taking part in sport is greatly sacrificed from the point of view of the time and equipment available, relegating it to a marginal activity:

I think that sport and school are two worlds that just don't have anything in common.

The boys and girls appear to be very sensitive to the inclusive potential of taking part in a sport, which is seen as being a vehicle for the involvement and participation of less well qualified athletes, even if this does not always happen:

Well, if you don't practice you sit on the sidelines. A lot of my friends gave up because they spent an entire season on the sidelines. When they were 16-17 years-old, they asked themselves: "what am I coming here for, if all I do is sit on the sidelines?"

The young people interviewed also underlined their desire of using sport as a vehicle to broaden their own circle of friends, besides taking part in motor activities (ludic expectation):

you can meet other people and make friends, have relationships through sport, you can find release and be free for a little while.

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aged between 30 and 45 years. The boys and girls were particularly well-educated and they were all attending technical-scientific courses, whilst their parents' education was average to low. With reference to their cultural and religious circles, the young group appeared to be quite well selected inasmuch as all six took part actively within the scope of parish activities.

It should be underlined that they are talking about their wishes to make friends and have relationships among peers, an aspect that might be taken for granted at this age but which, instead, should be interpreted from a different and more complex point of view. In fact, from what the boys and girls and (as we will see very shortly) their coaches and sports managers said, it would appear, in our social context, that it is not easy for children and young people to have a chance to meet each other outside the school environment, without the constant presence of adults. Playing and assessing themselves in conflicts, without adult intervention, are occasions to physically put themselves to the test as well as their capacity to solve interpersonal relations' problems. Today, from some extracts taken from the interviews analysed in this work, it would appear that there is a context of excessive control and protection exerted by adults over children and young people, with the result that some psycho-physical and relational abilities appear to have weakened. In this framework, sport finds itself invested with the families' requests to assert a problematic, supplementary function with reference to the recovery of capacities that are not just of a motor type.

Lastly, another important expectation emerged with reference to the coaches who are felt to be potentially very important adults from an educational point of view. Adults who, by means of their own example, supply valid, ethical models:

In my opinion, somebody who is a football coach must also be, in part, an educator, to transmit enthusiasm. He should provide a moral point of view on the things that occur in the team. I have been lucky because I've always had very positive coaches.

The parents<sup>4</sup> expressed their expectations on taking part in sport in a way similar to the way the boys and girls had, even if with a difference from those who, in youth, had taken part in a sport or not. The first claimed that sport is an important outlet for physical development and educational maturity, even by means of the acquisition of

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<sup>4</sup> Eight parents were interviewed (six men and two women) aged between 35 and 45 years. Their social status, calculated by taking into consideration the educational qualifications, and type of occupation, was medium to low.

"a competitive ethic": "Training must be done well with the purpose of playing the game and not giving up. It must always be present." (educational and professional expectations).

Instead, those parents who had never taken part in a sport did not appear to have much faith in the educational capacities of taking part in a sport, especially if it is football, the most famous and widespread Italian sport:

both (my sons) chose to play football, which is an environment that I don't like (...) and because it provides no education.

They want sport to offer an outlet to carry out some physical activities after they have finished their homework, to relax and get ready for their, subsequent, scholastic commitment:

with reference to the relationship I have with sport and the body's release valve at a physical level.

They are the ones who mostly expect all the boys and girls to have a place in the team, even those who are less physically and athletically endowed. Even the adults expect that taking part in a sport might facilitate the creation of new friendships between children or boys and girls, while the same desire with reference to the extension of the adults' friendships was not expressed.

We will also, subsequently, see the ludic expectations of sport, as being merely a physical release valve and for the creation of new friendships, which many of the young people and the parents, who were interviewed, gave to sporting activities. Then, they come up against the fact that the latter has also got a competitive nature and is, therefore, selective or, on the contrary, the professional aspect is taken to extremes by the coaches or most often, according to the interviewees, the parents, who use their children's sports' participation in a narcissistic way, as a vehicle to satisfy their desires for achievement, which had been unsuccessful. The problem with confrontation with competition and all that goes with it (for example, an athlete's constant training, acceptance of selection amongst athletes, tension with companions and technicians, their attitude towards defeat and physical and technical limits) is one of the more interesting themes that emerged from among the interviewees. We can anticipate that many of the

extracts from the interviews conducted with all, thirty-four of the participants, often concern this aspect of sporting activities – the expectations for success and victory that is implicit in competition – which often appears to be an element of stress for those who are involved. From a sociological point of view, this represents a phenomenon that could illuminate some aspects of the broader society in which sport's participation is developed. A society in which it is becoming ever more difficult to find places and opportunities to create meaningful friendships (Di Nicola, 2002; 2003) and where they can play and have fun, but also where it is difficult just "being children and boys and girls", since the parents' expectations – but also that of the coaches – becomes too hard to bear for our young people. As will be seen below, the meeting between the various expectations set forth herein and sports experience make these contradictions clear, with the result that occasionally the conflicts between the various protagonists involved in said activities are triggered off.

*b. Expectations of managers, coaches and P.E. teachers*

Concerning the expectations of managers/coaches, with reference to the world of youth sport, we can observe how a strict underlining has emerged on the educational and formative aspects of taking part in sport. A CONI (*the Italian National Olympic Committee*) regional executive for FVG (*the Friuli Venezia Giulia Region*) claimed that

at a youth level, almost all coaches are good educators who teach the boys and girls the rules of sport and life before success .

Over the last, few years, the regional, sports federations have invested considerable resources in training coaches and managers on the educational aspects of taking part in sport. In particular, we have received confirmation that Italian children, who start taking part in a sport, have fewer motor abilities compared to the past:

It is true that children don't play anymore. We have replaced play with sport, which is not the same thing. We, children, played a lot of different games and we did it every day. Today, instead, you take part in a sport only once or twice a week.

Differently from the past, today, taking part in a sport has become a mass activity and children are enrolled almost before they go to school. This is, perhaps, due to the fact that it is difficult for a parent to be at home regularly with his/her children, since, in north east Italy, there is a high number of women employed and grandparents are not always available. All of this is further aggravated by the fact that, with reference to the situation analysed,

(...) there is a lack of space free for boys and girls to move about. All our sports facilities are closed and at the disposal of sports clubs",

which gives an image of the territory that is not concerned by the needs and rights of the youngest members of society.

The coaches and managers understand the educational problem concerning the lack of autonomy that adults give their children these days:

an adult is always present now and this is an essential difference. This is not positive because when we went out to play, we undoubtedly argued but we learn the rules we made ourselves, on our own. I believe bullying is the result of these things.

Concerning the problem of the frequent expectations of children and their families to take part in a sport was for "fun", a manager confirmed that the value of taking part in a sport goes beyond mere fun. The objective is to constantly improve, achieve perfection through patience and effort, acknowledge one's own limits and try to overcome them. If sport is tackled in this way, sport is a practice that can lead to "happiness":

I can enjoy myself taking part in sports but I can also enjoy myself going to a disco. If we were to attribute a positive value to the disco, it would receive the maximum in education. Whilst happiness is because you have achieved something. Happiness does not necessarily envisage cheer but is something more intimate and penetrating.

With reference to this, last point, a P.E. teacher, instead, underlined that

Youth sport has underlying factors as its sub-base and enjoyment as its base (individuals take part because they enjoy themselves). When you push a little harder on the professional aspects, many children become reluctant because they are not enjoying themselves anymore. If you have to attend a second school (and already school, itself, is burdensome) or there are "sergeant majors" (the coaches), they just stop.

Clearly, the P.E. teachers interviewed in this research all agree on the fact that sports activities are, in any case, educational:

The positive aspects of sport concern sports' values which help young people as they grow up as well as enhancing value for them. Sport puts the young people into competition with themselves and others. Athletics, which is the field I come from, makes you compete against yourself. Sport helps growth if participation is constant. It even helps to make you feel surer of yourself. I have had boys and girls, who were shy, and who managed to gain a sense of confidence thanks to the sport. There is growth even through achieving very minor results. From a growth point of view, sport mainly helps young people.

Another teacher views sport as being an opportunity offered to the child to

become more mature, so intervention should not just aim at physical sport but should refer to those areas of the personality that are fundamentally social (being able to relate to others and adults) and emotional-sentimental (in the sense of being sure of oneself): there will never be a high level athlete who is unsure of himself, an athlete, as they say these days, must be a "King" and not a "Draught" to be successful, if you have been crowned, it means you believe you can make it.

Very briefly, we can summarise the expectations and requests that the various protagonists taking part in a sport have expressed, up to now, in the following table (Table 1). The degree of intensity of the three types of expectations goes from a minimum expectation (●) to a maximum expectation (●●●). The degree of motivation intensity for each group of individuals interviewed is recorded by means of the single expectations expressed during the interviews.

Tab. 1. Expectations concerning taking part in a sport expressed by a group of thirty-four people divided up into boys and girls, parents, managers, coaches and P.E. teachers.

Expectations	Interviewed		
	Young people	Parents	Managers/Coaches/Teachers
<i>Ludic</i>	●●●	●●●	●●
<i>Educational</i>	●●	●●	●●●
<i>Professional</i>	●	●	●●

Key ● = minimum expectation; ●● = average expectation ●●● = maximum expectation. Trying to find new friends is included in the ludic expectation.

The ludic expectation is the one that has been chosen most overall, achieving a maximum score from the boys and girls and the parents. Instead, the greatest, educational expectation concerning sport was expressed by those who are more personally committed in sports activities, or rather, the sports managers, the coaches and P.E. teachers, even if both the boys and girls as well as the parents gave said motivation a high score. Lastly, the professional aspect is not very strongly felt by either the young people or their parents, who took part in the research, whereas it achieved an average score from the managers, coaches and P.E. teachers. We can, therefore, say that there does not appear to be a considerable polarisation in the expectations of the various protagonists taking part in sport, such as to justify a mutual lack of faith. Instead, as we will see shortly, the problems in building an educational alliance and also, therefore, the production of associational and social capital can be observed, especially, in the quality of the daily relations established among boys and girls, families and sports clubs.

*Sport and satisfaction of the initial expectations*

*a. Ludic reasons*

The expectations that taking part in sport contributes to relieve the tension produced by study in young people appear to have been fully satisfied in the group under analysis. In fact, both the young people and the parents sustain that numerous benefits have been observed in those who take part in a sport, both from a *physical point of view*:

Sport is important, since I've stopped, I've discovered myself having some physical difficulties and I often have a sore back .

But the psychological dimension is also important:

Sport helps you to be organised: you must do what you have to do within a specific time because then you've got to go to training. Instead, without that commitment, I would be wasting time; "It is something that provides you with a source of release and better organisation during the day"; "movement makes me more active, more dynamic and more organised, so everything gets done decidedly better".



With reference to the possibility of making friends with other children or boys and girls, the young people interviewed underlined a rather complicated framework. On one part, they claimed that you can sometimes make some good friends in the sports environment, but that factor is not so easy and frequent. Instead, it is difficult to establish a friendly environment when the coach is devoted to developing sporting abilities and seeking results or when the athletes' parents have great expectations as to their children's sporting capacity. As one person interviewed claimed, with reference to the aggressive conduct of both coaches and parents:

Many others (boys and girls) like me are not happy in this environment, which is quite heavy-going at times. I felt oppressed. I remember the ways things felt during the finals of a championship competition, I just couldn't give as well as I could have. There was the worry that you had to win. That you had arrived at that point and it was logical that you had to win.

The problem also refers to some coaches, but according to the boys and girls interviewed, it was the parents who were most interfering and aggressive towards the athletes:

The parents get angry on the field. You see some shocking scenes. During the game, some of them appear to be there in place of the coach. You see some incredible scenes.

The negative pressure exerted by some parents seems to be a problem common to a lot of boys and girls:

I have also seen a lot of scenes, in which parents put pressure on their son/daughter. If I play badly, they get angry at home, I think, sometimes, that parents are really harmful. They interfere in the sports environment.

As one sports manager said with reference to parental interference:

It happens really frequently. I have two grandchildren aged six and I can see, even at that age that their parents get angry with them if they don't achieve good results. I have only seen a few couples who don't get angry with the children and see sport as being a source of enjoyment. The net majority of parents, at least in football, gets angry and rage against their children, even when they are only six years old. It is clear that the child cannot take all this.

In spite of this, there is friendship and enjoyment within the teams:

There is a good atmosphere in the team, we laugh and joke. I was sorry to leave football because I left a group of friends .

Or:

There was a good group during training sessions and games. We went to have a pizza together afterwards. There were ties among us that went beyond sport, itself.

According to one manager, the ties created whilst taking part in sport will always be quite fragile if the families are not involved:

They are not strong ties. They are only strong when the families are involved. The families become more active in those sports where the parents have to accompany their children. This necessity obliges them to create ties. I have to accompany my son; I go there and meet other parents. These ties are stronger.

Even those who operate on a voluntary basis in sports associations as to the capacity of sport to create friend networks, between boys and girls and their parents, is subject to a lot of debate and is controversial. Some sports managers are optimistic about sport's capacity to create friendship:

In basket ball, I saw that the boys and girls went out with each other after the game, went on holiday together and I saw that even the families went out together." Or: "Undoubtedly ties are created. Some sports create more ties than others. For example, rugby has the after-match party. It is an apparently tough sport but has fans and a movement sustaining it that is extremely modern. There are parents who organise the after-match party: once the match is over, the parents, themselves, make arrangements to spend time together. This is good.

Other managers have, instead, observed a weakening in the potential of creating friendships by taking part in a sport:

Up to a few years ago, relations were very strong. An individual started a sport as an adolescent and finished it as a young man/woman and there were very strong ties among the athletes. Today, since it is the family who chooses for the child, I can see that this no longer happens. I see that the older coaches had better relations with the athletes. Today it is difficult for this to occur, except in villages. Relations often continue in those smaller places.

A P.E. teacher sustains that the social change in cultural models, with the affirmed advance of individualism, also has an influence on the relations created through sport:

It is easy for ties to be created in sport, because toiling together helps in building a relationship. I think it is more difficult today because we are all more individualists. Parents take them to their activity and pick them up. Before you went to the competitions because the manager took you and you stayed on afterwards. Today, it is difficult that the boys and girls meet up and stay together after the competition.

The framework that emerges is, therefore, full of grey areas. We can claim, overall, that there is a certain capacity for the sports' associations to offer an opportunity to play and charge one's batteries after daily stress and also that friendships among the boys and girls have been confirmed. And all this in a situation in which the parents and coaches do not always assert a positive role and support the young athletes. The interviews seem to reveal that, very often, the adults invade the space of youth sport, just as they occupy all social areas, leaving young people on the margins of the same. As one sports' manager claimed:

Today, adults, by means of volunteering, have taken over sport, politics have taken over sport, and psychiatrists have taken over sport. But the boys and girls are leaving, perhaps to sit on their terraces to play music with friends. Boys and girls can no longer stand adults interfering in their things.

*b. Educational reasons*

The parents interviewed did not highlight any particular educational problems in sport, even because, as we have previously seen, there do not appear to have been many expectations, from the very beginning, to this end, in the small group under examination. Somebody, however, asked the question as to what the real reasons are for an adult to encourage his son/daughter to take part in a sport:

What are the reasons why parents encourage their children to participate in sport? Why is it the parents encourage them to take up a sport. What, then, do parents expect from sport? What do they see as being useful and what does sport give?

Said question, in the group under examination, did not prove that their children's sporting activities are seen as being a possibility to compensate their parents' hopes for success that had gone unfulfilled. Or, in the case of families with two or three children, that the young people taking part in

sport is invested by the adults with an excessive dose of expectations. These interpretations, instead, are made by the group of managers, coaches and P.E. teachers, who have brought another and paradoxical, problematic aspect to the surface, or rather, the "superficiality" with which children/boys and girls and their parents undertake sports activities. Or rather, on one hand, sport is conferred with great expectations by the families (above all success, but also an educational type); whilst on the other hand, by taking part in sport, the young athletes' fragility and capacity for "tolerance" is discovered. With reference to the suppositions made by the people interviewed on this interesting and confliction social process, we can summarise it as follows:

- according to a baseball coach, all this is due to the fact that

today, boys and girls have mobile phones, TVS, etc., boys and girls are interested in these things and their parents do not prohibit them. Boys and girls are stuck to their PCS. Sometimes, taking the boys and girls to take part in a sport is a commitment for the parents. It is not easy.

We could say that according to this interviewee, sport might be seen as being a kind of merchandise that is consumed in the same way as other objects. In this consumption process, the boy or girl is essentially alone in front of the object, inasmuch as it is difficult for their parents to find the time and energy to mediate the relationship between the child and sport;

- even a P.E. teacher underlined the family's struggle to keep up with their children, who are taking part in a sport:

A few decades ago, parents were happy to spend a day on the snow with their children. I do not have children, but I believe that there is no longer the desire to be dedicated and make sacrifice. Having a child, who is enthusiastic about sport and going to see him constitutes another job to be done. It is great going to see your own son/daughter, in my opinion, but very often it is viewed as being a burden, an extra commitment to undertake.

This interpretation confirms that, today, the family makes more of an effort to keep up with their children, when they take part in a sport (and, we believe, that this is not merely limited to this, particular activity). Besides new, individualism, cultural models being dominant in our society and may also influence parental roles, we could, however, put forward the

assumption that said difficulties might also be connected with different, social conditions in which every family finds itself, compared to the past, such as, for example: the progressive growth, due to the increase in separations and divorces, of single-parent families; the constant fall in Italian families' income and the consequent necessity for both parents to have to work; the absence of services in favour of the family in the support of agencies to take care of children and other people who are not self-sufficient etc. (compare Di Nicola, 2008);

- another P.E. teacher further expanded on the family's role in abandoning sports activities, making reference to changes in the demographic structure of the aforementioned, Italian families:

I believe it also depends on the fact that very often the children are only children, so they are completely focused on those children. Families, at times, exaggerate because they also create a sense of tension in the boys and girls. If the children do not obtain the results, they become discouraged and give up. What we need is greater balance.

Even some boys and girls acknowledge that stopping taking part in a sport is often due to the overbearing interference of families in their relations between their children and the sports clubs that they belong to and this also occurs in motor activities that are less directed towards its professional practice (such as dance):

Perhaps, you might not say it, but where we go (dance), there are a lot of mothers who go to complain to the teacher because their daughter does not get a part, because their daughter could have been the most appropriate one. Some of them also say the same thing among the other mothers: "my daughter could have been chosen". I often take part in scenes like this. The girl sometimes gets demoralised too ("I'm not going anymore"), because they did not get the part and the parent says that she is right. The parent indulges her daughter without making her understand that her day will come.

Therefore, we have a clearer interpretation of the process – which seems paradoxical – concerning the high investment made by families in sport and the contemporary ease with which the sport is abandoned by the children/boys and girls. Taking part in sport is much more accessible, today, than it used to be in the past and it is often perceived by the parents (especially if they did not practise sports when they were young) as being a

health activity, a pastime, but also an opportunity for social success to offer the children. Since sport requires long-term effort and commitment and the logic of competition is affirmed and since the sports offered are wide-ranging, the type of sport is changed and the experience brought to an end. In one manager's opinion, this process has its roots embedded in a certain kind of social culture that is present in a lot of Italian families:

Then, we have families that say to their children: "if you want to obtain results you have to work hard". Instead, they say: "find a job where you don't have to do anything and they'll pay you all the same on the 27th of the month (traditionally, pay day)". The majority of people think and say this.

One of the consequences of the aforementioned attitude is the widespread diffusion of taking part in an amateur sport which, according to the interviewees, is participated in by very young and endowed athletes because

being an amateur means not having any commitments. In an amateur team I do what I want. Today, you can find people aged about thirty, who are free and can play as much as they wish. Once, amateurs were forty-five years old who, after thirty years of sport, were dedicated to it only out of enthusiasm. Today, boys and girls do not want to train out in the cold, under the snow and rain.

Besides the families, a source of educational problems, identified by the interviewees, is also constituted by the coaches:

(in sport) there is the idea of the educational spirit but educational practice is postponed. If the coach has the mania to win, he only aims at that. There are no boundaries to this. The coach who wants to win only lets the best athletes take part. I can see no solution to this, because there is the imperative of staying with your head above water. This is why a lot of boys and girls take part in individual sports: at least they are always kept occupied.

The fact that in our country, sports participation is in no way significantly sustained by the State and Public Authorities, leads the sports clubs to try to immediately maximise their sporting results, in such a way as to obtain sponsorships or payments for the sale of athletes to bigger clubs:

What becomes problematic is that when you reach a higher level, other components are added, such as the frenetic aim to achieve results. The point of having achieved a result implies that you, then, have a sponsor who sustains you, you become more

visible. The fact of only seeking to obtain a result encourages you to attempt even illegal methods to achieve it.

In this process, the managers and coaches are pressed to pursue the logic of the result, even in relation to very young athletes.

From an associational point of view, for some of the interviewees, the activities performed by so many volunteers represents a precious asset for local communities, activities that are motivated by an authentic spirit to serve:

I think, the awareness of taking part in a sport is good for everybody, both for their health as well as for the psyche and for the ability to tackle other people without an obsessive professionalism. I am convinced that adults get involved in youth clubs (and they give a lot) and do not do it for money. Some do it out of enthusiasm, others to relive times gone by and out of conviction that sport is good for all the boys and girls who have been entrusted to their care.

The social consequences of sports associational participation are the object of the following and last paragraph.

#### *Sports associations and local community*

The positive consequences of associational action on the local community are very important in the creation of social capital. Said consequences refer to the diffusion of a sense of participation and co-responsibility among its citizens, an improvement in the quality of interpersonal relations and social conflict being mitigated (Putnam, 1993). An explicit question was added to the interview outline used in the research analysed herein as to the capacity of sport associations being able to contribute to creating community ties, the thirty-four interviewees' highlighted different aspects – sometimes even in contrast – of the question. Very briefly, as we will see below, even in the relationship between sports associations and the local community, the interviewees claimed that there had been a weakening in the intensity of said ties, even if – as set forth in the conclusions contained in the previous paragraph - sports associations are acknowledged as being one of the few occasion for social cohesion and commitment still present in our communities. For example, a sports manager claimed that social interaction is created by

sport, even if one has to distinguish in which type of community the sports association operates:

I have to say that in the cities, social relations are missing. Cities are large places and the athlete is only one of many. In villages, there is a considerable relationship between sport and the community. The situations are often mixed up together: an individual who is a sports coach is often to be found in the civil protection authority, the church choir, etc. There are the Alpini (Alpine Regiment) who make the pasta for the footballers, etc. Situations tend to overlap in small places.

Here we have a hint to the fact that an individual who is active in a sports association is also present in other prosocial organisations, as proved by the association research and the production of social capital (Di Nicola *et al* , 2011; Donati and Colozzi, 2007). Another interviewee, instead, was more pessimistic even about the levels of social interaction created by sport in smaller communities.

Perhaps, there is social interaction in villages because it is simpler. An individual involved in sport is connected to other people, then there's one of dad's friends who comes to make the pasta, etc. But, there are always fewer. Sport is ever more seen as being one of many commitments.

Another coach also remarked on the same difficulty in recruiting new volunteers:

Volunteering, in my opinion, is really undergoing a crisis. As you said, a championship is an important occasion, but it only lasts three days, and volunteers are willing to come. But, helping out all year long is quite another thing.

A third manager made some similar remarks:

Today the replacement of volunteers is lacking because nobody does anything for nothing. Just as there is a crisis throughout volunteering, there is a crisis here too. The return, besides the sentimental aspect towards the club, is hard work. A manager must always be present during training and at the games (4-5 times a week). The manager is away from home more than half the time.

It is for this reason that sports volunteers are aging:

There are no replacements because a volunteer in sport is essentially somebody who has already retired. There are, essentially, pensioners. It should be remembered that when a young person, who goes to university, goes to study somewhere else, then finds a job far from home.



According to the interviewees, another aspect to take into consideration in the weakening of the relationship between sports associations and the local community is given by the consequences of the decrease in the population:

It is clear that there is a fall in births. Once, every village had a football team. Then, it became necessary to join villages together to make up a team.

Today, sports clubs have a lot of difficulty in recruiting new children, both because there are so few but also because they tend to stay at home, where they have a lot of toys and amusements, such as computers:

There are two types of boys and girls: there are those who take part in a sport five days a week and those who do nothing at all. I think it depends on computers. The ones that don't do anything sit in front of a PC four hours a day. When they come home from school, they do their homework (at least, that's what they say) for four hours in front of the PC and, then, they don't have time to do anything else. Thirty years ago, you took part in sport and made do because you had the time. Today, with having a PC, the television and video games, there is no more time. Today, there are fewer boys and girls who take part in a sport. Today, sport is supplied by the PC. Twenty years ago you played football out on the street. Not anymore.

The reduction in the number of children available to take part in a sport, makes it necessary to carry out more recruitment in other, local communities. If, on one hand, this undoubtedly encourages the possibility of making a larger and differentiated, interpersonal network, on the other hand, it makes the associates think that it does nothing to reinforce the community identity:

Do I think that sports associations reinforce community ties? At the moment, no.

In summing up, we would like to mention a problem concerning the bureaucratisation of youth, sports associations. This is a problem that is also well known to individuals operating in other prosocial organisations. According to Donati (Donati and Colozzi, 2004), the bureaucratisation of the third sector world represents a sort of colonisation of the public sector, which makes the world of social solidarity function according to specific logics – political and bureaucratic – which they are unconnected to. The struggle that Italian volunteers have in continuing their work under very rigid conditions, from a legislative point of view, has been documented in

many research studies (Donati and Colozzi, 2004; Stanzani, 1998). This problem emerged from the interviews analysed herein, which is added together with all the other difficulties that have already been underlined. For example a CONI manager for FVG claimed that:

The Italian world of sport is sustained only by volunteers. The law doesn't help: there is a formidable bureaucracy and only the ignorance of the presidents allows them to become presidents. If they knew what all their obligations would be and the risks they run, I don't think anybody would do it. In all sports clubs, there is always something to be found on a bureaucratic level (finance, equipment, safety) that doesn't work. The laws are those of the State integrated by a specific, regional law. If I go into a gym, I have a series of obligations that runs from checking that the extinguishers are full to inspecting whether the electrical systems are in compliance with the law, it is quite incredible.

Legal requests from sports associations are very far away from the volunteers' real needs:

In my opinion, on one hand there has to be less bureaucracy and on the other refresher courses for managers, which are not just administrative but also educational. They must be able to understand their roles. Today, the courses are only bureaucratic and administrative. These days, those who organise have no idea that a club president is also the father of a family and friend of the boys and girls' parents and, therefore, should receive an input on how to manage the club from a value enhancement and educational point of view.

## **Conclusion**

This work, in spite of being conducted with a limited group of interviewees, highlighted some interesting elements concerning the relationship between youth sports associations and the production of social capital to reflect on.

The first point concerns the problem the sport's social image and the relative expectations that the various protagonists have in relation to youth, sports associations. Taking part in a sport contains, in itself, all three motivations, which we described in this work: ludic, educational and professional. A child's initial motivation concerning sport is clearly ludic,

whilst the families, but especially the managers and coaches, also pursue educational and professional aims. As we have seen, the contending positions that emerged from this work, between the boys and girls and their families and those of the managers and coaches is mainly centred on the fact that there is, very often, a certain, mutual lack of faith between the families and those who operate in youth, sports clubs. Said attitudes are connected to a series of complex, social factors, which taking part in a sport catalyses and shows in all its complexity: on one hand, the families have invested a great deal upon a very reduced number of children. In this case, sport is seen as being an instrument of self-affirmation (the parents) and also success by the children. On the other hand, with reference to the situation under examination (the lower part of the Friuli Region), the interviewees agreed in observing how families are alone in the children and boys and girl's educational management and how there is a lack of opportunities, structures and services available for children to play and to meet each other. As already mentioned, even for this reason, sport has probably undertaken an "exaggerated" importance compared to the role it should have. We expect leisure, friendship, education, protection and professionalism from it. Then, there is often the parents' difficulty in accepting the limits of their children, which is not so strange if we think, as one interviewee declared, that

even the parent and child contests the teacher if they get a bad mark at school .

The second aspect on which to reflect concerns the positive perception that the volunteers continue to have of themselves and their activities, even in a context that is so complicated, contributing to improve the quality of local community life. Even if the problems are countless, associational participation continues to be considered as being satisfactory and useful. However, at least with reference to the group interviewed, the problem is that it is mainly the "older" generations who are active in the world of youth sport, whilst there is difficulty in obtaining generational replacement. Said fact, which can also be found in the broader world of third sector associations, perhaps, represents a warning alarm as to Italian society's capacity to regenerate social solidarity processes.

The third element to reflect upon concerns the capacity of local, sport clubs to create social ties in the community. The interviews told us that opinions were often contrasting. Those who take part in or perform sport locally believe that it is still felt as being an important area in community activities and many children take part. The problem is that the interviewees seemed to perceive (without having said so explicitly) that the interpersonal relationship models in the community tend to resemble ever more those of citizens (individualised and private). It is difficult to have the parents take part in social initiatives, each one looks after his/her own child and, once the game is over, they go straight home. It is really difficult to ask sport to attempt to contrast these, cultural processes. The managers and coaches interviewed do not appear to be discouraged and, indeed, reconfirm that what they do generates diverse and better social relations.

Lastly, the problem concerning the bureaucratisation of the life of sports associations: as previously mentioned, said fact complicates volunteers' work, binding them in a series of constraints that impoverish prosocial action. Said fact undoubtedly contributes to discouraging some young people from entering more difficult management processes. As occurs in the case of third sector associations, there is the necessity of releasing sports clubs from a part of their bureaucratic obligations, even in the world of sport, acknowledging its solidarity particularity.

Returning, therefore, to the title of this contribution, "What kind of social capital is generated through sport?" The conclusions are as follows: with reference to the groups analysed, local sport generates – with difficulty - association capital. Even if together with the problems that we have analysed up to now, sports associations continue to involve thousands of families, offering the possibility of meeting, playing and education experiences. Not all sports associations generate social capital, contributing to the improvement of the quality of community, social relations, just as not all the third sector associations produce social capital. The quality of the social capital produced by the world of sport depends a lot upon the managers and coaches' level of training and the quality of relations with the young athletes' families. The more regularly an educational pact is achieved between these two subjects, the greater the benefits will be for the

young people and local community. The fulfilment of this educational pact is rather complex, inasmuch as social factors, even of a structural kind, burden them (such as, for example, social culture and the composition and social status of the family). Some actions might improve the capacity of producing social capital in the world, for example, areas to play and meet children and boys and girls (and even the families) could be strengthened in the local community. As we have seen, it has been maintained on many occasions that children often have problems with motor coordination and emotional and relational education, tracing it all back to being too sedentary and the daily loneliness in which they often find themselves. Furthermore, the local authorities and sports associations could realise some projects together with the schools to increase the resources and play areas. Lastly, the political sector should decrease bureaucratic pressure and supply greater support in educational training.

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