Eligibility age debates in figure skating: Historic evidence from elite female sport

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Introduction and previous works

The debates about the minimum age of Olympiad participants are taking place for a long time now. In figure skating specifically discussion is focused on young girls that are becoming Olympic champions and therefore do not let older women to have a longer career in sports. All media is focused on women because seems like men figure skaters are not facing this problem (Eagleman, et. al., 2013). The questions that bother sports community is what we can do to help prolong careers of figure skaters.

We see the difference in discussion of men and women sport, so the problem here is related to gender. The investigation of the issue that accrued in figure skating can be a clue for gender related problems outside of sport, because it can be seen as a model of real world (Pfister, et. al., 2010).

If women leave sports earlier then we need to understand what is different in their decision-making. It is claimed that it takes from 3 to 4 decisions for a sportsman to retire. And a number of decisions has a negative correlation with social status of the sportsmen (Brewer, et. al., 2021). In this paper we are going to show that the difference in age of retirement and length of career between men and women is significant. And also discuss the reasons of this difference and possible solutions.

Methods and results

Because of lack of the studies related to figure skating we created a dataset of all Olympic champions since 1908 in men and women single figure skating. And also, another dataset that contained all World Championship medalists since 1990. Both datasets contained age of birth, age of the first world championship medal, number of Olympic games and Olympic medals in the career and the age of retirement. The age of retirement was taken either from interviews of the skater, or a skater was considered retired if he or she had not participated in two seasons in a row.

With this data we had several major findings. Firstly, the mean age of the first major international medal is lower for women then men. The same is true for the first Olympic medal. But the mean number of Olympic games in the career is significantly higher for men. Secondly, women retire right after the first Olympic victory more often than men. Furthermore, female singles competitors ended their careers earlier than men and left after winning the Olympics even when women's skating was not about quadruple jumps and triple axels. And this leads us to another problem, how to make women champions stay for more Olympics. Because, taking into account our findings, if the minimum age for Olympics participation was higher, we wouldn’t see longer careers, just older champions, which is not the goal of the community.

After analysing the biographies of past female Olympic champions, we believe that the motivation structure that pushes women to end their careers earlier is more complex,
and is not just limited to the difficulties of physiological maturation. We identified three groups of factors: physiology-related (harder to compete with younger teenage girls at today's level of competition), social, and economic.

We hypothesize that the influence of these factors in proportion could change over time, but they all still have an impact. For instance, with the complication of jumps the influence of the physical component increased, and the economic component slightly decreased with the abolition of strict restrictions on earning money by amateur figure skaters. On the other hand, the latter may have increased again with the decline of commercial ice shows. Accordingly, if sport governing bodies aim to develop effective policies in regard to keeping superstars in amateur figure skating, they have to take them all into account.

References

