

The crisis of Belarusian youth sport: can we expect a new Domracheva?



















At the Pyeongchang 2018 Winter Olympics, Belarus finished 15th in the medal table with two golds and one silver. The result represents a true sporting achievement for a country with a relatively small GDP. Yet, despite the triumphs of [Darya Domracheva](#) and Hanna Huskova, the Belarusian team failed to repeat its success at the 2014 games in Sochi when Belarus finished 8th in the medal standings. Belarusian youth sport faces several problems which reduce expectations of victories at Tokyo 2020 and Beijing 2022.

First, numerous sports clubs lack either private sponsorship or state support. Secondly, poor salaries reduce the motivation of talented youth coaches for career advancement. Finally, an abundance of entertainment, as well as the high cost of sports equipment, prevents youngsters from attending sports schools. For these reasons, instead of investing in sports infrastructure, the Belarusian government needs to support youth coaches. An efficient approach towards youth sports will improve the results of Belarusian sports teams in future.

Belarus's sporting triumphs

As a part of the USSR, Belarus produced numerous sporting legends, including Olga Korbut, Vital Scherba, and Alexander Miadvedz. Belarusian sportsmen and women have traditionally demonstrated impressive achievements in fencing, gymnastics, rowing, track and field, skiing, and wrestling, if you will like to start making your way in to the skiing crowd, you

might want to check out the [Altitude Sports](#) skiing gear collection at the link. The Soviet period left behind strong sports traditions and an excellent coaching system. However, the rapid breakdown of the Soviet economic system took its toll on the development of sport in independent Belarus.

Rank	NOC				Total
1	 Norway	14	14	11	39
2	 Germany	14	10	7	31
3	 Canada	11	8	10	29
4	 United States	9	8	6	23
5	 Netherlands	8	6	6	20
6	 Sweden	7	6	1	14
7	 Republic of Korea	5	8	4	17
8	 Switzerland	5	6	4	15
9	 France	5	4	6	15
10	 Austria	5	3	6	14
11	 Japan	4	5	4	13
12	 Italy	3	2	5	10
13	 OAR	2	6	9	17
14	 Czech Republic	2	2	3	7
15	 Belarus	2	1	0	3

Source: pyeongchang2018.com

Nevertheless, Belarus managed to preserve strong Soviet sports traditions in biathlon, freestyle skiing, rhythmic gymnastics, rowing, wrestling, and weightlifting. In Pyeongchang, Belarus – with a GDP per capita of just \$4,989.25 (2016 figure) – finished 15th among 92 competing nations.

In comparison, the GDP per capita of Norway, which topped the medals table, amounts to \$70,812 (2016); the GDP of 10-million-strong Sweden – \$51,559 (2016); and the GDP of Austria with 8.7 million people – \$44,176 (2016). Belarus, the poorest country among the top 15 medal winners, managed to do so well despite its economic hardship. A stable medal flow leaves hope for future Belarusian sporting achievements. However, Belarusian sport faces a number of problems.

Belarusian sport vs. the market economy

Place	Country	GDP per capita (\$)
1	Norway	70,812
2	Germany	41,936
3	Canada	42,157
4	United States	57,466
5	Netherlands	45,294
6	Sweden	51,599
7	Republic of Korea	27,538
8	Switzerland	78,812
9	France	36,854
10	Austria	44,176
11	Japan	38,894
12	Italy	30,527
13	OAR (Russia)	8,748
14	Czech Republic	18,266
15	Belarus	4,989
16	China	8,123
17	Slovakia	16,495
18	Finland	43,090
19	Great Britain	39,899
20	Poland	12,372

Sources: World Bank (2016), pyeongchang2018.com

After the break of the Soviet Union, Belarusian sport had to adjust to a market economy. In order to attract serious sponsors, sports events required tens of thousands of spectators. However, despite cheap tickets, sports events have never managed to attract regular [crowds in Belarus](#). For instance, only 3,864 spectators supported the national football team in its European Championship qualifying match against Slovakia. The attendance at ice hockey matches has turned into a farce whereby students fill empty stands [in exchange for better grades](#) for years. So far, the national sport has failed to be considered first-rate entertainment among Belarusians.

Since Belarusian sport cannot provide for itself, the Belarusian government [obliged enterprises to finance sports teams](#) across the country. For instance, the Belarusian Potash Company “Belaruskali” sponsors the “Shakhtyor-Saligorsk” ice hockey club, while OJSC “Byelorussian Steel Works” sponsors another ice hockey club, “Metallurg-Zhlobin”. However, the

level of financial support depends on the profitability of each particular enterprise and, in cases of bankruptcy or financial crisis, teams must survive without support for months, if not years. Financial straits have put an end to several Belarusian sports teams, including male volleyball teams from Hrodna and Homiel.

Belarusian sport vs. the entertainment industry

Aside from financial challenges, Belarusian sport faces a decreasing talent pool. At present the [national sports industry](#) competes with numerous entertainment giants. Films, concerts, clubs, cafes, the internet and computer games simultaneously fight for young Belarusians' attention. While Soviet youngsters pursued sports activities due to the lack of entertainment, contemporary Belarusian teenagers possess plenty of it. Moreover, music idols such as Rihanna and Jay-Z score higher in teen popularity than the biggest national sports stars, including [Victoria Azarenka](#) and [Alexander Hleb](#). As a result, many potential sporting talents do not develop their potential.

Expensive sports equipment also deters talented children. Youth hockey equipment costs between \$600-800 (approximately one-and-a-half times the average Belarusian monthly salary); especially problematic for a growing teenager who requires new hockey equipment each year. While golfers will need a [golf launch monitor](#) to effectively practice at home.

A rhythmic gymnastics suit costs \$400 and lasts just half a year. A high quality tennis racquet costs about \$3,000 (or nearly eight times the average Belarusian salary). Belarusian parents therefore have to think twice before investing in their child's sports activities. In this way, the [proclaimed state support for national sport](#) looks rather hypocritical.

Belarusian sport vs. diminishing coaching talent

Belarusian youth coaches have outlined two major problems harming the development of Belarusian sport. The first problem [concerns poor salaries](#) for a highly challenging job of coaching children and teenagers. At present, Belarusian youth coaches receive between \$200-350 per month, even less than the official average salary of \$426. Consequently, the best specialists quickly move into better-paid roles coaching adults and prospective juniors.



Mikalai Lukashenka competes at Snow Sniper biathlon event. Source: belta.by

The second problem relates to a decline in the quality of coaching education. The lack of professional prestige deprives sports faculties of a competitive selection. As a result, education standards also drop, as does motivation of young specialists. Aside from this, Belarusian sports specialists rarely attend international conferences or apply creative teaching approaches. Therefore, a higher education diploma in physical education does not guarantee a professional coach.

To conclude, Belarusian youth sports undergoes a crisis, which

has stemmed from its slow transition to a market economy. Youth sports schools suffer a shortage of talent, sports clubs lack sponsors, and spectators are not entertained. The primary task facing Belarusian sport remains to increase its target audience. As soon as national sports become important for Belarusians, they will attract sufficient financial flows. As for state support, the major investment should be redirected into supporting youth coaches instead of building infrastructure.