

STUDY RELATED TO THE EVOLUTION OF TABLE TENNIS IN OLYMPIC GAMES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SPORT HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT. Our intention is to study the evolution of Olympic tournaments of table tennis, both from the perspective of the history of Olympic Games and geography. In the introductory part, the authors attempt to place this article into the present works written on this subject, addressing several research essays related to sport and particularly to the Olympic sport as a result of joint study made by specialists in sport and geography. Then, we describe the main events that led to the inclusion of table tennis in the Olympic Games competitions. The evolution in time of table tennis Olympic tournament, the athlete's attendance and medals obtained by them are described and analyzed by linking maps to tables and by using various graph representations.

Key words: *table tennis, Olympic Games, sport history, geography.*

REZUMAT. *Studiu privind evoluția tenisului de masă la Jocurile Olimpice din perspectiva istoriei sportului și geografiei.* Autorii lucrării și-au propus să studieze evoluția turneele olimpice de tenis de masă, atât din perspectiva istoriei mișcării olimpice, cât și al geografiei. În partea introductivă, se încercă încadrarea articolului în sfera de preocupări de până acum în această direcție, făcându-se referiri la o seamă de lucrări care abordează cercetarea sportul, în general, și cel olimpic, în mod deosebit, ca rezultat al studiului comun al specialiștilor din domeniul sportului și al geografiei. În continuare sunt prezentate principalele evenimente care au condus la includerea tenisului de masă în programul Jocurilor Olimpice. Evoluția în timp a turneele olimpice de tenis de masă, participarea sportivilor, medaliile obținute de către aceștia sunt prezentate și analizate prin asocierea hărții cu tabele și diferite modalități de reprezentare grafică.

Cuvinte cheie: *tenis de masă, Jocurile Olimpice, istoria sportului, geografie.*

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Introduction

For over one hundred years, the Olympic Games have represented one of the major events, attracting a large audience consisting of billions of spectators and billiards of viewers. Their importance and role for the contemporary society made the Olympic Games an event studied by specialists of several domains: sport history, management, Olympism, Olympic education, etc. Taking into consideration the phenomenon complexity, in addition to the particular studies made in a particular scientific field, many research approached the phenomenon from interdisciplinary perspective. Thus, among others, from the very first edition of the Olympic Games, specialists in geography and sport collaborated in the study of sport phenomenon in general, focusing especially on the Olympic phenomenon (Bale, 1993). The collaborations between the specialists in the two science domains varies on a global scale: cartography (Bánhidi, 2004), life quality (Ahlfeld & Maenning, 2010), territory amenity (Augustin, 1995), educational field (DeChano & Shelley, 2006) etc. First scientific paper in Romania approaching sport from the perspective of geography dates back in 1938. (Mihăilă & Ulmeanu, 1938). More recently, under the coordination of the University Professor Vasile Surd, at Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, Faculty of Geography, certain doctoral thesis related to sport from the perspective of geography were elaborated (Sandor, 2005). Specialty literature includes books researching the relationship between sport and geographical environment (Bogdan, 2009). Likewise, works written by specialists in sports and geography were published (Maroti & Ilieș, 1995; Stașac, Maroti & Ilieș, 2005; Sandor, 2003).

Using this joint approach to different sport aspects, one can identify amongst others, the relationships occurred between the spatial variations of distribution, structure, dynamics of Olympic phenomenon and its geographical site. Linking the map to the column diagram, frequency polygon, statistical landscape features, etc. offers the opportunity to present, analyze and understand the phenomenon researched from a different point of view than the ordinary one, for those approaching it only from the point of view of the specialist in physical education and sport.

In over 100 years of existence, the table tennis has developed and become one of the most popular sport, currently being played in approximately two hundred countries in the world, by billions of youth and elderly women and men. Although, the procedures for recognition of table tennis as Olympic sport, its inclusion on Olympic Games agenda, the attendance and the results obtained at Olympic tournaments, which represent important steps in the history of this sport, all these were poorly studied. In the specialty literature of Romania, only few works related to the presence of table tennis in the Olympic Games were written. Therefore, we decided to master information and prepare this essay.

We strongly consider that an essay approaching table tennis tournaments from the perspective of the two domains: sport and geography is topical, interesting and contributes to a better familiarization with the studied phenomenon. The cartographic representation and geographical analysis come to complete with additional information the vision of the sport specialist.

Events that led to the inclusion of table tennis into the family of Olympic sports

In the first years after the World War I, when the table tennis quickly gained momentum, the organizational procedures for establishing governing bodies for this sport became the subject of debates both at the national and international level. Thus in 1926, shortly after the beginning of the month of December at Dr. Lehmann's initiative, representatives of six countries gathered together in Berlin to discuss the establishment of a table tennis international governing body. As a result, in London was founded the International Federation of Table Tennis (Antal, 1974).

In the first years after its establishment, part of the leaders of Table Tennis International Federation understood that inclusion of this sport into the family of Olympic sports might have a positive influence upon its development and evolution and took steps to make it happen. In February 1926, in Budapest, the table tennis governing body made the decision at the General Meeting to confer powers to some of their members for exploring the chances to include this sport on the agenda of Olympic Games (11). This first step was followed by actions for informing the affiliated national federations about the attitude to be adopted by them in order to offer the tennis table the opportunity to become an Olympic sport (6).

The General Meeting held in 1937 on the occasion of World Championship in Baden, Austria, granted powers to the members of Consulting Committee of Table Tennis International Federation for contacting the Committee for Organizing the 1940 Olympic Games in Tokyo with the proposition to include the table tennis into the Olympic agenda (1).

An important event of the table tennis pre-Olympic history happened at the 40th Session of International Olympic Committee, when the twenty six members attending the session rejected the request of the International Federation for recognition of the tennis table as an Olympic sport (3).

In the first years after the Word War II, in addition to the considerable number of members rejecting the idea of including the tennis table on the Olympic Games agenda, several hostile opinions expressed by some members of the Table Tennis International Federation contributed to the postponement

of its inclusion into the Olympic sports with almost four decades (8). Furthermore, the position of the Table Tennis International Federation towards the amateurism, as well as the divergences related to the difference between an amateur and a professional player, were long time an impediment for recognition of the governing body for table tennis by the International Olympic Committee (9).

In 1967, after the retirement of Ivor Montagu, the new president H. Roy Evans de Wales, initiated several actions that led to the modifications of the By-law of Table Tennis International Federation with the purpose of complying with the requirements of Olympic Charter. As a result, in November 1977, the International Olympic Committee has recognized the Tennis Table International federation as an Olympic Federation (7).

At the 84th Session of International Olympic Committee, held in 1981 in Baden Baden, the inclusion of table tennis into the Olympic Games agenda beginning with the edition held in 1988 in Seul was approved (4).

Attendance to the table tennis competitions in the Olympic Games

The inclusion of table tennis in the Olympic Games agenda has a decisive influence on the direction and development of this sport. In the following years the number of athletes practicing table tennis has grown, the table tennis has strengthen its position within the Olympic family and has benefited from increased support of the national and international governing bodies. As an Olympic sport, the promotion of international and national official competitions, as well as other activities related to this sport in newspapers, radio and television has increased. All these resulted in an increased attention to table tennis from the part of audience and viewers interested in this sport.

From 1988 to 2004 the format of table tennis competitions included the singles and the doubles matches both for men and women. Starting from 2008 Edition of Beijing, the doubles match was replaced by the team competition (4). A number of 1145 athletes representing 91 countries attended in the seven editions of the Olympic Games that host table tennis competitions. The participants in the table tennis Olympic tournaments and their origin was influenced by the decisions made within the session of the International Olympic Committee, who decided on the number of athletes admitted to a single edition, the qualification conditions by taking into consideration the changes occurred on the world map (** 2007).

Players from 21 countries competed in the seven editions where table tennis was included in the Olympic Games agenda. Seven countries sent their competitors to 6 Olympic tournaments, 11 countries to 5 editions, 5 countries to 4 editions, 12 countries to 3 editions, 12 countries to 2 editions and 19

countries to one edition (10). By widening the participation area of national committee to Olympic tournaments, the tennis table contributed along with other Olympic sports to the universality of Olympic movement.

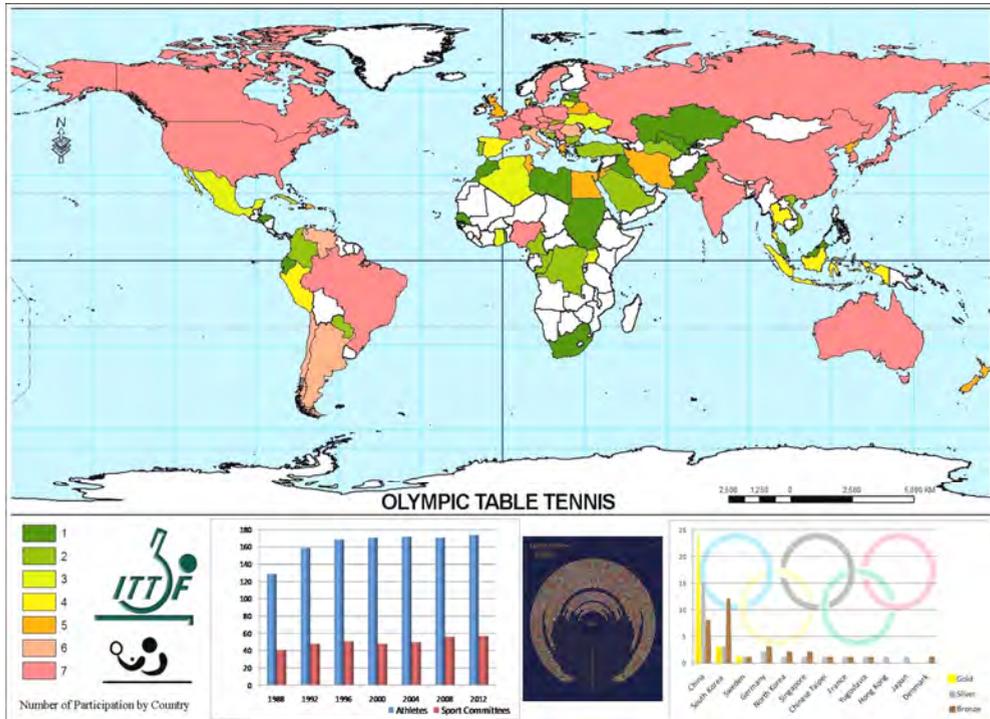


Figure 1. Olympic national committees participating in table tennis Olympic tournaments; number of participating athletes; countries whose athletes won medals (made based on 10, 2 and 5)

Time evolution of the number of athletes and national committees participating in table tennis Olympic tournaments is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Evolution of the participation of national committees and of the number of athletes (2)

Country	Olympic Games Edition						
	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
Athletes	129	159	169	171	172	171	174
Number of national committees	41	48	51	48	50	56	57

The study of the participation of Olympic national committees in function of the geographical area of their origin reveals that Europe has the largest number 34.44 %, followed by Asia 26.66 %, Africa 17.77%, North America 8.88%, South America 8.88%, and Australia/Oceania 3.33 %.

Table 2. Participation of Olympic national committees in function of the geographical area (2)

Europe	North America	South America	Asia	Africa	Australia/Oceania
31	8	8	24	17	3
34.06 %	8.91 %	8.91%	26.37 %	18.68%	3.29 %

Although the decisions of International Olympic Committee based on the proposals made by the Olympic Programme Commission and Table Tennis International Federation for facilitating to a great extent the access of athletes from all geographical areas, Europe and Asia hold the largest number of athletes.

In any sport, the most important criterion taken into consideration for establishing the value of the athlete's participation to the Olympic Games is the number of won medals. In the table tennis Olympic tournaments, the 88 available medals were distributed between the participants of merely 12 countries, representing 13.18% of the total number of participants. From the total number of medals the athletes of China won 47, 53.41%. In the ranking of Olympic medal winners we also found athletes from South Korea, Sweden, Germany, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Singapore, Chinese Taiwan, France, Serbia, Hong Kong and Denmark (5).

The study of distribution of medals on continents reveals that only athletes from two continents, Asia and Europe ranked the required positions to win Olympic medals. The table tennis tournaments were dominated by athletes from Asia, who won 75, 85.33%, of the total number of medals – 27 gold, 23 silver and 25 bronze – followed by athletes from Europe with 13, 14.78%, – 1 gold, 5 silver and 7 bronze. The athletes from North America, South America, Africa and Australia/Oceania have never won any medals at the seven Olympic table tennis tournaments.

Table 3. Ranking by medals of geographical areas

Place	Continent	Medals			
		Gold	Silver	Bronze	Total
1	Asia	27	23	25	75
2	Europa	1	5	7	13
Total		28	28	32	88

Conclusions

Although, the table tennis is one of the most popular sport at international level and the attempts of its inclusion into the Olympic Games agenda dates back in 1920, the first Olympic tournament of table tennis was held only in 1988 at the Seul Olympic Games.

1145 athletes from 91 countries participated at the seven editions in which the table tennis was present on the Olympic Games agenda. Only 21 National Olympic Committees succeeded in sending athletes to all Olympic tournaments.

Distribution of participants by continents reveals the dominant role of Europe with 34.06% and Asia, with 26.37%. Other continents have the percentage between 3.29%, Australia/Oceania and 18.68%, Africa.

From the participating countries only 12 succeeded in ranking positions allowing their athletes to won medals. Most medals have been won by athletes from People's Republic of China 47, 53.41%.

Distribution of medals in function of the geographic area reveals that only the athletes from Asia, 75, 85.33%, and Europe 13, 14.78%, have won medals in table tennis Olympic tournaments.

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