

# Sponsorship as a determining factor in the development of the careers of Spanish elite athletes. Inequalities by gender and type of sport.

***El patrocinio como factor condicionante en el desarrollo de las carreras de los deportistas de élite españoles. Desigualdades por género y tipo de deporte***

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ARTICLE



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RECEIVED: 2023-01-10 / ACCEPTED: 2023-02-03

## Abstract

The importance of sponsorship has increased a lot in recent years, being essential in the recognition of elite athletes. The main objective of this study is to determine the scope that sponsorship has on the athlete's success, analyzing the differences based on gender, discipline or country where the profession is practiced. Qualitative methodologies have been used (personal interviews and focus groups with elite Spanish athletes). It is concluded that obtaining a sponsor is not the same easy for all athletes, depending largely on the chosen discipline, gender, the country in which the activity takes place and previous sporting successes.

## KEYWORDS

Patrocinio; marketing; deporte; perspectiva de género; redes sociales

## Resumen

La importancia del patrocinio se ha incrementado mucho en los últimos años, resultando esencial en el reconocimiento de los deportistas de élite. El objetivo de este estudio es determinar el alcance que sobre el éxito del deportista tiene el patrocinio, precisando las diferencias en función de género, disciplina o país donde se ejerce la profesión. Se han empleado metodologías de tipo cualitativo (entrevistas personales y focus group a deportistas españoles de élite). Se concluye que obtener un patrocinador no resulta igual de sencillo para todos los deportistas, pues influye la disciplina, el género, el país o los éxitos precedentes.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Patrocinio; marketing; deporte; perspectiva de género; redes sociales

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Sponsorship has become one of the fundamental sources of financing for the best athletes in each discipline to face the competitions in which they participate. In this context, numerous sports contracts are signed in which athletes are provided with the necessary equipment to compete at the best level and sometimes financial aid is offered so that they can

continue their sports training. In any case, there is a great inequality of sponsorship among the various disciplines; likewise, the gender of the athlete influences the amount of support received from the major brands.

If we are aware of the great impact generated by sponsorship contracts in today's sport, the main objective of this research is to try to analyze the influence of a sports sponsorship contract on the development of an elite athlete's

career. This work focuses mainly on how this financing is influenced by the discipline practiced and the country where the practice takes place. It also aims to analyze the gender differences that can currently be detected and the interests of major brands in their decision to invest in a person. To this end, we will provide the vision on the sponsorship of different representatives of the country's sports scene and what it has meant throughout their sporting career in their dealings with brands.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **2.1. IMPORTANCE OF SPORTS SPONSORSHIP IN THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY OF COMPANIES**

In today's society, sport has a great sociocultural relevance, so big brands seek to be present in the most important sporting events in the world, which represent extraordinary opportunities for companies and other institutions to showcase their brands and products, or promote their image through an intense and positive association between advertiser and sport, in terms of value and experience (Ginesta-Portet and De-San-Eugenio, 2014; Keshkar *et al.*, 2019; Aragonés-Jericó *et al.*, 2020). In this sense, sports sponsorship, understood as agreements between companies and professional athletes or sporting events, is increasingly present in the strategic communication decisions of companies, since the actions carried out in this field usually offer a proven profitability at the level of notoriety, consumer acceptance, capital-image positioning and sales, as their products more easily achieve greater international recognition (Lobillo-Mora *et al.*, 2016; Bрева-Franch *et al.*, 2019; Koronios *et al.*,

2020; Lázaro-Marcé *et al.*, 2021; Koronios *et al.*, 2022).

Sports marketing has evolved significantly in recent decades, due to the widespread use of the Internet. This has created a context in which, in a simpler way than before, sports fans can show a high degree of involvement in different disciplines and competitions. On the other hand, companies manage to be constantly informed about the tastes of their customers and analyze the motivations and concerns about the people, teams or tournaments that audiences follow (Beech and Chadwick, 2007; Fondevila-Gascón, 2012; Da-Silva and Las-Casas, 2017). A scenario has thus been shaped in which sport, media, communication and marketing have been integrated so that, thanks to the use of new digital technologies, it is possible to generate more efficient sponsorship strategies, both for sports organizations and associated brands (De-Moragas-Spà, 2020; Garza-Segovia and Kennett, 2022; Cornwell, 2023). In this new framework, corporate investments in this type of sponsorship tend to have good returns, especially if the association achieved with what is sponsored provides a positive brand image. Thus, consumers increase their degree of satisfaction with the brands and products acquired due to sponsorship, also allowing an easier purchase decision, while professional athletes or sponsored sports entities capture one of the revenues that usually has a large weight in their accounts (Yousaf *et al.*, 2018; Lee and Jin, 2019; Kunkel and Biscaia, 2020).

### **2.2. DETERMINANT FACTORS IN SPORTS SPONSORSHIP AND ELECTION OF ATHLETES**

The most relevant factors for driving sports sponsorship policies among companies are customer loyalty, employee motivation, reputation and image improvement, effective com-

bination with the use of social networks, innovation, the emergence of a good opportunity, positive consumer response, corporate social responsibility and brand revaluation (Miragaia *et al.*, 2017; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Navarro-Picado, 2019; Contreras-Espinosa, 2021). Once sponsorship is implemented, companies try to recover or monetize their investment, through fan involvement and brand recognition and positive image associations generated in the long term (Smith *et al.*, 2008; Kwon and Shin, 2019; Gutiérrez-Aragón *et al.* 2021). In any case, measuring the return value of an investment in a sports sponsorship is an extremely complex task, as this return depends, to a large extent, on the positioning and prior knowledge of the brand in the market and the sustainability over time of the investments, which favor the recognition and association of the brands to specific projects, athletes or sports entities (Brewer and Pedersen, 2010; Walraven *et al.*, 2014; Abril *et al.*, 2018).

On the other hand, regarding sponsorship of individual athletes, although not all sports enjoy the same sponsorship conditions and there is an increasing effort to combat possible inequalities, the most common form of contract negotiation is carried out through agencies specializing in this field. These agencies reach reach cession agreements of certain rights of the athlete in exchange for certain services, material or, in the best cases, periodic sums of money more or less large, depending on the gender or media impact of the athlete, the discipline or the country in which he or she exercises his or her activity (Buser *et al.*, 2020; Manzenreiter, 2021; O'Connor, 2021). Sponsorship contracts signed under these parameters, in the absence of a global regulation relating to sport and its sponsors, are different in each country, depending on their respective regulations, so that situations that are legal in a given country may

not be legal in another, due to issues relating to salary or income ceilings of the teams (García and Meier, 2016; Akhmetshina *et al.*, 2017). Thus, for example, while university sport enjoys extensive funding and a large public following in Anglo-Saxon countries, these competitions in Spain bear a heavy burden of indifference from the public; this results in university sports being relegated in many cases, and their infrastructure and investment are precarious (Blanco-García and Burillo, 2018; Brunton and St Quinton, 2021). Apart from the relevant legal considerations regarding the country in which the investment will take place and the different sociocultural rules that operate there, these contracts have to take into consideration both the needs of the sponsored athlete, the events and disciplines in which he or she participates, and the communication objectives of the sponsoring company. In this way, it is avoided that low social acceptance of the sponsoring company causes the loss of the investment (Mikhailitchenko *et al.*, 2012; Montes *et al.*, 2014; Keshkar *et al.*, 2019).

The companies' selection of professional athletes to be sponsored will depend on their results and their sports image, or on the media presence of their discipline; but it will also depend on the values represented for society and their moral exposition to the community, besides the potential brand visibility in function of the products that they want to promote. (Crespo-Celda, 2020; Torres-Romay y García-Mirón, 2020). Other valuable aspects in the same sense are the phenomenon of shared experience, international relevance, and the volume of participants in the events. Thus, some variables are relegated, in many cases, like spectators' preferences and even athletes' needs (Rutter *et al.*, 2019; Wakefield *et al.*, 2020). In this field, big multinationals usually bet for sponsorship contracts with big athletes with worldwide

recognized prestige (such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Leo Messi, Rafael Nadal, Lewis Hamilton o LeBron James), able to associate the brand and the company's products with their own personal brand, mainly through their use in social networks, where they have millions of followers. (Zhou *et al.*, 2020). Another successful strategy, mainly on extreme athletes, has been to become official sponsors of those disciplines, organizing competitions and challenges, providing all the material needed by athletes (e.g., Red Bull). This is a way to reinforce, through the use in social media directed to a wide community of fans, their brand image, that ends up being directly related more with risk, as concept, than with the product itself that is promoted (Kunz *et al.*, 2016; Næss y Tickell, 2019).

### **2.3. SPORTS SPONSORSHIP AND GENDER INEQUALITY**

One of the relevant issues in the sponsorship of professional athletes lies in the fact that, despite the cultural and social evolution of recent decades, gender inequalities in terms of investment are still very significant in some countries. Although it is also true that there is an increasing number of them trying to issue regulations in this field that lead to the requirement of similar conditions, both in terms of gender and the discipline exercised (Lafrance-Horning, 2018; Moawad, 2019; Norman *et al.*, 2021; Yenilmez, 2021). In this sense, although it is also a phenomenon that affects male athletes to a lesser extent, there are many female athletes who are harmed by the reduced social scope of their disciplines, both in the purely financial aspect and in their own psychological state, especially if the sports results are not present and there is a loss of sponsorship (Keshkar *et al.*, 2019; Sait and Bogopa, 2021). In any case, although women's sport has traditionally been underrepresented in the media, in recent years

there has been a notable increase in its visibility that heralds the advent, in many countries, of a new era in terms of media coverage. This coverage will have to favour increased investment in sponsorship in the future, both for athletes and competitions (Darvin and Sagas, 2017; Petty and Pope, 2019; Billings and Gentile, 2021).

Even so, while greatly appreciating this positive evolution, it should not be forgotten that, like so many other socioeconomic fields, sport has unfortunately also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to contractual repercussions and reductions in salaries and sponsorship for many professional and semi-professional sports women. A commercial prioritization of male athletes is revealed again that favours economic precariousness of females (Bowes *et al.*, 2020; Clarkson *et al.*, 2020; Parry *et al.*, 2021). However, once it is possible to recover normality in the health area, the social background that was previously being established is encouraging, as there seems to be a great involvement of both public and private organizations, either through scholarships for the training of athletes or the promotion of professional sponsorship, as an expression of the social character of the brand. This will serve to favour and support gender equality in sport (Fernández-Morillo, 2019; Martínez-Abajo *et al.*, 2020; Sanahuja-Peris *et al.*, 2021).

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

In order to achieve the research objectives and to carry out an in-depth study of the current situation of sponsorship of Spanish elite professional athletes and its relative weight or importance in their careers, a combination of methodologies has been chosen; it is understood that, in this way, the research can achieve a greater knowledge of the subject under study (Webb *et al.* 1966; Bericat, 1998; Gutiérrez-

rez-Aragón et al., 2022). For this purpose, two qualitative techniques were used: semi-structured interviews with top athletes from different sports disciplines, and a focus group with a group of athletes who were considered relevant to the objectives of the research. The interviews were conducted between January and April 2021 and the focus group was carried out in June of the same year.

Specifically, nineteen interviews were conducted with athletes (eight men and eleven women) from different sports disciplines practiced in Spain. They were chosen for their sporting career and success and for their different experiences in terms of sports sponsorship. Depending on the personal situation of the interviewee and the specific sport he or she practiced, the interviews could vary in structure and format; the conversation was allowed to flow naturally, in order to collect reliable qualitative data. In any case, in order to shape the line of argument required by the research guidelines, each of the interviewees was asked the same eight open-ended questions, among other questions, so that they could express their feelings and opinions on the issues raised. It was considered appropriate to obtain as broad a view as possible of the current context of sponsorship, so not all the sports chosen have a high media and social visibility in the country. It was precisely because of their lesser relevance, in this sense, that they were chosen. Thus, it was

possible to analyze the real impact of sponsorship in each case (Table 1).

Since, in general, women's sports in Spain have had less social consideration, the athletes were chosen for their relevance in their sport. All of the selected cases have stood out in their disciplines in recent years; most of them have gone through high performance centres and, in many cases, have been called up to the national team on repeated occasions. Three of the athletes were chosen for the interview because they were training in the United States, which would serve as a point of comparison in terms of sponsorship with a pioneering country in this field. The interviews provided a large amount of information of interest, so, in order to analyze the information in depth, systematize the data obtained and organize the results, they are divided into three large blocks. In the first of these, a comparison is made between genders, based on the most common responses between the two. In the second block, an in-depth analysis is made of the responses offered by women grouped according to four variables of interest: the world of motorsports, the Spanish national team, their stay in the United States and minority sports. Finally, the same was done with the men's responses, grouping them into four sections: major disciplines, retired athletes, Spanish national team and minority sports.

**Table 1***Interviewed athletes and sports*

Athlete	Sport	Relevance for the research
Marta García	Car racing	Women in an eminently masculine sport
Emma Reyes	Rhythmic gymnastics	Minority sport. Spanish national team
Marina Bassols	Tennis	Gender gap with respect to male tennis
Laura Ester Ramos	Water polo	World champion (Spanish national team)
Agustina Talasimov	Basketball	Works in the U.S.
Anna Grima	Volleyball	Minority sport
Júlia Gutiérrez	Volleyball	Part of his career in the U.S.
Ester Ribera	Beach volleyball	Has competed in the world circuit
Melanie Serrano	Football	Gender gap in men's football
Laia Muñoz	Football	Works in the USA
Berta Abellán	Trials	Women in a predominantly male sport
Rubén Gracia "Cani"	Football	Professional career in elite teams
Pau Martínez	Football	Athlete at the beginning of her career
Miki Juanola	Football	Athlete at the beginning of her career
Jaime Fernández	Basketball	Athlete at the beginning of her career
Ignacio Alabart	Roller hockey	Minority sport
Cristian Portelli	Surfing	Minority sport
Guillermo Fayed	Alpine skiing	He competes with the French national ski team
Àngel Mullera	Athletics	European medallist (Spanish national team)

*Source: own elaboration*

It was considered appropriate to complement the study with a focus group of five athletes from different disciplines, which would allow, on the one hand, to resolve certain doubts that were not resolved in the interview phase, and, on the other hand, to reveal other significant factors on the subject of the research that could be of interest to the study. All participants have a long experience in their field of sport and with current sponsors and were chosen for certain characteristics that were relevant to the

study (table 2). As a starting point, they were presented with a questionnaire similar to the interview questionnaire, in order to generate a discussion among them and to get their opinion on the questions raised in the study.

**Table 2***Composition of the Focus group*

Athlete and sport	Motivación para su participación
Agustina Talasimov (Basketball)	Extensive experience with sponsorship in the USA (her institution informs about changes every season).
Berta Abellán (Trials)	Breaks gender stereotypes in the sport (the number of female pilots is quite small).
Miki Juanola (Football)	He is the youngest home-grown athlete to participate in the study. His place of training is key in terms of his sponsorship.
Cristian Portelli (Surfing)	Extensive experience in sponsorship from an early age, despite being part of a very minority discipline in Spain.
Guillermo Fayed (Alpine skiing)	By competing for the French national team, he can bring a different vision to the table.

*Fuente: elaboración propia*

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

In order to detect differences in sponsorship models between disciplines and genders and to be able to contrast them with each other, five football players (trained in some of the best quarries in Spain), two basketball players and three volleyball players with a wide national background were interviewed, as well as high-level representatives of sports with a lesser social following such as rhythmic gymnastics, trial, motor racing, surfing, tennis, alpine skiing, athletics, water polo and hockey. The interviews conducted with the sportsmen and sportswomen, within the flexibility allowed by the semi-structured modality, made it possible to gather reliable information on the subject analyzed, obtained from conversations carried

out within the naturalness allowed by a process of this type. In this sense, when designing the research, it was considered appropriate to maintain a minimum set of questions of major relevance to the study, which were asked to all the people interviewed. Six of the results obtained from these questions have been processed, categorized and tabulated according to gender, in order to achieve a quantitative treatment that facilitates a better interpretation of the results (table 3).

Thus, a first approximation of the data obtained in the interviews shows that 87.50% of the men interviewed, whether active or not, had sponsorship contracts during the study, in contrast to 63.64% of the women. In the case of the male athletes, the only one who did not have a valid contract was the athlete Àngel Mullera, who received support from his own local council; therefore, when he stopped competing, his contract was terminated. The also retired Guillermo Fayed (third in the world in downhill alpine skiing) and Rubén Gracia “Cani” (who played for several Spanish football teams) still have a contract with the brands that offer them clothing and equipment, even though they are no longer active. Young footballers Miki and Pau enjoy individual sponsorship contracts with Puma and Adidas, respectively; these contracts, in addition to funding, provide them with all the necessary competition material and other clothing throughout the season. As for women, those who are still competing today and are at the top of their sport have contracts with brands that help them to continue their sporting commitments by providing them with equipment. In contrast to men, sportswomen who are no longer competing or whose performance has deteriorated have automatically had their contracts terminated.

The male sportsmen interviewed whose discipline is a mass sport (football and basketball)

**Table 3***Summary of questionnaire interviews on sponsorship*

		MEN	WOMEN	TOTAL
Do you currently have a sponsorship contract?	YES	87,50%	63,64%	73,68%
	NO	12,50%	36,36%	26,32%
Were you at the top of your sport when you started your sponsorship contract?	YES	50,00%	72,73%	63,16%
	NO	50,00%	27,27%	36,84%
Is sponsorship a key factor in your career?	YES	50,00%	100,00%	78,95%
	NO	50,00%	-	21,05%
Do you think that the conditions of sponsorship are similar regardless of the gender of the athlete?	YES	37,50%	45,45%	42,11%
	NO	62,50%	54,55%	57,89%
Do you think there are differences in sponsorship conditions between disciplines?	YES	100,00%	72,73%	84,21%
	NO	-	27,27%	15,79%
Do you think that there are differences in the conditions of sponsorship in the United States compared to Spain? (*)	YES	-	100,00%	100,00%
	NO	-	0,00%	0,00%

(\*) This question was only asked to sports women pursuing their professional careers in the United States.

Source: own elaboration

state that their contracts with sports brands started when they were still in the lower categories of their club. The situation is very different for the other four athletes from minority disciplines, as it was much more complicated to get a sponsor, as they had to win national titles. On the other hand, all the women interviewed who are currently practicing their profession in Spain admit that they had to be the best in their disciplines and win several titles in order for a sponsor to be interested in them. The case of the Spanish sports women currently competing in the United States is different, as they enjoy a sponsorship contract just for the fact of being part of their university team and competing at a good level.

Overall, 78.75% of the sportsmen and women interviewed believe that sports sponsorship is vital for their development and training. However, while only half of the men considered this requirement to be essential, all the women agreed that, at present, without a sponsoring brand, they would not be able to continue their professional careers in their disciplines. The four men who signed sponsorship contracts when they were in lower categories (majority sports) do not attach too much importance to this type of sponsorship, as they see it as an extra in their career and could develop their career without it. However, since they have this economic boost and since this incentive is good, they take advantage of it. The four men who belong to minority sports disciplines argue that, for them, sports sponsorship is very important, as the equipment they use on a daily basis is very expensive. They also point out that reaching the elite requires a lot of effort and sacrifice, so getting sponsors increases their motivation to keep fighting for more titles and not lose them.

The results of the study found that 57.89% of the respondents felt that sponsorship conditions are not equal depending on the gender of the athlete. The three sportswomen belonging to American universities point out that in this type of sport, a woman and a man receive the same conditions for sports sponsorship within their institution, as there are regulatory norms that oblige both to receive the same budget and the same facilities. Ester Ribera (beach volleyball) and Marina Bassols (tennis), despite competing in Spain, point out that in their disciplines there is not too much difference in sponsorship in terms of gender. However, for the five members of more minority sports, the sponsorship situation is quite complex, partly due to the fact that the visibility and influence of women's sport in these disciplines is practically non-existent. Thus, although sponsorship has increased in recent years, they feel that it is still far from what is offered to men, and their conditions are much more demanding. Among the men interviewed, Rubén Gracia "*Cani*" was the only one who acknowledged that women receive worse sponsorship conditions. Athletes from minority disciplines perceived that, in their sports, women are on an equal footing with men, arguing that they enjoy similar visibility, as the championships are held at the same venue and on the same day for both, so the impact should be the same. When taking into consideration the great contrast of perspectives on the visualization of this issue by the different interviewees, it is especially relevant to see how this situation is perceived by the youngest athletes: Miki, Pau and Jaime (football and basketball). Although they have had sponsors since their youth career, they claim to be totally unaware of the differences between genders in sports sponsorship contracts. Ignacio Alabart (roller hockey) also shared this opinion.

On the other hand, 84.21% of the interviewed sportsmen and sportswomen appreciate the existence of different sponsorship conditions between the various disciplines. In general, it is evident that there is a great deal of inequality in sponsorship between mainstream and minority sports, as many disciplines receive a tiny amount of money and material compared to what is received in mass sports such as football. The footballers interviewed are aware of the advantages of their sport in this respect, although they warn that the main cause is that much more money is involved and much more profit is generated. The three sportswomen who compete in the United States explain that there is more equality between the different disciplines there, even though not all sports have the same sponsorship budget. This is because the law does not allow individual sponsorships, so the best brands sponsor the whole institution so that the best athletes in each discipline promote their products. Finally, many of the participants in the study note that the widespread use of social media as a communication tool may be a major driver of sponsorship contracts in less socially embedded sports. This encourages a levelling of sponsorship conditions between disciplines.

## 4.2. FOCUS GROUP

The second phase of the research consisted of a focus group of five athletes from different disciplines, with the aim of providing feedback on the information obtained in the interviews and conducting a debate based on the arguments and opinions that emerged (table 4). The main objective of using this qualitative analysis tool was to obtain information on the generic particularities of individual sports sponsorship in Spain. The responses, statements or revelations that appeared most frequently in the focus group confirmed, among other things, the

**Table 4***Summary table Focus group. Most frequent response*

	Most frequent response	Other high frequency responses
What does your contract mainly consist of?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Receive appropriate sports clothing for competition each season.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participate in brand events</li> </ul>
What obligations or conditions does your sponsorship contract entail?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote the material received in social networks and competitions and do not use material from competitors.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Occasionally it may be possible to negotiate with another brand for a particular material.</li> <li>Failure to comply automatically voids the contract.</li> </ul>
How often do you receive material?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In general, athletes are provided with equipment whenever they need it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The brand supplies the material and sends it out whenever there are new items.</li> <li>In the official shop, you could always get what you wanted (competition clothing on a monthly basis).</li> </ul>
Do you think it is important for your career to be sponsored?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is no doubt about it. It is essential</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Majority disciplines: it is an extra in the career and contributes to the image.</li> <li>Minority disciplines: without sponsorship it is not possible to survive as an athlete.</li> </ul>
Are there substantial differences in sponsorship between the United States and Spain?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There is a huge difference. In the United States there is much more investment in sport (it is more professionalized).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>University sport is considered professional</li> <li>Just by being part of a university team you get sponsorship.</li> </ul>
Are there significant gender differences in sponsorship?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In most cases, women do not enjoy the same opportunities as men.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>There are differences depending on the discipline and the country.</li> <li>It is more equal in minority sports</li> </ul>

*Source: Own elaboration*

need for sponsorship for athletes, the importance of receiving sports clothing and equipment in order to compete in certain disciplines, the existence of significant inequalities in sponsorship based on gender, and the differences between the United States and Spain in sponsorship at the university level.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The main objective of this article was to find out and analyze the influence that a sports sponsorship contract has on the career of an elite athlete, as well as to discern the existence of possible differences or inequalities depending on the athlete's gender, the discipline he/she practices and the country where he/she practices his/her profession. For this purpose,

a methodological triangulation has been practiced, carrying out two different types of qualitative analysis. This was done in order to achieve a more complete vision of the subject matter of the research (Webb *et al.*, 1966; Bericat, 1998; Gutiérrez-Aragón *et al.*, 2022).

The results of this study show that, currently, thanks to technological advances, the evolution of companies' marketing strategies and the widespread use of social networks as a means of communication, brands can make their products known globally, which is why there is great interest in sponsoring professional players and sporting events. This is a practice that usually offers a proven return in terms of notoriety, influence on fans, image and sales (Miragaia *et al.*, 2017; Brevia-Franch *et al.*, 2019; Kim *et al.*, 2019; Navarro-Picado, 2019; Koronios *et al.*, 2020; Zhou *et al.*, 2020; Contreras-Espinosa, 2021). For companies, it is particularly important, in this sense, to carry out a study of various factors related to the athlete or event to be sponsored that may end up influencing their choice. Thus, depending on the different regulations and socio-cultural aspects that may affect public acceptance in each country, it will be possible to choose those sponsorship investments that can achieve the expected return (Mikhailitchenko *et al.*, 2012; Montes *et al.*, 2014; Keshkar *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly common for a company to sponsor or organize events, providing the necessary materials to the athletes. This helps to reinforce the brand image, so that it relates to the competition itself and not to the products it offers (Kunz *et al.*, 2016; Næss and Tickell, 2019).

There are many types of individual sport sponsorship contracts, although in most cases they involve an agreement to cede the ath-

lete's rights in exchange for services, materials or money, which will be of greater or lesser amount or importance depending on gender, discipline or country (Garcia and Meier, 2016; Akhmetshina *et al.*, 2017; Buser *et al.*, 2020; Manzenreiter, 2021; O'Connor, 2021). A large body of previous academic work, as well as the results obtained in this research, point to the fact that gender inequalities in sponsorship are generally contrastable. It is estimated that, more often than not, women do not enjoy the same opportunities or facilities in finding a company to sponsor them, nor the same conditions as their male counterparts when sponsorship is finally achieved (Lafrance-Horning, 2018; Moawad, 2019; Norman *et al.*, 2021; Yenilmez, 2021).

Another factor that undoubtedly causes inequality in the formats and amounts of sponsorship is the discipline practiced by each athlete, as companies are not as willing to invest in sponsorship in mass sports as they are in those that are minorities in terms of their following. This is because the financial return on the investment made, in terms of communication, will largely depend on the media presence of the discipline (Rutter *et al.*, 2019; Torres-Romay and García-Mirón, 2020; Wakefield *et al.*, 2020). On the other hand, although there are many factors that influence the performance of athletes, one of the most relevant is the pressure to achieve sporting titles and not lose their sponsorships, since, without these, in minority sports, it is very difficult to continue with a professional career (Keshkar *et al.*, 2019; Sait and Bogopa, 2021).

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Obtaining sponsorship is not equally easy for all athletes, as this is influenced by a number of variables. For example, all the female athletes in the study who were no longer in the elite of their sport lost the sponsorship of the brands that sponsored them; the brands stopped providing them with equipment, even though the athletes continued to compete. On the other hand, the men who were no longer active continued to keep their contracts in force. Also, among the athletes participating in the study, those involved in mass sports had received sports sponsorship before reaching the elite, while those in disciplines with a lesser social following found it much more difficult. In most of the cases, they had to contribute with sporting achievements first, before receiving funding. Moreover, all of the women interviewed noted that, in their sports training, it is essential to receive financial support, whether from private entities or public subsidies. The three Spanish sportswomen who belong to university teams in the United States recognised that sport there is much more professionalized and that there is greater regulatory control of sports contracts, in order to guarantee greater equality in terms of sponsorship among the members of the teams that participate in competitions, both by gender and between disciplines.

In short, athlete sponsorship as a marketing and communication technique and an element of potential commercial persuasion has been gradually gaining presence in different disciplines over the last few decades, through outstanding sportsmen and women. For many

of them, sponsorship is an essential source of funding for the development of their professional careers; without this type of support, in many cases, they would have to give up sport. However, inequalities are quite marked in terms of access to relevant contracts, so obtaining sponsorship with sufficient guarantees will depend on the sporting discipline, gender, the country in which the activity is being carried out and the sporting successes that have been achieved beforehand.

In carrying out this study, limitations have been encountered which, logically, derive from the willingness to collaborate in the research on the part of the sportsmen and women who were proposed, some of whom declined to participate. On the other hand, the fact that one of the researchers is a professional sportsperson also meant that many interviews could be carried out in conditions of cordiality and complicity, which made it possible to obtain data that might not otherwise have been possible. Thus, the study has tried to contribute to clarifying, to a certain extent, many of the unknowns raised by the subject analyzed, although, logically, at the same time, it has also generated new questions that open up future lines of research and work. These lines of research could be of interest to both sport and communication professionals and academic researchers. Among these lines of study are the analysis of the salary and socio-labour gap between the men's and women's sections of top-level clubs (mainly football and basketball), and between mass and minority sports.

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