

“YOU DON’T HAVE A LEG? DON’T WORRY, YOU CAN STILL BE A STAR!”

MEDIA IMAGE OF CYCLIST JIŘÍ JEŽEK

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ABSTRACT:

The article provides a theoretical and analytical insight into the framework of celebritization in sports; it mainly deals with the world of athletes with physical disabilities. The authors focus on the media image of Jiří Ježek, the most successful cyclist in the history of Paralympic Games, created by Czech public television, Česká televize, and Czech private television, TV Nova. The content analyses of their main sports broadcasts (TV sports news) were the most important research item. The quantitative research (how often he has been presented by TV stations in question during the last fourteen years) was followed by the qualitative research methods (how they have presented him and his story). The authors also contacted the companies to find out why they chose him as a figure to present themselves. Using the research findings as well as other sources of information, the article presents the media image of Jiří Ježek and outlines in detail the process of celebritization of an athlete with a disability who has become really famous, a real star.

KEY WORDS:

athletes with physical disabilities, celebritization, cycling, Jiří Ježek, media, paralympic games, paralympic sport, sport

1 Introduction: Man without a Leg

It is nothing new in the world of sports that certain athletes tend to become celebrities – usually at national, international or even global level. Their status is caused by endless popularity of sport; although each country prefers another, e.g. football (soccer), cricket, hockey, tennis or volleyball. *“Athletes are perfect celebrities. We know almost too much about them, most notably what they look like in extremes: dirty, sweaty, teary, demoralized, undressed, furious, joyous, unguarded, unconscious, and otherwise injured.”*¹ Athletes with dis-

¹ MILLER, T.: Exposing Celebrity Sports. In WENNER, L. A. (ed.): *Fallen Sports Heroes, Media, & Celebrity Culture*. New York, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013, p. 18.



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abilities can be celebrities too, despite facing more obstacles. They definitely have to overcome their physical impairment. However, the main difference here is less media interest paid to athletes with disabilities, which is proven by the statistics of the corresponding sports events – Olympic Games and Paralympic Games. However, the athletes with disabilities can be stars and we try to prove it using the case of the Czech cyclist Jiří Ježek.

Media coverage represents a really important, even key element of the process of celebrityization. The term ‘celebrity’ comes originally from the Latin word *celebritas* and it means glory. Celebrity is a person who is “renowned in the world or respectable personality in their field”.² The word ‘renowned’ seems to be really important since neither success nor victory are enough to make a person famous. As Daniel J. Boorstin said: “Only media can create the celebrity.”³ Therefore, the role of mass media in the process of celebrityization is irreplaceable.⁴

Jiří Ježek has achieved a great success in sport. Living without right leg that he lost in a car accident in 1985, he has become the most successful cyclist in the history of the Paralympic Games; to be more specific, he is a six-time Paralympic champion. He also competed in the most famous cycling race in the world (Tour de France) as an opening rider. He deserves a lot of respect for his sport performance and strong will, but it is not still the reason to call him a celebrity. As Boorstin pointed out – from 1900 we seem to have discovered more processes by which fame is manufactured than in the century before.⁵

The centuries before also created heroes, for example during wars. The term ‘hero’ acknowledges bravery, courage, or power. “The hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media.”⁶

It is not surprising that the term hero appears very frequently in the language of media, especially in the sports reporting, which can be described as an emotional kind of communication. James Watson and Anne Hill also talk about celebrity as a modern version of an old hero.⁷ James Monaco divided celebrities in his book *Celebrity: The Media as Image Maker into three categories. He distinguishes between heroes, stars and “quasar”. The first one, hero, is a famous person who has done something special and only after that has become known. The second one is a star (because of simply being who he/she is). The third category is called “quasar”. These people are celebrities because we think they are and they fascinate us.*⁸

For “quasar” it is important to find an audience and sport, generally, has it. Sport is a regular and successful part of TV or radio broadcasting, newspapers and magazines, and its popularity still grows along with the increasing popularity of the Internet, which is able to present the sport results and also emotions faster. Sekot says that sport has become an integral part of the entertainment industry, and his high-profile figures have become stars and celebrities.⁹

This thesis is valid not only for the world of sport, but also for the athletes with a disability and perhaps for them even more than for athletes without a disability. As Boorstin points out: “[...] there never was a time when ‘fame’ was precisely the same thing as ‘greatness’.”¹⁰ The performance of athletes with a disability, sometimes augmented by their will to contest with sportsmen without a handicap, can make them great. We can mention the story of the runner Oscar Pistorius (before the incident when he killed his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp while it is not clear whether he did so deliberately or accidentally) or his compatriot swimmer Natalie de Toit, who both have become the examples or symbols of strong will. “If sports and the sports media do play this important expressive role in our culture – revealing those features of our lives that are heroic and deserving of our highest esteem – then such acts of athletic heroism must necessarily operate close to edge of what we regard as morally and aesthetically praiseworthy.”¹¹

2 Methodology

To answer our key question “Is Jiří Ježek a celebrity?” we analysed the main sports news programmes of two main Czech TV stations: the public television Česká televize and commercial broadcaster TV Nova, which is the most watched TV station in the Czech Republic. We conducted the research from February to May 2015.

We focused on the main sports news programmes of the given TV stations that were broadcast between 2000 and 2014 (in 2000, Jiří Ježek won the first gold medal at the Paralympic Games) and we applied quantitative and qualitative content analyses¹² to answer the following research questions:

- How often do they report about Jiří Ježek?
- Is there any difference between ‘Paralympic years’ and the others?
- Which information do they underline: his results from big sports events, his private life, or other activities?
- Did they repeat his story (how he had lost his leg) or did it become known?

Both analyses were followed by two qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews¹³ with editors of both TV stations. We tried to find also the reasons why these two TV stations have broadcasted the reports related to Ježek: Was it about his life story, his sports results, his success, or his private life? “Athletes become celebrities when their social and private lives grow more important than their professional qualities. They represent the times more generally because they provide stereotypes of success, power and beauty.”¹⁴

The content of the analysed sport reports and the changes in their topics can prove that the image of Ježek has gone through a significant transformation during these fourteen years. Němcová Tejkalová explains in her book *The other athletes. Media Stereotyping and Framing Athletes with Disabilities in the Press in the Years 1948 – 2008* how and why the media inform more often about athletes with physical disabilities. “The framing of subordination and otherness contribute to two categories – softnewsness and protectionism. In published reports, there are not many results and information is often published late. It puts emphasis on curiosities instead of sports performance, which in this context we understand as stories about disability and celebrityization combined with the removal of handicap. Protectionism takes the form of criticism of the social situation of people with disabilities. People admire athletes with disabilities but also they pity them. [...]”¹⁵

To make Jiří Ježek’s media image more comprehensive, we also look at his – media or social – activities including his participation in TV shows or talk shows, two published autobiographies written by himself as co-author, his seminars in schools or business companies where he talks about his life, about the power of will and about the motivation to overcome obstacles. We found also all companies, which chose Jiří Ježek for their advertising campaigns, because professional sport is currently driven by profit and advertising.¹⁶ Companies choose successful athletes in hope of achieving a positive effect (they are trying to connect own products with faces and personalities of famous athletes to promote their brands). It is the same for both parts of these business alliances: from the economic point of view, the sponsorship of big events is never a charitable donation. A simple relationship: ‘services – services in return’ are considered the economic point of the main principle of sponsorship.¹⁷

The importance of companies, which choose to cooperate with Jiří Ježek, or their number during the analysed time period can demonstrate a great deal of interest in his person. “Sponsorship of individual athletes is almost exclusively the domain of professional sport. Personality of the sportsman is a guarantee

2 KLIMEŠ, L.: *Slovník cizích slov*. Praha: Státní pedagogické nakladatelství, 1981, p. 75.

3 BOORSTIN, D. J.: *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992, p. 61.

4 HORNE, J., TOMLINSON, A., WHANNEL, G.: *Understanding Sport: An Introduction to the Sociological and Cultural Analysis of Sport*. London: Spon Press, 1999, p. 163.

5 BOORSTIN, D. J.: *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992, p. 47.

6 BOORSTIN, D. J.: *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992, p. 61.

7 WATSON, J., HILL, A.: *Dictionary of Media and Communication Studies*. London: Arnold, 2000, p. 37.

8 MONACO, J.: *Celebrity: The Media as Image Makers*. New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1978, p. 10.

9 SEKOT, A.: *Sociologické problémy sportu*. Praha: Grada, 2008, p. 175.

10 BOORSTIN, D. J.: *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992, p. 46.

11 MORGAN, W. J.: Athletic Heroic Acts and Living on the Moral Edge. In WENNER, L. A. (ed.): *Fallen Sports Heroes, Media, & Celebrity Culture*. New York, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013, p. 31.

12 TRAMPOTA, T., VOJTĚCHOVSKÁ, M.: *Metody výzkumu médií*. Praha: Portál, 2010, p. 100.

13 TRAMPOTA, T., VOJTĚCHOVSKÁ, M.: *Metody výzkumu médií*. Praha: Portál, 2010, p. 271.

14 MILLER, T.: Exposing Celebrity Sports. In WENNER, L. A. (ed.): *Fallen Sports Heroes, Media, & Celebrity Culture*. New York, Washington D.C., Baltimore, Bern, Frankfurt, Berlin, Brussels, Vienna, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013, p. 21.

15 NĚMCOVÁ TEJKALOVÁ, A.: *Ti druzi sportovci. Mediální stereotypizace a rámcování handicapovaných v tisku v letech 1948 – 2008*. Praha: Karolinum, 2012, p. 150.

16 FREY, J. H., EITZEN, D. S.: *Sport and Society*. In Annual Review of Sociology, 1991, Vol. 17, p. 507-508. [online]. [2015-09-22]. Available at: <<http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~rosenl/sports%20Folder/Sport%20and%20Society.pdf>>.

17 SEKOT, A.: *Sociologie sportu*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2006, p. 230.

of quality and success associated with the product or manufacturer. Athletes often support products that they cannot use because of the nature of things.¹⁸ Another two standardised interviews were done to explain the reasons why those companies choose him and which values does he symbolize for them.

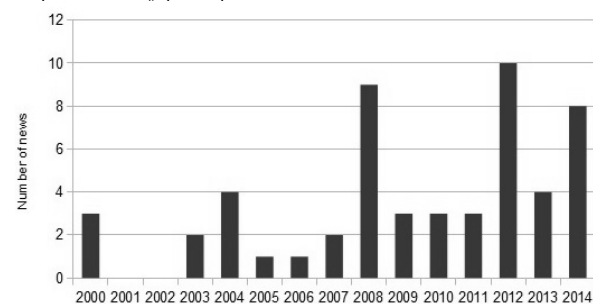
3 Story Outshined by Success

Česká televize broadcasted 53 reports about Jiří Ježek in the period from 2000 to 2014. Most of them were aired during the ‘Paralympic years’: 2000, 2004, 2008 and 2012. In these four years, the trend is quite recognisable. There were more and more reports about him that prove his success. The highest number (10) comes from the Paralympic Games in London in 2012, where he won the time trial and was second in 4 km pursuit. This gold Paralympic medal, sixth in his rich career, makes him the most successful cyclist in the Paralympic history. His performance in London was covered live by one reporter and one cameraman from Česká televize.

Miroslav Langer, editor of the main sports news programme broadcast by Česká televize, explains why they have informed about Jiří Ježek. “If you ask me why we broadcast the reports about athletes with disabilities, these are the same reasons as in case of sportsmen without any handicap – it depends on their performance or their results. We behave more like public TV¹⁹ in case of athletes with disabilities.”²⁰ Moreover, Jiří Ježek has assumed a rather special position. “First, his success is really great. Second, we can see him competing side by side with athletes without disabilities. He has good ideas and many other activities. No one among the physically disabled sportsmen is like him.”²¹

Another high number of reports about him appear in 2014. It was not a Paralympic year but Jiří Ježek had an accident at the World Championship, was seriously injured and had to spend time in the hospital. Eight reports of Česká televize indicate continuous, even non-stop reporting on this accident and its aftermath during more than one week. Česká televize also informed about his social activities: for example when he opened the new playground for children in Motol hospital in Prague.

Graph 1: Number of sports reports related to Jiří Ježek, Česká televize

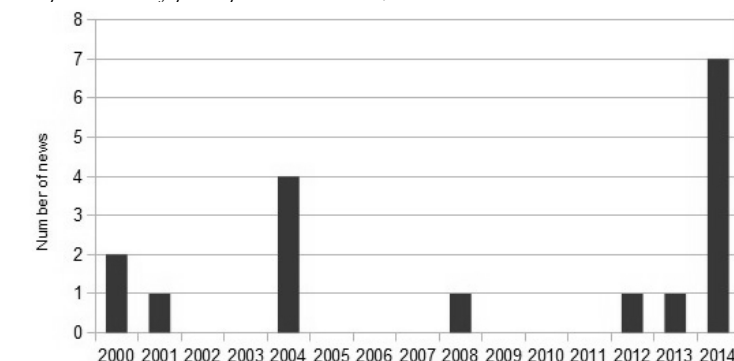


Source: own processing, 2015

In case of the public TV (Česká televize), we can see continual growth of news reporting in two categories (stronger during Paralympic years, weaker in the meantime); the private TV station (TV Nova) has two big peaks – the first in 2004 during Paralympic Games in Athens, then in 2014 when Jiří Ježek was seriously injured.

The style of sports reporting in TV Nova is different than in Česká televize. As a private television, Nova prefers ‘stronger’ and emotional stories, which corresponds more with the definition of Tejkalová (emphasis placed on curiosities instead of sports performance, less results).²² But it is important to say that there was always at least one report during the Paralympic years and the ‘record’ number in 2014 is not only associated with his serious injury but also with him personally. “Media have informed about Jiří Ježek for a long time, perhaps for ten or fifteen years. Ježek won gold Paralympic medals in Sydney, Athens, Beijing, and in London and I suppose that every big and well informed sports supporter in the Czech Republic knows him,”²³ said Petr Plintovič, editor of the main sports news programme in Nova and explained that the high number of reports was related to both Ježek’s serious injury and his status of celebrity: “Jiří Ježek is a sports celebrity for sure!”²⁴

Graph 2: Number of sports reports about Jiří Ježek, TV Nova



Source: own processing, 2015

His statement is supported by the content analysis. The TV Nova’s reports about Jiří Ježek have changed during the years same as the news in Česká televize. Both TV stations repeated the story about how he lost his leg during childhood only in the first years of this period. In the next years, however, Jiří Ježek was no more the man without leg; he became a successful man. News reports from the last years, especially those from 2014, did not mention his handicap anymore or did so only exceptionally. According to both editors, it was not necessary. “His story is already well known,”²⁵ said Langer. “And it is outshined by his success,”²⁶ added Plintovič.

4 Symbol of Character and Moral Values

Jiří Ježek is not only an athlete with a disability and a well-known face from TV. He is also a ‘face’ of many commercial companies supporting him. The number of sponsors and cooperating companies has increased after his success. In 1997, when Jiří Ježek began cycling, he had only two sponsors.

As a result of success at Paralympic Games in Athens in 2004, he became a professional cyclist and the number of sponsors increased to 19. After the Paralympic Games in London (2012) he became the most successful cyclist in the history of the Paralympic Games (as we have mentioned, he is a six-time Paralympic champion), interested sponsors have been accumulating and he had 23 sponsors in 2014. Duratec (Czech manufacturer of hand-made bicycles), DAS (legal protection insurance), Nutrend (sports nutrition and fluid intake), Otto Bock (world leader in the prosthetic technologies) belong to the most significant ones. We tried to find out why those companies wanted to cooperate with him. The main reason is not related to his success,

18 SEKOT, A.: *Sociologie sportu*. Brno : Masarykova univerzita, 2006, p. 231.

19 The status of public TV in the Czech Republic is established and defined by the appropriate laws, which – besides taking into consideration other function of public TV – order to cover minority topics.

20 Interview with Miroslav Langer, the editor of the main sports news programme in the Czech television. In Prague, on 18th May 2015.

21 Interview with Miroslav Langer, the editor of the sports main news session in Czech television. In Prague, on 18th May 2015.

22 NĚMCOVÁ TEJKALOVÁ, A.: *Ti druzí sportovci. Mediální stereotypizace a rámcování handicapovaných v tisku v letech 1948 – 2008*. Praha : Karolinum, 2012, p. 150.

23 Interview with Petr Plintovič, the editor of the main sports news programme in TV Nova. In Prague, on 19th May 2015.

24 Interview with Petr Plintovič, the editor of the main sports news programme in TV Nova. In Prague, on 19th May 2015.

25 Interview with Miroslav Langer, editor of the main sports news programme in the Czech television. In Prague, on 19th May 2015.

26 Interview with Petr Plintovič, editor of the main sports news programme in TV Nova. In Prague, on 19th May 2015.

but rather to his life story – the story about strong will, about a man who did not give up and goes on despite all the obstacles. The most important reason for achieving media interest and media coverage is the strong story. You cannot become famous without embodying a strong story.²⁷

Kateřina Duchková, the director of Duratec, said about Jiří Ježek: “*He is a man with a big charisma, whose mission is to motivate and make the rest of us happy. For his unprecedented character and moral values, he is a sports celebrity and sports hero.*”²⁸ Another director of a big company (DAS), Jitka Chizzola, added: “*I appreciate his sincerity and strong will. He never gives up. He shows us that despite all obstacles a man can reach a big success. There are not many athletes like him; he is really a good guy.*”²⁹

The popularity of Jiří Ježek exceeds the world of sport. He started to appear at social events outside of the sports industry, e.g. in various entertainment programmes and TV talk shows. He was nominated for the Man of the Year award in Czech Esquire magazine in 2014. You can find him also in some calendars and other objects of daily use. He co-wrote an autobiographic book and prepares also special motivational seminars.

Conclusion: Is Jiří Ježek a Celebrity or Not?

Celebrity studies are still an up-to-date topic. In the Czech Republic, however, these issues are not addressed frequently, especially in the case of athletes with disability.³⁰ Therefore we wanted to analyse the main sports news broadcasting of major Czech televisions Česká televize and TV Nova and discuss the personality and perhaps even celebrity status of the most famous Czech athlete with a physical disability.

There is no doubt that Jiří Ježek (with his six gold medals from Paralympic Games) is an exceptionally successful athlete. However, according to the above-mentioned theoretical outlines, the media and strong story are the key factors in the process of celebritization.

The story of sportsman Ježek demonstrates that disability does not necessarily have to be an obstacle for becoming a national or even global celebrity. Our article also analyses media coverage of his sport performance in the world’s most famous cycling race – Tour de France. His overwhelming success – alongside with the gold medals that he won – has multiplied his popularity.

The quantitative research was followed by the qualitative research methods. We conducted interviews with sports editors of both television stations, and then talked with directors of companies that have chosen Jiří Ježek as a figure who helps present them and their products publicly.

Česká televize did not ignore him in the main sports broadcasts and the number of reports gradually increased; their content changed concurrently. They tend to inform about his results but his social activities or his serious injury are mentioned as well. On the other hand, the information about his handicap has disappeared progressively. According to the statement of the sports news editor of Česká televize, emphasising this disability is not necessary anymore. The number of reports about Jiří Ježek had an increasing trend in the reporting period from 2000 to 2014; the same approach is applied by the private TV station Nova (but the style of reporting is different, less sports results, more human interest stories).

Popularity of Jiří Ježek is manifested also by the interest of big companies that have chosen him for their advertising campaigns (the number of sponsors increased from 2 to 23 during fourteen years). The big car company Škoda (sponsor of Tour de France, the most popular cycling race in the world) allowed him to attend this race as an opening rider. He thus became the first athlete with a disability who participated in Tour the France.

Let us repeat the most important facts – Jiří Ježek has appeared in several entertainment programmes and talk shows. He was nominated for the Man of the Year Prize in Czech Esquire magazine in 2014. He is also the co-author of two autobiographical books and his life story and personality are as interesting as his cycling career. All these facts make a real basis for the claim that he is indeed a celebrity.

27 BRAUDY, L.: *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*. New York : Vintage, 1997, p. 592.

28 Interview with Kateřina Duchková, the director of Duratec. In Prague, on 22nd May 2015.

29 Interview with Jitka Chizzola, the director of DAS. In Prague, on 26th May 2015.

30 Jan Děkanovský is one of the most renowned academics dealing with celebrity studies in the Czech Republic.

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