

# BOOM OF ROAD RACES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC - SPORT FOR ALL OR LUXURY AMUSEMENT?

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## ABSTRACT

Nowadays, similar to worldwide trends, running has become very popular in the Czech Republic. Since the mid of 1990s, the business sector has become very active in this area. Private companies organise many road races for the public, including participation of top level runners (i.e. Prague International Marathon). In 2016, within the framework of the international project IRNIST, we realised an empirical descriptive study of the Mattoni ½ Marathon in Ústí nad Labem, a middle size town. The IRNIST questionnaire was used. Analysing data on 491 runners (of 2,238 runners finished the race) we found that concerning socio-economic status of respondents, 56.9% of runners have a university education, one third advanced secondary education; and 63% earn more than the average wage. Participant were able to spend quite a lot of money for participation costs. These results raise the issue if the privatization and commercialization of running for the masses does not cause limit for sport participation for all.

**Keywords:** IRNIST; half-marathon; sport participation; socio-economic status

## Introduction

The biggest global trend in mass sport events with competitions for public concerns running. Running is no longer a competitive athletic discipline tied to traditional sports facilities and clubs. In the 1960's and 1970's various sports and physical activities started to be promoted and presented to the public as a means to prevent civilisation diseases. Running gained popularity as a physical activity that did not require special equipment or skills or space. Thanks to K. H. Cooper's research, running or jogging has been used as an aerobic activity suitable to improve the health and fitness of "modern" people. This has been helped by an "informalisation" process where people became less and less embarrassed to engage in sports in public outside of sports clubs. This (r)evolution has been greatly beneficial for running and launched the first wave of longer running events and, most importantly, marathons (Scheerder et al., 2015).

The global running boom reached former Czechoslovakia, too. But this trend is also based on the rich Czech tradition of running and running competitions which started more than one century ago. We may take the example of the Běchovice run (Bečvář, 2011), which was first held in 1897 (a 10-km route starting in a small town outside of Prague and terminating in the capital city). Much later, amateur running was popularised as part of physical training programmes for the general public as well as a growing number of open running events attended by members of sport clubs and amateur runners

alike. The Czech Republic has become one of the world's running superpowers in terms of mass events. In Prague, the first marathon was held in 1963 and there was an even earlier marathon event in the city of Ostrava in the region of North Moravia. Brochures for amateur runners, published by Sportpropag, the enterprise of the former unified sport organization (Czechoslovak Sport Union) provided advice how to perform various sport activities including running with the aim to improve physical fitness and health of sporting people.

According to the study of Scheerder et al. (2015), the second wave of the running boom came to Czechia at the turn of the millennium and continues until today. Running's "emancipation" from the space of amateur sport clubs and the private sector's involvement in the production of goods and services for runners thus represent a positive example of sport privatisation and professionalization. This trend has helped to spread participation in physical activity throughout the population, not only in running activities.

With the current boom in running, however, comes the organisation of numerous races by various organisations, many of which have found success in this business aimed at sport and running events for the public. Finding precise figures on the number of events organised each year is very difficult. But existing sources prove the widespread popularity of running events. For example, according to the [www.behej.com](http://www.behej.com) website (běhej.com, 2018), there were 900 races of various types (road, cross, running with dogs, relay, etc.) and lengths (from 3 to 111 km) held within 100 km of the capital city of Prague in 2018 alone, including 75 half-marathons and marathons. Other information on running popularity is showed by the findings of the Czech Athletic Federation. In 2015, there were over 1,300 races with 133,000 participants in the Czech Republic (Český atletický svaz, 2015). Marathons and half marathons enjoy a particular popularity and take place either as special events or as part of running series.

It is in society's interest to involve as many people as possible in sport, or in sport for all, due to its positive health-related benefits in terms of its necessity for a good life<sup>1</sup> (European Commission, 2008; Česká republika, 2016, etc.).

The above characteristic of new trends in the population's participation in sport, however, raises a couple of issues. The interconnection of professionalization and commercialization of sport results in the fact, that recreational athlete must pay for their participation unless they practise sport and exercise completely outside any organization. This applies both to sporting activities running under the auspices of associations (membership and club fees), which do not have to be so high depending on the type of sport and locality, but, in particular, to sporting activities offered and organized by the for-profit sector. The organizations engaged there try to provide professional sporting services and, quite understandingly, charge adequate financial amounts to their "clients", recreational athletes, for this activity not only to cover the costs of the respective activities, but primarily for profit, which this activity brings them.

The financial costs related to a sporting activity (organization of a lesson, competition, etc.) rely on the ability and willingness to pay the required amount (in the form of an entrance or participation fee plus a series of accompanying expenses like travel, sporting equipment, etc.) on the "clients" part. Here, we are getting to the problem that is the focus of interest of many specialists, mainly in the field of sport sociology, but also general sociology. In each society, there are social inequalities resulting in different access to some social assets, less favourable for some social groups, or some groups may even be excluded from using these assets. Research into social inequality has gone through some development in the last decades. As stated by Šanderová and her research team, the issues at the forefront of concern in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were classes or strata, ethnic origin and gender. Classes and strata were studied particularly with respect to socio-economic inequalities, while research into ethnic inequalities and inequalities between men and women,

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1 Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity. Retrieved from: <https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/constitution>.

so-called socio-cultural inequalities, concentrated on their symbolic or cultural rooting. The above study assesses later research projects that described the decline of social classes, but other authors started to perceive the social structure as a culturally rooted construct and keep working with the concept of class (Šanderová, Šmídová a kol., 2009). The original socio-economic approach accentuating the economic aspect of differences among people is gradually complemented by the issue of recognition and morally cultural assessment (ibid). The French sociologist Bourdieu brought the above approaches closer to each other by defining inequalities as a social position of people where they can be placed in mutual relationships and where inequalities are understood as relationships between social positions in the sense of “above” and “below”. This concept was also applied in the research studies on Czechoslovak and later Czech society by Machonin (Machonin & Tuček, 1996, Machonin, 2004). Like Bourdieu, he also stressed the importance of leisure time, including sport, in terms of individuals’ position in the society social structure and their place in the life style of the population.

The topic of the relation between social stratification and participation in sport with respect to the openness of access to sport for any member of society (regardless of their socio-economic and socio-cultural characteristics) has been investigated by numerous studies. Political documents, on the one hand, call for the necessity of making sport accessible for all and promotion of social justice (White paper on Sport, European Commission, 2008 etc.), while, on the other hand, research studies manifest that many people are excluded from participation in sport, from its consumption (e.g. Pociello, 1981; DAVISSE & LOUVEAU, 1991; SLEPIČKA a kol., 2001; COLLINS & KAY, 2003; MULLER, 2003) and that social inequality exists here. From the studies investigating different aspects of sport at a local level in the Czech Republic, it is evident that socially underprivileged groups include people in manual jobs, unemployed, people with elementary education, pensioners, housewives, female secondary school graduates from non-gymnasium schools and adolescents commuting to school for longer distances (SLEPIČKOVÁ a kol., 2010). These results correspond with foreign findings where, in addition, the situation of ethnic minorities is pointed out, which still does not represent a significant problem for the Czech environment and has not been studied yet.

If we accept the theoretical definitions of inequalities that try to interconnect the approaches, the exclusion from sport or limited possibilities for its consumption mostly result from socio-economic factors (income/wealth, power and professional success), while, at the same time, socio-cultural factors (education, intelligence, cultural taste), play their role as well, which was also indicated by the above research studies addressing this topic, although they did not always cover all the factors. Therefore, in sociological research studies focusing on sporting activity of the population, we encounter basic variables characterizing individuals (income, job, education, gender, sporting equipment) and variables characterizing their close social environment with respect to sport (partners, children, friends, etc.) or demographic variables (place and type of housing, etc.).

As already mentioned, new trends in sport and its commercialization in the positive sense of the word contribute to extending the possibilities for sporting activity among the general public. This is the reason why we are interested in which part of the population takes advantage of these possibilities, in particular in relation to the running boom. In keeping with theoretical approaches aiming at complexity in the social stratification concept and with the latest findings on participation in sport among the adult population<sup>2</sup>, we would like to know whether running events for the general public organized in the Czech Republic also attract people with a rather higher socio-economic and cultural status.

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2 Different research studies tend to specify the age limit of adulthood in relation to participation in sport differently. Some consider the minimum age limit of 15 years, others of 16 or 18. We do not solve this issue here.

## Methods

To answer the above question we have conducted a follow-up to the Road Races international research whose participants cooperate within the IRNIST (International Research Network in Sport Tourism) informal group consisting of researchers from 10 European countries, 3 North African countries and Canada; the Czech Republic is represented by the Faculty of Sport and Physical Education of Charles University. The research was primarily focused on economic and environmental aspects of such running events, particularly half-marathons, in medium-sized towns. The study was based on a questionnaire established by all members of the IRNIST project. This questionnaire contained several series of questions (travel to the race, costs of participation, motivations to join the race, quality of the event's environment and the efforts of the organizers to prevent any environmental impact, thoughts on the touristic appeal of the town).

A questionnaire was compiled in English and in national versions to survey different areas characterizing the participants and their opinions on holding the events. This type of questionnaire is frequently used in the field of sport tourism to estimate the impact of a sport event, a festival, etc. (Daniels & Norman, 2003; Getz, 1991; Veltri, Miller & Harris, 2009). On the Czech part, the questionnaire was extended by monitoring life satisfaction and contained a total of 69 questions. The data were collected electronically with a very friendly support from the organizer of a half-marathon from the Tempo Team Prague, Ltd. organization. They use email addresses of all participants and via these emails, all participants were kindly asked to fulfil the on-line questionnaire.

In here presented study, we have focused on the issues of the socio-economic status of those participating in the run for the reason if these commercially organized events do not exclude a certain part of the population from participation. This is also outlined in the presentation of corresponding results from the research. The questions of a mostly scale type were primarily processed by means of basic statistical methods.

## Results

Participants of the Mattoni ½ Marathon Ústí nad Labem Run, part of the RunCzech series, co-organized by Prague International Marathon, Ltd., were examined. The RunCzech brand and its running events have become very popular and known even at the international level. The 6<sup>th</sup> annual Mattoni ½ Marathon Ústí nad Labem took place on September 17, 2016. Organisers and partner organisations make use of various media and social networks. Online registration and result tables are a matter of course as is information about various aspects of the race. According to organizers, the capacity of the race was 3,600 in 2016 and it was reached several weeks before the event (Prague International Marathon, 2016), which testifies not only to interest in such running events, but also to participants' confidence in the RunCzech brand. The half marathon can also be run as a relay of two- or four-member teams where each member runs a given portion of the marathon. The event was also attended by elite runners including many African athletes. Based on registration data, there were participants of 36 nationalities; 66% men and 34% women; mostly university graduates (58%) and secondary school graduates 34%. There were 645 volunteers working at the event. A specific feature of the half marathon is a 3-km part of the race that runs through the area of the Spolchemie factory.

The result table listed the performances of 2,238 participants but a total of 3,577 runners taking part in the race. The questionnaires were filled in the few days immediately after the race. Fully filled questionnaires were returned by 491 participants (2/3 men, 1/3 women), or 22% of those listed in the results table. One third was local residents. Respondents considered themselves to be "locals" if they lived in the city or within 60 km of the city. This is probably due to the fact that many people commute to the city for work and thus considered themselves "locals". More than 60% of runners travelled over 60 km to attend the Ústí race and half of this group travelled more than 100 km. This

is also a testimony to the good promotion of the event. Most participants travelled by car (67%) while others travelled by train (22%) and bus (4%). City residents, naturally, came on foot (6%).

The socio-demographic profile of the respondents corresponded to that provided by the organiser based on information stated in runner registrations – the majority of participants attained higher and highest educational levels (table 1). This aligns with the participant structure based on registrations (see above). Given the average age of respondents, we may assume that most of them have completed their education and were active in the labour market. Most respondents, both men and women, were in the 30–39 and 40–49 age categories. There were relatively few respondents (and half marathon participants in general) younger than 25 years of age (7.3%). The oldest male participant was 72 years old and the oldest female participant was 71 years old.

**Table 1** Educational level of participants (%)

	Men	Women
Elementary, vocational school without academic diploma	7.1	5
Secondary with academic diploma	36.3	31.5
University – Bc.	10.5	20.5
University – Mgr., PhD.	45.1	39.1

The data on education aligns with data on employment and revenues. Concerning the type of employment/job, three quarters of participants were salaried employees, 10% businessmen, 5% self-employed and 1.7% unemployed. The majority were married people (65 %) and only 10 % divorced. The rest of 23 % were widowed single.

The income of the respondents was in the higher tiers for the Czech Republic (they were split into deciles according to their income). Less than a fifth of the respondents fell to the first 5 deciles with the lowest income, otherwise all participants had incomes above the national average and the earnings of a half of the respondents even fell to the top two deciles. For a half of the respondents, the race fee of CZK 850 (EUR 33) was the biggest expense in relation to the race. Many respondents participate in the entire running series of which the Ústí event is part, which means they pay race fees at other events, too. The data shows that most respondents (and participants in general) were adults (only 2% were students) with a relatively stable social situation and higher socio-economic status.

The financial cost of participation is an important factor for runners, too. The respondents stated that travel was the most costly expenditure (table 2), followed by registration fees and food. Given the location of the city of Ústí and the overall size of the Czech Republic, most participants were able to attend the race without having to stay overnight. However, with the exception of registration (CZK 850), the average expenditure per respondent was relatively low (travel 385 CZK, food and beverages 295 CZK, accommodation 182 CZK).

**Table 2** Importance of respondents' expenditures related to the ½ marathon (mean)

Travel	2.02
Registration	2.59
Food and beverages	2.70
Equipment	3.97
Overnight	4.26
Others	5.50

Scale from 1 to 6; 1- the most important, 6- the less important

Low expenditures were naturally stated by “local” participants, mainly for travel and accommodation. Some of those who did not live in the vicinity of the city paid 500-999 CZK for travel (20% of respondents) or 1000 CZK and more (9%). The accommodation capacity of the city was not used by 4/5 of the respondents (of the total number of participants app. 360 runners could be accommodated, which might have had some economic impact. However, the question is whether these runners did not replace tourists who would have come if the event had not taken place – but the issue of the economic impact of sport events is not solved here). Roughly 20% of the participants paid more than 500 CZK for food. As for total expenses, about a half of the respondents spent between 1000 and 4999 CZK and 8% stated expenses exceeding 5000 CZK (10 respondents over 10,000 CZK). It is evident that the respondents significantly varied by their expenses and higher expenses were incurred by non-local participants.

It must be mentioned that the run is sponsored by numerous companies and organizations ( “titular” partners - Volkswagen, Adidas, Sportissimo, Birell, O2, Mattoni) and that it receives not only social and political, but also financial support from the municipality (memorandum of long-term partnership) and the region. This undoubtedly contributes to the profitability of the event and potentially also to the relatively not too high participation fee, even though many comparable, less popularized runs are cheaper.

## **Conclusion**

Running events have become hugely popular in the Czech Republic in recent years. The Internet and social networks help spread the necessary information to potential participants. This has allowed many private companies to venture into the organisation of such events. These businesses contribute to the flourish of sport for all while generating profit.

The results of a part of the Road Races international research presented here and conducted using the case of the Mattoni ½ Marathon Ústí nad Labem Run indicated that the problem of sport accessibility to the general public still exists. The profiles of the participants, testifying to their socio-economic status and a more detailed analysis of the related expenses paid by the runners, including other complementary questions, showed that the participants are recruited from higher educational tiers of the Czech population, with significantly higher incomes than the Czech Republic average earnings and, thus, a willingness and potential to spend more money on their hobby. We have not presented the results testifying to the regularity or the reasons for participating in such events here. Looking at the overall results (which are presently being finally processed), however, it is evident that the Ústí nad Labem race attracts mainly participants with a higher socio-economic status in the productive age of 30-50 years and relatively stable family state. The run may be described as a “family” or “social” event because a large number of participants come with family members or friends, which might, after all, be the reason why the organiser offer a family run as well.

The education level and the reasons for taking part in the race indicate that most respondents consciously reflect on their own life. People with lower educational levels may face many obstacles of both subjective (lower cultural capital) and objective (higher cost) character. The event attracts local residents and people from the vicinity of the city but it also has a national and even international dimension. The race is very popular with non-residents also due to its inclusion in the RunCzech series and, undoubtedly, thanks to easy access from many parts of the country and from abroad.

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