“Building the future of sport & exercise psychology” – this was the slogan of the 15th European Congress of Sport & Exercise Psychology, this year was also associated with the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the European Federation of Sport Psychology (FEPSAC), founded in 1969 in Vittel, France. On 15-20 July, experts in the field of sport psychology from around the world came to Munster, Germany. Not only Europe, but also specialists from Australia, Asia, America and even Africa constituted a large group of enthusiasts of sport psychology.

The Congress, organised every four years so far, allows for broad discussion on current scientific achievements in the field of sport psychology and physical activity, as well as assessing their practical implications. It is also an opportunity to establish new networks and exchange experiences, both scientific and those resulting from the practice of sport psychology. This was made possible by the conference programme consisting of ten parallel sessions, four poster sessions and six inspiring keynote speeches presented by Brett Smith, Tatiana Ryba, Ben Jackson, Hulya Asci, Samuele Marcor and Zella E. Moore. As part of the parallel sessions, participants could choose between participating in panels, symposia, paper sessions, workshops, as well as gimme-5 format presentations, a new form of presenting scientific discoveries. During these sessions, each presenter had only five minutes to give their presentation on only five slides. After each short presentation, an additional three-minute discussion was possible.

A novelty that also appeared at this year’s congress, and which will probably permanently appear in the programme of subsequent FEPSAC meetings, was Science Slam. This is a special form of presentation combined with competition. A special science slam committee chose four candidates from selected applications who, during a Tuesday evening, before a wide audience, presented the results of their original research in a fun and creative way, but at the same time, in a substantive manner. Science slam participants competed for the prize of 1,500 Euro, and the winner was selected by a special commission, taking votes of the audience into account. Ultimately, the first Science Slam winner in the history of the FEPSAC Congress was Vanessa Wergin, presenting her research on the causes of team collapse, considering both qualitative and quantitative analyses. The whole event was additionally accompanied by live music as well as artistic performances, which meant that the new form of research presentation was enthusiastically received by the audience. This event was the only one open to the general public and not only to the participants of the congress, which allowed to show others, not only specialists in the field of sport psychology, that science can be presented in a creative and entertaining way, and thus, accessible for everyone.

As in previous years, before the official beginning of the congress, participants had the opportunity to take part in additional pre-congress workshops and seminars. During this congress, participants could undergo training in the field of qualitative research, the application of structural equation modelling, the use of mindfulness interventions in sport, as well as supporting young coaches in their transition from being an athlete to the role of a trainer. Two additional symposia were, in turn, devoted to issues related to refereeing in sport, as well as psychomotor knowledge (perceptual-motor expertise).

Due to the great amount and variety of the research, workshops and lectures presented during the congress, it would be impossible for us to share reflections on each session. The choice of several sessions, which were especially memorable, turned out to be extremely difficult. Nevertheless, each of us chose a few moments from the congress, which are discussed below.

One of the most inspiring sessions for me was Chris Harwood workshop (Loughborough University) and that by Sam Thrower (University of Roehampton) devoted to the issue of psychoeducation of parents of young athletes. Undoubtedly, parents play a key role in the sport of their children, affecting their involvement as well as the quality of experience related to sports competition (including Knight & Holt, 2014). Realising this, in 2016-2018, Thrower, Harwood and Spray examined the needs of parents of athletes and on this basis, created effective intervention programmes. Ultimately, in cooperation with the Lawn Tennis As-
association (LTA) in the UK, they created the “Optimal Competition Parenting Workshop” as part of the national strategic education of parents. Since 2017, over 1,500 parents of children aged 9-14 have participated in over 80 workshops designed, inter alia, by Harwood (Harwood & Thrower, 2019). The workshop presented during the congress allowed us to thoroughly familiarise ourselves with the idea of working with parents and presented specific exercises and ways to build knowledge and skills of parents of young tennis players necessary to optimally support their children during sport competition.

During these workshops lasting an hour and a half, we had the opportunity to learn specific exercises that help parents visualise their role during sports competitions. A simple exercise broken down into desired and unwanted parental behaviours can be a great starting point to discuss which of these behaviours can be viewed as supportive or exerting additional pressure on the child. As participants, we also had the opportunity to practice effective communication with a child both before, during and after a sports competition. Harwood and Thrower showed how they dismantle parents’ most common messages and show them the ‘hidden wall’ behind this way of formulating information. Thanks to this, parents can become aware of the attitudes they shape in their children depending on their manner of communication.

As a workshop participant, I obtained a whole range of inspirational exercises to use in my own practice. Personally, the workshop was also a stimulating and thought-provoking experience for me. I think that the subject of this workshop was also strongly inscribed in the general theme of this congress, emphasising the need for our commitment to training and education of parents of young athletes. The psychology of sport and physical activity is constantly evolving, and the workshop by Harwood and Thrower clearly reminded us, sport psychologists, that the support of parents of young athletes should be another branch of our actions, and not just ad hoc and selective actions. The question arises whether this is not the future of sport psychology and physical activity? Also taking into account the recent events during the Polish U14 Tennis Championships in Poland, when the parents of one of the players behaved unacceptably, the emphasis on psychoeducation regarding the parents of athletes seems to be an even more key direction in the field of sport psychology.

Another sessions engrained in my mind was the symposium led by Maria Kavussanu from the University of Birmingham, entitled “Preventing doping in sport: Moral, psychological, and knowledge-based interventions in young British and Greek athletes”. Doping in sport is unfortunately a common phenomenon. Data fluctuates, showing that incidents of doping among professional athletes can range from 1-2% (WADA) to 57% (Ulrich et al., 2017; in Kavussanu, 2019). This phenomenon also increasingly affects the environment of amateurs, but also young athletes (Kavussanu, 2019). During this symposium, the presenters discussed the development and effectiveness of three intervention programmes to prevent doping in sport. The main goal of the research was to develop such an intervention that would effectively reduce the likelihood of reaching for banned substances among young athletes and ensure that this effect is maintained in the long run.

The symposium began with a presentation by Maria Kavussanu, who provided an intervention programme that focused on three moral variables: 1) moral identity, 2) moral withdrawal, and 3) moral atmosphere. Studies in which the effectiveness of this type of programme was tested and then compared with the effectiveness of a standard knowledge-based programme were funded by the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA). The knowledge-based intervention included information on legal and anti-doping regulations, the health consequences of using banned substances or sports supplements. The obtained results showed that both programmes proved to be equally effective in reducing the likelihood of doping in the future. However, with the passage of time, the probability of using prohibited substances decreased only among participants of moral intervention. Including interventions related to an athlete’s morality in classic prevention programmes, including work on sport values, emotions after success, the consequences of using doping for others, or work on acceptable behaviours on a team, may prove to be crucial in increasing the effectiveness of these types of programmes.

Another intervention programme created thanks to funding by the International Olympic Committee focused on questioning the mechanisms of moral withdrawal, emphasising the expected sense of guilt and strengthening self-regulation in opposing doping, as well as the emotional consequences of using prohibited substances. The research results presented by Philip Hurst showed that a psychological prevention programme created in this way is as effective as the standard knowledge-based programmes in reducing the likelihood of reaching for doping, and this effect has been maintained over time.

In turn, Lidia Skoufa presented the results of qualitative research on the effectiveness of psychological and knowledge-based intervention. This presentation gives us practical tips on designed effective prevention programmes. The programme participants particularly appreciated the interactive nature of the workshop and materials used during meetings such as videos and case studies of professional athletes. They admitted that their views on doping had changed due to participation in the programmes. In psychological interventions, the analysis of the consequences of doping for others turned out to be the most interesting, while in the knowledge-based intervention, information about anti-doping control procedures and the consequences of doping were considered the most useful.
Research findings presented at this seminar indicate that support for sport psychologists may be crucial when creating anti-doping programmes. Again, I have the impression that the symposium in question, was very strongly inscribed in the theme of the entire congress, pointing us towards further possibilities of using psychological knowledge, highlighting the need for our close cooperation with such organisations as WADA or national anti-doping organisations.

With regard to the dynamic development of sport psychology and physical activity as well as the increasing opportunities to use knowledge concerning this field of psychology in the broad sports environment at the 2017 FEPSAC General Assembly, the authorities decided that the FEPSAC Congress will be held every two years from starting 2022. This year’s congress, with such diverse symposia subjects, greatly confirmed the correctness of this decision. Therefore, the next FEPSAC Congress will take place in three years. During the gala dinner at the end of the 15th FEPSAC European Congress of Sport & Exercise Psychology, it was announced that we would once again meet with a vast group of researchers and practitioners of sport psychology in Padua in 2022.

References

