

# Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia

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# ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY OF WATER POLO IN CROATIA

Bachelor Thesis

University of Zagreb

Faculty of Economics and Business

Course: Sports Economics

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Water polo is often considered to be one of the toughest sports there is but is constantly being overlooked by many. It combines the variables of swimming, ball handling and physical ability, as well as game intelligence all while battling an equally strong opponent. For some reason, water polo, being a first ever team sport to be introduced at the Olympic Games, is now facing a problem of falling out of a top priority sport category. With low media coverage comes low income from TV viewers, sponsors and other sources of income that all sports rely on. That is why the question of economic sustainability of water polo arises for many professional players.

Unfortunately, there is no exception when talking about Croatia and its' water polo players and teams, even though we have a long track record of excellent results in various international competitions. Over the years, the Croatian water polo team has accumulated 28 medals including seven World Championship medals and three Olympic Games medals, including a golden one. Nevertheless, the bleachers around the pools are most of the times empty, filled with only friends and family, and an occasional water polo enthusiast. All this has caused many that wanted to pursue this sport as a profession to change their original plan and devote their time to something else. Many are still active and participate in it for the simple pleasure of the game and the company of their team members.

The purpose of this thesis is to conclude whether water polo in Croatia is or can become an economically sustainable sport. Through research of financial statements of cities, water polo organizations and sponsors a screen shot of a current water polo situation in Croatia will be presented. As well as a survey, conducted on a number of professional water polo players in Croatia, which was able to give some insight into the opinion of those who are the most affected by the economic climate in this sport. The aim is to come to a conclusion about Croatian water polo, what are its' weak points, how and if, the situation can be improved. All this in hopes that this great sport receives the recognition and the financial stability it so deserves and that it is enjoying in some other countries.

## 2. ORGANIZATION OF WATER POLO

It is hard to tell exactly at which time water polo as we know it today became existent, but it is placed sometime in the second part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its' origins are traced to England as are many other sports. It developed from a form of rugby and was played in rivers and lakes. One had to carry the ball to the other side. In 1870, the London Swimming Club developed rules for "football to be played in swimming pools". The first ever official game was played in London, Crystal Palace Plunge, and the early games did not have many rules and were mostly a display of brute strength. In Scotland around 1880s came the introduction of goals, ball handling with only one hand at a time and no tackling of players that did not have the ball. The new rules were spread and adopted throughout Britain.

Second to follow Britain's suite was the United States, but they adopted the game with its' old rules before coming up with some rules and special characteristics to the game of their own. Their playing style was even tougher than that of early rules and the game was more about fighting and winning fights than the actual play. There were no fouls so it was common that the fighting would stop only when one would give up from the lack of air and needed resuscitation. One of the main reasons the US did not try and adopt the new rules of the game was the smallness of American pools. Louis de Breda Handley, who is considered as one of the pioneers of US Water Polo and swimming, said: "There is no room for above water passing action."

After, water polo quickly spread to other countries: Hungary (1889), Belgium (1890), Austria and Germany (1894) and France (1895) and they started forming their leagues. "In 1900, the sport of water polo was widespread enough to be added to the program of the Olympic Games. In fact, water polo was the first team sport to be added to the Olympic program, leading the way for many other sports. The 1900 Olympics were played in Paris, France. Because travel abroad was so expensive and because the Olympic version of water polo would be played according to "English rules", the Olympic water polo tournament did not at first attract Americans." <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Egan, T. (2004). Water Polo: Rules, Tips, Strategy, and Safety. In *Google Books*. The Rosen Publishing Group. [https://books.google.hr/books?id=-h\\_TWrs3b\\_wC&pg=PA11&redir\\_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.hr/books?id=-h_TWrs3b_wC&pg=PA11&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false)

## 2.1. WATER POLO ORGANIZATIONS

### FINA

July 19, 1908 during the Olympic Games in London, FINA (“Federation Internationale de Natation”) was founded. It was formed by eight national federations: Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary and Sweden.

“The states aims of the Federation were:

1. to establish unified rules for swimming, diving and water polo, applicable at Olympic Games and other international competitions;
2. to verify world records and establish an official updated world records list;
3. to manage swimming competitions at the Olympic Games.”<sup>2</sup>

FINA is in control and develops the following aquatic events: swimming, diving, high diving, water polo, synchronized swimming, open water swimming. FINA is the most important organization connected to the aquatic sports and is an integral part of the Olympic Games. It is the international governing organization for rules and regulations in all water polo games that are played.

“In January 2018, under the presidency of Dr. Julio C. Maglione, FINA comprises 209 National Member Federations in the five continents. The principal objectives are the following:

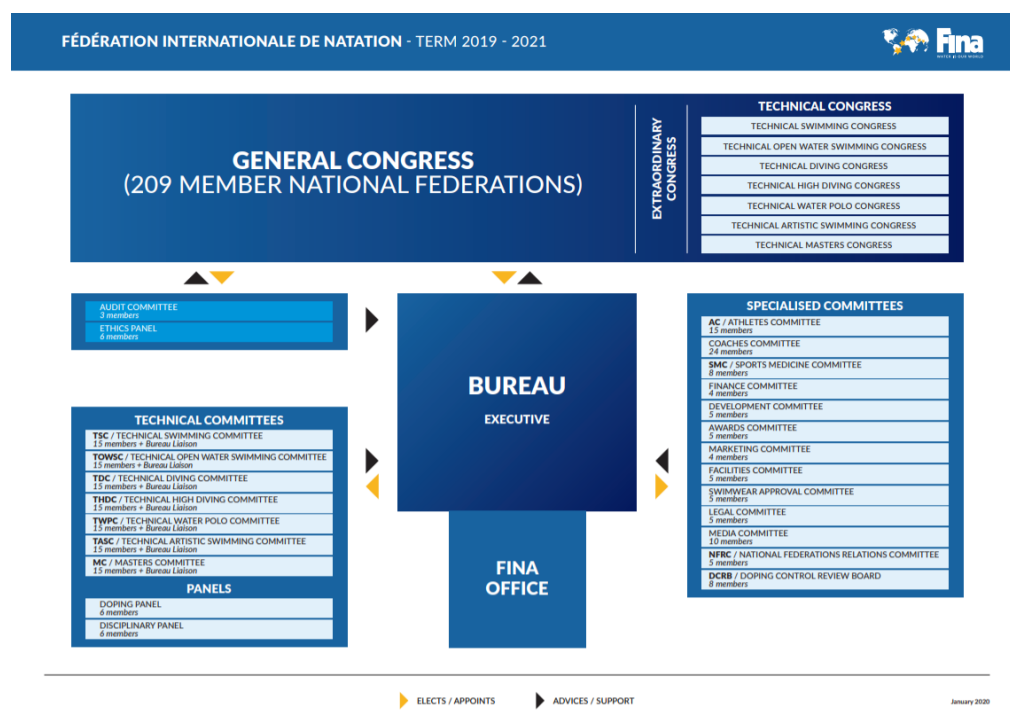
- to promote and encourage the development of Aquatics in all possible regards throughout the world;
- to provide fair and drug free sport;
- to promote and encourage the development of international relations;
- to encourage participation in Aquatics disciplines at all levels throughout the world regardless of age, gender or race;

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<sup>2</sup> *Overview and History | fina.org - Official FINA website.* (n.d.). Www.Fina.Org. Retrieved July 26, 2020, from <http://www.fina.org/content/overview-and-history>

- to adopt necessary uniform rules and regulations and to hold competitions in Swimming, Open Water Swimming, Diving, Water Polo, Synchronised Swimming, High Diving and Masters;
- to promote and organise World Championships and other FINA competitions;
- to encourage the increase of facilities for Aquatics' disciplines throughout the world with the support of other interested parties, and
- to carry out such other activities as may be desirable to promote the sport.”<sup>3</sup>

Figure 1 : FINA Organization chart



Source: SPECIALISED COMMITTEES. (2020).<sup>4</sup>

As figure 1 depicts, FINA Organization consist currently of 209 member national federations that form the General Congress. Out of the General Congress there is an elected Extraordinary Congress that supervises the work of the Technical Congress. There is a specific technical congress for each of the aquatic sports FINA is in charge of. Six divisions plus a master technical congress

<sup>3</sup> Overview and History | fina.org - Official FINA website. (n.d.). Www.Fina.Org. <http://www.fina.org/content/overview-and-history>

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.fina.org/sites/default/files/fina\\_organisation\\_chart\\_08.pdf](https://www.fina.org/sites/default/files/fina_organisation_chart_08.pdf)

that combines all. There is also an Audit Committee and an Ethics Panel that have to inform both the General Congress and the Executive Bureau of their work and progress. The Bureau is connected with all the Committees and the Congresses both technical and specialized. The Technical Committees once again just like the Technical Congresses are formed of six committees each for one sport plus a Master Committee. There are also two panels, a doping and disciplinary panel. Then there are the Specialized Committees, 13 of them, which range from athletes and coaches' committees to marketing, legal and other. The organization has an interconnected and clearly outlined structure.

The International water polo board was formed in 1929. It was made out of four representatives from England and four representatives from FINA, but FINA has been the highest and the governing body for all aquatic sports since of 1930, when the international rules and requirements were set by them and taken as default.

## LEN

Second to FINA comes LEN. LEN (The Ligue Europeenne de Natation) was founded in 1926, in Budapest. It is the oldest continental federation governing the aquatic disciplines. Throughout history it has been closely linked and related to the works of FINA. The organization came into existence when it became clear that FINA needed a Governing Body that would lead the organization of European Championships. The number of countries affiliated is currently 52. The Organization is in charge of organizing all kind of European aquatic events and competitions, but the one that stands out is the water polo category. Europe's water polo category is so strong that it has a stand-alone European Water Polo Championship every year. It is a two-week tournament unique of its kind.

The Croatian Water Polo Federation is an active member of both organizations, which is evident from Article 12. of their statute:

### **“Article 12.**

The federation joins the European Swimming Federation (LEN) and the World Swimming Federation (FINA).”



## 2.2 WATER POLO COMPETITIONS

Water polo competitions have been held on both national and international level for quite some time now. The crown jewel of all competitions in this sport is the Olympic Games, and its' golden medal. It is something that most professional water polo players dream of and strive to achieve. There are naturally a lot of titles and medals, what in Europe what in the World, along the way that a team wants to acquire before hopefully reaching their ultimate goal.

As mentioned previously, Europe's water polo category became so strong that each year there is a two-week European Water Polo Championship organized by LEN. The Championship is a competition between different nations. This year a 34<sup>th</sup> Championship was supposed to be held in Budapest but was postponed due to the global pandemic situation. In respect to the tournaments organized for European clubs there is more than just one competition. There is a LEN Trophy competition, Super Cup (both for women and men), Euro League Women, Euro Cup and Champions League. FINA is on the other hand in charge of organizing world tournaments and qualifications : Water Polo World Cup, Water Polo World League, Water Polo Olympic Games Qualifications Tournament, junior and youth championships and the World Water Polo Conference.

### Olympic Games

As stated, water polo was the first team sport to be introduced to the Olympic Games in 1900. It is sad to say that it took exactly 100 years to introduce women's water polo to the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympics. In the early years the dominance was established by the British. The British dominance was not long lasting though, with former countries of Yugoslavia constantly battling for dominance, Hungary being the absolute leader in the number of titles and medals won, followed by great results from Italy, France, Serbia and Croatia.

## 3. WATER POLO IN CROATIA

First water polo game ever to be played in Croatia was in Split at Bačvice beach in 1908. It was brought to Split from Prague by a few college students from Split that studied in Prague. Fabijan Kaliterna was the founder of "Hajduk", "Gusar" and "Jadran" clubs and he was the first one to have brought a water polo ball to Croatia. The first international game that was played is said to

be in 1922 in the harbor of Split between club “Baluni” and the crew from a British war ship called “Brionny”. “Splićani” won 9 to 0.

After the first world war, water polo clubs are renewing to the prewar state and some new clubs are being formed. “Sušačka Viktorija”, “KSU” in Karlovac, “Jug” in Dubrovnik and so on. In the former country of Yugoslavia there was a championship type of a tournament. The first champions in the newly formed Yugoslavia were “Sušačka Viktorija” ( now called “VK Primorje Erste Bank” ) and they held the title for the first three years after which the title goes to “Balun”. At the Championship in Split in the 1925, the title is won by “Jug” and is held for the next 13 years. In the time between the wars the Yugoslavian national team had 43 players of which 37 came from Croatian clubs – 19 from “Jug”, 9 from “Jadran”, 8 from “Viktorija” and 1 from “ZKP-a”. The first appearance that Croatian players have at the Olympics was in 1936 as a part of Yugoslavia, from 11 players 8 were from Croatian. As a part of Yugoslavian national team Croatian players won 4 silver medals and 3 golden medals. Following the second world war some of the clubs changed their names and now “Sušačka Viktorija” is called “Primorje”, instead of “ZPK” the club is called “Mladost”.

The first ever official game that Croatia played under its’ own flag was December 28<sup>th</sup>1991. On the same day a meeting of the Croatian Water Polo Federation was held and Vlado Kobešćak was named the president of the association and Duško Antunović was named as the first coach of the Croatian national team. The conditions all trough Croatia were tough at those times and not all clubs could train regularly, but still the first ever Croatian Championship in water polo was held on the 19<sup>th</sup> of June 1992. “Mladost” won the first title.

### 3.1. CROATIA – AT COMPETITIONS

Croatia as one of the former Yugoslavian countries made its’ first independent appearance at the 1993 Mediterranean games and reached the finals and took the silver medal. At the Mediterranean Games the Croatian national team has won another silver medal, twice lost in the semifinals and in 2003 won the gold medal. In 2018 they did not participate in the competition; this was the first time they did not compete since 1993.

Since 1993 Croatia qualified for every European Championship. In the 14 times Croatia participated in the Championship, they have won one bronze medal, two silver medals and a gold one in 2010.

Out of the World League the Croatian team has won three bronze medals, three silver medals and a gold one in 2012.

The Croatian team has yet to win only one golden medal from a major competition and that is the World Cup. They have won a silver and a bronze medal two competitions in a row, 2010 and 2014, but are still waiting for the golden one.

When talking about the World Championships, Croatia has always qualified. They have won 4 bronze medals, one silver medal and two golden medals, one in 2007 and the other in 2017.

Finally, there is the Summer Olympics. The biggest competition there is. The Croatian team participated all six times they could participate in the qualifications. They won two silver medals and a gold one in 2012 Olympics held in Great Britain, which is to this day the biggest achievement of the Croatian National team. The golden team was led by the coach Ratko Rudić and in the finals they won against the current (at that time) world champions, the Italians. Our team consisted of: Pavić, Burić, Bošković, Dobud, Joković, Buljubašić, Muslim, Bušlje, Sukno, Barač, Hinić, Obradović, Vićan. The final score was 8:6.

### 3.2. CROATIAN OLYMPIC FEDERATION (Support & Impact on water polo )

The Croatian Olympic Federation as a part of International Olympic Federation and the Olympic Solidarity Program operates consistent with the vision and the mission set by the Croatian Olympic Federation, which above else, is to encourage and generate the conditions to achieve excellent results in all sporting categories and develop sports in all age categories even further. The program is set between the period of two Olympic Games 2017-2020 (because of the COVID-19 situation, 2021), and the major points of action are towards athletes, coaches, sports administration, programs and organizations that are closely connected to the development and the organization of the Olympic Games. The planned amount that the Croatian Olympic Committee plans to spend on different programs is 3.185.650 HRK, from which 2.892.150 HRK would go to the Olympic Solidarity Program and the rest, 292.500 HRK would go to other Croatian Olympic Committee programs.

*Figure 2:* Support for the Men's water polo representation from the Croatian Olympic Committee as a part of International Olympic Committee Solidarity program for 2019

No.	Title of the program of Olympic solidarity of IOC	Amount (USD)	Amount (HRK)
1.	<b>WORLD PROGRAMS: Athletes, Coaches, Managing of NOC and sharing of knowledge, Promotion of Olympic values, Forums and special projects</b>	251.100 USD	1.632.150 kn
1.1.	<b>Olympic scholarships for athletes "Tokyo 2020."</b> (duration: 1.September 2017 - 31.August 2020.) 10x athletes x 500 USD monthly x 12 months 3 quarterly periods: Jan - April; May - August; Sep - Dec 2019	60.000 USD	390.000 kn
1.2.	<b>Subsidy for a team sport "Tokyo 2020." - Men's water polo representation</b> (duration: 2017-2020., altogether 100.000 USD: 2017. = 20.000 USD, 2018.= 20.000 USD, 2019.= 20.000 USD, 2020 = 30.000 USD)	30.000 USD	195.000 kn
1.3.	<b>Subsidy for Continental level athletes (CASG) - Preparations for EYOF</b> -project for the preparation for summer EYOF "Baku 2019." (Duration: 2017-2020; altogether 80.000 USD: 2017.=28.000 USD, 2018.=12.000 USD, 2019.=28.000 USD, 2020.=12.000 USD)	28.000 USD	182.000 kn
1.4.	<b>Winter Junior Olympics "Lausanne 2020." - Subsidy for athletes</b> (options 1-3: recognizing talent, qualifications and preparations)	50.000 USD	325.000 kn
1.5.	<b>Olympic scholarships for athletes' refugees</b> (Oleksandra Oliynykova) (duration of the program: 1.September 2017.-31.December 2020.), 1.500 USD monthly x 12 months: 3 quarterly periods: Jan - April; May - August; Sep - Dec 2019	18.000 USD	117.000 kn
1.6.	<b>Olympic scholarship for coaches</b> ; -program ICECP 2018/2019 (University of Delaware/USOC)	400 USD	2.600 kn
1.7.	<b>Promotion of Olympic values - "POV package" - TV show on SPTV</b> - for a whole period 2017.-2020. approved altogether 220.000 USD (allocation: 2017.=142.000 USD,2018.=50.000 USD,2019.=14.000 USD and 2020.= 14.000 USD)	14.000 USD	91.000 kn

1.8.	<b>Development of Administration</b> - administration subvention - support for the development of administrative conditions/ current administrative expenses	45.000 USD	292.500 kn
1.9.	<b>Sport for social developments</b> - support for the organization <b>Olympic Day</b> ( Olympic Day 2019)	4.000 USD	26.000 kn
1.10.	<b>International Olympic Academy - 2019 IOA International Sessions</b>	500 USD	3.250 kn
1.11.	<b>Forums and special projects</b> - participation in a seminar EOO-a	1.200 USD	7.800 kn
2.	<b>CONTINENTAL PROGRAMS</b>	238.100 USD	1.547.650 kn
2.1.	<b>Activity of NOC</b> - yearly subsidy for everyday activities of NOC	99.600 USD	647.400 kn
2.2.	<b>Special activities of NOC</b>	25.000 USD	162.500 kn
2.3.	<b>Continental and regional games - winter and summer EYOF 2019.</b> ( Sarajevo and East Sarajevo/Bosnia-Hercegovina; Baku/AEZ)- support for participation according to the number of athletes ( <b>EOC Subsidy</b> )	10.000 USD	65.000 kn
2.4.	<b>European Games "Minsk 2019." - Team Support Grants</b> ( Subsidy for travel expenses, approx.. 150 per. x 4.500 kn; exact amount per person EOO publishes in September 2018.)	103.500 USD	672.750 kn
3.	<b>SUPPORT FOR THE OLYMPIC GAMES - OI "Tokyo 2020."</b>	900 USD	5.850 kn
3.1.	<b>Meetings of mission bosses, Tokyo/JPN</b> - support for travel expenses	900 USD	5.850 kn
	<b>TOTAL projection for 2019.</b>	490.100 USD	3.185.650 kn

*SOURCE:* Made by author based on the report “Program javnih potreba sporta državne razine i financijski plan Hrvatskog Olimpijskog Odbora za 2019.godinu”<sup>5</sup>

Figure 2 presents a table of how the funds that are given by the Olympic Committee are spread and divided throughout different sports categories, events, scholarships and organizations connected to the development and improvement of conditions for athletes in hopes of bettering their chances of achieving great results at the upcoming Olympic Games. The table displays

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hoo.hr/images/dokumenti/programi-i-proracuni/2019/Program-i-financijski-plan-HOO-2019.pdf>

evidence that the Croatian water polo team is the only team sport and the only specific sport all together that has exclusive financial help form this source. Display of the support to the Croatian national water polo team is closely connected with the continuous excellent results that the team has been delivering throughout the years at competitions, especially the Olympics. Throughout the period of four years (2017-2020) the Olympic Committee has given subsidies in the amount of 100.000 USD to the Croatian men's water polo team. In 2017 and 2018, it was 20.000 USD (130.000 HRK) per year and for 2019 and 2020, it was 30.000 USD (195.000 HRK) dollars per year.

The funds received are managed and divided by the board of directors of the Croatian Water Polo Federation by Article 35. of their statute :

**“Article 35.**

The Board of Directors manages the affairs of the Alliance, and performs the following tasks:

- implements the established policy for the development of water polo in the Republic of Croatia determined by the Assembly
- determines the proposal of the Statute of the Association and other general acts, which are adopted or considered by the Assembly
- adopts a calendar for domestic and international competitions
- adopts acts within its competence, including propositions for all competitions
- proposes to the Assembly the adoption of a medium-term plan and program of development in the Olympic cycle, the annual program, the financial plan, and the acceptance of the final account of the Association
- proposes to the Assembly the conditions and manner of using the funds
- determines the draft proposal of the overall program of water polo for which funds are provided through the Croatian Olympic Committee and other sources of funding
- executes the financial plan of the Association and within the financial plan decides on the distribution and dynamics of the use of funds, in accordance with the inflow of funds
- manages the movable and immovable property of the Association

- proposes to the Assembly the conditions for the organization of competitions in the Republic of Croatia, the system of competitions at the state level, determines measures for the improvement of professional work and training of professional staff
- decides on the performance of economic activity
- makes business decisions in accordance with the business policy determined at the Assembly
- appoints a representative of the Association to the bodies of other organizations and associations, members of delegations or representatives at meetings in the country and abroad
- elects the national selector and coaches of all other national selections, as well as other necessary experts
- establishes permanent or temporary working bodies - commissions and appoints members
- considers issues from the work of associated organizations and takes appropriate measures to improve their work
- gives an opinion and consent for the organization of major international water polo competitions held in the Republic of Croatia
- adopts the Rules of Procedure for its work
- adopts and amends the Registration Rulebook which applies to all players and clubs, except for the I league competition in men's competition (competence remains at the CVC Assembly), the Disciplinary Rulebook, and adopts the Rulebook on the internal organization of the Association
- decides on the organization and manner of performing professional - technical and administrative tasks, as well as auxiliary tasks for the needs of the Association and associated organizations (founders)
- prepares documentation and proposes convening the Assembly
- elects the directors of the national teams as needed
- elects the executive director and the general secretary of the Association
- makes decisions on the request for protection of legality when the President accepts the proposal of the request for Protection of legality

- decides on the lists of judges
- if necessary, makes decisions within the competence of the Assembly - except for the adoption of amendments to normative acts, provided that the first subsequent session of such a decision verifies
- performs other tasks determined by this Statute and other acts of the Association”

Through the Olympic Committee the Croatian Water Polo Federation receives the funds from the Republic of Croatia that have been set aside from the state budget, evident from the Article 61. of the statute of the Croatian Water Polo Federation :

**“Article 61**

The Federation generates revenues from its own activities, from funds provided by the Republic of Croatia in the State Budget, and submits them to the Federation through the Croatian Olympic Committee, through companies, payment of membership fees, voluntary contributions and gifts and other sources in accordance with law.”

### 3.3. NO CLUBS WITHOUT CITIES

“It is not even a commercial sport, because it can’t attract sponsors and investment. That is why the state should take care of this sport.” (*Telegraf.co.uk, 2018*) . In water polo there are not a lot of sponsor and investors. It is usually an exception if a club has long-term sponsors and a specific contract is usually involved. Water polo is a sport that is extremely hard to commercialize and sell to the public. It does not have a very high profiled media coverage and what is more important for the sponsors there is not much equipment that could be sold with the clubs and sponsors logo. Their uniform consists of a pair of swimming trunks and a cap, not much room for commercialization and selling of the same. Which leads to clubs being sponsored by cities. That is why cities have yearly plans for financing various sports.

“In accordance with the above and adopted amendments, the Assembly of the Sports Federation of the City of Zagreb on its 8th. session on November 21, 2019 adopted the Schedule of the Plan



of funds for co-financing the Program public needs in sports of the City of Zagreb for 2019 to end users.”<sup>6</sup>

In figure 3, below is a table of funds that have been allocated and directed towards water polo from the City of Zagreb in 2019. Altogether, 3.829.214,00 HRK was awarded to different segments of water polo, from development programs to competitions and so on. Most of the funds were directed to “HAVK Mladost” as it is the strongest and most known water polo club in the City of Zagreb.

*Figure 3 : Allocation of fund from the city of Zagreb to Water polo*

<b>Water polo</b>		<b>In Kuna's</b>
1	Sport events of city significance	50,000.00
2	Use of sports facilities - training of athletes	kn -
3	Other development programs	50,000.00
4	Professional paper, professional and substantive rights	544,615.00
5	Competitions of athletes	468,000.00
6	Professional secretaries, professional and substantive rights	181,142.00
7	Material expenses of the union	31,000.00
8	Support for occasional professional work	130,000.00
9	Expenditures for the financial service of the alliance	48,750.00
10	Professional paper, professional and material rights of quality holders	995,707.00
11	Domestic competitions of clubs holding quality	300,000.00
12	International competitions of quality clubs	280,000.00
13	Preparations for competitions and support of clubs holding quality	200,000.00
14	Development programs of young clubs with quality	550,000.00
<b>Total :</b>		<b>3.829.214,00</b>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.zgsport.hr/files/programi-pravilnici/raspored-plana-sredstava-za-sufinanciranje-programa-javnih-potreba-u-sportu-grada-zagreba-za-2019.pdf>

*SOURCE:* Schedule, Fund plan for co-financing public programs; The need for support of the City of Zagreb for 2019<sup>7</sup>;

As evidence of how financing from only one source or mostly from one source is not recommended comes in the form of players leaving the club and once again new financial troubles for “HAVK Mladost” in 2020.

“The COVID-19 crisis has not yet reached Mladost, because it still owes the salaries to the players from the period before the global pandemic. The strong earthquake that hit Zagreb a few months ago also is not in their favor. Namely, one of the primary sources of funding is the city’s budget, i.e. the largest city company, “Zagrebacki Holding”. In the coming period, the budgets for sports in Zagreb will undoubtedly be lower than before.”<sup>8</sup>

Current situation is not looking to promising for the great club and there is a high possibility that its’ most valuable players will leave in order to have a more secure financial future than their current club can offer them.

#### 3.4. SPONSORSHIP EXAMPLE – “VK PRIMORJE ERSTE BANK”

“VK Primorje Erste Bank” is the oldest water polo club in Croatia, dating from 1908. It is also one of the rare clubs that receives a financial support from their sponsors. Their biggest sponsor being Erste Bank which is why they have rights to have their company name next to the clubs. On the example of “Primorje” sponsorship agreements will be explained.

There are three types of sponsors a club can have : General sponsor of the Club, Golden Patron of the Club and Patrons of the Club.

The General sponsor of the club has an obligation to pay the club a fixed amount per season. In return, the sponsor has a right that the club is named by them. The club also has to have the sponsors logo on their equipment, on the front of the water polo cap, on the bathrobe, tracksuit, on the shirt and the towel. The panels around the pool and the bleachers also have to have the sponsors logo. Printed materials such as : posters, calendars, tickets, promotional leaflets ... have to have

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.zgsport.hr/files/programi-pravilnici/raspored-plana-sredstava-za-sufinanciranje-programa-javnih-potreba-u-sportu-grada-zagreba-za-2019.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> *Mladost in trouble, Vrlic in Brescia?* (2020, June 9). Total Waterpolo. <https://total-waterpolo.com/mladost-in-trouble-vrlic-in-brescia/>

the company's logo. The logo and the link of the sponsor have to be displayed clearly on the web site of the club as well.

The Golden Patron of the club also has a commitment of a fixed sum to a club and in return they have the right to put their logo on the towels and shirts of the club. The panels around the pool and the bleachers have to have their logo and all the printed materials where the General sponsor has the right to put their logo the Golden Patron can also.

Patrons of the club have a fixed sum obligation to the club and in return they can have their logos on the panels next to the pool and the bleacher and on all printed material. All three types of sponsors can have their logos present at press panels, various conferences, on the result screen during the game and they can all use the players and the professional staff for commercial purposes.

There are different possibilities of how the club can be financed. Through school scholarships that are up to 1.750,00 HRK per month, for those who are regular students in high schools or universities. A company awards a school scholarship agreement with a player from the Club and is directly financing the player and in that way they are co-financing the players contract with the club. The same goes for sports scholarships and fees for amateur athletes, both up to 1.750,00 HRK. There is also the possibility of donations towards the club. Donations of up to 2% of the income generated in the previous year are recognized as tax expenses to entrepreneurs. Donations to the Club are used to help and co-finance the costs of junior categories.

As previously stated there are not many sponsors in water polo as there is not really any equipment and or promotional material that could be sold and used as a source of income for the sponsors of clubs.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

Google Forms Survey, titled Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia has the following look (Figure 4.-7.). The survey is intended for those who have been, are, or are currently in the works of becoming a professional water polo player in Croatia. The data has been collected in the form of a Google Forms questionnaire and the participants were contacted and responded through

email. The sample has been chosen from water polo players that are a part of water polo clubs: “Mladost”, “Primorje”, “Jadran”, “Jug” and others, including the national water polo representation. In between the respondents, there are also former and future water polo players who are still or will be active in the field of water polo and their knowledge and opinion contributes to the results of this survey.

The questionnaire is made out of sixteen questions. 14 mandatory questions and 2 optional ones. 8 of the questions are in the form of checkboxes, 4 have the format of a Likert scale and also 4 open ended questions. Likert scale is a point scale which is used in order for the individual to express the level of their agreement or disagreement with a certain topic. The scale used in this questionnaire ranges from 1 to 6, in order to avoid the common answer of 3 in the 5 point scale which is considered middle ground, and not much can be concluded from it. In question number 14, the premise is similar but the question is set to find out whether players believe that salaries outside Croatia are significantly lower or higher. From the questions, a point of view of each player can be established and then a group opinion based on the collective answer pattern can be formed. The main idea is to discover whether players consider water polo in Croatia an economically sustainable sport, with which they can achieve the goals they have set for themselves or do they believe that it is not enough for a well-off life they had in mind. Figure 4 presents the basic introductory questions: gender, age and current status of a water polo player. In figure 5 the set of questions is about the recognition of sport in Croatia, the respondents’ financial benefits from the sport and whether they are considered sufficient in the eyes of the same. Figure 6 continues to examine the trend of economic sustainability, whether water polo is the only source of income for the respondents, is it sufficient to cover their living expenses and are there any extra benefits they might enjoy. While figure 7 focuses more on salaries and economic benefits of water polo outside of Croatia and whether the conditions somewhere outside of Croatia are better, that Croatian players would want to go there.

*Figure 4:* Survey – Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia

8/11/2020

Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia

## Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire and participating in my research while writing my thesis. This survey is anonymous and conducted for the purpose of gathering information for my bachelor thesis at the Faculty of Economics. Any gathered information will not be used for any other purposes.

\* Required

1. 1.) Gender \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to say

2. 2.) Age \*

*Check all that apply.*

- 15 - 19
- 20-24
- 25-29
- 30-34
- 35-39
- 40-50
- 50-60

3. 3.) What is your current status as a water polo player ? \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Active player
- Former player

*SOURCE:* Author

*Figure 5:* Survey – Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia

8/11/2020

Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia

4. 4.) Are you a professional water polo player (do you earn a salary) ? \*

*Check all that apply.*

- No
- Yes. I receive my paycheck regularly as stated in my contract.
- Yes. But my club is sometimes late with payments.
- Yes. But I don't have a contract.

5. 5.)What is the expectancy of your professional career ? \*

\_\_\_\_\_

6. 6.) Is water polo a recognizable sport in Croatia or do you believe that it is better known in other countries ? \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes
- No

7. 7.) Are water polo players in Croatia sufficiently paid ? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

*SOURCE:* Author

**Figure 6:** Survey – Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia

8/11/2020

Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia

8. 8.) Are water polo salaries sufficient to cover living expenses in Croatia? \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes
- Partially, I have to have a side income
- No

9. 9.) Is water polo your only source of income ? \*

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes
- No

10. 10.) If no, what other sources of income do you have?

\_\_\_\_\_

11. 11.) Is water polo in Croatia economically sustainable? \*

*Mark only one oval.*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

12. 12.) Are there any direct benefits of being a water polo player in Croatia ? \*

\_\_\_\_\_

*SOURCE:* Author

**Figure 7:** Survey – Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia

8/11/2020

Economic sustainability of water polo in Croatia

13. 13.) Water polo players in Croatia are underpaid : \*

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Strongly disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly agree

14. 14.) Are salaries of water polo players outside of Croatia : \*

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Significantly lower	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Significantly higher

15. 15.) Would you rather play water polo outside of Croatia ? \*

Check all that apply.

- Yes
- No

16. 16.) If yes, where ?

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SOURCE: Author

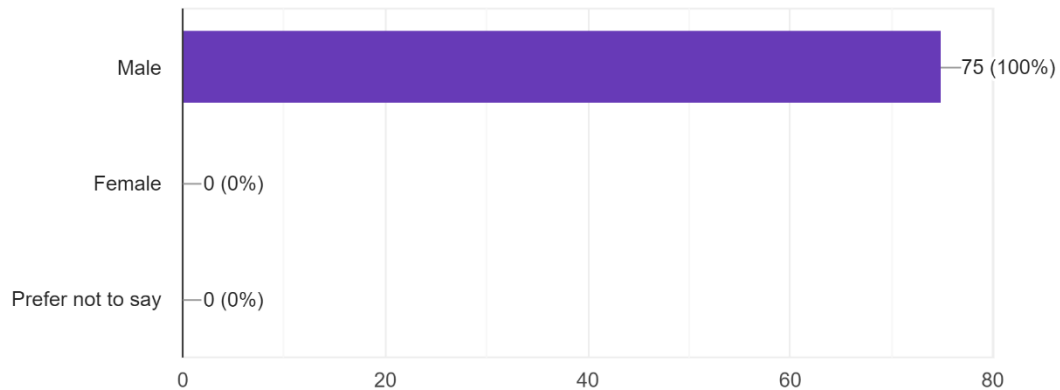


## 5. RESULTS

*Figure 8:* Survey question number one

1.) Gender

75 responses



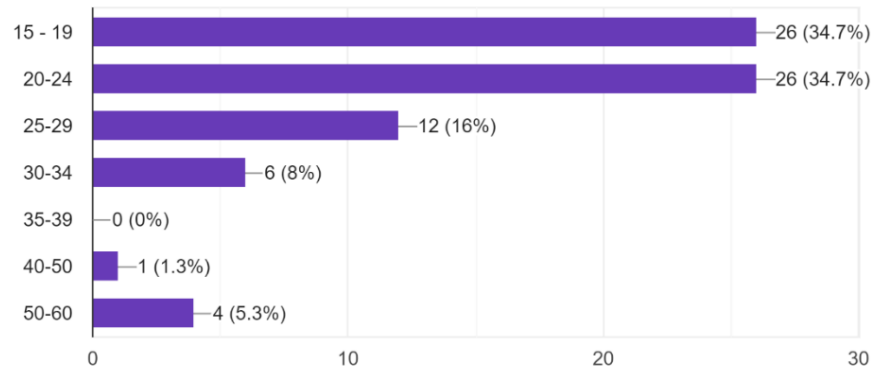
*SOURCE:* Author

There were 75 participants in the survey. All were male (as can be seen in the figure 8). Looking at figure 9 it can be concluded that they belong to different age groups. Emphasis on younger age groups, players that are still being shaped and working on gaining experience. Most of the respondents are currently playing water polo professionally, but some have retired and are no longer active players. This can also be witnessed in figure 10 showing us that out of the 75 respondents, 65 of them are still active players while 10 of them have retired or decided to pursue a different career.

*Figure 9:* Survey question number two

2.) Age

75 responses

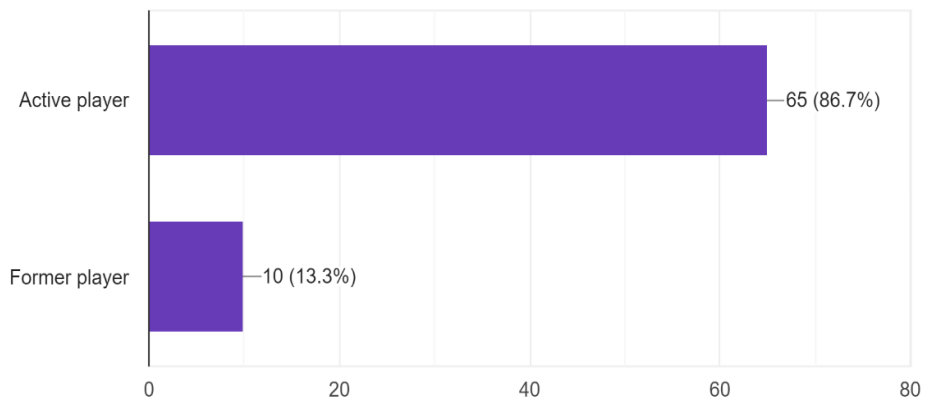


*SOURCE:* Author

*Figure 10:* Survey question number three

3.) What is your current status as a water polo player ?

75 responses

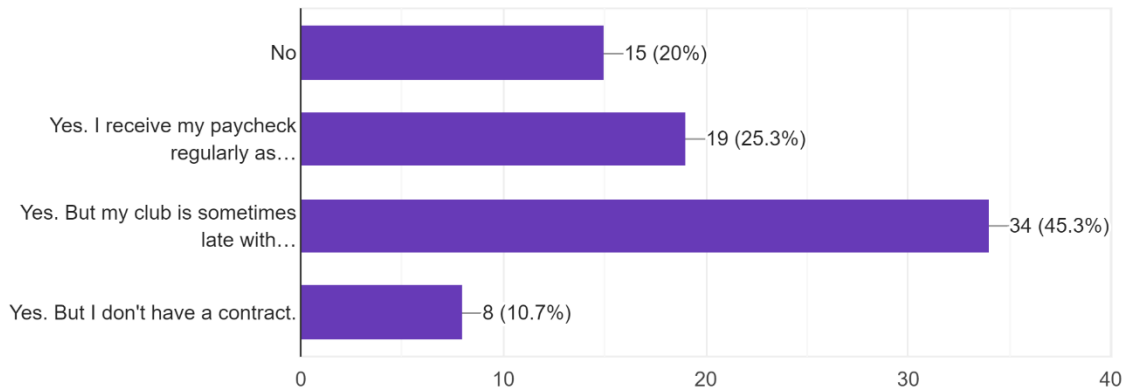


*SOURCE:* Author

*Figure 11:* Survey question number four

4.) Are you a professional water polo player (do you earn a salary) ?

75 responses



*SOURCE:* Author

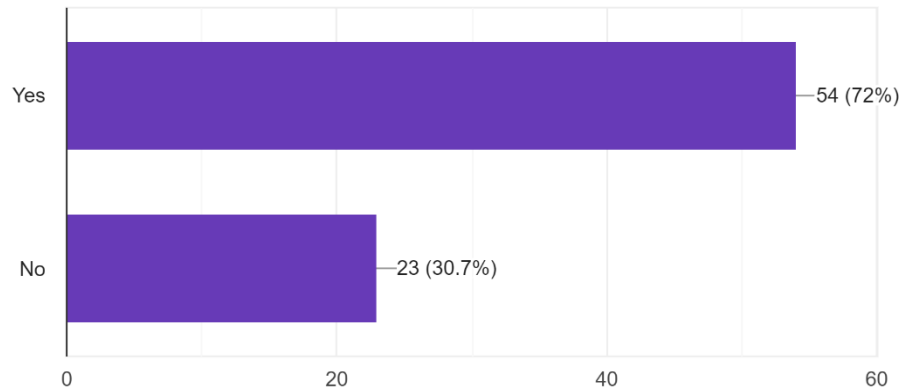
In figure 11 from the collected data it is evident that the perception of being a professional player is not necessarily connected to having a contract or earning a specific salary, some participate for the simple pleasure and love for the game, 20%. On the other hand, 81.33% (61 respondents) do receive some kind of financial earnings. Even though 10.7% of respondents do not have a signed contract which might put them in uncertain situations regarding their financial plans. There is a big difference in the numbers of players who have a signed contract and receive their paychecks regularly (25.3%) and those who also have a signed contract, but their clubs are sometimes late with payments (45.3%). High percentage of 45.3% goes in hand with the uncertainty of those players who do not have a signed contract (10.7%) and who are also most likely not on a steady payroll. All this goes in hand and can be considered as a sign that water polo might not be economically sustainable for those who practice it. It is not uncommon for clubs to take on younger players who are on scholarship/student agreements. Going back to figure 9 which offers the same evidence, that most of the players fall in younger age groups and are on scholarship or student agreements while playing. This can sometimes reflect poorly on clubs' performances. The team consisting of young and unexperienced players who are not ready to go up against more experienced and better trained players. This leads to lower ratings in competitions which yields lower financial rewards. No matter the size and the history of a club it is common to find articles

that state that players have not received their paycheck for more than a year and are playing and competing practically for free: (Net.hr, 2013.).

*Figure 12:* Survey question number 6

6.) Is water polo a recognizable sport in Croatia or do you believe that it is better known in other countries ?

75 responses



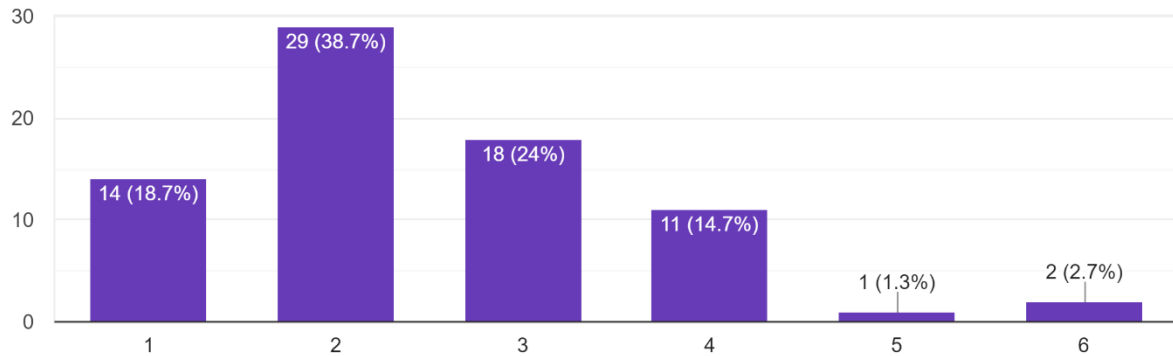
*SOURCE:* Author

Figure 12 shows that 72% of respondents believe that water polo is a recognizable sport in Croatia. This can very likely be attributed to excellent results of our national water polo team at big competitions such as Championships, but especially the Olympics which most of the Croats follow intensely.

*Figure 13: Survey question number seven*

7.) Are water polo players in Croatia sufficiently paid ?

75 responses



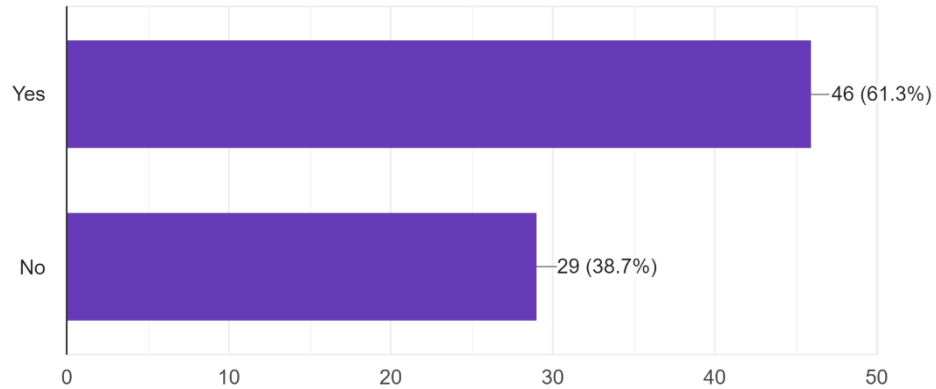
*SOURCE: Author*

By using a Likert scale that can be seen in figure 13 the respondents were asked to rate from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) if they consider their salaries to be sufficient. Majority of respondents fall into the category that they strongly or mildly disagree and believe that water polo players are insufficiently paid. This is not just present in Croatia, but in surrounding countries as well. For instance, Serbia who won a fourth consecutive gold medal at the European Championship in 2018, the first in Europe's history to achieve it, say that their entire team costs as an average European football player. Former goalkeeper Slobodan Soro said: " You can finance the entire water polo league in Serbia with a one-year long contract of Red Star or Partizan basketball players" (*Slobodan Soro for RTS, 2018*). A yearly salary of an elite Serbian water polo player is in between 150.000-200.000 euros, but not many fall under that category. Others are playing for far less, a range from 5.000-100.000 a year, depending on the quality of the club (*Telegraf, 2018*). From the conducted survey, it can be concluded that Croatian players share the same opinion and believe they deserve bigger paycheck or at least more stability when it comes to receiving them.

*Figure 14:* Survey question number nine

9.) Is water polo your only source of income ?

75 responses



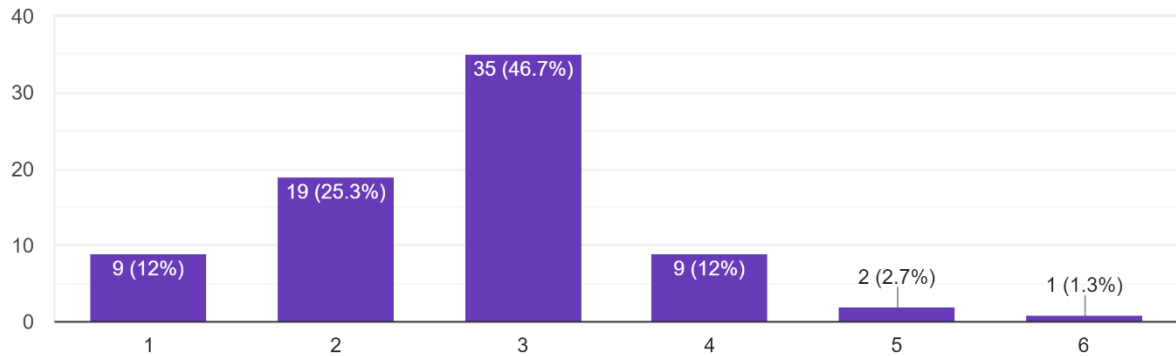
*SOURCE:* Author

From figure 14, 61.3% of professional water polo players state that water polo is their only source of income, while 38.7% have some other sources of income as well. This might not seem as to big of a number but considering in how much physical effort and time goes into a professional water polo career, having a side job might be considered difficult for some. Those who say that water polo is not their only source of income state that they either have summer jobs, part- time jobs, regular jobs or are a part of private business firms or they receive financial help from their parents or partners.

*Figure 15:* Survey question number eleven

11.) Is water polo in Croatia economically sustainable?

75 responses

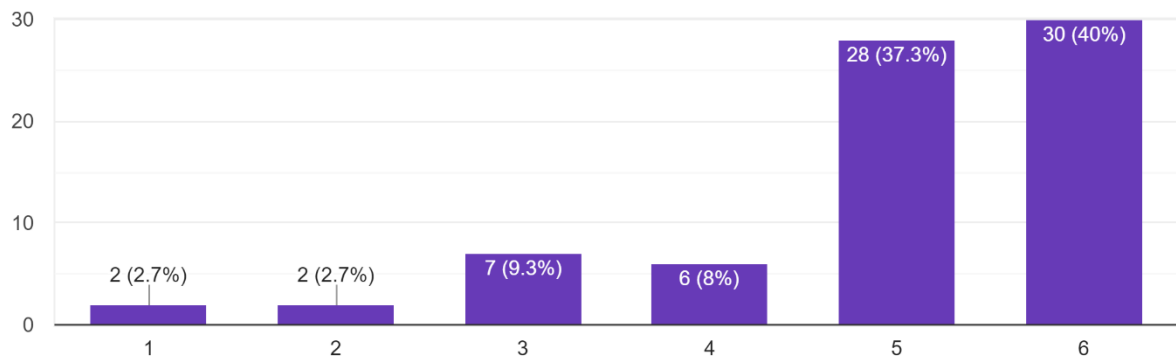


*SOURCE:* Author

*Figure 16:* Survey question number thirteen

13.) Water polo players in Croatia are underpaid :

75 responses



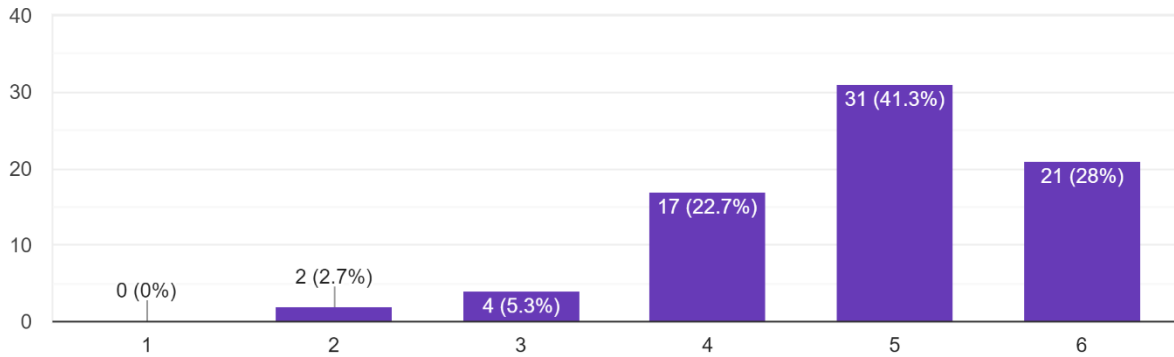
*SOURCE:* Author

Figures 15 and 16 go hand in hand, supporting the opinion shared by the majority of players which states that water polo players are underpaid. There is a larger number of respondents who consider themselves underpaid, although not all would say that it is economically unsustainable. Depending

on the club, position and the results achieved throughout the career some players believe that water polo is enough to be their only source of income and can provide them a secure life.

*Figure 17:* Survey question number fourteen

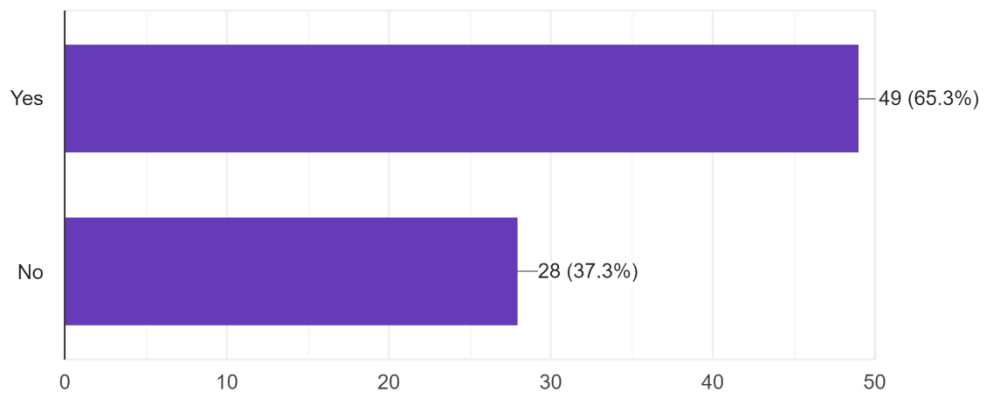
14.) Are salaries of water polo players outside of Croatia :  
75 responses



*SOURCE:* Author

*Figure 18:* Survey question number fifteen

15.) Would you rather play water polo outside of Croatia ?  
75 responses



*SOURCE:* Author



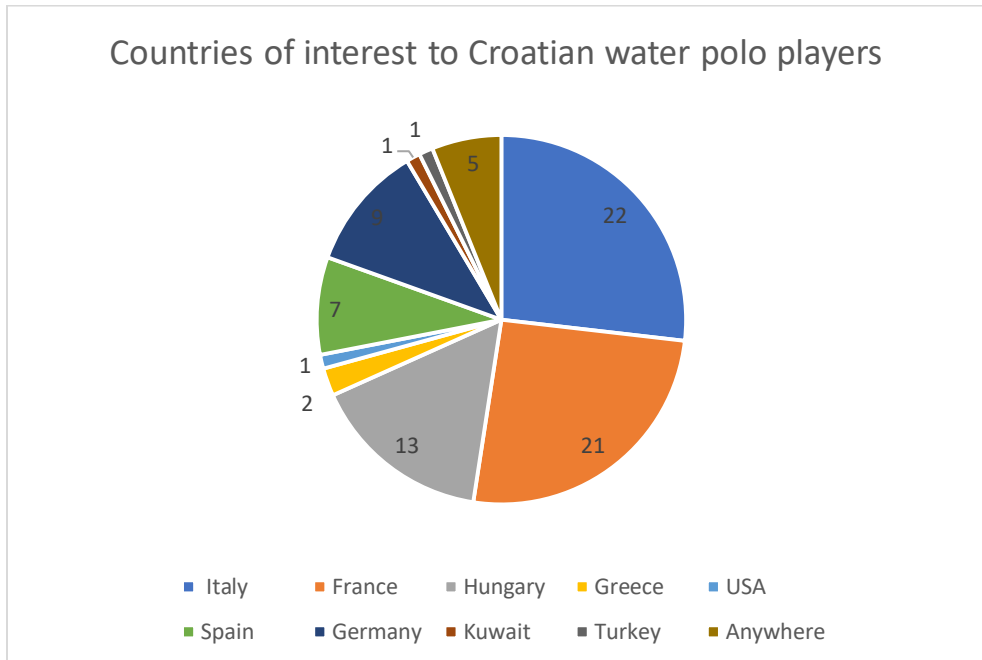
The numbers in figure 17 show that the opinion about salaries outside of Croatia is very much alike, with them being higher in other countries than in Croatia. Figure 18 presents 65.3% of Croatian players wish to play water polo outside of Croatia, believing that conditions, salaries and benefits are bigger in other countries. Alternatives for their current positions are presented in figure 19 Italy, France, Hungary, Germany and other countries being their top choices. It is not surprising that the players want to continue their career in countries that won most medals throughout the history (Hungary) or countries that are known to have higher salaries or at least steadier salaries (France, Italy..). In Croatia, as mentioned before, clubs are very dependent on cities and how much the country supports the sport. In Croatia there are a lot of things that hold a precedence over water polo.

In 2017, Ivan Janković reported for tportal.hr : “Water polo is definitely not a sport in which the players and the coach can get rich and secure a future for themselves and the following generations in their family, what is supported by the amount our golden water polo players received on the World Championship.” This is a part of the article in which it was stated that after winning the World Championship in 2017, FINA secured a price of only 80 thousand US dollars for gold medalists. The whole prize fund for the competition was only 350 thousand US dollars, while for other swimming competitions the prize fund was up to two and a half million US dollars. The disappointment does not end here though. “According to the Sports Act and the Decree from 2012 on awarding state prizes for top achievements to Croatian water polo players and the selector, everyone is also entitled to a cash prize of 45 thousand Kuna, and members of the professional staff will also be awarded. It should be emphasized that for a similar success in Hungary, a prize of 50 thousand euros is intended for players, and in Serbia 30 thousand euros. Given that these are not two rich European countries, then it is clear that they value the great successes of athletes.”<sup>9</sup>(Janković, 2017.)

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<sup>9</sup> *Otkrivamo koliko su hrvatski vaterpolisti zaradili titulom prvaka svijeta.* (n.d.). Tportal.Hr. Retrieved August 14, 2020, from <https://www.tportal.hr/sport/clanak/doznali-smo-koliko-su-hrvatski-vaterpolisti-zaradili-titulom-prvaka-svijeta-2017073>

*Figure 19:* Pie chart presenting countries of interest for Croatian players



*SOURCE:* Author

## 6. CONCLUSION

After careful analysis of the past and current water polo scene not only in Croatia but in the surrounding countries and the world altogether it is safe to say that water polo as a sport needs fast rebranding and a breath of fresh air if it wants to remain in the top tier sport category. Media coverage of the sport is almost non-existent, sponsors and investments from outside parties are rare and insignificant. Main water polo organizations are now trying to bring the sport closer to the public, commercialize it more, simplify the rules and make a bigger spectacle out of the games all in order to attract more attention and possibly more sponsors to the game. There should be a bigger emphasis on bringing the sport and the games into everyday lives of people and make it a habit for viewers to follow the games in person and on different media platforms. The game is very dynamic and there are a lot of games (one national player plays around 85 to 88 games per season) that can be followed, all this can be used in order to bring publicity and attention to the sport.

When talking about Croatia specifically its' biggest problem is that most of the clubs are financed from cities, with a few exceptions. This brings a high level of uncertainty to the game in respect of wages and what a club can offer to its' players. Croatia is known for producing excellent players but a lot of them leave Croatian clubs due to the uncertainty if they will receive their next paycheck or not. Croatia has an excellent national team and a very strong league of its own. It should try to commercialize it more, not only during Olympics, but throughout the season as well. The Croatian Water Polo Federations should bring awareness, to our nation, which is known to be very passionate when it comes to sports and include the supporters more. With bigger recognition there is a bigger possibility of attracting outside sponsors that can better the conditions for players. Better conditions lead to a more perspective future that could support our excellent players. They would finally get the recognition and the economic sustainability and certainty that they deserve. From the survey it is evident that there is a lot of passion and love for the sport. Biggest hope of many is to bring home the Olympic gold and enjoy the game as much as possible but still get the reward that they deserve. I believe that the game of water polo has great potential to become a top tier sport once again, but only through mutual cooperation of organizations, leagues and players can this be achieved. Not taking the current situation as a given but work on promoting, bettering and bringing the game closer to the people.

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