



## **FRIENDSHIP-84' – STOLEN DREAMS: THE SOCIO-POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE AND LEGACY OF “SOVIET OLYMPIA”**

Abstract - The aim of the present article is to characterize a multi-sport event; The Friendship Games were held between 2 July and 16 September 1984 in nine states of the former Eastern Bloc. A special regard is given to the social, political, cultural and legacy aspects of this event. Historical methods, mainly the source analysis with elements of the content analysis, served as research tools. An important aspect of the research was personal and private notes and memorabilia of Jacek Sobkowiak, a silver medallist of the Friendship Games who was a Finn class sailor. The second part of the article is devoted to Friendship 84' in the light of dissonant sporting heritage.

Keywords: Friendship Games; Olympic legacy; Olympic politics; Sporting heritage; Heritagization of sport.

## **JOGOS DA AMIZADE-84 - SONHOS ROUBADOS: A PERSPECTIVA SOCIOPOLÍTICA E O LEGADO DE “OLIMPIA SOVIÉTICA”**

Resumo - O objetivo do presente artigo é caracterizar um evento multiesportivo, Os Jogos da Amizade foram realizados entre 2 de julho e 16 de setembro de 1984 em nove estados do antigo Bloco Oriental. Uma consideração especial é dada aos aspectos sociais, políticos, culturais e legados deste evento. Métodos históricos, principalmente a análise de fontes com elementos da análise de conteúdo, serviram como ferramentas de pesquisa. Um aspecto importante da pesquisa foram as anotações pessoais e particulares e memorabilia de Jacek Sobkowiak, medalhista de prata dos Jogos da Amizade que era um marinheiro da classe Finn. A segunda parte do artigo é dedicada à Jogos da Amizade-84 à luz da herança esportiva dissonante.

Palavras-chave: Jogos de Amizade; Legado Olímpico; Política Olímpica; Herança esportiva; Patrimônio do esporte.

## **JUEGOS DE LA AMISTAD-84 - SUEÑOS ROBADOS: LA PERSPECTIVA SOCIOPOLÍTICA Y EL LEGADO DE LA “OLIMPIA SOVIÉTICA”**

Resumen - El objetivo del presente artículo es caracterizar un evento multideportivo, los Juegos de la Amistad se llevaron a cabo entre el 2 de julio y el 16 de septiembre de 1984 en nueve estados del antiguo Bloque del Este. Se presta especial atención a los aspectos sociales, políticos, culturales y de legado de este evento. Los métodos históricos, principalmente el análisis de fuentes con elementos del análisis de contenido, sirvieron como herramientas de investigación. Un aspecto importante de la investigación fueron las notas personales y privadas y los recuerdos de Jacek Sobkowiak, un medallista de plata de los Juegos de la Amistad que era un marinero de clase finlandesa. La segunda parte del artículo está dedicada a Juegos de la Amistad-84 a la luz de la herencia deportiva dissonante.

Palabras-clave: Juegos de Amistad; Legado Olímpico; Política Olímpica; Herencia deportiva; Patrimonio del deporte.

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## Introduction

Even though sporting competition has always been connected with the world of politics, which could be observed also during the events of the ancient Greece, researchers outside Europe who deal with Olympism and the history of the Olympic Games are frequently unaware of political problems going on in the first half of the 1980s in Europe<sup>1</sup>. Experts on political affairs, Patrick M. Cottrell and Travis Nelson, claim that since the 1936 Summer Olympic Games in Berlin there have been no Games that would not have been used for political purposes<sup>2</sup>. A sport aspect of a quarter-century theory is one of the approaches touching upon the recurrence of the political phenomena starting from the foundation of the International Olympic Committee up to this day<sup>3</sup>. It refers to the cyclicity of geopolitical events that significantly influence the multilateral relationship between countries<sup>4</sup>. Theoretically, the modern Olympism has been apolitical, however practically, the situation is not so ideal<sup>5</sup>. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the Soviet Union and its East European satellites used international sport as a diplomatic tool to convince the world that communism was a vibrant and superior political ideology<sup>6</sup>. The Olympics has provided a perfect model for seeing the politicization of sports, as it has always been used as an arena for diplomatic struggle for dominance<sup>7</sup>. Friendship-84 serves as a good example: more than 7000 athletes from all over the world participated in the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics, there were no representatives from Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, GDR, Poland, Hungary or USSR<sup>8</sup>. These states, alongside with Cuba, Mongolia, and North Korea, among others, boycotted the American event for political reasons, as a response to the boycott of the previous Games in Moscow by most of the Western countries\*. The states in question decided to hold their own cycle of sport events, which were called the Friendship Games<sup>9</sup>. They constituted, hence, an alternative to the Olympics. The main aim of the event was presented as an opportunity for athletes who could not participate in the 1984 LA Games to (p. 320): "[...] show their skills and shape at the end of the four-year Olympic cycle"<sup>10</sup>.

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\* The only communist countries which did not boycott the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics were China, The People's Republic of the Congo, Yugoslavia and Romania.

## Material and methods

Using the cumulative of knowledge and its social character, the authors of the present article made a selection of the most crucial information in regard with the 1984 Friendship Games. During the research, methods stemming from historical studies, mainly the source analysis with the elements of the content analysis, served as research tools<sup>11</sup>. In order to obtain necessary data, the authors visited the International Olympic Academy in May 2017, where they got familiar with a number of references. An important aspect of the research were also Jacek Sobkowiak's private memorabilia and notes, a silver medallist of the Friendship Games who was a Finn class sailor. Jacek Sobkowiak intended to participate in the 1984 Summer Olympic Games in Los Angeles however, given the tempestuous social and political climate between the USA and socialist states, he, the entire Polish team and many of his peers would not get that opportunity. Given this reality, the Friendship Games were envisaged and gave athletes like Sobkowiak the prospect to participate and compete. Jacek Sobkowiak was a prized Polish athlete, his trainer Andrzej Zawieja was convinced that Sobkowiak would be a world champion. Sobkowiak was the Polish champion winner in 1987. Yet, there is little known about this athlete, his life and career, which is what has inspired the authors to write this article.

Unfortunately, the international academia lacks detailed information concerning the organization, course and legacy of the "Soviet Olympics". It is hardly possible to find an elaborate passage regarding the event in academic monographies. Only the heritage of the Games in Los Angeles was written<sup>12</sup>. Bearing that in mind, while developing an in-depth analysis of the topic, the main sources relied on are of Polish research, with additional supportive international sources, among others. A few interesting facts regarding not only Friendship-84 itself, but also the reasons behind the decision of Soviet countries and other states not to participate in the Olympics, are covered in a 2016 monography by Michał Sloniewski<sup>13</sup>, 'The boycott of the Olympic Games as an international politics' tool in 1976-1988'. Relevant information is also provided by Marlena Gmur<sup>14</sup> in the article 'The boycott of the Olympic games in Moscow and Los Angeles in the light of "Sportowiec"' published in the "Acta Universitatis Lodzianis. Folia historica" journal 2010. In continuing the work of the authors above, this article looks to resume and further explore the Friendship Games

from a socio-political perspective (especially from a Polish perspective) and discuss aspects of the event's legacy.

### **XXIII Summer Olympic Games vs. Friendship-84**

"The Soviet Union supported and will sustain the worldwide Olympic movement" – Leonid Brezhnev wrote in his addressed letter to members of the IOC organizing committee and the staff of the XXI Olympics in Montreal in 1976. These words were a commitment to the full support from the Soviet Union and other socialist countries. One of the most important Olympic themes was the 'comprehensive dissemination of Olympic rules, in order to achieve good will between nations. During the post Second World War years, a number of athletes defected from the newly established Communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Many of these exiled athletes wanted to compete in the Olympic games, but the rules of the Olympic Charter stipulated that they could not<sup>6</sup>. The countries of the socialist community consistently appealed for the democratization of the Olympic movement and fought against all forms of discrimination. However, the representatives of socialists' states were not able to take part in the 1984 LA Olympics, although they seemed very well prepared to do so. They were not even allowed to compete under the Olympic flag, which had happened before during other historic editions of the Olympic Games. The athletes did not truly believe in the validity of the boycott, therefore, in private conversations, they would frequently express their disappointment with their situation<sup>15</sup>. That is why, among other things, an idea emerged to hold a similar event for the whole group of excellent athletes (particularly from the Eastern Europe)<sup>16</sup>. According to Gmur<sup>14</sup>, all technical and organizational aspects of the event (who can participate, where, when and on what conditions) were presented by Boguslaw Ryba, a vice president of the Head Committee of the Physical Culture and Sport, in the 28 issue of "Sportowiec". Back then, the committee was an administrative unit (under the supervision of the prime minister) working to popularize and develop physical culture, sport and tourism in Poland<sup>14</sup>. Ryba claimed that: "Friendship-84 did pose any threat to the 1984 Olympic, for none of the participating countries opposed the Olympic Movement; they only aired their grievances against the Ronald Reagan's administration"<sup>17</sup>. Such a statement was obviously political, presumably given to avoid any repercussions from the International

Olympic Committee managed at a time by Juan Antonio Samaranch<sup>18</sup>. The Russian Press Agency TASS highlighted that the event was held in the spirit of friendship with the socialist states, stating: "important in terms of sporting competition in the Olympic year"<sup>†</sup>. The President of the Soviet Olympic Committee Marat Gramov described the Games in LA as 'full of chauvinism' and added that the thanks to the Friendship Games: "[...] the socialist states remain faithful to the enhancing the unity of the Olympic Movement"<sup>‡</sup>.

It is not groundless to say that the boycott of the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Olympics actually started four years earlier in Moscow<sup>19</sup>. The public opinion has not been however unanimous in regard to the official reason for the boycott. Some historians claim it was USSR revenge for the American boycott of the Moscow Games. Allegedly, the United States intended to oppose the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan<sup>15</sup>. Other researches highlight poor relationships between the bilateral Soviet government and the Reagan administration. It is also noticed and noted by Peter Ueberrith (Head of the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games in 1984) that the USSR might have been afraid to lose to the US and Germany in a general ranking<sup>§</sup> (Reich 1986). Coincidentally, the formal reason behind the resignation has never been revealed to the public.

The Kremlin introduced a plan to hold the Friendship Games, the international event in nine different states of the Eastern Bloc<sup>21</sup>. Pressure was also put on other communist states, including Poland, where some people were opposed or undecided about whether or not to participate, leaving the final declaration until the very last moment. Much of Poland's dissemination depended on Hungary's decision; and after much consideration, they decided to take part in the Games. On 17 May 1984, representatives of various disciplines met at the headquarters of the Polish Olympic Committee in Warsaw, where the discussion took place. One of the main speakers was Marian Renke, a president of the Polish Olympic Committee at a time, who announced a decision, most probably taken much earlier<sup>22</sup>, that Poland would not be taking part in the LA Summer Olympic Games.

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<sup>†</sup> Moscow to stage games. 1984. *The Sydney Morning Herald*. [Access: 2018 Aug 10].

<sup>‡</sup> Russians Host Their Own '84 Games. 1984. *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*. [Access: 2018 Aug 12].

<sup>§</sup> Reich K. 1986. *Making It Happen. Peter Ueberroth and the 1984 Olympics*. Santa Barbara, California: Capra Press; 1986.

The Olympic Games is known for its' prestige and international atmosphere, and although the wider community may think that there could be no better, the creation of the Friendship Games challenged this view. The media on both sides of the Iron Curtain frequently compared the results of the LA Olympics to Friendship-84<sup>15</sup>. Due to the decision of the Soviet Union and nearly all of its East European satellites to withdraw from the 1984 Los Angeles Summer Games, the communist media provided audiences in the Soviet bloc with only few reports on the sporting events in the Olympic city<sup>20</sup>. Over sixty final results achieved at the Friendship Games would give athletes the Olympic medals, including gold ones. One of the most outstanding examples was the result of Li Yuwei who achieved 587 points in shooting. He won a gold medal in the 50-meter shooting in LA, however, this result at the Friendship Games would only get him to sixth place<sup>15</sup>. All the best wrestling and weightlifting athletes also participated in the Eastern Europe event<sup>15</sup>, e.g. Wladyslaw Stecyk, Adam Sandurski or Marek Seweryn. The absence of national teams from most socialist states adversely impacted the level of sporting competition in some disciplines during the Olympics in California. It has been estimated that approximately 2000 athletes from 16 countries did not come to LA, which influenced the significance of the event<sup>16</sup>.

In general, 2300 athletes from 50 countries participates in the Friendship Games. The motto of the event was: “Sport, Friendship, Peace” (Russian: Спорт, дружба, мир). The opening ceremony took place at the sports stadium in Luzhniki, Moscow, which was also the site for the 1980 Olympics. The stadium was founded in 1956, and until today such teams as FC Spartak Moscow and Torpedo Moscow have been playing their matches there<sup>\*\*</sup>. At the current time, the stadium has a total seating capacity of 81,029 people and is used for various sporting events. On the 21st of May 2008, it hosted the Champions League Final, and in 2013 the World Championships in Athletics and the Rugby World Cup. Since 2015, the venue has been reconstructed due to the 2018 FIFA World Cup<sup>§</sup>. The flame was lit by Victor Markin, the Olympic 400 meters Champion, and the Eternal Flame was dedicated to the victims of the World War II. There were expectations that the ceremony would reflect the 1980s ceremony and although the motto of the Games' was: “Sport, Friendship, Peace” much of the artistic performance

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<sup>\*\*</sup> Luzhniki Stadium. [Access: 2018 Feb 17]. Available in: <http://www.stadiumguide.com/luzhniki/>

was in contrast. With children danced wearing folk outfits and the girls were twirling hula hoops, cardboard tanks entered the racetrack and to the melody of the Red Army March with the lyrics: “For the sunny peace: yes, yes yes; for the atomic bomb: no, no, no”<sup>23</sup>. Despite the conflicting artistic narratives, the Friendship Games opening ceremony and inauguration, for many, stole the show from the much bigger Los Angeles counterpart.

### **Stolen dreams? The legacy of the Friendship Games from a Polish perspective**

The Friendship Games took place in the following countries:

USSR, Moscow – men’s athletics, basketball, men’s field hockey, canoeing, shooting, swimming, track cycling; Tallinn – sailing

Bulgaria – artistic gymnastics, sports acrobatics, weightlifting, freestyle, women’s volleyball

Czechoslovakia – gymnastics, archery, women’s athletics, women’s handball

GDR – road cycling, men’s handball

Hungary – diving, fencing, wrestling

Poland – horse riding, judo, tennis, women’s field hockey, modern pentathlon

North Korea – table tennis

Cuba – boxing, men’s volleyball, water polo

Mongolia – sambo<sup>††</sup>

At a time, Poland was struggling with a recession, so the country oversaw contests that did not require much financial effort. In Warsaw, there was going to be a judo tournament, in Poznan the women’s field hockey, in Dzonkow and Warsaw the modern pentathlon, in Sopot and Ksiaz the horse riding (including teams from Italy and West Germany), and in Katowice the tennis<sup>23</sup>. Nowadays, there is little physical evidence or commemoration of these events located at these destinations. Although this does not mean that this part of Polish history has been forgotten. This was a period in sporting history that impacted not only Poland but the global sporting community at large, and as such should serve for valuable education and tourism purposes.

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<sup>††</sup> Sambo (Russian самбо) – a martial art and combat sport developed in the USSR in the first half of the 20th century. It combines judo and regional versions of wrestling. It is considered to be a sporting discipline, but not an Olympic one.

In the Polish media, the issue of Polish athletes who did not go to LA has come back every now and then. Some claim that even in ancient times the Olympics were a war free zone, but in the 1984 the Games were used to highlight political conflicts. Many athletes suspected that the USSA might want to take some form of reprisal, given many western countries boycott and absence in Moscow four years prior. Nevertheless, Polish officials claimed that they had every intention to attend the 1984 Los Angeles Games and they only changed position at the very last moment. The boycott of the Olympics was announced at the last minute, which came as a shock to the athletes involved. Polish representatives felt devastated hoping that boycott would eventually not come into being. It was the last opportunity to participate in the most important sporting competition. Many Polish athletes had serious chances and dreams of gaining medals, which unfortunately, were dashed due to the political climate overpowering the Olympic ideals. The Polish team were physically and mentally ready to compete in LA (some of them had already received Olympic equipment, such as outfits and traveling accessories, etc.), yet the authorities decided on behalf of them to take part in the games of "Spirit and Friendship". Some athletes, who were staying abroad at the time, were considering whether to come back to Poland in the first place, but their patriotic attitude prevailed. As most of them emphasized, representing the country with "the eagle on the chest"<sup>††</sup> was the highest value. They also expressed the hope that such a boycott would never take place in the future<sup>24</sup>.

In 1984, the Polish Olympic team had 165 athletes, the crew and supporting athletes took part of the Friendship Games, resulting in the Poles winning 57 medals. However, this meant nothing as according to the 1996 bill of qualified sport they were not recognized as authentic Olympic achievements. The bill entitled only official Olympic medalists (older than 35) to pension benefits. Not sooner than in 2006 did come a proposal to provide the Friendship Games medalists with the same rights as the Olympic medallists<sup>24</sup>. With time, the number of athletes entitled to pension benefits has decreased. In the last two years, 12 people who had hoped for participation in LA died. In Friendship-84, Poles won 7 gold, 17 silvers and 33 bronze medals. Among silver medallists' there was Jacek Sobkowiak (1960-1987), a prominent Polish Finn class sailor, he was also a junior Europe vice-champion from the Netherlands in 1981 and a

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<sup>††</sup> The white eagle is an element of the Polish ensign.

bronze medalist from the European Championships in 1984. His dream was to be the top sailing athlete at the Los Angeles Olympic Games, which is reflected and memorialized in the illustrations below.



Fot. 1 and 2: The map for Finn class sailors with the participants' signatures. Source: private archive of author E.M.M.

During the LA Olympic Games, Sobkowiak got the map from his fellow sailors with their signatures and a note saying how sorry they were that he could not compete with them. The illustration shows hand-written messages, such as: “Hoping fighting with you again”, “To my good friends in Poland”, “Sorry you couldn't be here with us”, “Too bad you were not here”, etc.



Fot. 3: Jacek Sobkowiak in the album “On the Olympic Route 1984” published by Wydawnictwo Sport i Turystyka in Warsaw. Source: private archive of E.M.M.

In 2007, the President of Poland Lech Kaczyński signed a bill which changed the qualified sport bill and the physical culture bill. The Friendship-84 medalists finally could receive the benefits from the government budget, as the President entitled them to “Olympic pensions”<sup>25</sup>. In line with the new law, 57 athletes who were accepted to participate in the LA Olympics, but could not due to the boycott, got their entitled to the financial benefits. It was decided that they were to receive financial support, because they did participate in the Friendship Games and won medals there<sup>25</sup>. Unfortunately, many of these athletes did not receive the financial support promised or enjoy the well-deserved acknowledgment for their efforts, most disappointingly they were not ever acknowledged with equity of their fellow Olympians.

It is worth mentioning that in his article K. W. Jankowski<sup>26</sup> wrote (p. 68), “The boycott as an argument for sporting and political struggle” describes the long history of this phenomenon and notices that the boycott of the LA Olympic closes an era, at least in terms of the scale and message of such occurrences<sup>26</sup>. The next Games in Seoul were also boycotted by the teams from Cuba, Ethiopia or Nicaragua, but it was, as of now, the last such incident. According to Jankowski, it should be noted that even though the last decades have been free of such a form of political pressure, potential risk is still serious<sup>26</sup>. Although the socio-political climate has changed in some respects, the 21st century exposes new forms of deliberation. As new challenges including non-government organizations contest aspects of the Olympics, such as seen in Beijing 2008, with social actions by non-profit organizations and human rights groups who encouraged boycotts.

It is very important to protect the politically charged heritage of sport. A lot of sport stadiums and monuments are not under protection now because they are treated as “dissonant heritage”. A good example of a sport event qualified as dissonant heritage are the Friendship Games. Unfortunately, there is neither a site nor a monument in Poland, which commemorates this ignored part of the national sport history. This is often the fate of heritage – including sport heritage – which has been abused as a political tool and has become “heritage without heirs”<sup>27</sup>.

The relationship between sport, heritage, and tourism is strong<sup>28</sup>. Researchers usually understand sport tourism as "leisure-based travel that takes individuals temporarily outside of their home communities to participate in physical activities, to watch physical activities, or to venerate attractions associated with physical activities"<sup>29</sup>. Sport tourism manifests itself in two basic forms: active sport tourism which is based on practicing sports mainly by means of physical participation in competitions and passive sport tourism which includes attending sporting events as a spectator and visiting attractions as a sport tourist<sup>30</sup>. Both active and passive sport tourism have a strong cultural element because sport is as noted a crucial element of everyday life, and practicing and watching sports have always belonged to the most common forms of cultural behavior. Sport travelling includes cultural trips based on sport, which enable to learn about the material/tangible and non-material/intangible heritage of sport. That is why sport tourism can be considered as a specific form of cultural tourism.

Current travelling related to sport has become a varied and multidimensional phenomenon that has grown significantly in the last decades. Sport travels are one of the most developing fields of international tourism as they have become an important aspect of life for people interested in sport. Sporting activities have increased touristic mobility among people in almost all continents in recent years, and sport tourism has been gaining more and more popularity. In the World Travel Market Report, presented at a sport tourism conference in London in 2011, it is clearly highlighted that sport attract more tourists than beautiful beaches, historical monuments and astonishing landscapes<sup>31</sup>. The touristic business is stimulated not only by travelling to sport events, but also by individual trips, during which tourists can actively develop their sporting interests and passively (without any physical effort) broaden their hobbies. Visits to famous stadiums or sport museums and galleries are getting more and more popular. Due to this worldwide development, sport tourism is nowadays one of the most dynamic branches of the touristic business. It has been estimated that 15%-30% of the global touristic economy are travels related to sport, and an outlook for tourism development in the upcoming years indicates further increase of such trips. Indeed, according to the latest statistics of World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC), the segment accounts for 25% of the tourism sector income (Available in: <http://www.tourism-review.com>, April 16, 2018).

## Conclusion

Friendship-84 was a cycle of international sporting competitions held between July 2 and September 16, 1984, by socialist states and an alternative form of the 23rd Los Angeles Olympic Games. The event took place in nine socialist states (including North Korea, Mongolia and Cuba) with special regard to the countries of former Eastern Bloc: the USSR, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, East Germany and the Polish People's Republic. The competition resembled the Olympic Games however, the main difference between the two sporting events was the limiting factors for competing participants who represented socialist states. Final results and statistics of the event showed the level of the "Soviet" games were very high, in comparison to the LA competing athletes. With up to sixty of the athletes competing in the Friendship Games that would have achieved medal status if they had been competing in the LA Olympics.

During the decade in Poland, a number of activities was initiated to commemorate the sporting achievements of the Friendship-84 athletes and the symbolism of this time. Jacek Sobkowiak, whose memorabilia is referred to and shown in this present article, did not live to witness the acknowledgements, unfortunately he passed away suddenly in 1987. For the surviving athletes, 2007 was a year of long waited recognition, as participants were symbolically acknowledged as equals to their Olympic counterparts. Financial benefits have been awarded to them from the Polish governments budget. Although, there is still some more that could be done to give significant recognition of the Friendship Games and those Polish athletes that took part.

Contemporary sport in its various forms plays an important socio-cultural role in the leisure time of the 21st century. Both sport and tourism, as mega leisure activities, constitute a significant element of the global entertainment business, and mark the international mass culture. Visiting touristic attractions related to sport and sport heritage is extremely popular now. It would be valuable to work on the success of sport tourism in Poland especially in connection with its cultural heritage. A lot of Poles are sport fans, and Poland has a long and beautiful sport history. Education has to play a key role in the promotion of respect towards the Polish sport cultural heritage, for example by means of interesting museum exhibitions focusing on all age groups. Poland has the potential to develop its sport tourism and it would be a waste not to promote its assets abroad. People have never travelled as much as they do now which creates the

opportunity for Polish travel agencies to offer sport trips. It is high time to present Polish heritage to the world by using best international practices, such as attracting the young generations through interactive content. Young sport tourists should also learn about forgotten aspects of sports history like Friendship Games.

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