

3rd Safe Zone European Seminar: "Preventing Youth Radicalization in Sport: Lessons learned from Covid-19 pandemic".

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Greetings everyone; first of all, allow me to introduce myself to you. My name is Simon Mihalina, and I come from the beautiful city of Maribor and an even more beautiful country of Slovenia.

I have been taking part in sports all my life. As a young man, the martial art of Judo, of which I am a master, led me to the Faculty of Sports, where I also graduated and became a professor of physical education. Lately, I have spent less time on the judo mat and more gaining experience as an employee at the Office for Sports in Maribor. In this work, I have had the opportunity to observe the work of clubs and athletes I meet daily - especially coaches of clubs and presidents.

Right at the beginning, let me say, that for me, movement is a crucial activity since it balances a young person's energy and therefore has a significant impact on his development and prevents a young person from turning to negative thinking or extremism. This is especially true in the case of a contact martial art. It seems that the excess of energy in the adolescent, which can be expressed as anger, sadness, or hurt, can turn a life of a preadolescent around; in a positive or a negative direction. Sports, especially martial art, can and does successfully extinguish or take away this inner tension.

If you're asking me what to do with youth, who cannot quench or constructively direct this internal charge, I have to take you with me on a trip to the beginnings of my life.

I had an exciting childhood, some with some extraordinary experiences. As a boy, I had the opportunity to see and recognize which boys or girls succumbed to various harmful subcultures, bullying, or in some cases, even fell into extreme behavior that can lead to violence and crime.

For me, the art of Judo has been a great guide. It seemed to me that this skill kept me on the safe side of the thin red line which we as boys have sometimes crossed. Yet, we always returned quickly to the safe side. It has also been proven that contact sports in childhood, falling on the ground, and children's wrestling positively affect children's development. If I had that option, I would introduce martial arts in school or even as a compulsory class in a child's school day. Martial arts, especially Judo, help to introduce the rules and boundaries into the lives of children and adolescents, which we all must adhere to throughout our lives if we want to coexist successfully in a healthy society.

Yes, I mean it, if I had that power, I would bring contact sport into children's every day. Here I am talking about introducing martial arts in schools. I think this is one of the keys to the development of much less radical personalities. Let me describe why.

In my opinion, a radical is a person who does not know what physical pain really is. In contact sports, you quickly learn that it can hurt you too. When we practice contact sports, we start to have an awareness that pain hurts, and a person is less inclined to harm others.

Let me say this in another way:

I honestly believe that many young people would be more developed and balanced if they practiced contact sports as a basis. And I am almost certain that this would achieve a lower rate of violence and extremism in individuals in the long run.

Adolescents start going out to clubs when they are already full of pain (emotions such as anger, hurt, loneliness, exclusion), but at that time, it is often too late. As a consequence, some start (ab)using it for harmful actions, which hurt themselves and others.

Among other things, I founded a Judo School myself, which has had about 200 members a year. Well, this club is still alive and well today, but I handed it over to someone else. In this club, my theory mentioned above is still being confirmed daily. I am delighted about that. It seems to me that I have done an excellent job here.

It seems we are living in very radical times. Some would call it "corona time, "A time of Extremes, a time, which in a way, inhibits movement or at least restricts it a little; it locks children and adolescents in apartments and separates or isolates them.

As far as I can keep track, (currently) many gyms are closed. It is almost practically impossible to work out or train. Given all my experiences as a professor of sports, considering what has been said, if we take an honest look at our present time, I do not believe we are doing a good job with adolescents.

I will try to turn the topic already mentioned upside down. As a professor of physical education, I have always advocated movement and recommended the benefits that physical contact brings; I can also ask to look at the other side of the problem: What will the situation we are in (i.e., lack of movement) at the moment bring?

If our teenage child will spend all his time on the phone playing games, browsing Instagram or Facebook, and will only feel physical pain occasionally, how can he even know it exists?

Don't you think that's the key? Children and teenagers are "killing" each other in virtual games, and some even believe this is how real-life looks. But in fact: it is not.

It seems to me that in the future, this can become even a greater problem. I think we should think deeply about this and prepare ourselves for the future. I also believe that your work - that is, preventing extremism at- is very significant. We all know that right now, there is less and less movement for us, right?

After talking to my sports friends, we all agreed that this break in training in the corona time caused a great regression in technique and a setback in mobility. Only the hard-working ones will be able to fix this - and even for them, it will take them another year or so to get to the same level they were on before. Some never will be able to make it.

Also, their mindset has profoundly changed during this time. As I am not an expert, I cannot talk about it in-depth, but I can guess it is leaning more towards nervousness than calm...

Because as we can see, at home, fewer and fewer children are practicing contact sports. But perhaps today, it may happen that someone will hear me (a bit of a joke), and they might introduce contact sports into schools. Martial art one of a few activities where we can acquire a feeling for a fellow human being – for their and our pain, which is also a teacher.

As a coach, I have met many very different children, and I can tell you that the old Slovenian proverb: "100 people, 100 wonders" is correct. But I can assure you that I was able to observe how the children who grew up training with me also changed and became calmer as a result. Their parents were also satisfied and happy, as they enthusiastically followed the development of their children.

My final message for today is that I wish all countries would research the influence sport, especially martial arts, has on extremism, radicalization, or violence and show a greater commitment to sports,

especially for children. Simply because we are aware that this will change the adults they will one day become and reduce the chances of disasters, which these injured adult adolescents may commit.

In Slovenia, they say that the children are our future- well, I would start there - with children, and at least in my opinion, they are our best hope.

Thank you for the invitation, and kinds regard from Maribor.