

Managing the sportsman image on social media

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Abstract

Creation of athletes, teams, and sporting organizations positive images, brand building and effective cooperation with media, these three elements can be indicated as basic elements of functioning within sport markets. This image is very important in a sports career and after it. The article discusses the issue of sportsman's image creation and it is based on the example of one of the RKS Club player and its captain – Tomas Petrasek. The article includes some theoretical facts related to a concept of an image and its creation in different types of organisations, including sporting organisations. Image creation process is discussed in the paper as one of the public relations tasks. Discussion in the article is orientated on presentation of results that may be obtained by effective image creation and it is based on the example of a football player Tomas Petrasek's performance in media. It is based on his social media activity. The issue of image creation in his case, is discussed in the scope of professional career development, as well as actions undertaken anticipating its finish. The case discussed in the paper gives some wider overview over the topic of sports careers, that do not last long and the level of uncertainty is quite high in their cases. In consequence, the careers should be treated as bases for further activities and in that scope, players should be perceived as products. In the paper, basic rules for effective strategies of image creation were indicated, as well as the ways to draw perspective goals for individuals.

Key words Sport, public relations, image, social media, Tomas Petrasek

Introduction

International Public Relations Association (IPRA) defined public relations in 2019 as “a decision-making management practice tasked with building relationships and interests between organisations and their publics based on the delivery of information through trusted and ethical communication methods”. Budzyński (2008) defined PR as planned, continued and supported by research practice that includes presentation of the desired image that enables better integration with a surrounding and realization of basic goals of an entity. PR as an element of promotion is defined as “the art and science of achieving harmony with the environment through mutual agreement based on a true and complete information” (Black, 2005). It is important to ensure professional PR practices within an organization, for the direct relation that exists between the way that organization is perceived by stakeholders and societies, and many aspects of its functioning.

PR consultants, who manage perception of a brand, are responsible for organization of: press conferences, staff training courses, team building events and company events. They are also responsible for media training of employees and managers, as well as for successful introduction of the internal marketing concept. They also look after different forms of criticism and complains (Blythe, 2002).

Public relations efforts should promote an organization as a whole. Thus, the practice should be long-term and precisely organised. PR is described as a non-payable form of promotion, although there are some costs related to it, for example associated with events' organisation or preparation of information packages. The costs though, are not associated with publication of the materials in PR. High creditability of promotion in that form as well as wide range of audience are significant advantages of PR. At the same time, as its disadvantage, the lack of control over the information that reaches audiences may be indicated (Brebeka, 2004).

Public relation in sport is defined as managerial communication – based function designed to identify a sporting organisation's key public segments, evaluate its relationships with those segments, and foster desirable relationships between the sporting organization and those segments (Stold, Dittmore, Branvold, 2012). Nowadays, not only the quality of tournaments is important, but also the way that a sporting organization or a club is presented to audiences. To introduce effective strategic public relations, sporting organisations should understand expectations and behavior of its audience and different groups of stakeholders (Halemba, Kucharski and Juchimiuk, 2013). “Public relations professionals embrace the complex sporting value chain and strategically manage communication and celebrity profile from creation to communication with fans. (...) The specific goal of public relation in sporting organizations is to strengthen the relationships between the organization and its stakeholders” (Serbanica, Constantinescu, 2016).

Table 1. Public relations in sport

Goals of public relations practice in sport	Public relations techniques in sport
Raising awareness	Media relations
Inform	Publicity
Interest	Publications
Excite	Corporate communication
Educate	Public affairs and audience affairs
Comprehension	Lobbying
Building brand trust	Sponsoring
Loyalty encourage	Events
Maintain relationships	Crisis management

Source: (Halemba, Kucharski and Juchimiuk, 2013)

When the process of image building is conducted, the set of features that are the most characteristic, valuable (from the organization's and audiences' perspectives) and expected to be communicated, should be chosen. The sport organization's brand should be associated with health, physical activity, joy and pleasure. It is important to communicate clearly the abstractive concepts, as strength, pace or dynamism. It is significant, not only when the club's image is considered, but also from its identity creation perspective. Sport clubs' identity is enhanced by visual elements of communication, like: club's name, logo, slogan, letterheads, etc. Direct, personal selling, calling customers, as well as indirect contacts (by words and pictures/images) may be indicated as factors that directly and indirectly influence image and identity of a sporting organization. All types of activities in that area are considered as meaningful because reputation of a sporting organization, of a club, a team or a single athlete is created by publicity, identity and image (Klisiński, 2008).

Identification of main goals can be indicated as one of the main steps when marketing strategy of an organization is designed. Main goals of public relations in sport cover:

- Building consumers' trust for a club or a sporting organization, and sport equipment producers;
- Gaining creditability related to quality of sports events and equipment technology;
- Attracting new spectators and participants of events;
- Increasing the level of attendance during matches;
- Stimulation of public support for particular sport events;
- Transfer of the sport brand reputation on partners and sponsors (forfame.pl, 2020).

Also, professional realization of crisis management is extremely important in sporting organization. It is used when image of an organization requires improvement, for example, as a result of hooliganism during matches, racism, financial crisis, internal conflicts, arbiters' performance or doping (Sznajder, 2008).

During the process of positive sport brand image creation, the most useful activities may involve:

- organization or participation in events not directly associated to sport (charity, social and educational actions),
- prosocial sport events organisation,
- open days organisation,
- earning prestige.

In the process of desired image of a club or a sporting organisation creation, media relations are extremely important. Positive cooperation with local and national media, may be crucial in the process of creation of the desired perception of an organisation by its stakeholders and society at large. Generally, if a team or its member are successful, media seek contact and any information about them. If an adequate media policy is introduced, the interest may be maintained in a long-term perspective, and even increased in future. Because sport is unpredictable, media relations should not be built only on results of matches. That area of cooperation should be planned before seasons start, and shaped flexibly to introduce essential changes during regular seasons. Afterwards, adequate plan of media relations should be prepared. Firstly though, it must be researched what is a perception of a club and how it was presented in media so far. Then, media to cooperate with should be chosen. For local teams, local portals, local radio stations, would be optimal; the national teams search for possibilities to cooperate with national broadcasting companies. Additionally, meetings with journalists during press conferences or other meetings, may be really beneficial. Possibility to speak directly to players or coaches influences the ways of club's presentation in media.

Sports organisations use in their marketing activities that are not only traditional Internet tools, such as e-mail, websites and discussion forums, but also social media that favour the democratisation of information and allow the creation and development of the so-called virtual consumer communities (Cieśliński, Kloc, Tomanek, 2020).

Social media consumption affects team identification and word-of-mouth intention directly. Team identification affects word-of-mouth intention and attendance intention directly (Park and Dittmore, 2014). The most important contribution of this study was to provide the evidence that social media consumption can affect the behavioral intention directly and indirectly with team identification as mediator. Thus, this study suggests the way that social media can be used not only for information distribution but also for driving more revenue by stimulating fans' team identification and intentions.

Apart from media, also sponsors are the key stakeholders of sporting organisations. Because sport is generally very attractive to media, players, organisations and clubs are privileged. In that context, media play significant role in implementation of marketing goals of organisations as well as sponsors, because their requirements directly affect ways of presentation, image creation and promotion in target groups (Hanarz, 2007). According to M. Brzeźniak's research, fans choose the place. When searching for information about the club, the respondents mainly indicate social media (78.9%), but also the club's official website (70.3%). More than half of the fans declared that they also look for news via unofficial portals and for the Internet (Brzeźniak, 2018). That is why today it is the Internet and social media that constitute the basis for building a positive image of an athlete. The current social media landscape has two key aspects to it. First are the platforms—major and minor, established and emerging—that provide the underlying technologies and business models making up the industry and ecosystem. Second are the use cases; i.e., how various kinds of people and organizations are using these technologies and for what purposes (Gil A., Grewal L., Hadi R., Stephen A.T., 2020).

Social media through its own influence is also used to create the image of a company or person.

Many authors have dealt with this issue, demonstrating the role of conscious creation of one's own image (Datko M., 2013; Khakhimov T.I. 2014; Akranglytė G., Andriukaitienė R., Bilohur V., 2020)

The paper includes analysis of Tomasz Pietrasek's image creation process in social media. Tomasz Pietrasek is a captain of Raków Częstochowa football team. He joined Raków in 2016. Before, he had played for Viktoria Ziskov.

The analysis, that is a base of the paper, enabled indication of steps that had been taken by the player to increase his market value bearing in mind forthcoming retirement.

Materials and methods

In case of football players who are well known, professional managers are the ones who are responsible for their image creation. In consequence, the sportsmen are not personally involved in processes of press releases preparation. Messages sent to markets are verified by PR specialists or the specialist prepare them. In case of the players who are not so popular, their careers are managed by agents, who are responsible also for others players' images, and their concern is to rise their transfer values. Contract with agents usually provide players with different types of suggestions and limitations, that must be considered when promotion of a player is planned and introduced.

When their image is considered, the players are imposed different rules how they should conduct their public relation efforts. Although, it may be observed that the lower the position in a league is, the rules are treated less seriously. That situation can be derived from a low level of professionalism, typical for lower leagues.

In Poland football players are classified as amateurs or a professional players/registers. That categorization was introduced in status of Polish Football Association (Polski Związek Piłki Nożnej, PZPN) in the art. 69 §1. A sportsman is given a status of a football player after gaining opinions of members of the professional league (§2 of the quoted status). At the same time, when the status of the player is defined, applicable regulations from FIFA's Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players (RSTP) must be taken into consideration. The status of Polish FA defines professional players as the ones who have contracts with clubs. Although, some players, who do not have any written contracts with clubs may also be reckon as professional players, if they receive any financial payments or benefits-in-kind from clubs.

Players, to be paid, must fulfill strictly defined set of obligations towards their clubs. Among the most important ones, the following may be indicated, when the topic of the paper is considered:

- active participation in trainings and matches, due to instruction of coaching staff;
- participation in marketing events, advertising, and promotions aimed at popularisation of a club;
- following all the antidoping rules;
- keeping fit, leading a healthy life style, respecting recommendation of a club's physician, not drinking alcohol, not using drugs and any other substances;
- being loyal towards a club, not undertaking any actions that may influence negatively club's reputation, reputation of its owners, sponsors and other direct stakeholders. The rule is also applicable in case of entities organizing and hosting tournaments;
- respecting the club authorities' instructions concerning different activities that are not directly related to sport, for example, place of residence or ways to spend free time during the contract. The club may also obligate players not to practice particular sports or to do that in a range that does not influence their performance for the club. Generally the limitations are related to activities that may threaten health or even life of players, for example motorcycling, racing, combat sports, extremal sports, etc.
- high level of propriety, moral behavior towards co-workers and outside the club.
- players are not allowed to participate in betting (Chalas&co., www.media.chwp.pl).

The mentioned duties can also be interpreted as the rules that should be followed by players due to obligations included in their contracts.

Image creation is important in its strategic dimension, when perspectives after sport retirement are considered. The chapter presents public relations practices introduced by a Czech player Tomas Petrsek, who is

a captain of RKS Raków Częstochowa, that plays in Polish Ekstraklasa league. In the research process, the methods of observation and secondary data review were used. Basing on the results, the main directions of the player's development were indicated, as well as his perspectives after retirement. To analyze the data to estimate a level of Petrasek's popularity and to interpret on-line contents published by him basic statistic tools were used.

Results

Public performance undertaken by players is influenced by conditions that are agreed with their clubs or their managerial agencies, what was mentioned above. Introduction of the rules generally means application of public relations in sport. The more precisely the rules of public appearances, creation of contents to be published are defined, the more coherent the image of players are. In consequence, their marketing value rises, without any relation to their real sporting value. Research hypothesis states that introduction of public relations tools is important not only during a professional career of a player, but also when it is finished, to indicate directions of further performance of a player.

Tomas Petrasek was born on 2nd March 1992 in Rychnov, Czech Republic. His football career began in 2014, when he started playing for FC Hradec Kralove B. Afterwards, he was loaned out to FK Kolin. After that, he came back to FC Hradec Kralove B., and played for Polish and Czech clubs: Flota Świnoujście, SK Prevyšov, FK Slavoy and Viktoria Ziskov. All the clubs played in second and third national leagues, and all the transfers were conducted without any payments. In 2006 T.Petrasek joined the team of RKS Raków Częstochowa. Only then did his marketing and sporting values increased. In the 2016/2017 season, RKS Raków Częstochowa started playing in the first league, and T.Petrasek scored 8 goals for it. Three years later the club joined Ekstraklasa, and the player started acting as its captain. Until March 2021 he scored 27 goals (8 in Ekstraklasa until 23.03.2021), playing on the position of a central defender. In January 2020 his transfer value was estimated by Transfermarkt for around 1 million Euros. The value in this case is estimated basing on sporting issues, without any influence of public image created by the player. Tomas Petrasek cooperates with a INNfootball agency that manages careers of Polish national team players: Paweł Dawidowicz (2 mln euros) and Rafał Kurzawa (1 mln euros). His sporting value has been constantly increased, and in consequence, he was appointed to play in the Czech national team in March 2020.

Apart from his sporting achievement, image of players and their public perception are important. Tomas Petrasek, as a player and a captain, is obligated to participate in different promotion events organized by RKS Rakow. Also, his performance in social media, including his official profiles are observed and the content that is published there is appraised by different groups of stakeholders including football clubs researching transfer options, potential sponsors, entities interested in marketing potential of the player, etc.

Among many possibilities that are provided by social media, Tomas Petrasek is active on Facebook and Twitter where he has his official profiles. Moreover, different materials - interviews, etc., may be found on the official RKS Rakow webpage, its Instagram profile and on YouTube. It is quite appropriate way to conduct performance in social media. The player does not waste his energy and efforts on presence in too many different channels and his performance in social media may be precisely planned and coherently introduced.

The research conducted by the authors considered the period of time between February 2019 and the end of January 2020. Analyzing the information that was published by the player, the frequency of communication was researched. Activeness in that area was divided into observation of two channels for communication : Facebook (5536 observing) and twitter (1534 followers). Fig. 1. presents numbers of posts, that were published in the social media by the player in the analysed period of time.

Fig. 1. Public performance of Tomas Petrasek in social media

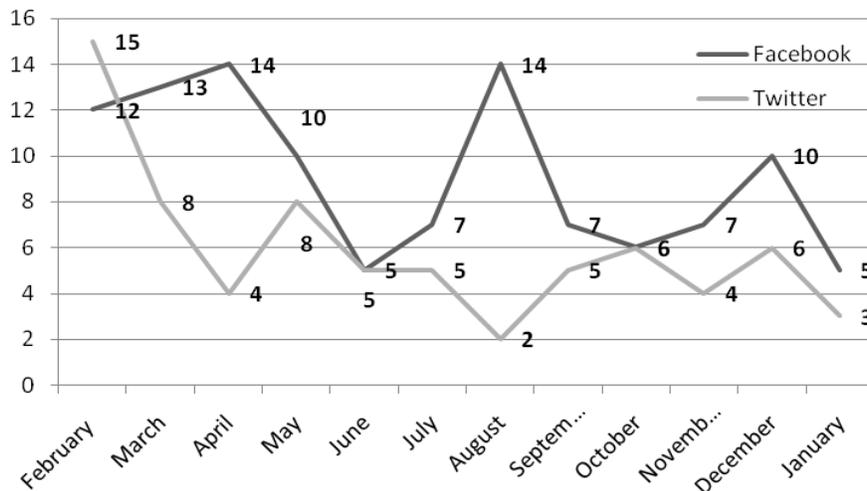
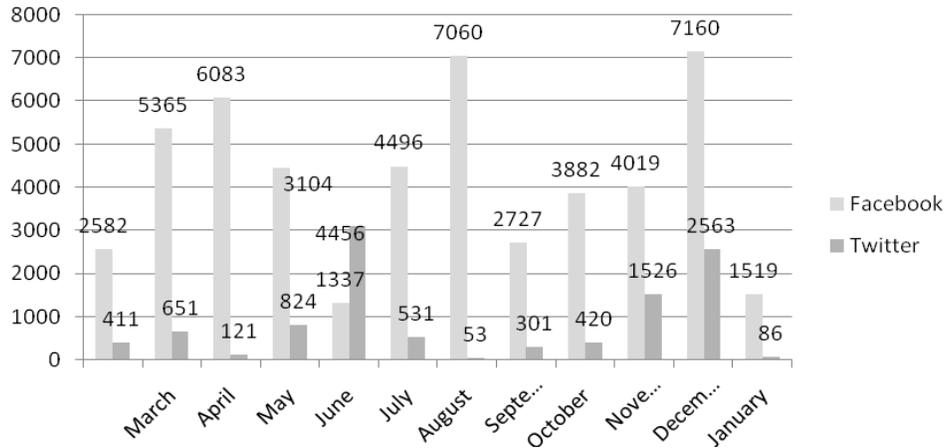


Fig. 1 shows that creation of Tomas Petrasek image in the researched period of time (February 2019 – January 2020) based on his Facebook profile usage. On Facebook he published 110 posts, while on Twitter – 72. The difference may not be reckon as significant, but when the two channels are analysed in the scope of character of the communication, Twitter seems to be almost unused. It should also be indicated that Twitter was the channel that the player used to communicate in Czech. Moreover tweets seem to be more personal, because Tomas Petrasek shows there his hobbies and interest, as Czech hockey, watching box galas (a photograph with Joanna Jędrzejczak) and Czech basketball.

Number of reactions (likes) related to contents that were published by the player are presented on Fig.2.

Fig. 2. Reactions on contents published by Tomas Petrasek in social media



As Fig. 2 presents, only in June 2019 the number of reactions by Petrasek’s followers on Twitter was higher than on Facebook. It was related to two the most popular tweets (protests against prime minister of Czech Republic, and recollection of the match between Czech and Netherlands in 2004).

Reactions on Facebook were much more numerous then reactions on Tweeter. Because of the diversity of distribution, average value should be indicated in the value of median of reaction. Its value comes out to 31,5 in case of Twitter and 375 in case of Facebook. Analysed dimension it is higher than the median value for the RKS Club (139 reactions).

Tomas Petrasek also runs Instagram profiles with 5,021 followers. Each photo gets several hundred reactions, but it doesn’t have high marketing value as the relationships are weak.

When activeness of fans and followers on official profiles of Tomas Petreasek is analysed, it may be observed that fans on Facebook are much more active. Minimal value of the reactions is 74 and maximum 1600. Despite the fact, that topics of the posts were similar, the ones published on Twitter were more personal. On Facebook Tomas Petrasek discussed professional issues as: results of matches, trainings, treatment of injuries etc.; his Twitter profile though was used to comment on more personal issues. The topics of the contents were analysed and the results of the study were presented in Fig. 3.

Fig. 3. Topics discussed by Tomas Petrasek on his official profile on Facebook

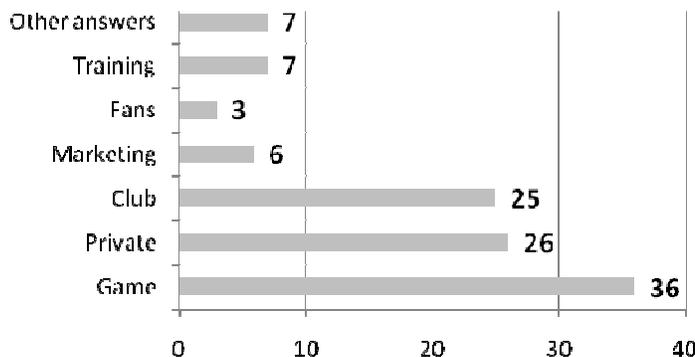


Fig. 3. presents topics of the posts on Facebook published by Tomas Petrasek. It may be reassumed that he mainly has informed his fans about matches and different issues concerning his club there. Apart from those, he has also posted many contents relating to his personal life. He presented his partner, a dog he owns, holidays, etc. All the posts may be described as positive ones. They present the player at work, and leading a normal life.

He also publishes information about charity actions, information about different events related to marketing strategy of the club, thanking addressed to his fans and sponsors. He has never discussed any political or ideological issues, and he has never posted any controversial posts, photos, etc. He has also never mentioned his friends from the past. On 26 May 2019 he wrote: „on Thursday I was really pleased to train with boys from the U7-9 group of the club, in which I started playing football. And yesterday I was cheering them on during the tournament they participated in. The boys won and they presented me with my own T-shirt that I used to play in when I was their age. Thank you very much again AFK Častolovice!”.

When performance of Tomas Petrasek in social media is analysed, it may be observed, that it is wholly applying the public relations rules. The lack of controversial contents is not only a consequence of personal characteristic of the player, but also understanding of the obligations he has towards the club he represents, and Ekstaliga.

Apart his own performance in social media, Tomas Petrasek is also asked to comment on matches and the club, and he is mentioned in media quite often. One of the most spectacular initiatives includes involving him into presentation of Czestochowa by the Czech television (www.ceskatelevize.cz). On 6 of March 2020 he was presented in Polish sport magazine *Przegląd Sportowy* in the interview titled: ”Petrasek: Szczęście odnalazłem w Polsce. to była najlepsza decyzja w moim życiu (Petrasek: I found happiness in Poland, it was the best decision in my life). A few months earlier his career was described in the material titled „Zasłużenie proszę pana, zasłużenie, czyli Petrasek w kadrze Czech” published on weszlo.pl. All that facts provoke discussions about Petrasek’s transfers and his career’s further development. When the topic of the paper is considered, the presented medial presence of Petrasek indicate the implementation of coherent strategy to create his image, not only as a sportsman. Another aspect that support that statement is related to his career as a co-owner of a touristic agency in Czech Republic in Hradec-Kralove. The LaMer Agency (<https://www.lamer-travel.cz>) was established in January 2020 by him and his partner. The player’s involvement in business indicate strategic planning and the image he creates, in that scope, can be analysed as an investment for the times after his retirement.

During the pandemic the player’s activity did not change significantly. Tomas Petrasek posted about 200 pieces of information on social media. In 2020, most were on Twitter, but messages on Facebook were more popular. It was also a platform for reporting on being the face of IndigoFifa20Cup or collaborating with charitable foundations.

Discussion

The medial image of Tomas Petrasek and its relation to his sport value is a great example how to use public relations tools in sport. Sport value has its consequences in publicity intensiveness and eventual transfers. When that dimension is analysed, a sportsman is reckon as a product that has its own brand not only in the time of sport career, but also after it is finished.

How the conducted analyse indicates, publicity of Tomas Petrasek is focused not only on his sport development, but also on the image he creates in relation to his prospective business projects. The player is not very intensively present in social media and does not publish post too frequently. The content he chooses for publication is not controversial. Tomas Petrasek nearly never gets involved in political issues (although they could give him a lot of fans’ attention), he also does not comment on any internal problems of the club he plays for. He does not write about issues or show photos that may cause any ambiguous comments related to his professional or private lives. He wants to promote his image as a person who is friendly, honest, hardworking and devoted to his club. In spite of the fact, that he is quite active in different media, during different types of interviews he gives, he has never discussed any controversial topics since he perceives team work as an integral element of the club’s image. When the contents of his posts are analysed, it may be observed that he has actively participated in charity actions; That involvement may be observed not only in case of actions that eventuate from his contract with the club, but also from his own willingness. The charity actions he participated in were organised in Poland and Czech Republic. Public image of Tomasz Petrasek is totally uncontroversial.

Conclusions

The attitude of Tomas Petrasek seems to be honest and natural. That may be the reason why his posts are so popular and positively perceived by his fans. That type of approach is also important when it is analysed in present and future consequences by different groups of stakeholders. Fans, potential sponsors, potential employers also investigate his performance and estimate his value in the scope of its potential as a marketing offer. Fans perceive the footballer as a representative of the club they support. Sponsors search for players whose positive image can be transferred to a product or a business they represent. Potential employers estimate not only sportsman’s sport value, as a player, but also him, as a professional who treats his obligations seriously. In consequence, when he builds his image as a professional sportsman, he supports further development of his sport career, and chances to find the best way for further development after his career would finish. That approach is important, because sport career may be disturbed in any time by sport injury or any other incident. In that scope, it is important for each player or an athlete to decide what are perspectives for his or her development considering their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as threats and opportunities. Strategic approach that the player introduces, includes perception of a sportsman as a product that is related to sport. That approach

makes it possible to stay independent from other's help and do not feel as his level of life has decreased, after his or her career is finished.

Tomasz Petrasek as a sportsman creates his image professionally and may be indicated as an example to follow. He shows how to use his own potential for further sport development as well as for the actions that are not related to sport. That is possible due to prudent strategy that he has to create his image as a person and as a sportsman.

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Recommended websites

- www.ceskatelevize.cz/porady/1096911352-objektiv/219411030401229/video/741241
- www.chwp.pl/novosci-i-komentarze/kontrakt-zawodnika-wyglada-polskiej-ekstraklasie/
- www.facebook.com/TomasPetrasekOfficial/
- www.innfootball.co/
- www.kurs.forfame.pl/kurs/pluginfile.php/36/mod_resource/content/1/Modu%C5%82%20II%20-%20PR%20w%20sporcie.pdf
- www.lamer-travel.cz/
- www.media.chwp.pl/29605-kontrakt-zawodnika-jak-to-wyglada-w-polskiej-ekstraklasie
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