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Recollections of lectures delivered by Jerzy Brycki at the University of Physical Education in Krakow: “Chess as a form of rehabilitation of the blind”

Introduction

Looking back, I can admit that my first encounter with chess was incidental. Before it happened, I had made several important steps in my career. The first was the graduation from the University of Physical Education in Krakow. With MA in Movement Rehabilitation, I was offered to continue my scientific explorations and work at the University.

What was important, is that at the beginning of the 1980s, a new subject was added to the Movement Rehabilitation program: Disability Sport. As a result of an extended discussion during one of the institute staff meetings, I was given the opportunity to design the subject’s curriculum.

Back then, the Internet resources were not available in Poland. In order to find information about sport for persons with disabilities, I had to conduct a library search. After a thorough analysis of the available literature, I noticed that only the textbook by Beck (1977) addressed some general issues regarding sports for persons with different dysfunctions. Other publications focused on separate topics like the history of sport (Beck, 1972; 1976) or members of Polish National Teams competing in Summer or Winter Paralympic Games in the years 1972-1980. These publications provided mainly statistical data like: gender and number of athletes, disciplines and competitions, results and medals (Beck, Janiszewski, 1972; Hady-Maniak, 1981, 1985; Maniak, Beck, 1972; Marczak, Skupniewski, 1976). Some works focused on: goals (Beck, 1973), tasks (Domański, 1979; Dziedzic, 1979; Kamińska, 1979; Laurentowski 1963a, 1963b; Walicka, Beck, 1967; Zawadzka 1971) as well as the ability of persons with disabilities to engage in sport activities (Beck, Walicki, 1971; Dziedzic, 1982). Other papers described trainings (Beck, 1971; Pąchalski, Majewska, 1973; Podleśny, Szczygieł, 1982; Witczak, Sozański, 1979). While referring to the above mentioned publications, it is worth pointing out that the majority of them was published in the “Vocational Rehabilitation of Disabled Newsletter” issued by the Research Institute for Social and Vocational Rehabilitation of the Central Association of Co-operatives of the Disabled and then by the Scientific-Research Centre of the Disabled Cooperative Movement of the Central Association of Co-operatives of the Disabled.

It did not come as a surprise because by the end of the 1980s sport of persons with disabilities was financed by the co-operative movement (Sobiecka, 2013). On the basis of my library search I came to the following conclusions:

- issues regarding disability sport in Poland were not of much interest among the Polish researchers,
- daily news about the athletes participating in different competitions, including Paralympics, was very limited,
- Polish scientific literature addressing these issues was scarce and hardly available (Sobiecka, 2015).

It is also worth pointing out to the then organizational structure of Polish parasports (Sobiecka, 2013). Sports were practiced only in the disabled cooperatives. In order to provide conditions for persons with different dysfunctions to engage in sports, sport clubs “Start” were founded. In this way, sports activity was based on Sport Associations of the Labor Cooperatives “Start” (Zrzeszenia Sportowe Spółdzielczości Pracy „Start”, ZSSP „Start”) and it was coordinated at the regional level by the ZSSP “Start” Regional Councils.

Given the above, I decided that the only source of up-to-date information about disability sport in Krakow region would be the ZSSP “Start” Regional Council in Krakow (Rada Główna Zrzeszenia Sportowego Spółdzielczości Pracy „Start”, 1983; 1988). Therefore, I visited the Council’s seat at Plac Szczepański 4. After many conversations with Jolanta Mazur, who was responsible for the sport activities there, I became a volunteer and then part-time employee. Thanks to that, I had access to the available documentation and detailed knowledge. Moreover, I could participate (as an observer) in all the trainings in our region.

The first meeting with Jerzy Brycki

I had visited numerous trainings for athletes with both locomotor disabilities and visual impairments, and I was particularly interested in blind persons playing chess and the equipment they used – Braille chess boards, pieces and clocks, I had never seen before. I must also admit that it was an extremely emotional experience to watch players’ deeply focused faces in a room filled with absolute silence. One of the players I so admired was the **doyen of the Polish blind chess players – Jerzy Brycki**, even though I was not aware of his great achievements back then (Picture 1.).



Fig. 1. Jerzy Brycki during a chess match
(from the private collection of Elżbieta and Jerzy Brycki)

I remember that regular chess trainings were organized in the “Start” sport club established by the Krakow Co-operative of the Blind “Sanel”. In December 1981, the club held the 1st Blind Chess Tournament – Antoni Tomasz Starczewski Chess Memorial dedicated to another blind player (Picture 2). The formula of the competition was original: the players did not actually use chess sets (board and pieces) but only the clock and Braille board or a piece of paper. The matches were played using only memory and imagination of the players (Brycki, 1982a).



Fig 2. Jerzy Brycki during the 1st Blind Chess Tournament
(from the private collection of Elżbieta and Jerzy Brycki)

As I was observing the tournament, a question came to my mind: why do movement rehabilitation specialists not recommend chess to patients with visual impairment? The more so that not every patient will have functional abilities or medical indications to engage in activities like athletics, swimming, sound ball games or winter sports.

Lectures

The question kept bothering me as I analysed the potential curriculum of the new subject. I decided that the only person who could inspire the future rehabilitants to use chess was Jerzy Brycki. After a while, during another training I asked **our Master** if he would agree to deliver a monograph lecture for the students of the University of Physical Education, as part of the Disability Sport subject. The intended leading theme of the meeting was **CHESS AS A FORM OF REHABILITATION OF THE BLIND**. He thought for a moment and said: “It is possible but I need to talk to my wife, Elżbieta, because she is my eyes”. I have a debt of gratitude until now. It is thanks

to his wife who accompanied him as his guide, that the University could offer the unprecedented lectures of the **Great Chess Player**.

Every meeting with the **Creator of chess play among the blind** was both theoretical and practical.

In the first part, Jerzy Brycki presented a brief history overview and game rules when the blind plays against a sighted player. He often emphasized that the growing proficiency presented by the visually impaired players earns them recognition among the able-bodied persons. He was convinced that it all depends on the properly adapted teaching methods, techniques and means, which do not focus on visual stimuli (Brycki, Brycka, 1985).

Using his experience, our guest, **the enthusiast of the Royal Game, class II chess trainer**, recommended that the classes should be carefully prepared and included attractive facts and trivia related to chess. He also suggested that they should be based on more than one teaching method. Referring to Śnieżyński (1984), he characterized and pointed to instruction, exploratory, expository or practical methods. At the same time, he emphasised active contribution of the blind players to the teaching-learning process, according to their abilities.

What was important was that he convinced the students how critical it is for a chess instructor to use the compensation role of touch and hearing when training persons with visual impairments. It allows them to shape correct imageries and notions related to the game. Jerzy also said that, in case of the blind persons, tactile schemes play an important role in the process of imagination development as well as regarding their thinking because the blind often develop stereognosis (Słownik Wyrazów Obcych, 1974). Spoken words, in turn, not only compensate the inability to explore the reality using sight, but they also inform the blind persons about the phenomena, characteristics or situations they cannot access (Brycki, Brycka, 1985).

At the end of his lectures, **our Master – Polish Chess Legend**, used his own example to emphasise the role of the game in psychical adaptation. He referred to the intellectual, emotional and social sphere. He noticed that developing adequate emotional reactions during sport competitions helped him develop resilience to new and challenging situations he faced everyday and build healthy relationships with the sighted people (Brycki, 1992b).

Over the years, I must admit that it was not the theoretical part of the lectures (presented above) that attracted numerous students but practical demonstrations – blind chess matches (Jerzy Brycki played using his memory and students used the chess set). The future movement rehabilitation graduates familiarised themselves first with the Braille equipment which is hard to imagine for able-bodied persons. Then they played against the master at the table placed on the dais.

I remember that Jerzy brought the chess boards and pieces, which were quite different than the traditional ones. Each square had a small hole in the centre. The holes were to keep the pieces in place and prevent them from being knocked over. In addition, all the black squares of the board were a few millimeters higher than the white ones. To enable the recognition of black and white pieces, the black ones had sharper finishing (Picture 3).

The match began with players greeting each other. The students also chose their captain who took part in the game. As benefits the real gentlemen, the guest made the first move. It was agreed that all pieces were moved by the captain who

informed the players about all the moves. The first match was quick as students made many mistakes. However, there were some insinuations which I recall with regret after all those years. The students did not believe **our Master** was blind. They suspected that he had used some visual support.



Fig. 3. Braille chess board and pieces
(from the private collection of Elżbieta and Jerzy Brycki)

Having these opinions in mind and after discussing the students' request with Jerzy, I agreed to some changes. The chess board was placed on a table in the centre of the room and students could invite other friends who could play chess well. As usual, after the theoretical introduction to the world of the Royal Game, a very emotional match began. It was a long game but in the end, as benefits the **Chess Legend**, he won. I can still remember the students exclaiming: How could this be? But Jerzy replied with focus and calm: "You have made a serious mistake". In order to explain the problem, he asked them to reconstruct the positions of the pieces. Then, as during a "bling game", that is, a game played in memory, without the board – he began to replay the match. He instructed the captain how to move the pieces one by one, the blacks and the whites. At some point he said: "And here is where the students made an unpardonable mistake". The **creator of chess play among the blind** continued to share his reflections: "If you had moved the figure here..., not here..., I would have been defeated". Puzzled, all the students stood up and gave the **Master** loud applause, paying him great respect.

Summary

The lecture was very popular among the students of both full-time and part-time studies. Thanks to it, **the doyen of Polish blind chess players** and his wife were invited to share their playing and training experiences during the National Scientific and Methodic Conference titled: "Sport for persons with disabilities in different age groups". It was organized by the then Institute of Movement Rehabilitation of the University of Physical Education in Krakow, as part of the Key Issue 10.7: "Optimisation of Physical Culture System as the Basis for Development of Health

and Physical Fitness". The Issue Manager was prof. dr hab. Tadeusz Ulatowski, while the thematic group leader (VIII.4: "The Role of Sport and Physical Recreation in Rehabilitation of People with Disabilities") was dr Tadeusz Kasperczyk.

The conference took place on 17-18 November 1983. There were numerous presentations focusing on different sport disciplines and one of them was delivered by Jerzy and Elżbieta Brycki during the 1st Scientific and Methodic Session. It was titled "Chess as a form of rehabilitation of the blind" (Program Ogólnopolskiej Konferencji Naukowo-Metodycznej, 1983). It was followed by an interesting discussion. As the whole conference was held at a very high level, the Scientific Board invited the speakers and other trainers and scientists to write a joint monograph.

Thus the work "The role of chess in rehabilitation of the blind persons" was published in 1985 in the book titled "Sport for persons with disabilities in different age groups", edited by Janusz Orzech and Joanna Sobiecka, issued by the University of Physical Education in Warsaw (Brycki, Brycka, 1985).

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Recollections of lectures delivered by Jerzy Brycki at the University of Physical Education in Krakow: “Chess as a form of rehabilitation of the blind”

Abstract

The paper presents the Author’s memories regarding the monograph lectures presented by the doyen of Polish chess for the blind – Jerzy Brycki, which were part of the Disability Sport curriculum. The lectures were delivered in the University of Physical Education in Krakow and their main theme was “Chess as a form of rehabilitation of the blind”.

Prior to the lectures, the Author participated (as an observer) in chess trainings and tournaments which she recalls as extraordinary emotional experiences. First, thanks to the opportunity to observe the blind players who remained deeply focused in an absolutely quiet room. Second, due to the unique character of the competitions as the players used only their memory and imagination. These experiences had inspired the Author to invite the Royal Game enthusiast to meet the movement rehabilitation students.

Each lecture delivered by the Master was both theoretical and practical. In the first part, Jerzy Brycki presented a brief history overview, the game rules when the blind plays against a sighted player, and the nature of learning chess. Using his own example, he emphasised the role of the game in psychical adaptation as well as intellectual, emotional and social development. The practical part included a blind chess match. Jerzy Brycki played using his memory whereas students used a Braille chess set. After the game, in order to explain the students’ failure, the Master always asked them to reconstruct the positions of pieces on the board. Then, as during a “bling game”, that is, a game played in memory, without the board – he began to replay the match. He instructed the captain how to move the pieces, one by one, the blacks and the whites, and commented the students’ moves.

As a result, Jerzy and his wife were invited to share their playing and training experiences during the National Scientific and Methodic Conference titled: “Sport for persons with disabilities in different age groups”. During the 1st Scientific and Methodic Session Mr and Mrs Brycki delivered a presentation titled “Chess as a form of rehabilitation of the blind”, which was highly rated by the Conference Scientific Board.

Key words: Jerzy Brycki, monograph lecture, blind person, sport for the disabled, chess

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