Sport, like so many other facets of life, has been affected by globalisation. By crossing national boundaries, globalisation, often also termed modern imperialism or Americanisation (Donnelly, 1996), has the ability to affect sport's various processes. This becomes more evident during mega events and when observing the traditional winners or the strongest nations. Paul De Knop and Sandra Harthoorn (1998) discuss several elements of the globalisation of sport including: the presence of international sport heroes; the world trade in sportswear; the increasing power of the international sports organisations; mega-sporting events as city-marketing; the mediaglobalisation; the migration of players and coaches; transnational teams; and sport and tourism development.

When participating at international events, countries are treated with equal rules in spite of their disparities. It so happens that national pride at international sports events is associated with the success the country (or rather its athletes and teams) obtains in those events (Chalip, Johnson & Stachura, 1996). In the past the most important goal appeared to be to participate in international events; in the 1960s the concern changed and it became to win medals. Recently, in the late twentieth century it has evolved further; the most important objective became to get the gold medal (Corbett, 1999).

Normally, groups of people are classified according to some characteristics that they share, such as hippy culture, Latin culture, arts culture and adolescent culture among others. Sport also has its own culture and there are different tendencies, such as elite sport culture and/or sport for all. Culture is defined in the current context as the values, customs and ways of life which distinguish one group of people from another (Dimmock & Walker, 1999). Sport bodies, as well as other forms of organisations, have their organisational culture in which they share a unique set of values, beliefs, attitudes, meta language, symbols, and behaviours (Doherty & Chelladurai, 1999; Heinilä, 1995). The collection of sporting bodies within a country could also share these elements in a national experience such as the Olympic Games.

A sport discipline is a social institution and 'it continues to live on its own and instil some self-value on participants' (Heinilä, 1995: 104). The presence
of sport heroes and the ambition of national pride, at the expense of medals obtained at international level, have imposed a model to follow in the elite level of sport. It has produced the development of a particular 'fragmented and segmented culture regrouping individuals independently from the national level' (De Knop & Harthoorn, 1998). This can be seen by observing how, to some extent, for the high performance community (athlete, coaches, judges and administrators) their identities are linked more to a network of training and competition than to any element of national belonging, such as language or religion (Harvey & Houle, 1994). Peter Donnelly (1996: 248) has already suggested the emergence of a global sport monoculture or ‘the emergence of prolympism as the basis of a global sport monoculture’. This paper presents the study of the elite sport culture in artistic gymnastics. It includes six national gymnastics sport organisations that share similar goals in the international world of sport.

Method
This paper presents the findings of two aspects explored while conducting a thesis project related with regulation and structural organisation. The participants were members of the national gymnastics organisations in six countries. The organisations were: the Australian Gymnastic Federation; French Gymnastics Federation; Indonesian Gymnastics Association; Italian Gymnastics Federation; and New Zealand Gymnastics Association. Eight participants from each country were interviewed and classified as administrators, coaches, judges and gymnasts; two from each group. In Ecuador only one administrator responded, so seven participants in total were consulted, thus providing a total of 47 participants. The research was developed working with qualitative approaches (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Thomas & Nelson, 1996). The interviews conducted with all the interviewees were semi-structured (Hitchcock & Hughes 1995, Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander, 1990). The participants from Ecuador could not be interviewed face to face, they sent their answers via electronic mail and recorded on audiotapes. They were contacted later in order to clarify specific aspects of their answers. The interviews with the other participants took place in Indonesia, Australia and China. All the participants are involved with elite gymnastics in their countries.

The presentation of this paper is divided into two parts: The first part presents an overview of their responses towards the impact of their particular cultures towards their practice or permanence in elite gymnastics. The second part looks at their perspectives about the artistic gymnastics code of points.

Artistic Gymnastics and Cultural Influence
The interviewees were asked if there were cultural elements in their countries that had contributed to their permanence or practice of artistic gymnastics. Most of the interviewees indicated that there were no cultural elements that influenced them to stay in the sport. It is interesting to observe that in all the
countries the majority believed that their particular culture did not influence them to continue in the elite gymnastics environment. In Australia, Italy, Ecuador and Indonesia there was a unanimous answer that there is no influence. While in France and New Zealand, one and three interviewees respectively, believed in a possible influence, yet most of the participants believed that it was not due to cultural influence. The interviewees indicated that artistic gymnastics at the elite level was not a popular sport in their countries. One of the best examples that summarises the participants' opinions was given by one of the coaches interviewed who indicated:

Gymnastics is popular at the general participation level in the clubs but it depends on what gymnastics we are talking about. The term gymnastics is used equally to name: the one that is practised in your room to the one at the Olympics. The term gymnastics is used freely, the man is born doing gymnastics. But the gymnastics at high level is not popular, people think it is too strange.

The interviewees provided several reasons why their culture had no impact on their permanence in the sport. In Australia and New Zealand, they indicated that netball and rugby were the most popular sports and that people had the tendency to practise outdoor sport: 'I guess we are really a very outside sport dominating country and here we are working very inside; so I'm actually not really following our culture whatsoever being involved' (Australian Coach) or, 'I don't think that there's any cultural aspect that made me involved in gymnastics' (New Zealand Administrator). They also indicated that gymnastics is too demanding, and that 'there are many sports in New Zealand that people do, and gymnastics takes so much time and it's hard to do' (Coach). Additionally, 'It's not a great culture in New Zealand to do gymnastics, it's not a popular thing ... it does not give any prestige, there's not prestige involved in it' (Coach).

In France the interviewees also mentioned the low popularity of the sport: 'it is not because of the culture of the country.... at national level gymnastics is not one of the most popular sports, like soccer, cycling, car racing (Formule), or tennis. Among these sports maybe gymnastics can be placed in eighth to tenth position' (Administrator). Another element pointed out by several interviewees was the French life style indicating that the French culture is more oriented towards leisure sports at recreational level:

The living standard is very good, people live well and comfortably. Gymnastics is a very demanding sport whereas we have a lot of sports that are for recreation and pleasure. For this reason it is difficult to keep a gymnast in gymnastics while there are all those opportunities outside that are easier ones. On the other hand, there are many people who like to watch gymnastics (Judge).
In Italy three participants mentioned one of the reasons why sport lovers, fans or practitioners to remain involved or interested in gymnastics, 'First, it is needed to be obsessed with gymnastics, to be masochist' (Administrator). The interviewees also addressed the issue of low popularity of the sport, indicating that gymnastics as a 'high performance [sport] has suffered. Children practice gymnastics for fun, recreation, but it is very little the number of participants who practise gymnastics at high performance levels' (Judge). They indicated that the culture in the country is to practice soccer: 'In our country, the national sport is soccer. So, one child out of two practices soccer, it could also be 1 and 1/2 in 2' (Coach).

In Ecuador the reasons varied from popularity of the sport to the lack of government support. They expressed that their permanence in the sport was because of their personal will. They indicated that children are more oriented towards soccer and that, 'Gymnastics is not an important sport in our country.... It is a very unknown sport' (Gymnast).

In Indonesia there is also the problem of the popularity of the sport:

Gymnastics is not a popular sport in our country. . . . I am involved in gymnastics because I like it. I was a gymnast. . . . It is not a cultural issue. . . . I don’t think the lack of popularity of gymnastics is due to a cultural problem, because since 1963 WAG (Women’s Artistic Gymnastics) was popular in certain cities (Judge).

Another issue raised was in relation to religious practice and its influence in the low participation in women’s artistic gymnastics, and one of the gymnasts answered: 'I’m Muslim . . . I don’t think it is a problem to practice gymnastics . . . Religion is not a problem. According to me is that people don’t know much about this sport, so many girls don't know about it' (Gymnast).

The answers that indicated there was a cultural influence were referring to the practice of gymnastics in general. It is interesting to observe from the different responses of the interviewees the similarities that exist in their perceptions about how their particular country has influenced their practice or permanence in high level gymnastics. Doherty and Chelladurai (1999: 281) remark that the 'culture of a group of individuals sharing some personal characteristic(s) reflects what they understand about themselves and their place in society'. Comparing the answers from the interviewees we could ask: 'Are we in front of a globalised cultured of elite gymnastics?' The reference to the popularity of the sport in different countries is a common element in all the answers. It is also true that there are specific circumstances in each country that have influenced this perception, however, it is fascinating to listen so many similar answers from people who are thousands of miles away from each other. The common answer among the interviewees is that artistic gymnastics at high performance level is not popular because it is too demanding and in some countries unknown to many.
Artistic Gymnastics and the Code of Points
The Codes of Points (men’s and women’s) of artistic gymnastics are a set of technical rules by which gymnasts have to follow established technical criteria to perform in their routines for competitions. It has gone through specific changes after each Olympic cycle. The Code of Points in artistic gymnastics has been a matter of debate on different occasions and in recent years it has raised several controversies (Buwick, 1999; Fink, 1998; Normile, 1999; 1998) and changes are expected to occur (Official FIG News, 1998a; 1998b). The idea in this paper is not to talk about the code in terms of technical matters, but to present the perspective of the interviewees related to the code. The coaches, judges and gymnasts (two from each group) from the different countries were asked the following question: How has the constant and periodical changes of the code of points influenced gymnastics in your country? Their answers are classified in three groups: a) Difficult, b) Not much concern, and c) Indifferent, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Responses towards the changes of the code of points*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Italy</th>
<th>Ecquador</th>
<th>Indonesia</th>
<th>New Zealand</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Difficult</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>33.34%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not much difference</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>66.66%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No concern</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Six interviewees per country

Australia, France and Italy comparatively speaking have had better results at international events than Ecuador, Indonesia and New Zealand. At first glance there is the belief that countries that achieve better results at international competitions do not have many problems with the Code of Points as those that perform poorly. The interesting element that came from the responses of the participants is that they believed the Code of Points has been difficult for most of them in spite of their results internationally. An Australian representative stated that: ‘the Code of Points has made the sport more and more difficult’. A New Zealander conceded that ‘the code of points has made it more difficult over the years to compete, to get minimal requirements, to come to ... top competitions is very, very hard’. The interviewees indicated that the level of complexity in the code every time it changes has been too high. One from Italy expressed the opinion that: ‘it was already hard to get good results with the previous one. ... For us ... the National team, it is not that hard but for juniors and the new gymnasts it is too difficult, complicated’.

There was a trend that the continuous changes in the code of points make it too hard to follow: ‘it changes every four years ... it’s too short time,
because we have to adapt and it's difficult' (Indonesia). The constant changes in the code have caused instability in the technical programs and it has affected the development of the sport in general, it has been 'a disaster. Continually you have to be changing so there is no time to assimilate something because it is immediately changed and you have again to completely change the program' (Italy). On the other hand, other interviewees pointed out that their opinions and the situation of most of the countries that are not at the top level are not considered: 'it has affected our country. Our country hasn't been considered' (Ecuador).

In France four of the interviewees' responses were categorised as 'not much concern'. They understand that the rules have been difficult, nevertheless, they have to follow the trends in order to participate in the competitions: 'as in all the countries, you know those are the rules, you have to do it. You have to take care of the changes and follow the evolution. Maybe the tendency is not so good but those are the rules. That's the influence of the code of points'. Another interviewee indicated that in order to arrive at this stage they have had to work for many years in order to have a structure that allows them to work with the changes in the code of points. Nevertheless they did not deny that the code is difficult to follow.

The responses categorised as 'indifferent' indicated that the changes of the code have been difficult and they are too far away from reality: 'it is said that the changes have come because gymnastics has evolved technically and scientifically. However, for us, the gymnastics level is still the same with the difference that now there is another system of evaluation' (Ecuador). They believe that the changes are too fast and more complicated. But they feel that it is a problem that only affects them because their level of gymnastics is not high.

As the popular proverb says 'the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence', some interviewees believed that in the top countries and in some European countries they did not have problems with the code. In a general sense there was a feeling that there were many countries in the middle and lower ranks that are not considered 'I think there are many countries in the middle. I don't think the top countries have any problem. The big gymnastics countries, they always had the regulations of the code of points, they have always tried to suit them best' (New Zealand). From this overview with people from other countries, and some of them with Olympic success, however, they also have the feeling that the code is difficult:

maybe if we were a country like Russia it wouldn't be difficult to follow this code, we, as well as others. It is not simple to follow the code. That's why it is necessary to stop the code a little bit, and especially it should be done not just by people who are in countries where gymnastics is super developed; because some of these directors don't go to the gyms and they don't know how difficult it is to master exercises of high difficulty (Italy).
The biggest criticism has been that the code has not considered the majority of its participants but a minority who were at the top. The code of points settles the conditions and requirements for the development of specific tendencies in the sport and it means that it could either benefit or damage the image and number of participants. Artistic gymnastics has to compete in a sport market that is surrounded by many different sports and the criticisms presented by its members are important to be considered. It means that the members who are really affected by the code and consequently have to spend more hours in the gym. One of the interviewees commented and advised in terms of the Code of Points:

The Code of Points has influenced but it has also created problems. There has been no philosophical thought towards the direction of the code. Especially after the 50s there was always reference to the East European countries, which had a particular state organisation with specific objectives, and that's how the rest of the countries were behind these countries, without thinking that these societies had a specific organisation and political system. Now this has been the fundamental mistake of the FIG [International Gymnastics Federation]. To go back now, it's extremely difficult, and to change in a short time. In a few words, the FIG has forced the rest of the countries to run behind these people without thinking where it was going. FIG has not been strong enough to stop it. There was a lack of vision in the objectives. Everybody tried to imitate and this had been the mistake. ... It must change, but of course you can not go back, it is impossible. But it is necessary to implement some changes little by little.

The interviewees were eager to speak about the code and its implications to the development of the sport. They were all aware that there have been mistakes in the process and that a more open approach has to be studied. A code that allows most people to participate and not to restrict artistic gymnastics to a minority should be the aim of the sport. The high demands of the sport, instead of creating more practitioners, could perhaps create more people watching it instead.

The interesting summary of this question is that all the interviewees believed that the code of points was too difficult in spite of their rank in the international gymnastics world. There are many people who share similar points of view on this issue despite their different experiences in artistic gymnastics. Again, this reinforces the global sport monoculture notion suggested by Donnelly (1996).
Conclusion
As it has been said by several authors (Corbett, 1999; Heinilä, 1995) a sport discipline instills self-value in participants; its participants share an ideology that can be nominated as their world view (Hoberman, 1984). The participants in this study responded in similar ways in spite of their cultural differences and distance, diverse and extreme in some instances. Nevertheless, they share similar values in the sense that they are all members of the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) and they abide by similar rules. It makes no difference if some of them are struggling in developing or developed countries; they share a similar view about artistic gymnastics. They believed artistic gymnastics at elite level is highly difficult, does not have many practitioners, and that the Code of Points is complex and difficult. They also mention other problems such as combining education and gymnastics training at a high level. This is a common problem in all the countries studied. In addition, they all made reference to financial problems, some with greater difficulties than in others. Nevertheless, they all believed that with more financial support they could develop better programs.

The respondents’ reaction to a lack of relationship with their national culture can only be tied to their overall feeling of how their sport is recognised within their particular society. This is related somewhat to the perception of their sport within the sporting culture of the country. Gymnastics gains public appeal, in most instances, through its success stories. The countries represented in this study have achieved limited recognition internationally, compared to, for example, Russia, Japan, China and Romania. The surveyed countries would more likely find recognition through one of the football codes. Quite obviously, the way to obtain gymnastic recognition is from outstanding performances. Often in the less prominent countries this can be achieved by one or two individuals having early training in a country known as a gymnastic giant or by the importation/emigration of coaches from these countries. Without such a boost to national gymnastic attainment, however, the prospect of some of these surveyed nations achieving better status is further exacerbated by lack of publicity or funds, or the lack of attention from the FIG concerning the development of the Code of Points. This vicious cycle continues, broken momentarily by events transcending national boundaries, such as the Olympic Games.

REFERENCES


