

THE POTENTIAL OF SPORTS HERITAGE FOR TOURISM – A CASE STUDY OF THE CITY OF ZADAR

Abstract

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Purpose – This paper aims to analyze the potential of sports heritage for the qualitative enrichment of the tourism offer in Croatia. More specifically, the focus of this empirical study is on Zadar, the city of basketball. It will be analyzed to what extent the basketball heritage of the city of Zadar is perceived by tourists and how it can influence the offer and competitiveness of the city as a sports tourism destination.

Methodology – An online questionnaire was created to examine respondents' attitudes towards basketball, local sports facilities, the quality of infrastructure and the impact of sporting events on the overall experience and attractiveness of the city as a destination for sports tourists. The collected data (mid-April to mid-May 2024; 200 respondents) was analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and t-test.

Results – The results indicate that for majority of respondents, sports activities and facilities are important when choosing a destination. Respondents associate Zadar with basketball and show interest in basketball and basketball events. About a third of the respondents believe that Zadar could be a basketball destination, but this would require expanding the range of basketball activities, improving basketball infrastructure, promotion and advertising as well as cooperation with key sports stakeholders, and considering the cost of the overall experience. Respondents who already recognize Zadar as a basketball destination are more interested in basketball-related tourist activities and are more likely to recommend Zadar as a basketball destination than respondents who do not recognize it in that way.

Contribution – In addition to a better understanding of sports heritage and sports nostalgia tourism, this paper has important practical implications for the organizers of the tourist offer in Zadar by providing them with guidelines for the development of the city as a sports tourism destination.

Keywords Sports heritage; Sports tourism; Nostalgia; Basketball; Zadar

Original scientific paper

<https://doi.org/10.20867/tosee.08.8>

INTRODUCTION

Sports tourism combines sport and tourism in a special way. Not only are the providers of sport and tourism the same subjects – people – but the motivation for participating in these activities is often identical (Gibson et al. 2019; Higham 2021; Sánchez González et al. 2025). In addition, sport itself does not remain an incidental part of the stay, but often becomes the main motive for the tourist trip, making sports tourism one of the most propulsive sectors in tourism, generating around 10% of global consumption and an estimated growth rate of 17.5% between 2023 and 2030 (UN Tourism 2024). But even within sports tourism, the motivation of participants can be extremely complex. Therefore, sports tourism as a specific form of tourism is extremely heterogeneous, with participants seeking new experiences through active or passive participation (Mascarenhas et al. 2024; Pashaie and Perić 2023; Sánchez González et al. 2025).

Within sports tourism, sports nostalgia tourism occupies a special place, drawing mainly on the tangible and intangible heritage of sport (Ramshaw 2019; Ramshaw and Gammon 2005). Sport is an integral part of a destination's heritage and many tourists choose to visit places associated with a particular sporting past and sporting culture (Saputra et al. 2025; Takata and Hallmann 2025). While this type of sports tourism is well recognized in the world, especially in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia (Hinch and Ramshaw 2014; Pichierri 2023; Wise 2024), it has only modest beginnings in Croatia. Therefore, this article analyses the potential of sporting heritage to enrich the quality of the tourism offer in Croatia. The specific example of the city of Zadar is used to analyze the extent to which Zadar's basketball heritage is perceived by tourists and how it can affect the city's offer and competitiveness as a sports destination.

After presenting the basic concepts on which this paper is based, the methodology and results of the empirical research are presented. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusions as well as recommendations for the organizers of the sports tourism offer in the city of Zadar.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW – SPORTS HERITAGE AND NOSTALGIA SPORTS TOURISM

Sports heritage is recognized as a strong driver for tourism (Cho et al. 2019; Heydari et al. 2024; Ramshaw 2019; Reichwein 2023). Ramshaw and Gammon (2005) distinguish four characteristics of sports heritage: (1) immovable tangible sports heritage (sports stadiums and halls, monuments and natural sites), (2) movable tangible sports heritage (museums and halls of fame and

sporting events), (3) intangible sports heritage (intangible heritage and institutions) and (4) goods and services with a sports heritage component (marketing and management of tourism products). The above categorization includes places, attractions and experiences based on the sporting past. Subsequent work critically reviews this categorization and proposes additional dimensions of sport heritage that should place greater emphasis on the intangible characteristics of sport heritage, sport monuments as a form of immovable, tangible heritage, and recognition of the increasingly global nature of sport and its impact on fans and other sport followers (Gordon and Ramshaw 2022; Ramshaw and Gammon 2017).

Although the above points to a holistic approach to sports heritage, a large proportion of sports heritage- based experiences are summarized under the term sports nostalgia tourism. Although nostalgia has long been treated as a form of mental disorder and associated with a negative human condition (Earl and Hall 2023), in the late twentieth century it is defined as a sentimental longing for the past, whereby the desire to experience and preserve heritage can be understood as a form of nostalgia (Gentry and Smith 2019). This has significant implications for cultural tourism and heritage tourism, through which the relationship between nostalgia and tourism is most commonly explored (Newland and Taylor 2010; Wang 2023). In this sense, sports nostalgia tourism involves tourists travelling to famous and significant places associated with a particular sport, event, club, institution or place that they identify with or support (Dodig et al. 2022; Pichierri 2023; Ritchie 2005). Within this type of tourism, nostalgia is defined by a specific spatial dimension, sporting experience, socialization and personal and group identity of tourists (Borovčanin and Lesjak 2021; Cho et al. 2017).

Although it is extremely important to provide an authentic experience (Takata and Hallmann 2025), this is not always possible and the experiences are often staged in sports museums, halls of fame and visitor centers (Ramshaw and Gammon 2005). Sports museums and halls of fame, which offer memories of past sporting success alongside tangible elements of sporting heritage, are the best-known product of heritage and nostalgia- based sports tourism (Ramshaw 2019). Examples include the Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield and the Liverpool Football Club Museum at the iconic Anfield stadium. Numerous associations involved in the preservation, interpretation and promotion of sports heritage also contribute significantly to the popularization of this type of tourism, such as the International Sports Heritage Association – ISHA, which aims to educate, promote and support organizations and individuals involved in the preservation of sports heritage (ISHA 2024). In any case, for the development of tourism based on intangible sports heritage, it is necessary to harmonize other elements from the internal (e.g., management and marketing, human resources) and external (economic, socio-cultural, legal, technological and environmental factors) environment in addition to a specific sports tourism infrastructure, that is, attractions (Heydari et al. 2024).

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT - THE CITY OF ZADAR AND BASKETBALL

The city of Zadar is the administrative center of Zadar County and the fifth largest city in the Republic of Croatia (Zadar County 2024). It is located in the central part of the Croatian coast and is well connected to other places in Croatia by state roads and the A1 motorway (Zagreb - Split) as well as by airlines (Zadar Airport) and ferry connections with Ancona in Italy. The city is also connected to numerous islands in the Zadar archipelago by ferry and catamaran services. The entire county and Zadar itself are important tourist destinations. In 2024, Zadar County recorded 15,425,005 overnight stays (which accounts for 14.17% of all overnight stays in Croatia), and Zadar recorded 2,553,847 overnight stays (which accounts for 2.4% of all overnight stays in Croatia). The structure of accommodation capacities is dominated by rooms and flats (almost 68%), campsites (23.5%) and hotel accommodation make up only about 5% of accommodation units (Zadar County Tourist Board 2024).

As far as sports infrastructure is concerned, Zadar has several large sports and recreation centers (Višnjik Sports Centre or Krešimir Ćosić Hall, ŠRC Mocire and ŠRC Ravnice, Jazine Hall, Stanovi Football Stadium, Bagat Football Field and the Kolovare outdoor swimming pool. Although Zadar has a long tradition in many sports (e.g. a shooting club was founded in 1870 and the first football match was played in 1887), Zadar is best known as a city of basketball. The beginnings of basketball in Croatia are linked to Zadar and the 1920s and 1930s (Marić 2004). An important turning point occurred in 1951, when the Zadar Basketball Club became an independent club and a large part of its activities were linked to the iconic Jazine Hall. In 2008, the club moved to the Višnjik Hall, a modern hall with a capacity of 9,200 spectators, named after the legendary player Krešimir Ćosić, who in 1996 became the first Croatian and third person outside the USA to be inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame (Days of Kresimir Cosic Association 2019). Zadar's dedication to basketball is also reflected in the slogan "God created man, and Zadar created basketball", which is displayed in the Jazine Hall. The Tornado fan group (founded in 1965), which supports the Zadar basketball club, is also one of the oldest fan groups in Europe and is considered to be at the heart of the city's sporting spirit. Basketball in Zadar is more than just a sport - it is a true symbol of the city's identity and an important part of its tradition and cultural heritage.

3. METHODOLOGY

A questionnaire consisting of four parts was created for the purposes of the study. When analyzing Zadar as a sports and basketball destination, the respondents' interest in basketball, attitudes towards local sports facilities, the quality of infrastructure and the impact of sports events on the overall experience and attractiveness of the city as a sports destination were examined. The questionnaire questions were designed by the first author based on previous work by Carvache-Franco et al. (2024) and Research Resolutions & Consulting Ltd (2007).

The data was collected via an online survey (Google Forms) distributed among domestic and foreign tourists visiting Zadar. The distribution was done with the help of local tourist boards in Zadar County, which sent a link to the questionnaire through their channels, including social networks and mailing lists. After receiving the questionnaire, respondents were asked to forward the link to their acquaintances, thus using the snowball method. The data collection lasted from mid-April to mid-May 2024 and a total of 200 correctly completed questionnaires were collected. The data collected using the questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Pearson correlation was used to test the correlation between the level of awareness of respondents about Zadar as a basketball destination and their willingness to recommend the city as a basketball destination. A series of t-tests was used to test the differences between groups of respondents who already recognize and those who do not recognize Zadar as a basketball destination in terms of their interest in specific basketball-related tourist activities and their willingness to recommend the city as a basketball destination.

The profile of respondents in Table 1 shows that men (52%) and women (47%) are equally represented in the sample, most of them of younger age, which is due to the fact that older people are less inclined to use technology. Respondents are mainly from Slovenia (22%), Croatia (20%), Germany (16%) and Italy (13.5%). For the majority (74%), it was not their first visit to Zadar, with 36.5% of respondents having been here more than five times. Furthermore, for almost 57% of respondents, the main reason for visiting the destination is to rest and relax, while for 18% of tourists, sport is the reason for visiting the destination.

Table 1: Respondent profile

Gender	N	%	Country	N	%
M	104	52	Slovenia	44	22
F	94	47	Croatia	40	20
Not known	2	1	Germany	32	16
Age	N	%	Italy	27	13.5
18-24	122	61	Austria	9	4.5
25-34	47	23.5	Serbia	7	3.5
35-44	20	10	Spain	7	3.5
45-54	7	3.5	USA	4	2
55-64	4	2	Other	30	15
Number of visits	N	%	Purpose of visit	N*	%*
1	52	26.0	Rest & relaxation	113	56.5
2-3	55	27.5	Sport	36	18
4-5	20	10.0	Business	20	10
> 5	73	36.5	Other	65	32.5

*Note: Multiple answers possible.
 Source: Adapted from Marošević (2024)

4. RESULTS

Table 2 shows that 43% of respondents are interested in basketball and that one third of respondents (33%) regularly participate in basketball-related activities (e.g., playing, watching games, following the news). Furthermore, for about 60% of respondents, sports activities and facilities are important when choosing a destination, and the majority of respondents (62%) are aware of the fact that Zadar is associated with basketball. In this sense, as many as 73% of respondents are aware of the Zadar Basketball Club and slightly more than half of respondents know Krešimir Ćosić and the Višnjik Hall. The awareness of the Tornado fan group, Jazine Hall, Giuseppe Pino Gjergja (another legend of Zadar basketball) is much lower, and 13% of respondents have never heard of any of the above terms.

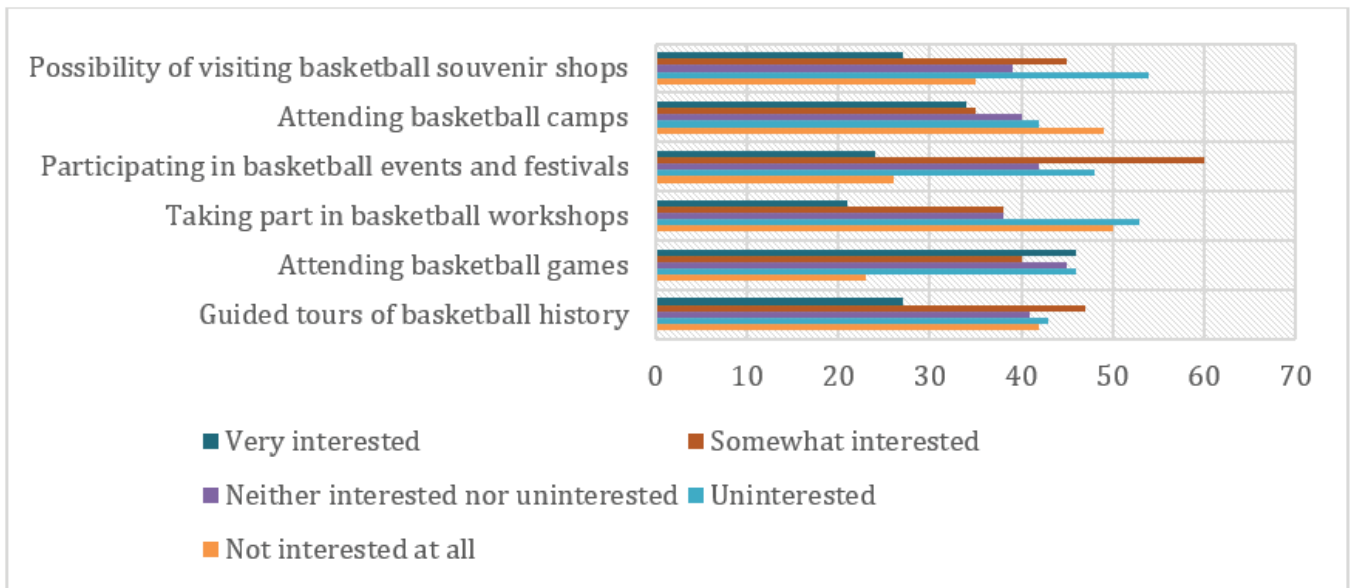
Table 2: **Interest in sport and recognition of Zadar as a city of basketball**

Respondents' interest in basketball	N	%
Not interested at all	29	14,5
Not interested	41	20,5
Neither	44	22
Interested	43	21,5
Very interested	43	21,5
Frequency of participation in basketball activities	N	%
Never	23	11,5
Rarely	64	32
Sometimes	42	21
Often	42	21
Always	29	14,5
The importance of sports activities when choosing a destination	N	%
Not important	35	17,5
Slightly important	46	23
Moderately important	62	31
Important	42	21
Very important	15	7,5
Level of awareness of Zadar as a basketball destination	N	%
Completely unaware	33	16,5
Quite unaware	43	21,5
Somewhat aware	36	18
Quite aware	44	22
Completely aware	44	22
Familiarity with basketball related terms in Zadar	N*	%*
Basketball Club Zadar	146	73
Krešimir Ćosić	107	53,5
Višnjik Hall	105	52,5
Fan Club Tornado	77	38,5
Jazine Hall	55	27,5
Giuseppe "Pino" Gjergja	33	16,5
None	26	13

*Note: Multiple answers possible.
 Source: Adapted from Marošević (2024)

In terms of tourists' preferences and expectations regarding basketball in Zadar, Figure 1 shows that respondents are most interested in attending basketball games (as spectators) and basketball events and festivals. Although other activities (guided tours of basketball history, basketball camps, visiting souvenir shops and actively playing basketball) also attract some interest from respondents, this percentage is slightly lower.

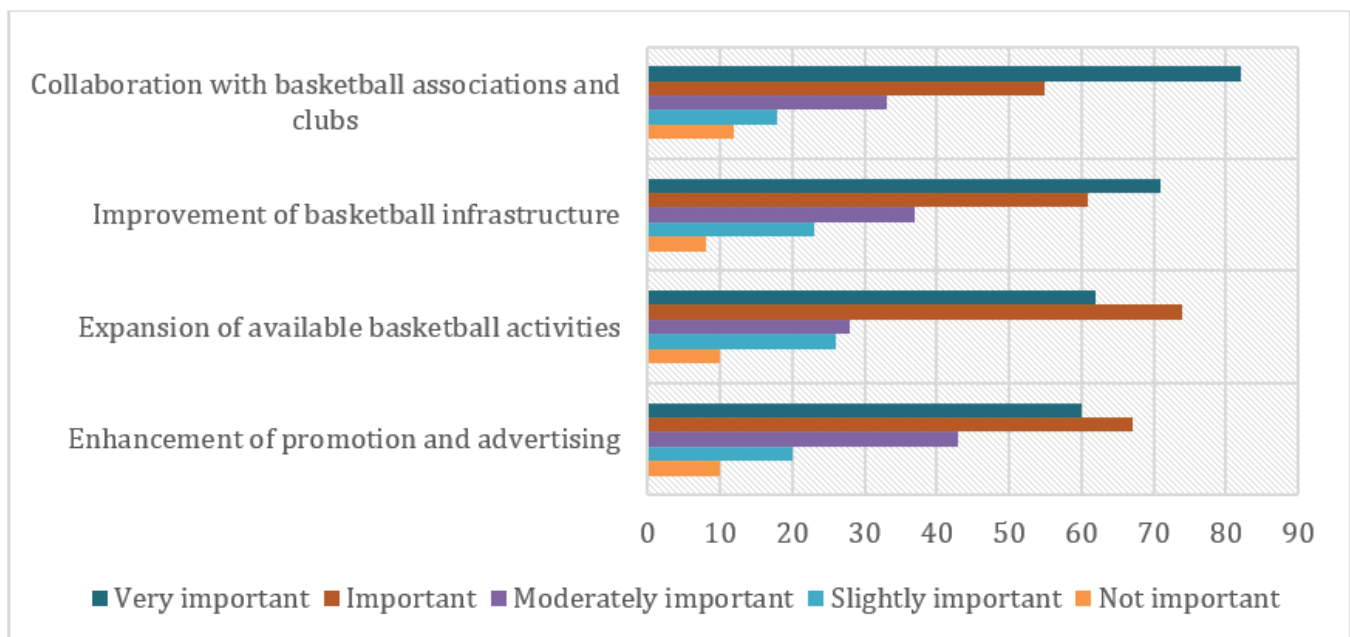
Figure 1: Interest in potential activities



Source: Adapted from Marošević (2024)

Of the total number of respondents, one third (32.5%) believe that Zadar could be primarily a basketball destination, 18% believe that this possibility is not realistic, and as many as 49.5% of respondents are not sure about this possibility. However, in order to get closer to this goal, respondents consider it necessary to improve promotion, expand the range of basketball activities, improve basketball infrastructure and cooperation with basketball associations and clubs (Figure 2). All of the above activities are rated as very or fairly important by an equal number of respondents (62-67%).

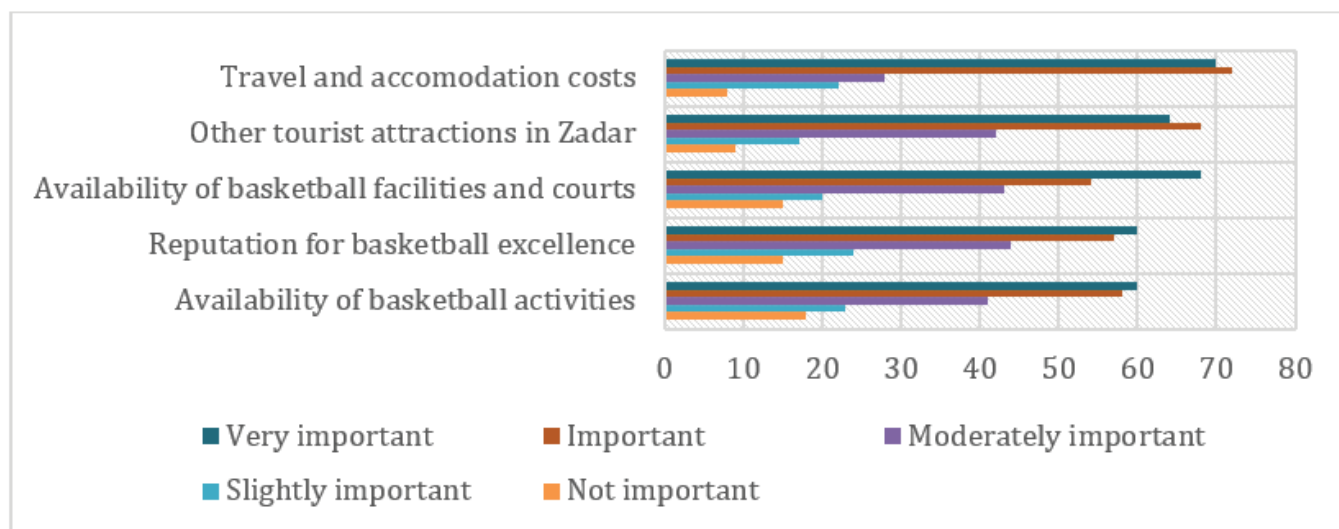
Figure 2: Opportunity for advancement



Source: Adapted from Marošević (2024)

Figure 3 shows the factors that respondents consider important when choosing a sports holiday destination. For around 70% of respondents, the choice of destination still depends primarily on the cost of travel and accommodation as well as other available tourist attractions in Zadar, while factors related to basketball (availability of basketball activities, facilities and courts as well as reputation for basketball excellence) are slightly less important.

Figure 3: The importance of factors when choosing a sports destination



Source: Adapted from Marošević (2024)

Finally, 22.5% of respondents would definitely recommend Zadar as a basketball destination and 40.5 very likely. On the other hand, 28.5% of respondents are not sure and only 5% and 3.5% would most probably and definitely not recommend Zadar respectively. The relatively high number of those who are willing to recommend Zadar indirectly speaks for their satisfaction with Zadar. Pearson correlation between the respondents' level of awareness of Zadar as a basketball destination and their willingness to recommend Zadar as a destination for a basketball-themed vacation is moderate ($+0.528$, $p=0.000$). However, there is a strong difference between the group of respondents who recognize Zadar as a basketball destination and those who do not regarding their interest in specific basketball-related tourist activities and their willingness to recommend the city as a destination for a basketball-themed vacation. Respondents who already perceive Zadar as a basketball destination are more interested in basketball-related tourist activities and are more likely to recommend Zadar as a basketball destination (Table 3).

Table 3: Differences between groups in their perception

Statement/Groups	Low awareness (N=76)		High awareness (N=124)		t	p (2-tailed)
	M	SD	M	SD		
1.How interested are you in participating in these specific basketball-related tourist activities during your visit to Zadar?						
- Guided tours of basketball history	2.53	1.351	3.08	1.319	-2,848	.002
- Attending basketball games or tournaments	2.58	1.319	3.58	1.197	-5,397	.000
- Participating in basketball workshops	2.18	1.272	2.91	1.282	-3,912	.000
- Engaging in basketball-related cultural events or festivals	2.57	1.268	3.33	1.139	-4,301	.000
- Basketball Memorabilia Shop	2.28	1.239	3.24	1.226	-5,371	.000
-Basketball Camps	2.38	1.356	3.08	1.400	-3,495	.000
2.How likely are you to recommend Zadar as a destination for a basketball-themed vacation?	3.21	1.123	4.03	0.796	-6,043	.000

Source: Authors' calculations based on Marošević (2024)

5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE THE BASKETBALL HERITAGE OF ZADAR

Although sport is not the main reason for the majority of respondents to come to Zadar, the research results show that sport is still important when choosing a destination, which once again confirms how complementary the phenomena of sport and tourism are (Higham 2021; Mascarenhas et al. 2024). A large number of respondents recognize the sporting characteristics of the city and are quite loyal when choosing a destination. Although the results do not explicitly answer the question of whether repeat visits are motivated by sports or basketball or other content, a high proportion of repeat visitors indicates a long-term connection with the destination. Certainly, part of this connection can be attributed to a strong sense of sport nostalgia, with repeat visits reflecting the sentimental value of past experiences and connections with local sporting heritage and culture, as

argued by Ramshaw and Gammon (2005) and Gordon and Ramshaw (2022). The results further suggest that tourist who are already aware of Zadar's rich basketball heritage and recognize it as a basketball (sport) destination are more likely to be consumers of basketball-related activities than those who do not perceive Zadar as basketball destination. Additionally, this group of aware tourists is more likely to recommend Zadar as the basketball destination confirming the importance of "being aware" concept in providing support for the tourism development (Taks et al. 2018). The above confirms that the city of Zadar can follow the examples of other cities (see e.g. An and Yamashita 2022; Pichierri 2023; Vila-López et al. 2024) and utilize the potential of sports heritage and sports nostalgia tourism to shape the destination's identity and image.

However, considering that authentic sporting experiences and storytelling are key to attracting tourists interested in sporting heritage (Heydari et al. 2024; Takata and Hallmann 2025), the above should be seen in the context of the fact that this may not be enough. As Jamal Mahdi and Esztergár-Kiss (2023) and Karl et al. (2020) have claimed and this research has confirmed, the price of the overall experience (which includes the trip, accommodation and accompanying attractions) is a key criterion by which tourists choose destinations.

From the previous analysis, concrete recommendations can be derived to better utilize Zadar's rich basketball heritage in order to improve the recognition and further tourism development of Zadar. Targeted promotion, education, development of sports and basketball infrastructure with related content and active involvement of the local community can be singled out as the most important recommendations. The above confirms that the development of tourism based on sports heritage is not easy and that it is necessary to harmonize many elements to ensure success, as Heydari et al. (2024) also emphasize in their work, especially considering the price.

Advertising is key to recognizing destinations in the market, and sports tourism destinations are no exception (Achilleos et al. 2021; Florido-Benítez 2022). Targeted marketing campaigns could include advertising on sports channels and the organization of promotional sports events such as guest appearances by famous basketball players. Participation in sports fairs in collaboration with travel agencies offering special packages for basketball fans is another form of promotional activity. Considering that younger age groups are on average more active than older generations when it comes to playing sports and using digital tools (Seyfi et al. 2022), marketing strategies should also include the promotion of basketball events via social networks and other digital channels. Given current trends suggesting that 75% of the world's population will be using social media by 2028 (Statista 2024), this strategy would also include other age groups. In addition to sports channels, older age groups can be attracted due to nostalgia, especially when it comes to memories of basketball legends Krešimir Ćosić and Pino Gjergja and the sporting successes of the Zadar Basketball Club.

Therefore, in addition to promotion, additional educational and interactive content about sports heritage in promotional materials for the city and the entire county would be of great importance, as well as the installation of appropriate tourist signage directing tourists to historically significant sports venues and facilities and providing relevant information about Zadar's basketball greats and historical games. This would be complemented by organized guided tours to the most important sites of Zadar's basketball past and present. This requires an appropriately equipped sports infrastructure capable of receiving a certain number of visitors and providing them with content that will fascinate them. Without having to invest in the construction of new sports facilities, the existing halls and courts (especially the Jazine Hall as a place of the beginnings of basketball) should be modernized and enriched with new content such as souvenir shops and museums, which have long been recognized as important places to promote nostalgic sports tourism (Ramshaw 2019).

The offer can also be enriched by organizing high-level international tournaments that would attract tourists and athletes from all over the world (the Zadar Basketball Tournament as an example of good practice), but also small city/neighborhood tournaments. Both require good cooperation with the local basketball clubs and active involvement of the local community, not only through education and promotion of the sporting heritage and importance of basketball for Zadar, but also through volunteering at basketball events, which is an extremely good way to create greater connections within the local community (Moustakas 2021) and provide visitors with an authentic experience (Duursma et al. 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study confirmed that Zadar, a city with a rich history and sporting heritage, has the potential to become a recognizable basketball destination. Despite the long-standing association with this sport, the results point to the need to further develop infrastructure, promotion and education in order to further strengthen this segment of the tourist offer. Sport in Zadar is not only a form of physical activity, but also a strong identity of the city, linked to the successes of the Zadar Basketball Club and its sporting greats.

The theoretical contribution of this study is reflected in the valorization of sports heritage, sports nostalgia tourism and sports management. By examining the impact of basketball heritage on tourism, the thesis contributes to understanding the importance of preserving sporting identity in the context of tourism development. Sports nostalgia tourism, which is associated with the successes of sports teams, can play a key role in attracting a specific group of visitors interested in authentic sports experiences.

The aforementioned practical recommendations include the increased promotion of basketball heritage through digital media, the organization of thematic tourism packages and the improvement of sports infrastructure, highlighting the need to modernize the Jazine Hall, which is of historical importance for basketball in Zadar. It is also proposed to establish a basketball museum in Zadar, where visitors can experience the rich history of this sport in the city. In addition, the organization of international tournaments and cooperation with famous basketball players could further enhance Zadar's image as a sports city. It is crucial to involve the local community through educational programs, volunteering initiatives and cooperation with tourist boards to further raise awareness of basketball heritage and its potential for tourism.

The main limitation of the research concerns the relatively small sample of respondents, mainly younger people, which could affect the generalizability of the results. Future research should include a larger sample with a stronger representation of different age groups and use qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups alongside more complex quantitative methods of analysis in order to gain a deeper insight into the perceptions of tourists, but also the local population, about sports tourism in this city. The reason why Zadar is still not even more intensively recognized as a basketball destination could be that Zadar, like the whole county, is currently primarily a holiday destination with a focus on summer tourism and a lack of basketball-related content and infrastructure. Given the favorable conditions, strategic investment and better planning can help position Zadar as a leading sports and tourism destination in the region.

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