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Strategic analysis of Slovenian women’s handball

Abstract
The purpose of the study was to analyse the situation in Slovenian women’s handball with the use of theoretical findings from the area of strategic sports management. The basic methodological tool used was SWOT analysis: partial and holistic methods have been used throughout the study, whereas methods of description and comparison have been mostly used within the theoretical part of the study. The findings revealed that in 2004, Slovenian women’s handball was ranked 10th in 2004 European Handball Federation rankings, whereas in 2009 it was ranked only 25th. The subject of the study is an analysis of the influence of internal and external factors on the performance of Slovenian women’s handball; the analysis could be used as a starting-point for setting future strategic development of this sport. The purpose of an in-depth analysis of the situation is to contribute to fulfilling a goal of reinstating Slovenian women’s handball among the ten best European national teams. In general, it can be concluded that strategic management will have to be introduced at all levels of Slovenian women’s handball.

Key words: women’s handball, SWOT analysis, strategic management.

1. Introduction
Success in sport is usually linked with various areas within the discipline that require continuous development. Popularity of particular sports discipline, media attention and thus related material stability is related to success of senior national teams. Adequate organisational and financial structure of the sports discipline is one of requirements for development of sport and national teams.

Slovenian women’s handball has in recent years achieved good results with clubs and national teams; furthermore, junior national teams have permanently qualified for the major competitions. Unfortunately, in the last few years national teams experienced the stagnation and demise in the results (Bon, Čuk, 2006). Reasons for regression are to be found in various areas. It is generally thought that there are considerable reserves in organisation, the work of clubs and the management of national governing body.

In 2004, the Expert Council and the Slovenian Handball Federation (RZS) defined the following goals of Slovenian women’s handball (Bon, Čuk, 2006):
1. To achieve noticeable and, for marketing, interesting results in women’s senior national team.
2. To qualify permanently with junior national teams to major competitions.
3. To nurture female players, national team members with emphasis on sport and psycho-social development.
4. To create possibilities for improved performance of all clubs.
5. To increase the number of female players on the basis of widespread quality in school and club handball in the youngest categories, including mini-handball.
When the goals, set in 2004, are analysed, it is clear that only the last one has been fulfilled and even that one partially. The other four goals remain unfulfilled; in some cases the situation now is even worse than in 2004.

The subject of the study is an analysis of Slovenian women’s handball in order to set groundwork for formation of developmental strategy of women’s handball in future. Importance of strategic management for future success in sport has been emphasised. The research problem is current situation of Slovenian women’s handball and the influence of internal and external success factors of women’s handball. The purpose and goals of the study are to examine current situation of Slovenian women’s handball through theoretical findings from the area of strategic sports management, thus setting the starting-point for creation of strategy.

The study has been divided into two parts. First part is theoretical and is related to strategic sports management, particularly on the external (environment) and internal (organisation) analysis. Theoretical review defines terms in order to make it easier to understand the research subject. Within the theoretical research, mainly used methods are description and comparison, whereas throughout the study whole- and part-methods are used. Deduction method is used to analyse current situation of Slovenian women’s handball on the basis of review of professional literature.

In formation of theoretical part of the study, mostly domestic and some foreign professional literature from the field of strategic management has been used. In the second, practical part, current situation of women’s handball has been analysed with the help of SWOT analysis, which represents a key approach to complete analysis within strategic management (Pučko, 2006). Basic activities of SWOT analysis are therefore studying the information from outside and inside the organisation, setting the opportunities and threats in the environment and defining strengths and weaknesses of the organisation. Data were collected with the method of interviewing (former president of Expert Council, present president of Expert Council, professional associates at Slovenian Handball Federation, Secretary General of Slovenian Handball Federation), by studying available and accessible written sources and certain statistical data from official website of Slovenian Handball Federation (INFOSTAT system), some of the work is also based on the personal observations of authors.

2. Strategic management and SWOT analysis

A process of strategic management can be defined as dynamic process, consisting of four parts: formulation of assumptions for strategic planning, development of strategies, implementation of strategies and strategic control (Pučko, 2006; Pučko, Čater, Rejc Buhovac, 2006). In one way, guidelines of the theory of strategic management from business world were used, stating that strategic management is defined as formation of plans and implementation of activities, which vitally influence the matters of life, general and continuous importance for the entire company or organisation. It is more so a business philosophy than exact technique, which is based on the dynamics of the company’s environment. Strategic management provides an answer to what is present and what should be a future business field of the company (Pučko, 2006). On the other hand, it is important to understand that sport most of the times follows the principles of club management and is based on the law of non-profit organisations and the law of sport, therefore strategic management should be adapted to these particularities.
When a process of strategic planning is analysed in detail, in practice of non-profit organisations (the majority of sports organisations are of this type) following steps are being undertaken (Bryson, 2004): definition of initial agreement, competencies and the mission of the organisation, an analysis of external and internal factors and their fusion into a holistic (SWOT) analysis, setting the goals of an organisation and development of strategies (followed, of course, by implementation of strategies and strategic control, although these two phases are not a part of planning process, but rather independent phases of strategic management). Some of these steps will be presented in detail.

The mission of an organisation defines its area of work, it expresses certain future directions of functioning and purposes of acting towards business environment. It also represents the way of fulfilling long-term business definitions of organisation (Fred, 1995). Beside its mission, a key strategic document of any sports organisation should be a logically defined vision, representing a projection of the envisaged future of organisation. Creation of a vision is a process, which is continually changing and being supplement. Definition of a vision is the task for the top management of the organisation. It has to be defined clearly, it has to represent a challenge for employees and it has to be directed into future, yet still be close enough for the employees to identify with it.

Evaluation of the external factors of an organisation is important in order to find out who are important outside participants of the studied organisation and where an organisation is ranked according to the performance criteria of these participants. In order to gather all the desired information, general environment needs to be analysed (tendencies in sub-environments: from economic, political-legal, social, technological and demographic sub-environment) as well as task (industry) environment (current and potential spectators of the matches and competitive and partnering organisations) of the organisation (Pučko, Čater, Rejc Buhovac, 2006). With the use of external analysis, opportunities and threats within the environment are being identified.

The internal environment of a sports organisation is evaluated mostly to gain insight to the strengths and weaknesses and also the view of participants within the organisation. When evaluating the internal environment, it is sensible to focus mainly on measuring the results of work and input and processes of the organisation. Analysis is directed on the past performance of organisation, evaluation of its current strategy, its resources and potential. The results of such analysis are identified strengths and weaknesses of the organisation.

On the basis of initial agreement, competencies, mission and the vision as well as the findings of analysis of external and internal environment, strategic goals of the organisation are being set. They are the foundation for evaluation of achieved situation in comparison to the planned situation. It is prudent to set only those goals which are suitable to the interests of key individuals and stakeholders who can enforce and have a vested interest in the actions of the organisation. The set goals have to consider the environment and the resources available. It is important to understand that goal setting is of key importance for an organisation’s operations; namely, goals are the most needed, yet also the most often overlooked factors for success of company’s operating in future (Jereb, 2002).

3. Slovenian women’s handball and Slovenian Handball Federation

The history of the Slovenian Handball Federation dates back to 1949 when it was part of the then Yugoslavian Handball Federation. After Slovenia declared its independence in 1991, the
Slovenian Handball Federation also became independent and a year later received full membership to the European and International Handball Federations. National teams started to participate at European and world competitions, Slovenian clubs made initial appearances in all European cup competitions in 1992/93 season. Slovenian women’s national handball team has won its first medal (bronze) at the 1997 Mediterranean Games and in December of same year participated for the first time at the World Championships in Germany, finishing 15th. In following years, the team has been permanently qualifying for European (9th and 10th) and World Championships (8th, 10th and 15th). The last participation at major competitions was recorded in 2006 in Sweden (finishing 16th – last without a single match won). Since then, Slovenian senior national team did not manage to qualify for any major competitions. Junior women’s national team achieved 16th place out of 24 teams at the 2008 World junior Championships and the 1990 born generation finished 10th at the last European Championships.

Two poles of functioning are characteristic of Slovenian club handball, one of them being success of the only professional women’s team in any team sport – RK Krim Mercator. The club was twice the winner of Champions League (2000/2001 and 2002/2003 seasons); a further three times it reached the final of this competition. These good results started in 1996/1997 season with winning the EHF cup, then under the RK Robit Olimpija name. Currently, RK Krim is being placed 8th best European club.

At present, there are 26 registered women’s clubs in Slovenia, which play in national and lower regional leagues. National championships are also organised for all younger categories, who participate in national leagues or elimination tournaments (Slovenian Handball Federation, 2008). In the new ranking list, issued by the European Handball Federation, Slovenian women’s handball dropped to 25th place (European Handball Federation, 2009), whereas in 2004 it has been ranked 10th. The latter information, in addition to empiric reasons, is further proof that women’s handball requires a long-term, systemic approach. The first national league consists of 12 teams, half of them carrying a name of the sponsor in their titles. It can be concluded that their financial situation is healthy due to sponsorship (Mercator, Krka, Celjske mesnine, Tenzor, Euro Casino, Gen-I); nevertheless, the majority of clubs have large organisational financial problems. The second league (1b league) consists of nine clubs, two of which carry a name of a sponsor in their titles.

Slovenian Handball Federation as a national governing body has not publicly disclosed its mission, vision or goals. It seems as if the goals are being set more or less blindly, most often aiming for a success of individual national team at a major competition. The goals of women’s handball have been set only in a document of Expert Council and some professional articles (Bon, 2006; Bon, 2008) and have later never been revised or published. It can be generalised from the answers of some of the interviewed subjects that in the last few years Slovenian Handball Federation has not show any interest to act in a planned and long-term way.

4. SWOT analysis of Slovenian women’s handball

This chapter presents opportunities and threats as well as strengths and weaknesses of women’s handball through an analysis of various sub-environments of Slovenian women’s handball. Analysis of environment has been divided into general and task environment. General environment has been analysed with the help of tendencies in different sub-environments. An analysis of current and future spectators of matches and an analysis of
competitive and partner organisations have been used to analyse task environment. Data from interviews have been used to generalise common opinions about the current situation of women’s handball.

4.1. External analysis (analysis of environment)

4.1.1. Sub-environments in general environment

In studying the economic sub-environment, an analysis of current and potential sponsors and donors and the buying power of the population are particularly important. The current economic situation is still very unstable due to the past developments in global economy. Simultaneously, unemployment is increasing whereas the sponsorship money for sport is decreasing. The Slovenian Handball Federation has sponsors divided in several groups according to the resources they contribute (gold, silver, bronze set and eighth player). Additional opportunities for RZS in acquiring sponsors are the companies, which are already supporting handball teams in Slovenia. Unfortunately, the majority of Slovenian women’s clubs does not have strong sponsors and are therefore facing financial problems; consequently better conditions for work are unobtainable.

When studying the technological sub-environment, expected novelties and possibilities are analysed. In handball there are no significant changes in the rules or refereeing to be expected at the moment. Slovenian handball will have to adapt to the way of refereeing and transfer the knowledge from different fields into handball as soon as possible. Worldwide and particularly in Europe, handball is being played more often on different outside surfaces during the summer months, above all in younger categories. This practice should in future be introduced also in Slovenia with a foresight of reducing the facility costs. In Slovenia, there are numerous outside sports grounds and different surfaces available. In addition, beach handball grounds should be introduced, as they appeal to increasingly more young people due to their attractiveness.

Regarding the political sub-environment it is important to evaluate the inclination of the government towards sport and handball and the amount of financial resources, available for handball from different sources. According to the current political-legal situation, no significant changes are to be expected. Taxation and the attitude of the government towards sports should supposedly remain the same. A new law on sport is being prepared; however, no major changes are expected. All sport organisations mostly wish for changes in tax relief for sponsorship money. RZS receives money for its operation from the Foundation for Financing of Sport, Ministry of Education and Sport and the Slovenian Olympic Committee.

In social sub-environment, the values and needs of people and their attitude towards sport and handball are being analysed. Increasingly more people in Slovenia understand the importance of sport as a life value and parents tend to direct children more often into sport. Nevertheless, many people consider handball as too rough for girls and enlist them in some other sports. Besides, the majority of clubs are increasing their membership and training fees as a result of worse financial situation, which consequently reduces the enlistment of children into clubs.

In evaluation of demographic sub-environment, the analysis is focused on some structures of population and natural growth in Slovenia. At the moment, the number of women in Slovenia in relation to men is decreasing despite the increase of population. At the time of writing,
there were 47.635 10- to 15-year-old girls and 54.369 15- to 19-years-old women in Slovenia (Slovenian Statistical Office, 2009).

4.1.2. Current and potential match spectators

An analysis of current match spectators is based on the average number of spectators at matches in the 2008/09 season and information from media. An analysis of potential spectators has been done through the prediction of authors. An average attendance at the national league women’s match is between 150 and 200. Teams play in average 25 matches during one competitive season. The attendance at matches of senior and younger categories national teams is between 500 and 1000, depending on the opponent and the importance of the match. An initiative of the RZS to organise the fan club and to sell RZS fan material has been very important. There have been fewer TV broadcasts of the matches recently or else the matches have been shown on the lesser viewed TV channels. Additionally, it has been noticed that newspapers and electronic media write less often about women’s handball teams. Predicted number of potential spectators will increase with better attractiveness of the game, higher level of competitiveness, with results of national teams and clubs in European cup competitions and with bigger media exposure.

4.1.3. Competitive and partner organisations

The analysis of competitive organisations mentions only those representing immediate competition. In Slovenia, they are mainly team sports, such as basketball, football, volleyball and ice hockey. These sports take potential candidates for sponsoring handball and some of the financial resources. Competitive organisations are also other national teams and clubs in Europe and around the world. Partner organisations include all the organisations, which the RZS work together with: all men’s and women’s Slovenian clubs, clubs and national teams in Europe and around the world, European and International Handball Federation, Association of Slovenian Handball Referees and Association of Slovenian Handball Coaches, Ministry of Education and Sport, Slovenian Olympic Committee, primary schools and media.

4.1.4. Summary of external analysis

Some opportunities and threats can be identified in the external environment of RZS and handball in Slovenia, which the RZS will have to consider. Table 1 presents main opportunities and threats of external environment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPPORTUNITIES</th>
<th>THREATS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Systematic emphasis of positive influence of the game on bio-psycho-social</td>
<td>- Financial difficulties of women’s clubs and lesser possibilities for</td>
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<tr>
<td>development of children and youth</td>
<td>acquiring sponsors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Marketing the activities on renewed basics</td>
<td>- Smaller amount of public funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Attractiveness (handball on the outside courts and beach handball)</td>
<td>(government, local councils)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Promotional activities</td>
<td>- Recession and continually smaller sponsorship possibilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Methodical guidance of young people into handball</td>
<td>- Inclination of young people for other sports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Handball as a free time (leisure) activity</td>
<td>- Progressively smaller female population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Improving the appeal of the game</td>
<td>- Inability to progress in the game due to decreased competition</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Systematic encouragement of media</td>
<td>- Parents enlisting children into other sports due to supposed roughness</td>
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</table>
4.2. Internal analysis (analysis of the organisation)

4.2.1. Performance analysis of Slovenian Handball Federation

Performance of RZS’s work can be evaluated according to many criteria: results and achievements of all women’s teams at the European and World Championships, quality of programmes offered by the RZS, number of Slovenian female players who play abroad, number of registered clubs, number of registered female players in Slovenia, number of national team events or women’s national team days, financial capability of the RZS etc.

Results and achievements of women's national teams

In the last few years, the reputation of Slovenian women’s handball in Europe has deteriorated mostly as a result of poor achievements in senior category. Slovenian women’s handball has dropped on this year’s ranking list of the European Handball Federation from 10th to 25th place. Youth and junior national teams have been fairly successful at major competitions in the 2004 to 2009 period. The youth national team has been placed 5th and 12th at two European Championships and 1st, 5th and 7th at three open European Championships. The youth team also qualified for the World Championships, where it finished 5th. The junior team ranked 6th, 10th and 12th at three European Championships and qualified for the World Championships, where it finished 15th. The senior team qualified for the first time to the World Championships in 1997 (WC in Germany) and since then qualified several more times to European and World Championships. The best position has been 8th place at the 2003 WC in Croatia. The senior team did not qualify for any major competition between 2006 and 2009, during which time it experienced planned and unplanned rejuvenation and several replacements of national team coaches. An average age of a senior national team member at the moment is 21.7 years.

Quality of programmes within the Slovenian Handball Federation

RZS organises a national competition for female categories, which is divided into two quality categories. 1st national league consists of 12 clubs and 1st B national league of 9 clubs. In addition, RZS organises national competition for younger age categories, together including 26 clubs (junior, youth, younger and older A and B girls, mini-handball) and cup competition for women. Handball club Krim Mercator also competes in the regional handball league. Only three Slovenian players, who have recently played for the national team, play abroad. Two of them are over the age of 30 and have already retired from the participation in the national team. One national team member currently plays in the Norwegian second league and one player is on loan in Serbia.

Number of registered clubs and players in Slovenia

Twenty-six clubs are registered in Slovenia. Five of them do not have a senior team and only play in younger age categories. In the last few years, four new teams have been created (Tržič, Nazarje, Rače and Koper). In some areas, the cooperation with neighbouring clubs brought...
about the disappearance of other clubs (Šentjernej – Novo mesto, Ribnica – Kočevje, Škocjan – Novo mesto, Planina – Kranj). In the 1st national league 230 female players are registered and 155 female players are registered in the 1st B national league. A more realistic picture could have been obtained by revealing the average ages of players in the 1st league, as many club players are still juniors or even belong into youth category, yet they already play for senior teams (Slovenian Handball Federation, 2009).

The number of national team events is a reflection of the attention that RZS gives to women’s handball. The number of national days for senior, junior and youth national teams’ amounts annually to 25 and 35, without counting the number of days spent at major competitions. This is relatively small number, compared to other European countries, which have formed a system of national team activities.

RZS is late in settling its financial responsibilities to various companies and contractual partners, thus introducing poor organisational atmosphere in its environment. Women’s clubs also face large problems and are financially inept. Majority of clubs do not have sufficient financial resources for all the costs of competitions. As a result, some of the clubs cancel their participation in European club cup competitions and consequently the possibilities for the progress of players are reduced.

4.2.2. Analysis of current strategy

Orientation of the Presidential Board of the RZS for the next few years is to improve the position of women’s handball. A competitive goal has been set: to qualify for the 2012 Olympic Games (Slovenian Handball Federation, 2009); similarly to previous six years, when (high) competitive goals have always been set without a formation of a strategic plan. The interviews lead to conclusion that some people are aware of the necessity for changes in the way of working with national teams and for changes of organisation in general; however, there are no guidelines from the people in charge at RZS. Apart from replacing the national coach, no specific measures have been undertaken in order to fulfil high result goals. The president of the RZS is emphasising high results when dealing with media, yet the new national team coach has publicly stated that the result is not primary goal. Due to obvious performance gap, it would be expected from the people in charge at RZS to change an approach or at least unify it. General guideline should be to create a systematic approach with the use of tools and practices of strategic management at various levels and in all sub-environments.

4.2.3. Analysis of resources and potential

Sub-structure of services could be analysed with the RZS’s performance analysis, where various services are being represented: mini-handball, national competitions, working with the clubs and national teams. RZS has undertaken an organisation of qualification tournaments for European youth junior championships. Additionally, beach handball should be introduced, as they are becoming more attractive and interesting around the world (Brazil, Croatia, Spain, Hungary etc.).

Studying the technological sub-structure includes an analysis of the area of conditions for work and progress as well as the number of adequate sports halls in Slovenia. A large number of sports halls, which are suitable for handball, have been built in Slovenia in recent years. Consequently, the hiring costs of halls have increased for clubs; nevertheless, the increase is
still positive for a progress of handball. Outside surfaces also represent large potential, particularly during summer time, yet often they are not utilised enough.

From the human resources aspect women’s handball can be divided into managerial, technical and playing sub-structures of human resources. The managerial segment can be evaluated according to the formal education of employees. The General Secretary of the RZS has been replaced; the present GS is an economist with a university degree. Furthermore, a position of RZS secretary has been added. Technical associates, also called project managers, are graduates of the Faculty of Sport. It is an aim of the RZS to choose a suitable candidate for the position of Head of Technical Department. Some of the RZS associates are volunteers, usually former employees of the RZS.

Finally, the organisational sub-structure has to be mentioned, consisting of the handball national teams and clubs. In 2004, RZS passed regulations about the organisation of national teams. These regulations list all national teams, from the youngest, which do not participate at official competitions, to seniors. The regulations also define all the work tasks and required human resources of national teams as well as financial remunerations. The level of organisation in clubs varies significantly, from professional set-ups to entirely amateur types of organisation. In general, it can be said that the organisation of clubs is at a low level and that clubs function more by chance than in a long-term and systematic way.

4.2.4. Summary of an internal analysis

Main strengths and weaknesses of the RZS and Slovenian women’s handball according to the analysis of internal environment are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Analysis of organisation – strengths and weaknesses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STRENGTHS</th>
<th>WEAKNESSES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Success of junior and youth national teams</td>
<td>- Senior national team has to play pre-qualification tournaments in order to qualify for major competitions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Low average age of senior national team, possibility for progress</td>
<td>- Poor financial situation and organisation of the majority of clubs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Organisation of qualification tournaments by the RZS</td>
<td>- Small number of registered senior players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- New women’s clubs</td>
<td>- Too many junior and youth players in senior teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- In Europe competitive club Krim Mercator</td>
<td>- Unsystematic approach to national selections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Current ambitions of some of the clubs</td>
<td>- Unsettled payments between clubs and players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Cooperation of clubs, better selection</td>
<td>- Poor educational structure of coaches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Several new and well-equipped sports halls</td>
<td>- Unfulfilled previous strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Too many partial interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Absence of competent knowledge of management and marketing</td>
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</table>

5. Conclusion

An analysis of current situation in Slovenian women’s handball is a foundation for the formation of strategic goals. In order to carry out more detailed analysis, more data – particularly financial – should be collected from RZS and other sources in general
environment. The latter presents a problem in itself, namely, data from those in charge at the RZS are hard to obtain. Only some individuals, who are familiar with the situation, are willing to cooperate. Two years ago, the RZS publicly announced that it will create a developmental strategy of the RZS and its sub-systems. To the best knowledge of authors, there has been no realisation so far. The working group, led by former General Secretary, has met two times and at present the RZS still functions without a publicly available vision and strategy. Situation in women’s handball, which as a sub-system also functions without a strategy, is a reflection of everything mentioned. In the meantime, negative economic environment has spread and setting of goals and strategy for any cost in such times would be very insensible. It seems as if nobody at the RZS considers strategic management. The management of the RZS did not identify with a previous strategy, which has not been realised. One of the characteristics of handball is a large number of partial interests of individuals, which presents a strong limiting factor in implementation of strategic management. On one hand, it looks as if people with competencies from the area of strategic management are not even invited to cooperate, on the other hand, some people do not wish to cooperate due to previous bad experiences. Setting of goals and strategies requires a strong individual, who can achieve unification of different sides and who possesses managerial and implementation competencies. On the basis of analysis, it can be said that changes in thinking, organisation and functioning are required. These changes will not happen by chance, principles of strategic management will have to be considered and it will be necessary to prepare and carry out a strategic plan for all levels of women’s handball.

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