

## Why the Netherlands are successful and Belgium is not? A comparison of the elite sports climate

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### Introduction

Belgium (Flanders<sup>32</sup>) and the Netherlands are two comparable countries with regard to population<sup>33</sup> and wealth. Why is it then, that the Netherlands are more successful in international sports? They got five times more medals than Belgium: from 1980-2000, the Netherlands got 84 medals (of which 25 were gold); Belgium got 22 medals (of which 9 were gold). The market share of the Netherlands is 2,66%, whereas 0,53% for Belgium. The Netherlands seem to have increased their international position a lot, from the 30<sup>th</sup> (1980) in the medal ranking to the 8<sup>th</sup> (2000). Belgium decreased from the 24<sup>th</sup> to the 54<sup>th</sup> place. Next to their results, the Netherlands also have ten times more athletes on the A-level<sup>34</sup> than Flanders: 461 versus 17. All these findings made the Flemish Ministry of Sports decide to compare sports policies of these two countries.

Is it reasonable to assume that the Netherlands have more talents? Several studies have tried to explain and predict Olympic success of countries through socio-economic determinants. The underlying assumption of these studies is that there is an equal distribution of talent throughout the world. Every country has equal opportunities to produce good athletes (e.g. Levine, 1974, Kiviaho & Mäkellä., 1978). There are only few literary references to the efficiency and effectiveness of sports policies and sport investments (De Bosscher, De Knop & Heyndels, 2003). However, governmental authorities spend large sums of money to compete against other countries for superior sport performances, without knowing what the exact influence of sports policies can be. In this paper we will try to compare the elite sports policies of two rival and comparable countries.

This comparison of two countries is a preliminary stage of a larger study, where the elite sports climate of seven countries will be compared: the Netherlands, Great-Britain, Flanders & Wallony, Canada, Italy, Greece and Norway. In the next study, a sport specific analysis of sports policies will be done, in order to determine factors leading to international sporting success. This project is coordinated by a consortium group of researchers from three countries (UK, NL, B.) (SPLISS, 2003).

### Purpose

The first part of our analysis focuses on a comparison of the elite sports climate in both countries. The *“Elite sports climate”* of a country can be defined as *“the current, general condition of the social and sport organizational environment in which sportsmen can develop to elite sportsmen and thus continue to deliver international sport performances”* (van Bottenburg, 2000).

In a second analysis processes (throughput) of national sports policies are compared. This paper will mainly confine to the first part, which measures the output of sports policies.

### Methods

Two identical studies into the elite sports climate have taken place in Flanders and the Netherlands using the same questionnaires (van Bottenburg, Roques, & Smit, 2004; De Knop, De Bosscher & Leblicq, 2004). To gather the data, a representative questionnaire was spread among elite athletes and their coaches and among performance directors from the national sports organizations. With regard to the comparability

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<sup>32</sup> Flanders is the Northern Dutch speaking part of Belgium. As there are two Ministries of Sport, the analysis of sports policies has to be done separate for Flanders and Wallony. However, to participate in international championships, athletes represent the whole country: Belgium; therefore results in international competitions are represented for Belgium.

<sup>33</sup> The Netherlands have a population of 16 million, Flanders 6 million; GDP/cap is around 22.400€ in both ‘countries’

<sup>34</sup> A-level athletes: international level athletes, with a final position (or first 8) at world championships or a qualification for the Olympic Games

of both studies, an elite athlete was clearly defined. Furthermore, shared semi-structured interviews with key figures involved in elite sports policies and a secondary resources analysis have taken place.

### Results<sup>35</sup>

140 athletes (43%), 119 coaches (51%) and 26 performance directors (100%) have responded to the questionnaires in Flanders. In the Netherlands the response was respectively 421 athletes (34%), 62 coaches (28%) and 28 performance directors (52%).

The respondents were asked to point out in a list of 9 items, the three aspects that have according to their opinion the greatest influence on improving their position in the world rankings (see table 1).

*Table 1: Factors with the greatest influence on improving the position of athletes on the world rankings according to athletes, coaches performance directors of national sports federations.*

* p< .01	Flanders	The Netherlands
better training opportunities	1 (21%)	1 (25%)
improved financial position and social security for elite athletes*	1 (21%)	2 (24%)
better trainers/coaches	3 (15%)	4 (12%)
more international competition	4 (12%)	3 (15%)
better team of accompanying professionals (finance, social security, study, work, physiotherapist, doctor, psychologist etc)	4 (12%)	5 (10%)
improved co-operation with school and/or work	6 (10%)	6 (8%)
better equipment	7 (5%)	7 (6%)
more support from parents/partner *	8 (2%)	8 (1%)

There are only some slight differences in the relative importance of each item according to the respondents from Flanders and the Netherlands. Better training opportunities and an improved financial position and social security for elite athletes are the most important factors leading to international sporting success in both countries, followed by better coaches and more opportunities for international competition.

Next to this, the respondents were asked to point out 4 of the 13 options with regard to the elite sports climate that are the most eligible for improvement (see table 2).

*Table 2: Which factors are the most eligible for improvement according to athletes, coaches and federations?*

* p< .01	Flanders	The Netherlands
individual life situation of the elite athlete (financial, social security, legal position, study, work, business promotion etc)	1 (16%)	1 (17%)
talent development through sport organizations	1 (16%)	5 (9%)
scientific cover and guidance ((para)medical guidance and elite sport research etc)*	3 (10%)	9 (6%)
extent and quality of media coverage *	4 (9%)	2 (13%)
society's appreciation of your sport and elite sport	4 (9%)	4 (10%)
sport specific coaching through framework	6 (8%)	7 (7%)
availability and quality of training facilities *	6 (8%)	3 (11%)
opportunity to take part in international competitions	8 (7%)	5 (9%)
position of movement education *	9 (6%)	11 (3%)
availability and quality of elite sport facilities	10 (5%)	7 (7%)
organizational provision of services through sports organizations	11 (3%)	11 (3%)
scale of recreational sport *	12 (2%)	10 (5%)

<sup>35</sup> The results described for Belgium, only relate to the elite sports climate in Flanders

With regard to the factors that need to be improved, we see some remarkable differences in the opinions of the respondents in both countries. Talent development through sport organizations is the second most important determinant that must be reformed in Flanders. In the Netherlands significantly more respondents pointed out a higher need for improvement of the extent and quality of media coverage and the availability and quality of training facilities. The flow of scientific information is pointed out more in Flanders.

Although athletes, coaches and national sport organizations have about the same opinion with respect to important factors that may improve the position of athletes on the world rankings, the opinions in both countries differ much more for the factors that need to be improved. The elite sports climate survey in both countries goes more into depth on each of these factors and gives insight in the strengths and weaknesses of the elite sports policies. We describe the main conclusions of significant differences between Flanders and the Netherlands:

- elite coaches in the Netherlands have more experience at the international level as a former athlete; furthermore, they have more often an employment contract and are more often employed by the federation which may allow them to work more professionally. Flemish coaches more often have an official qualification from the federation.
- according to trainers and performance directors from the federations, more federations in the Netherlands have a structural system for talent identification and development and athletes can more often count on extra attention from their federation; however, in both countries coaches are in the opinion that they can not spend enough time with their athletes
- athletes in the Netherlands have a higher income (also deriving from their sports) and spend more money to their sports. Also more athletes can rely on an income and reimbursement of expenses from government.
- more athletes in Flanders think that more international events should be organized in their own country.

## **Conclusions**

In this study, we compared how athletes, coaches and performance directors perceive the elite sports climate in Flanders and the Netherlands. Although there were some remarkable significant differences, all in all many opinions are the same, no matter how elite sports is organized. Therefore the second part of the study, which was an analysis of inputs and throughputs of national sports policies, had to give more insight in these differences. This analysis of the underlying processes particular leading to international sporting success can be recapitulated into seven conclusions:

1. both countries have always spent a same like budget on sports. The budget for elite sports is higher in the Netherlands: 25 million Euros (29% of total budget) versus 9 million Euros (6,7% of total budget) in Flanders
2. the Netherlands have a more intensive cooperation with commercial business, and for instance gathered 27 million Euros extra only to prepare athletes for the Olympics in 2004.
3. historically Flanders has put much energy in the formation of new structures against fragmentation of all means: a complex state structure (Flanders-Wallony) and different organizations existed within Flanders who had the same aims and there was no coordination of initiatives. On the contrary, there has always been reasonable consultation in the Netherlands.
4. sports policies in the Netherlands are more professional:
  - since 1969 there have been 21 policy plans published with reference to elite sports; in Flanders only one in 1997; furthermore the Netherlands have a strong network of data- and information bases;
  - the Netherlands has invested in long term policies and making choices
5. the Netherlands have always lead in some initiatives to prepare athletes' career: the LOOT-schools since 1991 (versus the elite sports schools in Flanders since 1998); regional support centers (1992); coaches support initiatives and Holland Promotion are some examples.

6. a leitmotiv in the national policies of the Netherlands is “services to suit the sports organizations, athletes ad coaches”:
  - federations are more subsidized on a performance basis; but they are supervised in their process to professionalism and increasing demands of elite sports by 7 account managers and 5 sport technical coaches. Until 2001, federations in Flanders did not get any guidance and there is a lack of professionalism; this was also one of the lacking conclusions in the elite sports climate survey according to the performance directors;
  - for athletes there are regional Olympic support centers and individual counselors in order to prepare their whole career; in Flanders athletes can get a reasonable financial support, but mostly stand alone in their career development and life style management;
  - although Flanders has a good centralized system of coaches education, information exchange and courses for elite coaches are lacking. Next to the master coach in sports, the NOC\*NSF<sup>36</sup> foresees a coaches platform, topsport expertise centre (TEC) and courses for elite coaches;
7. the Netherlands recognize one elite sports facilities (A-facilities) for each sport. A clear definition on elite sports facilities in Flanders is lacking.

Although the Flemish government and sports administration Bloso has made increased investments in elite sports during the last five years (e.g. an increase of the elite sports budget with 45% and a steering group for elite sports was set up), Flanders still have a great backlog compared to the Netherlands. After the elite sports climate that was finished at the end of 2003, Bloso has created a long term action plan, until 2008 that goes much into depth on all the weaknesses of Flemish sports policies. However we must realize that even these outstanding initiatives are in the first place a make up of considerable arrears. In the Netherlands the elite sports system and investments may be liable to be pushed aside as the Dutch Ministry of Health ad Sports has decided to decrease the means for sport by halves for the next four years.

### **Discussion**

With all the analysis on elite sports policies that have been done in this study, no causal conclusions can be made on their relation to international sporting success. It is impossible to set up an experiment trying to explain a causal correlation of one factor leading to success while other factors are excluded. A range of studies tried to explain differences in Olympic success of countries by using socio-economic determinants such as GDP, population, area, politics,.... However, these factors are out of control of sports policies. On the other hand, there are only few literary references to the efficiency and effectiveness of sports policies and sport investments. Despite the fact that there is no question as to the importance of good sports policies, knowledge of the impact of governmental or private investment in sports is minimal. Out of all the factors determining success, those on the meso-level are the only ones that can actively be influenced. This makes it particularly interesting to examine the effects of elite sports policies.

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<sup>36</sup> NOC\*NSF: national Olympic Committee\*National Sports Federation is the national sports administration in the Netherlands

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