

(SP) AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON OF THE ELITE SPORT CLIMATE AND POLICIES IN SIX NATIONS

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Introduction

Over the last few decades the power struggle between nations to win medals in major international competitions has intensified. This has led to national sports organisations and governments throughout the world spending increasing sums of money on elite sport. Nevertheless, in spite of increasing competition and the homogenisation of elite sports systems, the optimum strategy for delivering international success is still unclear. There is a lack of an empirically grounded, coherent theory on the factors determining international sporting success. The aim of this paper is to present the results of an experimental study in six sample nations that compared different elite sport systems and the elite sport climate. The nations are: United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Belgium (Flanders³ & Wallony were kept separate), Norway, Canada and Italy. In the longer term, the main goal of this project is to increase our knowledge about the optimum strategy for delivering international success and the key performance indicators that demonstrate that an efficient and effective management of sporting excellence is in place.

Methods

The basic framework of our analysis consists of nine sports policy factors, or “pillars”, that are commonly considered to be important for international sporting success.

Inputs

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. financial support; | |
| Throughputs | |
| 2. integrated approach to policy development | 6. training facilities |
| 3. participation in sport | 7. coaching provision and coach development |
| 4. talent identification and development system | 8. international competition |
| 5. athletic and post career support | 9. scientific research |

This model is based on an extended literature review of success determinants in sport, different sources of elite sports systems, completed with an experimental test with Flemish athletes, coaches and coordinators. Criteria have been developed to compare and assess the data of the six sample nations in each pillar.

Data for comparison were gathered in two ways. First an overall policy questionnaire, containing over 85 open-ended and closed questions on the nine pillars, filled in by the researchers of each participating country. Given that some features of successful nations as defined by Oakley and Green (2001) and Clumpner (1994) can not easily be quantified, they can be subjectively assessed by their primary users.

³ Flanders is the Northern, Dutch speaking part of Belgium; Walloon Provinces are the Southern, French speaking part. As sports policies are split up in Belgium, both states are analysed separately in this study.

Therefore, a study into the elite sports climate was a second data source. Athletes, coaches and performance directors filled in written questionnaires on “*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).

Results

The large amount of information gathered through both surveys allowed us to define concrete criteria and evaluation norms for each pillar. A summary of the results is presented in the “traffic light”-scheme below. The nations (on the horizontal line) are ranked from left to right according to their success in summer sports.

	ITA	UK	NED	CAN	NOR	FLA	WAL
1a National expenditure							NA
1b Financ. support NGBs							NA
2. Policy development							
3. Participation in sport							
4. Talent id. & development							
5. Athletic and post career							
6. Training facilities							
7. Coaching				NA	NA		
8. International comp.							
9. Scientific research							

policy area very well developed
 good level of development
 na: data not available
 limited development
 little or no development
 moderate level of development

Conclusions and Discussion

This research supports the view of, among others, Oakley and Green (2001), Green and Houlihan (2005) that elite sport systems are becoming increasingly homogenous. Overall, there are relatively few areas in which there are significant variations between the sample nations. Competition for success in elite sport is increasing and more nations are adopting a common strategy to develop medal winning athletes. The survey reveals a remarkable acceleration in the funding for elite sport, which almost doubled in the period between 1999 and 2003 in four of the six nations. This suggests that standing still could mean going backwards and the price of success will raise.

The policy areas in which the three most successful nations in summer sports (Italy, UK and the Netherlands) achieve the highest collective rating are (1) coaching provision and coach development (P7), financial support (P1), athletic and post career support (P5) and scientific research (P9). If one accepts the view that there may be a relationship between the quality of elite sport systems and nations’ performance in international sport, then it could be argued that this finding is highlighting the importance of these pillars as key drivers of an effective system. Another finding is the relatively poor rating on talent identification and development systems of the two

wealthiest nations in our sample, Italy and UK. This finding may be showing that nations with larger populations have, historically, taken a relatively relaxed approach to talent development, believing that talent will emerge naturally. If larger nations would take a more systematic approach towards talent development, it will be even more difficult for smaller nations to compete.

References

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