

# (SP) IDENTIFYING SUCCESSFUL NATIONS IN INTERNATIONAL SPORT: LESSONS FROM A TRANS NATIONAL STUDY

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## **Introduction**

This paper is derived from a programme of research conducted over the last three years by the SPLISS<sup>1</sup> consortium and can be read in greater depth in the SPLISS final report (2006). The paper is concerned with measuring the success of nations in elite sport competition and the efficiency of the production systems employed to produce medal winning elites. It is implicit throughout the paper that the 'production' of successful elite athletes by nations is an output from a strategic planning process. Nations for whom sporting success is important commit to strategic planning processes such as the World Class Performance Programme in the UK or Performance 2008 in the Netherlands.

The aim of this paper is to examine various methods by which the outputs of an elite athlete production system can be measured using the Summer Olympic Games, Winter Olympic Games, the UK Sport World Sporting Index and a Sport Canada equivalent as case studies. Furthermore, we also examine the limitations of the analysis and propose some alternative measures that will need additional research in due course. The reason for including this analysis is that the key focus for the partners in the SPLISS project was to examine the effectiveness and efficiency of systems in order to identify which nations are performing well and why they are performing well so that the drivers of international sporting success can be understood more clearly. This rationale is entirely consistent with Oakley and Green (2001) who noted:

Success in the Olympic Games has far more to do with effective national elite sport development, careful targeting of resources and the use of scientific means. Those strategies and institute networks that display greatest efficiency in producing model outputs attract international attention as to the 'methods' used.

## **Methods**

The identification of international sporting success for the SPLISS project was primarily conducted using an extensive programme of desk research. Building on the SIRC research of 2002, which was based on secondary analysis of performance in the Summer Olympic Games 1948 to 2000, this research has updated the SIRC data to include Athens 2004, the last five editions of the Winter Olympic Games and indices of world sporting performance devised by UK Sport and Sport Canada. The central feature of all the performance measurement systems is that they are based on 'market share' as an effective concept by which to measure the totality of achievement of individual nations on a standardised time series basis.

## **Results**

Table 1 presents the results of the SPLISS consortium nations in rank order of performance according to four different measures of international sporting success.

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<sup>1</sup> SPLISS = Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success

Table 1: Relative performance of nations in international sport

Nation	Athens 2004	WSI 2004 <sup>1</sup> (60 sports)	WSI 2004 <sup>2</sup> (Olympic sports only)	Torino 2006
Italy	1st	3rd	2nd	2nd
United Kingdom	2nd	1st	4th	5th
Netherlands	3rd	5th	5th	4th
Canada	4th	2nd	1st	1st
Norway	5th	4th	3rd	3rd
Belgium	6th	6th	6th	6th

<sup>1</sup>WSI = World Sporting Index (world-level performance in 60 sports)

<sup>2</sup>WSI = World Sporting Index (world-level performance in Olympic sports)

## Discussion

Table 1 shows that there is considerable variation in the relative performance of the sample nations in international sport. This variation is a function of the portfolio of sports included in the analysis. When a diverse portfolio of 60 sports is analysed, the UK emerges as the most successful sporting nation in the sample largely because of the breadth of sports in which it takes part including non-Olympic and professional sports. When the focus is narrowed down to all Olympic sports, the UK performs relatively poorly because of its weak performance in winter Olympic sport. Canada is the most successful winter Olympic sport nation in the sample and its dominance of the winter Olympic medal table in recent editions of the winter Olympic Games is such that it also gives Canada a high rating in the index of all Olympic sports and the UK Sport World Sporting Index. However, when Canada's performance in the summer Olympics is analysed, it is ranked 4th which is slightly below what might have been predicted by regression analysis (3rd). These findings suggest that Canada has different sporting priorities to the UK and Italy.

The key point arising from the analysis of sporting performance is that a nation's performance in international sport is not an absolute. Before an assessment of performance can be made, particularly when wishing to make trans national comparisons, due consideration needs to be given to how the notion of 'performance' is to be measured. Broad measures such as the UK Sport World Sporting Index favour nations such as the UK which have traditions in a wide range of Olympic and non-Olympic sports. When narrowing the focus down to Olympic sports we find that some nations perform better in summer Olympic sports, some perform better in winter Olympic sports and some perform well in both. Thus, performance in international sport is a function of how 'international sport' is defined.

## References

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