

(SP) “WHO GOVERNS THE ELITE?” THE REORGANIZING OF NORWEGIAN ELITE SPORTS

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Introduction

Change is a central topic to the study of contemporary sports organizations (Slack & Hinings, 1992). In relation to elite sports, change processes are particularly relevant, as elite sports organizations are subject to strong global pressures towards performativity. This paper analyses the process towards a reorganizing of Norwegian elite sports during the period from 2004 to 2006.

Methods

The analysis is based on a combination of methods. First, documents concerning the change process, such as task statements, working papers and reports have been collected. Second, fieldnotes have been made from observations in formal meetings where the process has been debated and from conversations with persons involved in these debates (10). Third, the media coverage of the process has been monitored systematically.

Results

In Norway, elite sports have been organized since 1996 under the umbrella organization called The Norwegian Confederation of Sports and Olympic Committee (NOC). This organization federates local level sports clubs, National Federations and Regional Federations. The employed leader for the elite sport organization unit is under the authority of the general secretary of the NOC and reports to him. Issues concerning elite sports are thus presented to the elected board of the NOC by way of the general secretary. The mandate of the group that was established in order to elucidate different forms of reorganizing in 2004 stated that the elite sports unit should be strengthened and become more dynamic and competent. A stronger integration of the National Federations was conceived as a necessary means to achieve this.

When the working group presented its draft statement in September 2005, its main advice was to create an organization for elite sport that should remain under the authority of the board of the NOC but with its own board elected from a general assembly consisting of the National Federations. Implicit in this was a change in the lines of authority, i.e. the employed leader would report to his own elected board. However, this solution was dismissed by the board of the NOC as too radical and the working group was asked to explore other solutions. The second draft, presented in February 2006, opted for a modified solution. A “plenary forum” consisting of the National Federations would appoint a committee for elite sports that would serve as a counselling unit for the employed elite sports leader. This person would still report directly to the board of the NOC and thus omit the general secretary of the confederation. The launching of this draft started off a fierce media debate where the defenders of the proposition were accused of wanting to weaken the elite sports unit by strengthening the power of the National Federations. In April 2006, the board of the NOC voted that the organization of elite sports would remain unchanged with the exception of the establishment of a small, counselling group.

Discussion

Despite the declared need for a change that could strengthen the dynamics of the organization and anchor it more firmly in the National Federations, the process ended in preserving the status quo. It is argued that the reason for this is that any organization of elite sports reflects the relative strength of different parts of the global organization, i.e. the relations between the National and the Regional Federations and also the relations between National Federations. Using stakeholder theory (Friedman and Miles 2002) the paper discusses the bases for influence among these parts of the organization. Using Mitchell et al.'s sources of influence, i.e. "power", "legitimacy" and "urgency" (Mitchell, Agle and Wood 1997), it is argued that the issue of legitimacy was highly decisive to the result of the process. The debate surrounding the process tended towards giving high legitimacy to the cause of the Regional Federations, which ended up winning through with their arguments.

Conclusion

The attempted change process highlights how the issue of elite sports touches upon the existing dividing lines within a confederation that seeks to integrate elite and mass sports. It also illustrates the dilemmas in creating an autonomous elite sports organization within such a confederation, i.e. the difficulty in finding an acceptable equilibrium between forces.