

Benchmarking of Elite Sport Systems

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Abstract

Background to the Research

The organisation of elite sport systems has been the focus of a great variety of research in the past decade [1,2]. This research has led to a convergence of the components that make up elite sport systems, leading the elite sport systems of many countries to have a number of similar components, such as the sport science support, talent identification programmes and competition structures. However, despite this trend towards homogeneous elite sport system design, the medal tables of major sport events show that some nations are still more successful, at some sports despite similarities in the make up of the elite sport systems.

To help to understand these differences in performance, the management tool of benchmarking has been identified as a useful framework to guide comparisons of elite sport systems at the operational level. Benchmarking can be considered as the process of identifying, understanding and transferring ‘best practice’ from organisations in order to help another organisation to improve its performance [3]. The premise that underpins the organisational benchmarking approach constitutes an intuitive element of everyday life where instead of developing a new solution for a specific problem, it is usual to find an organisation that has developed a successful solution to the problem and to seek to understand the nature of the developed solution and how it might be applied. Thus, benchmarking appears to lend itself to the study of successful elite sport systems in order to learn how these systems continue to be more successful than other systems with similar characteristics.

However, the appropriateness of benchmarking to the field of elite sport systems has not previously been tested. Research shows [4,5] that benchmarking is not without criticism and whether the benchmarking approach can be applied to the, at times, very specific contextual conditions that affect an elite sport system required investigation.

Aim of Research

Thus, the research outlined here evaluated the applicability of benchmarking as a concept for furthering understanding of elite sport system management and sought to address the following question.

Can the management tool of benchmarking inform managers and policy makers of how to improve the operations of elite sport systems?

Method

In order to conduct this evaluation it was decided to analyse five operational processes of two successful elite sport systems. The research was carried out with the federations of Swedish Athletics and Norwegian Cross-country Skiing, both of which have had consistent success at major international competitions. Specifically, the investigation focused on the comparison of the design of the squad system, the hierarchy of coaches within the squad system, the organisation of coach education, as well as the provision of sport science and lifestyle support. The research was carried out by a series of semi-structured interviews which were conducted with approximately 50 key position holders such as coaches, athletes, lifestyle support managers, or performance diagnosticians during two study visits to Norway and Sweden.

Discussion

This study concluded that benchmarking can lead to insights into the management of successful elite sport systems, some of which that can be transferred to other elite sport systems. However, the two sport organisations under study also demonstrated a number of unexpected aspects to the way they delivered the studied components of their elite sports systems and some of these practices appeared to be heavily linked to the organisational and cultural context of the investigated sport systems. Organisational and cultural contexts obviously differ between countries and therefore the wholesale transfer of practice from successful elite sport systems appears difficult. This research challenges previous understanding of the benchmarking concept, which is based upon the identification and then transfer of practice, as it suggests that, although practices may be transferable, the outcomes of these practices may differ depending on the context into which they are introduced. It is apparent from this research that each 'best practice' that is identified during a benchmarking exercise must be evaluated carefully in order to see if it constitutes transferable best practice which can be applied outside the organisational context under study.

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