

CENTRALIZATION RECONSIDERED/ CHANGES IN FRENCH ELITE SPORT POLICY

Author:
Emmanuel Lelore

email:
emmanuel.lelore@insep.fr

Co-authors:
Mignon, Patrick

University:
INSEP

Faculty:
Sport Sociology Laboratory

Abstract

The question

We have based our research on the principle established by Oakley and Green of "a global sporting arms races" (2001) and convergence of elite sport policies through nations. The aim of this paper is to question the present changes occurring in French elite sport and appreciate the role and weight of the different logics which intervene in this process.

In the case of France, convergence could be a withdrawal of the state. France has been considered for a long time as the most centralized model of elite sport policy, similar to former Eastern European countries where it took its model. Its originality has been in the special compromise between State and sport governing bodies, in a kind of reciprocal dependency. But under the pressure, among several other factors, of international sport competition, cuts in public funding and professionalization of the majority of Olympic sports, the role of state has been reappraised and we can presently observe the building of another sport compromise between traditional and new actors (local authorities, business) which is called new sport governance.

Literature review

Research on elite sport policy is under developed in France. Sport sociology has been more interested in sport activities in general than in elite sport, except to analyze the impact of elite sport on athletes' health or social condition. Most of literature on elite sport policy, in France, consists in studies or reports from insiders who have tried to describe the organization or evaluate the cost of medals.

Methodology

The paper is the result of the research which has been made possible thanks to integration in SPLISS project. We have collected data from various sources (reports from political representatives, official or non official studies and

reports, and public statistics) and above all we have conducted interviews with different actors to understand what is now called shared governance.

Results

We have identified the following factors to understand the new sport governance and the problems it will be faced. Two are independent from sport issues but have consequences on sport. At the state level, this is a new public spending policy (RGPP) which wants to prevent recruiting civil servants and to improve performance in public services. The consequence for sport is to limit grants to sport bodies, to negotiate grants against sport performances, to decrease the recruitment of state sport technical specialists, to suppress some of the decentralized sport institutions (CREPS) and to distinguish between sport for all and elite sport. At the local authorities' level, cities, departments and regions have been spending lot of money in all kinds of sport and now want to play a bigger role.

Others come from actors of the sport world who have been boosted by the increasing media coverage of some sports and big sport events; by debates around interpretation of French individual athletes' and teams' results; by the two process of professionalization, those of athletes or coaches and those coming from rationalization of sports governing bodies; the emergence of coaches who have become sport's experts through their success; by the will to attract funds from private sector.

All these factors converge around the idea that the system which has been established progressively from 1960 to 1985 has come to its end. In this context, all the actors are claiming a bigger role in elite sport policy: sport governing bodies want to be more autonomous from the state, local authorities want to define their own sport policy, sport's experts want to gain decisional power and State wants to keep authority on elite sport policy.

Presently, we assist to the maintaining of state centralization through: financial investments in a national institution like INSEP; the will to coordinate the sports policies of the different sport governing bodies, for example through a program of top level coaches training, under State supervision and certification, and coordination of research; the dependence of the majority of sport federations towards public funds.

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