

NORDIC ELITE SPORT: SAME AMBITIONS - DIFFERENT TRACKS

Author:
Svein S. Andersen

email:
svein.andersen@bi.no

Co-authors:
Lars Tore Ronglan

University:
Norwegian School of Sport Sciences/ Norwegian School of management

Faculty:
Leadership and organization

Abstract

Aim

The paper compares the elite sport systems in the four Nordic countries. Denmark and Norway developed special elite sport institutions in the mid and late 1980s. In Sweden major changes in elite sport has been accommodated within existing institutional structures. In Finland a stable overall institutional structure framed elite sport until the mid 1990s. However, during the last 15 years the elite sport system has suffered from fragmentation and lack of legitimacy due to wider societal changes as well as doping scandals. In this way the four countries illustrate how an overall trend of convergence can be combined with significant diversity between national elite sport systems.

Literature review

Research on the development of international elite sport systems have argued out that elite sport organizations in Western countries have become increasingly homogenous during the last two decades (Augestad, Bergsgard 2008; Houlihan & Green, 2008) Important determinants of public policy are found in supranational policy network, rather than in domestic policy alone (Houlihan & Green 2008:9). However, a trend towards isomorphism does not imply that elite sport in various countries, or within specific sports, organize or pursue key elements in elite sport in very similar ways. How general ideas, cognitive models and norms in the international environment are exploited depends on characteristics of the local national context (Sahlin & Wedin 2008, Thornton & Ocasio 2008). Both in terms of the overall structure of organized sports, and specific arrangements for elite sports, the Nordic countries have in important respects become much more different over the last 30 years. Such differences relate to leadership capabilities, priorities, resource allocation and working methods in national elite sport systems.

Methodology

The paper is based on research carried out by a group of

researchers that are specialists on their own national systems. Descriptions and analysis of individual countries are based on comprehensive literature review and data collection; combining documents with informant interviews. To ensure comparability, the interpretation and analysis of data have been discussed in two work shops. Data have been coded in two steps. The initial coding was used to identify similarities and differences across countries. The theoretical coding used a framework from institutional theory to identify patterns of convergence and divergence.

Results

Elite sport systems in the four Nordic countries are not only becoming more different, but it happens in ways that run counter to what one might expect based on general pattern of political and societal organization in the four countries. Norway is generally characterized by decentralization of authority and dislike for elites, but ends up with the most centralized system and a high degree of legitimacy for elite sport. Denmark, where the state has been most reluctant to intervene in civil society and the economy, ends up with the strongest role for the state. Finland, with the strongest tradition for centralization ends up with the most decentralized, fragmented system. Sweden, known for its ability to modernize and react to international trends in society and in thy economy preserves an overall system that tends to reproduce traditional political cleavages. The divergent paths of Nordic elite sport systems are schematically presented in figure 1.

Figure 1: The divergent paths of Nordic elite sport systems – here

The resulting systems of elite sport organization are not only different in terms of structure, priorities and practices. The also represent different frames for identifying, discussing and improving elite sport efforts. In Denmark and Norway reforms in the 1980s and further elaboration of national elite sport systems created a relatively stable framework for discussions about various types of support. In Sweden, the changes in elite sport over the last decades have reinforced some of the tensions between mass- and elite-sport in the system. In Finland, the fragmentation and loss of overall coordination, together with doping scandals, has led to loss of support and legitimacy for elite sport. It is no surprise, then, that the public discourse in Sweden and Finland has focused on the need for overall reform of the elite sport systems.

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