

Institutionalizing sustained sporting success: top down or bottom up?

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Introduction

Research on international elite sport has shown that, at a general level, elite sport organizations in Western countries have become more similar during the last decades (Augestad, Bergsgard & Hansen 2006; Houlihan & Green 2008). General characteristics of this development are targeted elite sport policies, increased funding, centralized talent development programs, strict priorities, and professionalized support systems (DeBosscher, De Knop & van Bottenburg, 2009). However, recent research has also demonstrated that this broad trend of convergence on a general level may go hand in hand with major divergence at a national or sport-specific level in terms of the organization, coordination and centralization of elite sport efforts (Andersen & Ronglan, 2012).

Aim

This paper aims to explore and trace quite different paths to sustained sporting success in individual sports. The chosen cases are the development of Swedish golf and Norwegian women's handball in the period from mid-1980s to 2010. It will be demonstrated how both cases represent remarkable sustainable success stories in terms of international results over a period of 25 years. In specific, the objective of the paper is to describe and discuss the two stories as examples of a top-down and a bottom-up process.

Contextual background and research design

The two investigated cases are examples of lasting elite sport successes grounded in a "Scandinavian sport model" (Ibsen & Seippel, 2010) dominated by broad based voluntary sport organizations which include both mass and elite sport development. Thus, the societal and organizational contexts for the two stories were quite similar. Within this framework different phases of two cases' gradual

institutionalization of their success spirals are described and compared. The data was generated from results statistics, document analyses, media texts, and interviews with key actors. Comparison of categories such as mass sport foundation, infrastructure / facilities, strategies, and key actors, made it possible to illuminate similarities as well as differences between the cases.

Discussion and conclusion

The paper discusses the two cases as examples of (1) a powerful bottom-up process leading to a remarkable increase of both performance level and number of elite players (Swedish golf), and (2) effective implementation of strategies decided on a central level to improve and maintain the competitiveness of the national team (Norwegian handball). The different paths – 'bottom-up' versus 'top-down' – may help to kill the myth that 'one size fits all': there is no such thing as one way to excellence. Even within a quite homogenous Scandinavian context, obvious differences regarding strategies and initiatives emerge when we take a closer look at the success stories. It seems clear that societal, organizational and sport-specific contexts must be taken into account when trying to understand why specific initiatives and efforts to develop elite sport succeed or not. Despite the fact that elite sport is a highly competitive domain, subject to strong pressures towards convergence and centralized strategies, there is considerable space for local ingenuity in identifying and making most out of their local resources.

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