

In search of the Swedish elite sport development system – approaching a micro-level analysis

Authors: Josef Fahlén & Paul Sjöblom

Institutions: Umeå University & Stockholm University

E-mails: Josef.fahlen@pedag.umu.se,

Paul.sjoblom@historia.su.se

Abstract keywords

Sport policy, meso-level analysis, critical success factors

Theoretical background or literature review

This study answers the call made by De Bosscher, De Knop and van Bottenburg (2009) for more detailed scrutiny of sport policy factors leading to international sporting success. As proposed by De Bosscher et al., research on sports policies of nations needs to proceed at a sport-specific level since elite sports development is largely organised on a sport-by-sport basis. Another point of departure for this study was that such research must pay attention to different cultures and different sport systems since “a system leading to success in one nation may be doomed to fail in another” (De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg & Shibli, 2006, 209). These two notions formed the basis for a study of how the Swedish elite sport system operates and supports elite sport efforts.

Aim of abstract/paper - research question

Taking the aspect of individual sports rather than national systems and the aspect of the Swedish culture and larger elite sport system into consideration we asked two questions: 1. How is performance development organised at the level of eight individual sports? 2. How are these sport specific performance development systems influenced by and integrated into the wider national elite sport system? Our aim was to explore how the answers to these two questions can combine into an understanding of the performance and results of Swedish elite sport.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The selection of the individual sports was guided by the ambition to sketch a varied and multifaceted picture of the conditions that dictate the opportunities for elite athletes to fulfil their potential. Therefore a mix of male and female, large and small, Olympic and non-Olympic, well established

and newly established, winter and summer, team-sport and individual sport, successful and less successful, commercial and less commercial national teams was selected for scrutiny. The selection of informants was based on the argument put forward by De Bosscher et al. (2006) that athletes, coaches and performance directors are the primary stakeholders in elite sport and thereby have the ability to validly evaluate the throughput of each sport specific elite sport system, which was the main concern for this study. In total we asked eight athletes, eight national team coaches and eight performance directors questions corresponding to the nine pillars of sports policy factors influencing international success (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

Results show remarkable variance between the eight performance development systems across all nine pillars. Nevertheless, all sports can be considered successful when looking at championship medals and international rankings. All informants also highlight similar critical success factors such as the extensive sports for all policy in Sweden which enables many children to enter sports, the well-educated and driven leaders at club levels and the possibilities for athletes to combine their carriers with studies. They also point to the same problems: the lack of long-term planning, the lack of transparency in the distribution of government funds, and that the overall financing of sport doesn't allow for all prospective talents to fulfil their own potential.

These results lead us to the conclusion that many critical success factors in Swedish sports are not to be found at the national policy level, neither so much in each sport specific performance development system. Instead, we suggest that they are to be found among the athletes and leaders – and the relationship between them – at the club level. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the performance and results of Swedish elite sport, research efforts must in the future be directed at the operations at club levels.

References – limited to 5

- De Bosscher, V., De Knop, P., van Bottenburg, M., & Shibli, S. (2006). A Conceptual Framework for Analysing Sports Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 6 (2), 185-215.
- De Bosscher, V., De Knop, P., van Bottenburg, M. (2009). An analysis of homogeneity and heterogeneity of elite sports systems in six nations. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 4, 111-131.