

Success or failure? Trends in the Dutch elite sport climate from an elite sport policy perspective and a public policy perspective

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Abstract keywords

Elite sport, sport policy, public policy, effectiveness, Olympics

Aim of abstract/paper - research question

Building on the theoretical model of SPLISS (De Bosscher et al. 2006, 2008) and based on a monitoring study of the Dutch elite climate from 1998 until 2012 (Van Bottenburg et al. 2012), this paper aims to show that success from an elite sport policy perspective can go hand in hand with failure from a public policy perspective.

Theoretical background or literature review

The fundamental principle of the 'global sporting arms race' (Oakley & Green 2001) is that the competitive struggle in elite sport continuously forces countries throughout the world to strategically improve the performance capacity of their elite sport system. Bottom line, this means that countries try to recruit and develop as many talents as possible, get them involved in fulltime training programmes, and improve their training conditions and facilities. This requires an increasing sum of (public and private) money. While the main goal of the SPLISS studies is to increase our knowledge about the optimum strategy for elite sport policy to successfully operate in this medal race (De Bosscher et al. 2008), this paper focusses on some unplanned negative externalities of such a policy.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The study is based on four evaluation studies of the elite sport climate in the Netherlands, carried out in 1998, 2002, 2008 and 2011, with an emphasis on the results of the most recent one. In line with the multidimensional approach to assess the effectiveness of elite sports policies of nations, as suggested by De Bosscher et al. 2011, we collected data at multiple levels (input, throughput, output) and by different stakeholder (constituent feedback). The measurement of the elite sport climate in 2012 consisted of representative surveys among elite athletes (N=302, response rate 35%), former elite athletes (N=320, 20%), national and international talents (N=477, 36%), elite sport coaches (N=106, 44%) and performance directors of national sport associations (N=33, 55%). A representative survey of the Dutch population (N=2612, 15 years and

older) including ten questions about elite sport (policy) was added to this.

Results

The analysis shows that the national expenditure on elite sport has been raised substantially in the Netherlands. In the four years' Olympic cycle on the road to London (2009-2012), the Netherlands invested 20 percent more in elite sport than during the road to Beijing (2005-2008). The overall elite sport expenditure in 2012 was twice as high as in 1998. This increased expenditure has improved the elite sport climate according to both subjective assessment and objectified criteria. In all elite sport climate surveys (1998, 2002, 2008, 2011), a majority of the athletes, coaches and performance directors agreed with the statement that the elite sport climate had been improved compared to the situation four years earlier. Moreover, compared to earlier elite sport climate surveys, we found in our 2011 study:

- that young talents were identified at an earlier age;
- that schools increasingly facilitated their sporting ambitions with special educational arrangements;
- that both talents and elite athletes had increased their number of training hours;
- that more elite athletes followed fulltime training programmes without combining elite sport with other educational or vocational obligations;
- that athletes were facilitated more and better to follow and intensify these training programmes.

At the same time, however, we found:

- declined school marks by talented athletes at specialized sport schools;
- a decreased average annual income by both athletes and coaches;
- a more gloomy view of athletes' vocational career after the termination of their sporting career;
- a diminished return on investment in terms of elite sport success related to elite sport expenditure;
- a reduced esteem for elite sport as a profession among the Dutch population;
- a decline in public support for elite sport investments.

Discussion and implications/conclusions

The data indicate that Dutch elite sport policy has been successful in many respects to improve the elite sport climate in the Netherlands. This success from an elite sport perspective, however, was accompanied with negative externalities from a public policy perspective. This has raised new problems and issues that challenge its future elite sport development.

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