

The swiss elite sport system – striving for excellence

Authors: Marco Stopper & Andreas Ch. Weber
Institution: Swiss Federal Institute of Sports Magglingen SFISM

Background

Since the establishment of the Federal Office of Sports FOSPO in 1998, the state adjusted and clarified its role by defining strategic areas of activity within the Swiss sport system. Digel, H., Burk, V. & Fahrner, M. (2006) as well as Houlihan, B. & Green, M. (2008) used different approaches to compare elite sport systems of nations. The international comparative study 2011-2012 by the SPLISS-Consortium offered a tested and evaluated 9 Pillar Model, developed by De Bosscher et al. (2008) with established instruments, to benchmark the Swiss elite sport system.

Objectives

The overall sports policy inventory aims to offer a structured overview of the Swiss sports policy with particular focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the system. The elite sports climate surveys assess the areas of improvement from the perspective of the different stakeholders. The project aims to support decision-makers in the Swiss elite sport to improve the elite sport climate and to reach a higher effectiveness of the nationwide support. The stakeholders participated actively in the review process: the communication between the different players has been forced in order to facilitate the implementation of future measures for improvement.

Method

A national project team has been established to coordinate the data collection by the Swiss Federal Institute of Sports Magglingen SFISM, involving the Federal office of Sports FOSPO, and the Swiss Olympic Association SOA. The two data collecting instruments have been adapted to the elite sport system in Switzerland and translated into 3 languages. An online survey has been put in place to survey the athletes, the coaches and the performance directors. In order to improve the response rate of the elite athletes, meetings with national teams were arranged. To collect the data of the overall sports inventory, experts for each Critical Success Factor (CSF) have been interviewed. Interviews with senior experts were conducted subsequently to validate the collected data and to determine the strengths and weaknesses of each pillar. The sample of 1158 athletes, 677 elite coaches and 58 performance directors has been defined. The results of the surveys enables to prioritize the need for action within the elite sport system.

Results

Some main preconditions to understand the Swiss elite sport system are crucial. Switzerland has a deep rooted federalist, basic democratic tradition, which influences the structures

and the organization of its elite sport system. Hence the elite sport system grew organically. In the Swiss elite sport system the operative responsibilities are historically and culturally rooted in the private sector (SOA and National Governing Bodies), while for strategic decisions also the public sector represented by the FOSPO is involved. In general, the acceptance and understanding of "excellence" in elite sport is rather poor by the Swiss population.

By completing the overall sports inventory of the Swiss elite sport system, the strengths and weaknesses of each pillar have been recognized. Some areas of activity resulted well developed (organization, participation, coach training and competition), while in others a room for improvement became evident (finance, athletes support and scientific research).

The response rates of the surveys resulted very high: athletes (n=776), coaches (n=366) and performance directors (n=41). They show a very consistent view on the areas of investment, which have to be improved. The athletes ranked the "Financial support for (elite) sport" with 75% as one of the three main areas with the highest room for improvement. Followed by "(Elite) sports culture" (35%) and "(training) infrastructure" (33%). The coaches ranked "Financial support for (elite) sport" with 71% as well in the first place, followed by "(Elite) sports culture" 50%, while they identified as third major area of improvement the "Talent identification & development" with 35% of mentions in the first three places. The performance directors replicate however perfectly the results of the athletes: 81% "Financial support for (elite) sport", 49% "(Elite) sports culture" and 44% "(training) infrastructure".

The findings suggest the need to establish transparency in the financial flows in the Swiss elite sport system. The (Elite) sports culture has to be encouraged as well as a complete career guidance and long term athletes support provided. The clubs, as main carriers of competitive sport, have to be assisted in the further development and professionalization in line with their needs.

Conclusion

The results of the elite sport climate survey support the findings of the overall sports inventory. Furthermore the surveys emphasize and set priorities to the investment areas which need to be improved most from a primary affected point of view in order to stay focused and reach "excellence".

References

- De Bosscher, V., Bingham, J., Shibli, S., et al. (2008). *The Global Sporting Arms Race. An International Comparative Study on Sports Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success*. Aachen: Meyer & Meyer.
- Digel, H., Burk, V. & Fahrner, M. (2006) *Die Organisation des Hochleistungssport. Ein internationaler Vergleich*. Schorndorf: Hofmann.
- Houlihan, B. & Green, M. (2008). *Comparative Elite Sport Development. Systems, structure and public policy*. Oxford: Elsevier.