THE INSTITUTIONAL WORK OF OWN THE PODIUM IN DEVELOPING HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT IN CANADA

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Synopsis:
This investigation examines the ways in which Own the Podium (OTP) has developed high performance sport in Canada.

Abstract:
Over the past 15 years Canada has witnessed fundamental changes to the way in which high performance sport is delivered. These changes include, but are not limited to the formulation and endorsement of Canadian Sport Policy (CSP1 2002-2012) and its successor (CSP2 2012-2022), the overhaul of the National Coaching Certification Program to a competency-based system, the adoption and ongoing implementation of the Long Term Athlete Development model, the formalisation of the Canadian Sport Institute/Centre Network (CSI/C Network), and the creation of a number of quasi/non-governmental organisations such as Sport Matters in 2001, True Sport in 2003, Canadian Sport for Life Leadership Team and Own the Podium (henceforth OTP) in 2004 (Thibault & Harvey, 2013).

This investigation examined one of these developments, namely the establishment of a C$117 million strategy/initiative entitled ‘Own the Podium 2010’ (OTP-2010). The OTP-2010 strategy/initiative was originally designed to achieve Canada’s goal of reaching first place on the podium for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games and in the top three places for the 2010 Paralympic Winter Games (Priestner Allinger & Allinger, 2004). This initiative/strategy has since formalised into a not-for-profit multi-sport organisation. In light of the abovementioned systemic developments and with the Vancouver Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games now over for some time, why is OTP continuing to operate even after its initial mandate has ended? OTP’s continued existence is particularly unusual given the typically cyclical nature of federal government investment into high performance sport in Canada (Green & Houlihan, 2005; Macintosh, Bedecki, & Franks, 1987; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; Thibault & Harvey, 2013).

Whilst it has been acknowledged that OTP’s continued existence can, at least
in part, be explained by Canada’s success at the Vancouver Winter Olympic 
and Paralympic Games, whereby the nation had its best medal haul in history — 
placing first on the gold medal table and winning 26 medals (Thibault & Harvey, 
2013), we contend that OTP’s permanence can also be explained by the 
actions of individual actors/agents that have been (and continue to be) actively 
working to shape interests towards the support for OTP specifically and high 
performance sport objectives more generally. In support of this contention, we 
draw upon the concept of institutional work as a newly emerging theoretical 
approach to institutional analysis (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, 
specifically, our investigation adopts Lawrence and Suddaby’s Institutional 
Work Framework (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009) to 
examine the ways in which OTP has shaped (i.e., created and maintained) the 
institution of high performance sport in Canada over the past decade.

A holistic, singular, case study approach (Yin, 2013) was adopted to 
examine OTP. This involved collecting and analysing organisational and policy 
documentation that were either produced by, or significant to the development 
of, OTP. Documents were analysed using Altheide’s (1996) Qualitative 
Document Analysis (QDA) approach. All data were then subject to an inductive, 
open-coding analytical process to identify any key developments or events 
within Canadian sport over the past 10 years whilst simultaneously examining 
documentation for any evidence of OTP institutional work practices in line with 
Lawrence and Suddaby’s (2006) Institutional Work Framework. These 
developments and associated practices were then converged to draw second 
order codes and themes.

The analysis identified a number of ways in which OTP has attempted to 
develop high performance sport in Canada. These include changes to the 
institutions’ rules and regulations, most notably those surrounding federal 
government-National Sport Organisation funding and reporting process (e.g., 
creation of a three-tier/categorisation system and the hiring of High 
Performance ‘Advisors’). OTP has also attempted to change stakeholder norms 
and beliefs by articulating its own contribution to Canada’s sporting success 
(e.g., quarterly newsletters and media guides) and by creating new and 
incorporating pre-existing high performance sport programs (e.g., the ‘Top 
Secret’ program and CSI/C Network leadership).

Institutional work draws attention to “the ways in which desperate sets of 
actors, each pursuing their own vision, can become co-ordinated in a common 
project” (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 249). The product of OTP’s intentional 
and unintentional institutional work over the past 10 years, we suggest, has 
been an increasingly co-ordinated approach to high performance sport in 
Canada. Furthermore, our investigation highlights the importance role of 
individual actors in shaping institutional settings, bringing to the forefront the 
understanding that even increasingly taken-for-granted organisations (like 
OTP) and institutional settings (such as high performance sport) require active 
promotion and promulgation in order to survive.

References:

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