
**DO SPORT SYSTEMS MATTER?
AN INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON OF ELITE SPORT POLICIES IN 15
NATIONS (SPLISS)**

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Synopsis:

Abstract:

Over the past decade there has been an increasing interest in the comparative analysis of sport systems, particularly at the national level. What can be concluded from these studies is that broad common categories of elite sport systems exist across multiple countries. These are based on a similar model of elite sports development with only slight variations (e.g. Bergsgard et al., 2007; De Bosscher, et al., 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2005). However more recent literature also emphasized the diversity of the ways that resources in elite sport policies are combined in different countries (Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; Truyens et al., 2013). High performance sport development is characterized by prevailing (and long term developed) local culture in sport influenced by local politics and a political system. Complementary to these studies, this paper aims to explore to what extent 'systems matter' and are characterised by convergence and divergence. The results are based on an international comparative study in 15 countries, where 58 researchers and 33 policy makers collaborated in a joint project, known as SPLISS 2.0 (Sport Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success).

Methodology

Building on previous research, this study adopts the SPLISS framework (De Bosscher et al., 2006) to collect data on nine pillarPillars (or policy dimensions) and 96 Critical Success Factors (CSFs) in each nation, using two kinds of research instruments: (1) the overall sport policy inventory, with open ended and closed questions on elite sport systems for each of the nine pillarPillars (212 questions, 184 pages), that are completed by a local researcher in each country and (2) an 'elite sport climate survey' completed by 3140 elite athletes,

1376 elite coaches and 241 performance directors. Mixed qualitative and quantitative data were aggregated into a scoring system as a supportive and tangible way of understanding elite sport policies more broadly in relation to sporting success.

Results

Overall, the results revealed that better performing countries, also tend to have higher scores on the nine Pillars and that those countries that we have identified as being the most efficient (Australia, Japan, France and the Netherlands for summer sports; Canada, the Netherlands, and Switzerland for winter sports), are also the countries that perform best. So, systems do matter. However, one of the key findings is that good performing countries show strengths in different sets of Pillars. This is also further evidence that there is no 'one size fits all' approach that is applicable to all nations. For example, the strengths of Canada in Pillars 7 (coaches), 8 ((inter)national competition) and 9 (research innovation) are almost diametrically opposed to the scores for the Netherlands showing relative strengths in Pillars 2 (organization), 3 (participation), 4 (talent ID and development) and 5 (athletic career support); this shows the importance of the Dutch organizational model that not only enhances sport participation and talent development (mainly in speed skating) but also proves to be effective and efficient in turning this broad base into later elite sporting success with a relatively modest financial investment.

When we delve deeper into the 96 critical success factors (CSFs) that are the building blocks of the nine Pillars we find that 22 factors significantly correlate with success either in summer or in winter sports (at the 0.05 level); many of these are characterised by sufficient financial resources and effective structure, governance and coordination. This finding lends further weight to the hypothesis that there may well be a minimum 'entry level' of investment required for a nation of any size to have an effective system, and that money alone does not guarantee success. Meanwhile, each Pillar score is composed of different configurations of CSFs, for example in relation to (de)centralization of talent and facilities and national coordination of local development.

Discussion

Despite the search for a common (or similar) path towards elite sport development, the reality seems to be that there is no generic blueprint - no sets of Pillars, Critical Success Factors or recognised best practices that can be simply lifted from one context and placed in another that will guarantee success. There is broad consensus on the ingredients that go into the elite success recipe but countries combine ingredients in their own unique ways. Accordingly, the key challenges for nations remain to "benchlearn", instead of benchmark against other competitors; and to seek best broad brush principles of efficient and effective elite sport policies rather than looking for simplistic transfer of so-called best practice. The challenge remains to find the right blend of system ingredients and processes that will work best for given nations in their own context and culture.

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