

## Conceptualising a new structural approach to league organisation: league systems in individual sports in Germany

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### Aim of abstract

In team sports, a league system represents the main format for competitions (Noll, 2003). But, over the last decades, more and more sport federations organising individual sports have also introduced league competitions, like Judo, Swimming, Triathlon and Golf. Obviously, the league competition model provides an added value for the athletes, the clubs and the federations. To explore these added value dimensions of leagues in individual sports, a research project was conducted, whose first step compared the leagues' formats and governance from an economic perspective. Therefore, the research question of this paper is, how are the league systems in individual sports constructed and what distinguishes them from team sport leagues?

### Theoretical background

While there is a large number of studies on team sport leagues, leagues in individual sports represent a lack in economic research. However, the literature on management and economics of professional team sport (e.g. Drewes, 2003; Noll, 2003; Ross & Szymanski, 2010; Szymanski, 2003) provides general criteria and analysis how to construct and manage leagues successfully, related to e.g. league formats, governance structures or institutional mechanisms to protect the integrity of the competition. They all have to be designed to ensure exciting competitions and to maximize marketing opportunities. These and other indicators of league construction and governance will guide the analysis of league systems in individual sport.

### Methodology

Various methods of explorative research were used, e.g. a document analysis and qualitative surveys. To obtain information about the structures and organisation of the leagues, a document analysis, based on published league statutes and regulations from all 31 individual sports leagues, was carried out. In addition, qualitative problem-centered interviews with league organizers from 16 sport federations (39 interviews in total) were conducted in order to examine the aims of the leagues and to explore the procedures and coordination processes in league management and marketing. To analyse the documents and interviews, a qualitative and quantitative content analysis method based on Mayring (2014) was executed.

### Results

The findings show similarities but also differences between the individual sports leagues. Differences exist in the governance of the league (trade association vs. league corporation), the linkages with other competitions (team or individual competitions), the organization and marketing of league competitions, the restrictions for the athletes (admission of professional athletes), the participation requirements (infrastructure) and the determination of the champion (playoffs

vs. league ranking). Individual sports federations with a bigger membership basis have a more comprehensive and professional league management than smaller sports federations. This is the case in Golf, Tennis or Table Tennis. However, there are also some exceptions from this rule, such as in Judo, Triathlon or Wrestling, which are small federations but do have a comprehensive league system and a professional league management.

In contrast to professional team sport leagues, leagues in individual sports are primarily focussed on the amateur level and talent development prospects rather than marketing prospects. Nevertheless, the basic construction of these leagues is similar to professional team sports leagues, although other priorities are set, e.g. predominantly decentralized marketing activities, a shorter competition season, less participation requirement rules or few measures to protect the integrity of the competition. In addition, special characteristics can be observed, e.g. competitions between professional and non-professional athletes, multiple starting rights for the athletes or a league design combining elements of the European and North American league system. Furthermore, for the individual sports leagues specific challenges exist: to synchronise the individual competitions with the league system competition schedule, to arrange simultaneous meets involving several teams, and lastly to create flexible competition arrangements that are independent of the rules defined by international sports governing bodies.

### Conclusions

In comparison to team sport leagues, the league systems in individual sports have many common characteristics, but also differences. The specific features of the individual sport leagues show unique characteristics, which can provide added value to the actors involved and to the specific sport. Future research will focus on exploring this added value, and on the economic and sporting benefits of leagues in individual sports in general.

### References

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