

MANAGING HIGH PERFORMANCE ATHLETES

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Context

It has been recognised for some time that, at the elite and professional level of sport, the application and development of specialised, scientific knowledge is fundamental. No longer can any one individual hold all of the existing expertise required to produce elite athletes. Increasingly a group of specialists is required, which necessitates managing these people. In many ways the elite head coaches are sport managers. Sport management necessitates the leadership of a wider group of personnel as well as the direction of individual and team athletes. This in turn implies that expertise and experts are needed, often available through services purchased outside the nominal organisation. Another feature of the current situation is that a split between the CEO/Manager and high-performance specialist managers (HPM) exists.

After World War2, there was a long history of this development in Eastern Bloc countries under state socialism. Western nations have followed suit, but this must be seen within a western management context. This paper seeks to provide this history and locate the current sport management practices of HPMs in western sport management. In many sport organisations, especially those involved in elite, high-performance games preparations, a new, specialised line manager position has evolved. This post has different names: high-performance manager (Australia, New Zealand), performance director (UK), and high performance director (USA). This management role is involved with various staff, including coaches, team managers, training camp staff, mission staff, and a wide variety of sport science and medicine specialists. In our view, they have demanded that previous HPM structures and practices be noted, in order to move forward with their implementation in western sport systems.

These specialised roles have not been studied although they have been noted in amateur and in professional sport organisations (Smith & Stewart, 1999; Zakus & Bird, 2002). This paper describes first, in a preliminary manner, the elements of this management function and its necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities, as well as the roles and responsibilities from a historical perspective, and then through current developments in Australia, New Zealand, the UK and the US. A case study of Modern Pentathlon is also presented.

Methods

One author has served in this capacity and therefore brings a strongly grounded knowledge of the role to the study. He also trained and competed under the Soviet HPM system. With this as a basis for the study, we sought examples to build a profile of this type of position. First, we used existing literature on eastern European structures and processes. Then, we explored extensively by Internet national sport bodies in Australia, New Zealand, the UK, and the US. A number of job advertisements were located and their content analysed to develop an exemplar. The second major method used was to interview persons occupy/occupied such positions, which provided an interesting pastiche of experiences.

Results

The position of HPM in elite sport identifies a new line position and a new level of management in sport organisations in the west. Most often the person in this role reports directly to the Chief Executive Officer/Head manager of the organisation. A key feature is the need both for sport management and coaching management knowledge, skills, and abilities. The role involves both leadership, and coordination with a wide number of sport specialists, teams, events and organizations.

What makes the HPM profile unique is this combination of two types of management skill: strategic leadership and operational coordination. Creative and inspired leadership skills are necessary for such responsibilities as developing a future strategy for the sport and stimulating athletes to strive for Olympic gold. Coordination skills are necessary for working in consultation with many stakeholders to monitor athletes' performance, oversee drug education and testing programs, manage team budgets, national ranking and national squad selection, athlete and staff employment contracts, amongst others.

A number of the job descriptions and key duties demonstrated that both leadership and coordination skills are important even at lower organizational levels, such as the recently advertised HP Administrator for USA Water Skiing (Teamworkonline, 2005).

Another important skill emerging from the data is the need to be a coaching coordinator. A new notion of 'coaching' is developing – from primarily training program advise to full support covering all aspects of an athlete's life. It is very strongly premised on coaching as developed in former Eastern bloc systems. Ideally an HPM needs to provide expertise and manage specialists in all performance areas from training, medicine, diet and psychology to career management (ACE programs) and marketing. The Modern Pentathlon case study provides an exemplar.

Modern Pentathlon

Over the past two Olympics, pentathlon has been one of Britain's most successful sports. The full quota of four women's places were filled for the 2000 and 2004 Olympics combined, winning gold and bronze in Sydney and bronze in Athens. This success coincided with employment of Jan Bartu, Great Britain's Modern Pentathlon National Performance Director and 1976 Olympic silver and bronze medallist. Our review of the job description and organizational structure suggests that the success is not accidental, as the Director's role is comprehensive, holistic, and strategic compared to many other analysed HPM positions. For example, in addition to tasks noted in other job descriptions, the British Performance Director also had such responsibilities as facility development, marketing (programme commercialisation and publicity), and management of all financial and human resources. One of the most common responsibilities in HP management, athlete development, also had a strategic approach in this case, as it aimed at generational management through elite achievements at different age groups. Bartu indicated (Powell, 2005) that some of the key success factors were the programme's acceptable funding level, training centre, management and coaching experience, support from the administrators of the Association and from the UKSport development programme called World Class Performance. Overall, and with this programme's achievements, we view it as a best practice model.

Discussion and Implications

A key point is that recognition of such positions is growing, and they require a knowledge, skills, and abilities base that is not currently provided in professional preparation of undergraduates. The role of HPM is specialised and points to a unique integration of both sport management and coaching management. Many current programmes have some degree of this educational content (e.g., those located in physical education/kinesiology, education schools, departments, or faculties), whilst others have limited exposure conducive to graduates filling these positions (e.g., those in business schools, departments, or faculties). This is stated in recognition that the number of such specialists will be limited, however we must acknowledge and provide further integration of both management specialties within university programmes.

References

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