

(SP) DOES SPORTING SUCCESS INDICATE THE EXISTENCE OF TRANSFERABLE BEST PRACTICES IN ELITE SPORT SUPPORT?

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Introduction

We witness today a convergence in the service portfolio offered by elite sport supporting organisations. The general design of different elite sport support systems might vary, for example, in the involvement of the respective national government or in the degree of centralisation of the physical support infrastructure. But no matter if it is the Australian or English Institute of Sport, Olympiatoppen in Norway, or the system of *Olympiastützpunkte* in Germany, all of these organisations attempt to offer a similar support spectrum that is believed to be crucial for achieving sporting success on the international stage. Services from this portfolio, which might affect the athletes and coaches most directly, include for example lifestyle support programmes, performance diagnostic measurements, and coach education schemes.

Despite the striking similarities in the service portfolios offered by today's elite sport systems, medal tables reveal that some nations are still more "successful" than others. If services like sport science or lifestyle support are indeed crucial factors for the development of winning athletes, this suggests that more successful sport systems might have found better ways to implement these support services.

Hence, this study seeks to investigate the management processes that are applied by two successful sport systems in the delivery of some of these services. It is hoped that this study will identify transferable practices from which other systems could learn.

Methods

The Swedish Athletics Association and the cross-country skiing section of the Norwegian Skiing Federation were chosen as most suitable comparison partners for this study based on a system of quantitative and qualitative selection criteria. To confine the scope of this project, the focus of the investigation was limited to analysing the delivery of lifestyle and sport science support services, the design of the coach education, and the organisation of the squad system. Based on the problems discussed in the literature concerning the delivery of these elements of an elite sport system, question guidelines were developed for semi-structured interviews with key position holders from the two sport systems.

A total of 45 people from the two federations and their partner organisations were interviewed. The interviewees were selected according to their position in the two systems and included specifically coaches, athletes and diagnostics staff members. The aim of the interviews, which were conducted during two study trips to Scandinavia, was to understand how the above mentioned services are delivered in the daily support situation in these two sport systems.

Over 65hrs of interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed with the use of the software solution NUDIST[©].

Results

The interviews revealed striking and unexpected similarities, while the actual secret behind the Scandinavian success appears often to be rather intangible:

Neither the Norwegian Skiing Federation nor the Swedish Athletics Association provides e.g. a formal squad system offering a long-term development

pathway. Additionally, neither country requires coaches to have any formal coaching education or certification.

Sport science support services are not delivered by an elaborate, compulsory, and top-down organized diagnostic schedule in Norway or Sweden. Rather, sport science support services are incorporated into the training practice more or less indirectly, while a successful cooperation between practitioner and theorist appears to depend very much on the “personality” of the latter. Didactical skills and communicating a true interest in and knowledge of elite level training is thereby often considered to be more important than subject-specific knowledge.

With regard to lifestyle support, the two Scandinavian systems do not provide the specific expertise of career advisors or athlete mentors. Athlete and coach are instead left with a lot of responsibility to plan and secure an athlete’s non-sporting development.

Discussion

It remains difficult to evaluate in how far the identified *practices* are transferable to another context as they often appear to depend on the personal characteristics of the respective individuals rather than on clear management practices. Even more so, the way coaches, athletes, and support staff members interact with each other often appears to reflect the nature of the general Scandinavian context. One of the Swedish interviewees indicated however, that their success might not necessarily be due to the fact that their team is managed in a very Swedish way. For him, it might much more be the case that the “Swedish way” is simply more suitable for today’s athletes and coaches: *“That is maybe also a part of our success that our approach is more modern to the kind of people living in the society.”*

On a more general note, it appears that it is not only the extent and the sophistication of the support an elite sport system offers that determines its athletes’ success. The amount of support that is actually accepted and used by coaches and athletes is much more relevant. Both investigated cases suggest thereby that a successful integration depends on the determination and personality of only a few key support staff members and the maturity of the personal relationships between these individuals and the athletes or coaches.

References

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