A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FLANDERS (BELGIUM) IN ELITE SPORT AGAINST 6 OTHER NATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The performances of Belgium, a nation with a small population of ten million inhabitants and a reasonable affluence (GDP/cap = 24,037 Euros), are beneath expectations. The highest number of medals Belgium ever won during the Olympic Games was six in Atlanta 1996, with a decreasing line in performances ever since. Belgium was ranked 51th in Athens 2004 (in total medals), which was below what could be expected when macro-level determinants such as population and wealth are taken into account (De Bosscher, De Knop & Van Bottenburg, 2007). Furthermore, a comparative study with the Netherlands revealed that Flanders (the northern part of Belgium[1]) has ten times less athletes per inhabitants in the world top eight (17 versus 461). This raised questions for Flemish policy makers, who have invested seriously in elite sport since 2000, with expenditures on elite sport that have more than doubled. In this respect, this study aims at determining the competitiveness of Flanders in elite sport by comparing it to six other nations.

METHODS

Because of the lack of an empirically grounded, coherent theory on the factors determining international sporting success, the first step in this study was to develop a theoretical model. Nine sports policy factors, or "pillars" that are commonly considered to be important for international sporting success were identified: (1) financial support, (2) sport policy structures and organization, (3) sport participation, (4) talent identification and development system, (5) athletic and post career support, (6) training facilities, (7) coaching provision and coach development, (8) international competition, (9) scientific research (De Bosscher, De Knop & Van Bottenburg, 2006). Second, this theoretical model was tested in an empirical environment in six nations: Belgium (separated by Flanders and Wallony), the Netherlands, Canada, Italy, Norway and the United Kingdom. Researchers in each nation collected data on their sport policies (over 85 open-ended and closed questions) and furthermore 1090 athletes, 253 coaches and 69 performance directors filled in written questionnaires on the general climate to train as an elite athlete in their country. The latter was aimed at conducting information that can not easily be measured, by involving the main stakeholders in elite sport as the evaluators of the services conform to literature in quality management and effectiveness of sport organisations (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000; Papadimitriou & Taylor, 2000). Finally, because of the lack of an appropriate methodology to compare nations an objective scoring system was developed measuring over 100 criteria resulting in a total percentage score for each pillar.

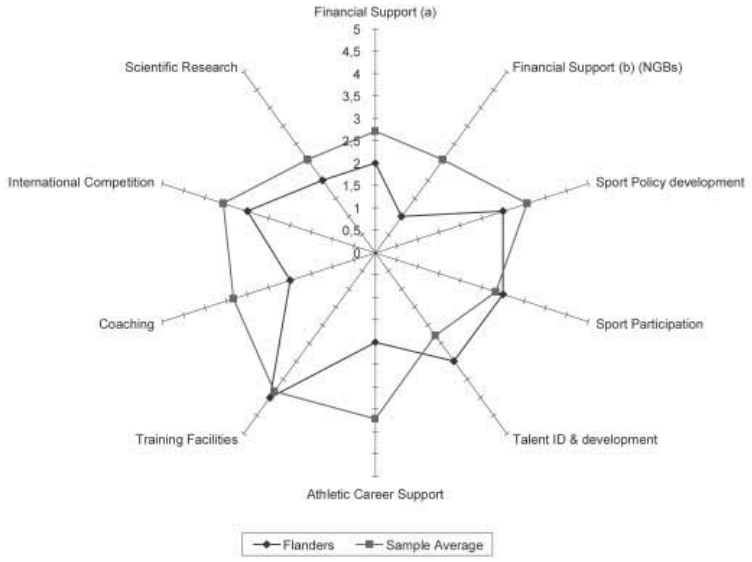
RESULTS

Figure 1 shows how Flanders performed on each 'pillar' against the average of the other sample nations. Flanders appears to have a relative strength in Pillar 4 (talent identification and development) compared with the sample

1 Flanders is the northern, Dutch speaking part of Belgium, Wallony the southern, French and German speaking part. As Flanders and Wallony have separate sport policies they have participated in this research as if they were two distinct nations. There exists no national Belgium sport policy (besides the Olympic Committee making selections for the Olympic Games).

average. From a national perspective this might be expected, but bearing in mind the very low number of top eight athletes in Flanders this finding endorses the need for further research at the sport specific level. Against the other nine factors Flanders is equal to the sample average for Pillar 3 (participation in sport) and Pillar 6 (training facilities) and below the sample average for the seven other factors. The magnitude of the gaps between the scores for Flanders and the sample average are greatest in athletic career support (-1.7), financial support for governing bodies (-1.6) and coaching (-1.3). If Flanders wants to narrow the gap between itself and the other sample nations, the priority for investment should be the three policy areas with the greatest gap between the region's score and the sample average.

Figure 1: performance of Flanders against the sample average for each pillar.



DISCUSSION

Competition for success in elite sport is increasing and more nations are adopting a common strategy to develop medal winning athletes (Shibli & Bingham, 2005). The survey reveals a remarkable acceleration in the funding for elite sport, which almost doubled in the period between 1999 and 2003 in four of the six nations. This suggests that standing still could mean going backwards and the price of success will raise. If Flanders (or Belgium) wants to increase its success (the Flemish ministry of sport has claimed to aim at 10 medals in 2016), even a tripling of the current elite sport expenditures of 9.3 million Euros might not be unreasonable. But a simple input (financial support) -output (medals) model may be too rational and economic. Elite sporting success appears to be the outcome of a multivariate process involving many variables. The prior areas for investment in Flanders are pillar 5 (athletic and post career support) and pillar 7 (coaching provision and coach development). Furthermore in terms of where nations can gain a competitive advantage, pillars 4 (talent identification and development) and 7 (coaches) are relatively under developed in most nations. The study was showing that Italy and UK, the two largest nations from our sample, have historically taken a relatively relaxed approach to talent development, believing that talent will emerge naturally. If larger nations would take a more systematic approach towards talent development, it will be even more difficult for smaller nations to compete.

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