

High Performance as a Leading Force of Sport Development: Analyzing Practices of the Former USSR and Russia

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Abstract

Research Question and Aim of Paper

A vital question for many sport organizations and governments around the world is how to provide sport participants with a gradual path to excellence. Lack of theory in this area and insufficient practical frameworks often result in less than efficient, perhaps even disjointed, sport systems that are disadvantageous for participants [4]. There is a growing literature on the development of high performance sport, particularly from the Western European, North American, and Australian perspectives [e.g., 1, 2, 5, 6]. The aim of this paper is to create a globally applicable model of high performance sport development integrated with mass participation that incorporates Eastern European practices.

Theoretical Background

Researchers identify both gaps and similarities among successful sport systems using taxonomies established through comparative studies [e.g., 1], and they have also developed conceptual models to understand the micro, meso, and macro level integration of effective national sport delivery [e.g., 5]. However, sport coaches, managers, and policy makers need more specific recommendations as they try to build bridges between mass participation and high performance sport. The fundamental theory behind this investigation, shared by De Bosscher et al. [1], Digel [2], Fetisov [3], Isaev [7], and Platonov [8], is that of the sport excellence hierarchy which finds its foundation broadly based in mass participation sport and its pinnacle at the elite level of performance by talented athletes. The paper also considers the necessary systemic elements identified by the above authors, such as coaching, facilities, competitions, qualification, talent identification, and development. Effective means of supporting and coordinating these elements are still to be detected.

Methodology

Australian, North American, and Western and Eastern European reference material was analysed to construct a globally applicable model of high performance sport integrated with mass participation. To examine the empirical evidence against the model, the sport systems of the former USSR and post-Soviet Russia were investigated utilising international literature sources.

Results, Discussion and Implications

The macro level of the proposed model is defined as socio-economic, cultural, legislative, and organizational support for a national sport system by the whole society and the State. The meso level includes infrastructures, personnel, and services enabling sport programs, that is, those required for the delivery of sport policy. The micro level consists of operations, processes, and methodologies for development of individual athletes. The examination of the former USSR and Russian sport systems offers the following approaches to the seven elements of the proposed model:

Macro level

1. The balance of centralized and club-driven development of mass and elite sport in integration, particularly creation of a hierarchical system of clubs and specialized sport schools which maximize both participation and excellence and serve as a tool of connecting mass and elite sport.
2. Partnerships across all types of organizations to support sport through investment into both personnel fitness and athletes' performance.

Meso level

3. Scientific, medical, educational, philosophical, and marketing support to both mass and elite sport.
4. A system of competitions across all levels of each sport integrating local, national, international as well as professional and amateur schedules.
5. A network of multi-sport mega facilities servicing all ages and levels of participation.

Micro level

6. Talent identification and development methodologies for a 12-18 year progression of participants recommended to coaches.
7. Advanced athlete preparation and support through effective coordination of numerous specialists and partners surrounding athletes, from diagnostic and restorative therapists, through to family, sponsors, and the media.

We argue that this typology provides a heuristic against which national sport systems can be measured and developed. This model is holistic and complex. It demands commitment from all levels of society and the State to reap the potential benefits from all levels of a sport system. The model, it must be remembered, is an ideal-type one, and many countries will vary in terms of alignment with different elements of the model. This does provide, however, evidence where gaps exist and where new policies and programs can be developed.

Elite sport requires a strong base of mass sport participants to reach policy goals in health, fitness, social capital and community development, success in major global competitions, and national identity and pride.

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