

Is there Room for Diversity in Elite Sport Development of Nations?

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Abstract

Introduction

As a consequence of internationalization and the pressure of globalisation (Houlihan & Green, 2008) elite sport systems from different nations have converged to a single model of elite sports development with only slight variations (Bergsgard, Houlihan, Mangset et al., 2007, Green & Houlihan, 2005, Oakley & Green 2001).

However there is room for diversity, caused in particular by social, cultural and political specificities that may limit the extent to which countries are able to adopt sport systems.

This study explores to what extent elite sport policies in six nations (Belgium, Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, United Kingdom) have become more homogenous, and where differences emerge in relation to explaining (mainly) Olympic success.

Theoretical Framework

The basic theoretical framework for international comparison consists of nine sports policy factors, or “pillars”, that are commonly considered to be important for international sporting success (De Bosscher et al., 2006): (1) financial support, (2) Sport policies and structures, (3) participation in sport, (4) talent identification and development system, (5) athletic and post career support, (6) training facilities, (7) coaching provision and coach development, (8) (inter)national competition, (9) scientific research.

Methods

Researchers in each participating nation collected data on their elite sport policies (over 85 open-ended and closed questions) for each of the nine pillars. Additionally data were gathered directly from the main stakeholders in elite sport by means of written questionnaires, responded by 1090 athletes, 273 coaches and 79 performance directors. To support a descriptive analysis of elite sport systems and to increase objectivity of data comparison, a scoring system was developed, by measuring over

100 critical success factors on a five point scale and aggregating a percentage score for each nation on the nine pillars.

Results and Discussion

The results endorse the opinions of other authors that homogeneity has increased compared to several decades ago, but also show that there are considerable variations in each of the nine pillars and that large differences emerge in the way elite sport policies is implemented in the different nations.

Diversity is often related to the general sport structure. For example, whereas UKSport and Olympiatoppen (Norway) are only responsible for elite sport at national level, NOC*NSF (the Netherlands), Bloso & Adeps (Belgium, separated by Flanders & Wallonia), CONI (Italy) and Sport Canada also have responsibilities for general sport for all development, leading to increasing tensions between both areas.

With regard to talent identification and development, no sample nation has a well developed system. Similar developments of elite sport schools are found in the smaller nations (Belgium, the Netherlands and Norway), which do not exist at a national structured level in the UK, Canada and Italy.

Regarding financial support it appears that the best performing nations in the Olympic Summer Games (Italy, the UK, the Netherlands) also spend the highest amounts of money on elite sport. However, differences are found in the priorities made by these nations for elite sport (like Canada, the Netherlands and Italy) compared to sport for all (Norway, Belgium) and the number of sports that are targeted for elite sport. Furthermore, all nations provide financial support for athletes, but the criteria and the purpose of this support vary considerably.

Financial support for coaches is still slow in developing in all the sample nations, and may become a similar characteristic in future development.

The results yielded that it is impossible to create one single model for explaining international success, because of (1) the different priorities given to success by nations, (2) the lack of evidence on cause and effect explaining elite sporting success, (3) the different sport systems and cultural backdrop of elite sport and success and (4) the demographic and economic situation of nations.

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