

The competitiveness of nations in athletics

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Aim of paper and research questions

The struggle among nation to win medals and gain international sporting has been intensified and politicized, as scientific researchers and governments have shown increasing interests in elite sport policies and the factors or determinants contributing to the success in international competition (De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg & Shibli, 2006; De Bosscher, De Knop & Van Bottenburg, 2009; Digel, 2005; Houlihan, 1997; Green & Oakley, 2001; Smolianov & Zakus, 2008). Despite the large variety of literature concerning the relationship between policies and elite sport success, a wide diversity of research outcomes can be noted regarding the measurement and empirical analysis of contextual, processual and specific elite sport policy structures (Houlihan, 2008). The purpose of this paper is the validation of the SPLISS-model (2007) in a sport specific context (cfr. athletics), based on interviews with international experts and a survey on international high performance directors in athletics. This will lead to (1) new insights in determinants on the competitiveness of elite sport policies and (2) larger theoretical understanding in the determinants of competitiveness in high performance athletics.

Literature review

International researchers have developed several ways to describe measure and evaluate the competitiveness, effectiveness or efficiency of national elite sport systems regarding political processes, structures and procedures facilitating the achievement of sporting success. De Bosscher (2007) is one of the few studies that succeeded in testing a conceptual model of elite sport policy factors in an international context, by measuring and empirically testing critical success factors in an international sporting context. Although this model is of notable international scientific value, it lacks (like most other models) the capability to generate deeper understanding in the key areas at a sport-specific level. Furthermore, new perspectives from the economic literature related to the competitiveness of nations in international competition, will enlarge international comprehension in the quality of elite sport policies. Even though competitiveness is a popular concept within international economic and business literature, the variety of concepts of competitiveness is large. While traditional Industrial Organisation and more specific Porter's framework adopt an "outside-in" framework, the resource based perspective focuses on the relationship between firm characteristics and performance (Porter, 1990; Siggel, 2003; Spanos & Lioukas, 2001).

Research design and proposed data analysis

A qualitative questionnaire was developed to measure the determinants in high performance athletics. Based on telephone interviews or in-depth face to face interview on athletic policies, insights regarding (1) the international success in athletics, (2) the key success factors in athletics, (3) the policy factors that need to be improved in the future and (4) elements that could improve the competitiveness of Europe were developed in this stage of research. Although high performance directors of all European federations were contacted (N=50), the response was low due to linguistic and organisational reasons (12 respondents from 7 countries contributed to

this study). Inductive procedures were used to classify items into the SPLISS model pillars and categories' clusters.

Discussion of progress

To explain the national success of their country, 35% of the indicated determinants by the respondents referred to the structure and organisation of athletic elite sport policies (pillar 2), indicating the quality and 'willingness of policies' to develop an efficient policy structure within their own sport discipline or in cooperation with other sports. Other respondents indicated this being one of the factors that have to be improved most in their country (Belgium & Denmark). Furthermore, 30% of all the determinants draw attention to the necessary improvement of financial and educational support for elite coaches (pillar 7) in their national policy. As good policy structure and organisation was indicated the major reason for international success, the role of competitive sports and approval of top level athletics as a part of the society made clear that the environment wherein athletic policies take embedded, are of major importance to high performance success. Growing internationalisation and cooperation among athletes, coaches and policy structures were indicated in 36% of all determinants to increase the competitiveness of athletics in Europe.

Increasing the overall response is a necessity to enlarge the insights into the competitiveness of nations in athletics based on the SPLISS-model. This will create new perspectives on evolution within high performance athletics such as the growing specialisation and internationalisation of national talent development systems.

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