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Elite sports in Nordic countries: Is leadership and organization the key to success?

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Elite sports in Nordic countries

Is leadership and organization the key to success?

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Background

Finland, Norway and Sweden have strong traditions in winter sports. Due to natural conditions, Denmark has a very weak position. In summer Olympics Denmark, Finland and Sweden have all historically done much better than Norway. The period after 1988 shows a marked shift in favour of Norway, in winter and summer Olympics. In winter sports, Norway has managed to establish a significantly higher level of success than Sweden and Finland. In summer sports, where Norway historically has been much less successful than its neighbours, it has managed to reach about the same level. Denmark has been able to keep the same level, while Sweden and Finland have lost ground (Andersen 2010).

Objective

The question here is why results differ among the Nordic countries. The four countries have comparable population size, similar political and social systems, quite similar conditions and resources for achieving excellence. The development of national elite sport systems over the last decades also reflect a general trend towards increased rationalization and professionalization, including construction of elite facilities, support for 'full time' athletes, the provision of coaching, sports science and sports medicine support service etc. (Houlihan & Green 2008:6). However, at the same time important aspect of the overall the specific organization and leadership models for elite sports in the Nordic countries have become more different. The objective is to investigate how such factors can explain differences in Olympic results over the last 20 years. These comparisons do not give a complete picture of elite sport success in the Nordic countries, as it is limited to Olympic medals. Results in huge non-Olympic sports (e.g. golf) and in professionalized sports in which the major contests are not Olympic Games (e.g. football and tennis) are not included.

Methods

The article is based on a comparative project, with researchers from the four countries. The design is a most similar case comparison. The most striking source of variation seems to be national model organization and leadership in elite sports. Data focus on how organization and leadership variables influence capacity for top-level performance. Country studies are in-dept cases, based on various written sources and in-dept interviews with top leaders in Nordic elite sports. The study uses a conceptual framework of mindful organizations (Weick & Sutcliffe 2001) to capture variations in reliable experience-based learning development work. Data were systematized through *open and theoretical coding*. Theoretical saturation was achieved as new interviews did not introduce new elements that could refine or challenge emerging interpretations and their implications (Charmaz 2006, Silverman 2005).

Results

The study suggests a clear relationship between models of organization and leadership, on the one hand, and Olympic results, on the other hand. It is not only a pattern of co-

variation in overall national Olympic results, organizational mechanisms and processes supporting capacity for top-level performance can be related to degrees of mindful learning and development. Despite many similarities, small differences in such capacities over time seem to have major effects on results.

Denmark and Norway has moved towards increased centralization and integration of elite efforts across sports as well as sports and Olympic associations. In Denmark elite sport has its own legislation since 1984 (revised in 2004) and central elite sports organization – Team Denmark – is a state institution. In Norway, the Olympic Top Sports program – Olympiatoppen – is the operational elite sports organization of the Norwegian Sports Federation and Olympic committee.

i Conversation with Director Team Denmark, Michael Andersen, April 1. 2009

ii Conversation with Head of Olympic Top Sports program, Jarle Aambø, May 12 2009

iii Conversation with Stephan Lindeberg, president of Swedish Olympic Committee, Stockholm, April 29th. 2009.

iv Conversation with Juha Heikkala, Helsinki, Finnish Sports Federation (SLU) 27th. November 2009, and with General secretary Jouko Poruntakanen and Head of sports Kari Niemi-Nikkola, Finnish Olympic Committee, May 11 2010.

In Swedenⁱⁱⁱ and Finland^{iv} there are no central organizations for elite sports. In Sweden individual sports associations has a dominant role in elite development. The relationships between the national peak organization and the Olympic committee have been characterized by disagreement and open conflict. Clubs seems to play a more important role than in other Nordic countries. Finland has moved towards increasingly specialized independent sports associations that include both competitive and recreational activities. The national Olympic committee is independent and has a limited role in ongoing elite developments.

Concluding remark: filling a knowledge gap

In a number of areas the Nordic countries have been subject for intense comparative research. This is for instance the case for welfare state studies. However, there are no systematic comparative studies of elite sports in Nordic countries. Even within-country studies of elite sports are few. Differences in organization and leadership partly reflect underlying struggles over values and interests, partly the instrumentality and efficiency of different types of arrangements. In contrast to quantitative studies that are built around

rough structural indicators, we try to capture the more detailed structures as well as intentions and processes that may explain in international results.

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