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Elite sport success: Improvement as a proxy for successful policies?

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Background

The 'global sporting arms race' (De Bosscher et al, 2008) details how an increasing number of nations are taking a strategic approach to the development of elite sport in order to achieve success in events such as the Summer and Winter Olympic Games. If nations are successful in elite sport, it is reasonable to expect improvement in the various measures of performance that are commonly used. These include: medal table position, gold medals won, total medals won and 'market share'.

Objectives

Previous research into elite sport performance such as UK Sport (2003) and De Bosscher et al (2008) has tended to focus on single sports events such as the Summer Olympic Games. With the recent completion of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Games, the objective of this paper is to analyse both Beijing 2008 and Vancouver 2010 to identify the performance of nations across both Summer and Winter games in order to identify possible evidence of successful elite sport development policies

Methods

This research has been conducted primarily using desk research on the results and tables of the two Olympic Games in question. The methods used are adaptations of the techniques described in Shibli and Bingham (2008) and involve the reconfiguration of performance data using proprietary packages such as Excel and Access. Having identified cases of interest, further follow up work is conducted to facilitate the interpretation of the results.

Results

In Beijing two clusters of nations are identified. In the first cluster there are five nations who improved on the four indicators outlined above in the introduction. In the second cluster there are nine nations ranked between 16th and 50th place who also improved on all four indicators. The second cluster nations tend to be those with modest levels of success in absolute terms for whom a gain of one or two gold medals represents a considerable improvement. In the first cluster we find nations such as China, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Jamaica and Kenya who were all regarded as having highly successful performances in Beijing - albeit for a variety of reasons.

In Vancouver two clusters of nations are identified. In the first cluster are Canada and Norway (1st and 4th respectively); and in the second cluster are five nations ranked between 13th and 17th place. When looking across the two events as a whole, there are no nations that improve on all indicators.

Conclusions

The first key point to emerge from the data is that what we define as being 'improvement' is a demanding target to achieve. For example, in the case of China it could only improve its medal table ranking by one place from second to first. This also means that it is impossible for the top ranked nation to improve.

Second, there appears to be a clear hosting effect with both China and Canada achieving their best ever performances when acting as hosts. China is notable for winning 51 gold medals (increasing its tally from 2004 by 19); increasing market share in sports in which it is traditionally strong (gymnastics, weightlifting, diving and table tennis); and winning medals in more disciplines than ever before (first ever gold medals in boxing and sailing). China's gains were mainly in subjectively scored events, which may point to one of the sources of home advantage. Canada's haul of 14 gold medals was spread across a record number of disciplines for that nation. The performances of China and Canada indicate that elite sport development strategies built around 'specialisation' and 'diversity' are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The manner in which other nations achieve improvement tends to vary considerably. In the case of the United Kingdom, the second most improved nation in Beijing 2008, the strategy adopted appears to have been the development of strong competitive advantage in cycling, rowing and sailing building on past performance whilst also developing medal winning capability in areas that have only been modestly successful in the past, such as swimming. Analysis of previous Summer Olympic Games shows that future hosts also tend to improve in the lead up to their own hosting of the event. By way of contrast with the United Kingdom, the improvement of Jamaica and Kenya was confined to track and field with the former specialising in sprinting events and the latter specialising in middle distance events. Thus we are able to see specialisation and diversity at an overall Olympic Games level as well as specialisation within a specific sport such as track and field.

A final point of note is that no nation met our definition of 'improvement' in both Beijing 2008 and Vancouver 2010. Having identified those nations which have improved, the next stage of the research is to identify whether the causes are policy related or random events.

References

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