

Session: **Local and global sport governance II.**

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Striving for world class performance in cross-country skiing: What separates the national team from private teams in developing elite athletes?

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Background

The national sports association determine who should represent their country in international competitions. Traditionally, the national team have also offered athletes the best opportunities and support to achieve world class performance. Thus, the national sport associations have had a monopoly on the best athletes. This is also the case for the Norwegian Ski Association (NSA) (cross-country skiing). NSA was in the period 1990-2003 responsible for the elite-, development-, and junior national cross-country skiing team. As the NSA development team was closed down in 2003, because of a financial crisis which hit the association, development of future elite skiers became an issue for private teams. The close-down of this NSA team resulted in an increase in number of private teams. These teams were in the beginning seen as an important supplement to the development work of NSA, but as they began to attract the elite skiers the relationship between the private teams and NSA cooled off. As a result of the conflict between the private teams and NSA together with a substantial increase in sponsorship income in NSA, the NSA development team was reintroduced in 2010.

Objective and theoretical perspective

A previous study by Andersen (2009) described reliable experience-based learning as important for an elite sport organization to sustain successful (Andersen, 2009). My study uses the same theoretical perspective to investigate: *how processes of development and learning are managed in three private cross-country skiing teams compared to how these processes are managed in NSA*. Central to this question is to what extent the processes of development and learning determines the organizations' capabilities for success (in terms of developing skiers from good to great). The study draws upon the theory of *mindful learning* (Sitkin, 1992; Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 1999; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001), to identify critical factors that support reliable experience-based learning. A key element in this kind of learning is to consciously exploit the many small unavoidable failures in such process as learning opportunities. The theory is developed by studying how less successful high reliability organizations failed to learn from small failures that cumulated into a major disaster (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988; Starbuck & Hedberg, 2006; Weick, 1987; Weick, 1988; Weick & Roberts, 1993; Weick, 1993). An important aspect of mindfulness is related to reliably learn from experiences/experiments (Sitkin, 1992). Reliable experienced-based learning in the included organizations will therefore be analysed in terms of how the organizations' manages developing processes and thereby their capabilities to

learn intelligent (Sitkin, 1992). Their capabilities for learning through experiences are analyzed in relation to their level of success.

Methods

The starting point is data organization of elite development teams, results in major international competition, successful breakthrough of new elite skiers etc. The key challenge is to understand how organization of development work influences success. In this, qualitative in-depth interviews are the major source of data. There will be conducted a strategic sample consisting of former and current skiers which have been on either the national elite team or a private team (or both). Interviews with the leaders of the national team and the private teams will be carried out as well. The aim of the interviews with the skiers is to unveil similarities and differences about how the sport organizations (national team and the private team) place emphasis on reliable experience-based learning. The interviews with the leaders in NSA and the private teams are aimed to give insights in how they organize for success and if this can be related to the concept of mindfulness. How the coaches and leaders consciously render reliable experience-based learning possible is therefore a topic in the interviews both with the leaders/coaches and the athletes. Summarized; throughout interviews with skiers, leaders and coaches the study will be able to unveil divergence and convergence of reliable experience-based learning between the national team and the private teams. It thus answers to what extent this way of learning is essential to succeed in developing future elite skiers.

Results

As the collection of data takes place between May and September 2010, the presentation only concerns a brief presentation of the findings. This includes findings about how the included organizations place emphasis on reliable experience-based learning and how this affects their capabilities for generating elite athletes.

Conclusion/Application to practice

A comprehensive conclusion might not be possible at this stage. However a tentative conclusion will be presented. The presentation emphasizes the practical implications for organizing elite sport, in light of how to develop elite athletes.

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