

Factors behind excellence in sports

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The common understanding is that rich nations like the United States of America, China, Australia, Russia, United Kingdom, and Canada excel in international sport competitions. In fact, statistics show that gross domestic product (GDP), GDP adjusted for Purchasing Power Parity, size of the Population, and the Land Mass of the nations were very highly correlated with the medals won by different countries in the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Chelladurai, 2009). The population of a country and its land mass are also said to be critical factors in achieving sporting excellence.

An equally important factor is the popularity of a sport within the country. For instance, the popularity of basketball in the US is one reason why the best players are groomed in that country. Similarly, the popularity of football in Brazil, England, Germany, and France and Rugby in New Zealand, Australia and South Africa would account for the emergence of great players from those countries.

In addition, it has also been suggested that national sport policies and the associated priority funding fostering systems leading to sporting excellence are significant factors in nations emerging as victors in international competitions (de Bosscher, de Knop, van Bottenburgh & Shibli, 2006). In this connection, there have also been references to the systems of governments and their sport policies. Currently, the Chinese system of the government's heavy involvement in promoting, directing, and funding of sport excellence is contrasted with the American system where the federal and provincial governments do not engage themselves in the promotion or funding of excellence in sports. Instead, the all levels of educational institutions are focused on promoting pursuit of excellence in sports. Those systems that lie in between these two extremes such as the Australian, British, Canadian, French, and German systems mimic both the extremes in specific features. More specifically, these governments do fund heavily some aspects of pursuit of excellence such as facilities, coaching, training centers, athlete support, competitions, and so on. But they refrain from managing, controlling, and/or regulating the activities of the relevant sports organizations and/or the athletes. The foregoing perspectives have also been affirmed in scholarly investigations of sporting excellence among nations (e.g., De Bosscher, Shibli, van Bottenburgh, De Knop, and Truyens, 2010; Houlihan & Green, 2008).

Robinson and Minikin (2012) offered an alternate explanation by arguing that the nations achieve success by creating competitive advantage on the sport arena. In their view, the ability to use resources effectively and the skills

and knowledge of an organization provide the potential to create athletes with the ability to achieve at an international level.

But there is another side to it. It is true that monetary wealth as indicated by the gross domestic product (GDP) of nations expressed in terms of purchasing power parity was correlated at the .832 level with number of medals won at the Beijing Olympics. This explains 69% of the variance in the relationship (Chelladurai, 2009). But that statistic masks the fact that there still remains 30% to be explained in medal count in the Olympics. By dividing the GDP (Purchasing Power Parity-PPP) of nations by the respective population size, we can identify the surplus or discretionary wealth available to be spent on sports. The resultant per capita GDP-PPP is correlated with medals won at the .23 level which explains only 5% of the variance. Thus, it is apparent that monetary wealth is not a necessary or sufficient condition for excellence in international sport competitions. This become evident when we consider that poorer and smaller nations like Azerbaijan, Cameroon, Cuba, Estonia, Ethiopia, Jamaica, Kenya, Mongolia, Thailand, and Zimbabwe have also won some medals including gold medals in the Beijing Olympics. They have also produced outstanding athletes in football, basketball, and baseball.

Thus, there is a need to identify and articulate a generic model that will be applicable to all nations without reference to wealth, population size, and land mass of nations. The purpose of the present research is to investigate the experiences of those exceptional athletes from poor and small countries, and identify those factors that have instigated them into the pursuit of excellence, those that sustained them in their endeavor, and those that contributed to their reaching the pinnacle. By synthesizing and integrating these factors, we propose to advance a model containing features that are sufficient and feasible for all to pursue excellence in international contests.

References

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