

A systems perspective on elite sport policy and athlete success in tennis

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Abstract keywords

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Aim of abstract

This study used a systems perspective in order to determine the factors that lead to international success in tennis. The focus of this study is on the policies of national tennis associations (NTAs) which are viewed as open systems. More specifically, the study looks at the characteristics of open systems as defined by Chelladurai (2009). These characteristics include (a) the system properties of NTAs, (b) the processes in open systems and (c) the input-throughput-output conceptualisation of NTAs.

Theoretical background

Research on policy factors that influence sport performances of countries has received an increased interest over the past 20 years. De Bosscher et al. (2007) developed a conceptual model of nine policy pillars that lead to international success and concluded that key success determinants might be different for every sport. The increased focus of researchers on the meso-level (i.e., factors that can be influenced by policies) has led to the study of sporting organisations as closed systems, not taking into account their interaction with the environment. However, literature suggests viewing sporting organisations as open systems as they are influenced by the social, cultural and economic conditions of the community in which they operate (Chelladurai, 2009).

Methodology

To explore the crucial factors of domestic policy in elite tennis and athlete success, 35 international tennis experts including high performance directors, coaches' education managers and other tennis specialists from 15 countries successful in tennis completed a short questionnaire including three open-ended questions. Additionally, 18 of those experts were interviewed in a follow-up study. The responses to the open-ended questions of the questionnaire and the interview transcripts were thematically and

inductively analysed using the qualitative software program Nvivo.

Results

The results of this study are represented at three levels: (1) the formal policies, (2) the proximal environment and (3) the distal environment of NTAs. At a formal policy level, the experts highlighted 'financial support' as an input and 11 areas of throughputs as key success factors. The 11 throughputs are 'structure and organisation', 'tennis participation', 'talent identification', 'talent development', 'athletic support', 'post career support', 'training facilities', 'coaching provision', 'coaches' education', 'competition' and 'scientific research'. These throughputs are usually located within different departments (or else subsystems) of NTAs. Experts also highlighted the interrelationships between the different throughputs and within subsystems. At the proximal environmental level, experts highlighted the importance of cooperation of NTAs with private high performance tennis academies. For example, one expert said "we want the players of the country to do well, not only the players who train in the national tennis association". At the distal environmental level, 'commercial environment' (i.e., media and sponsors) and 'culture' (i.e., tennis culture, school culture and mentality of players) emerged as important areas for international tennis success.

Discussion and implications

At the formal level, the majority of input- and throughput-related areas identified in this study are similar to the nine pillars of the conceptual model of De Bosscher et al. (2007). However, examining NTAs using an open systems approach as suggested by Chelladurai (2009) allowed this study to move beyond the formal structure and policies of NTAs. More importantly, and where the theoretical contribution and innovation of this study lies, is that the open systems approach illustrated the importance of private high performance academies as well as the commercial environment and the culture of the sport for athletes success. In conclusion, this study recommends the use and application of an open systems approach when analysing factors that influence international sporting success to gain a holistic picture. The findings offer sport management practitioners and policy makers insight on the areas that may have been previously overlooked.

References

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