

HOW THE NORWEGIAN NATIONAL ELITE SPORT ORGANIZATION, OLYMPIATOPPEN, STIMULATE ORGANIZATIONAL MINDFULNESS WITHIN ELITE CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

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Aim of paper

To cope within the “global sporting arms race” (Oakley & Green, 2001), states have increased their intervention and funding of national elite sport systems to render international sporting success possible. Previous research have highlighted that modern elite sport systems has become highly organized and key elements have converged over the last twenty years (Houlihan & Green, 2008). Such elements emphasize structural functions necessary for achieving sporting success (De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli, & Bingham, 2009). Although these elements are essential, they may not be sufficient. In order to enhance our understanding of how a national elite sport system deliver effective elite athlete development, the present paper explores how the responsible organization for elite sport in Norway, Olympiatoppen (OLT), pursues the process of producing successful international sportsmen and women. The research questions are: 1) What characterize the organizational practices and culture of OLT? 2) How does OLT support and challenge training processes within the national elite teams in cross-country skiing to improve the quality of training?

Theoretical background

The theory of organizational mindfulness specifically directs attention towards how organizational practices and culture influences the quality of core processes (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). It is an organizational sociology perspective on how social relationships and interaction within an organization influences its ability to continuous development. A key concern is how organizational practices and culture influence social interactions in ways that encourage rich thinking and capacity for action at all levels.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The study was designed and conducted as a holistic qualitative single case-study (Yin, 2009). It is a case study of how a national elite sport system delivers elite athlete development, within the context of Norwegian elite sports. The unique access to leaders and specialists at OLT, and national elite team coaches, sporting directors and elite athletes within cross-country skiing allowed for semi-structured in-depth interviews with key actors. The interviews started with open and rather general questions, but also contained a number of specific questions to test specific expectations concerning the organizational practices. The data was analyzed in a stepwise coding process including initial, focused, and theoretical coding.

Results, discussion and implications

The findings illuminate that the organizational practices and culture of OLT are consistent with the organizational practices within mindful organizations. The organizational practices and culture are characterized by emphasizing the importance of a close interaction and cooperation between OLT and the national elite teams. This is illustrated by the fact that: 1) generalist OLT coaches make sure that negative as well as positive experiences from other sports are shared and reflected upon when discussing how to develop the national elite teams, 2) OLT specialists challenges the national elite teams through providing them with scientific evidence, and 3) both OLT coaches and OLT specialists closely monitor how everyday training are implemented. This way of delivering elite athlete development contribute to improved quality of training in three ways: 1) it ensures that a national elite team doesn't use time on aspects proven not leading to improvement, 2) it ensures that the national elite teams are reminded about what is considered as best-practice, and 3) it increases the possibility to identify minor deviations in the training process that may have major consequences for future success. However, to what extent a national elite team can benefit from interacting with OLT depends upon that roles and responsibilities are clearly defined. Although the Norwegian elite sport model is somewhat different from other elite sport models, in terms of a weak state intervention, the findings can be transferred to all ambitions elite sport systems which are facing the same challenges regarding how to improve the quality of training. Nevertheless, more process-oriented research is needed to capture how different elite sport systems work to deliver effective elite athlete development.

Reference

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