

THE IMPACT OF SPORT FOR ALL POLICIES ON ELITE SPORTING SUCCESS

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Aim of the paper and research question

This paper addresses the question to what extent national sport policies directed towards sport participation determine their elite sporting success, and which policy aspects are most crucial in that respect.

Theoretical background

Although it is often assumed that the scale of sport participation is a condition for elite sporting success, the literature on this subject is inconclusive (Green, 2005; Green & Houlihan 2005; Sotiriadou, Shilbury & Quick 2008; De Bosscher & Van Bottenburg 2011). Of course, most top athletes originate from grass roots participation. And yes, a large base of mass participation numbers provides a broad breeding ground for elites sport. But the relationship between sport for all and elite sport is not that simple. First, many people practice a sport without any desire to attain a higher level, and increasingly on an informal, non-competitive basis. Second, it appears to be possible to build high performance programs without relying on a broad participation base, making use of highly developed system-related talent identification and development processes (Green 2005). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of empirical analyses of this relationship, primarily due to a lack of internationally comparable data (De Bosscher et al. 2008; De Bosscher & Van Bottenburg 2011). This paper contributes to filling this gap in the literature, based on the SPLISS-II study.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

The SPLISS-II study elaborates on earlier studies in which a nine-pillar model was developed which identified key sports policy factors that influence the international success of nations (De Bosscher et al. 2008). From January 2011 onwards, researchers from 16 nations collected data following this pillar model and measured 126 critical success factors in a standardized way, with the help of a validated scoring system. As in SPLISS-I, these data were collected in all participating nations through an overall sports policy research instrument consisting of 226 questions answered by desk research and interviews, and through surveys with primary stakeholders. Overall, surveys were held with 3142 athletes, 1376 coaches and 241 performance directors. On the basis of this information, we aggregated the critical success factors into percentage scores that allowed for comparison within and between the nine pillars. Pillar 3 (sport participation) consists of 20 questions, measuring 16 critical success factors.

With respect to the relationship between national sport policies directed towards sport participation (pillar 3) and elite sporting success, six levels of analysis were distinguished:

- (1) the organization of sport at schools (physical education and extra-curricular activities);
- (2) the level of non-organized sport participation;
- (3) the level of sport participation in clubs;
- (4) the level of sport participation in competitions,
- (5) the national policy to improve total quality management in sports clubs; and
- (6) the national policy to improve the quality of talent development in sports clubs.

Elite sport success was measured by the success ratio of the SPLISS II countries in the Olympic Games and World Cups in the 2009-2012 period.

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions

At the time of this abstract submission, the final results could not be calculated yet. However, preliminary findings revealed interesting results. First, in general, the relationship between national policies directed towards sport participation and national sporting success appeared to be rather weak. Second, the relationship was found the weakest with respect to national policies towards total quality management in sport clubs, the level of unorganized sport participation, and the organization of sport at schools, and the strongest with respect to the level of organized sport participation and sport participation in competitions. These findings suggest that sport policies directed towards broadening the participation base are only of secondary importance in explaining differences in elite sporting success between nations, and that such policies are most effective from an elite sport perspective if they lead to more organized and competitive sport participation.

References

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