
THE INSTITUTIONAL WORK OF OWN THE PODIUM IN DEVELOPING HIGH PERFORMANCE SPORT IN CANADA

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Synopsis:

This investigation examines the ways in which Own the Podium (OTP) has developed high performance sport in Canada.

Abstract:

Over the past 15 years Canada has witnessed fundamental changes to the way in which high performance sport is delivered. These changes include, but are not limited to the formulation and endorsement of Canadian Sport Policy (CSP1 2002-2012) and its successor (CSP2 2012-2022), the overhaul of the National Coaching Certification Program to a competency-based system, the adoption and ongoing implementation of the Long Term Athlete Development model, the formalisation of the Canadian Sport Institute/Centre Network (CSI/C Network), and the creation of a number of quasi/non-governmental organisations such as Sport Matters in 2001, True Sport in 2003, Canadian Sport for Life Leadership Team and Own the Podium (henceforth OTP) in 2004 (Thibault & Harvey, 2013).

This investigation examined one of these developments, namely the establishment of a C\$117 million strategy/initiative entitled 'Own the Podium 2010' (OTP-2010). The OTP-2010 strategy/initiative was originally designed to achieve Canada's goal of reaching first place on the podium for the 2010 Olympic Winter Games and in the top three places for the 2010 Paralympic Winter Games (Priestner Allinger & Allinger, 2004). This initiative/strategy has since formalised into a not-for-profit multi-sport organisation. In light of the abovementioned systemic developments and with the Vancouver Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games now over for some time, why is OTP continuing to operate even after its initial mandate has ended? OTP's continued existence is particularly unusual given the typically cyclical nature of federal government investment into high performance sport in Canada (Green & Houlihan, 2005; Macintosh, Bedeck, & Franks, 1987; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990; Thibault & Harvey, 2013).

Whilst it has been acknowledged that OTP's continued existence can, at least

in part, be explained by Canada's success at the Vancouver Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games, whereby the nation had its best medal haul in history – placing first on the gold medal table and winning 26 medals (Thibault & Harvey, 2013), we contend that OTP's permanence can also be explained by the actions of individual actors/agents that have been (and continue to be) actively working to shape interests towards the support for OTP specifically and high performance sport objectives more generally. In support of this contention, we draw upon the concept of institutional work as a newly emerging theoretical approach to institutional analysis (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence, Subbasy, & Leca, 2009, 2011; Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013). More specifically, our investigation adopts Lawrence and Suddaby's Institutional Work Framework (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Lawrence et al., 2009) to examine the ways in which OTP has shaped (i.e., created and maintained) the institution of high performance sport in Canada over the past decade.

A holistic, singular, case study approach (Yin, 2013) was adopted to examine OTP. This involved collecting and analysing organisational and policy documentation that were either produced by, or significant to the development of, OTP. Documents were analysed using Altheide's (1996) Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) approach. All data were then subject to an inductive, open-coding analytical process to identify any key developments or events within Canadian sport over the past 10 years whilst simultaneously examining documentation for any evidence of OTP institutional work practices in line with Lawrence and Suddaby's (2006) Institutional Work Framework. These developments and associated practices were then converged to draw second order codes and themes.

The analysis identified a number of ways in which OTP has attempted to develop high performance sport in Canada. These include changes to the institutions' rules and regulations, most notably those surrounding federal government-National Sport Organisation funding and reporting process (e.g., creation of a three-tier/categorisation system and the hiring of High Performance 'Advisors'). OTP has also attempted to change stakeholder norms and beliefs by articulating its own contribution to Canada's sporting success (e.g., quarterly newsletters and media guides) and by creating new and incorporating pre-existing high performance sport programs (e.g., the 'Top Secret' program and CSI/C Network leadership).

Institutional work draws attention to "the ways in which desperate sets of actors, each pursuing their own vision, can become co-ordinated in a common project" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 249). The product of OTP's intentional and unintentional institutional work over the past 10 years, we suggest, has been an increasingly co-ordinated approach to high performance sport in Canada. Furthermore, our investigation highlights the importance role of individual actors in shaping institutional settings, bringing to the forefront the understanding that even increasingly taken-for-granted organisations (like OTP) and institutional settings (such as high performance sport) require active promotion and promulgation in order to survive.

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