

# National Pride And Belgian International Sporting Success In 2016

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## **Aim of the research**

This abstract represents the results of a study on the relationship between national pride and Belgian international sporting success. The results are based on four measurements among readers of a Flemish newspaper before and after the European Football Championships and the Rio Olympics in 2016.

## **Theoretical background**

National identity constitutes an important geographical identification of who we are. People feel attached to shared values, memories, traditions, habits and a shared territory. More than other cultural forms, sport, represented by a focus on symbols, winning and competition lend itself as an indicator of a national identity (Boyle & Haynes, 2000).

Research has indicated that international sports performances are most often mentioned as making people proud of their country (Elling, Van Hilvoorde & Van Den Dool, 2014). This is explained by the story-telling capacity of the sport, the level of commercialisation and intensive media attention provided to international sporting events like the World Cup football or the Olympics. Additionally, governments invest heavily in elite sport success assuming that medal success leads to increased levels of sport participation, a growing international prestige and a general 'feel-good factor' among the population (Grix & Carmichael, 2012).

In her study on the relationship between elite success and national pride, Elling et al. (2014) found that national pride is a rather stable characteristic of national identification that cannot easily be increased by improving national sporting success and winning more Olympic medals. Instead, national performances in international sport events may lead to small, short-term eruptions in feelings of national sporting pride and well-being. These results are confirmed by Van Hilvoorde, Elling and Stokvis (2010) who state that in order to have a positive effect on national pride, identifying with sport success must be preceded by a sense of belonging to a specific nation.

A comparable analysis on the relationship between elite success and national pride in Belgium can be of added value for two reasons. First, during the last decades, Belgium's international sporting success has always been limited. Belgium was unable to qualify for a European football Championship since 2000 and only won a restricted number of medals at the Summer Olympics (i.e. three medals at the London 2012 Olympics). Second, Belgium is a federal state with two different cultural communities; the Dutch speaking north and the French speaking southern community. According to Beerten, Billiet and Maddens (1999) most Belgians experience a bipolar identity; citizens identify with the Belgian nation and with the Flemish or Walloon subnation.

## **Methodology**

From May to October 2016, four measurements evaluated the national pride, sporting pride, identity, the level of sport participation and media involvement through a number of standardised questions and statements. While the first pre-measurement was conducted in May, the second and third measurement were conducted after the knockout of Belgium of the European football championships (July 4<sup>th</sup>) and the end of the Rio Olympics (August 25<sup>th</sup>). A post-measurement was executed in October 2016. The respondents are subscribers of a Flemish newspaper. The number of responses varied between 759 for the pre-measurement and 409 for the second measurement.

## **Results and discussion**

The data show a significant drop in sporting pride between the pre-measurement and the second measurement, following the elimination of Belgium from the European football Championship. Sporting pride decreased fell with 20.2% to 60.4% between May 2016 and July 2016. The post-Olympic measurement did not provide a significant difference in national or sporting pride compared to the pre-measurement. No significant changes have been found for national pride. It seems sporting pride is higher for women than for men, while lower educated people are more proud than higher educated people. Respondents referring to a Belgian identity are more pride (both national and sporting pride) than 'Flemish' respondents. Finally, people who indicated they never participated in sports are significant less proud than people who sport at least on a weekly basis. The outcomes of this study indicate that Belgian elite sport achievements and especially football do directly lead to a change in feelings of sporting pride but not on national pride. Similar

to previous research, sport performances seem to have a greater influence on sporting pride, while national pride seems to be more stable over time.

## References

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