

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN SPORT BUSINESS AND  
MANAGEMENT

# Managing Elite Sport Systems

Research and practice

Edited by

Svein S. Andersen, Barrie Houlihan and  
Lars Tore Ronglan

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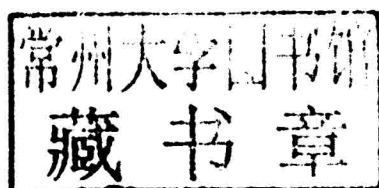


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# Managing Elite Sport Systems

Over the last twenty years or so there has been a sharp increase in interest from national sport federations and governments in the development of effective elite sport systems, particularly focused on achieving success in the summer and winter Olympic Games. Many countries now have publicly funded elite sports strategies which provide specialist facilities and support staff and often provide direct financial support for athletes. These developments have stimulated academic interest in describing the elite sport systems, analysing the processes by which policy is established and evaluating the impact of these policies on elite athlete success. Far less attention has been placed on the operation of the elite sports systems and on how the system interfaces with the athlete. The aim of this book is to refocus attention on the management and operation of systems designed to deliver elite success.

The book draws on the theoretical literature in implementation, organisation theory, leadership and complexity. This provides an initial context for analysis and a stimulus for theory development around key questions such as:

- How do coaches manage their relationship with athletes?
- How does talent identification operate in practice?
- Do coaches fulfil the role of gatekeeper between the athlete and other elements of the sports system e.g. sports science support?
- How do managers, support staff and athletes interpret the expectations placed on them?

The first part of the book focuses on aspects of the effectiveness of elite sports systems and the second explores aspects of systems operation focused on the interface between the athlete and the sport development system, and cross-cutting themes within the book include the management of talent identification and coach development. This is illuminating reading for any student, researcher or practitioner working in sport development, sport management or sports coaching.

**Svein S. Andersen** is a Professor of Organization Studies at BI Norwegian Business School, and an Adjunct Professor at the Centre for Training and Performance,

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### **Managing Elite Sport Systems**

Research and practice

*Edited by Svein S. Andersen, Barrie Houlihan and Lars Tore Ronglan*

# Preface

There has been considerable academic interest in describing the elite sport systems, analysing the processes by which the policy was established and evaluating the impact of these policies on elite athlete success and on other elements of the sport field. Far less attention has been placed on the operation of elite sport systems and on how these systems interface with the athlete. Very little research exists on the management of elite sport systems.

This book is an attempt to start filling this gap and to stimulate further research in this area. The aim is to refocus attention on the management and operation of systems designed to delivery elite sport success. A greater insight into such issues is also of great importance to policy makers and practitioners in the field. The countries and topics covered direct attention to some key issues but do not in any way provide a representative picture of the heterogeneity and complexity found in international elite sport. The book is primarily a research contribution, but hopefully it can also be of use for students and practitioners in the field.

The project was initiated in 2012. We are grateful for support from the Centre for Training and Performance at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences and from the Department of Leadership and Management at the Norwegian Business School. Nineteen researchers investigate key challenges of elite sport in ten countries. The book consists of individual contributions, but it has also been a collaborative effort. In this sense it is more than a scientific anthology. In two workshops the contributors discussed preliminary versions and attempted to develop a shared frame of reference. The three editors have contributed equally to the introductory and final chapters. The editorial process has been an equal partnership. We have also benefitted from criticisms and comments from a number of colleagues.

Oslo and Loughborough, December 2014.  
Svein S. Andersen, Barrie Houlihan and Lars Tore Ronglan

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## **Part 1**

# **How different systems work**



# 1 Systems and the development of elite athletes

*Svein S Andersen, Barrie Houlihan and Lars Tore Ronglan*

## Aim and key questions

Over the last twenty years or so there has been a sharp increase in interest from national sport federations and governments in the development of effective elite sport development systems, particularly focused on achieving success in the summer and winter Olympic Games. Many countries now have in place publicly funded elite sport policies which provide specialist facilities and support staff and often provide direct financial support for athletes. These developments in federations and governments have stimulated academic interest in describing the elite sport systems, analyzing the processes by which the policy was established and evaluating the impact of these policies on elite athlete success and on other elements of the sport field. Far less attention has been placed on the operation of the elite sport systems and on how these systems interface with the athletes.

The aim of this book is to refocus attention on the management and operation of systems designed to deliver elite sport success. What is not covered is 'pure' commercialized sport, which is detached from national elite sport policies and systems regarding management and operation, like professional soccer, golf, tennis, the major US team sports leagues (baseball, football, basketball, ice hockey, etc.). The theoretical context of the book is the literature on implementation, organization theory, leadership and complexity. These bodies of theory provide both an initial context for analysis and a stimulus for theory development around questions such as: How do coaches manage their relationships with athletes? How does talent identification operate in practice? Do coaches fulfil the role of gatekeeper between the athlete and other elements of the sport system e.g. sport science support? How do managers, support staff and athletes interpret the expectations placed on them?

The management of elite sport systems has so far received limited attention from researchers. This management function is the key concern of this book, and it raises two questions:

- 1 How are elite sport systems managed in order to pursue policy goals?
- 2 How do elite sport systems influence elite sport efforts?

#### 4 *How different systems work*

The answers to these questions are likely to depend on the nature of policies, the role of the state and its relationship to operative sport organization. There has been a tendency to emphasize the increased similarities and policy imitations across quite diverse countries. As Andersen and Ronglan (2012) have pointed out, however, isomorphic trends on an overall level may well be combined with increasing differences with respect to specific organizational solutions and practices.

As this book will demonstrate, there are important differences with respect to the role of the state and the structure of elite sport systems. For instance, France has a state dominated system, but that system is increasingly dependent upon cooperation with more autonomous regional and local public and private organizations. The elite sport systems in the UK, Australia and New Zealand are state-led, but in close partnership with national sport federations, universities and sport institutes. In contrast, in the Nordic countries elite sport, and indeed all sport, is the prerogative of relatively autonomous voluntary sport federations which dominate policy-making and the organization of the elite sport system. The state is a provider of resources, particularly finance, but keeps an arm's length distance from strategic and day to day decision-making.

All elite sport systems engage in some form of performance management. This is necessary to ensure that resources are utilized in ways that promote world class athletic performance and realize medal winning ambitions. New public management (NPM) principles, most clearly developed in Australia, Canada, the UK and New Zealand, have become important elements in many different countries. Performance budgeting, contracting and evaluation are key management mechanisms. The challenge is to identify valid key performance indicators of future performance. Such performance management systems pay attention to various outcomes, but not to the processes underlying such outcomes. The application of NPM principles has been an important international trend, but its impact varies across, and even within, countries.

In any elite sport system there are a number of different management mechanisms at play. In many countries management principles may vary considerably within and across levels: from instructions, binding rules, negotiations and contracts to shared values, information sharing and imitation. As a result, it is often not at all clear how overall ambitions concerning elite sport development are effected across regions, clubs and different sports. The relationship between central, intermediate and operational levels is characterized by considerable dynamics. How to manage the overall system and integrate available resources and input on the local level involves challenges that have received limited attention from researchers. These are the central topics of this book.

#### **The characteristics of modern elite sport systems**

While few would deny that the production of elite athletes has become increasingly systematic, there is far less clarity regarding the characteristics of effective elite sport systems. This is in part the result of the vagueness of the concept of an elite sport system, but also a legacy of the amateur ethos and the reluctance to



see sporting talent as anything more than the demonstration of natural untutored ability. In the recent history of sport, two factors hastened the rise of elite development systems: First, the model of athlete development introduced by the Soviet Union and refined by the East Germans, and second, the gradual acceptance of professionalism in the Olympic movement in the 1970s and 1980s. The initial impact of professionalism at the Olympics was more evident in the commercialization of sport through sponsorship, while the impact of the communist approach to athlete development was more substantial.

The characteristics of the Soviet and East German model have been fully described elsewhere (Morton 1982, Riordan 1978, 1999) and, if one accepts the model as a system, then it is one characterized by wastefulness (of public finances), brutality (in the disregard for the interests of young athletes), corruption (due to the extent of doping) and judgment of athletic potential (still primarily based on the subjective assessment by coaches). Taking the search for buried treasure as an analogy, rather than using a metal detector – a sophisticated scientific means of searching – the communist ‘system’ amounted to simply ploughing up the whole field: both might claim to be effective systems, but only one is economical and efficient.

Even in the post-Soviet world of sport, too often an elite development ‘system’ is simply a description of the interconnection between established practices, with little regard for efficiency and effectiveness and with little attempt to provide a foundation for the system (as opposed to its individual components) based on research and evidence. However, since the late 1980s, there has been a sustained attempt among an increasing number of countries and sports to base elite athlete development on research, focusing particularly on the assessment of the effectiveness of existing practices and processes, the development of potential innovations and the analysis of apparently successful systems developed in other countries or in other sports in the home country. Among the key indicators of attempts to develop a more systematic approach are: the emergence of specialization and professionalization; increased investment in specialist facilities; and an increased political salience. However, the primary indicator is the central role adopted by governments and the overt politicization of elite sporting success – what Oakley and Green (2001) accurately referred to as the global sporting arms race.

One of the first researchers to attempt to identify the key elements of a successful elite development system was Clumpner (1994), who noted the importance of sustained financial support for athletes, well-funded training centres, a focus on selected (usually Olympic) sports and a pool of athletic talent. Two years later Larose and Haggerty (1996) undertook a similar exercise. The outcome was discussed with sport experts in Canada, who advised that it was not possible to identify a set of factors which applied across a range of sports or indeed across a range of countries. Despite this conclusion, the attempt to specify the elements of a successful elite development system continued. Oakley and Green provided what many considered to be, at the time, the most persuasive listing. Based on a study of elite sport development in Spain, France and the UK, they identified the following