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COMPARATIVE **ELITE SPORT** DEVELOPMENT

systems, structures
and public policy



Comparative Elite Sport Development: systems, structures and public policy

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***Comparative Elite Sport
Development:
systems, structures and
public policy***

For my dad ('Tiny' Green), sadly not here to see this book

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Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>List of figures</i>	<i>xii</i>
<i>List of tables</i>	<i>xiii</i>
1 Comparative elite sport development	1
<i>Barrie Houlihan and Mick Green</i>	
Introduction	2
Developing elite athletes	3
Pressures for convergence	9
Explaining elite sport policy development	14
Conclusion	20
References	21
2 China	26
<i>Fan Hong</i>	
Introduction	27
The origin and development of the Chinese elite sport system	27
The characteristics of the 'whole country support for the elite sport system' (Juguo tizgi)	36
Elite athlete development	38
Elite sport system critique	44
The strategy of winning Olympic medals in 2008	46
Conclusion	49
References	50

3	Japan	53
	<i>Mayumi Ya-Ya Yamamoto</i>	
	Introduction	54
	Current structure of the elite sport system	54
	The development of elite sport policy in Japan	58
	Four dimensions of the elite sport infrastructure in Japan	63
	Talent identification system and the development of potential athletes	72
	Competition opportunities for young athletes	74
	Distinctive features of the Japanese elite sport system	76
	Conclusion	78
	Notes	79
	References	79
4	Singapore	83
	<i>Lionel Teo</i>	
	Introduction	84
	Development of sports excellence in Singapore	86
	National sport associations	91
	Dimensions of elite sport policy development	92
	Summary of key issues	104
	Recent developments and future directions of elite sport policy in Singapore	105
	Conclusions	108
	References	109
5	Germany	115
	<i>Karen Petry, Dirk Steinbach and Verena Burk</i>	
	Introduction	116
	Development and structure of the German (top level) sports system	116
	Dimensions of elite sport development in Germany	127
	Conclusions	142
	Notes	143
	References	144
6	France	147
	<i>Emmanuel Bayle, Christophe Durand and Luc Nikonoff</i>	
	Introduction	148
	Characteristics of the French model of elite sport	151
	Tensions, conflicts, and the future	156
	Conclusions	164

	Notes	164
	References	165
7	Poland	166
	<i>Jolanta Żyśko</i>	
	Introduction	167
	Elite sport in Poland	167
	Changes in the system of elite sport governance	178
	Discussion of the elite sport system	184
	Conclusions	190
	Notes	191
	References	192
8	Norway	194
	<i>Pål Augestad and Nils Asle Bergsgard</i>	
	Introduction	195
	The elite sport system in Norway	195
	The infrastructure of elite sport	198
	Focusing events	206
	Government and elite sport	208
	The Norwegian way	210
	Concluding remarks	213
	Notes	214
	References	215
9	New Zealand	218
	<i>Shane Collins</i>	
	Introduction	219
	Current structure of the elite sport system	219
	Increasing government intervention	221
	The business of elite sport	225
	Important dimensions of elite sport development	232
	Conclusion	239
	References	240
10	United States	242
	<i>Emily Sparvero, Laurence Chalip and B. Christine Green</i>	
	Introduction	243
	Federal involvement in elite sport	243
	Athlete pathways	249
	Success of American athletes	253
	Research and development	259
	Elite sport development amid the chaos	260
	Observations and implications	268
	References	270

11	Conclusion	272
	<i>Mick Green and Barrie Houlihan</i>	
	Introduction	273
	Common pressures for convergence	273
	Mechanisms for convergence and processes of learning	278
	An assessment of the three 'explanations'	288
	References	291
	<i>Index</i>	295



List of figures

Figure 2.1	The administrative structure of Chinese sport 1952–1996	37
Figure 2.2	The administrative structure of Chinese sport 1997–2006	38
Figure 2.3	Pyramid of the selective system	40
Figure 3.1	Organisational structure of elite sport in Japan	55
Figure 4.1	Schematic representation of the Sports Community and the Sporting Vision of Singapore	85
Figure 5.1	The development of the West German sports system after the World War II	120
Figure 5.2	Model of training and performance	134
Figure 7.1	The organisational structure of sport in Poland	176
Figure 7.2	Historical changes in the naming of the central national administrative body for the management of physical culture in Poland since 1946	181
Figure 8.1	Direct state funding (lottery money) for elite sport development in NIF/NOC, the income from sponsors of NIF/NOC, and total expenditure on elite sport by NIF/NOC, 1996–2005	210
Figure 10.1	Key organisations in American sport development	252
Figure 10.2	US medal performance in the summer Olympic Games	255
Figure 10.3	US medal performance in the winter Olympic Games	256

List of tables

Table 1.1	Factors contributing to elite success	4
Table 2.1	China's participation in the summer Olympics 1984–2004	35
Table 2.2	China's participation in the summer Asian Games 1978–2002	35
Table 2.3	Chinese sports budget 1981–1996	39
Table 2.4	Budget for elite sports teams 1991–1997	39
Table 3.1	Competitive Sports Division Budget Allocation regarding the preparation for the NTC, JISS, 1998 Nagano Games, and 2002 World Cup	65
Table 5.1	Top level German performances in the sports of athletics, swimming and hockey	128
Table 7.1	Public sport financing: 1989–2006	177
Table 9.1	SPARC actual total funding	230
Table 9.2	Allocation of SPARC investment funds	230
Table 10.1	School and professional system support for Olympic sports	254

CHAPTER 1

Comparative elite sport development

Barrie Houlihan and Mick Green

Introduction

In the 4 years prior to the Athens Olympic Games in 2004, the UK government allocated around £70 million in direct financial support to UK athletes. At the Games, the Great Britain and Northern Ireland team obtained a total of 30 medals, 9 of which were gold – an approximate cost of £2.3 million per medal. In the run up to the Beijing Games in 2008, the government has allocated a sum of £75 million in direct financial support. The United Kingdom is far from being alone in providing substantial support for its elite, and especially, Olympic athletes. The poor performance by the Australian team at the 1976 Montreal Olympics prompted a government enquiry which led to sustained and substantial investment of public funds in elite training facilities such as the Australian Institute of Sport and in direct support to athletes and domestic Olympic sports federations. At around the same time, the government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR; former East Germany) was reputed to be spending about 1 per cent of its gross domestic product on elite sport. As Bergsgard et al. (2007, p. 170) note, government resources ‘were very much concentrated in high performance training centres in Berlin where there was a substantial “over-employment” of support personnel’. A DSB official reported, following reunification, that ‘when we took over, in East Berlin in track and field, we took over 65 physiotherapists. Each individual athlete had his own ...’. Even in free market, non-interventionist and decentralised political systems, such as the United States, draconian government intervention in sport was not unusual if it was deemed necessary to protect elite sport success. For example, in 1978 the US Congress legislated to resolve the long-standing dispute between the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) for control over elite track and field athletes (cf. Hunt, 2007). The Amateur Sports Act marginalised the AAU and gave the US Olympic Committee primary responsibility for the preparation of teams to represent the United States.

There are a variety of explanations why such a diverse range of governments should be so concerned with elite sport success which include international prestige and diplomatic recognition, ideological competition and a belief that international sporting success generates domestic political benefits ranging from the rather nebulous ‘feel good factor’ to more concrete economic impacts associated with the hosting of elite competitions. In recent years hosting major sports events has been, for a number of countries, an important element in various forms of

economic development including tourism promotion (Sydney 2000 Olympic Games) and urban regeneration (Barcelona 1992 and London 2012 Olympic Games). The economic benefits of hosting major sports events are increasingly significant in post-industrial countries where the sports-related service sector is an important engine for growth and employment (Gratton and Taylor, 2000). However, if countries are to be in a position to use sport as a resource, whether for diplomatic, economic or social objectives, they are in a much better position to exploit sport's potential if they possess assets in the form of recognised world-class elite athletes. There are few governments who have not recognised the value of sport as a high-visibility, low-cost and extremely malleable resource which can be adapted to achieve, or at least give the impression to the public/electorate of achieving, a wide variety of domestic and international goals. Such is the flexibility of sport as a policy instrument that it is increasingly difficult for governments, providing of course that they possess the necessary financial resources, not to espouse a commitment to elite sport and competition as illustrated by Canada's agonising over the place of elite sport in public policy following the Ben Johnson doping scandal at the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games. Despite many statements decrying the distortion of values resulting from a commitment to the pursuit of Olympic medals, Canada is now investing heavily in elite sport in advance of its hosting of the 2010 winter Olympics in Vancouver.

Developing elite athletes

There have been a number of attempts to identify the ingredients of successful elite athlete development such as those by Fisher and Borms (1990), Abbott et al. (2002), Digel (2002a, b), Green and Oakley (2001a, b), Oakley and Green (2001), UK Sport (2006). Although the various authors identify a different number of key elements in a successful elite development system, there is considerable overlap between the analyses (see Table 1.1). In particular, it is possible to organise the elements or characteristics into three reasonably distinct clusters: contextual, for example, the availability of funding/wealth; processual, for example, a system for identifying talent, determining the basis on which particular sports will be offered support; and specific, for example, bespoke training facilities.

For Oakley and Green (2001; see also Green and Oakley, 2001a) the 10 characteristics listed in Table 1.1 represent 'common approaches to the problem of enhancing elite sport rather

Table 1.1 Factors contributing to elite success

Factors	Oakley and Green	Digel	UK Sport (SPLISS Consortium)	Green and Houlihan
Contextual	An excellence culture	Support, especially financial, of the state	Financial support	Support for 'full-time' athletes
	Appropriate funding	Economic success and business sponsorship A media supported positive sports culture	Participation in sport Scientific research	
Processual	Clear understanding of the role of different agencies	Talent development through the education system	Talent identification and development system	
	Simplicity of administration	Talent development through the armed forces	Athletic and post-career support	
	Effective system for monitoring athlete progress		Integrated approach to policy development	
	Talent identification and targeting of resources Comprehensive planning system for each sport Lifestyle support		Coaching provision and coach development	
Specific	Well-structured competitive programmes	Sports science support services	International competition	A hierarchy of competition opportunities centred on preparation for international events Elite facility development
	Well-developed specific facilities		Training facilities	
				The provision of coaching, sports science and sports medicine support services

Sources: Digel (2002a, b); Green and Houlihan (2005); Oakley and Green (2001); and UK Sport (2006).

than responses to the social, political and economic elements in each country' (2001, p. 91). Moreover, they suggest 'that there is a growing trend towards a homogeneous model of elite sport development' (2001, p. 91). Digel's analysis (2002a, b) focuses more on the context within which an effective elite sport system can develop, but there is a clear overlap with the analysis of Oakley and Green insofar as he stresses the importance of a culture supportive of elite achievement, adequate financial support, and processes through which talent can be identified and developed.

The joint report by UK Sport, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, WJH Mulier Instituut (The Netherlands) and Sheffield Hallam University, UK (known as the SPLISS Consortium) compared elite development systems in six countries (United Kingdom, Canada, Italy, Norway, The Netherlands and Belgium) in relation to the nine factors (pillars) listed in Table 1.1. The findings were 'inconclusive' insofar as there was no clear relationship between particular factors and elite success. However, the authors did note that the three most successful countries at the Athens Olympic Games, Italy, United Kingdom and The Netherlands, all scored well in relation to the following four factors: funding for national governing bodies (NGBs); coaching provision and coaching development; athletic and post-career support and training facilities. The report also suggested that the similar high scores for the United Kingdom and The Netherlands in relation to 'athletic and post-career support' and 'international competition' might be due to both countries benefiting 'from the learning curve of other nations which might be described as "early adopters" such as Australia' (UK Sport, 2006, p. 15). Finally, the report noted the paradox of

increasing global competition ... encouraging nations to adopt ... more strategic elite sport policy in order to differentiate themselves from other nations. The net result is an increasingly homogeneous elite sport development system which is ostensibly based around a near uniform model of elite sport development with subtle local variations (2006, p. 16).

However, in an article also published in 2006, by many of the same authors of the UK Sport report they qualify their initial conclusion by stating that

It is impossible to create one single model for explaining international success. A system leading to success in one nation may be doomed to fail in another. Therefore it needs to be emphasised that the combination of the nine pillars may be specific to a given nation's context and that different systems may all be successful'.

(De Bosscher et al., 2006, p. 209)