

COMPARISON OF SUCCESSFUL SPORT SYSTEMS

Verena BURK*

SUMMARY

The possibility for success in any competitive endeavour is enhanced when one has an understanding of the opponent's strategy, tactics, means, resources and will. In the case of high performance sports, however, those responsible of national systems aiming top athletes and performances have traditionally been inward looking. This presentation reports on the preliminary findings of a project to reverse this tendency by analysing conditions, structures and work towards modernisation in eight nations that were successful at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta (Australia, China, Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, and the United States of America). After starting with an introduction on modern high-performance sport, the article moves on to describe the aims, theoretical and methodological approach of the project. It then gives results under the "General social conditions", "The system of high-performance sport" and "Selected system-environment relationships" headings. Taken together, these reflect a picture of similarities and differences between the examined systems. The main sports considered are athletics, swimming and volleyball, and their national governing bodies. Information was requested from upper level organisations (e.g. the National Olympic Committees), as well as from national ministries responsible of elite sport in the selected countries. Written surveys (questionnaires), interviews, documental and literature analysis, and socio-demographic data were performed.

Key words: High performance sport, sport systems, organisation, society, environment

ÖZET

BAŞARILI SPOR SİSTEMLERİNİN KARŞILAŞTIRILMASI

Rekabet içeren her alanda başarı oranı rakibin strateji, taktik, olanak ve arzusu iyi anlaşıldığı ölçüde artar. Ancak, yüksek performans

* University of Tübingen, Germany

sporlarında ulusal sistemlerin elit sporcu ve performanslarından sorumlu olanlar geleneksel olarak konuya içsel bakmışlardır. Bu çalışma, sözü edilen eğilimi tersine çevirmek için şartları, yapıları ve çalışmalarını 1996 Atlanta Olimpiyatlarında başarılı olmuş sekiz ülke için (Almanya, ABD, Avustralya, Büyük Britanya, Çin, Fransa, İtalya ve Rusya) analiz eden bir projenin ön sonuçlarını sunmaktadır. Modern yüksek performans sporu hakkında bir girişten sonra makale projenin amaçlarını, kuramsal ve yöntemsel yaklaşımlarını açıklamaktadır. Daha sonra sonuçlar “Genel sosyal şartlar”, “Yüksek performans sistemi” ve “Seçilmiş sistem-çevre ilişkileri” başlıkları altında verilmektedir. Tüm bunlar bir arada incelenen sistemler arasındaki benzerlik ve farklılıkları ortaya koymaktadır. Başlıca atletizm, yüzme ve voleybol sporları ele alınmaktadır. Üst düzey kurumların (Örneğin Ulusal Olimpiyat Komiteleri) yanı sıra bu ülkelerde elit spordan sorumlu bakanlıklardan da bilgi edinildi. Yazılı anketler (sorgulamalar), söyleşiler, belge ve kaynak taramaları ile sosyo-demografik veri analizlerinden yararlanıldı.

Anahtar sözcükler: Yüksek performans sporu, spor sistemleri, organizasyon, toplum, çevre

INTRODUCTION

At the Institute of Sports Science, University of Tübingen, Germany a project is being carried out, entitled “Organisation of high-performance sport – a comparison of selected sport systems” supported by the IAAF and the IOC. This study, which is based on the high-performance sport systems of Australia, China, Germany, France, Italy, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States of America, aims to work out a detailed analysis and comparison of the high-performance sport systems in the mentioned countries.

This study focuses on the following central question: *Which common features and which differences can be found in the high-performance sport structures of the eight selected countries?* The interest lies in the “various resources” available for high-performance sport systems. Also of interest are the “mechanisms of compensation” ensuring success in case one or more of the resources is missing. Consequently, the analysis of the conditions of high-performance sport in different nations is in question. With the restriction on the description of structural similarities and differences, we can only make prognoses about the so-called functional equivalents ensuring success. Therefore, it is the task of this project to provide “a resource model for successful high-performance sport”.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Three resources in particular move into the focus of attention when working on the central question of the project. They can be identified as “the society”, “the high-performance sport organisation”, and “the relationship of the top-sport system to its environment”.

On the first level of the suggested heuristics, the level of society, one has to investigate for example the structure and development of the population as well as the political system and the economic situation. Furthermore, social injustice and values are of interest (Fig. 1). This first level has to be seen as a background variable, as one has to work on the assumption that the differently developed general conditions in each country have an independent influence on the other two levels.

	The political system
The social system	The economic system
The system of mass media	Demographic figures/population development
The education system	Standard of living and satisfaction with life
Employment figures	Social inequality/injustice
	The system of values

Figure 1. Factors at the society level

On the second level – the organisation of high-performance sport – one can distinguish between many categories that are of importance for success in international competitions. For example, there are establishing priorities, finances, sport facilities, talent identification and development, competition system, reward systems, and so on (Fig. 2).

	Organisational structures	
Athletes	Coaches	Employees and voluntary staff
Award systems for athletes	Finances	Award systems for coaches
Talent identification	Training	Talent promotion
	Referees and judges	
Social security for athletes		Social security for coaches
The fight against doping		Schemes and priorities
Sport venues		Competitions
Historical conditions and Olympic tradition		Ideological basis
	Interest and participation in sport	

Figure 2. High-performance sport organisation

Finally, the system of sport itself is determined by interdependent relationships to its environment. The following factors seem to be of special influence for the development of sport systems in terms of quality and quantity: the contribution of politics, the private sector as a partner of sports, the mass media as a promoter of interest in sports, the education systems, the function of science regarding success in sport, and the importance of the military. The analysis of system-environment relationships is intended to reveal typical forms of networking and of useful combinations, the costs of arising transactions, and the systematic influence of relevant environmental protagonists on the structural conditions of high-performance sport.

Summarizing the resources for high-performance sport, various models or resource patterns will probably come into being depending on the respective sport and nation. This refers to those resources that have been worked out on the three levels and directly or indirectly linked with success. The assignment will be to trace these models and resource patterns in a comparative way and to interpret them. On the basis of the acquired knowledge, one may be able to offer the desired advisory service.

METHODICAL APPROACH

As mentioned before, the research project refers to the high-performance sport structures of Australia, China, Germany, France, Italy, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States of America. These structures have been registered and typologically classified by means of written and oral interviews, as well as by means of literature and documental analyses. Particular emphasis has been put on athletics, swimming and volleyball, their national governing bodies, the National Olympic Committees and the ministries responsible for high-performance sport in each country.

RESULTS

The selected results of this international project deal with the question: which specific support is allocated to the athletes of the eight chosen countries in order to combine high performance sports and education? This topic was also chosen in particular since athletic career begins even earlier, and the young people, at the point they are discovered as talents for a particular sport, or as they become active in

their high performance sport, are usually enrolled in an educational institution. A career as a high performance athlete and development of talents are in many cases determined by the contribution generated by the national education system for the benefit of the young high performance athletes.

The school system can contribute substantially to high performance sports by establishing specific support and measures. These should enable young high performance athletes to coordinate their educational requirements with those of their high performance sport. The problem of coordinating education and high-performance sport is a rather pressing issue in the university domain. For this reason, appropriate support measures by universities for high-performance athletes also constitute an integral contribution to the assurance of high level performances. Special support and assistance when combining everyday training and academic commitments are implemented in various ways by the universities.

A strong pursuit to accommodate high-performance athletes is evident in **France**. The French high-performance athletes who are on the sport ministries list are able to attend and complete their academic work at one of the “pôles”, besides their normal school. Furthermore, more than 100 universities in all regions of France offer high-performance athletes support with the organisation of their academic training as well as certain benefits. These benefits differ from university to university: Some universities reserve a certain number of study places for high-performance athletes, other universities for example make an extension of courses possible or offer flexible exam dates. In some cases the athletes may also receive the status of “salary assisted student”. These university benefits go back to a ministerial request aimed at presidents and heads of universities in 1987.

The universities in the **USA**, where competitive sports are heavily supported, display comprehensive cooperation regarding high-performance athletes. Such athletes receive at universities a number of benefits, such as scholarships. These sport scholarships constitute a very important support service of the university system. The United States Collegiate Sports Council alone supports student athletes with around 47,000,000 Euro a year, of which most goes into long-term scholarships. In the American education system, a highly professionalized competitive sport has established itself, and the college and university teams are part of

the entertainment industry. The university's support of the athletes is therefore part of the competition for the best protagonists of this competitive system.

The support of high-performance athletes in **Australia** is based on the 700 scholarships awarded each year by the Australian Institute of Sport in 30 different sports. This is linked to high-performance athletes pursuing a part-time or full-time occupation or academic career. Such scholarships include the use of modern sport facilities as well as individual training, supply of competition equipment, sport medical and sport scientific care, financial aid for competitions, accommodation, travel, as well as full-pension for athletes who live in the Institute, or financial aid for athletes who do not live in the Institute. The selection criteria for the scholarships vary from sport to sport, though basically the applicant must rank among the national performance elite. Scholarships programmes of this kind are also offered by the State Institutes of Sport and the State Academies of Sport.

In **China** also, high-performance athletes are accommodated at universities in their per sports legislation. For example, a simplified entrance to universities is granted and reduced academic requirements make the combination of studies and training or competition possible. Moreover, room and board free of charge and also financial benefits can be named as support measures.

British high-performance athletes only enjoy special privileges at few individual UK universities. Here, the enrolled high-performance athletes are for example granted the opportunity to prolong their studies from three to six years, or to postpone exams in order to better combine their studies and high-performance sports. The number of universities at which athletes are granted this support is nevertheless quite low. And that is why it is so far mostly dependent on the athletes' own initiative whether and how he or she is supported by his university.

Explicit privileges for high-performance athletes at **Italian** universities exist only after individual consultation between athletes, their sport associations and the respective universities. Up to now there have been very few attempts to provide high-performance athletes, for example with flexible exam dates.

In **Germany**, measures by the German Athletics Federation were initiated in 1998 with selected universities. In 1999, the German

University Sports Federation established the “Partner Universities of High-Performance Sport” programme. Through contractual regulations, disadvantages were balanced in order to enable enrolled high-performance athletes to better plan their “stage in life“. This support is aimed at entrance requirements, counselling, personal support, leaves of absence, flexible course of studies, flexible attendance with make up for absence opportunities, flexible exam dates, part-time studies, as well as the use of training facilities. At present, 62 such Universities exist.

Privileges granted by the **Russian** university system are evident in the fact that there are 35 special “Universities of the Olympic Reserve“ which are open to school graduates with a high-performance orientation. At these schools, the athletes are able to complete a “master trainer’s diploma” besides their training.

CONCLUSION

The resource character of the education system can be seen in various scholastic support measures in favour of high-performance sports. Besides the school system, that of higher education also needs to be focused on. There is a reason for the university system in the USA emerging as a pronounced resource of high-performance sports. If one endeavours to ensure the development of young athletes on their way towards peak athletic performance, the phase following graduation at 18 to 19 yrs of age, until they reach international success level, is an immensely critical one. That is why the question arises as to how the analysed nations deal with this phase in order to avoid premature career terminations. It is apparent that some nations rely heavily on their military structures (as Germany). In other nations, one strives to assist athletes in this difficult phase by offering apprenticeships and employment in private businesses. In the USA, the foundation in this phase is the college and university system, in which high-performance sports is socially highly acknowledged. This is only partly the case in European nations. Athletes who wish to combine academic and athletic careers are faced with substantial difficulties in European universities. Only recently has this problem been identified, and there is a move towards developing and utilising the university system as a resource more intensively in favour of high-performance sports.

Correspondence e-mail: verena.burk@uni-tuebingen.de