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Sport-specific policies and factors that influence international success: The case of tennis

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ABSTRACT

Countries continue to seek ways to achieve and sustain elite athlete success. However, competitive advantages in elite sport are largely found within individual sports' contexts and policies. This paper uses tennis as an exemplar and mixed methods to examine sport-specific policy and other factors that influence international success. Thirty-five international tennis experts participated in a questionnaire which combined (a) open questions, and (b) Likert scale questions, based on the Sport Policy Factors that Lead to International Success (SPLISS) model. The findings support the significance of the SPLISS model at a tennis specific level. The most significant contribution of this paper rests on the emergence of two contextual themes, namely *culture* and *commercial environment*, which help explain the context within which tennis operates. These findings are important for understanding the ways elite sport success is fostered in professional sports like tennis and potentially transferring that knowledge to other commercialised sports. The paper advances the theoretical understanding of the combined meso-level and contextual factors at a sport-specific level that influence international success. The practical implications address high performance directors' and sport policy makers' challenge of nurturing and enhancing the tennis culture and commercial environment.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades elite sport policy has received an increased research attention. Such research has offered advancements including an understanding of the common approaches and the key characteristics of elite sport systems of different countries (e.g., Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006; Digel, Burk, & Fahrner, 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2008; Oakley & Green, 2001). It is well documented (e.g., De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli, & Bingham, 2009; Robinson & Minikin, 2012; Truyens, De Bosscher, Heyndels, & Westerbeek, 2013) that countries and sports seek innovative ways to achieve and sustain elite success. On that note, several researchers called for research at a sport-specific level as elite sport development and sport competitive advantages are largely found within individual sports, their context and policies (e.g., Bosscher, De Knop, & van Bottenburg, 2007; De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli, et al., 2009; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009).

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In the move away from country or sport generic studies and towards specific contexts, a few authors have further advanced the field of sport policies by studying certain aspects of the elite sport policy and key success factors of specific sports. These include the examples of Swedish athletics and Norwegian cross country skiing (Böhlke, 2007; Böhlke & Robinson, 2009); Norwegian handball, Finnish ice hockey, Danish track cycling and Swedish tennis and golf (Andersen & Ronglan, 2012); athletics (Truyens et al., 2013); and sprint canoe in Australia (Sotiriadou, Gowthorp, & De Bosscher, 2013). Even though each of these studies had a different scope, they all identified new areas or important factors for success that were not addressed in sport-generic studies. These studies illustrate the value of sport-specific studies and their implications to high performance directors and policy makers.

Whilst sport policy studies and their influence on practice are flourishing, the relevance and influence of contextual factors, such as the professionalisation and commercialisation of some sports, and the role of the cultural, historical, political and social context to elite success is less prominent. Various studies (e.g., Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; Bergsgard, Houlihan, Mansget, Nodland, & Rommetveldt, 2007; Böhlke & Robinson, 2009; Digel et al., 2006; Houlihan & Green, 2008) showed that it is harder to analyse elite sport policy in isolation from contextual factors and these factors should be taken into account.

This paper addresses the need for sport-specific research and the relevance of sport-specific contextual factors by examining the policy and other factors that influence international tennis success. Tennis is a sport where professionalisation and commercialisation have particularly increased over the past decades. However, the potential role of the professionalised and commercialised environment that tennis operates in is largely unknown. Consequently, tennis provides a valuable case for examination. The research question driving this study is 'What policy or other factors influence international tennis success?'. Using a mixed methods approach, a questionnaire comprised of open and Likert scale questions was used to collect data from 35 international tennis experts. This paper contributes to the body of research on elite sport policy and high performance management by responding to the need to examine elite sport policy at a sport-specific level (De Bosscher, De Knop, & van Bottenburg, 2007; De Bosscher, De Knop, & van Bottenburg, 2009; De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli, et al., 2009). In addition, the findings allow for contextual factors that are important for international tennis success to emerge.

2. Elite sport policies

Studies that examined elite sport policies (i.e., factors at the meso-level) (e.g., Bergsgard et al., 2007; De Bosscher, De Knop, & van Bottenburg, 2009; Digel et al., 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2008; Oakley & Green, 2001) conclude that the common characteristics of elite sport systems of developed nations are based around a single model of elite sports development with variations in the way elite sport policies are implemented. One of the most inclusive studies of meso-level factors that influence international sporting success, that empirically tested a model in six nations, is the Sport Policy Factors that Lead to International Sporting Success (SPLISS) model (De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006; De Bosscher, De Knop, & van Bottenburg, 2009; De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli, et al., 2009). SPLISS identifies nine pillars (or policy areas) that influence international sporting success, and specifies 31 sub-dimensions and 126 critical success factors as key elements within pillars that are necessary to improve the elite sport success of a nation. Specifically, financial support (pillar 1) and an integrated approach to policy development (pillar 2) are necessary conditions for the development of sport and athletic careers within a given sport. Pillars 3, 4 and 5 represent the sequences of the athlete development stages including foundation and participation (pillar 3), talent identification and development (pillar 4) and athletic and post-career (pillar 5). Investment in four remaining pillars (i.e., pillar 6 training facilities, pillar 7 the provision and development of coaches, pillar 8 national and international competition structure and pillar 9 scientific research and sports medicine support) is essential for the development of elite athletes (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

Even though the focus of the SPLISS study was meso-level factors, the model suggests the inclusion of a tenth dimension, the environment of sport systems. This environment contains contextual factors such as the education system, the general sport and elite sport culture, the tradition of a certain sport in a country, the tradition of success, the private sector as a sports development partner, the media and sponsoring (Digel et al., 2006). However, the environment of sport systems was not examined in the SPLISS study, as it cannot be influenced directly by sports policies. Nevertheless, De Bosscher et al. (2007) recognised that policy and contextual factors need to be examined at a sport-specific level. Based on this call, some studies examined elite sport policy at sport-specific level (e.g., Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; Böhlke, 2007; Böhlke & Robinson, 2009; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Sotiriadou et al., 2013; Tuyens et al., 2013). Table 1a presents an overview of existing studies that include a sport-specific level of analysis and shows their grounds for conducting sport-specific research, the sports that were examined and the criteria for selecting these sports and countries. Furthermore, Table 1b shows the focus (including contextual factors), the methods and the frameworks used in previous studies.

All studies presented in Tables 1a and 1b examined elite sport policies by including some aspects of the context of elite sport (factors in italics in Table 1b). Even though each of these studies had a different focus, they all concluded that when comparing the factors that influence international sporting success, each sport requires the examination of its contextual factors. For example, Böhlke (2007) and Böhlke and Robinson (2009) compared athlete development pathways, coaching structures, sport science support and athletic lifestyle support in Swedish athletics and Norwegian cross country skiing to conclude that the implementation of these policies is strongly dependent on the socio-cultural context of a country. Therefore, policy makers have to take into account specific conditions such as the socio-cultural context, existing club competition infrastructures and working atmospheres in the sport environment, when attempting to transfer best practices across countries.

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