

2010 and Beyond

David Legg

For the purposes of this submission I will respond only to the first two questions focusing on what general strategies need to be implemented to improve the international performances of Canadian athletes, including ensuring the development of a stream of talented and well trained Paralympic athletes at the international level.

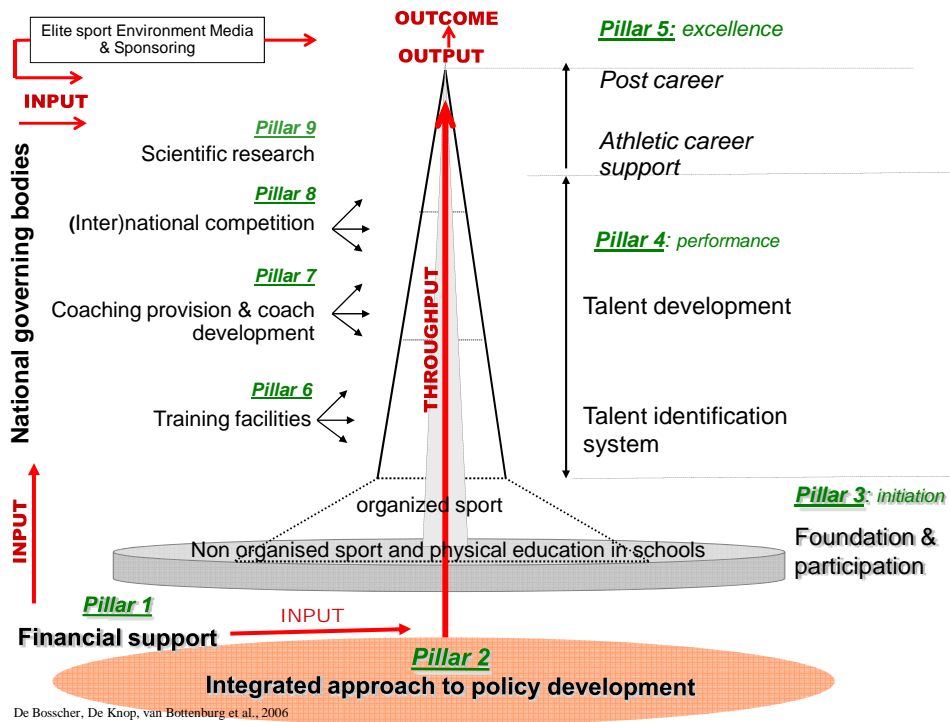
In 2004, I participated in a research study looking at how Canada compared to six other nations in regards to sport policies and performance. From this study I would suggest that to improve athletic performance Canada should enhance those areas where we are strong and spend greater emphasis on those areas where we are comparatively weak.

Before addressing these, however, it is important to note how this study was created. A challenge had been that there were few if any internationally recognized models that allowed sport leaders to assess their national systems in a systematic fashion. It was the recognition of this absence that in 2002 led to the creation of a consortium of researchers from Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. After the consortium developed a framework for further study, other researchers were invited to participate in a larger study with those from Norway, Italy and Canada accepting the invitation. This group then worked together with the goal of better understanding how sport policies could lead to sporting success (SPLISS). The specific objectives of the study were to compare sample nations, create a benchmark for future studies, improve theoretical understanding and methodological approaches, inform policy makers and broaden the scope of future studies.

It was determined that three levels intertwined that impacted sport performance. These included those at the micro level (the athlete), the meso level (sports policies and politics) and macro level (cultural context). What then became clear was that sport leaders were primarily able to influence directly those items at the meso level. Certainly, an impact could be made for instance through coaches at the micro level such as altering training techniques and providing mental training but other factors such as genetics and social influences were not. At the macro level potentially influential factors such as the economy, climate and population growth were completely outside the realm of influence (although some have suggested that GDP and population are not as good at predicting sporting success as once thought). What remained which could be changed or manipulated by sport leaders in order to ensure the greatest return on sport investment was at the meso level.

The next question was to identify the key sport policy variables that led to increased performance during international sporting events. Second, the researchers wanted to know how elite sports policies functioned so that athletes could train and perform in optimal circumstances at each stage of their careers, with access to good facilities, surrounded by high quality coaches and medical support. This was answered with the recognition of nine factors or pillars: financial support, an integrated approach to policy planning, grass roots participation, talent identification and development, athletic and

post career support, training facilities, coaching, international competitions and scientific research.

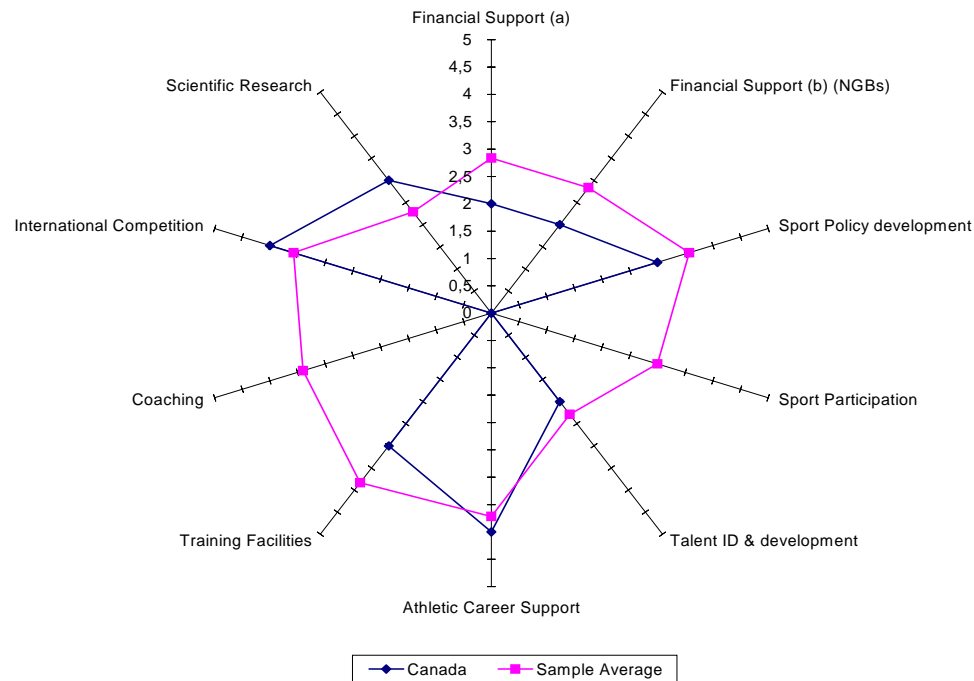


Following the development of this model and a related survey focusing on each pillar, researchers from all six nations (Belgium was divided into Wallonia and Flanders and considered two separate nations), surveyed athletes, coaches and administrators of national sport governing. As well, the Consortium leadership developed a system to assess the nation's performance in international sport so that the two measures could then be correlated.

Depending on the portfolio of sports chosen, the participating nations surveyed ranged in where they compared to each other in relative performance. A portfolio developed by the UK researchers to represent a broad range of 60 sports played internationally showed Canada placing 2nd. If the performance in Athens at the 2004 Summer Olympic Games was considered, however, Canada placed 4th, while if only considering the 2006 Winter Olympic Games in Torino, Canada would place 1st once again. For the purposes of this study only the performances at the 2004 Summer Olympic Games were chosen. (It is important to note that I surveyed athletes, coaches and administrators from Paralympic and Olympic sports but unfortunately not all other participating nations did likewise and thus comparisons will only be made for the Olympic athletes. The Canadian data, however, reflects both Olympic and Paralympic perspectives.)

After the researchers submitted the in-depth review of each nation's sport policies and then tabulated the results from the various surveys, a comparison was made in relation to

the nine pillars and each participating nation with scores ranging from 0 meaning poor to 5 being excellent. Canada did not rate on participation in sport because a determination of how the school systems fit within the larger sport system was not calculated and due to a low response rate from coaches it was also determined that this particular area was also not appropriate for a formal international comparison.



As noted earlier, assessments were made based on perceptions from coaches, athletes and administrators as well as an in-depth analysis conducted by the researchers themselves. Overall there was little variation among the sample nations and the relationship between policy and performance were not conclusive.

Athletes from all countries perceived that finances, better training opportunities and better support staff (and highest on that list were coaches) were the key determinants to improving performance. Canadian athletes noted similar results with one exception where opportunities for international competition were rated highest when compared to all other countries and was the second most important issue for Canadian athletes overall. This was likely the result of a significantly larger geographic location and distance to other countries when compared to the other six participating nations.

A second observation was that the organization of sport in Canada appears to be more complicated and complex when compared to the other six nations. This likely reflects the multiple jurisdictions for elite and grass roots participatory sport at the Federal and Provincial / Territorial levels.

A third interesting result was that funding for elite sport was comparably lower in Canada when compared to the other six nations, although this is admittedly difficult to truly

ascertain due in part to the infrastructure complexity noted earlier and how the various funding bodies fit together into the larger sport pool.

Fourth, the current status of Physical Education in Canada is similar to the other six countries with all seven noting lost opportunities for athlete recruitment and development.

Fifth, athlete development in all seven countries was identified with several weaknesses. This included all four phases of athlete development ranging from talent identification to retirement. Specific items of note for Canadian athletes were a lack of support in higher education and high out of pocket costs to train and compete.

Sixth, Canada was unique in that the federal government did not officially administer a training centre for elite athletes. This may be misleading as support is provided from the Federal Government for Canadian Sport Centres, among others, but the Federal Government is not recognized as the facility operator. Regardless, Canadian athletes noted dissatisfaction when compared to the other six nations regarding accessibility and availability of facilities.

Cooperation between the scientific community and the sport community was seen in all seven countries as a weakness although by comparison Canada ranked comparatively high and lastly Canadian athletes were the most satisfied with regards to media quality and quantity.

All participating nations accepted that the nine pillars were key determinants yet they also recognized that they were trying to differentiate themselves from competitors. What we need to discern then is how we can improve in each pillar thus leading to improved podium performance.

The Full Study “The Global Sporting Arms Race: An International Comparative Study on Sports Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success” was published in 2008 by Meyer and Meyer Sport Publishing. Thanks to Sport Canada and Mount Royal University for supporting this research initiative.