Book Review

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The need for SPLISS 2.0

As knowledge on the role of elite sport policies on elite athlete success rapidly advances, international comparisons have become of great interest and value to countries and politicians, practitioners and sport organisations, athletes, their coaches and entourage, as well as academics, researchers and students across the globe. The new edition on the SPLISS 2.0 research reports findings that extend the boundaries of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of successful elite sport policies across 15 nations in the most articulate, succinct, and methodologically sound way.

The SPLISS 2.0 study builds on the model and methodologies developed in SPLISS 1.0. (i.e., De Bosscher, V., Bingham, J., Shibli, S., van Bottenburg, M., & De Knop, P., 2008) and it presents substantially more detailed information about the sport policy pillars, and is inclusive of more nations, more researchers and more respondents. Specifically, the SPLISS 2.0 project involved 15 nations, 58 researches, and 33 policy makers, and responses from more than 3,000 elite athletes, over 1,300 coaches, and 241 performance directors. This magnitude of expertise comes in addition to many sport organisations and governments that provided funding or other necessary resources to carry out the study and allowed the authors and researchers involved with the project to provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of elite sport policies. The outcome of this extensive and labour intensive data collection allowed the SPLISS consortium partners to develop a more comprehensive scoring methodology and to obtain deeper insights into the relationship between elite sport policies and sporting success of nations.

There is no doubt that the research interest that SPLISS has generated all over the world is a testament to its impact at a global level! Thanks to the hard work of the SPLISS initiator Dr. Professor Veerle De Boscher and her colleagues, SPLISS is now a worldwide phenomenon and this book represents the large scale of the trajectory of the unprecedented impact that this work has had on a global spectrum.

The qualities of book

The qualities of the book are notable. With the clarity and grace of a story telling, the authors tell us an important story; they take the reader through the journey of SPLISS, from its inception to specific detail on policy pillars in various countries and the ways they compare with each other. All this is achieved with a straight forward writing style, illustrative, colourful figures and tables, and a book structure that will keep readers engaged and informed at all times. The authors managed to incorporate sheer volumes of data and analysis, and convey it all in such a detail yet in the most succinct and

interesting way that is beyond commendable… I can only imagine how challenging this task would have been considering the volume of data!

Key findings and future directions

The key findings in the SPLISS 2.0 endeavours are quite telling! One of the most intriguing finding is that there is no evidence to support that the nations which *prioritise* their *funding* will be more successful to win more medals. In fact, in some cases the relationship seems to be negative (see CSF 2.18). Furthermore, the results are inconclusive as to whether nations that invest across *many sports* are successful in more sports. In addition, the strategic choice for a *priority funding approach* does not show a strong relationship with increased success especially not in the longer term. What the SPLISS 2.0 data suggest is that countries with an average elite sport budget seem to spread funding across more sports and countries with either a bigger or smaller budget take a more targeted approach. Among a variety of interesting and informative tables, I wish to draw the readers' attention to Table 44 and the *key success drivers per Pillar based on significant correlations with success,* as this table identifies 22 factors that significantly correlate with success either in summer or in winter sports! Another key observation is that high performing countries show strengths in different sets of Pillars and each Pillar score is composed of different *configurations* of critical success factors. The role of resource configurations is an emerging area of study (see Truyens, De Bosscher, Sotiriadou, Heyndels, & Westerbeek, 2015). Also interesting is that talent ID and development was the only pillar that correlated negatively (and not significant) with success! Despite the plethora of research on talent ID, relative age effects, early and late specialisation sports, hours of training, and test batteries, talent ID is a difficult and convoluted task that we are far from understanding its process. As many skills are 'best trainable' before the age of 12, there seems to be scope to intervene positively in athlete development at an early age, and invest in high quality delivered programs within sport clubs that would allow the development of basic competencies. Of course this demonstrates the big role that clubs (and/or other organisations) play in talent development and the need to further investigate the role of clubs and how they offer and deliver athlete development pathways.

What I like about the work of De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek, and van Bottenburg (2015) is that they leave 'no stone unturned'. However insightful their findings, the authors are aware and modest about the boundaries of their research and identify some limitations in their work that pinpoints toward significant areas of future research. Not many books I have read achieve that!

Specifically, the SPLISS 2.0 project attempts to provide a model that can be used as a *guiding tool for nations to evaluate their effectiveness*. This can become problematic when nations use this information to *benchmark* themselves and *simply transfer best practices*. Similarly, as governments start to invest in certain pillars areas, just to improve their SPLISS scores, their investment can become problematic because improving SPLISS scores does not mean more chances for success! The authors suggest that it is still unclear under what conditions best practices that work in some contexts or structures can be effectively transferred from one setting to another. Furthermore, the results have shown that there is no generic blueprint or best practices that can be copied and pasted between countries. What we do know is that there is broad consensus on the

ingredients that go into the elite success recipe but countries *combine ingredients in their own unique ways*. Accordingly, as the authors nicely suggest, the key challenge for nations is to *benchlearn* instead of benchmark. During benchlearning, nations should also consider environmental elements of elite sport that are not measured in SPLISS 2.0 (e.g., culture, politics, sponsorship and media) that can be of significance to athlete development and success (Sotiriadou, Gowthorp, & De Bosscher, 2013).

In another finding, it is suggested that the countries in the SPLISS sample use central governments to shape policy that would suit their own agendas. However, despite the national co-ordination and increased government funding trends, elite sport development remains dependent on NGBs as the organisations that are ultimately responsible for the advancement of the sport. What is interesting to note is that in some circumstance there is a *shift from a highly centralised approach* towards the principles of *sport runs sport* and increasing the accountability of NGBs (Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; De Bosscher, & De Croock, 2010).

Moreover, in a move away from public funding and toward the more commercial or market based models of elite athlete development, it is likely that sports such as football, cycling or tennis (e.g., Brouwers, Sotiriadou, & De Bosscher, 2015) use a commercial approach to elite sport development which would differ from a government-led approach that SPLISS examines. The co-financing of elite sport by the private and public sectors is currently not captured in the SPLISS model and that offers opportunities to engage in this significant and emerging area of research. Last, the SPLISS study takes a rather closed systems perspective on elite sport policy. In doing so it opens doors for research on the *environmental factors* (such as inputs and throughputs from private organisations). Indeed, latest research argues for the need to use an *open systems perspective* when examining factors that influence elite sport success which allows the role of the private sector (e.g., sport academies, third party organisations and other private initiatives) to be taken into account (Brouwers et al., 2015; Phillips, & Newland, 2014).

Overall, this is a much needed book for a great host of individuals, organisations and nations! It will keep its readers engaged and informed at all times. This book achieves it aims as it advances both academic knowledge and contributes to effective elite sport policies for practitioners, offers a mix of theoretical and practical insights and develops an instrument that can be used by policymakers and academics alike to evaluate the effectiveness of elite sport policies. It is a *must have* book in your personal, organisational or faculty library!

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