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To cite this article: Popi Sotiriadou & Veerle De Bosscher (2018) Managing high-performance sport: introduction to past, present and future considerations, European Sport Management Quarterly, 18:1, 1-7, DOI: [10.1080/16184742.2017.1400225](https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2017.1400225)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2017.1400225>



Published online: 22 Nov 2017.



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## Managing high-performance sport: introduction to past, present and future considerations

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High-performance (HP) sport has emerged as an umbrella term that captures the enormity, growth and pervasive nature of elite sports on the global scene. This special issue of *European Sport Management Quarterly* focuses on ‘Managing High-Performance Sport’ by including a number of articles that highlight the breadth of this topic. In this introduction, we address definition challenges and the evolution of HP sport. Then, we offer insights on the contributions of the articles presented and the ways they assist in expanding the theoretical and practical boundaries of HP sport. We conclude with reporting on current and future trends in the field that may guide research and practice.

### Developments in the field of HP sport

The evolution of managing HP sport dates back to the 1950s and the onset of the Cold War (Houlihan, 2013). Political tensions between Western and Eastern Bloc powers prompted the involvement of some governments, in particular from developed countries, to systematically develop athletes to achieve diplomatic objectives (Riordan, 1978). Up until the 1970s, the typical elite sport system operated in a basic fashion where talented or elite athletes would train with a coach under the supervision or direction of the sports federations (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013). Since the mid-1980s, HP sport evolved from this ‘athlete–coach–federation’ relationship to encompass an increasingly complex team of support staff including physiotherapists, doctors, soft issue therapists, strength and conditioning coaches, psychologists, physiologists, biomechanists, performance analysts and career lifestyle coaches (Collins, Trower, & Cruickshank, 2013).

The political and socioeconomic power of elite athlete success, in both individual and national teams, resulted in many strong performing nations including elite sport in their national policy agenda. The focus on elite sport policy, elite funding and a strategic approach to developing athletes represents a key policy agenda for many countries. From this agenda also emerged an interest by researchers to better understand elite sport systems, explain factors that influence successes and factors that shape policy. In particular, the question of why some nations succeed and others fail in international competition has appeared as an emerging field of study over the past two decades (e.g. Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; Bergsgard, Houlihan, Mangset, Nødland, & Rommetvedt, 2007; De

Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006; De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeek, & Van Bottenburg, 2015; Digel, Burk, & Fahrner, 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2008).

Elite athlete/team success is a key concern to policymakers who wish to improve their medal tally position at, for example, the Olympic Games. However, the management of HP sport is much broader and goes beyond these so-called meso-level factors of sport policies (De Bosscher et al., 2006). As this special issue illustrates, the development of elite sport systems is directly and indirectly influenced by many (macro-level and environmental) factors that shape policies and the management of HP sport, such as globalisation (e.g. coach migration), match fixing, corruption or drug-taking, national and international networks and organisations. This interconnection of factors at different levels has thus far been under-researched and is a response to calls to define the field of managing HP sport.

### Defining HP sport and its unique characteristics

Although the field of sport management has been widely defined, the sub-field of managing HP sport is relatively new and has emerged from elite sport. HP sport can be seen as the top end of sport development and encapsulates any athlete or team that competes at an international or national level. The field includes Olympic and non-Olympic sports, professional sport and team sports (e.g. baseball, football) and emerging sports (e.g. lifestyle sports emerging as mainstream sports, like surfing). In addition, if HP represents the pinnacle of sport, how do athletes reach this peak and manage to sustain their performances? As the wide range of literature on talent identification and development in the field of sport science endorses, the HP process commences with attracting athletes, retaining/transition and nurturing them (i.e. the ARTN processes) in the sport system (Green, 2005; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009). In these processes, a great number of organisations and stakeholders offer opportunities for competitions, training in specialised facilities, coaching and skill development, talent identification, selection, development and transition to higher levels of competition (Rees et al., 2016). Hence, HP sport hinges on the successful ARTN sport development processes and stakeholder input. These processes represent the *first unique characteristic* of HP sport (i.e. *the sport development reciprocity*) where, in most cases, success at the top does not occur in a vacuum. Success is the result of everything that takes place at the early stage of selecting and developing talented athletes who aim to reach the zenith of their athletic performances.

Second, HP sport operates in a fast paced, highly dynamic environment. This creates a *second unique characteristic* of HP sport (i.e. *the open system reciprocity*). Specifically, while on one hand, HP sport is influenced by the social, cultural and economic conditions of the community in which it operates (Chelladurai, 2009), on the other hand, these performances and elite athletes in general, have a pervasive effect on society, economy, government decisions and policy direction (Houlihan, 2013). As such, managing HP is a complex process that operates at and is influenced by macro-, meso- and micro-level factors (De Bosscher et al., 2006). The *macro-level factors* reflect economic, social and cultural aspects of nations (e.g. population, wealth, urbanisation, religion, geography), as well as the different political ideologies. These macro-level factors impact on sport systems, policies and athlete pathways. HP sport management at an organisational/sport policy level (i.e. meso-level) is where sport organisations develop strategies and policies. Well-

designed and implemented strategies and well-considered sports policies support long-term performance. Performances resonate on managing individual athletes, coaches and their close environment as well as the processes that would attract, retain/transition and nurture athletes (i.e. micro-level). Sotiriadou and De Bosscher (2013) drew attention to the complex and fast paced environment in which HP sport operates where specific pressures from media, sponsors and society influence the management of HP sport (e.g. commercialisation of elite sport, doping, match fixing, corruption) and how individuals or organisations deal with it. Houlihan (2013) stated that these factors are closely intertwined and influence how national and international organisations at the public, not-for-profit or commercial sectors manage HP sport.

Over time, and in particular, over the past decade, the growing research interest on managing HP sport has become more theoretically robust by drawing from different approaches, such as organisational performance (e.g. Winand, Rihoux, Robinson, & Zintz, 2013), organisational capacity (e.g. Robinson & Minikin, 2011; Truyens, De Bosscher, & Sotiriadou, 2016), organisational theory, inter-organisational relationships or stakeholder involvement theories (e.g. Sotiriadou, Brouwers, De Bosscher, & Cuskelly, 2017; Thibault, Kihl, & Babiak, 2010), (elite) sport policy (e.g. see list above), culture (e.g. Sotiriadou, Gowthorp, & De Bosscher, 2014), sport development (Smolianov, Murphy, McMahon, & Naylor, 2015), gender (e.g. De Haan, Sotiriadou, & Henry, 2016; Greenhill, Auld, Cuskelly, & Hooper, 2009) and agency theory (Gowthorp, Toohey, & Skinner, 2017).

This growing body of work provides a robust starting point in the scholarly understanding of the context, processes and factors involved in or that contribute to managing HP sport. It also offers an insight on the variety of recourses required, stakeholder input, roles and relationships in developing athletes from grassroots to elite levels of performance. However, the complex nature of managing HP sport has been largely under-explored and under-theorised. This special issue is a testament to the growth of HP sport and its establishment as a recognised research space. The aim of this special issue is to build on the existing research on the management of HP sport and present the latest research on HP sport. The emerging themes of research theoretically contribute to the sport management literature by discussing the ways the globalised nature of elite sport impacts HP coaching, the long-term influences of emerging types of sport leagues and events on athletes, athlete development, transition and new training possibilities for dual careers.

### **Current state of research – special issue topics**

Overall, the topics presented in this special issue highlight the breadth of managing HP sport. The variety of theoretical aspects drawn from different disciplines, such as macro-economic theories, psychology, policy, governance in the articles in this special issue are indicative of the breath of insights that can be drawn about HP sport, ranging from coaching and leagues, to athlete development, competitions and athlete performances.

Using the example of winter sports to illustrate how nations prioritise funding, Weber, De Bosscher and Kempf provide a management perspective derived from economics. They examine how eight nations position themselves in the Winter Olympic Games by comparing their funding prioritisation in the seven winter sports. Their findings suggest that all nations prioritise funding to some extent, but some (e.g. Canada and Switzerland) support

a diversified portfolio of targeted sports. Nations' positioning strategies differ depending on the type of sport prioritised. For instance, priorities included (a) targeting skiing or skating (i.e. the sports where 75% of the medals can be won), (b) sports of the natural landscape (i.e. mountains and snow), (c) sports that had long-term tradition of (past) success (e.g. skating in the Netherlands) or (d) searching for a unique position in high technical sports and different from rival competitors in the same industry (e.g. bobsleigh Great Britain). The portfolio analysis that the authors used, as is commonly applied in economics to optimise a firm's input to target different markets given its limited financial resources, provides fertile ground for further academic inquiry. In line with the work of other scholars (e.g. Hooley, Piercy, & Niclcloud, 2008), the authors argue the need for an internal analysis of resources and capabilities (i.e. resource-based view) with the external analysis of the markets' competitive environment (i.e. market-based view) to strategically position a firm within an industry and thereby gain a competitive advantage. These results provide a basis for evaluating prioritisation policies and making decisions that relate to national contexts.

The second paper in this special issue continues on the topic of funding HP sport. The study was conducted in the UK where a 'no compromise' policy resulted from funding cuts to many national governing bodies (NGBs). Bostock, Crowther, Ridley-Duff and Breese used the concept of turnaround management and applied a framework inclusive of 3 R's (retrenchment, reorganisation and repositioning) to identify how NGBs respond to funding cuts and which factors enable or restrict future performance. This study enhances our understanding of the responses of NGBs to funding cuts for short-term operational survival. A key conclusion is that funding cuts can cause instability that triggers short-term responses, which are highly inconsistent with sustaining long-term HP success. The authors found that reorganisation actions were shaped by resource dependency/rigidity and retention/loss of organisational memory and also by the development of new strategic alliances and partnerships between sports. The latter finding supports the literature that turnaround approaches driven by short-term necessities are also inconsistent with a stakeholder-centred view that safeguards stakeholder relationships. Furthermore, it is illustrated how the turnaround challenge, for NGBs, is shaped, and constrained, by structures for elite sport funding and a policy environment/funding regime. Consequently, the cases of turnaround management in this study signal the urgent need for further research into the impact of the 'No Compromise' framework on the management of NGBs.

In the paper that follows, Zimmermann and Klein (2018) explore an interesting and innovative aspect in HP sport; the emergence of a league system for individual sports. Their work contributes to the development of HP sport through competition formats and in particular the construction of league systems to individual sports in Germany. Specifically, as opposed to common concerns that the creation of a league would detract from HP systems, the study shows how individual sport leagues supplement existing competition systems and enable athletes to improve their performance, as well offer a platform for clubs to promote their sport to various publics.

In continuing on the topic of HP competitions, the paper that follows will engage ESMQ readers in varied ways. Kristiansen, Macintosh, Parent and Houlihan examine the role of Youth Olympic Games as a sport development pathway for athletes. Their study contributes to our understanding of how to reduce athlete drop-out at this

developmental stage. The authors offer suggestions on ways that other stakeholders or environmental factors can enhance the capacity of competitions to act as enablers to athlete retention and retention in the HP system.

The next paper illustrates the dynamic environment in which HP sport operates in a globalised world. It contributes to conversations on labour migration in HP sport from the perspective of coaches (just as athletes). In their work on coach migration in German HP sport, Wicker, Orłowski and Breuer (2018) discuss the factors that affect emigration, immigration and job migration of HP coaches in the context of sports in Germany. They found that offers of higher income represented a significant pull factor for emigration, while having school-age children and being a former HP athlete were retention factors. In addition, qualified and successful coaches migrated to non-coaching jobs during the observed period and in these instances, a sport science decree was a push factor.

The final paper moves into another aspect of the environment that influences HP sport and presents an ongoing challenge to HP sport managers (i.e. drug-taking behaviours of elite athletes). In their work, Kegelaers, Wylleman, De Brandt, Van Rossem, and Rosier (2018) investigate the incentives and deterrents for drug-taking behaviour from a diverse cross-section of sport. Their work suggests that many athletes are not deterred by the current punitive anti-doping strategies and as such a need exists for the development of preventive, or primary, anti-doping strategies to complement existing secondary strategies. The article offers additional insights into the complex decision involved in drug taking (or not) from an athlete perspective. This holistic athletic career approach and the push-pull, anti-push, anti-pull framework, which the authors adopt can assist the development of well-informed anti-doping strategies.

## **Future directions**

The papers within this special issue contribute to our academic understanding of the complexity and multidimensional nature of managing HP sport. They clearly demonstrate that HP sport has become a significant issue for sport and its many stakeholders. The collection of studies in this special issue, along with other available research in HP sport and our personal reflections from our teaching, research and publications in the field inform three areas of debate that have emerged in the last five years that deserve the reader's attention and future investigation.

One area of increasing interest rests in the various approaches for developing athletes from different contexts around the globe (for example, looking at the Australian approach in comparison with Chinese or British or American). In studying different approaches, we see various and ever emerging competition systems, cultural differences, training centres and HP institutes of sport, advanced athlete preparation and support, performance analysis, strength and conditioning and lifestyle management have really come to the fore in terms of investigation and could be given more prominence in the future. In the context of these developments, a greater consideration of professionals working in HP sport as well as new modes of developing athletes that rely on the private sector involvement are exciting new avenues for investigation (Sotiriadou, Brouwers, & De Bosscher, 2016).

Second, Shilbury and Sotiriadou (2017) pointed that coaches, managers, parents and athletes equally are unclear on where sport development ends and HP starts. This

confusion gives the illusion to a number of young participants and their families of the hope of representing their country at a national and international level when they are merely at the very early stages of skill development. Therefore, building on the definition of HP sport offered in this paper as well as offering clarity on the difference between elite (or HP) sport and elite sport development is crucial in moving forward.

In order for HP athletes to thrive, managers, coaches and exercise scientists work together creating synergies between applied (e.g. coaching, biomechanics) and social (e.g. management, marketing, policy) sciences. Multidisciplinary work in HP sport is essential and needed if we are to reach solutions based on a new understanding of complex situations. This disciplinary overlap should be seen as a strength and not a barrier that could prevent some of our research on HP sport to be published in sport management outlets. Quite frequently, the general perception is that this work fits best in coaching, sport psychology and exercise science outlets. We suggest that our work on HP sport can be more impactful to the strategic management of HP sport if it finds its way into sport management, sport policy or sport marketing journals. HP sport is a global business and as such, understanding the HP sport landscape in these broader terms is essential. This special issue of HP sport presents HP sport management as a legitimate field of research that generates discourse, and addresses some key enquiries in sport management practice and scholarship.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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