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Elite sport culture and policy interrelationships: the case of Sprint Canoe in Australia

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In recent years, elite sport policy has received considerable research attention. However, to date the emphasis of such studies has been the examination of policies as stand-alone entities and the ways each policy may impact athlete performance rather than how policies influence each other. This study explores the elite sport policy interrelationships of Sprint Canoe in order to explain the dynamic links between policies and how they may affect performance. To explore these links in depth, interviews with coaches, high performance managers and athletes from Sprint Canoe in Australia were conducted. The findings of this study offer a contribution to the existing literature on elite sport policy and go beyond the mere exploration of sport and country-specific policy contexts. They showcase the role of a sport's culture on shaping policy linkages and interrelationships. The practical implications of recognising where sport policies require attention and how to achieve improvements are discussed.

Keywords: elite sport policy; high performance sport; culture; homogeneity; heterogeneity

Introduction

Australia has a tiered approach to funding sport and Sprint Canoe enjoys the status of a Tier 1 sport. In other words, Sprint Canoe has demonstrated its medal-winning capacity at the Olympic Games. Australia is ranked within the top five nations in the world at World Championships and Olympic Games. Australia's international success has produced a number of World and Olympic Champions. Clint Robinson was Australia's first Olympic gold medallist in Canoe Sprint Racing in 1992. Since then, Sprint Canoe has consistently won medals at every Olympic Games, taking gold at the Beijing 2008 Games and the London 2012 Games. Consequently, Sprint Canoe is a well-funded sport, expected to consistently perform at significant international sporting events annually. Distributing the majority of public funding to the most results-capable sports is a common funding strategy in most Western and European countries (De Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, van Bottenburg, & De Knop, 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2008; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, &

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Quick, 2008). In its very simplistic interpretation and within the broader neoliberal contexts, tiered-funding rewards the ‘winners’ and ties in resource allocations to performances (Moynihan, 2006). Sam (2012) explains that this approach of investing in sports is a means of organisational control and offers a level of assurance about the best use of public money. Sport policies at this level of performance generate high accountability and a line of attributing fault when performance measures are not achieved as well as the prospect for central agencies is to be blamed (Peters, 1995; Sam, 2012).

These pressures to perform are further intensified with the notable increase in government funding that elite sport in many countries, including Australia, has experienced over the past decade. As nations are copying and adopting their policies and practices using other successful countries as a benchmark (Bohlke & Robinson, 2009), they homogenise their approaches to elite athlete development. This trend has generated significant research interest in identifying international similarities of sport policies (De Bosscher, De Knop, & van Bottenburg, 2009; Green & Oakley, 2001; Nicholson, Hoye, & Houlihan, 2011). As opposed to the studies of homogenous developmental policies and practices, there is minimal research that examines the level of heterogeneity in elite sport policies. After examining elite policies across six countries, De Bosscher, De Knop and van Bottenburg (2009) argued that even though policies of different nations are converging into uniform models, there is room for diversity. Andersen and Ronglan (2012) exemplified this diversity in their study which compared four Nordic countries. They found that elite sport systems are not only becoming more different, but it happens at odds with the expected political and societal organisations of these countries. Political and ideological manifestations have an influence on policy diversification as some governments (e.g. USA) choose to intervene minimally whilst others (e.g. Australia) have a much stronger involvement with financing and shaping policy for elite sport (Green & Oakley, 2001; Sotiriadou, 2009).

In order to explore potential diversity in elite sport policy, it is essential to first discover what sport-specific factors influence success. Therefore, using previously discovered elite sport policies and characteristics of successful elite sport systems, this study’s research question is ‘*What sport policy factors explain Sprint Canoe’s success?*’

Based on the sport policy factors that lead to international sporting success (SPLISS) model (De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006), a theoretical framework is presented that explains the importance of sport-specific policies in canoe and in particular the emergence of culture as a driver to other sport policies and policy interrelationships. The empirical analysis is undertaken using qualitative data from Sprint Canoe experts in Australia. The findings contribute to the body of research on elite sport policy by providing insights into sport policy interrelationships. These interrelationships show the need for sport and country-specific exploration of policy processes. These findings have implications for the management of elite sports and for policy-makers.

Literature review

The factors that determine elite success are classified into three levels; macro-, meso-, and micro-level (De Bosscher et al., 2006). Macro-level factors are the social and cultural context in which people live including economic welfare, population,

geographic and climatic variation, degree of urbanisation, political system and cultural system. Meso-level factors are the sport policies of nations (e.g. policies on coach development, policies on talent identification and selection). Micro-level factors relate to the individual athletes (genetic qualities) and their close environment (e.g. parents, friends and coaches). At the micro-level, some factors can be controlled (e.g. training techniques) and others cannot (e.g. genetics).

Sport policy-makers can make sport policies' changes that would have a relatively fast effect on improving athlete performances. Well-considered and implemented sports policies and processes may influence long-term performance outcomes. Over the past 20 years, various studies have looked at the factors at meso-level that influence sport performances of countries (e.g. De Bosscher et al., 2006; Digel, Burk, & Fahrner, 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2008; Oakley & Green, 2001). In their research attempts to identify the mix of ingredients for successful elite athlete development, these studies compared elite sport policies of different countries. Some of the studies were sport overall and others were sport-specific. Table 1 presents an overview of different comparative studies on national elite sport policy, the selection criteria and the methods they used.

Arguably, the most inclusive study in terms of factors that influence international sporting success is the SPLISS study (De Bosscher et al., 2006). The SPLISS model (see Figure 1) is based on an initial comprehensive literature analysis on the organisational context of countries in elite sport (meso-level). Findings from literature were then supplemented by two studies at the micro-level, which attempted to understand the determinants of success for individual athletes rather than nations and by two explorative surveys with experts and stakeholders. The first study examined the views of Flemish athletes, coaches and performance directors on the prerequisites for success. The second study examined the views of international tennis experts on the factors determining tennis success. The SPLISS model was then tested in six countries including Belgium (separated in Flanders and Wallonia), Canada, Italy, the Netherlands, the UK and Norway.

Pillar 1 in the SPLISS model represents the financial support (or input) for elite sport (see Figure 1). All the other pillars (organisation and structure of sport policies, foundation and participation, talent identification and development system, athletic and post-career support, training facilities, coaching provision and development, [inter]national competition and scientific research) are throughputs. Throughputs are the support services and systems delivered to athletes, coaches and organisations at each stage of the development process. The throughput pillars represent the *what* and *how* invested. Therefore, the throughput pillars refer to the optimum way the inputs can be managed to produce the required outputs (De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli, & Bingham, 2009) and are of central interest in the present study.

Even though the SPLISS model is the most inclusive work in terms of factors that lead to international success, it is a generic model for national elite sport policies and not sport-specific. Further, simply having these nine pillars in place is insufficient to achieve success; what is important is how these pillars are implemented (De Bosscher, 2007). According to De Bosscher (2007) and Larose and Haggerty (1996), key success determinants might be different for every sport or clusters of sports. Therefore, there is a need to gain an insight into the policy factors that influence international success at sport-specific level, in this case Sprint Canoe in Australia.

Table 1. On overview of elite sport policy studies.

	Oakley and Green (2001)	Green and Houlthian (2005)	Digel et al. (2006)	Houlihan and Green (2008)	De Bosscher et al. (2008; 2009)	Andersen and Ronglan (2012)
Focus	Role of different agencies Administration Identification and monitoring athletes Sport services Programmes Facilities, Culture, Planning, Funding Lifestyle support	Elite facilities Support for full time athletes Coaching, sport science, medicine support Competition opportunities	Resources Politics Education Competition Talent search Science Mass media Sponsorship	Historical Political Organisational Context Talent ID & Development	Financial support (P1) Governance, org/tion & structure (P2) Sport participation (organised and non-organised) (P3) Talent id & dvt (P4) Athletic & post athletic support (P5) Facilities (P6) Coach provision & development (P7) (Inter)national competition (P8) Scientific research (P9) Overall	Historical sport developments; critical decisions; resources; controversies; policy issues; systematic comparisons
Sports	Overall	Swimming Athletics Yachting	Overall Athletics Swimming Volleyball	Olympic sports		Norway; women's handball; Finland: men's ice hockey; Denmark: track cycling; Sweden: tennis, golf
Countries	6 The UK France Spain Canada The USA Australia	3 Australia Canada The UK	8 Australia China France Germany Italy Russia The UK The USA	9 China Japan Singapore Germany France Poland Norway New Zealand The USA	6 Belgium (Flanders + Wallonia) Canada Italy The Netherlands Norway The UK	4 Nordic countries (with similar systems)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

	Oakley and Green (2001)	Green and Houlihan (2005)	Digel et al. (2006)	Houlihan and Green (2008)	De Bosscher et al. (2008; 2009)	Andersen and Ronglan (2012)
Selection criteria countries	Relatively large populations Developed western democracies		Long Olympic tradition Countries that provide Olympic sports with privileged treatment Governed on the basis of ideological concepts	- Move beyond English speaking countries - Countries with a history of international success - Countries with specific characteristics	- sport performances - countries' socio-economic nature (western industrialised countries) - a broadly comparable cultural background	Similar countries with respect to size, geographical region, societal and political institutions and welfare state arrangements
Methods	Study visits, interviews, Review of secondary sources		Interviews Analysis of literature Socio-demographic analysis questionnaires (3 sport associations Ministers responsible for HP sport, National Olympic committees Country specific organisations)	Contributor from each country Green and Houlihan's (2005) analytical framework	- availability of funding/researchers Mixed methods Explorative QUAL 1st phase (literature/stakeholders/international experts) + QUAL-QUAN 2nd phase: Sport policy inventory, completed by researchers from each country Elite sport climate survey (athletes, coaches, performance directors) Development scoring system	Authors from each nation as specialists on their own national systems; they each used a variety of methods to provide the data underlying the chapters

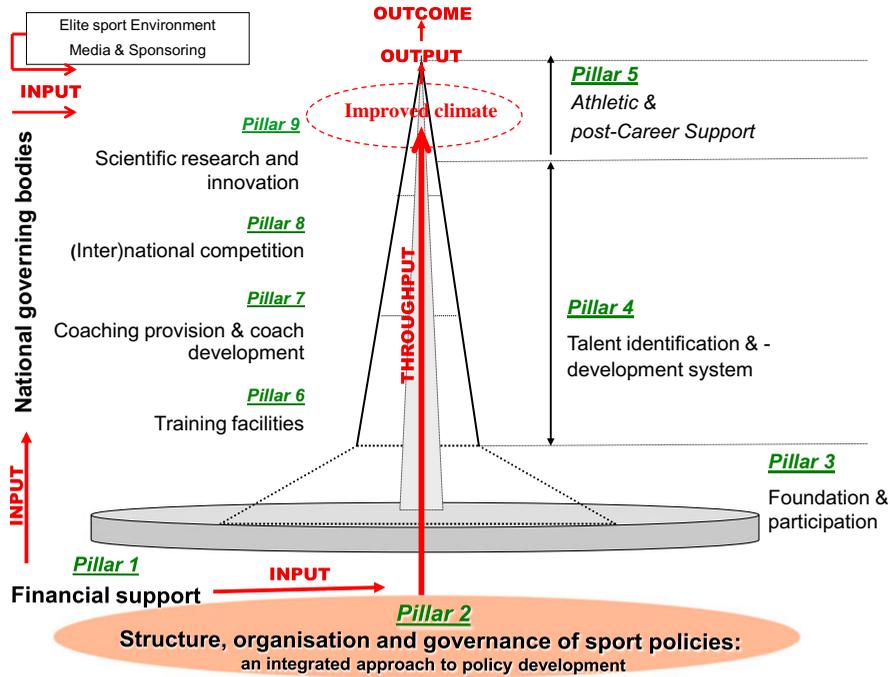


Figure 1. The sport policy factors leading to international sporting success (SPLISS) model (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

Source: De Bosscher et al. (2006) and De Bosscher (2007), reprinted with permission of VUBPress.

Amongst other factors, De Bosscher (2007) recognised elite sport culture as important for success. However, she did not include it in her study on the basis that culture cannot be directly influenced by policy-makers. De Bosscher (2007) clustered additional factors that influence elite success, including culture, as the *environment* of sport systems and indicated the need to examine these factors on different levels and on a sport by sport basis in each nation. Houlihan (2009) presented the factors that contribute to elite success clustered in three groups of policies, contextual, processual and specific. In his study of elite sport policies, Houlihan (2009) incorporated the SPLISS pillars of success and included culture as a contextual factor. As ‘nations implement policies differently, fitting with their own cultural background’ (De Bosscher, De Knop, & van Bottenburg, 2009, p. 112), culture is seen as an integral part of elite sport (Oakley & Green, 2001) and an essential aspect to appreciate in order to know if and how it influences elite sport. However, with the exception of Oakley and Green (2001) and Houlihan (2009), elite sport policy studies justified the exclusion of culture as an integral part of policy examination on the basis that culture is a macro-level rather than a meso-level policy; therefore, culture cannot be influenced by policy-makers (De Bosscher, 2007).

MacIntosh and Doherty (2007) claim that what goes on inside the organisation is the organisation’s culture. The most commonly known and simple definition of organisational culture is ‘the way we do things around here’ (Lundy & Cowling, 1996, p. 168). Culture reflects the values, expectations, assumptions and norms of the employees themselves (Smith & Shilbury, 2004). A lack of cultural consensus,

therefore a weak and fragmented culture, is thought to be detrimental to the organisation because of the potentially increased uncertainty about expectations for behaviour (Martin, 1992). On the other hand, MacIntosh and Doherty (2007) support the view that a shared (i.e. strong) culture is ideal for the organisation because it indicates that its values and beliefs are in line with organisational goals, 'having an impact on staff behaviour and attitudes, and ultimately influencing organisational performance' (p. 45). Klein, Masi and Weidner (1995) place organisational culture at the heart of an organisation's endeavours to improve its overall effectiveness and the quality of its products and services. Many strategy researchers (e.g. Bamey, 1986) assert that organisational culture is an important source of competitive advantage. Digel, Burk and Fahrner (2006) stated that 'successful nations in high-performance sport are characterised by cultural patterns of sport that have grown over many years' (p. 106).

Culture is expressed at various levels ranging from an individual to a team, organisational, national and global levels (e.g. Erez & Gati, 2004). On that premise, organisational and team culture can be explored and fashioned by policies (Oakley & Green, 2001; Wilson, 2000). This study examines the SPLISS policy factors using Houlihan's (2009) policy classification which is inclusive of culture. Using a qualitative approach, this study validates the SPLISS model and builds upon it further by exploring the way sport policies may influence each other. Therefore, the study findings may direct policy-makers and sport organisations towards taking specific actions and relevant approaches to managing and nurturing elite sport success.

Method

Procedures and data collection

Following ethics approval, data for this research was obtained through 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interviewees included four high performance managers, five coaches, the CEO, two sport scientists and four athletes. These clusters of participants were chosen in order to gain a full picture on sport policies from all experts involved in the sport. The inclusion of all these clusters of participants was important from a methodological stand because this selection reflects the processes utilised in the original SPLISS study (see De Bosscher et al., 2006). All the participants received and signed a consent form prior to the interview explaining the aims of the study and ensuring the confidentiality of their participation. The interviews ranged from 35 to 72 min in length. The interviews were digitally recorded and manually transcribed. In total, 96 pages of transcripts were obtained.

An interview schedule was used to ensure that data obtained would address the research questions and cover all the elite sport policies. To discuss the participants' views on the importance of policy factors that lead to international sporting success, the schedule was divided into three groups of questions (see Table 2). Examples of questions asked included 'How would you describe the quality of coaching staff in canoe/kayak?' 'How does coaching impact international performance?' and 'Is there appropriate planning and development for coaches in canoe/kayak? Why?' These groups were inclusive of the three clusters of elite sport policies (Houlihan, 2009) and all the SPLISS policy factors (De Bosscher, 2007). Table 2 displays the clusters of policies and factors investigated in this study.

Table 2. The elite sport policies explored using interviews.

Policy factors	Cluster of policies		
	Contextual	Processual	Specific
	Culture	Partnerships Administration Talent identification Athlete progress Resources Coaching Planning and evaluation Lifestyle	Competition Facilities and equipment Sport Science and Sport Medicine Research

Source: Adopted from Houlihan (2009).

Data analysis

After all the interviews were transcribed, the data were entered into the qualitative software NVivo where codes were assigned. The use of NVivo software assisted in organising and managing data, ideas and concepts that emerged from the data (Bazeley, 2007). This initial NVivo coding was followed by manual analysis and interpretation. During the manual coding stage, the data were subject to systematic *conceptual* and *relational* analyses (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Conceptual analysis was used to establish the existence and detail for each of the sport policy areas. Relational analysis is built on conceptual analysis by examining the relationships among concepts (sport policies). The policy factors examined in this study (e.g. coaching, scientific research, talent identification) are ‘a priori’ concepts. However, the nodes and sub-nodes identified within those policy factors emerged through the process of analytic induction and constant comparisons of data. The process of analytic induction continued until an adequate level of explanation of the process under investigation was achieved (Soulliere, Britt, & Maines, 2001).

Once both types of analyses were concluded, the research team examined the trustworthiness on the coding and analyses processes. Trustworthiness is the qualitative equivalent of reliability and validity in quantitative studies, and an important consideration in producing rigorous qualitative research (Patton, 2002). To enhance trustworthiness, the research team went through several iterations of individually coding the transcripts, meeting as a group to come to a consensus on revised codes and links, to ensure the codes and code links accurately represented participants’ responses. After the final codes were assigned, a fellow interpreter looked at the data using the coding scheme that the research team used (based on Table 2). Then, the research team compared the categorised responses to those of the fellow interpreter. The percentage of times the coding was in agreement (i.e. reliability score should be over 80% as recommended by Kirk & Miller, 1986) was 94%.

Results

In answering the research question, Table 3 shows the policy dimensions and factors that were examined in this study and help explain Sprint Canoe’s success. The table also displays the level that these factors are developed or need improvement. The table is followed by a discussion of the findings and interpretation of results.

Table 3. The sport policies that explain Sprint Canoe success.

Dimension	Factors	Australian development	SPLISS
(Australian) Culture	- culture from surf lifesaving	√	Not measured
Coach	- fun culture		
	- excellence culture		
	- overall quality of coaching staff foreign coaches (Europe)	√	Pillar 7
	coach that understands the Australian culture	χ	
Athlete pathways: participation, identification, talent development and athletes	- coach education, training and development programmes	χ	
	- transition of ex-athletes into coaching roles	χ	
	- coaches with good communication skills, long-term planning and organising; team spirit.	-	
	- mass participation base and grassroots numbers	χ	Pillar 3
	- good talent coaches at early stage of development	-	
	- transfer from initiation to talent	χ	
	- talent transfer from surf life saving	√	Pillar 4
Organisation	- talent identification coaches who identify children from schools and surf	χ	
	- systematic and well-planned talent identification, recruitment and development (<i>in Aus it appears to be accidentally</i>)	χ	
	- staff to monitor the progress from transition from junior into senior; communication between talent and high performance; involve elite athletes with juniors	χ	
	- fulltime paid athletes	√(recently) χ (partly)	Pillar 5
	- lifestyle support and other services (in AIS)	√	
Competition	- NGB long-term programme planning, long-term indicators to guarantee sustainability	χ	Pillar 2
		√	
		(improving)	
	- fast and clear decision making process	χ	
Facilities and equipment	- good communication and structures		
	- adapt to changes/change management	χ	
	- participation at quality national competitions international competitions	√χ	Pillar 8
Research and sport science	- build relationships with neighbouring countries to have more competitions a year, with sufficient participants	χ	
	- available facilities	√	Pillar 6
	- accessibility to equipment	√	
	- sport scientist and sport medicine support (were biomechanics and psychology, nutrition, strength and condition, tracking athlete training loads, massage and physio treatment)	√	Pillar 9

Legend: √ well developed; χ room for improvement; - underdeveloped.

Culture

'Culture' as a theme in this study captures global, national and sport-specific trends and aspects of Sprint Canoe. The respondents see the culture of Sprint Canoe as unique because it is shaped within Australia by the strong surf lifesaving environment symbolic of the Australian way of life. Specifically, the respondents indicated the need for country-specific policies and programmes. Sprint Canoe is a predominately European-based sport and Eastern European nations dominate the competition. For Australia to be successful in the sport, participants agreed to what Respondent 11 captures well in saying that 'We [Australians] are not based in Europe and we cannot have a programme that the Europeans have. We need to find our own programme and our own way to be successful'. This sentiment of country-specific sport policy needs was supported by Respondent 5 who suggested that they, as a sport, need to 'change the way we do some things so it's suited to Australians to perform and not compare us to how the Europeans do it'.

The findings show a strong link between the sport's culture and its talent identification processes. Participants indicated that in Australia athletes tend to transition to flat-water canoe/kayak from surf lifesaving, where competitors race a surf ski and have, therefore, developed the basic strength, flexibility and coordination required when transferring to the sport of Sprint Canoe. As such, Sprint Canoe experiences 'a fun loving culture' (Respondent 8). Furthermore, as stated by Respondent 6 'The culture is a surf culture, which I don't think is a bad thing ... a bit more relaxed and not as regimented as some other sports. I think if we try and change this we will lose many good athletes'. Despite Sprint Canoe athletes being laid back and fun, participants argued that when it comes to high performance there is a culture of excellence in the sport: 'There is a culture living on the coast [Gold Coast] where people are relaxed but when it comes to high performance, people need to be the mongrel and a little bit more selfish to be able to achieve their goals' (Respondent 9).

Coach

'Coach' is a theme inclusive of coaches, coaching and coach development and education aspects of elite sport policies (i.e. SPLISS pillar 7). The findings strongly suggest that the coaches' role is central and inextricably linked to other elite sport policies (see Figure 2). For instance, there is a strong link between coaches and the sports' culture, its athletes and athlete development or success. Respondent 9 summarises this relationship as follows:

I think a lot of the European coaches have trouble relating to the Australian way of life. There is a culture and I don't think you are going to change it overnight. And you have to have someone the athletes can relate to and respect as well in order to perform.

Further data analysis revealed that: 'Australian coaches have been forced out of the system ... yet it is the Australian coaches who had a better idea of how to coach Australian athletes and get results' (Respondent 5). That is because Australian coaches 'understand our culture and the athletes' (Respondent 11). Three out of four main coaches in sprint canoe are from Europe. The issue that arises is that European coaches are culturally different and their cultural background significantly varies,

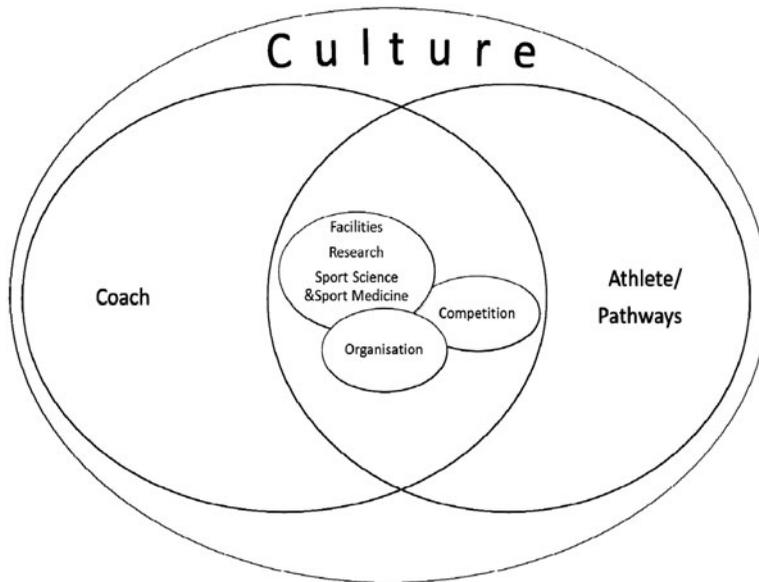


Figure 2. Culture and elite sport policy links.

therefore so does their coaching style, which differs from the way Australians coach. Therefore, ‘they [European coaches] don’t know what to expect or how to behave and they cannot handle it [the culture of the sport/athletes]’ (Respondent 12).

In addition to the international coaches’ difficulty or perhaps inability to blend in with the culture of the sport, strong opinions were voiced in relation to the overall quality of the pathways for Australian coaches. The participants agree that the coaches have a strong impact on athlete’s international performance as ‘without good coaches not many athletes will succeed’ (Respondent 11). Concerns were raised that the sport has limited pathways to produce Australian coaches that are good enough to fill national team roles. The lack of good Australian coaches was often raised in the interviews. Respondent 2, for instance, stated: ‘We are getting results but we don’t have quality [Australian] coaches and they influence international success’. The participants view is captured well by Respondent 11 claiming that ‘coaching is critical and as a sport we need to strengthen this area’.

Athlete pathways: participation, identification, talent development and athletes

‘Athlete pathways’ is a theme inclusive of policies on talent identification, selection, development and transition and the pathways from one level of performance to another (e.g. junior to more senior) (i.e. SPLISS pillars 3 initiation and 4 performance) and the actual athletes (SPLISS pillar 5 excellence). Sprint Canoe has small participation and grassroots numbers to use as a base to draw talent from. Sprint Canoe relies on identifying talented athletes through other pathways. Over the years, Sprint Canoe has developed strong links with surf lifesaving clubs to ensure that ‘talented [surf lifesaving] athletes get a chance at sprint canoe. They have most of the skill, and to date our best athletes have transferred from surf’ (Respondent 11).

The existing talent pathway relies on surf lifesaving athletes to transition into Sprint Canoe. However successful this model, participants claimed that to gain greater quality and number of elite athletes, the development of a national athlete pathway is required. As one of the participants suggested:

Individual coaches and clubs do their own talent scouting but there is no formal pathway or scouting process to ensure talented athletes can make it all the way to the senior international level. Junior athletes identified by coaches in the system and coaches with senior athletes will progress. However, those outside the system find it hard to progress into the senior levels. (Respondent 6)

The coaches emerged as being instrumental in facilitating talent identification, recruitment and development processes. As one of the participants articulates: 'Surf athletes can be picked up and taken forward by [the] elite coach' (Respondent 4). The participants highlight the importance of having a good coach at an early stage of athlete development to learn the right techniques and become outstanding athletes. However, participants strongly suggest that 'there's not enough follow through to pass them [talent] onto the next level. It's not happening so we are losing kids who haven't been coached properly' (Respondent 4). Senior coaches do not see it in their role to source junior talent and they expect coaches from clubs to 'pass' their best athletes on to them. Yet, this does not happen as club coaches want to keep their athletes and personally progress them to international standards, despite not having the technical skill to do so.

Elite athlete success in Sprint Canoe is occurring as current athletes have been in the system for many years and the juniors coming through train with current senior squad. Yet, an issue associated with talent identification and development processes is the need for more coaches 'to identify more potential athletes' (Respondent 1), and to 'find kids from schools, kids from surf, kids from anywhere' (Respondent 12). The findings highlight the importance of having clear athlete pathways and talent identification systems to provide sustained international success. One participant highlights:

Having successful pathways will lift the level of the sport. If having a level of consistency of performance with the guys underneath, this will push up the level of performance to stay in the squad. This constant pressure needs to be there. (Respondent 10)

However, according to the participants' comments, Sprint Canoe experiences a lack of clarity on both its talent identification and development pathways. This lack of clarity is portrayed as a major flaw and as one of the participants explains: 'The pathways and system needs work, there is always tension' (Respondent 10). The identified gap is in the transition between junior and senior athletes. One participant, for example, explains: 'If we don't get talent development and talent identification done correctly at an early age, it will affect the senior level' (Respondent 11).

The participants suggested the gap in the pathways is due to lack of links between junior and senior. Respondent 7 captures this gap by stating that: 'There is no communication between national talent identification and high performance. So, no real link or pathway.' A couple of the study participants suggested that elite athletes should be involved with juniors, 'to show them what it's like' (Respondent 14). However, it was unanimously recognised that for the retention of junior athletes

and their transition to more senior levels of participation, the role of coaches was instrumental. During the study, this issue was met with the appointment of an elite development manager to monitor the progress from juniors to U23 and to seniors so that the sport would ‘not lose as many good athletes after juniors as before’ (Respondent 15).

Overall, the coaches work with senior athletes and have little time to assist juniors or new talent. The existing coaching culture within Sprint Canoe in Australia is for the best coaches to train the senior athletes and for the developing coaches to work with the junior and developing athletes. This stands in stark contrast to many nations that have the best coaches working with junior athletes. Consequently, participants raise concerns that senior and junior programmes are very isolated to the detriment of developing athletes and Australian coaches. The participants stressed that the coaches’ role was fundamental in enabling talent development, athlete progression and offering the appropriate pathways for athletes to move to higher levels of competition. The coach is seen as largely responsible for these processes and they ‘should be going around the country looking at talent. He [head coach] should be tracking and monitoring them [talented athletes]’ (Respondent 8). The coaches’ role in bridging that gap in the development pathway and facilitating the transition from junior to senior is seen as mandatory. One of the participants explains that junior development depends on the coach as:

there have been kids come through and they get through because their coach is in the system – but all the other talent around Australia with a coach who is not known is not picked up because the head coach doesn’t have his finger on the pulse. (Respondent 13)

Participants raised concerns regarding the mismatch of the international coaches’ cultural expectations, and the lack of coach education. These concerns appear to affect the training programmes for the development and progress of athletes. In relation to the athlete pathways and programmes for talent progression, a participant complained that ‘it is the immaturity of some foreign coaches who won’t work together and that screws up the pathway’ (Respondent 8). Training programmes and talent progression appear to be affected by the lack of a long term vision regarding the high performance programme and the insufficient monitoring processes in place. The lack of a long-term vision can be linked to the two or four year contract that international coaches commit to. In most cases, all coach contracts end after an Olympic Games; therefore, there is little incentive to develop athletes who are not competing at international senior level.

Organisation

‘Organisation’ in this study is a theme that incorporates the governance, organisation and structure of the sport and its sport policies (i.e. Pillar 2). Organisation in the context of the present study is also inclusive of policies and processes on planning and evaluation, and structural partnerships with significant sport organisations. Structurally, the ASC’s AIS is a key organisation for Sprint Canoe and has the greatest impact on athlete success. The AIS has established a National Centre of Excellence (NCE) based on the Gold Coast that caters for the national Sprint Canoe athletes. While high performance programmes exist around the country, for example

in Perth at the Western Australia Institute of Sport (WAIS), the NCE on the Gold Coast houses the majority of national team athletes and national team coaches. The centre is also the primary destination for national training camps.

Australian Canoeing play an important role in the administration side of Sprint Canoe as they are responsible for organising events, employing coaches and managing the sports public relations. Even though there are tensions between athletes and coaches resulting from cultural and communication differences, Sprint Canoe employ the world's best coaches from a technical perspective and the study participants agreed that 'what Australian Canoeing do at the moment is great and [I have] never experienced better' (Respondent 7).

Policy links were apparent between various issues presented earlier (e.g. pathway gap, coach education) and the lack of long-term planning and the confusion that is taking place at the management level. In particular, the findings highlight the participants' concern for the sustainability of the sport's success and the need for Sprint Canoe to be replacing their short term goal attainment approach with the introduction of long-term indicators. Respondent 8 further exemplifies this point when suggesting that:

There is a lack of long term goals as we get too involved in the process of ticking the boxes and making everything colour-coded and forget what you are trying to achieve. A KPI [key performance indicator] needs to be measurable in the short term but we should be aiming for long term goal.

Participants suggested that the sport needs a plan that will be used for more than just a 'quick fix just for medals in London or Rio but a long-term sustainability of the programme' (Respondent 15). Associated with a long-term plan is also the need for succession planning and establishing a proactive approach to talented young athletes.

The issue of accountability came to the fore with one participant claiming that 'there is no one overseeing the planning or programming – everyone does their own thing, no accountability, no-one checking – no one really cares' (Respondent 6). Participants saw an urgent need to have a person responsible for development and planning as opposed to using 'recycled plans and programmes with not much tweaking and changing' (Respondent 3). The participants also highlighted the lack of succession planning and the impact on athletes: 'There isn't even succession planning – so if all coaches quit tomorrow we would have no idea of the direction or plans of the athletes' (Respondent 11). One of the participants captures the gravity and complexity of the issue by stating that Sprint Canoe should:

Employ good coaches who can communicate, plan and are willing to work. Also implement systems, accountability structures and a clear decision making process so time isn't wasted and people are not confused about what's going on. (Respondent 16)

The issues regarding planning were linked to lack of communication, and a slow decision-making processes. The general feel was that there was a plan but it was not well informed and communicated. A participant exemplifies this by stating that 'no one has a clue what is going [on], when and where or who is coaching ... I do not really "hear" the planning' (Respondent 6). The decision process appears to be slow and lengthy with interviewees suggesting what Respondent 9 captures in this quote: 'The communication between those who put the plans together, the process of

getting it approved and moved into circulation and then to the athletes can be a -confusing and slow process’.

Competition

‘Competition’ is a theme inclusive of national and international competition and competition structures (i.e. SPLISS pillar 8). Access to and participation at quality national and international competitions was highlighted as a factor influencing international success. All respondents identified the geographical isolation of Australia as a factor effecting Sprint Canoe’s athletes’ potential for optimal international performance. Respondent 10 states: ‘The lack of competition internationally does affect us. We can have 11 weeks between competitions’. In addition, ‘race practice is important in any sport, so the lack of it is only going to affect the quality of our athletes’ (Respondent 11).

Respondents strongly supported the opportunity to build relationships with neighbouring countries rather than relying on the European domestic season that is costly and requires extensive overseas stays, which many athletes do not want. One of the participants captures this point as follows: ‘We should try to improve relationships with Oceania and Asia so we can coordinate more single events. That way we can get more competition experience’ (Respondent 12). Most respondents commented on the lack of quality competition as an area that hinders Sprint Canoe athlete’s performances: ‘I think we should have a few more regattas – we only have three competitions a year’ (Respondent 10). However, due to limited competitors, respondents agreed that the quality of competition would be reduced if more regattas were added to the domestic programme: ‘Not many athletes attend so if we keep it at two or three per year, we can get more numbers and have better competition’ (Respondent 12).

Facilities, research and sport science and sport medicine

Training facilities, equipment (e.g. boats) and sport science technology (e.g. Go Pro cameras and ipads) reflect the SPLISS pillar 6. Scientific ‘research’ (i.e. SPLISS pillar 9) and the use of ‘sport scientists and sport medicine’ services designed to support athletes were three themes closely related and they are grouped together in this section. On the whole, the participants commented that the available facilities and accessibility to equipment is excellent. When participants were asked about the role of scientific research in athlete’s success, they agreed that Sprint Canoe in Australia represents world’s best practice even though there is ‘limited research done especially compared to some other sports’ (Respondent 13). Not surprisingly, the participants turned the focus of the discussion on other (previously discussed) ways for Sprint Canoe to achieve the world’s best practice including ‘investing in professional staff with better coaching structure’ (Respondent 13) and ‘begin [best practice] at junior levels’ (Respondent 7).

The results show that sport scientists and sport medicine support are effectively utilised in Sprint Canoe. The majority of participants agreed that ‘there’s enough sport science, physiology, dietician, sport psychology, training programme support and the quality is good’ (Respondent 13). The sport sciences and practices that were presented as the most influential for international performance were biomechanics and psychology, nutrition, strength and condition, tracking athlete training loads,

massage and physiotherapy treatment, and effective management and monitoring. However, there were also areas for improvement such as a fulltime physiotherapist, more physiology testing and research, and performance analyses. Figure 2 is an interpretation of the results and illustrates (a) the overarching role of the sports' culture in shaping sport policies, (b) the pivotal role of the coach and athlete pathways within the elite sport system and (c) the ways elite sport policies interrelate.

Discussion

Even though previous studies recognise an increased uniformity for elite sport development, they also maintain that variations in elite sport policies are apparent and will always remain (e.g. De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli, & Bingham, 2009, Green & Oakley, 2001; Oakley & Green, 2001). The findings from this study reiterate that the way elite sport policies are shaped and implemented vary in order to reflect sport-specific needs and country-related contexts. This study shows that Sprint Canoe implements policies in a very culturally driven fashion that is unique to the Australian context and Sprint Canoe's talent identification processes. This finding supports Digel et al. (2006) conclusion that 'successful nations in high-performance sport are characterised by cultural patterns of sport that have grown over many years' (p. 106). It can be suggested that the sport policy heterogeneity within the Sprint Canoe is driven by its culture and that culture influences success.

De Bosscher, De Knop and van Bottenburg (2009) argued that variations between countries will continue as each country has its own specific characteristics (e.g. mountains, coastline) and own cultural background that must be taken into account when making policy. This study supports that cultural patterns may be central to elite sport policy and may drive elite success. The use of the SPLISS model in this study facilitates the interpretation of the findings and helps explain that the combination of the nine pillars may be specific to a given nation's context and culture (De Bosscher et al., 2006). This combination is simply the reflection of the cultural context sports operate in. This study contributes to the body of research on elite sport policy confirming that there are considerable variations in each of the nine pillars and these variations emerge from the way sport policies are implemented on a sport by sport case. Last, for a theoretical stand, it may be suggested that a 10th 'pillar', namely the cultural background and the tradition of success as referred to by De Bosscher et al. (2006), is included in future SPLISS studies.

Also, applying the SPLISS model on a sport-specific context allowed the discovery of links and interrelationships between sport policies. The most striking examples of policy links are between culture and talent identification, and between talented athletes and coaches. The Australian Sprint Canoe's talent identification process is different to the European. The 'laid back' culture of the Australian athletes resonates within the sport's talent identification policies and processes drawing talent largely from surf lifesaving. This finding reiterates previous research which suggests that talent identification and elite sport development are largely organised on a sport by sport basis (De Bosscher, De Knop, & van Bottenburg, 2009). Further to this, it is clear from this study that there is an overlap between dimensions/pillars in SPLISS (e.g. SPLISS pillar 6; facilities, equipment, sport science technology and pillar 9; scientific research and sport scientists and sport medicine services), and as such, it is difficult to see pillars or dimensions as separate

entities. Consequently, this study has further implications for the management of elite sport, for policy makers and sport governing bodies.

Sprint Canoe athletes are culturally dissimilar to the sport's European coaches. This cultural diversity may generate coach–athlete conflict on values, expectations and beliefs. This finding supports previous research into this area which views culture as a system of principles, or rules which guide behaviour (e.g. Goodenough, 1961; Woods, 1975), and link cultural backgrounds to patterns of behaviour in sport (e.g. Allison, 1982). Because of this, Sprint Canoe has developed a sustained level of success and a competitive advantage over other countries on the basis of its culture and talent transfer from surf lifesaving. Therefore, it could be presumed that the source of Sprint Canoe's talent identification could be the basis for its competitive advantage. An advantage is competitive only if it can be sustained. Sprint Canoe draws talent consistently from the same pool of surf lifesaving athletes and that advantage can be sustained in the long term. Indeed, research supports that certain organisations enjoy competitive advantages that are not easy to imitate and this can be the source of sustained superior performance. If culture is the source of sustained success for Sprint Canoe then it would be reasonable to nurture and strengthen it. When making decisions such as recruiting a coach, sport managers should take into account the sports culture, athlete background and other policies such as coach development pathways in order to sustain their competitive advantage and avoid potential cultural conflicts (e.g. coach–athlete conflict). In contrast to De Bosscher's (2007) strong beliefs on policy-makers' inability to influence culture, this study suggests that a sport's culture, and in this instance cultural clash, can be influenced or avoided by policy-makers or sport managers directly. For instance, advancing the levels of organisational transparency and communication may reduce uncertainties across staff and athletes.

This study has some limitations since the examination of sport policies has been undertaken in an Australian context. Therefore, the generalisability of the findings needs to be considered with caution. The findings may be applicable to other countries with similar sport systems (e.g. club system and government support), similar sport clusters (e.g. highly funded sports) and similar cultural contexts (e.g. warm climate and long coasts) that confront similar performance pressures (e.g. hiring international coaches). The findings in this study, even though they are Australian based, reiterate previous research which suggests that elite sport policies are organised in unique ways (De Bosscher, 2007; De Bosscher, De Knop, & van Bottenburg, 2009). This study goes beyond that mere statement of the existence of diversity by highlighting the ways elite sport policies are linked and that sports may experience an elite sport policy environment that is largely driven by their culture.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to examine sport specific policies. The empirical evidence offered in this study assists in drawing several conclusions. De Bosscher, De Knop and van Bottenburg (2009) state that 'nations are searching for their unique ways to becoming successful as it fits their own cultural background' (p. 127). This study illustrates the significance of this statement within the context of a sport and country-specific analysis of elite sport policies. Recognising the role of the culture within the sport allows for a clearer understanding of the role and interplay of elite sport policies.

Second, even though many sports and nations may be utilising the same policies, this study demonstrates that there is room for diversity in how these policies are implemented. Hence, elite sport policies are sport and country specific and can be heterogeneous. More importantly, elite sport policies are intrinsically intertwined and interdependent, and these interrelationships may influence performance.

Cultural factors are important in policy-making processes and perhaps there are other cultural factors outside of those identified so far that may have a bearing. Future research on elite sport policies should allow for the inclusion and examination of elite sport-specific culture because cultural traits appear to be useful predictors of performance and effectiveness. A strong positive elite culture may be the source of sustained and successful athlete results. Hence, an examination on the ways culture may assist enhance performance and on the ways managers and policy-makers can shape sport policies that embrace and are inclusive of the sport's culture may be a better approach to athlete success than trying to follow best practice of other countries. Furthermore, future studies should pay attention to the aspect of elite sport policy links and interrelationships. These links may not be quite palpable and self-evident as in other policy fields (e.g. micro-economics, where fiscal policy and monetary policy are related). However, this onus should present a research challenge and not deter deeper investigations.

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