

Elite Sports and Coaching Development of the Future

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In the period following the Olympic Games it seems natural to look to the future and consider what options are available for the improvements in elite sports. Development is continuous and challenges will be substantial to those who wish to participate at an international level. Thinking in four-year cycles is not enough; we must understand that the winners in who are not going to be at the Olympics for another four, eight or even twelve years are now training in the clubs, and a strategy must be designed with a basis in the present.

Most coaches and athletes analyse their present training schemes by thinking about areas of improvement with the pre-disposition that what is good today must be improved to be better tomorrow. FISA's development program struggles with the facts that most of our member nations have a long way to go to reach a truly elite level, under present circumstances, and that measures needed to catch up with leading nations are perhaps beyond their means or dreams.

Here we launch a model for elite sport of the future. This model includes a support system for athletes and training for coaches. We need, however, to be aware of the limitations. Our proposals must be based on what gave good results in countries with limited resources at their disposal. For example, there is no point in copying the East German system in your country, no matter how successful it was in the past, when the political system does not support it. Similarly, the present German program will not work in a country with a small population, weak economy, and no academic tradition.

So, what are we looking for? The reply may be, "A model to propel us into taking medals at international championships." Several criteria must be met to develop and execute an elite sports program.

The following are some of the points to be considered in developing and executing an elite sports program:

1. A national sports organisation that believes in and supports elite sports;
2. A national system of single sports associations that maintains international contacts and memberships;
3. Political and societal acceptance of elite sports;
4. Coaching development focused on elite sports;
5. Professional status or financial compensation to coaches;
6. Support infrastructure for athletes: sports, academics, flexible job situations, financial compensation when away, etc.

Scandinavian countries have a long tradition of high athletic achievement. This has been achieved despite the fact that they have relatively small populations (Sweden, 8 million; Denmark, 5 million; Norway, 4 million). It makes sense to

look to these countries for an analysis of attitude and organisation. For me personally, a natural starting point for analysis is Norway. I was active for many years in sports at the highest level, as an athlete, coach and manager, with different tasks in the National Confederation of Sports, and the Norwegian Olympic Committee.

Consistently at the winter and summer Olympic Games the Norwegian efforts produce high medal totals which is nothing less than remarkable for a country of four million people and a population density of 10 per square kilometre. What made this possible? It did not happen overnight. Running the risk of exaggerating my own role in this, I need to point out that as early as 1963, I carried forward a proposal to create a position as "Olympic Supervisor" to help smaller sports with specialised support. There was no constructive response to this; it was just too early. But, in the years that followed, more and more people felt the need for cross-functional athletic co-operation, with its point of origin in elite sports.

Dedicated working groups were assigned with the task of filling this need. The result was the creation of the "Consultant Group of Elite Sports" which was in place all through the 1970s. Its main task was to seek acceptance for elite sports, contribute specialised skills to the Norwegian Olympic Committee, and to assist sports identified as needing particular help.

After the Olympic Games in Los Angeles, this "Consultant Group" had run its course and a new project, "Project 88" was started; a project aimed at the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul. Results in Seoul were good, and in 1989 an elite sports unit, "Olympiatoppen" (Olympic Peak), was created. It has contributed significantly to the magnificent results reached by Norwegian athletes recently.

In 1990, the Norwegian Confederation of Sports handed over the operational responsibilities of Norwegian elite sport, "Olympiatoppen," to the Norwegian Olympic Committee. The Olympic Committee monitors and co-ordinates all elite sports activities through the "Elite Sports Director." "Olympiatoppen" is the Olympic Committee's link to athletes and coaches of top international level.

Of the other Scandinavian countries, Denmark has established an elite organisation, TEAM DENMARK, which co-ordinates top-level sports. It runs testing centres with qualified staff and has the best equipment available. TEAM DENMARK publishes its own journals, maintains a support apparatus for the athletes, distributes funds, and selects the teams for the Olympic Games. The organisation is well managed and professional, but lacks some of the flexibility that typifies the Norwegian "Olympiatoppen." On the other hand, TEAM DENMARK is somewhat decentralised, which, in the long run, may reward it with a broader base in the national sports community.

Sweden is the Scandinavian country best known for its athletic achievements. It is world class in football, handball, ice hockey, tennis, table tennis, golf, sailing, and numerous other sports. The Swedish Sports Association (Svenska Riksidrottsförbundet), the umbrella organisation of all Swedish sports, is organised in the same way as its Scandinavian neighbours. However, at the elite level it does not offer the same targeted support plan as the others. Single sport associations have displayed tremendous skill and established themselves at top international levels without direct support from the main organisation. Additionally, Sweden has pioneered development of the "Idrottsgymnasium" (Sports High Schools) where promising youth can study and practise sport with expert guidance.

The need for additional support has grown lately and regional "Development Centres" have been created. This follows the strategy to "develop sports by developing sports leadership and coaching." This concept embraces the whole spectrum, from youth to elite, even though emphasis is placed on building performance. The task is "good" sports at every level, but primarily "good" coaching.

The goal for the Development Centres is to support coaches and athletes, where the sport, in and of itself, acts as a catalyst, attracting support from government and municipalities, schools and universities, research organisations, and the business community. By drawing on the vast resources of society, the supporting structure needed to reach the goal may be built rather quickly. Even though the Swedish system differs from the other Scandinavian models, it is performance driven, and it will be interesting to follow its development in the years to come.

There are also excellent programs and models in Great Britain and Canada. Both countries are well organised and have highly qualified sports leadership. "The Coaching Association of Canada" and "The National Coaching Foundation" in Great Britain have developed programmes that are well worth studying. They are, however, hardly applicable without modification in countries where FISA tries to help bridge the gap between the current circumstances and future international success.

I have now presented some of the factors that must be evaluated before launching a model of elite sports. It is obvious that many FISA member countries are not prepared to build a sports structure with a foundation based on acceptance, education and adequate finances. I will, therefore, present a Checklist, that, regardless of the above, may be used to evaluate one's own situation while remembering that in the future "good things must be done better." This checklist may be used to help analyse a current situation or assist in planning for the future.

Clearly, criteria must be established to achieve results, even if work is done under difficult conditions. I will focus on the athlete, the coach and the support system in the following checklist.

The Athlete

1. Identification of talented candidates;
2. Analysis of training and results;
3. Analysis of the individual situation with regard to studies, work, military service, family and economy;
4. Physiological and technical analysis;
5. Long-term planning for practise and competition, combined with studies, work and family;
6. Short-term planning of point five above;
7. Identify and improve necessary support systems.

The Coach

1. Identification of qualified coaches;
2. Analysis of skill and experience;
3. Life style analysis, time available and finances;
4. Create a programme for improvement of skill;
5. Supply necessary equipment, such as boats, technical equipment, gyms etc.;
6. Identify and improve professional support systems.

The Support System

1. Contact with the National Sports Association and the National Olympic Committee to present finished plans for approval and possible support - professional and financial;
2. Identify and seek co-operation of:
 - a. Medical advisors
 - b. Physiotherapists
 - c. Testing centres, hospital or universities with testing equipment
 - d. Other specialists, if required;
3. Contact with schools, universities or employers to clarify situation with studies or work;
4. Sponsorship agreements, within FISA rules;
5. Selection of qualified leadership.

With the checklist as a starting point, the chances are greater that a successful strategy can be worked out. Here again, the problem is that most of our associations operate without paid staff and administrative work is performed on a volunteer basis. In some member countries we still fight for the understanding of simple facts such as rowing being a year-round commitment or with a national regatta-calendar that gives a natural seasonal development.