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**SPORTS, CULTURE AND SOCIETY: WHY
THE NETHERLANDS ARE SUCCESSFUL
IN ELITE SPORTS AND BELGIUM IS NOT?
A COMPARISON OF ELITE SPORT POLICIES**

**ŠPORT, KULTURA IN DRUŽBA: ZAKAJ JE
NIZOZEMSKA USPEŠNA V VRHUNSKEM
ŠPORTU, BELGIJA PA NE? PRIMERJAVA
POLITIK VRHUNSKEGA ŠPORTA**

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of a comparative study on elite sport policies in Flanders and the Netherlands. The aim is to find out whether differences in elite sport policies can explain the under-performances during international competitions of Flanders compared to the Netherlands. A nine pillar model of sports policy factors leading to international success was operationalised through several critical success factors. One of the key elements is the involvement of the athletes, coaches and performance directors in the data collection, in order to have a standardised measure of hypothetical concepts that cannot be observed directly and to assess the elite sport climate as it is perceived. The results showed remarkable differences in the organisation and long-term planning of elite sport policies, financial support for elite sport purposes, a holistic approach towards athletic development, coach development opportunities and the dissemination of scientific information. It was concluded that policy differences may explain differences in success in the two nations to a large extent, but extraneous influences are inherent to international comparative studies and make it therefore impossible to create a theory that is totally construct valid.

Key words: sport politics, elite sports, success, Flanders, Netherlands

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POVZETEK

Prispevek predstavlja izsledke primerjalne študije politik vrhunskega športa v Flandriji (Belgija) in na Nizozemskem. Cilj študije je bil ugotoviti, ali je z razlikami v politikah vrhunskega športa mogoče razložiti rezultatsko slabše nastope flandrijskih športnikov od nizozemskih športnikov na mednarodnih tekmovanjih. Model devetih stebrov športne politike, ki vodijo k mednarodni uspešnosti smo operacionalizirali skozi nekaj ključnih dejavnikov uspeha. Eden izmed ključnih dejavnikov je vključitev športnikov, trenerjev in športnih direktorjev v zbiranje podatkov, da bi lahko dobili standardizirano merilo hipotetičnih konceptov, ki se jih ne da proučiti neposredno, ob tem pa proučiti tudi klimo vrhunskega športa, kot jo vprašani dojemajo. Rezultati so pokazali očitne razlike v organizaciji in dolgoročnem načrtovanju politik vrhunskega športa, v finančni podpori vrhunskemu športu, v celostnem pristopu k razvoju športnikov, v priložnosti za razvoj trenerjev in v diseminaciji znanstvenih informacij. Sklenemo lahko, da razlike v politikah vrhunskega športa lahko v veliki meri razložijo razlike v športnih dosežkih obeh nacij, seveda pa so zunanji vplivi tako neločljivo povezani z mednarodnimi primerjalnimi študijami, da ni mogoče postaviti teorije, katere ogrodje je popolnoma trdno.

Ključne besede: športna politika, vrhunski šport, uspešnost, Flandrija, Nizozemska

INTRODUCTION

During the last decennia the global medal race in elite sport, especially during the Olympic Games, has intensified. This has resulted in increasing amounts of money being invested in elite sport development in many nations. The keynote idea from this 'global sporting arms race' as described by Oakley and Green (2001b) is that elite sporting success can be produced by investing strategically in elite sport. At the same time, increased (media) attention to and popularity of major sports events have given sports the status of an issue of 'national importance'. Elite sport systems have historically been copied from traditional world sport powers such as former communist states, Australia and France. Consequently the elite sports systems of leading nations have become increasingly homogenous (Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2008; Oakley & Green, 2001). This evolution is still continuing. More nations are adopting strategic approaches to develop world level athletes and competition is therefore still increasing (Shibli & Bingham, 2005). Standing still could mean going backwards if those countries taking a strategic approach to policy development, develop a competitive advantage over those countries which do not plan for success (SIRC, 2002). This is also the leitmotiv of current elite sport policies in Flanders¹ and the Netherlands. The Netherlands want to belong to the top ten nations in the Olympic performance ranking and has been investing in a strategic planning towards success since the 1990s. Flanders started a few years later, of which the employment contracts in 1995 and the elite sports schools in 1998 are one of the first initiatives. Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands are two comparable countries with regard to population (respectively 10.4 (of which 6 in Flanders) and 16.6 million inhabitants) and wealth (GDP/capita is respectively \$35,300 and \$38,500). These two factors 'explain' more than 50% of international sporting success (e.g. Bernard & Busse, 2004; De Bosscher, De Knop & Heyndels, 2003; Johnson & Ali, 2002; Kiviaho & Makelä, 1978; Morton, 2002; van Bottenburg, 2000). Why is it then, that the Netherlands are more successful in international sports? They won five times more medals than Belgium: from 1980-2008, the Netherlands won 122 medals (of which 36 were gold); Belgium won 27 medals (of which 7 were gold). The market share (i.e. the number of medals won as a percentage of total number of medals) in the Netherlands in Beijing was 1.9%, compared to only 0.3% in Belgium. The Netherlands seem to have increased their international position a lot, from the 30th (1980) in the medal ranking to the 8th (2000) and decreasing again to 16th in 2008. Belgium decreased from the 24th (1980) to the 59th (2008) place. Next to their results, the Netherlands also have – taking the population into account – ten times more world top eight athletes than Flanders. These findings are striking and raise questions for Flemish government which wants to increase its performances. Is it reasonable to assume that the Netherlands have more talents? Several studies have tried to explain and predict Olympic success of countries through socio-economic determinants. The underlying assumption of these studies is that there is an equal distribution of talent throughout the world.

¹Flanders is the northern, Dutch speaking part of Belgium, Wallonia the southern, French and German speaking part. In Belgium the Flemish community (Flanders) and the French/German speaking community (Wallonia) have separate sport policies at each level, from local to national (including three separate ministers of sport). Apart from the Olympic Committee (BOIC), whose main task is to select athletes for the Olympic Games, there is no national (federal) policy or structure for sport, nor are there expenditures on sport at federal level. Although Belgium will always perform as a whole nation, at the policy level Flanders and Wallonia have participated in this research as if they were two distinct nations. This raises problems in methodological terms (comparing 'national Belgian' outputs whilst comparing 'regional Flemish' policies). However, these are reduced by the knowledge that performances of Walloon athletes are no better than Flanders and an international comparative study showed that policy evaluation of Wallonia is even worse.

Every country has equal opportunities to produce good athletes (e.g. Levine, 1974, Kiviahho & Mäkellä, 1978). There are however only few literary references to the efficiency and effectiveness of sports policies and sport investments (De Bosscher, De Knop & Heyndels, 2003). Governmental authorities spend large sums of money to compete against other countries for superior sport performances, without knowing what the exact influence of sports policies can be. In terms of how nations can sustain their competitive position amidst increasing competition and how the efficiency and effectiveness of their elite sport investments can be enhanced, the comparison of elite sport policies of nations may lead to these insights. Making transnational comparisons with the best competitors is very common in the economic sector, but in sport it is rather new. The current paper addresses this issue by comparing the elite sports policies of Flanders and the Netherlands as two rival and comparable ‘countries’. The purpose of this paper is to find out whether differences in elite sport policies in these regions may explain the observed differences in international performances.

A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF SPORTS POLICY FACTORS LEADING TO INTERNATIONAL SPORTING SUCCESS

As a first step in our research process, we developed a conceptual model, because of an identified gap in existing research and the lack of an empirically grounded, coherent theory on the factors, which determine international sporting success. A nine pillar model was derived from previous research as a basic analytical

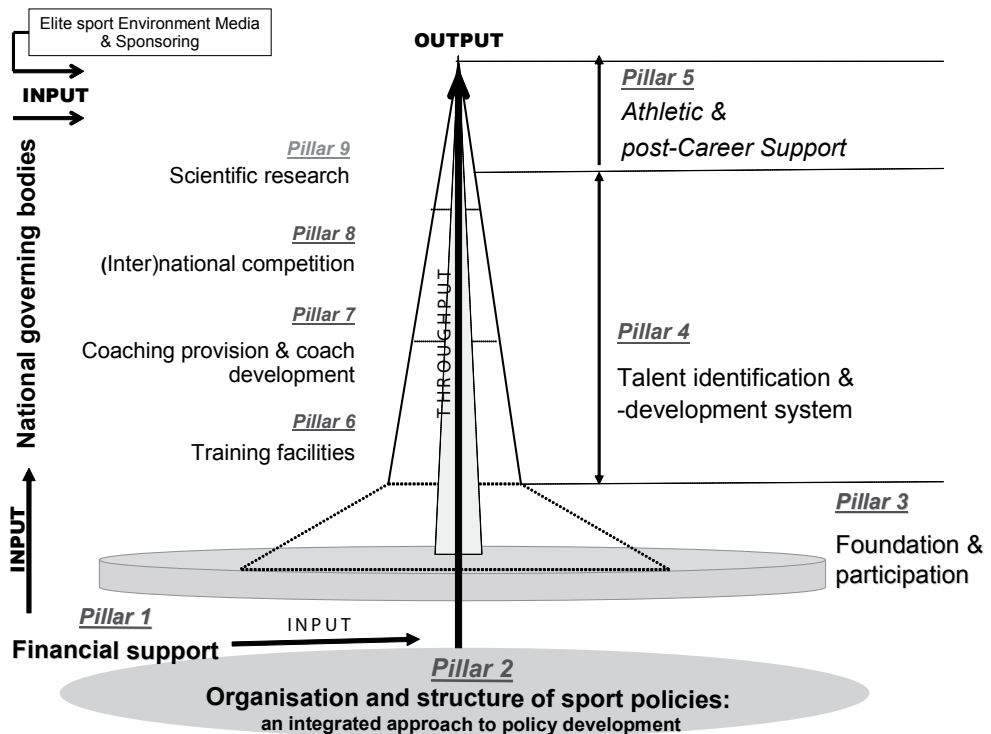


Figure 1: Theoretical model of 9 pillars of sports policy factors influencing international success (De Bosscher et al., 2006)

framework of sports policy factors that lead to international sporting success (De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006). In this research, inductive procedures were used to consolidate all relevant sources from a comprehensive body of literature on the former Soviet Union and East Germany (e.g. Broom, 1991; Douyin, 1988; Krüger, 1984; Riordan, 1989; Semotiouk, 1990) and more recently on the organisational context of countries in elite sport (e.g. Clumpner, 1994; Digel et al., 2003 & 2004; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Larose & Haggerty, 1996; Oakley & Green, 2001; Stamm & Lamprecht, 2000). This literature was supplemented by studies at the micro-level, which attempt to understand success determinants for individual athletes instead of nations (e.g. Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003; Duffy, Lyons, Moran et al., 2001; Gibbons, McConnel, Forster et al., 2003; Greenleaf Gould & Diefen, 2001; Nys, De Bosscher & De Knop, 2002; Unierzyski, 2002; Van Bottenburg, 2000). Eventually it was concluded that all key success drivers, which can be influenced by policies, can be distilled down into nine key areas or 'pillars', that are important during the different stages of athletic development as identified by Wylleman, De Knop and Sillen (1998) (i.e. the initiation or participation phase, the development phase, the perfection phase and the discontinuation phase).

Inputs and throughputs

These pillars are situated at two levels, according to a multidimensional approach to measure effectiveness of national sport organisations (Chelladurai, 2001; Chelladurai, Szyslo & Haggerty, 1987) (figure 1):

- Inputs are reflected in pillar 1, as the financial support for sport and elite sport: countries that invest more in (elite) sport can create more opportunities for athletes to train under ideal circumstances.
- Throughputs are the processes ("what" is invested and "how" it is realised) in elite sports policies, which may lead to increasing success in international sporting competitions. They refer to the efficiency of sports policies; that is the optimum way that inputs can be managed to produce the require outputs. All the other pillars (2-9) are indicators of the throughput stage:

Pillar 2: organisation and structure of sport policies: an integrated approach to policy development

Pillar 3: sport participation

Pillar 4: talent identification and development

Pillar 5: athletic career and post career support

Pillar 6: training facilities

Pillar 7: coaches provisions and coach development

Pillar 8: international competition

Pillar 9: scientific research

The nine pillar model was operationalised into critical success factors (CSF) which finally lead to the identification of 144 CSF divided over 9 pillars (De Bosscher, 2007). In this paper, these pillars will be compared in the two regions as a way to find explanations for the identified outputs (or success) of nations.

Outputs

Outputs are indicators of the success of nations in elite sport competitions that result from a combination of factors situated at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels (De Bosscher et al., 2006). A consensus is emerging among researchers that the impact of macro-level factors is declining because more nations develop a strategic approach towards the development of elite athletes (Bernard & Busse, 2004; Stamm & Lamprecht, 2001; SIRC, 2002). There are various methods by

which the outputs of an elite athlete production system can be measured, such as the number of medals won during the Olympic Games or other events, top six or eight places, the relative success (controlling for population, wealth, etc.) or even the number of participants qualifying to take part. All these methods appear to correlate significantly ($r_s > 0.8$) (De Bosscher, 2007). Differences emerge when a different portfolio of sports is used (e.g. summer or winter sports), or absolute versus relative success (i.e. controlling for macro-level factors). Applying these methods on the Netherlands and Belgium, it can be noticed from table 1 that the Netherlands consistently surpasses Belgium.

Table 1: Measuring outputs: Absolute and relative ranking of Flanders and the Netherlands according to different performance measures in Olympic sports

	The Netherlands	Belgium (Flanders + Wallonia)
Absolute success as market share (%)	%	%
OG Athens (summer sports)	2.1	0.3
OG Salt Lake City (winter sports)	4.0	0.0
WSI (mixed summer/winter/ other events)	1.9	0.3
Relative success (residual) (taking into account population, GDP/cap & (ex) communism, De Bosscher, 2007)		
OG Athens	0.9	-0.93
OG Salt Lake City	-3.92	-
WSI	0.71	-0.87

WSI: World Sporting Index: mixed OG Summer /Winter and includes other events (world level)

OG: Olympic Games;

During the Winter Games Belgium has won a medal at only one of the last five Winter Olympics and thus is not ranked in Salt Lake City. Interestingly, table 1 also shows results in terms of relative success, which is defined as the measurement of success controlling for extraneous macro-influences (De Bosscher, 2007). Based on population, wealth and (ex-communism) the Netherlands has a positive residual in summer Games, meaning that the nation performs better than what predictions based on these variables would lead to. For winter games however, the residual is negative. Belgium’s residual is negative, no matter what method has been used.

Another way to look at outputs would be the number of athletes that are reaching a certain level at the world ranking. Table 2 compares both nations.

Table 2: measuring outputs: number of world top eight and top three athletes in Flanders and the Netherlands

	Flanders	The Netherlands
Number of athletes in the world top 8 (2003)	17 (Olympic Summer sports)	461 (343 Olympic (of which 111 in team sports) and 118 non-Olympic disciplines; 40 are in winter sports)
Athletes/million inhabitants	2.83	28.3 (21.4 if only Olympic disciplines; 14.6 if team sports are left out)
Number of athletes in the world top 3 (2003)	47 (Olympic Summer and Winter sports)	4 (Olympic Summer sports)
Athletes/million inhabitants	2.88	0.67

As mentioned earlier, the Netherlands appears to have ten times more athletes per inhabitant in the world top eight and four times more in the top three than Flanders. International comparative research showed that this is also higher than the UK and Canada (De Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, Van Bottenburg, De Knop, 2008). This raises questions for the Flemish policies, as to why the Netherlands succeeds in ‘creating’ so many athletes.

METHODS FOR INTERNATIONAL COMPARISON

This study was a preliminary stage of a larger study, called SPLISS study, which aimed to develop a theory on the Sport Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS, De Bosscher et al., 2008). Therefore, taking the complexity of international comparative research into consideration, the study was coordinated by an international consortium group of researchers from three countries (Belgium (Flanders), the Netherlands and United Kingdom). The researchers, who all had experience in research on high performance sport, were involved as a team of experts during each stage: to refine the aforementioned theoretical model, to define success indicators and translate them into measurement questions, to supervise the objectivity of the data analysis and the internal validity and reliability (e.g. De Pelsmacker & Van Kenhove, 1999; Gliner & Morgan, 2000).

Apparatus

Since some CSFs are difficult to measure, they were concurrently collected through complementary quantitative and qualitative data collection methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007): quantitative data to enhance comparability and qualitative data to gain an understanding of the sport system of the nations.

Research data on each pillar were collected through analysis of secondary sources (such as policy documents, annual reports) and by undertaking interviews (17 in Flanders, 12 in the Netherlands) with main stakeholders in the two distinct nations. Furthermore in 2003 an elite sport climate survey (semi structured written) questionnaire was completed by athletes, coaches and performance directors in both nations. The term “elite sports climate” is defined by Van Bottenburg (2000) as “the social and organisational environment that provides the circumstances in which athletes can develop into elite sports athletes and can continue to achieve at the highest levels in their branch of sport” (p. 24). This survey served two purposes: (1) to gather information on indicators or “facts” that cannot easily be measured (using dichotomous questions) (De Pelsmacker & Van Kenhove, 1999) and (2) to measure success indicators as they are perceived by their primary users, in this case the athletes and their coaches (using a five point Likert scale). This method, which is derived from the marketing and services literature, assumes that it is the consumers who know the quality of a service as they experience it (Chelladurai & Chang, 2000). The method is also widely accepted in effectiveness literature, which states that the primary stakeholders in sport organisations should be involved (Chelladurai, 2001; Papadimitriou & Taylor, 2000) and is used in economic studies, such as the IMD world competitiveness yearbook (Rosset, 2008) or the global competitiveness report from the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2007). With regard to the comparability an elite athlete was clearly defined as “a sportsman or woman who either individually or as part of his or her team has participated, in the last twelve months, in an elite sport discipline in European Championships, World Championships, Olympic Games

or tournaments comparable to these championships or games". The athletes' and performance directors' questionnaires both contained 71 questions and the coaches' questionnaire 76.

Participants

Table 3 provides an overview of the response rate by target group.

Table 3: Overview of response rates from athletes, coaches and performance directors

	Athletes		Coaches		Performance directors	
	Response	%	Response	%	Response	%
The Netherlands	421	34%	62	28%	28	52%
Flanders	140	43%	119	51%	26	100%

As Table 3 illustrates, response rates vary from 28% for Dutch coaches to 100% for Flemish performance directors.

Data-analysis

Data from the overall sports questionnaires were analysed through descriptive analysis and frequencies, based on the different CSF. The SPSS statistical package for the Social Sciences was used to analyse quantitative data from the elite sport climate survey. Differences between Flanders and the Netherlands were measured using a Chi square test for data at nominal level and a Kruskal-Wallis test for data at ordinal level. A significance level of 0.01 was used.

RESULTS

Prior to presenting the results, it should be reiterated that this study focused on the national overall sports level. Moreover, only expenditures from national government and lottery money were included in our financial analysis. This study does not include any sport-by-sport analysis, or data on policy systems and investments from the local governmental level or private sector. The results will be discussed by comparing pillar by pillar. No striking differences could be found in sport participation (pillar 3) training facilities (pillar 6) and (inter)national competitions (pillar 8). This article will therefore not go into detail for these pillars.

Pillar 1: financial support

Making cross-national comparisons of expenditure on sport is a notoriously difficult exercise. To keep our analysis as simple and consistent as possible, we have chosen to look just at nations' public expenditure on sport at national level – that is, expenditure derived from central government and/or national lotteries. Figures 2 and 3 show that whilst expenditures on sport are higher in the Netherlands (122 million Euros in 2003) in absolute terms compared to Flanders (75 million Euros in 2003), this does not compare to the population of both regions. Flanders exceeds the absolute budget spent on sport, when these are divided by population. Furthermore the figures indicate the increasing investments especially during the last decade in both countries.

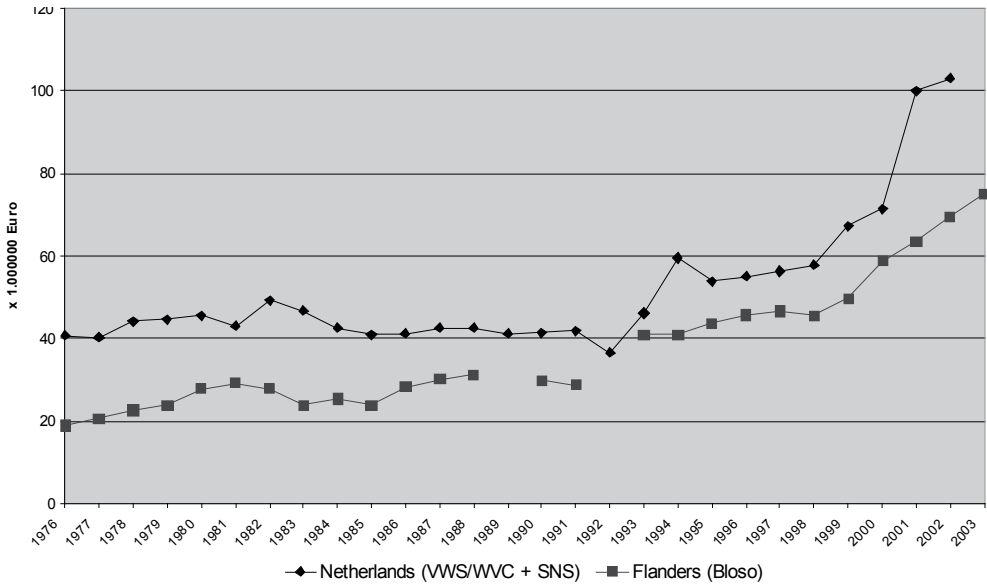


Figure 2: A comparison of expenditures on sport at the national sport level from ministry and lotteries, 1976-2003

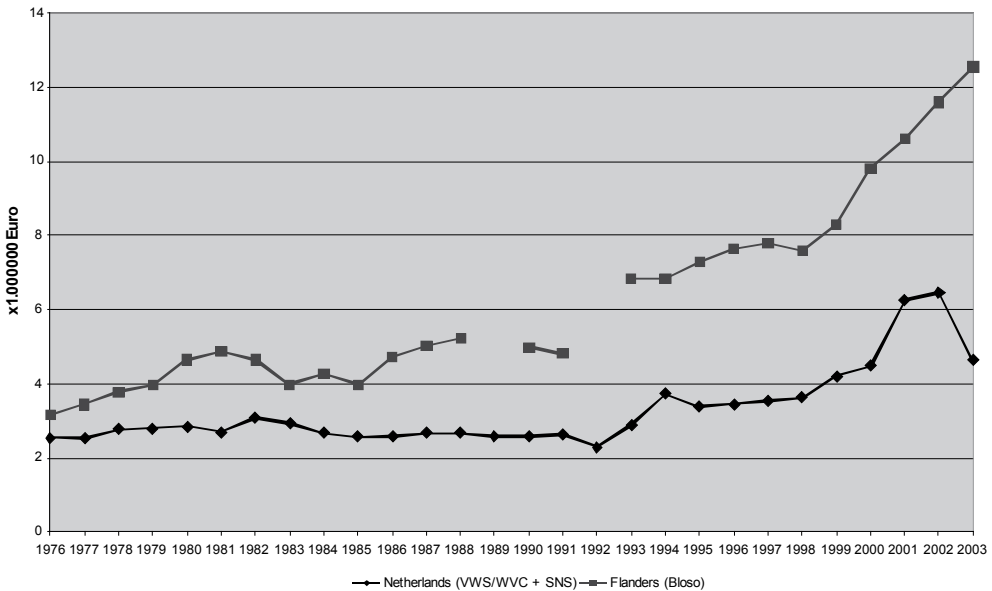


Figure 3: A comparison of expenditures on sport divided by population (x 1 million) at the national sport level from ministry and lotteries, 1976-2003. Sources Flanders: Diepens, 1988; Bloso annual reports 1992-2003; the Netherlands: de Heer, 2000; ministry VWS, 2003a & b.

For calculation of elite sports expenditures at the national level, we used all national coordinated expenditures, including the Olympic Committee. Table 4 compares data from 1999 with 2003 and 2007.

Table 4: national expenditures on elite sport in Flanders and the Netherlands: time comparison of 1999-2003-2007-08

Flanders (x 1 million Euros)		The Netherlands	
Bloso	5.36	SNS (lotteries)	18.00
BOIC	2.00	VWS elite sport	18.12
Ministry (youth & sport)	1.70	Funds for elite athletes (excluding donations)	5.523
Other ministries	2.9		
Total 2003	11.96		41.6
Total 1999	3.98		26.93
Total 2007-08	20.87		42.49

Data legend: The Netherlands: SNS = Stichting Nationale Sporttotalisator (lottery money); VWS = the Dutch Ministry of health, welfare and sport; Flanders: Bloso is the Flemish sports administration; BOIC is the Belgian Olympic Committee. *Sources:* Flanders: annual reports; De Bosscher, De Knop & Van Bottenburg, 2008; The Netherlands: annual reports; Van Bottenburg (in press).

Contrary to the overall sports expenditures, differences on elite sport expenditures are more striking. In 2003 the Netherlands spent 41 million Euros on elite sport which is 30% of the overall sports budget. This was only 12 million in Flanders. Interestingly, compared to 1999, both nations increased their elite sport expenditures considerably, and this even doubled in Flanders (+215%). This is an international trend that can be found in several nations elsewhere (De Bosscher et al., 2008). This trend has continued by 2007-08 in Flanders, whereas it has stagnated in the Netherlands. Another interesting finding is that the Netherlands appears to prioritise elite sport more, with a 32% of overall sport budget spending compared to only 11.7% in Flanders.

Pillar 2: organisation and structure of sport policies: an integrated approach to policy development

The second pillar concerns the organisation and structure of sport. At a strategic level it is our view that for nations to have a realistic chance of elite sporting success, an appropriate lead needs to be given by governments. Operationally, we believe that a coherent structure is a prerequisite for the efficient use of resources (De Bosscher, 2007). According to Oakley and Green (2001a) and Clumpner (1994), it is especially important to delineate clearly the responsibilities of different agencies; to ensure there is effective communication between them; and to simplify administration.

Belgium has a particularly complex political structure that can create difficulties in coordinating policy and allocating resources across their constituent countries or communities, because sport is predominantly a regional affair with no national policy other than from BOIC. Although the purpose of the ABCD² commission might be to delineate the elite sport activities in both regions, sport in Flanders and Wallonia is coordinated entirely independently which has led to a fragmentation of resources and responsibilities. Furthermore, even within Flanders, several national organisations have responsibilities in elite sport. The establishment of a steering group in Flanders (in 2003) to coordinate elite sport expenditure and activity has had a significant policy

² ABCD-commission: a commission with representatives from Adeps, Bloso, COIB (=BOIC) and the 'Deutsche' (German) sport administration, who meet each other two times a year.

effect. However, at national level still much energy has been put by all policy agencies in Flanders to delineate and coordinate activities, leading to a weak long-term strategic planning. The latter appears to be one of the key determinants that characterise Dutch elite sport policies. This point can be illustrated by the number of policy plans developed in both nations. Whilst there have been 24 policy plans with reference to elite sports published since 1969 in the Netherlands, there was only one in Flanders in 1997 and one in 2004 (preparing for 2012). Another example is the Dutch preparation to organize the Olympic Games in 2028, driven by a long-term plan in two stages: one to create an elite sports climate by 2016 and—if succeeded—one to win the bid for the Games.

The merge of the Dutch Olympic Committee and the Dutch sports Federation into NOC*NSF in 1993 was another significant structural change, which has improved the national coordination and planning of elite sport policies. Meanwhile, the Netherlands has built a strong network of data- and information bases. Other initiatives in which they were leading were:

- Elite sports and studies systems: the Dutch LOOT-schools exist since 1991 (versus the elite sports schools in Flanders since 1998)
- The establishment of 12 regional support centres in the Netherlands since 1992
- Innovation: cooperation with commercial enterprises, in order to gather the necessary money for the development of athletes and money that is not available from government; Holland Promotion and Holland Heineken House (1992)
- Services to sports federations: A leitmotiv in the national policies of the Netherlands is “services to suit the sports organizations, athletes and coaches”. Federations are guided in their process to professionalism and increasing demands of elite sports by seven account managers and five sport technical coaches appointed at NOC*NSF. Until 2001, federations in Flanders did not get any guidance and this is still developed in a limited form

Pillar 4: talent identification and development

The majority of talent identification issues need to be analysed on a sport specific basis, as in most nations talented athletes are recruited from the existing participation base of a sport. In smaller nations (in terms of population) it is important to plan for talent identification in order to provide the system with as much raw material as possible (Rowe, 1994). Nor Flanders or the Netherlands have a system-related scientific talent selection process, which aims to identify potential elite athletes from outside a sport's participant base, as was typical in the former communist countries (Fisher & Borms, 1990). The Australian national Talent Search Program is currently the most developed system in use in the Western world. Dutch federations were found to use more structured methods to recognise young talents than their Flemish counterparts. Furthermore the elite sport climate survey also showed that half of the federations in Flanders and 38% in the Netherlands believe that they begin their talent identification processes too late; 10 Flemish federations (out of 26) estimated that they miss more than 25% of the young athletes who would be eligible for talent development initiatives. According to trainers and performance directors from the federations, significantly more federations in the Netherlands have a structural (written) system for talent identification and development.

For talent development, we took as a starting point the availability of nationally co-ordinated systems for talented athletes during the secondary phase of their education. Research has shown that, as a rule of thumb, roughly 8 to 10 years and 10,000 hours deliberate practice are needed

to become an expert in music or sport (Ericsson, 2003). Much of this investment of time and effort coincides with a talented person’s secondary and tertiary education phases. The Flemish system of ‘elite sport schools’ is more recent (1998) than the Dutch LOOT schools (1991). In all these systems athletes can make use of personalised, flexible study programs such as absence from school, a reduced educational programme, flexible arrangements for exams and a study coordinator. These systems differ in the organisational structure, as can be seen in table 5.

Table 5: characteristics of elite sport and study systems in Flanders and the Netherlands

Flanders: “elite sport schools”	<p>Strengths: Centralisation of expertise: best athletes train together; coordination of other support services (mental coaching, dietician, physiotherapy...) finance through sports sector as well as educational sector sport specific coaching through federations; educational guidance through school all ages (12-18 years old), depending on requirements of sport</p> <p>Weaknesses boarding school system: children away from home? recent initiative highly dependent on governmental finance</p>
The Netherlands: LOOT-schools	<p>Strengths regional: young athletes stay in their home environment and train with their own (club) trainer decentralised: reach many students/athletes (broad pyramid) educational guidance through school all ages funded mainly by private sector</p> <p>Weaknesses best athletes don’t train together in one centre sport specific coaching: sufficient expertise of club coaches? Remark that the Netherlands has recently (2007) set up some initiatives of training, studying and living in one place</p>

Whilst the system in Flanders is centrally coordinated (on average one school per sport), subsidised by the government, the Dutch system is regionally organised through 20 LOOT-schools, where each talented athlete trains in the home environment. The LOOT-schools are mainly financed through private initiatives. Both systems have advantages and disadvantages and therefore for nations having both systems would be the ideal situation.

Furthermore, only Flanders has a central co-ordinated support system for athletes aged 18 and above, during the tertiary education phase. Since 2003, student-athletes (young athletes who are not yet performing at elite level), have received a contract for a ‘replacement salary’ through Bloso (70% of the average salary levels of people who have the same qualifications) to allow for the increased cost of studying and training plus the delay they encounter in completing their studies. For high performance athletes a full salary (100%) is provided. The co-ordinator within the university receives €3,000 per athlete in exchange for study support and the relevant NGB receives the sum of €20,000 per student per academic year, for which NGBs are required to organise a comprehensive sport-specific curriculum. A career guide was recently appointed to coordinate these systems for all universities and high schools. In the Netherlands, only two

private initiatives have been launched at higher education level; namely, the Johan Cruyff College and University, and Randstad Topsport Academy.

Finally athletes were asked to indicate in retrospect the nature of extra attention they had received as they developed from sources such as their clubs, national governing body or other. 'More intensive training' and 'clothes and equipment' were the most frequently cited additional support offered. Over 40% of athletes from Netherlands reported receiving more intensive training from NGBs. In both countries coaches are in the opinion that they can not spend enough time with their athletes (78% in the Netherlands, 62% in Flanders).

One main difference between Flanders and the Netherlands was found in the provision of information and support services to national governing bodies to develop talent programmes. Here the NOC*NSF employs four sport technical directors whereas support for talent development in Flanders is mainly confined to financial support.

Pillar 5: athletic career and post career support

Talented athletes pursuing their sport are recognised as and treated as employees. Funding for living and sporting costs linked to the minimum wage is in place. Generally there is a high degree of satisfaction with financial and other support services from athletes in Flanders and the Netherlands. In the Netherlands a stipend is paid to athletes who are rated in the world top eight (A-level) and whose yearly income is below the legal minimum income level. In June 2003, there were 452 A-athletes in total and 245 of them received a stipend. In 2008, these figures were 509 and 281 respectively (van Bottenburg, in press). 'Stipend' payments range from €11,474 to €16,752 per annum. The stipend for A-athletes guarantees athletes the minimum wage so they can train and compete as a full time athlete. Both A and B status athletes (1,250 in total) are entitled to reimbursement of sport-related costs with an upper limit of €455 per month for A-athletes and €137 per month for B-athletes.

Flemish athletes are in effect given employment contracts as a result of an agreement between the Ministry of Sports and the Ministry of Employment. Generally speaking such athletes should be ranked in the world top 12. The average 'wage' is €19,294 per annum, and the average amount of reimbursements is €10,970. Although there are currently 42 places available, only 36 athletes have reached the requisite performance level (on average top 12 of the world) enabling them to obtain employment contracts and to receive wages.

Some other athletes are still in employment, besides their sport activities. Here, the elite sport climate survey showed that 60% of the athletes in Flanders and 70% in the Netherlands considered the attitude of the employer towards their careers sufficient or good.

The main difference between both nations was found in the holistic approach towards athletes careers. Athletes with an A-status in the Netherlands can make use of the advice of three counselors. Furthermore, since 1992 there has been a regional network in the Netherlands of 12 Olympic support centres, where B athletes (top 16 of the world) can receive advice on matters such as technical, medical, social and organisational issues related to their sport. Support of any form in Flanders is limited only to athletes performing at the highest level internationally and recently one Career and lifestyle counselling was appointed by the ministry.

Pillar 7: coaches provisions and coach development

In terms of the profile of the coaches surveyed, figure 4 reveals that 89% of elite coach respondents from Flanders indicated that they were fully qualified (i.e. that they had completed their governing body's coach training course). The proportion of Dutch elite coaches who were fully qualified was significantly lower, at 66%. However, significantly more Dutch coaches have competed at an international level in their own career as an athlete: 60% of Dutch coaches compared to 36% in Flanders.

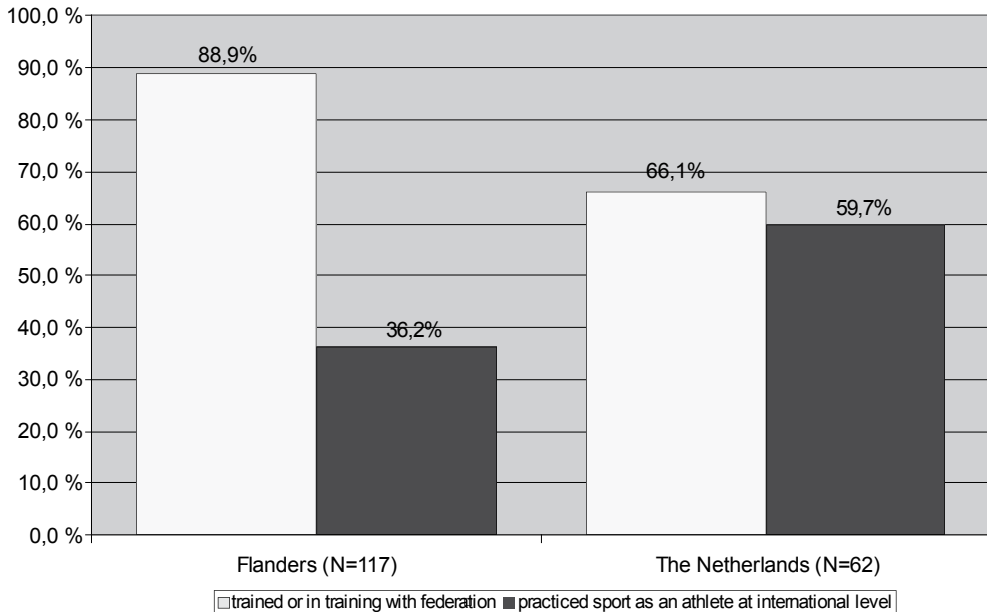


Figure 4: Number of coaches trained by federation and coaches who practiced sport at an international level as an athlete

Next, our comparison is divided into two main areas: coach development provision and coaches' individual living circumstances.

The lack of career development perspectives for elite coaches is flagged as a major weakness in Flanders. Although the Flemish Training School (VTS) is well developed and positively assessed by coaches, there is no elite training course or official certificate associated with this programme. Services aimed at promoting the development of coaches at the highest level are virtually non-existent, except when the federation takes initiatives itself. In the Netherlands the 'Master Coach in Sport' programme aims to develop a personal education plan for elite coaches who work with A or B status athletes. All coaches on this one-year programme must have a Physical Education degree and / or the highest NGB coaching qualification. Recently a 'coach 5' programme was also settled in cooperation with the high school of Amsterdam and supported by NOC*NSF. Furthermore, in the Netherlands, sport-technical consultants have been appointed by NOC*NSF to assist coaches, and regularly coaches' platform and courses for elite coaches are organized. Besides a top sport expertise centre (TEC) centralizes information through a database. On average, about half of the coaches in Flanders and the Netherlands are

satisfied with the level of the coach development programmes in governing bodies and the quality of individual trainings courses.

The recognition of the coaching career in terms of direct financial support and fulltime coaching is still slow to develop in many nations (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2005). Potentially high quality coaches are often lost to coaching because they are forced to seek employment in other areas (Clumpner, 1994). In Flanders, the new policy plan starting in 2004 provides, -apart from the coaches appointed in the Flemish top sport schools-, room for 42 fulltime elite sport coaches and 60 youth coaches. Currently only 12 coaches are appointed through this contract. On average, Flemish coaches earn 10,700€ with their sports, whereas Netherlands coaches: 21,500€. Furthermore in Flanders coaches spend on average yearly 1,900€ on their sports, in the Netherlands this is 5,100€. The Netherlands has a statute for coaches through NI-Coach. In this respect it also appeared that coaches in the Netherlands more often have a written contract of employment: 75% of the Dutch coaches against only 37% in Flanders.

Finally, coaches were asked whether their job as a coach is sufficiently recognised (Figure 6).

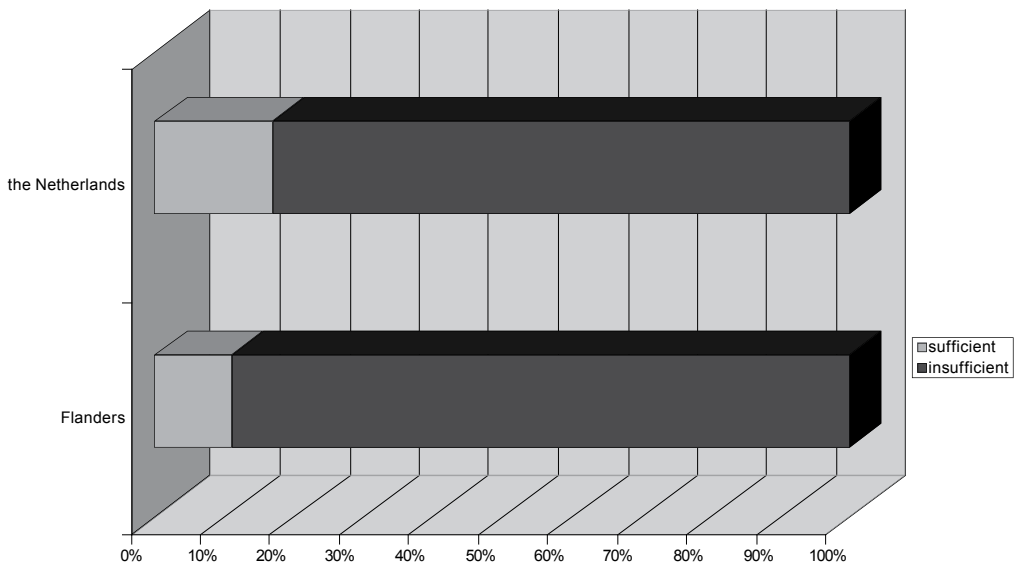


Figure 5: Is the profession of a coach sufficiently recognised according to Dutch and Flemish coaches

These figures are striking: 89% of Flemish and 81% of Dutch coaches consider that the job as a coach is insufficiently recognized. Furthermore, it was noted that to the opinion of 72% of the coaches in Flanders and 51% in the Netherlands, the profession of a coach is insufficient recognized.

Pillar 9: scientific research

The ninth pillar is concerned with the “scientific backdrop” to elite sport, in connection with which we sought to examine the extent to which nations take a co-ordinated approach to the

organisation and dissemination of research and scientific information. This factor was also one of the four key points made in Green and Houlihan's (2005) analysis in Australia, Canada and the UK. In our evaluation the Netherlands appear to have a more coherent approach to scientific research. Considerable attention is paid nationally to the *co-ordination, collection and dissemination* of scientific research and information about elite sport. This is led by the Elite Sports Expert Centre (TEC), which was established by NOC*NSF, and acts as a focal point for coaches and federations looking to commission or undertake applied research. Information is available online via TECnet or Bondnet (for federations), and NOC*NSF regularly publishes research-related reports and articles. In Flanders, there is no centralised online dissemination system.

From the elite sport climate survey it appeared that only 29% of the coaches in Flanders, and 39.7% in the Netherlands indicated that they received scientific information from their governing body.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research was inspired by the underperformances of Flanders (and Belgium) at major international competitions and (from comparative perspective), the over performances of the Netherlands, especially during the last decade. The Netherlands perform five times better than Belgium, in terms of medals at Olympic Games or other events, market share or in relation to the population and wealth of both countries. Furthermore there are—per inhabitant—ten times more Dutch athletes in the world top eight than Flemish athletes. This raises questions for Flemish policy makers as to why Flanders does not succeed in developing sufficient athletes at the world level. A nine pillar model was used as a basic analytical framework, which was operationalised through specified critical success indicators. Table 6 summarizes the most significant policy differences between Flanders and the Netherlands for each pillar.

It is clear that there are distinct differences in elite sport policies in Flanders and the Netherlands. It was also confirmed at an international level (in comparison with six nations) that the Netherlands performs relatively well in terms of elite sport policies. It may be expected that these policy differences may explain different outputs for both nations. In this respect there are strong beliefs that success of nations can be fashioned by policies. One may argue whether this is true and to what extent these policy variables are related to success. Because of the lack of a coherent theory on the sport policy factors leading to international sporting success, any causal relations are based on assumptions (De Bosscher, 2007). One of the main reasons is that there are many extraneous factors influencing success and therefore the difficulty of creating a model that is totally construct valid. The conceptual model and its CSF may not be applicable in nations where elite sport policies have not followed the trend of institutionalisation and governmentalisation in particular. The most obvious example is that of the United States where the federal government has chosen to delegate elite sport development to sport organisations and to keep itself out of sport and where, from the standpoint of elite sport development, the system is avowedly chaotic (Sparvero, Chalip & Green, 2008). Here the system illustrates the challenge of building elite athletes in the absence of policy coordination. In terms of policy learning, nations can barely apply the success elements of the US, because the schooling system lies at the roots of American high performance sport and there is no sport club tradition comparable anywhere else in the world.

Table 6: summary table on the policy differences for Flanders and the Netherlands

Flanders	The Netherlands
Pillar 1: financial support	Higher elite sport expenditures and higher proportion compared to the overall sport budget
Pillar 2: integrated approach to policy development	Long-term planning, innovation and higher professionalisation of sport policies
Complex state structure and fragmentation of sports policy structures at different levels	Ambitions: belong to the world top ten Guidance of federations through elite sport account managers working for NOC*NSF
Pillar 3: sport participation	
No significant differences	
Pillar 4: talent identification and development	Decentralised LOOTSchools
Centralised elite sport schools	More structural (written) system for talent identification
System for elite sport and study at higher education level	provision of information and support services to national governing bodies to develop talent programmes
Pillar 5: talent identification and development	
one lifestyle counsellor was recently (2007) appointed	Individual lifestyle consultants and advise through 12 Olympic support centres
Pillar 6: talent identification and development	
No significant differences	
Pillar 7: talent identification and development	Coaches have more experience as former international athletes More coaches have a contract (75%) Elite coach development: coaches education at elite level (master coaches and topcoach 5), support services for career development
Pillar 8: international competition	
No significant differences	
Pillar 9: talent identification and development	Coordination of scientific information towards coaches (Expertise centre, TECnet, National coach platform)

Inherent to international comparative research is the difficulty to take into account the general and structural context of nations as a key driver for success. Differences in elite sport systems between nations are the product of a specific historical development where cultural, economic and political processes have played a major role. In this respect Australia's passion for sport may be a stronger explanation for success than any other policy variable. A comparison of cultural values between the Netherlands and Flanders showed that the Dutch people are more achievement oriented, more inclined to long-term thinking, better planners, less likely to avoid uncertain situations and find it easier to run risks than Flemish people (Van Praet, Rooms, De Bosscher

et al., 2005). These factors can not in the short-term be fashioned by policies and were therefore excluded from this study, but may have – to an unknown extent – a high impact on international sporting success.

From a methodological side, this study attempted to concretise nine pillars into a range of critical success factors, which have been both quantitatively and qualitatively compared. One of the core characteristics of this study was that it tried to evaluate the black box of throughputs (or processes), and indicators that are not easily measured, by involving the main stakeholders in elite sport in the evaluation: athletes, coaches and performance directors. These respondents evaluated hard data (or facts) as well as perceived data. Similar methods are found in some economic studies to measure competitiveness of nations (Rosselet, 2008; WEF, 2008). It could be considered that the use of surveys in international comparison may be a helpful way to make similar competitiveness measurements in future comparative sport research. An international comparative study with six nations was set up by the authors of this article as a first onset in this direction and a follow up of this study. Here, the researchers endeavoured to develop a scoring system on these CSF in order to compare the sample nations less descriptively (De Bosscher et al., 2008). It was concluded that the use of surveys are a helpful tool to operationalise a range of CSF into measurable and comparable units. However, further research is needed at the sport specific level because factors leading to success may differ in sports or in a group of sports and each sport thus requires specific criteria for evaluation. Sport-by-sport comparisons may also reveal that certain pillars are more conditional than others.

Last but not least, there is a paradox in the methodology inherent to the relationship between elite sport performances (outputs) and the evaluation of policies. Elite sport success is the result of, among other factors, long-term policy evaluation. It was shown that it takes at least ten years to develop elite athletes in most sports (Ericsson, 2003). Therefore current policy evaluations (in the pilot study dating from 2003) should be assessed against future success indicators or these policy studies should be retrospective, because policy evaluation is a dynamic process that is susceptible to fast changes.

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