SPORTS POLICY FACTORS LEADING TO INTERNATIONAL SPORTING SUCCESS
Network for international comparative studies on high performance sport

ABOUT SPLISS

Veerle De Bosscher, veerle.de.bosscher@vub.ac.be – Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Maarten van Bottenburg, m.vanbottenburg@uu.nl – Utrecht University
Simon Shibli, s.shibli@shu.ac.uk – Sheffield Hallam University
Hans Westerbeek, Hans.Westerbeek@vu.edu.au, Victoria University
Jasper Truyens, jtruyen@vub.ac.be – Vrije Universiteit Brussel
1. Introduction: SPLISS, a network of research cooperation in high performance sport policies

SPLISS

At the end of 2002 a consortium of research groups from three nations (Belgium, the Netherlands and United Kingdom) initiated an international comparative study on elite sports policies. These researchers expressed common needs, all from their own perspective, to fill the gap in scientific research on the relationship between elite sport policies and international sporting success and to benchmark their nation against competitors. Their common purpose was reflected in the name “SPLISS”, which stands for Sports Policy factors Leading to International Sporting Success. A joint research project was established, of which the first stage was an overall comparison of elite sport policies in six nations: Belgium, Canada, Italy, Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom. The study resulted in a Ph.D (2007) and in a jointly authored book (2008):


A range of other publications and communications during international congresses related to the SPLISS work, are provided in appendix 1.

Key points

The key points of the 2008 SPLISS-study are characterised by four elements as outlined below.

- The specific focus on the relationship between policies and success and accordingly increasing insights in the factors that shape elite sport policies and the pathways to success in different nations.
The development of a theoretical model of sport policy factors leading to international sporting success, that has been operationalised through over 100 critical success factors (CSF).

The development of a methodology to measure the competitive position of nations in elite sport quantitatively by aggregating CSF into a final percentage score (see SPLISS brochure).

The involvement of the main stakeholders in elite sport as part of our research methodology. 1090 athletes, 273 coaches and 71 performance directors in the sample nations were surveyed in order to measure the competitive position of the nations in nine policy pillars.

Comparison with other competitors is very common in the economic sector, but in sport it is rather new. Further research is required to explore this field.

Results of the SPLISS study

The SPLISS study has resulted in a range of new insights into the key success drivers, and the way elite sport policies of nations evolve in an environment of increasing competition. Furthermore the SPLISS study has helped high performance organisations and governments in the respective nations to determine the keys of effective elite sport policies, and possible drivers for future investment. Finally, the SPLISS study has delivered some first steps in improving theories on the sports policy factors leading to international sporting success, and has devised a method to measure the competitive position of nations in elite sport.

This study mainly served as a pilot study and is only a preliminary stage in increasing insights into theoretical, methodological and political developments in high performance sport policy research, along with other recent studies that have been developed in the past few years (see among others Bergsgard, Houlihan, Mangset, et al., 2008; Digel, Burk, Fahrner et al., 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan & Green, 2008; Oakley & Green, 2001).
Effects on elite sports policies: some quotes from the consortium team:

United Kingdom, Jerry Bingham, research director UKSport

In the UK, it has been difficult to answer the frequently-asked question: how does our sports system compare with that of other nations? However, as a result of the SPLISS project, we finally have some robust comparative information on this subject. Looking across the nine policy areas that comprise the SPLISS framework, the results for the UK are generally encouraging, providing us with a degree of assurance that we are doing the right things. The two policy areas in which we appear to have performed less well are those of talent development and the coordination of scientific research. In reality, we have already identified these as areas needing attention, and the new investment we are now making in them may be seen as a test of the reasonableness of the SPLISS analysis.

Belgium (Flanders), Bert Anciaux, Flemish Minister of sport and Ivo Van Aken, elite sports manager

"In Belgium (Flanders) the SPLISS research has had an enormous impact on the direction of future policy choices. It has given policy makers and federations very useful insights into the strengths and weaknesses of our elite sports policies compared with other nations. The study has made policy makers aware of the determinants of competitiveness and the nine pillar model is now used as a basic framework for our 2009-2012/16 policy plan. Most of all, the study keeps policy makers alert to international developments, and has given insights into the characteristics of effective elite sport policies and how nations can develop a competitive advantage. We have also learned that it is difficult to implement good practice from other nations directly, but nonetheless it inspires us to innovate and develop our own ideas. Whilst the SPLISS project is a very welcome starting point in providing information on national elite sport policies at an overall level, even more research is needed. In particular we would very much welcome more in depth analysis and comparisons at a sport by sport level.”
Follow-up

As a follow-up the SPLISS group will continue their project in several directions and invites researchers, governments, Olympic Committees, national sport agencies and national governing bodies/federations and international organisations to be involved in future studies if their interest is in one of the three areas outlined below.

- **Policy purpose**: to benchmark your nation against competitors, -both at an overall and a sport specific level, for able-bodied and disability sports, to gain insights into the competitiveness of your nation and to get a better understanding of good governance in elite sport. To achieve a win-win situation for your nation by learning from other competitors.

- **Research purpose**: to develop theories on the key success factors and methods to compare nations in elite sport and to measure the competitiveness of nations in elite sport (both at an overall and a sport specific level, for able-bodied and disability sports).

- **Networking**: to develop a team of researchers and high performance experts who cooperate, have meetings and seminars on high performance sport policy research and common interests; and to offer a forum for other researchers to spread and communicate their high performance research.

- **Marketing**: to develop a world competitiveness ranking for elite sport policy, in order to articulate the value of elite sport of your own and other countries to the population and to evaluate your competitive position in elite sport policy in an international context.

The purpose of this document is to **invite researchers and policy makers** (governments, national sport agencies, Olympic Committees, national governing bodies etc.) who are interested in cooperating in further SPLISS studies. Participation could be at either an intensive level, by taking part in the SPLISS-meetings to prepare and realise the studies; or either at a less labour-intensive level, by just conducting the research in your own nation (in cooperation with a researcher), using the methods and research instruments prepared by the SPLISS group.

The nations that have been compared in the 2008 publication, all have expressed an interest to be involved in future SPLISS research projects: Norway, Belgium, the Netherlands, Canada, United Kingdom and Italy. Researchers and policy makers from a number of other countries have already demonstrated a keen interest in joining this

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1 Note that national governing bodies are synonymous to national sport organisations and federations. These terms are used differently in distinct nations and regions. National Governing Bodies (NGBs) manage eligibility, rules and championships for individual sports. They sanction competitions in its country and those competitions follow NGB rules (De Bosscher et al., 2008)
study (e.g. Australia, France, Germany, Greece, Japan, New Zealand, Portugal, Switzerland, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Finland). It is the aim of the SPLISS group to involve nations worldwide and to develop different research strategies depending on the individual needs of researchers and policy makers.

This document contains a number of research proposals, all with their indicative rationale, methods and purposes. It is aimed at a wide forum of people with common interests and is meant to be a discussion document. Any particular interests, comments or suggestions can be addressed to the SPLISS secretary (see contact details below).

2. SPLISS mission

The mission of the SPLISS group is “to create a sustainable international network that coordinates, develops and shares expertise in innovative high performance sport research at the meso-level (policy level) in cooperation with other policy makers, NOCs, national and international organisations, and researchers worldwide”.

The SPLISS studies are characterised by using recognised good practice that can be used by nations to benchmark their policies and to measure their competitive position; furthermore they aim to increase the social relevance of research by developing theories, methods and strategies to measure and compare elite sport policies of nations. Each study endeavours to achieve a win-win situation for every participating nation by maximising the policy relevance and learning effects. This is the purpose of benchmarking\(^2\). By disseminating the results amongst performance directors, coaches and policy makers and by searching for practical applications, the aim is to reduce the gap between academic research and practitioners. It needs however to be noted that the SPLISS group will respect each nation’s specific requests with regard to the publication of results.

By creating research networks and research cooperation, the SPLISS group wants to offer opportunities for researchers and research institutes, policy makers, and stakeholders to create networks around high performance sport research and joint publications (e.g. by publishing jointly authored books), taking into account the specific desire of policy makers and possible funders. Furthermore the SPLISS projects may

\(^2\) Benchmarking can be interpreted as “the continuous process of measuring products, services and practices against the toughest competitors or those companies recognized as industry leaders” (David T. Kearns, Chief Executive officer, Xerox corporation, cited by Waalewijn & Kamp, B., 1994).

Camp (1989) continues with: “the search for industry best practices that will lead to superior performance” On the other hand, no nation can be competitive in everything and every nation will be able to create learning effects in particular areas.
enable PhD students to realise some parts of the projects as integral parts of their doctoral studies, applied to their own context under supervision of a tutor within their research institute and eventually a SPLISS researcher. In this respect the SPLISS group is prepared to help research institutes with submissions for funding. Last but not least, in the longer term the use of the SPLISS forum can help to create your own networks and to stimulate recognisable research networks on high performance sport worldwide.

3. SPLISS follow up proposals

The list discussed in the following sections are titles of individual research proposals for projects that will be developed by the SPLISS group during the next few years. For each project, separate proposals will be developed. Nations are invited to participate in either all of them, or in a sub-set of them. Each project requires different resources (varying from only a limited budget to pay for marginal costs to a conventional full cost research budget), as well as specific methodologies and timings.

Nations, which have higher research ambitions than mentioned in this document, should not hesitate to share their thoughts and suggestions with the SPLISS group. The SPLISS consortium will be prepared to help in negotiations with policy makers, national or international organisations, and research institutes in order to assist in finding funding. Please do not hesitate to contact the secretary in this respect.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>SPLISS Project proposals</th>
<th>Starting</th>
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<td>Competitiveness of nations in elite sport: an international comparison of the overall elite sport policies and climate</td>
<td>January 2011 (finished data collection by December 2011)</td>
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This is an extension of the Global Sporting Arms Race research, whereby elite sports policies at a national level are compared using:
- evaluation of elite sport policies in nine pillars
- comparison based on measurement (traffic light) and description of processes and strategies
- including an elite sport climate survey with elite athletes and coaches in each nation

Contact: Veerle De Bosscher
veerle.de.bosscher@vub.ac.be

| | Data collection: |
| Competitiveness of nations in elite sport disciplines: athletics as a case study | May 2010 |

Contact: drs Jasper Truyens (as part of a PhD):
jatruyen@vub.ac.be
Veerle De Bosscher
veerle.de.bosscher@vub.ac.be

| | Data collection: |
| Competitiveness of nations in elite sport disciplines: tennis as a case study | 2011 |

Contact:
The following separate research projects are being considered:

**Competitiveness of nations in elite sport disciplines: summer and winter sports**
- Sports will be determined in cooperation with other nations
- Currently preferences have been expressed towards swimming, cycling and tennis
- Realisation will depend on availability of funding and PhD students

**Measuring the outcome of elite sport: an international comparison of the effects of elite sporting success on national pride and international prestige**

**The relationship between elite sport and sport for all**

**Competitiveness of nations in Paralympic sports**
- Overall
- Sport by sport

**An international comparison of financial support for elite sport (pillar 1)**
Please note that nations who participate in part I, will automatically receive the cooperation in this specific study. This is an in depth analysis of one particular pillar.

**An international comparison of talent identification and talent development programmes (pillar 4) (at the national level and some sports more in depth)**
Please note that nations who participate in parts I and II, will automatically receive the cooperation in this specific study. This is an in depth analysis of one particular pillar.

**An international comparison of coach development programmes and coaches provisions (pillar 7) (at the national level and some sports more in depth)**
Please note that nations who participate in parts I and II, will automatically receive the cooperation in this specific study. This is an in depth analysis of one particular pillar.

**An international comparison of the social status of practising elite sport and being an elite athlete (pillar 5)**

**Development of a world competitiveness elite sport policy ranking**
Please note that nations who participate in part I, will automatically be included in the world competitiveness ranking. The aim of this study is to develop a ranking system where nations can objectively compare themselves with other competitors (from a marketing viewpoint) and measure their competitive position (from a policy viewpoint) in order to help them in developing their future perspectives.

A selection of criteria from part I (overall comparison) will be used to develop this ranking. In order to realise this ranking, this research will mirror to economic competitiveness rankings. Therefore at least 30 nations should be included in this study.

**An international comparison of elite sport policies at the local (city) level**
4. Funding of SPLISS research

The SPLISS consortium group will take responsibility for: the guidance and mentoring of participating researchers; the research instruments; the comparative analysis of data; literature reviewing and analysis; and, the scientific procedures. SPLISS does not ask any financial contribution from the participating nations as a return for this coordinating work. This is paid by each consortium member and by the Vrije Universiteit Brussel as part of PhD and post doctoral funding. This is a similar model to the first SPLISS project which was completed in 2008.

So far funding for the individual nations to collect the data domestically has not yet been confirmed. We recommend that each participating nation should apply for funding to cover the expenses that are related to this 'pump priming' work. It is our aim to establish projects at international levels that will make a positive difference to the nations that take part. We also believe that nations which want to improve their elite sport policies and which are interested in these ambitious SPLISS-projects (from their own perspective and at their own level of engagement) should be able to fund the elements of the research to which they subscribe. In the longer term the SPLISS consortium aims to find additional funds for extending the project, providing a coordination function, and eventually to support individual nations.

From our previous experience we know that the funding required does not need to be extraordinarily high. Some parts of the SPLISS aims (e.g. sport by sport comparisons) only require limited funding and could be carried out with the help of postgraduate students. Other elements of the research are more time consuming, and may require the support of dedicated staff (e.g. the elite sport climate survey and competitiveness measurements) in order to achieve reliable data collection. It is possible, for nations which want to, to involve PhD-students on separate subjects and the SPLISS consortium group is prepared to help with supervision.

Costs (depending on each nation): regular running costs for data collection (copies, mailing, mileage, telephone,…). Eventually personnel (interviews, data collection, data analysis, domestic report); master thesis students could participate in some parts of data collection and inputs in SPSS)
5. Researchers or research institutes as the drivers for creating partnerships

Individual researchers or cooperating research institutes are the drivers of the SPLISS-projects. They need to ensure that the objectives of their funders, policy makers, NOCs, and national governing bodies are achieved and sufficiently addressed towards their particular context in order to maximise the outcomes for their country. The SPLISS group will assist researchers in this process. We recommend that policy makers or other organisations involved in high performance sport policies cooperate with a suitably experienced researcher in their own country.

Apart from the general report that will be developed by the SPLISS group on each project and in cooperation with each participating member, we strongly advise researchers to write a separate report (in the own language), which addresses the particular points of interest for the own country. This will not only enhance the credibility of the researcher in the eyes of funding organisations, but will also help policies in the nation concerned by making use of scientific data in an applied manner.

It should be noted that many research projects could be achieved with the help of postgraduate students, especially via the collection of data through interviews and secondary data analysis. Time invested by researchers may then be limited to the more higher level processes such as data analysis and interpretation. We therefore advise researchers to start looking for interested students according to the timing outlined in the table above. The SPLISS-group will assist researchers with supervision of these students. This may be a viable solution in instances where researchers only have limited funds but still want to be involved in some parts of the SPLISS-projects.
5. Contact details

For any questions about this SPLISS research project, please contact (secretary):

Veerle De Bosscher (vdebossc@vub.ac.be), Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

Or any other member of the SPLISS consortium group:

Maarten van Bottenburg, m.vanbottenburg@uu.nl – Utrecht University, NL
Simon Shibli, s.shibli@shu.ac.uk - Sheffield Hallam University , UK
Hans Westerbeek, Hans.Westerbeek@vu.edu.au, Victoria University, AUS
Jasper Truyens, jtruyen@vub.ac.be – Vrije Universiteit Brussel, BE

Institutional address:

Vrije Universiteit Brussel
Faculty of Physical Education and Physiotherapy
Department Sport Policy and Management (SBMA)
Pleinlaan 2, 1050 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: **32 2 629 27 12 (secretary)/ 32 2 629 27 72 (direct)/ 32 486 52 60 60 (mobile phone)

SPLISS consortium Partners
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Camp, R.C. (1989) Benchmarking: the search for industry best practices that lead to 
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vergelijking aan? [Strategic benchmarking: who dares comparing?] (Rep. No. 9404) 
Rotterdam, the Netherlands: Erasmus University Rotterdam and Rotterdam institute 
for business economic studies.
Appendix 1: publications related to the SPLISS study

Books

International (peer reviewed) journals
10. De Bosscher, V., De Knop, P., van Bottenburg, M (Accepted). Sports, Culture and Society: Why the Netherlands are successful in elite sports and Belgium is not? A comparison of elite sport policies. Kinesiologia Slovenica (KinSI), scientific Journal on Sport

Best Paper award was received at the SMAANZ conference, with the paper entitled: Sport policy excellence: An International comparison of elite sport systems and policies in six countries. SMAANZ, Raising the Bar. Promoting excellence in sport management. Fremantle (Australia), 27-29/11/2008.

Communications at international congresses/ symposia integrally published in proceedings


Congress of the European Association for Sport Management (pp. 48-51). Torino, Italy: EASM

Communications at international congresses/ symposia not published in proceedings