

# The Context of Talent Identification and Promotion: A Comparison of Nations

by Helmut Digel

 © by IAAF  
17:3/4; 13–26, 2002

*In this article the author focusses selectively on a review of the factors and systems that contribute to talent identification and promotion within each national system. After a brief review of general requirements for success in high-performance sport, a country-by-country comparison of specific systems will ensue.*

## ABSTRACT

### 1 Introduction

**A**s a sociologist, working with a team of young scientists at the University of Tübingen, I have been investigating the processes that underlie sport development amongst eight of the most successful sports systems in the Olympic movement. This project has been funded by the IOC, the "National Olympic Committee of Germany" and the "German Ministry for Domestic Affairs", which is responsible for matters concerning sports in Germany. As the investigation has been broad in scope, this particular report will focus selectively on a review of the factors and systems that contribute to talent identification and promotion within each national system. After a brief review of general requirements for success in high-performance sport (Section 1), a country-by-country comparison of specific systems will ensue (Section 2).

*Professor for Sport Science and Sport Sociology, director at the Institute for Sport Science at University of Tübingen/Germany. Studies and academic training in Sport science, linguistics, sociology and empirical cultural sciences at the Universities of Tübingen, Philadelphia and Los Angeles. Various functions within the administration of Sport and Sport science in Germany: head of the scientific council of the German Sport Federation. He is Vice President of the IAAF and member of the IAAF Development Commission. Research emphasis: Language and communication in Sports, Sport coverage by mass media, social change and Sport development, Sport development in young nations. Editor of the book series „Edition Sport und Wissenschaft“ and „Sozialwissenschaftliche Arbeitsbücher Sport“.*

## AUTHOR

### Section I. Generalities: Universal Underpinnings of World-Class Sport

World-class performance in sport, within any system, rests on three distinct pillars. The first one is **society**, in general, as a resource for the elite sports system. The second is the **sports system** itself. The third pillar is the **environment of the respective sports system** as a defining factor for world-class performance.

## Pillar 1. Society as a Resource for Elite Sports

Let us first focus on society as a resource for elite sport systems. Societies may differ from one another significantly. For example, a comparison between Italian society and that of the United States will reveal a large number of varying aspects. A closer look at different democratic societies makes apparent significant variations concerning their political, economic and educational systems as well as the features regarding their mass media. Of great importance, also, is the aspect of population development, especially in the context of an analysis of talent detection and promotion. Other features that are not to be neglected in this respect are employment figures, the standard of living, living conditions and a society's commonly recognized system of values.

The question of social equality or inequality is certainly another important aspect, as nearly all countries and their societies face the problem of having to cope with various facets and degrees of social injustice. Social inequality can have a great impact on sports, especially if socially underprivileged people are given the opportunity to raise their social and economic status through high sport achievement. Indeed, sports can be an extremely effective tool to enhance social mobility. In this sense, then, social injustice may have a profound effect and influence on performance outcomes (cf. Figure 1).

Society as a resource for the elite sports	
1	The system of society
2	The political system
3	The economic system
4	The education system
5	The system of mass media
6	The population development
7	Employment figures
8	Standard of living, living conditions, satisfaction with life
9	The system of values
10	Social injustice

Figure 1: Society as a resource for the elite sports

## Pillar 2. Sports System as a resource for elite sports

When focusing our attention on a country's sports system as the second important resource we have to consider that all the different sports systems have their own unique historical as well as Olympic traditions; some of them dating back more than a hundred years, whereas others have perhaps only existed for twenty, thirty or forty years. Each of these sports systems has its own ideological basis with its own individual ideals and values. Politicians like to refer to a society's "ideological basis" when speaking about high performance, high performance competitions and elite athletes.

Another important feature to take into consideration is the general interest and participation of the public in sports, because world-class performance depends to a large extent on this feature in every country and society. And we must also take into account organisational structures in sports, structures concerning staff and employment, financial aspects and funding systems, and of course, athletes and coaches, as they are indeed the most important people in this system. Additional features we must focus on are the different talent identification programs and talent promotion methods applied within the various sports systems.

There are specific questions to deal with, such as: How is training organized? How are competitions organized? This is important because without an effective competition structure as well as a year round competition system the whole sports system does not work. You may have many talented athletes, but if these athletes are not given the opportunity to compete, you will be confronted with a drop-out problem, as these talented athletes will soon suffer from a severe lack of motivation. Consequently, the competition structure is to be regarded as one of the key aspects of any high performance sports system. Sports venues, award systems for successful athletes as well as for coaches, social security for athletes and coaches are also important issues to deal with. And in all this

we must, of course, not forget the fight against doping.

Every nation and every sports system usually has its own specific schemes and priorities, and, in particular, its preferences and priorities concerning different sports. Do they put special emphasis on Olympic or on other events? What position do the Paralympics have in comparison with the Olympics? What are the current trends and specific national aspects a sports system focuses on? When dealing with these questions we will detect a fair number of significant variations between different countries and sports systems (cf. Figure 2).

The sport system by its own as resource for elite sports	
1	Specific historical conditions and Olympic tradition
2	Ideological basis
3	Interest and participation in sport
4	Organizational structures
5	Structure of the staff (employees and voluntary staff)
6	Finances
7	Athletes
8	Coaches
9	Talent identification
10	Talent promotion
11	Training
12	Competitions
13	Sport venues
14	Award systems for athletes
15	Award systems for coaches
16	Social security for athletes
17	Social security for coaches
18	The fight against doping
19	Schemes and priorities
20	Current trends
21	Specific national aspects

Figure 2: The sport system by its own as a resource for elite sports

### Pillar 3. Environment of the Sports System as a resource of elite sports

The third resource is the particular environment surrounding our sports system. Politics is the first element that comes to mind in this respect. What is the contribution of the political system? Are politicians and politics involved in our sports system, and what does this involvement look like? Do they financially support the system, or do they keep out entirely, making no contributions whatsoever?

A key factor in any high performance sports system around the world is the educational system. Any sports system largely depends on close cooperation and a special relationship with the many kinds of educational institutions. And the function and role of science regarding success and achievement in sports worldwide cannot be ignored. This aspect also includes the collection of data and statistics.

The military may also be an important element in the environment of a sports system. In some countries it plays a significant role. In others, however, it does not seem to have a major impact on the sports system and its structures. What is becoming an increasingly important factor is the private sector, particularly in the field of talent identification and talent promotion. Its potential may make it a suitable partner of the sports system. And then there are, of course, the media. Without the media there is no coverage, no promotion and no public interest in high performance sports. In the modern world any sports system needs the attention of the mass media for its development. Last but not least are the spectators - the audience. Without spectators there is no public interest in sports, either. If the people do not like sports and appreciate sporting performances the system does not function (cf. Figure 3).

The environment of the sport system as a resource for elite sports	
1	The contribution of politics
2	The role of education systems
3	The function of science regarding success in sport

- 4 The importance of the military
- 5 The private sector as a partner of sport
- 6 Mass media as a promoter of the interests of sport
- 7 The audience as a sounding board for world class performances

Figure 3: The environment of the sport system as resource for elite sports

## Section II. Specifics: Comparison of Conditions Amongst Major Sporting Nations

### 1. How is elite sports organised?

To this point this has just been a brief survey of the different resources of sports we defined for our analysis of the sports systems in eight nations, where we tried to find out how they organize and manage their systems from the base to the top, from the young talented athlete to the Olympic champion or participant. In this process we took a closer look at eight different countries, but here you will only get a short survey on six of these eight. Among them there is only one that does not feature any significant involvement of the state or its political system in sports - that is the **United States of America**. In all other systems there is a direct involvement of politics to be found. Usually this involvement is organised at

three different levels, there are national bodies, provincial or regional ones, and, finally, local authorities. In terms of talent detection and talent promotion the organisations at these three levels operate independently. So, for example, in **China** there is the State Sport General Administration at the national level. Other institutions operate at the level of the provinces or at the local level, and all of these have their specific functions and duties. Their efforts are supported by training centres, and, at the national and regional levels, also by research institutes. Additionally, great importance is attributed to special sports schools which differ largely from general schools although they also provide general education apart from their specific sports-related functions, and there are also sports universities serving the same purposes. Last but not least, the sports associations play a significant role in the Chinese sports system (cf. Figure 4).



Figure 4: Sports in the PR China

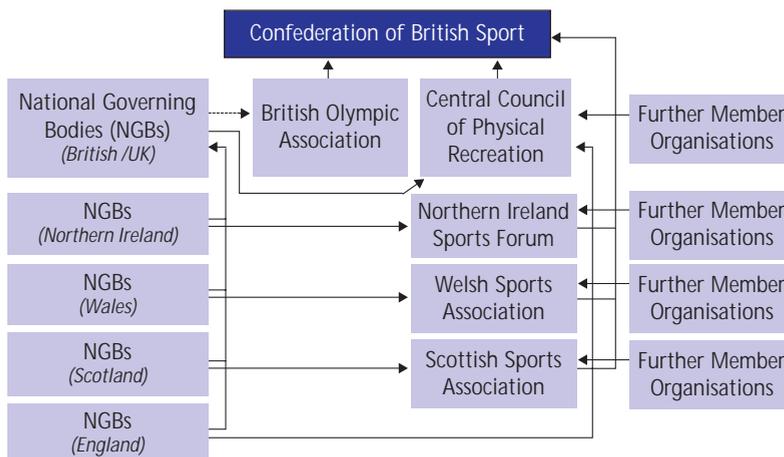


Figure 5: Sports in Great Britain

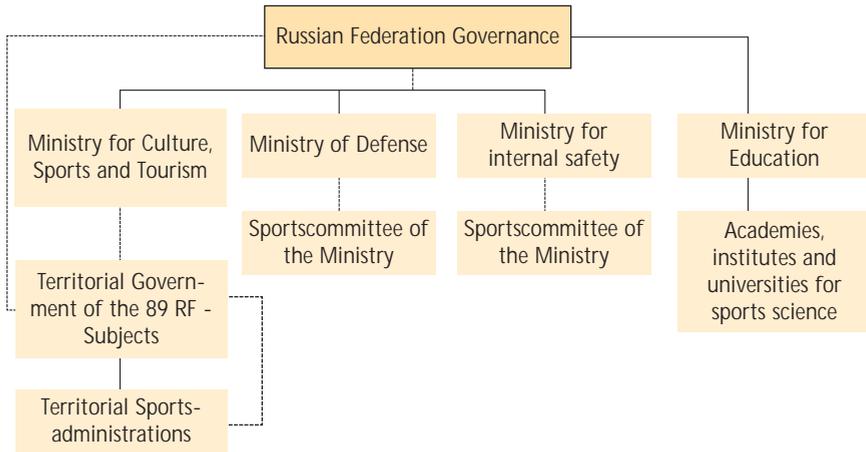


Figure 6: Sports in Russia

Similar features are evident in the **United Kingdom** as well. They are, however, more complex and also different from the sports systems of other European countries. There is a national governing body, there is the British Olympic Association as well as the Central Council of Physical Recreation and all the other member organisations of the Confederation of British Sport (cf. Figure 5). This system will be dealt with in greater detail later on, as it has been rather creative and innovative over the last ten years, having generated really impressive changes in the entire sports policy.

In **Russia** there is the Government of the Russian Federation at the top of the national level with a variety of different ministries and government departments involved in the system of sports, and at the next lower level there are territorial governments and territorial sports associations. Altogether there are three different levels (cf. Figure 6).

As for **Germany**, there are a few differences compared with other countries. At the top of its sports system there are the German Sports Federation, and a rather small National Olympic Committee, which is not directly involved in the matters discussed above. The

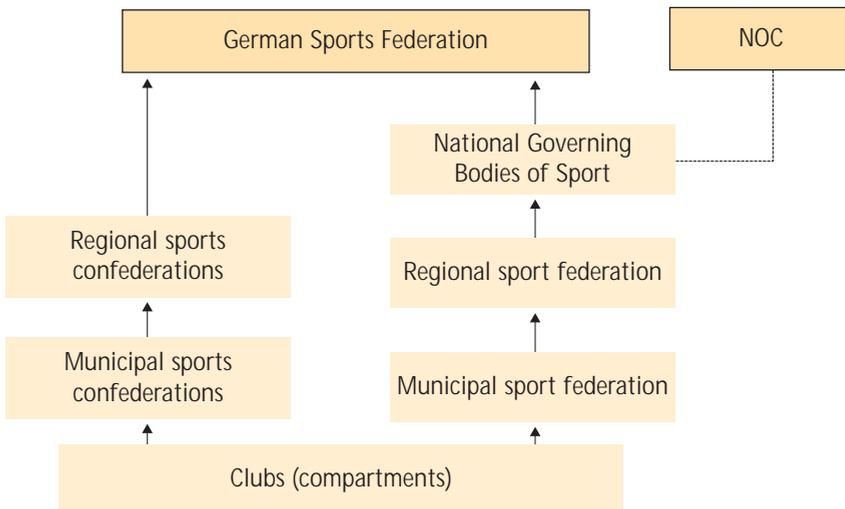


Figure 7: Sports in Germany

major responsibility is definitely with the German Sports Federation, which cooperates closely with the national governing bodies, the regional and the municipal or communal sports federations. So it is a very tightly structured system from the towns and villages to the regions and then to the level of the national federation (cf. Figure 7).

In the **United States** this system looks quite different, varying significantly from all the other countries within the sports family. If you went to Washington, D.C. and attempted to ask President Bush to show and explain to you the major features of his sports administration, that would be a very brief conversation. He would have to tell

you that there is absolutely no one on his staff who holds any responsibility in or for sports. In the whole Olympic family the U.S. is the only country whose government is not involved at all in the sports system. Sport is entirely dealt with at the state level, each state having its own administration system. The Federal Government in Washington, D.C. has no official influence whatsoever in matters concerning sport - contrary to France, the UK, Germany, Russia or China, where there usually is a minister for sport or a similar institution. The United States depends entirely on the private sector and its pool system. Consequently the only really important institution for the development of

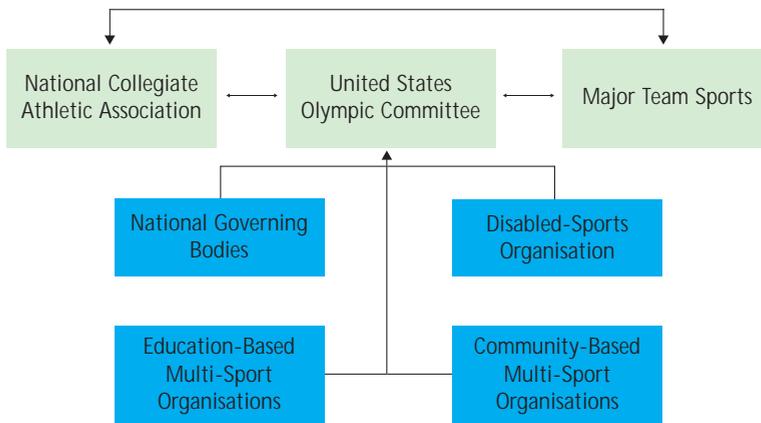


Figure 8: Sports in the USA

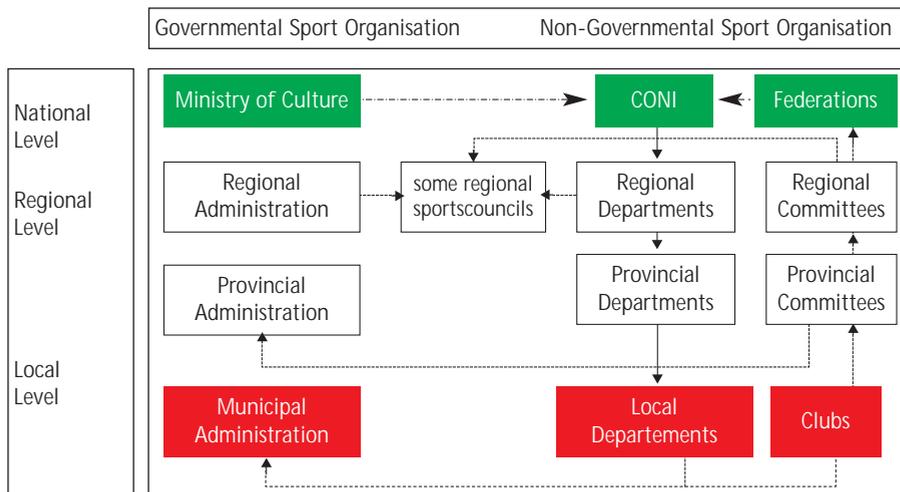


Figure 9: Sports in Italy

sports and all questions concerning talent identification and talent promotion in the United States is the National Olympic Committee, which has both full responsibility as well as complete authority (cf. Figure 8).

**Italy** also has its own unique system, as after World War II their legislature passed a law that gave CONI (the Italian National Olympic Committee) full authority in all sports-related matters. This law, enacted in 1946, also constituted that CONI would receive all lottery funds. Thus, CONI became an independent body, government influence has remained small, and CONI is in charge of all matters concerning sport in Italy. CONI is represented at all levels - national, regional and local - and it is also the Olympic governing body of Italy. It is involved in the policies of the sports federations, being responsible for sports facilities as well as for talent identification and promotion (cf. Figure 9).

## 2. How is talent identified and promoted?

**China**, for example, depends largely on its widespread system of sports schools. You do not only find these sports schools in large urban areas and big cities like Beijing or Shanghai. They are also to be found in almost all smaller towns. These schools vary to some extent. There are several types of them, such as the Popular Spare Time Sports Schools, the Physical Education Middle Schools, the Key Spare Time Sports Schools, the Sports Technical Institutes as well as the Competition Sports Schools (cf. Figure 11).

A closer look at our statistics shows that, nationwide, there were 35 Sports Technical Institutes in 1998, when we began our first round of interviews in China. At that time 31,000 athletes were given the opportunity to attend these Sports Technical Institutes. Additionally, there are 3,800 sports schools at four



Figure 10: Sports in Australia

In **Australia** we find basically the same structures as in all other systems, such as the national, state and local level, with each level having its own responsibilities regarding training, competition, talent identification and talent promotion (cf. Figure 10).

In the following section, we will take a closer look at each of these sports systems, focusing primarily on the questions concerning talent identification and promotion.

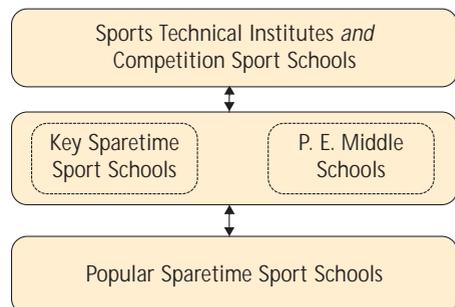


Figure 11: China – Sport schools

	Schools	Athletes (1997)	Coaches (1999)
Sports Technical Institutes	ca. 35	31.000	4.071
Competition Sport Schools	ca. 3.800	1.200	
P.E. Middle Schools		15.400	866
Key Sparetime Sport Schools		69.700	5.511
Popular Sparetime Sport Schools		191.000	11.070

Figure 12:  
China – Staff and athletes

different levels, and a large number of athletes and coaches co-operate with these schools (cf. Figure 12). This system of sports schools provides further opportunities and offers special services, which are usually financed by the province governments. On the other hand, the Sports Technical Institutes receive their funding from the national government. The whole system in China is completely dependent and entirely financed by the country's political system. No private money is involved. All funds come from the state budget.

About ten or fifteen years ago, **Australia** began to initiate a talent promotion program, which was governed and organised primarily by the Australian Institute of Sports. Other

institutions have been involved in this program, as well - for example, the State Sport Institutes featuring all necessary modern facilities where talented athletes enjoy superb conditions of training. In some states these are called academies. Furthermore, there are the national sporting associations and the state sporting associations, the schools and universities as well as the Australian Sports Commission, which are all involved in this program of talent promotion, co-operating very closely with one another (cf. Figure 13).

This system is a key factor in Australia's sporting success story, and any observer must realize that of all the eight nations investigated in our project Australia is the only one that



Figure 13:  
Australia – Organisations

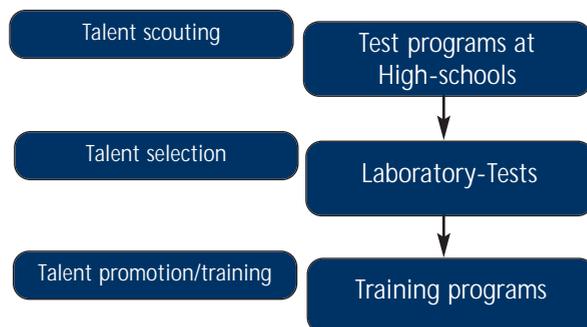


Figure 14:  
Australia – Testing system

has a real “sports culture”. In their every-day life sport is of extreme importance; this does not only apply to the schools but to their entire society and social life. Sports are more important than music, more important than literature and more important than all other arts. Australia has a real sports society and can truly be called a “sports nation”.

In cooperation with the schools at various levels the Australian Institute of Sports has successfully addressed the problem of detecting and promoting young talented athletes. In its efforts it is efficiently supported in the field of science by a number of universities and scientists, who, amongst other things, contribute testing programs. These testing programs are conducted at the high schools and analysed by means of laboratory tests and accompanied by special training programs. So, talent counting, talent selection, talent promotion and training are always organised within the same structures. The funds needed to finance this system are partly contributed by the private sector (cf. Figure 14).

**Russia** still has a very strong system of specific sports schools. According to our data there were 2,113 sport schools for physical preparation in 1999. Additionally, there is the so-called Olympic Reserve Sports School, and at the highest level of achievement the Olympic Reserve Academies. In terms of its strength there is probably no other country in the world that matches the Russian sports

school system, with the possible exception of China. As far as talent identification and promotion are concerned, Russia's system is also amongst the leading ones. However, it is currently facing severe financial problems, and the standards and the quality of the schools are not the same everywhere. Altogether, however, it still functions fairly well and remains successful (cf. Figure 15).

In **Britain** it was the Major government at first and, then, the Blair administration that initiated a new strategy after a noticeable lack of success at the Olympic games in Barcelona, where the UK only ranked 36th. At that point the government became increasingly more involved, changing both their institutions as well as their programs. A look at the Scottish program, for example, reveals that they have a special Talented Athlete Program and a program run by the Scottish Institute for Sports as well as the Talented Junior Sports Program. The Bank of Scotland sponsors another young athletes program, and, additionally, there are the Regional Junior Squads Program and the Sports Aid Foundation Awards, which are also a part of the system (cf. Figure 16).

The UK also has a new testing system with testing days usually in April and May. After these testing days they put together their junior squads that enjoy the perfect support of coaches and especially trained teachers who provide all the needed special services (cf. Figure 17). The UK now also has its own

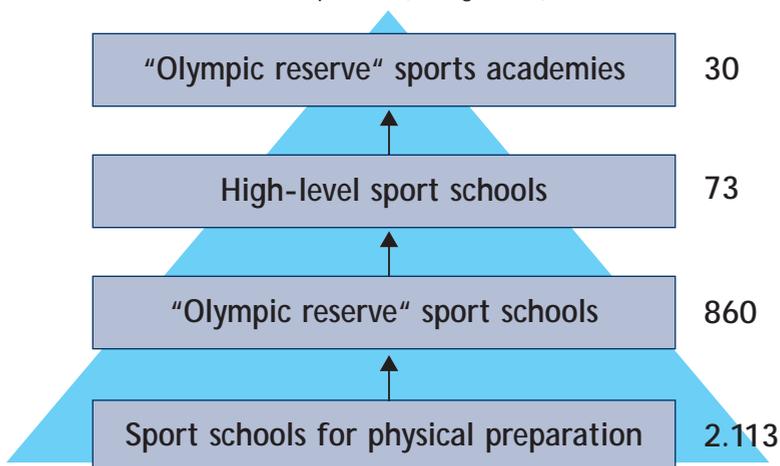


Figure 15: Russia – Sport schools

sport school program, and the number of sports colleges is growing from year to year. Whereas in September 1997, there were only eleven, the number of sports schools grew to 67 in September 2000, with a projected number of 150 by 2004.

Another unique innovation in Britain is the Sporting Ambassador Scheme, where former elite athletes as well as coaches or officials visit schools talking to students and teachers about the importance of sports not only for people's health but also for their entire social life. A comparable scheme is not to be found in any other country's sports system. Last but not least there are the Active Mark Award System and the Sports Mark Award System, whose prime purpose is to reward schools for outstanding sporting success and commit-

ment. The example of Great Britain shows that a country, after facing some significant problems concerning their elite sports system, may take advantage of the crisis by implementing new ideas and structures, thus changing and improving some traditional structures of their system.

Britain's sporting future looks bright and promising, as its educational institutions, its political system and its entire society are involved in this process.

What has been outlined so far also applies to Britain's sports federations.; UK Athletics has got its own program which is integrated into the general efforts for improvement made at all levels in the whole country.

As far as **Italy** is concerned there has been a similar development, based on the same



Figure 16: Great Britain – Scottish Programmes

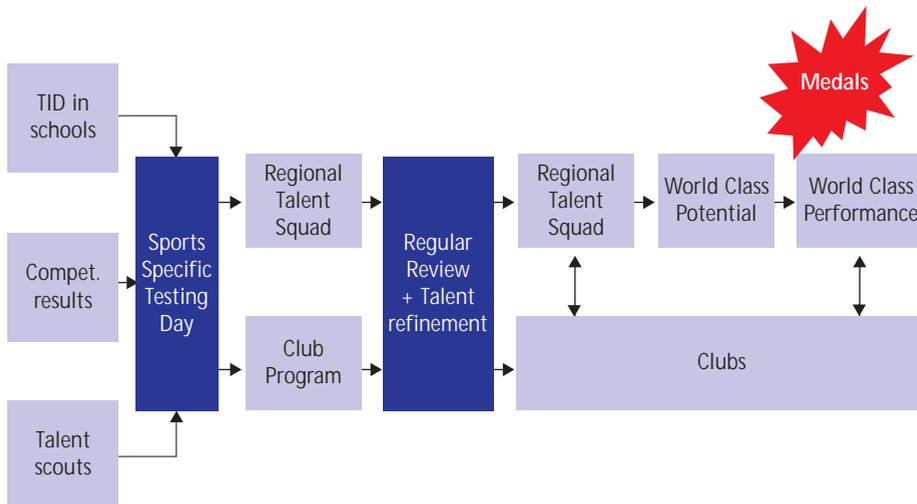


Figure 17: Great Britain – World Class Potential Plan (UK Athletics)

ideas. Sporting events are organised at school, provincial and regional levels as well as at the level of CONI (cf. Figure 18). Specific programs are run for a variety of different sports, and the Italian system also features squad structures with close cooperation between CONI and FIDAL, the Italian Athletics Federation. At the provincial level their squads comprise about 1,000 athletes and at the regional one 120 who are financially supported; at the national level there are the so-called "Interesse Internazionale" as well as the "Club Olimpici" with 150 and the "Probabili Olimpici" with altogether about 600 athletes who are a part of this special elite system (cf. Figure 19).

Clearly, having elite systems based on elite squads is something all countries have in common. **Germany**, however, differs to some

extent from the others with its still very important club competition system. In addition, there is a special program called "Jugend trainiert für Olympia", which means "Young People training for the Olympics" (cf. Figure 20).

Germany also varies from other countries in terms of its specific funding structures and its particular squad structure: starting at the school and club level with a complex system of squads called D 1 to D 4, followed by D/C, C, B and A and Olympic squads. This very differentiated system is unique in the world of sports. There is no other country or system that has so many different squads. This may also be an expression of the influence of scientists, which is not always a good one, because it tends to blow the bureaucracy within the system out of proportion,

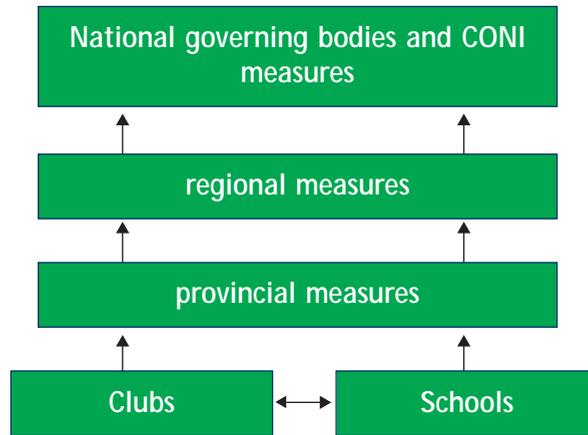


Figure 18: Italy – Measures

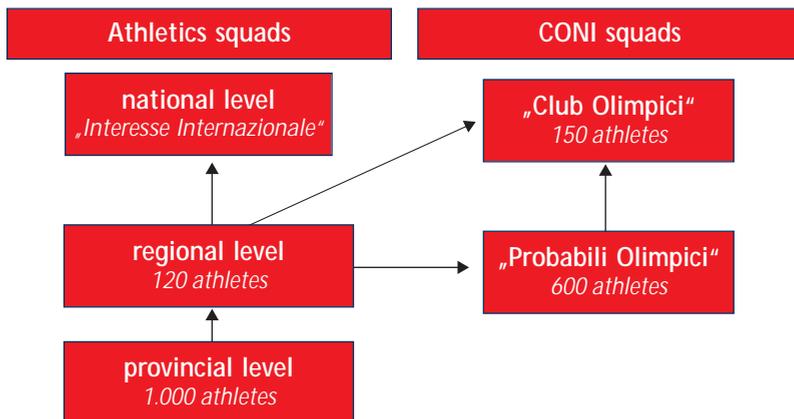


Figure 19: Italy – CONI and FIDAL

which at times seems to be somewhat problematical in Germany.

The entire German sports system is supported by 20 Olympic and 210 federal training centres, as well as a fair number of state and regional training centres and some sports boarding schools. In this respect it is obvious that some features of the former East German sports system have survived. The majority of these boarding schools are located in the states of the former East Germany. A few of them, however, are also situated in the west and south of the country, among them some which focus on winter sports (cf. Figure 21). To explain this in somewhat more detail, let me point out that Germany consists of 20

states, so-called "Länder", one of them is Baden-Württemberg with Stuttgart as its capital. In this state there are 125,000 athletes at school and club levels, 3,300 of these are in squads D 1 to D 4, 285 in squad D/C and 713 in squads A, B and C (cf. Figure 22).

Comparing the German system with the system of the United States clearly indicates the differences. In the United States you have got the school system with kindergarten, elementary, junior high or middle schools, high schools and colleges. On the other hand there is just one body in charge of athletics - the National Collegiate Athletic Association - that, together with the National Olympic Committee of the United States, is

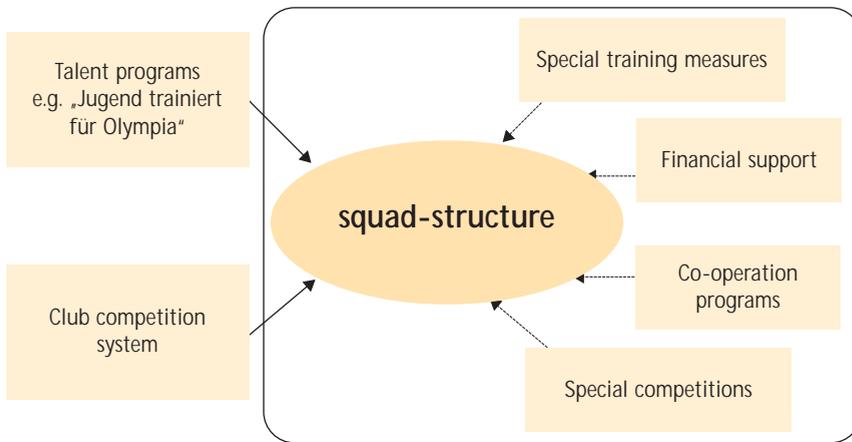


Figure 20: Germany – Talent promotion

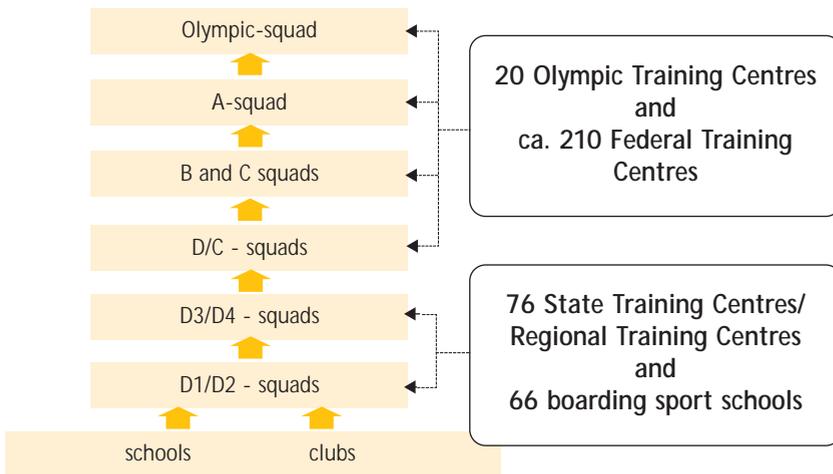


Figure 21: Germany – Talent squads

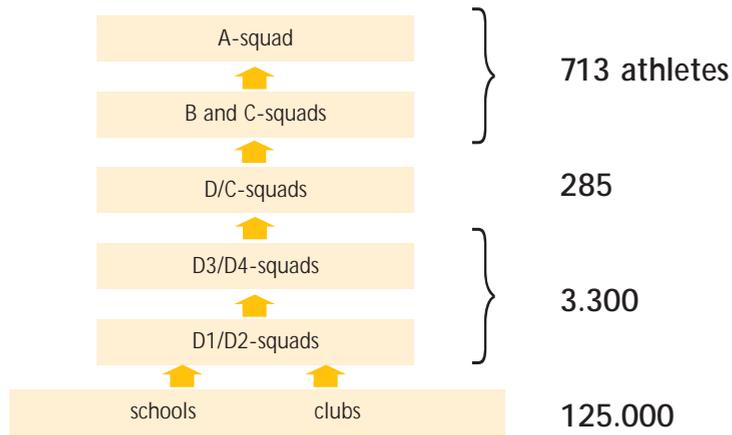


Figure 22: Germany – Baden-Württemberg

a really strong organisation. However, within this system there is nothing that truly resembles a talent-identification or talent-promotion system, as everything in this respect seems to depend on the idea of free enterprise. Athletes have to compete and those who win make the teams. They are promoted while those who lose are out. This system, however, only works satisfactorily if there are large numbers of participants in competitions and if not only the competition system but also your educational system is compatible, and if sporting competition is an integral part of the school system (cf. Figure 23).

This distinguishes the U.S. significantly from Germany, for example, where sports competitions are not an important feature of the university system, and where universities are not

an essential element of the sports system. A similar situation is to be found in Spain and in Italy, where the vast majority of schools and universities are exclusively oriented towards general and academic education, with sports being just one facet of physical education. But even physical education teachers are not responsible for the promotion of high performance athletes, and there are no strong and well-established competition structures, either.

Not so in the United States. When one enters any university or high school campus one of the most striking and evident features you will recognize is the hall of fame, which proudly presents the institution's fastest 100-meter runner rather than the high-flyer in mathematics. The heroes are those who are the champions in sports, as they symbolize

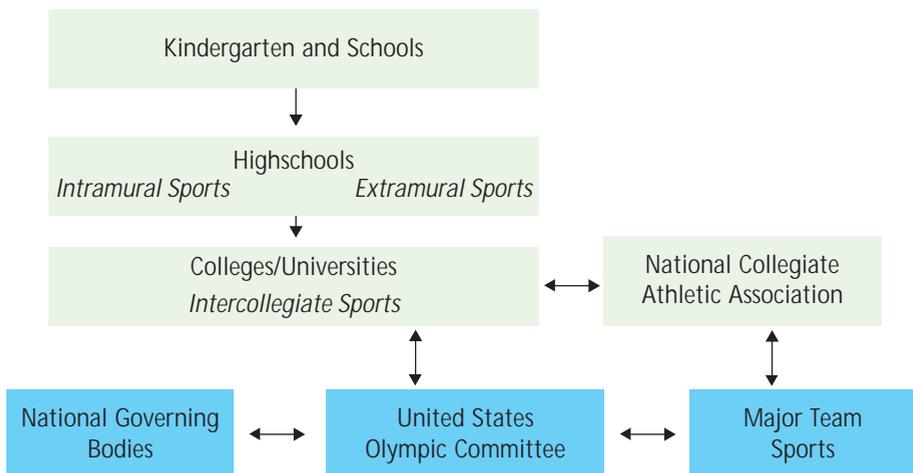


Figure 23: USA – Talent promotion system



Figure 24: USA – Talent chances

more than anything else dynamics, energy, activity and competitiveness. Relying exclusively on competition, the U.S does not put as much emphasis as we would expect on scientific support in all matters concerning talent identification and promotion. Even though a fairly large number of scientists are involved in the enhancement of performance in sports, there is, however, no institutionalised system like in other countries such as, for example, Germany. In this respect the U.S. is really different, having a very specific and unique system. The institutions responsible for sports are absolutely independent.

Statistics show that in the U.S. there are still large numbers of participants in competitions, which also poses a problem, as it is not as easy as in a smaller country to find and promote talent. Only one per cent of those who seem to be good enough and wish to pursue a professional career in sports, actually manage to achieve this goal (cf. Figure 24).

The American system cannot really serve as a model for countries like Estonia, the Netherlands or Andorra, because following this example would definitely ruin these countries' sports systems. Success with such a system requires large quantities of athletes. However, besides quantity we need quality as well. Both are important aspects.

### Concluding Remarks

Probably the most important strategy for improving a given sports system is for the custodians of sport to open their eyes, observe what is happening in other countries, take a close look at those programs and systems and how they are operated, and, finally, exchange ideas with- and learn from the people responsible for the success of

those countries. It is for this very reason that a comparison of systems is necessary, not only for the purpose of comparing talent identification and talent promotion systems, but also for the value of understanding all other parts and aspects of sports structures in different countries.

My view concerning the future is that we should have an interest in monitoring sports systems and we should also test a monitoring system which helps us in observing and analysing all the major sports systems to see how their structures change with time. We should exchange our views and ideas and share them with developing countries and young nations. Then we could justly say that we are all living in one sports family.

It is my conviction that knowing a little more about each other will make us all stronger. It will also help us in our struggle and our competition with other forces that exercise a strong influence on the young people in the world and are luring them away from practicing sports like the entertainment industry. It will also certainly help us to fulfill our commitment resulting from the contract between the generations of older and young athletes, where knowledge and experience and motivation are passed on. In order to achieve these goals we need knowledge which we can enhance through work like this. ■

CONTACT

**Contact:**  
**Helmut Digel**  
 helmut.digel@uni-tuebingen.de