Comparison of successful sport systems

By Helmut Digel

The possibility for success in any competitive endeavour is enhanced when one has an understanding of the opponent’s strategy, tactics, means, resources and will. In the case of high-performance sports, however, those responsible for the national systems required to produce top athletes and performances have traditionally been inward looking and insular. This article reports on the preliminary findings of a project, to reverse this tendency by analysing conditions, structures and work towards modernisation in eight nations that were successful at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta (Australia, China, Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Russia, and the United States of America). After starting with an introduction to the phenomena of modern high-performance sport, the article moves on to describe the aims, theoretical approach and methodological approach of the project. It then gives selected results under the headings “General social conditions”, “The system of high-performance sport” and “Selected system-environment relationships”. Taken together these create a picture of the similarities and differences between the examined systems. The article concludes with a discussion of the ways institutions associated with high-performance sport work to reform and renew themselves and the frequent discrepancies between organisational “talk” and “action” that were observed in the systems studied.

ABSTRACT
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1 Introduction to the subject

The phenomenon of modern high-performance sport is marked by a variety of interests, of which economic interests cannot be overlooked. While in earlier times you could find top athletes who were primarily concerned with recognition, self-realisation and personal confirmation, these motives are today displaced by financial considerations. All the interests and goals that once predominated in sport continue to exist but now they seem to fulfil ideological functions, covering up the benefit calculations that have become more characteristic. At the moment sport in modern societies is subject to input-output analysis, it is prepared long beforehand and it is staged by experts. It has, in fact, become an element of the global communication system and a globalising economy. Its survival and success depend on the flow of funds, the lack of which can also endanger it.
High-performance sport is marked by an ever-increasing complexity. It is becoming more and more confusing, begging the question as to whether it is controllable. It is not surprising that the system is characterised by continuous change and that there are ups and downs, winners and losers, in both the sporting and economic senses. As in the rest of the global economy, popular sports can become marginal, traditionally strong areas can become sporting fallow land, and leading sport nations can suddenly find themselves falling down the international rankings. We have seen that strong sports sometimes lose attractiveness while others succeed in renewing themselves; that some traditional European sports are under close scrutiny and pressure while sports imported from other continents and newly invented sports are just around the corner from mass appeal. We have also seen that some places formerly considered strongholds in the organisation of sports events have lost some of their quality and must now take a back seat. Nevertheless, high-performance sport is a growth sector of the first order and its future seems to be more open than ever.

This makes the quest for an optimal solution absolutely essential, and the search has long since begun everywhere in the world. Whole sports systems have been called into question and new ones are being created on the drawing board or composed at the computer.

More and more, high-performance sport is becoming an important political issue. In Great Britain, the Labour administration under Tony Blair – trying to do everything better than the Conservative governments of the recent past – has established totally new sport institutions on the basis of new legislation. Australia made way for a modernisation of its traditional sport structures by hosting the 2000 Olympic Games. In Italy, the expensive national sport system, marked by CONI (the centralised National Olympic Committee) has been called into question. In the Federal Republic of Germany, high-performance sport is under close scrutiny and sports leaders have been urged to present a top sports plan in 2000 that will be subject to evaluation after Athens 2004. In Russia, the upheaval of the last decade is clearly having its effect as a formerly closed society focused on high-performance sport finds itself in a transformation process and the question of the appropriate forms for the sport system remains unanswered. France, at least, seems to be relatively stable. However, even within its centralised system, which follows the ideas that marked successful high-performance sport for many years in the Eastern Bloc, one can find new structures. In China, the Communist Party still defines the matters and priorities of sport politics but the opening up of the Chinese economy has had a parallel effects in the field of sport: sponsors are offering new financial possibilities to sport associations, more efficient personnel structures are being searched for and, increasingly, the various sports are competing with each other. In the USA, an intense internal discussion on whether it is appropriate to leave all power with regard to Olympic Sports to the USOC (the National Olympic Committee) has long been underway.

These things are not happening just for the sake of activity. In sport there are few winners and many losers. Hence, one can find nations that are on the road to success and others that are in decline. The new ways of thinking, the striving for change, and the search for more effective structures all have to do with the fact that the system of high-performance sport is increasingly dependent on its environment. And more and more, one can see sub-systems that are playing an important role in the system’s survival and development.

For example, we can say that without television, high-performance sport is unthinkable. However, together with the internet, this medium is itself in transformation and for many people its configuration is no longer recognisable. Likewise, high-performance sport is unthinkable without sponsors. The fundamental necessity of funding from these sources means that high-performance sport is dependent on and must work in cooperation...
with the economy and this dependence makes a new way of thinking, planning, deciding and acting necessary. As a second example, we can say that high-performance sport is dependent on its own production machinery and that the matter of finding and managing the next generation of talents is vitally important. Sport needs to guarantee that young people continue to participate so that they can be developed and the “goods” can be offered to the entertainment industry. There are few options in this field and, therefore, high-performance sport needs to enter into cooperation with the education system. But in many countries, the education system is increasingly questioning such cooperation.

Considering the problems outlined above, one wonders about the basis on which leaders in the system of high-performance sport act, what knowledge they fall back on and how well-founded their decisions are. One may even wonder how it can be at all possible to take on responsibility in high-performance sport. The issue arises because in almost all systems of high-performance sport throughout the world, responsibility is split between people working on a full-time basis and those who hold honorary positions. In nearly every case, the honorary personnel have assumed overall responsibility for the development of the system. Looking at various national systems, one finds that the decisions of the honorary post holders are very often characterised by ignorance and a low level of professional competence and, not infrequently, by interests outside of sport. But even those in full-time posts are not necessarily equipped with the desirable levels of knowledge and skill. The lack of competence cannot be blamed solely on personal weakness; at least part of the problem must be attributed to the complexity of sport systems, both national and international. This situation will tend to remain the same. Nevertheless, it is surprising how little the individuals in charge know about the structures of their competitors, how persistently their associations remain in traditional patterns of work, and how rarely these associations are willing to put their work under close scrutiny. The deficits seen on the national level are multiplied on the international level. The persons in charge of high-performance sport in Britain know as little of the structures of Italian sport as those in charge there know about French sport, and those are likely to be uninformed about the sport systems of their competitors in Germany or Russia. When you ask the persons in charge of successful Olympic nations about their knowledge and experience concerning their competitors, extensive ignorance is the predominant feature of their responses.

It is quite obvious that success in is not determined by accidental structures. This is particularly true as high-performance sport is, to a great extent, a precisely controllable technological undertaking that can be compared to the manufacture of industrial products. Moreover, high-performance sport must prove successful in the market. The hard indicators that have to be taken into account in the analysis of sporting success are well known. In 1970s and 1980s the studies by NOVIKOV and MAKSIMENKO (1972), SEPPÄNEN (1972), COLWELL (1982), HEINILÄ (1982) and others identified important empirical evidence that suggests high-performance sport should be defined as a complex organisational, economic and personal political calculation.

2 Aims of the research project

In view of the introductory remarks above, the idea behind the research project reported here is both simple and obvious. If persons, groups, businesses, associations or even societies are in a state of competition, the competing parties can be distinguished; one can call them opponents. Each side strives to win the contest and be better than the other or others. In such a situation, there is value in knowing as exactly as possible who is on the other side, what they are capable of, and the strategy and tactics they intend to use to prevail in the competition. In short, it is good to know the methods the opponent employs.
On the grounds of this observation, it is an obvious project for sociology to point out the specific features of various high-performance sports systems. The research in this case is aimed at the following central question: Which common features and which differences can be found in the high-performance sport structures of eight selected countries? The interest will lie in the various resources available for high-performance sport systems. Also of interest are the mechanisms of compensation ensuring success in case one or more of the resources is missing. Hence, this report is focussed on the analysis of the conditions of high-performance sport in eight successful nations – with the criterion “success” still to be specified more closely. Consequently, the equally relevant issue of structural features remains disregarded, as it is a matter contributing to the success of a nation in a certain sport on the organisational level. With this restriction on the description of structural similarities and differences, there are predictions possible about so-called functional equivalents ensuring success. Therefore, the task of this project is to elaborate a resource model for successful high-performance sport in which all the above mentioned aspects are considered.

3 Theoretical approach

The obvious thing to do, and not just from a systematic point of view, would be to acknowledge the eight nations examined and their specific sport systems in individual studies. It would be equally obvious to then compare the individual studies. However, individual study and systematic comparison require developing a success-resources-model considering the necessary conditions for successful high-performance sport. Three resources in particular move into the focus of attention when working on the assumptions of the outlined preliminary considerations and on the central question of the project. They can be identified on the level of society, on the level of sport organisation, and on the level of the relationship of the top-sport system to its environment.

On the first level of the suggested heuristics, the social level, one has to investigate the respective structure of the population, the level of its differentiation and its level of modernisation. The structure of values is very important in this context, as are the status of top-sports and the status of top-athletes. Furthermore, the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, and thus the dimension of social inequality, are of interest. This first level has to be seen conceptually as a background variable, as one has to work on the assumption that the differently developed general conditions in each country have an independent influence on the other two levels.

Figure 1: The system of high-performance sport

On the second level – the organisation of high-performance sport – one can differentiate a number of categories that are of importance for success in international competitions. For example, there are ideological guidelines, established priorities, Olympic tradition, athletes, personnel, sport facilities, financial, talent identification and talent development, competition system, training, organisation, reward systems, the fight against doping, planned guidelines, current trends.

The system of sport itself is ultimately determined by interdependent relationships to its environment. The following factors
seem to be of special influence for the development of sport systems in terms of quality and quantity: politics, i.e. the particular nation state, the economy, the spectators, the system of mass media, the education system, science, and the military. The analysis of system-environment relationships is intended to reveal typical forms of networking and of useful combinations, the costs of arising transactions, and the systematic influence of relevant environmental protagonists on the structural conditions of high-performance sport.

Summarising the decisive resources for high-performance sport, various models or resource patterns will probably come into being depending on the respective sport and nation. This refers to those resources that have been worked out on the three levels and directly or indirectly linked with success. The assignment will be to trace these models and resource patterns in a comparative way and to interpret them. On the basis of the acquired knowledge, one may be able to offer the desired advisory service.

4 Methodological approach

The project is called “Organisation of high-performance sport – a comparison of the most successful nations of sport in the Olympic Summer Games of Atlanta 1996”. It refers to the high-performance sport structures of Australia, China, Germany, France, Great Britain, Italy, Russia and the United States of America. These structures have been registered and typologically classified by means of written and oral interviews, as well as by means of literature and document analyses.

Particular emphasis has been put on athletics, swimming and volleyball, their national associations, the NOCs (National Olympic Committees) and the ministries responsible for high-performance sport.

5 Selected results

5.1 General social conditions

The specific character of national high-performance sport systems can be best grasped if the systems are explained primarily in relation to their society. The sport systems in question are, of course, integrat-
ed into very different social systems. For example, the systems of values in the USA and China contrast considerably while the population structures in Russia and Italy are certainly very different from the point of view of age and family structures. Largely open societies, in which vertical mobility is not obstructed by barriers or closing mechanisms, are confronted with rather closed and immobile societies, in which only certain groups find access to sought-after positions. A very difficult employment situation can be found in Germany for an increasingly larger part of society, while there is full employment in e.g. China – at least according to the official information. Countries with the pronounced social security systems of the welfare state are faced with countries showing virtually neo-liberalistic economic concepts. The ethnic structures in France and Great Britain favour recruiting athletes while in Germany and Australia tighter immigration laws are being discussed. Within the scope of this project, these are only some of the indications of why it is important to pay special attention to social aspects.

5.2 The system of high-performance sport

By identifying the characteristic features inherent in the eight systems of high-performance sport in question, both the manifold aspects they have in common and the differences that can be acknowledged in the next step become clear.

All the studied nations show a long Olympic tradition with intensive participation in recent Olympic Games. In all cases, the Olympic sports are given priority support and have ideological guidelines. For example, first place or “Being the Best in the World” is the only goal of Great Britain, the USA and China. For the Federal Republic of Germany the guideline is to medal (places one to three). All the countries work with yearly plans and special programmes and have their athletes, who are increasing-

ly accompanied by professionally oriented service personnel, structured into hierarchical pools. Performance is motivated by differentiated reward systems. In all the countries, centralised training seems to be an essential prerequisite for success. This is accompanied by year-round physiotherapy and sports medicine care. To provide these services, all the systems require steadily growing budgets, which can only be financed by a mixed income structure. In all the nations, athletes have special sport facilities for training and competition at their disposal and in publicly accessible sport facilities top athletes have privileged rights of use. All eight nations face issues of talent identification and talent development. By offering an extensive national competition system to their athletes all year round, all the studied nations strive to create favourable general conditions for international comparison. Finally, more or less committed structures for the fight against doping can be noted in all eight nations.

However, these common aspects cannot conceal the fact that there are striking differences to some endogenous categories of the respective systems. There is a department of serious sports within the DSB (German Sports Confederation) controlling German high-performance sport but one cannot find a comparable authority in any of the other systems. The NOCs in both the USA (USOC) and Italy (CONI, which has 1,200 employees) control the high-performance aspects of the Olympic disciplines largely without governmental influence. With regard to policy making, the most pronounced level of athlete participation is in the USA, where it is legally enshrined as a part of the system, but in all the other nations studied, athletes are primarily the recipients of orders. The reward systems for athletes vary considerably from country to country, and coaches are integrated into these systems in only a very few cases, e.g. in Australia. In some countries athletes enjoy substantial privileges in school, job and university, while in others these are disputed or do not exist at all. In Australia
and France, doping is fought against by means of specific public laws, in others, like Italy, such laws are planned, while in Germany such laws have been rejected. The number of doping control checks in training and competition varies greatly from country to country, and it has to be said that, when required, sanctions are not applied everywhere with the same level of determination.

The list of differences could be continued. Its length leads to the observation that there is obviously pressure for modernisation in all the eight systems of high-performance sport studied. The interviewees were unanimous in expressing that, almost everything is under close scrutiny in their respective systems. The agenda includes increasing efficiency, examination of existing resources and the search for functional equivalents.

5.3 Selected system-environment relationships

The role of the state and politics

Success in high-performance sport requires some degree of support from the state. However, the forms of state influence and the ways that states control or take responsibility differ greatly. Except for the USA, in all the countries in this study high-performance sport is directly supported by state taxes, it is under an extensive degree of political control and it is granted privileges by the state that are not available to other areas of society. The strongest governmental control is found in China, although a loosening has been observed in the past ten years. There, the administrative headquarters for sport has the rank of a ministry, the director is simultaneously president of the NOC, and the country’s vice-prime minister is the highest representative of sport. The state also intervenes extensively in the development of sports in the cases of Russia, Australia and France. In Russia, all sports associations and the NOC were decreed independent by President Boris Yeltsin in 1990 and a new sports law confirming that governmental interference was to be restricted to the allocations of funds was passed in 1999. In practice, however, the degree of governmental control is not limited by laws or long-term principles, it is largely determined by the political personalities. It is, therefore, somewhat unpredictable and difficult to perceive from the outside. In France, the relationship is clearer as there has been special legislation giving the ministry for youth and sport direct influence over the development of sport since 1984. In Germany and Great Britain, the state takes an intermediate position. In Italy and the United States, as stated above, the influence of the state is the least pronounced. However, the specific conditions for the development of sport in the USA were defined in the Amateur Sports Act in 1978 and a law dating from 1950 provides tax advantages for sports organisations. In Italy, the state has only a monitoring function for high-performance sport though it is responsible for school and university sports. Nevertheless, it does have an indirect influence on high-performance sport through the military sport system. This situation is primarily the creation of Andreotti who, as minister of state in 1948, pushed through a law for the financing of sports in 1948 under which the Italian lotteries (Totocalcio, Totogol, Totosei) became the main source of funding for Italian high-performance sport and CONI was declared the association of associations.

The role of the economy

The role of the economy in the development of high-performance sport is extremely different in the eight examined nations. It is conspicuous that though in many cases there are company sports associations or industrial teams, business directly produces top sporting performances only in exceptional cases. The influence of business is usually indirect, confined mainly to sponsorship arrangements. In this way, the economy is co-financer of the system of
high-performance sport. The American economy has the biggest influence on the financing of the sport system through a comprehensive sponsoring and donation system. Australia and Great Britain show similar intensive sponsorship structures while the engagement of sponsors in France and Italy is slightly lower. Sport sponsorship in Germany is still has somewhat subordinate to governmental support. Sponsorship and patronage are least pronounced in China and Russia. In China it is almost exclusively US companies that support of high-performance sport: General Motors, General Electrics, Boeing, Delta Airlines. In Russia sport sponsorship only works on the highest level of sport and, again, it is primarily foreign companies – like Reebok, Adidas, Coca Cola, MTV-Inform (media) and Red October (equipment) - providing support. On a regional level, Russian governmental companies are still the most important supporters of local athletes and competitions, usually supplying non-monetary services.

The role of the mass media

In all the eight nations studied, the most important amplifier for the development of the system of high-performance sport is the media. In each case, the sporting press plays an important role by providing news coverage which complements sport programming, driven by viewing figures, on manifold television stations, including specialist sport channels. In Italy, there is a distinctive tradition of extensive coverage that includes three daily sports newspapers, two specialist sports channels (Streamsport and RAI Sport Sat) and a large profession of sports journalists. The Gazetta dello Sport reaches a circulation of 3.2 million compared to the best selling daily newspaper, Corriera della Sera, at merely 2.7 million. In France and in the USA, sport also has a special status in the mass media. On American television, there are several sports channels, some of which specialise on only one sport, and Sports Illustrated is the highest circulation sports magazine in the world. In Australia, Great Britain and Germany the media show similar structures with reference to sport while the Russian and Chinese sport media are still in the early stages of such development. In all the countries studied, TV sport is an important instrument of finance for high-performance sport as it is a particularly attractive medium for sponsors. However, the chance to obtain funding through the sale of broadcasting rights exists for only a few sports. In Russia, for example, only the most popular sports (football and ice-hockey) can sell their rights while all the other associations must pay for broadcasts in order to ensure sponsor funding for their sport. Finally, the Internet is becoming a new marketplace of high-performance sport in all countries.

The role of education

The public school system has an important role in development for all the systems of high-performance sport studied. The competition systems of schools and universities support the high-performance sport systems, they are recruiting sources for personnel and they pro-vide partial links to the system of science. The specific historical development in each country has also led to sports institutions that work in some degree of cooperation with the school system. This is especially true for the club system in Germany but comparable structures can be found in France, Italy and in Great Britain. Universities can also play a critical role but this mainly applies to Anglo-Saxon universities and, particularly to the USA, although the so-called sports universities that can be found in Russia, China, France and Germany are of importance. Seven of the performance systems have special schools for serious sport within the public school system. The children and youth sport schools of the former GDR and the comparable schools of the former Soviet Union are reference points in this context. In Russia, sport schools represent the central foundation of the system of high-performance sport. The country has 3,000 sport schools,
2,113 children and youth sport clubs, 860 children and youth sport schools of the Olympic Reserve Supply, 73 youth sport schools of higher proficiencies and 30 universities of the Olympic Reserve Supply. The number of these sport schools exceeds the totals in France and Germany by many times and only in China can a comparable number be found. About 80% of Russian Olympic participants in the individual sports hold a degree from a university of the Olympic Reserve Supply. Despite the country’s economic difficulties, one has to assume that Russia will continue to hold its position in international competition because of the ongoing functioning of its system of sport schools. In the USA, intramural sport at both the school and university levels plus interscholastic sport and intercollegiate sport are the primary mediums for the education system’s contribution to sport. The major universities, which are members of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, and some smaller universities and colleges grant scholarships to outstanding athletes, who are required to maintain a minimum grade average in their academic studies to remain eligible. These scholarships support the intercollegiate sport system and are a central element for the development of nation’s high-performance system.

The role of science

The systems of high-performance sport in the eight examined nations are all scientifically supported. In each case, there are special research institutes and advice centres to look after athletes and support their coaches. All the nations are also equipped with central research institutes, although these show considerable differences in respect to scientific orientation and number of staff. The Federal Institute of Sports Science (BISp), the Institute of Adapted Training (IAT) and the National Institute of Sports Equipment (FES) in Germany have a special status. The INSEP (Institut National du Sport et l’Education Physique) in France and AIS (Australian Institute of Sport) in Australia are central service institutes supporting pool athletes in the sports medicine / training scientific fields. But the INSEP is also the central institution of education with respect to high-performance sport and in France, where sport science at the universities is not a strong feature, there is only marginal research into high-performance sport. Otherwise, the universities of all the examined countries participate in general research into high-performance sport. Sport science is especially distinguished in Russia, Australia and Germany. Russian sports science plays a unique role in the world. The academies of St. Petersburg and Moscow are at the top of their field. In China, there are five special research institutes and two university research institutes, which split the research of high-performance sport between them. In the USA, sport science work is carried out through the various university research structures but specific sport science institutes are of no importance. In Italy and Great Britain, sport science advice services are rather subordinate. In Great Britain, a network of research institutes is established at the different home countries. In Italy only one research institute is occupied with high-performance sport. The Instituto Scienze dello Sport in Rome primarily conducts sports medicine and training science research. Furthermore, an effort is being made to build up an extensive advice system in cooperation with Italian universities. It is notable that only a few branches of sport science and their advice services are accepted by the systems of high-performance sport studied. Sports medicine, performance diagnostics, biomechanics and especially physiotherapy hold an outstanding position in this context. Only in the United States can sports psychology count on an equivalent response. Sport sociological advice services are generally unknown.

The role of the military

The assessment of the role of the military for the development of high-performance sport in the systems studied varies from “of
highest importance” to “without any relevance”. It is striking that the military and the police play virtually no role at all in the Anglo-Saxon nations whereas in Germany and Russia the military is of high importance. In the armed forces of these countries, there are special institutions for high-performance sport in which top athletes are offered ideal conditions for training and competition. The same is true for France, particularly for winter sports.

6 High-performance sport between “Talk” and “Action” - an interpreting outlook

The provisional look at the high-performance sport systems in eight countries, including their dependence on general social conditions and the important relationships to their environments, reveals anything but a consistent rationality. The first analysis focused primarily on the surface of the sport systems and relationships to other areas in society. When deeper structures are observed and analysed some possibilities for interpretation arise and patterns of communication that might not be noticed at first sight become evident. As with societies that are permanently under pressure for modernisation, the institutions of high-performance sport also seem to be in a race for continuous renewal. The economy, the market and competition seem to dictate the rationalities of action. The pressure for renewal that can be found in sport institutions indicates that they cannot be considered static. Instead, they are challenged again and again by protagonists from many systems and decisive changes are suggested by the demands of acting economically, demands whose influence on sport in increasing continuously.

The concept of “New Institutionalism” could be helpful in explaining this phenomenon. It was mainly MEYER/ROWAN (1977) and DIMAGGIO/POWELL (1983) who showed that organisations in a continuous process of modernisation not only strive for ever more efficient ways of dealing with problems, they also strive to establish legitimacy. The thought provoking thesis reads that the formal structures of organisations express myths, which are institutionalised within their social environment. Applied to high-performance sport, this means that certain myths outside of sports are taken up and are then copied in sport organisations. In this way sports institutions seek ensure their survivability and these patterns become more important than a mere orientation towards technical-instrumental criteria of dealing with problems. MEYER/ROWAN explain their thesis by giving the example of the increasing importance of professional management consultancies. Some companies making use of these services are not necessarily striving for an increase in efficiency in the operation of the organisation, but want to ensure an internal and external legitimacy. Just like these companies, some institutions of high-performance sport seek external advice without having an increase in efficiency in mind. In this way, they comply with the social myths of innovation and rationality. Such a mythical role can at least partly be assumed for sports science. Organisations that are under pressure for modernisation try to comply with the myth by forming committees, passing guidelines, calling transfer institutions into being, etc. The activity structure of the organisation itself, however, frequently remains untouched. Thus, a separation takes place between the formal structure visible to the outside and the inner activity structure. The activity structure of the organisation itself, however, frequently remains untouched. Thus, a separation takes place between the formal structure visible to the outside and the inner activity structure. Within the formal structure, one behaves as if one is ready for changes and adapts almost ritually to the altered expectations of the environment. In the inner activity structure, however, one carries out “business as usual” and remains unimpressed. The interviews conducted indicate, in various ways, that a separation between the outer formal structure and the inner activity structure has taken place in high-performance sport institutions and that it is probably necessary for their survivability.
An appropriate institutional-theoretical and interpretative aid to understanding current trends in high-performance sport systems could be DIMAGGIO’s isomorphism concept, which shows that competing companies are in a relationship of mutual legitimisation. DIMAGGIO states that it is possible to observe adaptation processes among various companies and calls these adaptation processes institutional isomorphism. He distinguishes between three isomorphic mechanisms: compulsion (coercive isomorphism), imitation (mimetic isomorphism) and normative pressure (normative isomorphism).

Isomorphism evoked by compulsion is primarily the result of governmental guidelines and obligatory regulations. In high-performance sport such elements can be found, for example, in the fight against doping. Common action in the legal field leads to structural adaptations of organisations. Such an effect can presently be seen in the creation of WADA (the World Anti-Doping Agency). Within Europe isomorphisms in sports organisations that are created by compulsion, in addition to the effects of social-institutional value systems, can also be seen in other areas such as women, minorities and environmental pollution. It is common to all organisations that these systems find expression, amongst others, through the creation of new jobs and the appointment of delegates.

The second form of institutional isomorphism is evoked by imitation. Mimetic isomorphism is mostly the result of insecurity. Unclear cause and effect structures, heterogeneous expectations of the environment and a lack of straightforward problem-solving technologies lead to processes of mutual observation and copying. These circumstances can be found in all the systems of high-performance sport studied. Successful models are imitated relatively quickly and are adapted across the boundaries of organisations. The innovation itself is in this way replicated, as is the pattern that is at the root of the innovation. HASSE/KRÜCKEN point out that an increasingly dense web of external consulting firms promotes such processes and act as agents of fusion. These firms are no longer restricted to working with business organisations. The takeover of some institutions of the former GDR sport system can be interpreted as “mimetic isomorphisms” as can the purchase of a concept for detecting talents by Britain or attempts to copy performance diagnostic strategies.

The third form of institutional isomorphism, namely normative isomorphism, is largely the result of professions exerting a normative pressure. They provide their members with a framework of orientation, which develops normative commitments and leads to the preference and general application of certain problem solving patterns. These patterns become effective partly through personnel selection and partly through professional unions. The dominance of lawyers on the management committees of sport organisations can be seen as an example of this tendency. Virtually everything calling itself “management” or “manager” exerts this normative pressure. Institutional isomorphism comes into being chiefly through a personnel selection exerted on such professions.

A continuity of reform claims also can be found in the examined high-performance sport systems. BRUNSSON/OLSEN (1993) have shown that in Sweden reforms are permanently expected and are therefore seen as perfectly legitimate. As a result, reform becomes routine. Presently a comparable development seems to be taking place in high-performance sport organisations. To them, increasing efficiency is apparently of special importance. But striving for efficiency often results in “reform for the sake of a reform”. A demystification of reforms in high-performance sport would hence be possible by a neo-institutionalistic view. The expectations of a rational development of organisation and of a hierarchic control are put into perspective by such observations. For the institutions of high-performance sport one can likewise assume that the lasting modernisation attempts will produce less specific and intended results, but rather indirect effects and, in contrast to the intention, partly coun-
teracting effects. Therefore, BRUNSSON/OLSEN differentiate between the terms “talk” and “action”. More and more frequently, a discrepancy between organisational “talk” and organisational “action” is manifested in the eight systems of high-performance sport studied. On the “talk” level one acts as if one was ready for reforms and one makes rhetorical allowances for the fact that there are altered ideas of appropriate and modern organisational behaviour. On the “action” level, however, unchanged patterns of behaviour continue to dominate in the organisation.

One can therefore assume that for the institutions of high-performance sport there will be contradicting expectations, which will lead to a situation in which some institutional guidelines will merely be followed symbolically. There is hardly a better example of the difference between “talk” and “action” than in the treatment of the doping problem. Some systems of serious sport regard “talk” without “action” as an appropriate functional equivalent to gain an advantage over the international competitors. Without any doubt, there is a conflict between an anti-doping policy and an orientation towards medals in modern high-performance sport. The clash of interests hints at a general social development, which leads to an increasing disintegration of straightforward and homogeneous expectation structures. Ambiguities, ambivalence and contradictions have long since replaced a point-to-point equivalent of institutional guideline and action in high-performance sport. Potential and actual contradictions of institutional guidelines have become a central characteristic feature of modern societies. High-performance sport between “talk” and “action”, between compulsion, imitation and normative pressure – it will still have to be proved whether these patterns of interpretation are acceptable.

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