


Faster, Higher, Longer – The Future of Top-Level Sport

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Our Future is Open

Our future can be thought in plural terms, contingent upon many possibilities. These possibilities, or better yet uncertainties, defy the validity of science, for predictions of the future do not necessarily agree with reality. However, this does not suggest that they are necessarily false or useless, for they may be responsible for avoiding a non-desirable outcome. Humans think about the future by creating visions with the intent of putting them into practice through action. It is typical and desirable for human beings to plan on a short-, medium- and long-term basis, thinking about tomorrow and beyond. This thought process can also be applied when we begin to question the future viability of top-level sport.

Past, Present and Future

People responsible for top-level sport should constantly think of the future and which goals to set and paths to follow. However, the ability to provide for and plan for the future is dependent on certain prerequisites. In order to discuss the future one needs to consult and refer to the past, a historical education. By knowing the past a person is more cognisant of how structures have developed and changed. The past provides knowledge of gains and losses important to interpreting current changes. In turn, one should avoid talking about future possibilities in an over-simplified and generalised fashion. It is more helpful and efficient to focus on the structures characteristic of the interpretation of phenomenon in both the past and present. By performing this, it is possible to extrapolate each individual structure as far as its characteristics are concerned into the future there by marking the chances and risks existing in the current structures.

Structural Prospects of Performance Sport

If we consider the system of top-level sport from this point of view, we are inclined to identify at least nine individual factors, responsible for predicting how the past and subsequently the present progress to and influence the future. These factors result from the point of view of a resource theory, based on the resources currently available in high-performance sport. Using this theoretical approach, I have observed the most successful nations at the Olympics over a period of several years. These observations are presented in this study.

Athlete

In order to ponder the future of top-level sport we need first to focus on the athlete. Without the athletes there is no future. Are they in their totality organised in a sensible way? Are they as a social group future-compliant? Which qualities should they possess? What are the problems they are currently confront? And to what extent are they at risk?

Recent empirical observations of athletes show that almost all of them are subject to the totalisation process of top-level sport. In short, an athlete's personality is reduced to and dictated by sport. The number of professional athletes taking part in the Olympic Games has risen steadily, with the athlete becoming totally absorbed by the training and competition process. Young, talented athletes are socialised into a profession characterised by high risks. School education is neglected, impacting careers after the competition period. Regeneration periods are getting shorter and shorter, which creates an increased risk of injury and is limiting for personal development in other areas (i.e., social and cultural). In short, there are no down-times for athletes. This may result in a premature end to careers, which lately has become more of the norm. Unfortunately for such an athlete, no social networks exist to care for them post career.

Coaches

Apart from the role of the athlete, the role of the coach must be considered. Is the identity of the coach sufficiently strengthened? Are there enough young coaches? What significance has gender in relation to the coaching profession? Are the current possibilities of education and further education sufficient? What should the education be like in the future?

The study conducted by DIGEL/THIEL in 2006-2009 referring to the situation of coaches in the Federal Republic of Germany has produced alarming findings concerning the occupational image of coaches. In the world of top-level sport, employment law is violated almost daily. Coaches can well be called the

victims of modern top-level sport. In most cases their income is completely insufficient, they face considerable mental risks with their job with no future professional development provided. In most international systems of top-level sport the coach profession is far from what is deemed desirable.

Associational organisation

Third, the associational organisation of coaches and athletes must be considered. Are there adequate management structures to the benefit of top-level sport? Is there sufficient competence? Is there modernisation potential in top-level sport?

Currently, the existing organisational units will not provide for optimal solutions concerning the future organisation of top-level sport. Top-level sport hovers between a non-profit and profit economic model. The poses great challenges as the cooperation between full-time and employees and volunteers is rarely successful, with the organisations suffering from long drawn-out decision processes and responsibilities remaining unclear. In Olympic sports a considerable lack of competence is observed on the boards with regard to decisions affecting the future development. Political priorities affect technical leadership, with questionable personal interests, in the form of corruption, leading to decisions threatening the validity of some of the Olympic sports federations.

Knowledge management

A fourth important aspect concerns knowledge management and communication responsible for enabling top-level sport performances. How do coaches and athletes learn? Is the exchange of experience successful? Are there new findings promoting the further development of a sport? Which communication media are efficient in this context? Which will be in the future?

Several studies conducted by MUCKENHAUPT/DIGEL, along with some international comparative studies, show that knowledge

management in top-level sport remains insufficiently organised and controlled. The communication between science and competitive sport is only rarely successful. Many coaches in top-level sport rely on structures that prevent open communication about coaches' knowledge. Only in exceptional cases have the scientists found forms of communication suitable for coaches. In addition, the problems of competitive sport are not taken sufficiently seriously by science, and scientific findings are only rarely helpful.

Science

Sport science and the other academic sciences involved with sport must play a greater supporting role in performance sport. Do they fulfil this task in an adequate manner? Are the right questions and problems being investigated? What will be the relevant questions in the future?

Although the cooperation between science and practice is called for, suitable instruments of communication have very rarely been found. The exchange between science and practice suffers from prejudices. Particularly sport science has only in exceptional cases proven that it is an applied science to the extent that the quality of advice it gives to high-performance sport is especially valuable.

Mass media

The aspect of mass media response is of increasing importance to top-level sport. Here it must be asked what influence the media has on the development of top-level sport? How will it change in the future? What will be the effect of these changes on top-level sport?

My observations concerning mass media show that perhaps we must speak of a 'sportisation' of the mass media. However, only very few professional sports benefit from this sportisation. The process of sportisation takes place in a twofold manner. Firstly, the TV programme is filled with more and more sports-casts. Football games can be watched every day of the week, with the share of airtime for sport coverage increasing from year to year.

However, sportisation takes place outside of sports reporting. In a trivialised form sport becomes a topic of entertainment in German TV programmes such as "Beat Raab" ("Schlag den Raab"). In knowledge shows such as "Who wants to be a millionaire?" ("Wer wird Millionär?") the idea of competition is at the centre of an entertainment programme as well. Often, prominent sports personalities are invited to such shows to serve as role models binding the audience to the programme. In general, the image of sport conveyed through such programmes is extremely one-sided, placing the cultural quality of modern sport in question. Here, trivialisation and banalisation form a questionable symbiosis. This process must be called dangerous for the further development of a lot of sports. Sports that will no longer appear in the reality created by TV will inevitably have difficulties in finding and recruiting young athletes.

Spectators

Spectators and their participation has become an integral part for the success of top-level sport. Does top-level sport have an adequate number of spectators? How has the spectatorship of the individual top-level sports changed? Can top-level sport still attract spectators? What kind of spectators has it lost and subsequently gained?

Studies on the issue of spectatorship in sport have indicated that there is a close correlation between the spectators visiting sport events and those who prefer watching sports on TV. Sports that achieve high viewing rates are normally the ones that attract people to the stadia. As a consequence of this interrelation there is a considerable loss of viewership in several sports. Sport events that cannot create media response are therefore not only unattractive for sponsors, but it also become increasingly difficult for them to create spectator loyalty both at a local and regional level.

Competition structure

An eighth area becomes self-evident when we ask what the competitions will be like in the future. What does the competition structure look like today? Which contents should

dominate the culture of elite sport? What will be the role of the Olympic sports in this context? What will be the role of the non-Olympic sports and the sport for the disabled? What will be the consequences if the differentiation of sports will also have a continuous impact on the sports events?

As far as the question regarding the future of top-level sport is concerned, the so-called sports calendar represents a key factor. My observations regarding the sports calendar have focused on a dangerous fact: During the last fifty years there has been a dynamic increase of international sport events, which has led to a year-round sports calendar. So, now we have the situation where there is not only an international sports event every day of the year, there is rather an accumulation of often up to ten international events competing at the same time for sponsors and TV time. This process of the increase of international events is not slowing down. On the contrary, decisions by the newly founded international sport organisations such as “SportAccord” have planned to add more global mega-sports events. Therefore, apart from both the summer and winter Olympic Games, there is a plethora of international sporting events (i.e., World Championships, Commonwealth Games, the Universiade, the Olympic Youth Games, the Asia Games, the Africa Games, the Mediterranean Games, etc). In addition, newly recent additions include the so-called Compact Games, the Mind Games with the president of “SportAccord” hinting at planning an additional three global sports competitions. Further, China will play a crucial role in the future development of the sports calendar, with the role of continents such as Africa and South America also contributing to this phenomenon.

As far as the awarding of international sports events is concerned, one can speak of a trend towards the de-Europeanisation of events. To a considerable degree this is caused by the new power structures in international sporting organisations. However, from the point of view of sports sociology, the impact of such processes on the national, regional and local level

all over the world is very important. For example, if one refers to the financial dependence of sports competitions in Germany, we begin to realise that these international processes are responsible for the decline and sometimes the death of competitions at the regional and national levels. The German sporting organisations are forced to secure funds in order to secure German representation at these international mega-events, to the detriment of the national and regional events. It remains to be seen what effects such funding support will have on young athletes in clubs and associations. This situation should be closely monitored in order to observe the future effects.

Health management

What are the minimal health requirements for children and adolescents to begin a career leading to top-level sport? How is their health protected during their career? How accountable and responsible are the medical systems regarding injuries and disease? What support exists for athletes who prematurely end their career because of illness?

If one considers how athletes, coaches and officials deal with these questions, recent studies by THIEL, MAYER & DIGEL (2008) have revealed that the situation can only be defined by one term, grave. In most Olympic sports, athletes are extremely careless with their health often self-medicating, with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as voltaren, aspirin, and other medicinal products (i.e., creatine) being consumed daily as part of their nutritional regime. The natural help signal of the human body, pain, is disrespectfully negated, leading to long-term health problems. There are no signs of a clever health management, with regeneration periods being grossly neglected, and necessary rehabilitation measures shortened. The top-level athlete's career is subjected to short-term thinking. Everything done is geared towards earning as much money as possible and achieving sports success as fast as possible. Thus a lot of careers are extremely shortened through personal negligence or fail because of these self-destructive measures.

Further Structural Features

Though the nine structural characteristics mentioned above are very important in influencing the viability of sport in the future, one can add to this list the impact of judges, referees, sports facilities and arenas. In turn, we must not forget the political power within the system of top-level sport. How has this changed over the years? Who will be in authority in sport on the global, European, or national level in the future? How will the competitiveness among the sports associations express itself in the future? In other words, looking at the relation between club and elite sport, between leisure-time and health sport on the one hand versus top-level sport with its rather harmful consequences on the other.

The Ethics of Top-Level Sport

Ethics is another important topic of equal or more weight with regard to the viability for the future of top-level sport. When considering the developments we have witnessed it has been observed that besides the intended positive effects there are also unintended consequences, often based on egotistical pursuits neglecting the common welfare of the athlete the sport itself.

The public image of top-level sport has long since been marked by immoderateness, corruption, violence, cheating, doping, health hazards, stupidity, arrogance and haughtiness. This is not to mention the number of VIPs and VVIPs, five star hotels and expensive cars. The list goes on and is still increasing. All these manifestations, which are at least indirectly related to the maxim of increasing performance, govern high-performance sports. These views have begun to convince many experts that sport is running the risk of destroying itself or at least that a new ethical consensus is required.

Conclusion

Referring to the nine structural characteristics discussed with their related questions, I can truly suggest that every single aspect presented is extremely critical as far as the future development of top-level sports is concerned. However, we continue to remain helpless when trying to provide answers to the many questions posed, as to how best to solve the problems put up for discussion.

In my opinion, completely new initiatives are necessary to help sport. Scientific activities in favour of sport must be increased considerably if science is to aid in the organisation of sport. The reflective skills of the sport organisations must achieve a completely new quality if they wish to continue influencing sport in a responsible way in the future. Athletes are in need of proper protection, with their health being considered a valuable asset, deserving to be preserved as long as possible. Health professionals who violate the ethical principles of their profession by non-medical behaviour must be ostracised and eliminated from the organisations of sport. Differentiation, for example as far as competitions are concerned, should be replaced by integration. Stop rules are strongly desired. Completely new co-operations with the mass media are necessary if top-level sport wants to develop further in a responsible way.

I would like to end my statements with the opinion that the maxim of “Citius, Altius, Fortius” has reached its limits and the suggestion that a new maxim is required for top-level sport. I invite readers to consider and comment on a maxim that reflects a new ethical orientation: “More Autonomous, More Fair, More Humane”.

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