

Swedish elite sport at a crossroads? Results from a study of government support for elite sport

Authors: Johan R Norberg, Paul Sjöblom, Josef Fahlén & Per Göran Fahlström

Institutions: Department of Sport Sciences, Malmö University, Department of History, Stockholm University, Department of Education, Umeå University
School of Education, Psychology and Sports Science, Linnaeus University

E-mail: johan.norberg@mah.se, paul.sjobolm@historia.su.se, josef.fahlen@pedag.umu.se, pergoran.fahlstrom@lnu.se

Aim of abstract/paper - research question

The Swedish National Centre for Research in Sports (CIF) is a state-funded scientific board with the task to initiate, coordinate, support and disseminate research on sport. Since 2009, CIF has also been responsible for annually examining the government's support for sport. This includes continuous evaluation through a set of quantitative indicators and thematic in-depth studies on issues identified by the government.

For 2011, the government decided that CIF would carry out an in-depth study of the structure and impact of government support for elite sport. A study was conducted in collaboration with several research groups under the guidance of Johan R Norberg, researcher at CIF. The results were reported to the Swedish government in May 2012. The aim of the abstract is to present results from CIF:s analysis of government support for elite sport in Sweden.

Theoretical background or literature review

In Sweden, elite sport has always had a relatively marginal position – at least on a political level (Norberg & Sjöblom 2012, Bergsgard & Norberg 2010). Ideologically, the Swedish Sports Confederation has always preferred to characterise the societal benefits of sport in terms of public health, voluntarism and youth fostering rather than emphasising elite sports accomplishments and medals. In addition, government support for sport has mainly come in the shape of subsidies to sports facilities, grants to youth sport activities and economic support to the administration of the national sporting federations, while targeted investments in elite sports been few. Furthermore, public funding of elite activities have had an ambivalent position, viewed as somewhat inappropriate in a social democratic welfare regime based on ideals of breadth and equality rather than elitism and ranking.

In recent years, however, the Swedish government has taken several steps to strengthen the international competitiveness of Swedish sport. The breakthrough came in 1998 in the shape of earmarked subsidies for talent-development in Olympic sports, followed in 2009 by a comprehensive and four-year-long elite investment of 22,8 million EUR to be distributed among all sports within the Swedish Sports Confederation. In addition, the government included elite sport among the goals that regulate state support for sports.

In sum, since the turn of the millennium the Swedish government has both recognised elite sports as an area of public concern and, at least to some extent, granted the sports movement's requests for government support for elite sport and talent development. In 2011, CIF was given the assignment of evaluating the impact of these measures. Theoretically, the survey takes its starting point in current research on increased competition in international elite sport (De Bosscher et al 2008, Houlihan & Green 2008). The overarching question is whether Sweden is about to join "the Global Sporting Arms Race" or if the Swedish government's support for sports will continue to focus mainly on sports-for-all, voluntarism and youth sports.

Methodology, research design and data analysis

CIF:s survey of Swedish elite sport consists of a number of empirical studies. Johan R Norberg begins with a comprehensive analysis of the Swedish elite sport system. This chapter is mainly based on previously unknown quantitative data relating to sports federations' economy, scope and results at international championships. Paul Sjöblom of Stockholm University and Josef Fahlén at Umeå University provide a brief account of international tendencies in elite sport support based on a review of international research. Thereafter, Fahlén and Sjöblom also outline the current state of Swedish elite sport, basing their findings on interviews with athletes, coaches and sports managers in eight strategically selected sports. PG Fahlström at the Linnaeus University maps the occurrence of programs for coaching development in Swedish sports based on surveys and interviews with higher education institutions and sports federations. Finally, Norberg highlights sports policy implications of the government's increased support for elite sport, based on different views of the governments role and responsibility in issues concerning sports and sports policy (Norberg 2011).

Results, discussion and implications/conclusions**

The study shows that the Swedish elite sports system is strongly influenced by the overarching sports-for-all- principles that characterize Swedish sports and Swedish sports policy: ideologically, organizationally and in terms of government support. Furthermore, the sports movement's 244 national teams operate under very different economic conditions. In addition, the government's objectives concerning elite sports support are vague. This raises the question if the public support to sport is to increase Swedish elite sport performances or to give all sports basic premises to carry out both sports-for-all and elite sports.

References

- Bergsgard, N. & J. R Norberg (2010) "Sports policy and politics – the Scandinavian way", in *Sport in Society Cultures, Commerce, Media, Politics*, Volume 13 Issue 4 (2010)
- De Bosscher, V., Bingham, J., Shibli, S., van Bottenburg, M. & De Knop, P. (2008). *The Global Sporting Arms Race – An International Comparative Study on Sports Policy Factors leading to International Sporting Success*. Oxford: Meyer & Meyer Sport.
- Houlihan, B. & Green, M. (2008). *Comparative Elite Sport Development – systems, structures and public policy*. Oxford: Elsevier.

- Norberg J. R (2011), A contract reconsidered? Changes in the Swedish state's relation to the sports movement" in *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* Volume 3 nr 3, 2011
- Norberg, J. R. & P. Sjöblom (2012), The Swedish elite sport system – or the lack of it? In S. Andersen & L.T. Ronglan (Eds.). *Nordic elite sport – is organization and leadership the key?* Oslo: Norwegian University Press. (2012)