

## Same ambitions – different tracks: A comparative perspective on Nordic elite sport

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## Abstract

Studies of politics, welfare states and social issues often emphasize the commonalities that constitute a Nordic model. Similarly, research on international elite sport emphasize the convergence of elite sport systems. In the domain of Nordic elite sport commonalities exist, but the differences are more striking. Not only are there differences among the national elite sport systems, they also often run counter to dominant patterns of political and societal organizations within each country. This article explores how such differences have come about since the Second World War, and how they influence the way today's challenges are dealt with in the different Nordic countries.

Key words: elite sport, Nordic, Olympics, support, systems, comparison, development, results

## **Same ambition – different tracks: A comparative perspective on Nordic elite sport**

### **Introduction**

The Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden – are in many respects quite similar. They have small populations and comparable social, economic and political systems. They are among the wealthiest countries in the world, with strong welfare states and a strong emphasis on egalitarian values. Social democratic values were the context for investments in infrastructure and development of a broad mass movement during sport in the post-Second World War period (Goksøyr, Andersen and Asdal, 1996). However, this does not mean that elite sports have no role to play in these societies. Compared to their size they all do well in international sports.

There are no systematic comparative studies of elite sports in the Nordic countries. Recently, *Sport in Society* (2010) published a special edition on sport in the Scandinavian countries. Scandinavia comprises three of the Nordic countries; Denmark, Sweden and Norway. The articles in the edition highlighted some characteristics associated with Scandinavian sport in general, such as the way sport is organized as voluntary organizations (Ibsen and Seippel, 2010), the extent to which sport policies reflect the broader Scandinavian welfare policies (Bergsgard and Norberg, 2010), and how sports for children are emphasized and organized according to specific criteria. Although these issues are related to the organization and workings of elite sport in these countries, elite sport development as such was not specifically discussed.

Even within-country studies of Nordic elite sports are remarkably few. A couple of studies have discussed the organization of elite sport in Norway (Augestad, Bergsgard and Hansen, 2006; Steen-Johnsen and Hanstad, 2008), Sweden (Sjöblom and Fahlén, 2010), and Denmark (Storm and Nielsen, 2010) respectively. One main finding of these studies is that,

due to increasing international competition, processes of professionalization and standardization are going on. This is consistent with international research supporting that elite sport organizations in Western countries have become more and more similar at a general level (Green and Oakley, 2001; Houlihan and Green, 2008; Oakley and Green, 2001). However, as this article will demonstrate, this kind of increased convergence may go hand in hand with growing divergence at a national level.

The article explores how similarities and differences across the Nordic countries have come about since the Second World War, and how they influence the way today's challenges of elite sport is dealt with within the different countries. Below we will first present methodology and data. Then follows a discussion of divergence and convergence related to elite sport organizations. The rest of the article compares and discusses historical paths and present patterns of elite sport organization in the four countries. In conclusion we discuss major findings and challenges for future research.

### **Methodology and data**

Success depends on many different factors. We do not attempt to provide a detailed explanation of variations in results among the Nordic countries. We focus on the organizational models of elite sports within the different countries. Such models are intended to support efforts to develop world class performance. Despite similar ambitions, the Nordic countries have pursued quite different strategies. The national elite sport systems vary considerably with respect to degree of centralization and coordination. They will often contain elements of conflict and dynamics that may affect the ability to effectively support elite sport development.

The article focuses on elite sport within a set of countries that represent 'most similar systems' (Meckstroth, 1975; Gerring, 2007). They are similar with respect to size,

geographical region, societal and political institutions, and welfare state arrangements. In the domain of sport they share a basic model emphasizing a broad voluntary sports movement, sports for all, and the utilitarian values of sport participation. The sports domain is dominated by one or a few organizations that incorporate regional levels and local clubs. These similar characteristics are the context of the divergent paths that are explored and compared in the article.

In the SPLISS model, the overall organization of elite sport is discussed as the second of eight pillars (De Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, van Bottenburg and De Knop, 2008). In contrast to quantitative studies that are built around rough structural indicators, we try to capture the more detailed organization supporting national efforts in elite sports. Critical factors are legitimacy and the ability to pursue strict priorities in a coordinated way. The development of organizational models is discussed within an institutional perspective. Organizational models are not simply tools designed to deal with specific challenges related to competitiveness in international sports. Strategies reflect underlying struggles over legitimate values and interests, as well as the instrumentality and efficiency of different types of arrangements (March & Olsen, 1989).

The empirical data builds on a collaborative project involving Nordic researchers that are specialists on their own national systems (Andersen & Ronglan, 2012). Individual studies of historical developments and present systems are the basis for the comparative analysis in this article. The project exploited a number of sources. Historical material, results statistics and policy documents were combined with interviews with key informants to enrich the information from each country. Comprehensive interviews have been conducted with central leaders in the national Olympic Committees, national confederations of sport and national elite sport organizations in all four countries.

### **Elite sports – convergence and divergence**

Convergence can be defined as alignment with elements in an institutional environment so that there is a lessening of variance around some central dimensions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Common elements of national elite sport systems include construction of elite facilities, support for ‘full-time’ athletes, the provision of coaching, sports science and sports medicine support service; and a hierarchy of competition opportunities centred on preparation for international sports (De Bosscher et al., 2008; Houlihan and Green, 2008). In this sense also, the Nordic countries have become more similar over the last decades.

Elite sport is characterized by intense competitive pressures. Convergence stems from the attempt to apply general blueprints, or templates, or to imitate successful prototypes. Such general models are used for comparing or evaluating practices. Cognitive models, reflecting general ideas about rationality, come to be viewed as appropriate, attractive or necessary institutional recipes in a field of action (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Prototypes are specific representations of such models to be imitated by those organizations that seek to improve competitiveness. Both templates and prototypes may trigger reorientation, reforms and changes across national systems (Wedlin, 2007).

Studies of modern elite sport show how the basic elements of the general and abstract model of modern elite sport have been integrated in national elite sport systems in developed countries. This tendency reflects macro-institutional processes at the level of the international systems, but also attempts to imitate others that are perceived as particularly successful (Houlihan and Green, 2008). The trend towards convergence does not, however, imply that national elite sport in various countries or within specific sport organizes or pursues key elements in modern elite sport in very similar ways. How general ideas, cognitive models and

norms in the international environment are exploited, depends on characteristics of the local national context (Thornton and Occasio, 2008).

Such local adaptations are typical for all national elite sport systems. As Augestad et al. (2006: 310) pointed out:

Even if we find that the various nations have developed a system of comprehensive expertise to serve their national sports teams, a closer examination of the systems will uncover many differences: roles, interaction between roles, patterns of interaction between experts and athletes, decision-making systems, treatment of performers, patterns of influence, ways of thinking, and so on.

The development in Nordic elite sport is consistent with a growing body of general research showing how local actors actively interpret, edit and use general ideas in local contexts (Røvik, 2007). Such factors also point to the importance of institutional entrepreneurship (Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence, 2004). Below we will show how different institutional arrangements, organizational capacities and entrepreneurial initiatives have shaped Nordic elite sport.

### **Nordic countries – international results**

Success in elite sport can be measured in different ways. Some non-Olympic sports (e.g. golf and tennis) have high prestige and are widespread throughout the world. For some professionalized Olympic sports such as tennis and football, the Olympic Games is not considered to be the pinnacle of achievement. Nevertheless, given that the Olympic Games is the most prestigious contest in many sports, elite sport organizations in nations across the world invest considerable effort in achieving success in Olympic sports. The Olympic Games also cover a wide variety of sports (26 sports and 39 disciplines in 2012) and thus the simple

statistics in the Figures 1 and 2 below provide a strong picture of the overall competitiveness of elite sports in each nation.

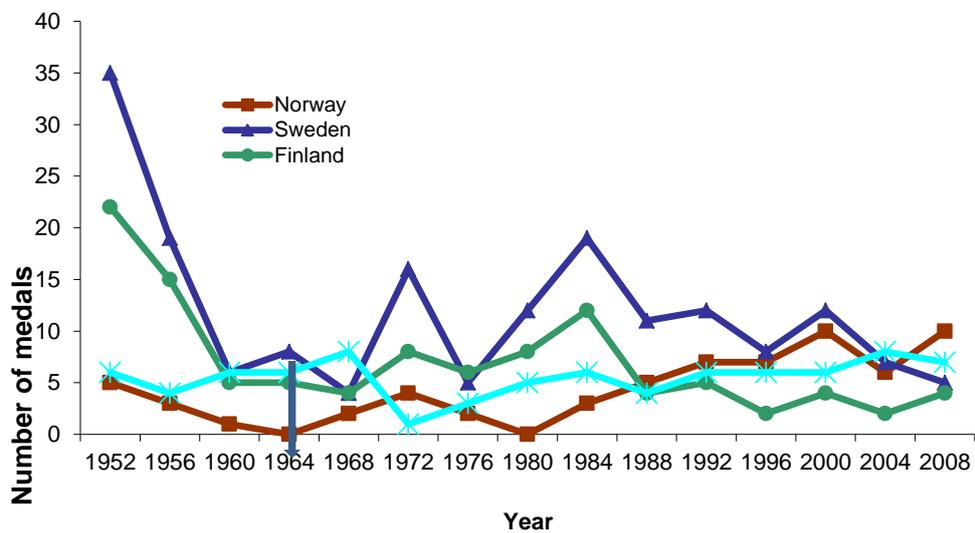


Figure 1: Summer Olympics – comparing four countries

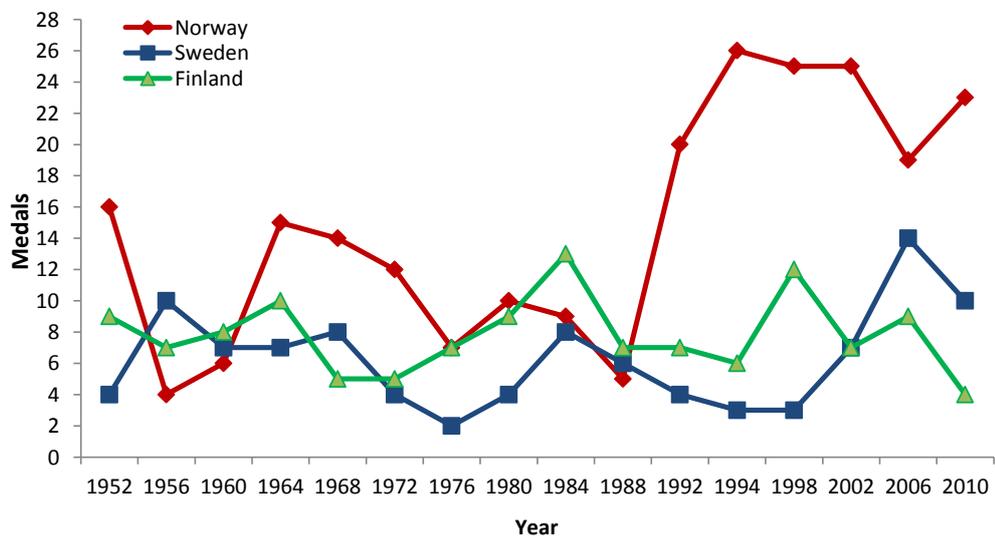


Figure 2: Winter Olympics – comparing three countries

In summer sports, Denmark, Finland and Sweden have all historically performed much better than Norway. Finland, Norway and Sweden have strong traditions in winter sports. Figures 1 and 2 show the Olympic medals won by Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark (in summer sports) from 1952–2008. There is a significant shift in favour of Norway after 1988, both in the Summer and Winter Olympics. Denmark has been able to maintain a relatively steady level of achievement whereas Sweden and Finland have lost ground. Investment in elite sports in all four countries has increased considerably over the last 20 years although the precise numbers are hard to quantify on a like for like basis. Augestad and Bergsgard (2007: 280–81) argue that the total spending on elite sports in Norway is a little less than in Denmark. Sweden and Finland, on the other hand, have spent less, particularly from central sources. The most striking difference seems to be related to the differences between models for elite sports development in the four countries. Below, the emergence and characteristics of these differences will be described.

### **A shared historical foundation - paths of divergence**

During the 1950–'60s elite sport was not organized as a specific domain in the Nordic countries. It was part of a broader mass sport movement, in the context of social democratic values and the development of the welfare state. When Norway and Finland took on the task of hosting the Winter and Summer Olympics in 1952, the two countries were relatively poor and marked by the Second World War. However, these events were also part of a welfare state strategy to stimulate the interest among ordinary people to engage in sports (Goksøyr &

Hanstad, 2012). The games created popular enthusiasm, and strengthened efforts to develop infrastructure for sports.

At the time, elite sport in the Nordic countries was the responsibility of individual sports federations dominated by mass sport (Lindroth and Norberg, 2002). Only the national Olympic Committees had a strict international elite sport perspective, by virtue of being subunits of the International Olympic Committee. The developments in the 1950s and '60s became a common point of departure for the elite sport developments that followed in the next decades. Despite such similarities, the four countries have pursued quite different paths to excellence in elite sports over the last 30 years. They all reflect a broad trend towards professionalization and rationalization of elite sport, but at the same time we see an increased divergence. The timing, the political processes, and the nature of changes, differed.

The institutionalization of modern sports in the Nordic countries after the Second World War created a somewhat similar overall foundation for elite sport. Finland, due to its special history preserved a class based segmentation of the organized sport movement until the 1990s. In the three other countries there was already in the 1950s a unification of the sport movement across historical class based divisions. In these three countries organizational differences developed from the late 1970s and continued until the present. While Sweden kept the basic structure, Norway and Denmark developed new and more integrated national systems from the last half of the 1980s. The changes in the Finnish sport organization from the early 1990s have again led to increased differences compared to the other three countries. Delayed political unification across sports was paralleled by increased fragmentation of the sports organization. The overall picture of the developments over the last decades is schematically presented in figure 3.

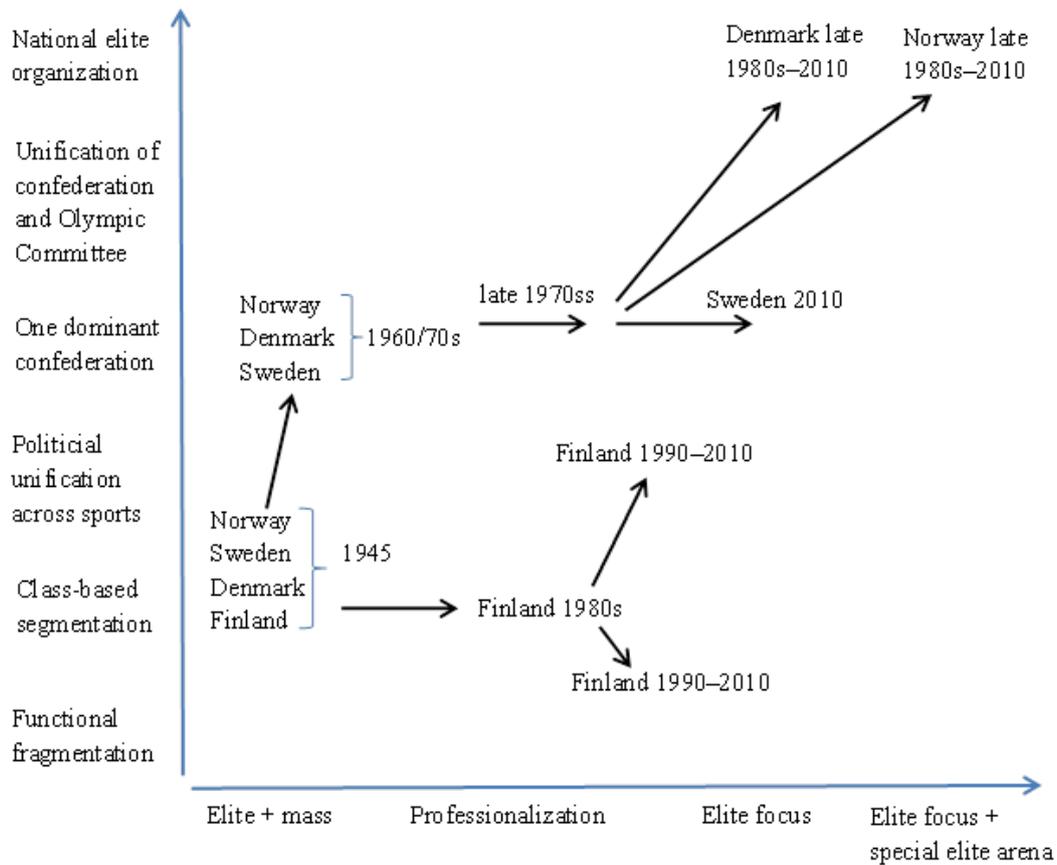


Figure 3. The overall organization of sports in Nordic countries 1950s -2010.

The timing and nature of reforms in the national elite sport systems tend to reflect failure to maintain competitiveness at an international level. Disappointing results are often discussed as ‘focusing events’ triggering change (Clumpner, 1994; Oakley & Green, 2001). However, this depends on how results are interpreted as well as the overall capacity to make necessary changes. Below we compare and discuss these developments in more detail.

### **Denmark and Norway in the 1970s and '80s: Stagnation and reform**

During the 1970s and '80s both Denmark and Norway experienced setbacks in major international sports competitions. For Denmark, results in the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich were especially disappointing with only one medal; a striking contrast to an average of six medals over the preceding decades. In Norway, both the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles and the Winter Olympics in Sarajevo in 1984 were experienced as great disappointments. In Los Angeles, Norway won three medals, but no gold. In Sarajevo three of the nine medals were gold, but only one in cross country skiing, a sport with a huge symbolic value in the Norwegian society.

In both countries, central actors interpreted disappointing results as signs of systemic problems. This triggered initiatives to strengthen special elite sport efforts. These involved redefinitions of what elite sport was about, the amount of resources required to stay in this increasingly tense competitive race, and how elite sport efforts should be organized. However, the central actors in such processes, their concerns and the solutions offered, differed.

In Denmark, lack of agreement within the sports movement led party politicians and civil servants to play a key role (Hansen, 2012). Their motivation was only partly directed towards the internal efficiency of the elite sport systems. Political discussions were framed as an extension of a welfare state perspective (Ibsen, Hansen and Storm, 2010). A major concern was that elite athletes engaged in the extreme efforts of modern sport would sacrifice health, education and opportunities in later life. The elite sport law from 1984 was a response to this (Bøje and Eichberg, 1994). It constituted a framework for the new central elite sport agency, Team Denmark, which was state funded, but formally organized as a foundation with a separate board that, in addition to the organized sports, also represented broader political and societal interests.

In Norway, concern was related not only to the number of medals in the Olympics, but the failures of particular sports, especially the national sport cross country skiing (Goksøyr & Hanstad, 2012). In contrast to Denmark, it was the leaders within the sports movement that introduced new initiatives. They focused on how to strengthen the competitiveness of elite sport, and wanted such challenges to be solved within the sports federations. The state should contribute with funds, but at an arm's length distance.

The first initiative in 1984 ('Project 88') had a four-year perspective. It was an effort to strengthen cooperation across sports to improve results in the 1988 Games. The results in the Summer Olympics 1988 were well above the historical trend. However, the results in the Calgary Winter Olympics were disappointing. For the first time Norway did not win any gold medal in cross country skiing. Lack of short term results in winter sports made it clear that not only more resources, but also stricter priorities, more competence, and stricter training requirements, were needed. This became the basis for the permanent national elite sport institution, Olympiatoppen, created in 1988.

### **Sweden and Finland in the 1970s and '80s: Still doing well**

Sports in Sweden and Finland also experienced their ups and downs during the 1970s and '80s as measured in Olympic results. Compared to Denmark and Norway they had been great powers in elite sports during the 1950s and '60s, especially in summer sports. During the 1970s and '80s they continued to do better than their Nordic neighbours.

In winter sports, Sweden had weak results from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, but recovered in the mid-1980s. Finland also experienced some problems between the mid-1960s and 1970s, but less so than Sweden. During the 1970s they recovered and climbed to a new peak in the mid-1980s before settling on the historical trend by the end of the decade.

In the Summer Olympics both countries experienced dramatic setbacks compared to the preceding decades. Sweden won 35 medals in 1952 but only 5 in 1960. With the exception of the 1972 Olympics, where they won 16 medals, the number of medals varied between 4 and 8 from then until 1980. The 1980s represented a new era of success, peaking with 19 medals in 1984. Finland won 23 medals in 1952 Olympics and 5 in 1960, which introduced a new trend. During the next decade the number of medals varied from 4 to 8, with 12 medals in the 1984 Olympics as the peak.

Still, compared to their neighbours, both Sweden and Finland were doing well, and perhaps equally importantly, prestigious national sports were largely successful. In Sweden, the exceptional results in tennis, and later golf, contributed to the country's image of itself as a successful modern elite sport nation (Wijk, 2012). In Finland successes in new sports, like Formula 1, and the growing professionalization of the national sport ice hockey, modified the impression of decline. Thus, the variations in Olympic results were not interpreted as a systemic issue neither in Sweden nor Finland. As a result, there were no serious discussions about changing the overall system of sport to accommodate the special needs of elite sports. Important changes took place, but within the established structures (Lindroth and Norberg, 2002; Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012).

### **Denmark and Norway 1990–2010: Consolidation and institutional elaboration**

The 1970s and '80s led to the introduction of special elite sport organizations at the national level in Denmark and Norway. This modified the segmented system where individual sports had the sole responsibility, as part of a broader effort where mass sport was the basis. The organizational changes in the two countries shared some similarities, but in many respects they were also quite different. This became increasingly apparent during the next two

decades, which saw a consolidation and elaboration of the two national models for elite sport. They differ with respect to formal arrangements, roles, working methods and priorities.

Team Denmark has created a more unified elite sport system, strengthening common policies, cooperation and general support for elite sport development. As an independent foundation it is only indirectly influenced by the Sports Confederation of Denmark (DIF). When the Danish Olympic Committee (DOK) merged with the DIF in 1993, the DOK was in a weak position. Team Denmark had already taken over many of its core functions (Hansen, 1995; Løvstrup & Hansen, 2002).

The new central elite sport organization is staffed with personnel with a background from sports sciences. It supports various types of development work to improve conditions for elite sport; like research, coaching competence and strengthening of organizational capacity in federations and clubs. Individual grants provide direct support for elite athletes. Team Denmark sets conditions for support, but it has limited capacity for direct involvement or intervention in actual development processes. In terms of Olympic results, Denmark has been able to defend its historical trend, with an average of six medals, with a low of three in the 2000 Olympics, and a high of eight in 2004. Also, in other international championships Danish athletes have achieved excellent results (Storm, 2008).

In 2004 a new elite law was passed. Under the new law, Team Denmark is a sort of independent state agency, with its own board (Storm, 2012). Since 2004 the projects are governed by the principles of new public management, with contracts as a major governance instrument. Efforts to prioritize between sports and athletes is also influenced by general political values and views represented at the board level. How, and to what extent, priorities should be based on strict criteria for international results has been a major public controversy in Denmark over the last years, where party politicians have played an important role. One of

the board members put it this way in a board meeting we attended (July 2009): ‘We get more of the best, rather than making the best better’.

In Norway, the loose structure of cooperation that characterized Project 88 was replaced by centralization and stricter priorities. The creation of Olympiatoppen in 1988 coincided with Norway being granted the 1994 Olympics. This provided a strong support for further development of the national elite sport system in the years to come (Goksøyr & Hanstad, 2012; Andersen, 2009). The leader of Olympiatoppen worked closely with the president of the Norwegian Sports Confederation (NIF) and the Norwegian Olympic Committee (NOK). In 1996 the NIF and NOK were merged into one organization, but in contrast to Denmark, the NOK was merging from a position of strength. Olympiatoppen became the operational instrument for all elite sport in Norway.

The changes in Norway represented a more far-reaching modification of the segmented sports model than in Denmark. There was a strong emphasis on coordination across sports. Olympiatoppen had a stronger formal position in relation to individual sports. There was no interference from the state or party politicians. However, through their support for the Lillehammer Olympics they provided resources that supported the institutionalization of new perspectives on elite sport, athletes and their role in society. The efforts that went into the creation of an elite sport system differed dramatically from how the Oslo Olympics in 1952 was used politically.

The core of Olympiatoppen is a group of senior coaches that have proved themselves within their own sports. In addition they have specialists within different disciplines of sports sciences. In contrast to Team Denmark, it has a relatively autonomous position, and at the same time considerable discretion over the direct state support for elite sport. The working style is informal and anti-bureaucratic. Priorities are strict, and often support is linked to direct intervention to influence leadership, organization and training methods in individual

sports (Andersen, 2009). International results have improved. Compared to the preceding decades, the average number of Norwegian Olympic medals has increased from an average of 2.5 to 8 in summer sports, and from 9.8 to 23 in winter sports. There have been recurrent discussions regarding the relationship between elite and mass sport, and between the Olympiatoppen and the sports federations.

### **Sweden and Finland 1990–2010: Stagnation and institutional stalemate**

The development over the last two decades in Sweden and Finland differs quite a bit from what happened in Denmark and Norway. It also differs dramatically between the two countries, both in terms of results and in terms of how the organization of elite sport has been debated and changed.

During the 1990s, Sweden did quite well in the Summer Olympics, with an average of 10.6 medals, but experienced a setback in winter sport to an average of 3.3 medals. After 2000 the situation was reversed. In the Summer Olympics the average fell to 6 medals, while the average in the Winter Olympics rose to 10.3. Finland, in contrast, was characterized by general stagnation. In the Summer Olympic the average for both decades was about 3 medals. In the Winter Olympics, the average for the 1990s was 8.3, falling to 6.6 after 2000. Despite these differences in results, the growing perception in both countries was that reforms were needed to keep up with international competition. However, tensions and conflicts developed over what to do, and they have become more intense over the last years.

Despite an on-going debate about the need to change, the overall Swedish system has remained remarkably stable during this period. Important changes have taken place, but mainly within the traditional segmented structure. Growing tensions and polarization between the Swedish Sports Confederation (RF) and the Swedish Olympic Committee (SOK) has undermined broader reform initiatives. The perspective of central actors in these organizations

regarding the nature both of the challenges and of each other reflects basic divisions in the Swedish sports movement.

During the last years discussions about Swedish elite sport have been intense and irreconcilable (Sjöblom & Fahlén, 2012). The Swedish system of allocating resources through the RF to different sports federations based on local membership activities is reinforcing the tension between mass and elite sport. The RF has a broad perspective on elites. In contrast, the SOK represents an exclusive elite perspective, but only for Olympic Sports (35 out of 80 competitive sport federations). Also, within the SOK all sports have one vote, independent of their size. For this reason the system also has a built-in tension between big and small federations. The RF is funded by the state, while the SOK, which owns the Olympic logo, is primarily financed through sponsorships. This arrangement tends to reinforce the tensions between the voluntary and the commercialized sports.

In contrast to Sweden, Finland has experienced dramatic changes in the organization of sports. However, these changes to a large extent reflect broader societal and political changes unrelated to the challenges in elite sport. Finnish sport was divided along class and ethnic lines until 1994 (Lämsä, 2012). The breakdown of the Soviet Union led to a political reorientation in Finnish society and politics. Part of this was to establish a new unified sports federation. This was supposed to be a coordinating mechanism, but without centralized authority. At the same time it should provide various services and support to federations.

By the end of the 1990s, two things happened that came to change the existing structure of Finnish sports in a dramatic ways. First, in 1993, the dominant sports confederation that had served as an organizing core actor within the field of sport for almost a century went bankrupt. This meant that the overall capacity of the sports movement to act in a coherent way was seriously weakened. Second, the doping scandals, particularly in the Nordic Ski World Championships in Lahti 2001, led to strong criticisms and loss of legitimacy for

elite sport in general. The forces of fragmentation became too strong. Although Finland in this period experienced a political turn towards neo-liberalism, the reaction was a return to traditional mass sport utilitarian values related to a welfare perspective.

Elite sport is still mainly the responsibility of federations and some elite clubs. The Finnish Olympic Committee is weak (Mäkinen, 2012). Public money to sport is distributed directly from the ministry to federations and clubs. Commercial sponsorship has tended to dry up. Specific sport federations have been losing out to new more specialized ones. Cross-country skiing created its own federation in 2009, and a number of regional and often non-competitive associations have been established. There have been several reform initiatives. Although it is recognized that the system needs more central authority that can influence structure, priorities, and support of elite sport, very little has come out of it so far. No one has had the authority or ability to effectively intervene.

### **Outcomes – organizational models**

Nordic elite sport systems have gone through major changes. However, the timing of change, the type of actors involved and outcomes vary considerably. In Denmark and Norway, initiatives for change came early and succeeded in creating major changes in the overall structure of national elite sport. In Finland a major shift came about as a result of an external shock due to the fall of the Soviet empire, but no one had the capacity to recreate a unified structure. In Sweden, changes have taken place within a stable overall institutional structure.

We have identified four dimensions that can be used to characterize the current systems, as shown in table 1. They are: (1) the role of a broad voluntary movement, (2) degree of unified structure, (3) legitimacy of sport elites, (4) centralization of authority and support. Below we will discuss similarities and differences between the present national systems of elite sport organization along these dimensions.

*Table 1: Dimensions of the current Nordic elite sport systems*

	Norway	Denmark	Sweden	Finland
Role of broad voluntary movement	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unified structure	High	High	Low	Weak
Legitimacy of elite sport	High	High/Medium contested	Medium contested	Weak
Centralization of authority and support	Authority Funding Project support Expertise Active intervention Training centre	Authority Funding Project support Expertise	Segmented structure	Segmented, decentralized structure

**The role of a broad voluntary movement**

The relationship between elite sport and broad voluntary movements give Nordic elite sport a unique character. Clearly, several trends related to modern elite sport may be regarded as threats to such a model. The role of professional and scientific knowledge, full-time paid athletes and commercialization, where sponsorship and advertising leads to commodification

of sports, teams and athletes are just examples. Still, however, the backbone of all the Nordic elite sport systems is the local clubs with volunteers, often parents. This is where young talents are identified and developed, and where they keep a lasting affiliation and presence even as they become international elite athletes.

The state has traditionally kept an arm's length distance to the voluntary movement. However, increasingly the financial support from the state plays a key role. There are several reasons for this, and an important one has been to avoid that the impact of commercialization and private sponsors should be too strong. There are of course tensions between the values of the broader sports movement and the values, requirements and external supporters of modern elite sport. However, the ways they are handled vary. This is related to the overall organization of sports in the four countries.

### **Degree of unification of national sports**

In Norway, the elite sport organization, Olympiatoppen, is the operative arm of the National Sports Confederation (NIF) and the national Olympic Committee (NOK). In Denmark, the national elite sport organization, Team Denmark, is a state institution. It is directly financed by the state and with an independent board where the national sport federations participate together with representatives for various societal interests appointed by the Ministry of Culture. In both cases the state is a major source of funding for elite sport, supplemented by private sponsors that may vary with the popularity of different sports.

The tension between the Swedish Sports Confederation (RF) and the national Olympic Committee (SOK) is partly related to mass versus elite sport. The RF is mainly financed by the state and responsible for how the money is used in all parts of the sports movement. The

SOK mainly relies on private sponsors and targets special athletes and teams with international elite potential in Olympic sports. In contrast to Denmark and Norway, this structure seems to recreate and intensify the underlying tensions between mass and elite sport as well as that between public and private funding.

In Finland, the overall sports movement has become increasingly fragmented over the last 20 years. The result is a curious mix of organizational autonomy, decentralization and fragmentation, on the one hand, and a more direct and centralized state role where the ministry is distributing funds directly to various federation and clubs on different levels, on the other hand.

### **The legitimacy of sport elites**

Sport elites may be defined as those that have been successful in national and international competitions. In this sense the celebration of sport elites seems to be a quite universal phenomenon, and the Nordic countries are no exception. Another aspect of sport elites has to do with how they achieve excellence. The means applied in this process, where the resources come from, how such efforts relate to other aspects of life and societal values may be important for how success in international competitions is viewed. The status of elite sport in Nordic countries has to be discussed in this broader perspective.

In Denmark, the concern for the athletes in the pursuit of extreme performances was an important motivation for the first Elite Law (1984) and the creation of an elite sport organization in the mid-1980s. In this sense it was an extension of a welfare state strategy, pushed by party politics. This was important in creating a legitimate frame for elite sport, based on a holistic perspective on the athletes. This became the basis for efforts to support performance development, with a broad definition of sport elites that included both national and international level.

In Norway, there has traditionally been a strong scepticism towards elites in all parts of society. The status of modern sport elites represents a remarkable exception. From the mid-1980s there was a stronger emphasis on strengthening international competitiveness, and the strategy was initiated and created by the sport movement. Major improvements in international results have reinforced the general support for an elite sport system based on strict priorities. Representatives of the elite sport system have, to a large extent, been able to influence the way society views modern elite sport.

The tension between mass and elite sport in Sweden is partly build into the national confederation (RF), and clearly a source of lasting tensions between the RF and the Swedish Olympic Committee (SOK). While elite sport is celebrated, the system is set up in such a way that it is difficult to arrive at national priorities for elite sport development. Such priorities are set by individual sports federations, sometimes with support from the SOK, but resources and capabilities vary considerably.

In Finland the status of elite sport is highly contested, despite strong and celebrated traditions in international sports. The fragmentation of the national sport systems means that resources are spread out in a way that does not support systematic elite sport development. Doping scandals have undermined the support for elite sport, leading to problems of state as well as private funding from sponsors. However, it seems that that a national sports policy has taken up and strengthened the traditional utilitarian aspect of sports related to health and wellbeing.

### **Centralization of authority and support**

For small countries, there is a recurrent debate about the need to concentrate limited resources. This issue is related to the questions about centralization of authority and support. The argument for decentralization is partly related to the need for diversity, partly to the

autonomy of sports federations and clubs. The argument for centralization is linked to efficiency, often discussed in terms of costly investments in infrastructure or the need to concentrate competence to achieve critical mass.

Team Denmark represents a formal and legal concentration of both authority and funds in national elite sport. An independent board appointed by the Ministry of Culture, with representatives of the national sports federation sets general policy. The specific funds for Danish elite sport are awarded directly over the state budget. The budget is used to support various projects in different sports. However, Team Denmark has a limited mandate, competence and capacity for intervention in performance development in specific sports.

The Norwegian elite sports organization, Olympiatoppen, is part of the national sport confederation. It reports to the board of the confederation through the general secretary. In this sense the formal autonomy of the Norwegian elite sport organization is not as strong as in Denmark. However, in practice Olympiatoppen has a stronger position in influencing what goes on in various sports. It represents a concentration of national expertise in coaching and sports science, with an elite sport training centre that also serves as an arena for informal exchange of experiences between coaches and athletes.

In contrast to Denmark and Norway, neither Sweden nor Finland has a central elite sport organization with an overall responsibility for developments in all sports. Elite sport development is mainly taken care of by specific sport federations. Resources and strategies differ considerably between sports, and there are also variations with respect to what is done on central and local levels. In both countries the national Olympic Committee has an independent and supportive role, despite open tensions between the Swedish Sports Confederation and the national Olympic committee (SOK). The SOK has a limited staff, but it plays an important role providing support and funding for various athletes, teams and

development projects based on strict priorities. In Finland, the national Olympic Committee has few resources and capacities for active support.

### **Concluding remarks: major findings – future research**

At the organizational level of elite sport systems, there is not only growing divergence between the Nordic countries; it also happens in ways that run counter to what one might expect based on the general pattern of political and societal organization in the four countries. Norway is generally characterized by decentralization of authority and dislike for elites, but has ended up with the most centralized system and a high degree of legitimacy for elite sport. Denmark, where the state has been most reluctant to intervene in civil society and the economy, has ended up with the strongest role for the state. Finland, with the strongest tradition for centralization, has ended up with the most decentralized, fragmented system. Sweden, known for its ability to modernize and react to international trends in society and in the economy, preserves an overall system that tends to reproduce political divides.

Entrepreneurial initiatives, political alliances and conflicts within the sports movement, and between representatives of sport and national politicians, seem to play a major role in the development. In this sense the observed differences add to our understanding of modern elite sport. This relates not only to the level of analysis; i.e. the abstract notion of elite sport organization versus the concrete organizational patterns. It also raises questions about the interaction between the dynamics of international trends versus space for national adaptation. Such adaptations may reflect path dependencies, but also lead to radical breaks that may change elite sport organization as well as its role and legitimacy in wider society and politics. The case stories are about evolving systems, where essential incidents and entrepreneurial initiatives play an important role. Despite strong international competitive

pressures, these stories are not primarily about local adaptation of international standards and requirements.

The present study addresses some key issues and introduces a comparative perspective that may also have wider implications. Internationally there are numerous studies of elite sport. So far the macro and policy levels have received most attention. Such studies produce valuable knowledge for policy makers, but will often be perceived as abstract and loosely coupled to the concerns of actors within the sport domain. There are few detailed studies of how national elite sport systems are organized. Even fewer provide insight in how they actually operate and support elite sport efforts. There is a lack of comparative studies between national systems and across different sports. Detailed process studies are hard to find. Both quantitative and qualitative studies are needed to develop and deepen our understanding of how current elite sport operate and develop.

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