



## Organizational psychology in elite sport: Its emergence, application and future

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The rapid development of elite sport in Europe and across the world has had far-reaching psychosocial ramifications for those operating within its sphere of influence. Whilst sport psychologists in the latter part of the 20th century largely focused on the cognitive determinates of elite performance, the findings of recent research suggest that sport psychologists in the 21st century will need to better understand the organizational influences on world-class athletes. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to discuss the emergence, application and future of organizational psychology knowledge in elite performance sport.

**Method:** Narrative review and commentary.

**Results and conclusion:** The review discusses the findings of six lines of inquiry that point to the salience of organizational issues in elite sport: i) factors affecting Olympic performance; ii) organizational stress in athletes, coaches and parents; iii) perceptions of roles within sports teams; iv) organizational success factors in sport and business; v) performance environments in elite sport; and vi) organizational citizenship behavior in sport. The commentary then focuses on the theoretical underpinnings and practical implementation of organizational service delivery in elite sport, and concludes by reflecting on how developments in this area have the potential to inform future practice and research relating to the psychology of elite sport.

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Elite sport in Europe is currently embroiled in a “global sporting arms race” (Oakley & Green, 2001, p. 100) that, it is argued in this paper, has far-reaching psychosocial ramifications for those operating within its sphere of influence. Over the past decade it has become clear that the power struggle between nations to win medals in major international competitions has intensified. Governments and national sporting organizations (NSOs) throughout the world have invested increasing sums of money in their quest for success at the highest levels (Green & Houlihan, 2005). Furthermore, it is now essential for nations to adopt a systematic and strategic approach to the development of their elite athletes in order to gain a competitive advantage over rival countries (de Bosscher, Bingham, Shibli, van Bottenburg, & De Knop, 2008; Houlihan & Green, 2008).

Within the sport management literature, there have been a number of attempts to identify the characteristics of successful elite athlete development across a range of nations, including European countries such as United Kingdom, France, Spain, the former East Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Norway, and Italy (de

Bosscher et al., 2008; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Oakley & Green, 2001). Houlihan and Green (2008) argued that it is possible to organize these characteristics into three reasonably distinct clusters: contextual (e.g., support for the full-time athlete), processual (e.g., a hierarchy of competition opportunities centered on preparation for international events), and specific (e.g., elite facility development and the provision of coaching, sports science and sport medicine support services). It is important to recognize, however, that these policy and strategic level developments alone will not guarantee international success; to attain and sustain successful outcomes such initiatives need to be inspirationally led, effectively managed, and competently executed. Oakley and Green (2001) emphasized that “clearly, further research is required in order to better understand the *how* and *why* underpinning the policy rationales behind [elite sport development]” (p. 100). However, to date, sport management researchers have neglected a detailed examination of these factors: “the one crucial element missing in all of the previous attempts to model policy influences on success has been the involvement of athletes and coaches, as the key stakeholders responsible for delivering success in their nation” (de Bosscher et al., 2008, p. 20).

Not surprisingly, sport psychology researchers have taken a different approach to examining success in elite sport, focusing

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largely on the intra-individual mental states and processes of world-class performers, including their motivations (Mallett & Hanrahan, 2004), beliefs (Hays, Maynard, Thomas, & Bawden, 2007), and emotions (Pensgaard & Duda, 2003). However, similar to their contemporaries in sport management, the tendency has also been to overlook the climatic and cultural factors associated with the optimal development of athletes. For example, Hardy, Jones, and Gould (1996) prefaced their text by noting that “one limitation of the book is that, in focusing strongly upon the psychological preparation of *individual* elite performers, it does not seriously consider group dynamics, or other social and organisational factors which might influence performance” (p. 7) and concluded by acknowledging that “elite athletes do not live in a vacuum; they function within a highly complex social and organisational environment, which exerts major influences on them and their performances” (pp. 239–240). Sport psychologists are increasingly researching some of these social influences (Beauchamp & Eys, 2007; Carron, Hausenblas, & Eys, 2005; Jowett & Lavallee, 2007) but the broader organizational context and dynamics have been comparatively underexplored. This is somewhat surprising because a number of psychologists (viz. Fletcher, Hanton, & Mellalieu, 2006; Jones, 2002; Males, 2006; Terry, Hardy, Jones, & Rodgers, 1997; Timson, 2006) have observed that international athletes frequently seek advice from consultants on managing the organizational-related issues that accompany their participation in elite sport.

It has become clear that a need exists to better understand the pivotal role that sport organizations play in preparing athletes for Olympic and world competition. Broadly speaking, sport management researchers have examined governance-level factors, while sport psychology researchers have focused on individual-level factors. Hence, a “twilight zone” has existed which envelops the organizational culture and climate in elite sport, together with how personnel and the environment are managed, and how individuals and the team interact with the broader organization. Fortunately, this blind spot in our understanding is gradually becoming illuminated as researchers have recognized the relevance of organizational functioning in competitive sport. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to discuss the emergence, application and future of organizational psychology knowledge in elite performance sport. It is hoped that reviewing and synthesizing what is known in this area will help stimulate reflection, provide a conduit through which to better inform practice, and act as a springboard for future development. To this end, the narrative is partitioned into three main sections. The first considers the emergence and significance of organizational issues in athletes’ preparation for and performance in major international competitions. The second discusses the potential application of this knowledge in organizational service delivery in elite sport. The final section offers a selection of promising themes for developing practice and research in this area.

## Emergence

The emergence of organizational psychology in elite sport is the result of a confluence of sport policy factors, such as the necessity for a systematic and strategic approach to elite sport development, and recent psychology research that is increasingly highlighting the impact of organizational-related issues on athletes’ well-being and performance. Whilst sport psychologists in the latter part of the 20th century largely focused on the cognitive determinates of elite performance and viewed athletes largely as “active processors of information” (Jones, 1990, p. 20), the findings of recent work suggest that sport psychologists in the 21st century will need to better understand the organizational impact brought about, at least in part, by the rapid progress in elite sport development and

management. A perusal of the sport psychology literature indicates that the findings of six lines of inquiry point to the salience of organizational issues in elite sport: (a) factors affecting Olympic performance; (b) organizational stress in athletes, coaches and parents; (c) perceptions of roles within sports teams; (d) organizational success factors in sport and business; (e) performance environments in elite sport; and (f) organizational citizenship behavior in sport.

## *Olympic performance factors*

The effects of the “global sporting arms race” are perhaps easiest seen at the quadrennial festival of each Olympiad, namely the Olympic Games. Some athletes and teams thrive in this arena and attain peak performances, while others with similar talent and preparation falter and under-perform. In an attempt to better understand why this occurs, the United States Olympic Committee (USOC) commissioned a large-scale evaluative research project designed to discern the positive and negative factors that influence Olympic performance (Gould, Greenleaf, Chung, & Guinan, 2002; Gould, Greenleaf, Guinan, Dieffenbach, & McCann, 2001; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, & Chung, 2002; Gould, Guinan, Greenleaf, Medbery, & Peterson, 1999; Greenleaf, Gould, & Dieffenbach, 2001). One of the most consistent findings throughout this body of work was that the management of organizational-related issues is a significant distinguishing factor in achieving Olympic success.

The first paper in the research project summarized results from in-depth focus group interviews conducted with Olympic athletes and coaches (Gould et al., 1999). Teams that met or exceeded expectations participated in resident training programs and perceived support. Teams that failed to meet expectations perceived planning and team cohesion problems, faced travel problems, and perceived coaching problems. A second qualitative study used in-depth interviews to explore in greater detail the experiences of Olympic athletes (Greenleaf et al., 2001). Major variables perceived to have positively influenced performance included using support services and support facilitation, and having high quality coaching and positive coach–athlete relationships. Major variables perceived to have negatively influence performance included departing from normal routine, facing media distractions, and encountering coach issues. The third paper in the research project employed surveys with athletes in an effort to determine the frequency and magnitude of the specific variables that they thought influenced their Olympic performance (Gould, Greenleaf, et al., 2002). Results revealed that numerous variables were perceived to influence performance, including several notable organizational factors such as strong cohesion, positive coach–athlete relationships, coach’s ability to deal with crises, coaching expectations, general social support, ticketing arrangements, venue transportation difficulties, and Olympic village distractions. The fourth and final study also adopted surveys but on this occasion with Olympic coaches (Gould, Guinan, et al., 2002). A large number of variables were perceived by coaches to have influenced athlete performances, which included having plans for dealing with distractions, strong team chemistry and cohesion, loud and enthusiastic crowd support, and fair and effective team selection. Perhaps the most important and novel message to emerge from this research project is that, whilst Olympic performance is undoubtedly a multifaceted phenomenon, the organizational culture and climate appears to have a significant impact on competition outcome. Reiterating calls from Hardy and Jones (1994; Hardy et al., 1996; Jones, 1995), Greenleaf et al. (2001) recommended that further research examining the impact of organizational stressors (such as late team selection or NSO politics) on performance is needed.

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