

# The Professionalization of Sport in the Scandinavian Countries<sup>1</sup>

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Kommersialisering, professionalisering, medialisering och globalisering är dominerande tendenser inom idrottens sedan 1970-talet, och den idrottsintresserade – och idrottsvetenskapligt intresserade – ser tecken på den här utvecklingen i praktiskt taget alla idrottsliga sammanhang. Idrotten befinner sig i ett tillstånd av genomgripande förändring, på många olika plan. På annan plats i denna uppdatering skriver Rasmus Storm om ett drag i denna förändringsprocess, som berör själva infrastrukturen inom den nationella idrotten, nämligen finansiering och central styrning av elitutveckling i syfte att skapa nationell stolthet och göra reklam för landet. Sådana satsningar görs nu i en rad länder där man tidigare ansett att idrotten självt ska klara sina internationella åtaganden, utan statlig inblandning. I det sammanhanget kan det vara på sin plats att, som Tomas Peterson, reflektera över den mycket speciella idrottstradition som de skandinaviska länderna har gemensamt, och som Peterson benämner den skandinaviska idrottsmodellen.

I ett keynote-framförande vid konferensen "Science for Success II. Promoting Excellence in Sport and Exercise", i Jyväskylä i oktober 2007, konstaterade Peterson att skandinavisk idrott, givet regionens befolkningsmässiga och klimatologiska förutsättningar, varit synnerligen framgångsrik i ett internationellt perspektiv. Dessa framgångar, menar han, kan bäst förstås utifrån tre specifika förutsättningar som karakteriserar den skandinaviska idrottsmodellen, nämligen att idrottsrörelsen i dessa länder växte fram som folkrörelser, att idrottsrörelsen länge var ideologiskt bunden vid amatörismen, samt att det fanns ett samhälleligt åtagande att ekonomiskt och på andra sätt stödja idrottsrörelsen. Dessa faktorer, menar Peterson, har i sin tur lett till en specifikt nordisk professionaliseringsprocess, som skiljer sig från den dominerande internationella trenden.

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<sup>1</sup> This text is based on a Key Note Speech, given at the conference "Science for Success II. Promoting Excellence in Sport and Exercise", held in Jyväskylä 10–12 October 2007. The Conference was hosted by the Finnish Olympic Committee.

**B**y whichever means you measure it, the Scandinavian sport model has been very successful historically. In an international comparison, countries with a small and sparse population as well as an unfavourable climate for summer sports, should not normally have gained all the international successes that Scandinavian sportsmen and sportswomen have had. My aim here is to reflect on why this has been the case, and to convey the message that it may even remain the case, if sport in Scandinavia continues to build on the preconditions already existing. I will do this through a discussion of the professionalization of sport in the Scandinavian countries.

## **Two paradoxes**

I will elucidate two paradoxes that are central in the context. They concern the relation between professionalism and its complete opposite – amateurism. *The first paradox* is the fusion that took place a little over a hundred years ago, between one ideology formulated by the English upper classes on the basis of their own sporting activities, and another created as an action ethos for the popular sport movements in Scandinavia. I am referring to *amateurism*, which is per definition the opposite of professionalism, and which must be said to have formed the main obstacle to professionalizing Scandinavian sport the way we associate with other countries and continents. Amateurism would be expected to have prevented successful results during the major part of the 20th century. Still, such results have been achieved. This leads me to *the second paradox*: there are important aspects of the Scandinavian sport model, which in spite of being rooted in amateurism have furthered rather than hampered the development of sport, and consequently, internationally viable sport performances. These are aspects, which, in my view, should also continue to be part of the professional development of sport.

## **The starting-point – societal conditions in general**

The professionalization of sport in Scandinavia has, of course, a unique history for each country. But there are a number of common characteristics that have affected the process in all of them, which allows us to speak of a Scandinavian Sports Model. Firstly, Scandinavia could be regarded as an homogeneous region, sharing linguistic, historical, cultural and political traditions that have structured sport in a positive way. The Scandinavian countries are also comparatively industrialized, which has enabled society to provide sport with stable material, technical and organisational conditions for development. Let us not forget that we may imagine a society without sport, but we cannot imagine sport without society. The development of sport as well as its structure, its actors as well as its results, must be related to the society it is part of. Many records recognised today would be unthinkable without the technological development of society — just think of the stopwatch, the glass fibre pole, Formula 1 engines, telescopic sights and plastic skis. Furthermore, the development of social organisation has paved the way for the development of the efficiency of

team sports. The fact that the individual can run, jump and swim faster for every year is due to better training facilities, training methods and an improved knowledge of nutrition — but also of the medical development that has made it possible to increase physical performance in both legal and illegal ways.

## **Sport model characteristics**

### ***1. The popular movement model***

These general societal conditions are then to be combined with a number of unique characteristics. *Firstly*: historically, the sports movements were built in the form of voluntary associations, as “People’s Movements”. These organisations are regarded as the fundamentals of the democratic system in the Scandinavian countries, since to participate in voluntary associations has been seen as an important measure in fostering democratic citizens. One precondition for a voluntary organisation is that it is open to everyone regardless of age, sex, social and ethnic affiliation, physical and mental condition, or place of residence. This has given to the Scandinavian sport movement a unique availability, which has definitely favoured the work of finding those active sports participants who have the best capacity for achieving international results. Besides formal availability good sport results have also been favoured by the social environment given to active sportsmen and sportswomen by the popular movement model via a tradition of voluntarism and an ideal vision of the impact of sport in general.

### ***2. The amateur ideology***

*Secondly*, being based on voluntary work, the sports movements ideologically became fundamentally inspired by English amateurism, which has had a profound impact on both thinking and praxis in Scandinavian sport. One important consequence of this impact is that up to the very end of the 20th century professionalism was (and to some extent still is) seen as something alien to sport. In fact, professionalism in the form of sport as paid labour was forbidden in all Scandinavian countries as late as the 1960s.

This is where the first paradox comes in. English amateurism was created by a social class that viewed the inherent physical and mental character of their own bodies as naturally superior to the rest of the population. For that reason amateurism initially considered even training to be wrong, since that would mean manipulating the individual’s natural assets. This of course also meant that it was wrong to receive economic compensation for sporting activities.

Paradoxically, this ideological reasoning, formulated by the English upper class on the basis of its material circumstances, became a solid foundation for the emerging Scandinavian sports movements. They evolved as part of an entirely new organisation pattern parallel with late 19th-century industrialisation, consisting of popular movements created by the lower classes as defence organisations against the unrestrained capitalism that pushed industrialisation forward – organisations for unionisation, cooperation, tenants, temperance crusaders, farmers’ organisations, non-conformists, you name it. Due to their lack of finan-

cial resources these movements relied on voluntary work carried out by people without pay and without any benefit for themselves, only for others.

Via the Olympic movement the amateuristic ideology came to dominate all the major sport organisations in the Scandinavian countries until the late 20th century.

### ***3. A different form of professionalization***

It is quite clear that amateurism impeded the process of professionalization of sport which we are familiar with from other parts of the world. However, what do we actually mean by professionalism in sport? In the world of sport the word professionalism has long been generally used in a stereotype way. Historically, it mainly referred to those who devoted themselves to sport as an occupation, as paid employees, like professional British football players. Today it means the creation of professions – both for practitioners, various administrators (supervisors, economists, lawyers, agents) and coaches/ instructors – which in form, content and objective are very similar to other professions in society. The concept also includes a strongly specialised organisation where rationality, efficiency and predictability determine both the organisation and the actual sporting activities.

This requires extensive financial resources, which is where commercialism enters the stage. However, in contrast to most other countries, the market in Scandinavia has not been the sole actor making capital out of sport. Here the transformation of sport from amateurism to professionalism has largely taken place with support from the public. In the post-war period government reforms in the social welfare system laid the basis for a new type of organisation for sports associations. The gradual transition away from amateuristic activities with their basis in the popular movements towards activities, based on paid employment and the market, has involved a gradual capitalisation of leisure activities performed and organised by unpaid labour in a popular movement form.

When the legal and ideological chains, molded from amateur ideals and amateur regulations, broke, it tore down the so-far insurmountable obstacles to a broad and deep transformation of the Scandinavian sport movements based on professionalization and commercialisation. But the way in which the sport movement has been transformed in post-war times can be interpreted as a way of professionalizing activities with due considerations to the special character of the Scandinavian sport model. More specifically, it means that the main consequences of government support have been noted in the broad sports, whereas commercialisation has chiefly affected elite sports.

### ***4. Public commitment***

*Finally*, the sports movements in the Scandinavian countries have, in an historical perspective, been comparatively well supported by the State. That is to say, state support for youth leisure activities has been directed to different youth organisations, particularly sports clubs, organised at lower levels on an every-day basis as voluntary organisations. For sports clubs, however, fostering top athletes is an essential part of their pursuit. Consequently, in youth sport activities, a characteristic contradiction can be found, as these somehow have to balance democratic values, particularly equality in participation, and elitism in the form of competitiveness.

The state support to youth sport in the Scandinavian countries is both a huge economic investment and an important ideological commitment, emphasising to the citizens that

they can safely activate their children in sports clubs, and should do so, too. Through this engagement, children are supposed to learn both democratic ways of thinking and acting, based on respect, cooperation and equality, and at the same time acquire the principles of competing and winning, which on the other hand strive towards selection, ranking and elitism.

According to the way society looks upon itself, government grants to sport are given primarily because it fulfills through its various activities a number of goals which do not necessarily have to do with sports, but which society considers important to achieve by means of government funding. What is perhaps most important, both in itself and in its significance for other goals, is to strengthen and develop democracy within the sports associations. The resources are to be used to reach out to people and activate those who want to take part in organised sports or choose to do physical exercise for their own well-being. In other words, it is a matter of goals that are supposed to be attainable by means of sport. To develop democracy within association sports means to make it available to everyone, regardless of age, sex, social and ethnic affiliation, of physical and mental condition, and place of residence. It is also a question of developing democratic forms of thought and action; children and young people should be given the chance to influence and take responsibility for their own sporting activities.

## **The strength of the model:**

### **The democratic fostering — competition fostering combination**

#### *Democratic fostering*

We may describe this as a task allotted to the sports movement, originating from the government and parliament and dealing with the motives behind the strong society support to child and youth sport activities. The aim of this task, which we may call democratic fostering, is to promote democratic forms of social life, founded on respect, equality and openness. It aims at everyone regardless of economic, social, ethnic, political or religious background. The basic idea is to take care of everyone in the ages attending such activities and to allow them to develop according to their own abilities. This fostering is thus supposed to favour goals that the government and parliament advocate in all fields of society: democracy, equality and integration. Through sporting practices children and young people are also supposed to be fostered to physical activity. Not even this goal need necessarily be related to the sporting practices under the auspices of RF (the Swedish Sports Confederation). There are other means and social arenas where such fostering takes place – at school and in other leisure time activities. What is special about this fostering is that it is done through associations, that is, in the form in which popular movement democracy usually functions.

#### *Competition fostering*

The other task is that of sport itself - competition fostering. Competition is the essence of sport, controlling the internal logic of its activities. Competition fostering is about teaching how to deal with competing, coming first, second or last, winning, losing, or ending up

in a draw, as the case may be, relating to opponents and fellow players, functionaries and audiences, becoming part of the team or not, being a stand-in, sitting on the bench or being left outside, as well as learning that training is the start of everything that happens during a contest or match. Competition fostering also includes good training in a specific sport. To compete leads to ranking and selection, since the goal of competition fostering is to create as successful athletes as possible, and in the long term the top elite that may assert itself against international competition in World Championships and Olympic Games.

## **Conclusion: a reasonable balance**

How could we then explain that the Scandinavian sport model, in spite of its roots firmly embedded in amateur ideology, and in spite of an organisational form which differs so radically from the professional organisation we find in sport in many other countries, has achieved so many great international sports accomplishments? My answer is that the Scandinavian model has created other conditions, which outweigh professional sport as it is organised abroad.

The success of the Scandinavian sport model builds on a reasonable balance between two tasks, which exist simultaneously and stand in an ambivalent relation to each other: democratic fostering and competitive fostering. Democratic fostering represents the citizen fostering that taking part in association activities is supposed to lead to; competition fostering stands for the measures that are supposed to create the best athletes.

In the past, the present and the future, the foundation of internationally competitive Scandinavian sports performances has been, is, and will be based on attaining *a reasonable balance in sporting activities between the two kinds of fostering*. Such a balance lives up to the interests of both society and sport in an optimal way. This is *the second paradox*: a correct balance between *democratic fostering* – based on the Scandinavian sport model's mix of voluntary work, state support and democratic work forms – and *Competition fostering*, following sport's own logic – will create the best precondition for attaining internationally competitive sport results also in the future.

(Translated by Staffan Klintborg)