



MALMÖ HÖGSKOLA

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There is much talk, especially in the Nordic countries but also in the rest of the world, of a Scandinavian model, or a Nordic model, with respect to various aspects of modern society. This special Nordic feature is mainly referred to in two situations. One is the Nordic welfare model, characterized by a comprehensive social and economic safety net that is activated when a citizen for various reasons is unable to work. The model is based on universal social rights, social solidarity, and security for all. That Nordic countries also has a welfare policy perspective on the organization of sport will surprise no one; thus the emergence of the Scandinavian or Nordic sport model, the basis of which, in summary, is that it's historically based on national popular movements, that it has a system of state financial support to the national sports organizations, mainly in Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and that there are socially responsible links between sport in general – sport for all – and elite sport. Recently, however, elite sport has become an increasingly important part of global sport, and the Nordic countries have introduced special elite sport systems, which many believe may violate the traditional sporting values. These elite systems are the subject of study in the anthology *Nordic Elite Sport: Same Ambitions – Different Tracks*, compiled by Svein S. Andersen and Lars Tore Ronglan (Universitetsforlaget). We asked Russell Holden, our British expert on sport and politics, for a review, and he navigates perspicaciously through the volume, displaying appreciation; however, he regrets the lack of a concerted focus on female sport, and that the editors are not more explicit in explaining the differences in the concluding chapter.

Appealing to both specialists and students

Russell Holden

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Svein S. Andersen & Lars Tore Ronglan
(red)

Nordic Elite Sport: Same Ambitions – Different Tracks

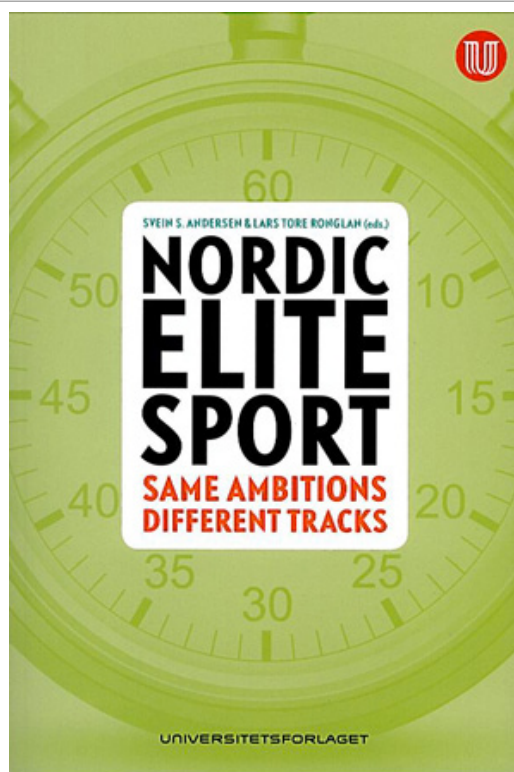
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With the London 2012 Olympics looming and discussion focusing on impending medals targets and the broader issue of sporting legacy, the wider critical analysis concerning the structure and funding of elite athletics has slipped beneath the radar. However, within months, attention will soon switch in the United Kingdom and elsewhere to why performances by elite athletes either exceeded or fell below set targets.

It is within this context that the new collection of essays edited by Andersen and Ronglan provides a valuable insight into the realities and organisational complexities of elite sport in Norway, Sweden Finland and Denmark, with particular reference to explaining what lies behind the sporting success at individual and team level of the four Nordic nations.



In the sphere of sport these countries share a model which emphasises a broad voluntary sports movement, sports

for all in addition to the utilitarian values of sports participation. This domain is dominated by one or few organisations (depending on the country concerned) that incorporates regional and local interests. It is these characteristics that help to contextualise and provide the critical insight into the diverging approaches to elite sport traceable within the afore-mentioned nations, thus framing the essence and shape of the volume.

The study explores the commonalities and striking differences of approach evident in the countries concerned, paying particular reference to differences that prevail within the perceived Nordic sporting model. This is an approach which is both legitimate and valuable as these countries have long been subject to comparative research and scrutiny by academics, government officials and sports administrators from across the globe who have sought to learn from Nordic success whilst acknowledging that research on the development of international sport elite systems shows that these organisations have become increasingly similar in recent times (Augestadt, Bergsgard & Hansen 2006 and Houlihan & Green 2008).

Furthermore, the importance of this study is heightened by the distinct lack of systematic comparison between the dynamics underpinning the relationship amongst the participants comprising the elite sport systems (Seippel 2010) and the core processes with regard to organisational logistics and finance supporting performance development in the four nations. This task has been addressed by a range of expert contributors from the four countries who, working within a brief driven by cross-national research, drawing extensively on a range of policy documents, literature reviews and interviews.

” *Initially the contributors grapple with the emergence of modern sport elite systems, prior to identifying a range of success stories, a consideration of perspectives and priorities in elite sports.*

Opening with a brief overview of what constitutes sporting success and how this applies to the notion of elite sport, the text is divided into four sections. Initially the contributors grapple with the emergence of modern sport elite systems, prior to identifying a range of success stories, a consideration of perspectives and priorities in elite sports. The concluding chapter, supplied by the editors, draws together the elements that indicate where divergences exist within a general trend of convergence.

Throughout the study, success is defined as extending beyond Olympic and championship medal hauls, correctly taking into account national perspectives on the kind of sports most important to specific countries (notably golf in Sweden, women’s handball in Norway, ice hockey in Finland and track cycling in Denmark). Such an approach pays due regard to Bairner’s (2010) view that Nordic elite sport is very much forged by the link between sport and the community and that elite performers maintain close ties with their sporting roots wherever possible.

Convergence is deemed evident through established common elements in sports systems. These include the construction of elite facilities, support for full-time athletes, provision of coaching, sports science and sports medicine support services and a hierarchy of competition opportunities based on preparation for international competition.

However, as the contributors chart (in Parts IV and V, the most valuable sections of the volume), the different national strategies reflect the impact of national characteristics and issues of resources that result in both bottom-up (Swedish tennis) and top-down (Danish track cycling) strategies operating. In their examination of the development of modern elite sport despite the common point of departure, the differences in organisation quickly become evident. Complex institutionalisation processes are traced with Norway and Denmark paralleling each other, though party politics are to the fore in the latter, whereas Sweden demonstrates a set of stable sporting structures formed by alliances amongst a range of sport organisations acknowledging the pressure to make changes to cope with intensified international competition. This is in strong contrast to Finland where the structure is highly fragmented, with contemporary sporting debate still adjusting to the fall of the Eastern block, the drive to neo-liberal economics, in addition to a desire for the state to have a greater authority in co-ordinating sport as its National Olympic Committee lacks teeth.

Refreshingly the study steers clear of any discussion of football. Despite a minor shortcoming – the lack of concerted focus on female sport, the work done in seeking to fill a critical academic void is highly commendable. Consequently, the central thesis should make the volume appealing to both Nordic specialists and students of sports who wish to explore more deeply a set of critical issues that will help to understand how and why elite athletic performances vary in a set of nation-states that share so many common values and ideological principles. However, in working towards a conclusion that demonstrates that a “one size fits all” approach is not acceptable even in a set of nations that share so many characteristics, the emphasis on explaining this reality could have been more explicit in its references to societal, and socio-political contexts. This is particularly striking as considerable thought has been devoted to creating a typology in the conclusion that seeks to highlight critical objectives in elite sport that shares broad ambition, yet acknowledges different routes to realising this ambition.

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