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Title: **Elite sport in Scandinavian welfare states: Legitimacy under pressure?**

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## Abstract

Taking part in the global 'sports arming race' is demanding to all small nations, in terms of the efforts needed to succeed at the international stage. The Scandinavian countries are wealthy, and could afford (in pure economic terms) wide-ranging elite sport investments. The question put to the foreground in this paper is the legitimacy of such efforts. More specifically, the aims are to investigate and discuss (1) the societal legitimacy essential to Scandinavian elite sport's credibility and support in general, and (2) how organizational legitimacy may be threatened by current developments aimed to strengthen international competitiveness. Based on an outline of the social democratic welfare model and the voluntary sport movements characterizing these societies, the paper emphasizes some rooted values and tensions underpinning sport in Scandinavia. Then recent developments in the three countries' elite sport efforts are described and discussed. Over the last decades Scandinavian elite sports have been professionalized, extended, and run in line with general international tendencies. Some of these developments challenge values fundamental to the voluntary sport model. A paradox arises: aspects that at the surface seem counterproductive to modern elite sport development; voluntarism, decentralization and local ownership to sport, contribute at a deeper level substantially to elite sports' legitimacy in this region. The paper is concluded by discussing conditions central to maintain elite sports' social legitimacy in Scandinavia, particularly in what ways sustainable elite sport development relies on the links to the broad voluntary movement.

Key words: Social legitimacy, elite sport, mass sport, voluntary movement, welfare state

## Introduction

In an essay published in a special issue on sport in Scandinavian societies Alan Bairner (2010, p. 734) concluded that 'there is evidence of a specifically Nordic and/or Scandinavian approach to sport, associated above all with social solidarity. (...) Nordic sport continues to offer salutary lessons about how to play and organize sport and, in particular, about how to maintain a balance between mass participation and elite performance.'

To a certain extent I agree with Bairner at this point. When reflecting on current elite sport developments in Scandinavia, there are indeed strong reasons to emphasize the linkage – or balance – between elite and mass sport. At the surface the picture looks quite harmonious: compared to most other countries sport participation in the population is high (Ibsen and Seippel 2010) and, compared to their size, the countries do well in international sports (Andersen and Ronglan 2012). Mass and elite sport are, except Denmark, not organizationally separated, and a substantial part of the labour put into this field is of a non-salaried, voluntary type (Ibsen and Seippel 2010). Although differently organized at the central level, also Denmark is characterized by close ties between elite and mass sport given strong voluntary sport federations responsible for the whole variety of activities within their specific sport. This overall, quite united, structure marking the organized sport domain in Scandinavia reflects historical traditions and certain values underpinning the notion of 'what sport is' in these societies.

The demands of today's international elite sport is, however, something that even small countries as Denmark, Norway and Sweden cannot evade as long as they want to achieve results at the global scene. Over the last decades elite sport efforts in Scandinavia have been professionalized, extended, and run in line with general international tendencies. Research has shown that elite sport organizations in Western countries has become more similar during the last two decades (Augestad, Bergsgaard and Hansen 2006, Green and Oakley 2001, Oakley and Green 2001). Common elements include construction of elite facilities, targeted talent development programs, support for 'full-time' athletes, provision of professional coaching and sports science and sports medicine support service (Houlihan and Green 2008). This captures a broad trend of convergence which also applies to Scandinavian countries' elite sport efforts.

A basic challenge to Scandinavian elite sport is how to deal with these 'intensification processes' – performance focusing, result optimization and resource mobilization – (Sjöblom and Fahlén 2010) in a sustainable way within a voluntary sport model associated with social solidarity (Bairner 2010). In other words: is it possible to take part in the global 'sports arming race' (De Bosscher *et al.* 2008) in ways that are in compliance with or strengthen, rather than undermine,

social values and basic assumptions underpinning sport in these societies? Taking part in the sports armament race is indeed demanding to all small nations, in terms of the investments needed to succeed at the international stage. Now, the Scandinavian countries are wealthy, and can afford (in pure economic terms) targeted elite sport efforts. The question put to the foreground in this paper is the legitimacy of such efforts; that is, what it takes to get 'value (not only medals) for money'. More specifically, the aims are to investigate and discuss (1) the societal legitimacy essential to Scandinavian elite sport's credibility and support in general, and (2) how organizational legitimacy may be threatened by efforts aimed to strengthen international competitiveness. I will restrict myself to focus on organizational tensions and questions arising from recent developments in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish elite sport efforts. As there are similarities as well as differences in the three countries' solutions and priorities, comparisons across the nations can provide a more nuanced picture of Scandinavian challenges and perspectives. After all, despite obvious similarities politically, socially and culturally, Scandinavia is not a single country but comprises three individual, small nations.

The paper unfolds as follows. First, the concept of legitimacy and its relevance to elite sport is briefly sketched out. This is followed by a rough outline of the 'social democratic' welfare model marking the Scandinavian nations and the characteristics of the voluntary sport movements in these societies. Thereafter, a more detailed description and discussion of different developments in the three countries' elite sport efforts is made, including comparison of selected cases from each country representing apparent sporting successes. This part draws on empirical material generated in a Scandinavian study on elite sport in the region (Andersen and Ronglan 2012). The paper is concluded by discussing some conditions central to elite sport's legitimacy in Scandinavia, particularly in what ways sustainable elite sport development relies on the links to the broad voluntary movement.

### **Elite sport and social legitimacy**

Speaking of sport as 'illegitimate' draws attention towards phenomena such as cheating, doping, or game fixing. Indeed, disclosure of such 'illegal unfair play' may hit involved actors hard and undermine public confidence both in individuals and the sport organizations in which the violation occurs. Vibrant examples are the disclosures of extensive organized doping in international cycling and game fixing scandals in European football, leading the concerned international federations to put efforts into cleaning up and rebuilding trust and reputation. Now, illegal actions are not the primary focus of this paper. Legitimacy, however, goes beyond an effective enforcement of laws and regulations (legal legitimacy). Beside legal legitimacy and democratic legitimacy (traditional

standards such as parliamentary oversight and representativeness), there is the broader concept of *social legitimacy*, addressing the accountability to citizens and responsiveness to the public at large.

The basis of social legitimacy is the support and credibility societies give to an institution, agency or organization (Weiler 1999). It has been defined as ‘a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions’ (Suchman 1995, p. 574). This definition points to legitimacy as a social construction and thereby something that is embedded in culture specific conditions. Consequently, to assess the ‘desirability’ and ‘appropriateness’ of elite sport in Scandinavia the norms, values and beliefs underpinning sport in general in this region form a necessary backdrop. Furthermore, as legitimacy is a dynamic construct (Mathews 1993) it has to be continuously proved and defended under changing societal conditions.

An argument which further strengthens the need to contextualize elite sport efforts follows from the concept ‘organizational legitimacy’. In building and maintaining support and credibility, organizations seek to establish congruence between the social values associated with or implied by their activities and the norms of acceptable behavior in the larger social system in which they are a part (Mathews 1993). Dowling and Pfeffer (1975, p. 122) claim that ‘insofar as these two value systems are congruent we can speak of organizational legitimacy’. Again; a consideration of Scandinavian elite sport bodies’ legitimacy supposes that they are viewed in close relation to the voluntary based organizations which constitute their basis. Organized sports constitute institutional fields (Powell and DiMaggio 1991) with values, perspectives and organizational arrangements that guide and regulate sport activities. In this respect, ‘social legitimacy’ and ‘organizational legitimacy’ are partly, but not entirely, overlapping concepts. Because several organizations constitute the organizational field, public support and credibility given to sport (social legitimacy) may be high whereas the more specific organizational legitimacy may vary. However, there is of course reciprocity here: maintaining social legitimacy is difficult if vital actors in the institutional field suffer from lack of organizational legitimacy.

In the general policy literature a distinction has been made between input- and output-legitimacy (Scharpf 1999). Generally spoken, ‘input’ concerns means and procedures in the production process whereas ‘output’ refers to effectiveness and efficiency related to goal achievement (Lindgren and Persson 2010). In short, the former is associated with processes and the latter with outcomes. Applied to elite sport, input-legitimacy may be threatened if the social acceptance of resource usage or working methods of the elite sport system diminishes. Output-legitimacy may be threatened if the system fails to produce socially expected results. The two facets

of legitimacy are both evident in current debates on elite sport; refer public discussions of national resource usage related to the Olympics in London and Sochi (input) and literature on elite sport systems' efficiency (De Bosscher *et al.* 2008) (output).

Reflecting upon the input-output distinction there is obviously a relationship between the facets: there should be a reasonable correspondence. The distinction may however be useful in specifying the dimensions of (a) *how* results are produced (input) and (b) *what* the system actually produces (output). Central to input legitimacy is, in addition to resource usage, acceptance of means and procedures based on transparency and openness. Perceptions of the 'production process' as more open, representative and inclusive increase public confidence (Lindgren and Persson 2010). Related to elite sport this aspect refers to social acceptance regarding how the results are produced, including the way elite sport efforts is organized and driven. This way, acceptance and support of the elite sport system as such can be regarded vital to input legitimacy.

When it comes to output, a decisive question is how 'output' is interpreted. In a narrow sense output is about efficiency in producing results; in a wider sense it concerns to what extent and in what ways the achieved results are seen as valuable to the society. Grix and Carmichael (2012) stated that the main reasons given for investment in elite sport in most Western societies appear as follows: elite sport success will lead to a better image abroad, bolster national identity and stimulate domestic mass participation; this, in turn, leads to a healthy nation and a wider pool of talents. They advanced the notion of a 'virtuous cycle' of sport to capture this philosophy which, notably, lacks empirical foundation. For instance, the elite sport-participation causality 'sounds eminently sensible, but there is little evidence to support it' (Grix and Carmichael 2012, p. 79). The same applies to the anecdotal claims that elite sport leads to social benefits such as building national pride (Sam 2009), although there is substantial research on sport (in general) and national identity (Topic and Coakley, 2010, Ward 2009). However, in terms of legitimacy: as long as the reasons given to support elite sport is not thoroughly empirically refuted and clearly contested in the public discourse they seem to maintain credibility. As the relationships are complex and the assumptions underlying the 'virtuous cycle' are difficult to capture or measure at a general level, the notions of elite sport's social benefits (outcome in a wider sense) has to be assessed in local discourses.

### **Scandinavian welfare states and voluntarily sport movements**

The Scandinavian Peninsula is a region in Northern Europe consisting of the three countries Sweden, Denmark and Norway. In line with the topic of this special issue they can be characterized as 'small';

today Sweden has 9.5, Denmark 5.5 and Norway 5 million inhabitants. The three neighboring countries share a partly common history and the languages are quite similar. In some respects they do not represent any unity, e.g. in foreign politics, Norway and Denmark (but not Sweden) are members of NATO, and Denmark and Sweden (but not Norway) are members of EU. Despite such differences, however, there are also striking similarities; politically, culturally and in relation to sport.

### *Social democratic welfare states*

A common feature of the three countries is the welfare state model as the basis for social security and equality of rights. The justification for still labelling the Scandinavian societies 'social democracies' (Castles 2009) – even in a decade where liberal and conservative parties have strengthened their position at the expense of the social democrats – has to be found in the continuation of the Scandinavian welfare states. The notion of 'Scandinavian social democracies' rests upon the political center of gravity in these societies during the last 50 years. Not only were social democratic politics powerful in these countries for much of the post-war period. Equally important is the distinctive welfare states that were developed in these countries; by Esping-Andersen (1990) labeled 'social democratic' welfare models.

In characterizing three typologies, Esping-Andersen (1990) distinguished between liberal, conservative, and social democratic welfare regimes. The latter, quite unique to Scandinavia, is driven by an ideal of equal social benefits to all citizens and far-reaching state ambitions concerning security and well-being for all members of society. The goal is a welfare state offering an equality of high standards, and welfare production mainly takes place within the public sector. Financing of the extensive public sector requires an active labour market policy aimed at full employment and high tax revenues. Still today, in a time of shifting governing coalitions, it seems to be a reasonable degree of political consensus on these basic features. In sum: the Scandinavian countries of today are wealthy, characterized by a high level of employment, strong welfare states and an emphasis on egalitarian values.

### *The voluntary sport movement*

Embedded in the context of the social democratic welfare state sport has developed largely within voluntary sport organizations. Despite the extensive public sector marking these societies, the domain of sport is left over to the third sector. At first sight this may seem surprising. However, this is



as example of how sport fits well into another typical feature of the Scandinavian societies; namely the occurrence of large 'popular movements' (Eichberg and Loland 2010). Sport is definitively one of those.

The state keeps an arm's length distance to the voluntary sport movement. This does by no means imply that public authorities see sport as unimportant; indeed, they take a main responsibility for infrastructure and provide crucial funding to the associations (Rafoss and Troelsen 2010). But the state has left the organizing and running of sports to civil organizations, and a substantial part of the labour put into this field is unpaid voluntary work. Within the framework of the welfare state, a division of labour has arisen in which the government ensures public access to the facilities, while the sport organizations (with public support) concentrate on developing and organizing sports activities. The result is a voluntary sport movement characterized by a huge degree of autonomy and self-regulation, combined with extensive state support based on the notion of sport as an important component of the welfare society (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010). This Scandinavian model reflects a mutual dependency between the state and the sport movement marked by an 'actively neutral' state position (Norberg 1997) and sport organizations operating with 'normative autonomy regarding values and morals' (Carlsson and Lindfelt 2010, p. 719). However and particularly interesting in relation to the focus of this paper: vital for the sport movement in claiming maintained autonomy and public support at an arm's length distance is the imperative to continuously demonstrate its significance as a cornerstone of the welfare society. As few specified political signals follow the money, the sport organizations need to show their eligibility related to the basic assumptions behind the funding. In short: the autonomy increases the need of legitimation efforts.

This leads to an account of the ideal of voluntarism; a characteristic feature of the sport movement. Local, voluntarily driven sport clubs constitute the basic units of Scandinavian sport. In terms of resources, main sources of income in the clubs are membership fees and income from activities conducted by volunteers, while public-sector funding and sponsors only account for between a third and a quarter of total income (Ibsen and Seippel 2010). In almost all sports associations, voluntary unpaid work – as a coach or a leader, on the board, in committees or to raise money – is indispensable. I agree with Ibsen and Seippel (2010) who claim that there is a positive cultural climate towards this way to organize sports in Scandinavia. Although this form of 'collective volunteerism' is changing concurrently with individualization processes in late modernity (Wollebæk, Skirstad and Hanstad 2014), the quantity of voluntary work remains remarkably stable. Enjolras (2002) showed that increasing commercial resources did not reduce the level of voluntary work in Norwegian sport organizations. Moreover, according to Seippel (2010), proved increased amount of professional work in the organizations does not seem to threaten the level of voluntary work. In sum,

although the sport model has become more differentiated due to processes such as professionalization, commercialization and globalization (Carlsson, Norberg and Persson 2011), voluntarism can still be regarded as one of the core values associated with organized sport in Scandinavia.

### *The meaning of sports*

This brief sketch of the welfare state and the sport movement provide a backdrop for a main point related to social legitimacy and sport in general: sports *matters* in these societies. Now, this is in no way unique for Scandinavia; sport matters all over the world. It would be more accurate to claim, as Bairner (2010) does viewing the region from a British point of view, that people in Scandinavian countries are more likely to be directly involved in sport as active participants and volunteer coaches than is the case in most other western societies. Because local clubs organized and run by parents and volunteers constitute the basic unit of the sport movement, it can be argued that the link between sport and local communities is stronger than elsewhere. Although literature on sport and community integration has indicated that there is a tendency to oversell sports' potential as an integrative force (Coalter 2007), empirical studies in this area have typically investigated authorities' targeted initiatives aimed to *use sport as a tool* in promoting integration (Hassan and Telford 2014). In contrast to such externally initiated top-down initiatives, it seems more reasonable to suggest such positive outcomes as an implicit consequence of a voluntary driven local club (although the relationship is hard to judge). Then it is more likely that the relationship between the grassroots clubs and local communities becomes internal, promoting the community's identification with and feeling of ownership of local sports.

The social organization and workings of voluntary associations contribute in defining the meaning of sport as a societal phenomenon in these countries. Beside public health, not surprisingly used as a prominent argument for supporting sport, democratic and social integration seems to be equally prominent arguments underpinning Scandinavian sports policy objectives (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010). In addition to youth and mass sport being regarded a role as provider of good health, its significance as an expression of local engagement, democratic participation and egalitarian values contributes to legitimize sport as part of the Scandinavian welfare societies (Helle-Valle 2008). This way, output legitimacy (outcomes) is more clearly related to 'participation' in a broad meaning of the term than it is to 'performance', with subsequent consequences to input legitimacy (processes). Maintained organizational legitimacy supposes clubs that remain inclusive and member driven at the local level, and that federations at the central level proceed according to democratic principles such

as representation of grassroots interests by the umbrella organization. Although a recent study of the Norwegian confederation of sports (the umbrella) did not reveal evidence of oligarchic governance (Enjolras and Waldahl 2010), the study underscored that ‘memberships’ lack of active participation, informal network-based decision making and issues of representativeness are likely to undermine organizational legitimacy’ (p 215). Such tendencies may be reinforced by developments in the ‘elite sport system’, to which we now turn.

### **Elite sport development in the Scandinavian context**

As in the rest of the Western world elite sport obviously plays a role also in Scandinavia, reflected in current sport policies, public interest, and priorities and efforts made by the sport associations. In recent decades elite sports have successively been given a more prominent position in policy documents (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010) and targeted elite sport bodies has supplemented the traditional organizational structure.

#### *The organizational linkage between mass and elite sport*

Before looking in more detail into recent developments in elite sport efforts the organizational linkage between mass and elite sport need to be emphasized. Until the 1980s no organizational unit had any sole responsibility for elite sport in neither of the Scandinavian countries. The general rule was that the same associations that promoted youth and mass sport also had the main responsibility for elite sports within their domain. The voluntary sports sector consisted of one confederation (several in Denmark) – serving as umbrella organizations – and their network of national sport organizations, regional/district organizations, local sport councils and local sports clubs. All organized sports – children and youth sport, mass sport, talent development, and elite sport – were organized and driven within the same organizational structure. This ‘segmented structure’ (Andersen and Ronglan 2012); meaning that each individual sport federation (e.g. skiing, cycling, swimming) holds the responsibility for all kind of activities within their domain, still today applies as a main rule. Thus, the emergence of overarching elite sport bodies over the last decades has supplemented the segmented structure rather than radically changing it.

#### *Establishment of elite sport bodies*

In Denmark and Norway, the emergence of more distinct elite sport models can be traced back to the 1980s. Until this decade the Olympic Committees played a modest role at the outside of the confederations, whereas the real responsibility for mass and elite sport development lied with the individual sport federations. During the 1980s, however, there was a closer cooperation between the national sport confederation (the umbrella) and the Olympic Committees in both countries, ending with a merger in the mid-1990s. A part of the cooperative efforts was the establishment of a new elite sport body in both countries; Team Denmark (TD) in Denmark (1985) and Olympiatoppen (OLT) in Norway (1988/89).

The introduction of special elite sport organizations at the national level modified the traditional segmented model. In Denmark, the process leading to the establishment of TD involved party politicians and civil servants in key roles (Hansen 2012). Their motivation was only partly directed towards the internal efficiency of elite sport efforts, as the political discussions were framed within a welfare state perspective (Ibsen, Hansen and Storm 2010). A major concern was that elite athletes engaging in extreme efforts of modern elite sport might sacrifice health, education and opportunities in later life. As a response to this an elite sport law was enacted which constituted a framework for Team Denmark, and TD became a state funded state agency with its own board representing sport interests as well as broader political and societal interests (Storm 2012). This way, efforts were made to institutionalize TD in a way that secured societal and organizational legitimacy. In Norway, the establishment and further development of OLT followed a somewhat different route. In contrast to Denmark, it was leaders within the sports movement that introduced new initiatives, focusing on how to strengthen the competitiveness of elite sport (Andersen and Ronglan 2012). OLT was organized as an elite sport body integrated in the sports confederation, with no external board, supported by the state through funding but at an arm's-length distance. The autonomy of OLT, compared to TD, arguably increased the need for legitimation efforts. First, OLT has had to operate in ways that build support and credibility concerning elite sport in the population at large (social legitimacy); second, OLT's decisions are judged by the wider sport movement and it has had to justify its eligibility within the organizational network (organizational legitimacy).

TD and OLT have over the last decades been institutionalized as core actors in elite sport production in Denmark and Norway (Augestad, Bergsgard and Hansen 2006, Storm and Nielsen 2010). As overarching elite sport bodies they are aimed to lead, coordinate and strengthen efforts across specific sports. In some ways this implies a centralization of elite sport support as a response to increasing demands at the international stage. However, to stress a point touched upon earlier: the individual sport federations still have the main responsibility for developing their own sports (mass *and* elite). OLT and TD are primarily meant to work through the federations, rather than

operate as isolated actors. Disagreements concerning division of responsibilities and the extent of involvement and interference are from time to time expressed and display underlying tensions embedded in this structure, particularly in Norway (who 'owns' elite sport) (Goksøyr and Hanstad 2012). For example, the cooperation between OLT and the Norwegian Ski Federation (NSF) was for a long time limited and characterized by mistrust, while the dispute concerning who (OLT or NSF) deserved credit for international skiing successes was rather hostile. NSF was among the federations that throughout the 1990s questioned (and actively worked to undermine) the organizational legitimacy of OLT (Hanstad 2002).

In Sweden, contrary to Denmark and Norway, no specific elite sport body has been established, and the traditional organizational set-up has remained remarkably stable during the last decades. This structure emphasizes the autonomy of individual sport federations and clear division of roles between the sport confederation on the one hand, and the Olympic Committee on the other. Due to increasing commercialization the Swedish Olympic Committee (SOC) has grown and become a significant actor. Crisp tensions characterize the current relationship between the sport confederation (RF) and the SOC, stemming from long disagreement on priorities and organizational solutions (Norberg and Sjöblom 2012). Not being able to reach a cooperative solution has led both sides to claim principal ownership to elite sports and thus inhibited coordinated efforts. The tensions includes a struggle for legitimacy and a rhetoric aimed at devaluating the other part: RF accuses SOC of lack of representativeness (input legitimacy) whereas SOC accuses RF of lack of competence and efficiency regarding elite sport support (output) (Norberg and Sjöblom 2012). As SOC has been professionalized and expanded, its way of supporting elite sport has become quite similar to Team Denmark and Olympiatoppen: offering expertise and support to federations, teams and athletes and intervening in performance processes (but only in Olympic sports). This way, the three nations today seem quite similar concerning the ways targeted elite sport bodies (TD, OLT, SOC) operate, but quite different concerning the ways these bodies are part of / separated from the voluntary movement. Indeed they each face their specific legitimation challenges.

#### *Distinctive Scandinavian 'elite sport systems'?*

Common to the Scandinavian countries is that a notion of a distinct 'elite sport system' seems somewhat difficult to explain or capture. In some ways the concept make sense in a Scandinavian context, as construction of elite sport facilities, targeted talent development programs, support for full-time athletes, provision of professional coaching and sports medicine support service have become integrated in elite sport efforts also in these countries. The establishment and working

methods of the elite sport bodies described above have definitively reinforced such developments. If we understand an 'elite sport system' as driving forces directed towards continuous performance enhancement and the consequences of such endeavors, this is clearly present in Scandinavia today. As *processes*, an elite sport system is evident.

More difficult, however, is to capture an elite sport system understood as an organizational structure. What complicates the picture is the intimate relationship between mass and elite sport, expressed in the ways sport as such is organized. Because: where starts and where ends the 'elite sport system' as an organizational structure? In organizational terms, the notion of such a system has to include far more than the targeted and professionalized elite sport bodies. The sport federations, responsible for both mass and elite sport within their domain, definitively play a major role. Elite sport studies investigating for instance cross country skiing in Norway (Hansen 2014) and ice hockey in Sweden (Fahlén 2006) clearly demonstrate the federations' (including the clubs') major role related to elite sport development, particularly in huge national sports. Here, the elite sport bodies may provide important specific competence and support (Hansen 2014), but compared to the total amount of resources allocated to elite sport (money, personnel, competence, technology), the individual federations are by far the most important contributors. For example, in economic terms, the elite sport budget of the Norwegian ski association alone reaches almost the level of Olympiatoppen's total budget; a budget OLT distributes between dozens of sports. Similarly, in Denmark it is estimated that the federations' total spending on elite sport is approximately twice that of Team Denmark (Storm 2012). It is worth noting that this estimate does not include the voluntary work in the federations (at club, regional and central level), which; if included, even clearer would demonstrate the federations' role as core actors in the 'elite sport system'.

This joint responsibility for elite sport development partly explains why the Scandinavian elite sport bodies seem so modest in international comparison. Stated in a different manner: the quite limited resources (in international comparison) allocated to the elite sport bodies do not prove that elite sport efforts are as modest as this funding alone may indicate. The scale of targeted efforts initiated by the individual sport federations varies heavily from one sport to another, depending on the size of the sport, the resource base, and not least political priorities made by the respective sport federation. The dual aim of the federations; promoting both elite and mass sport, constitute a basic distinction underlying political controversies over a range of topics. A major challenge embedded in the Scandinavian sport model is that there are inherent tensions between groups which promote efficiency and performance as basic goals, and groups which promote traditional organizational values linked to democracy and representation (Steen-Johnsen and Hanstad 2008). Interwoven in the notion of Scandinavian 'elite sport systems', is continuous debates rooted in these tensions.

An implicit parallel (or opposite) to the concept of an 'elite sport system' is a 'mass sport system'. Due to the Scandinavian organizational structure these are not separate, but to a large extent overlapping 'systems', making it harder to distinguish elite sports concerns from mass sports concerns. This interweaving has important consequences when it comes to questions related to social as well as organizational legitimacy of elite sport. A major concern is about 'ownership' of elite sport; that is, the extent to which central bodies (e.g. OLT, TD) can intervene and make decisions which bind the sport federations. By being given the 'overall responsibility' for elite sport, the central agencies seek to attach conditions to their priorities; for example, allocate resources provided that the federations meet certain requirements. Particularly to small federations with scarce resources this can lead to 'policy drift' (Béland 2007) towards a more evident elite sport focus. This is again linked with transparency in decision making and resource allocation, as the federations, with a dual aim of promoting elite and mass sport, may want to blur such a drift in a societal and political context where mass sport in many ways stands in a discursively privileged position (Helle-Valle 2008).

Given the interdependency between the overlapping 'mass sport system' and 'elite sport system' in Scandinavia, the region faces an increasing challenge. On the one hand; competitiveness in modern elite sport supposes an adaption to the international environment; that is, comprehensive and targeted efforts aimed at producing international results. On the other hand; elite sport in Scandinavia is dependent on an adaption to the values characterizing the voluntary sport movement to maintain its legitimacy as an integrated part of the movement. So far, (modest) elite sport bodies have been added to the organizational structure, modified it, and strengthened the intensification processes related to elite sport. Still, however, distinct Scandinavian elite sport systems is difficult to distinguish, understood as a structure detached from organized sports as such.

### **Different paths to elite sport successes – three Scandinavian cases**

To illustrate the interplay between 'mass' and 'elite' and the complex organizational relationships underlying Scandinavian elite sport, I now turn to three specific cases of sport successes: Swedish golf (Wijk 2012), Norwegian women's handball (Ronglan 2012), and Danish men's track cycling (Nielsen and Hoffmann 2012). The idea is to describe and compare cases that have achieved extraordinary international results over the last decade(s). The three stories provide examples of different tracks to sporting success and can thus shed light on conditions and drivers behind elite sport successes, the linkages between different parts of the sport organizations, and in which ways the portrayed stories are socially valued beyond pure athletic achievements.

Concerning international results the 'success stories' can be summarized as follows. (1) Swedish golf: Until mid-1980s hardly any Swedish golfers qualified for world elite competitions. However, during the last two decades (until 2010) 10-15% of the world tour players were Swedes and more than 50 Swedes won tournaments at the major tours (Wijk 2012). Thus, the most remarkable aspect is the breadth of the success. (2) Norwegian women's handball: The international breakthrough happened about the same time as the Swedish golfers, when the national team in 1986 won its first medal in the World Championships. Since then, the team has dominated international handball; from 1986 to date no other nations has won as many medals in international championships as Norway (Ronglan 2012). Thus, the sustainability of the success is striking. (3) Danish men's track cycling: This story differs somewhat from the others as track cycling has a long successful tradition as Olympic sport in Denmark. However, the 'modern' story of Danish track cycling is about how a deterioration of international competitiveness during the 1990s was turned into a new era of success from 2005 onwards (Nielsen and Hoffmann 2012). Thus, the story is mainly about regaining competitiveness.

In contextualizing these stories I will restrict myself to elaborate on four dimensions: the relationship to mass sport participation in the respective sport; the significance of facilities / infrastructure; organizational strategies in the respective federations; and the involvement of elite sport bodies. Along these dimensions there are significant differences between the three cases, as summarized in the table below and described in more detail in the following sections (see table 1).



Table 1. Key dimensions in elite sport development (adapted from Andersen and Ronglan 2012)

|  | <b>Swedish golf</b>  | <b>Norwegian women's handball</b>                               | <b>Danish men's track cycling</b>                               |
|--|--|---|---|
| <b>Mass sport participation</b>              | Increasing mass sport participation prior to elite sport success | Stable mass sport participation prior to / during elite success | Diminishing mass sport participation during elite sport success |
| <b>Facilities</b>                            | Massive building of courts prior to elite sport success          | Gradual improvement prior to / during elite sport success       | The one essential track modernized and reopened                 |
| <b>Strategies / key actors</b>               | Bottom-up process. Local / regional mobilization                 | Broad top-down process. Strategy to extend core competencies    | Narrow top-down process. Niche strategy, strict priorities      |
| <b>Interaction with 'elite sport system'</b> | Modest   | Increasing  | High  |

*'The Swedish golf miracle'*

Two dimensions stand out as characteristic features of the story. First; the explosive expansion of players in general and the development of golf towards a 'folk sport' in Sweden. Second; the modest role played by central sport leaders or elite sport bodies directly related to the elite sport success. Regarding the first point, it is reasonable to suggest that the huge broadening of the sport at least prepared the ground for the elite success that was to come. Massive building of golf courses throughout Sweden in the 1980s and 90s improved training conditions for athletes and teams. The upgraded infrastructure was accompanied by an expansion of 'open' golf clubs; that is, local community based clubs where in principle anyone was welcome to play. This contributed to transform golf from being a narrow 'upper-class sport' in Sweden to become a broad popular sport. Around 100 golf clubs and 40.000 members in the early 1970s grew to 450 clubs and 600.000 members around the millennium (Wijk 2012).

The processes leading to the broadening of golf, both geographically and socially, can be linked to the next point, namely that neither the central level of the federation nor any elite sport body operated as strong driving forces for developing world class performance. Initially, the explosion of young players was not part of any distinct elite sport strategy; the agenda was to broaden the sport. However, when world-class results started to come, the relatively small 'central level' of the golf federation took some actions to nurture the continued success. Such actions included improved coach education and talent development initiatives in general, rather than any direct interventions in the club teams and regional teams which constituted the basic units of the success. As golf was no Olympic sport during this period it did not qualify for any support from SOC.

Taken together, the story of Swedish golf fits well into the traditional notion of elite sport development within the context of the Scandinavian sports model. It pictures a powerful decentralized bottom-up process supported by state funded improvement of infrastructure leading to a remarkable increase in players as well as performance level. This story, which has been called 'the golf miracle' in Sweden (Wijk 2012) appears as a strong testimony of the close relationship between mass and elite sport. As such it contributes to strengthen public confidence in the sport model and elite sport's value as a genuine product of the sport movement. Given the developments of current elite sport, however, it can be questioned if the golf miracle is an example of yesterday's solutions: perhaps it is literally 'miraculous' to expect elite sport success of tomorrow if a specific elite sport strategy is absent?

#### *Institutionalized Norwegian handball success*

The handball case differs from the story above. Here, the elite sport success over the last decades can be framed as a story of gradual institutionalization of basic elements necessary to be competitive internationally, primarily driven by the handball federation. Contrary to the Swedish golf case, there was neither any significant growth of players prior to or during the success, nor any massive improvements of infrastructure relevant to handball. Participation in grassroots handball remained high and stable during the period, while there has been a steady improvement of courts and training facilities. The central dimensions of the more profound institutionalization process appeared to be a more consistent and structured talent work, an increased cooperation with the elite sport body Olympiatoppen, and the implementation of a distinct and uniform holistic coaching philosophy across the youth, junior, and senior national teams. These developments were facilitated by a remarkable stability in leadership position within the federation, which made it easier to develop and maintain long-term strategies (Ronglan 2012).

Compared to the Swedish golf story, which roughly can be portrayed as elite sport success emerging as a pure 'bottom-up' product of the voluntary sport model, the handball story definitively appears as a more centralized driven process. The success of the national team was not just a reflection of improved performances and efforts made at the club level. Targeted elite sport strategies were developed by key actors from the 1990s and onwards aimed at developing and extending core competences; strategies that gave priority to the national team (Ronglan 2012). However, it is important to note that the handball success, although it relied on the establishment of a more targeted elite sport model, have been underpinned by a high degree of legitimacy both within the handball federation and in the Norwegian public. One reason for this is the close link that has been maintained to community and club handball as a major national sport for girls and women (Broch 2014). Another dimension that adds societal value to the success is a public discourse linking the handball idols – who are among the most celebrated sport stars in Norway – to the image of a society marked by gender equality (Lippe 2002).

#### *The revival of Danish track cycling*

The Danish track cycling case differs from the golf and handball stories in several ways. First, track cycling is a sport with a long elite sport tradition in Denmark; the first Olympic track cycling medal was won in 1924. Next to sailing, cycling is the sport where Denmark has won most medals in the Olympic Games, and most of these have been achieved on the track. Second, the modern story of Danish track cycling is primarily about how a radical deterioration of international competitiveness during the 1990s was turned into a new era of success from 2005 and onwards. This way, this is an example of a narrow and focused strategy aimed at regain competitiveness (Nielsen and Hoffmann 2012).

The revival of Danish track cycling can be seen as an elite sport success created by the Danish cycle federation in close cooperation with Team Denmark as the central elite sport body. This alliance adopted a strict niche strategy to facilitate the development of a number of carefully selected athletes, competing in particular track cycling events. Distinguished foreign coaches was hired, who implemented targeted training models aimed at maximizing performance in the selected events. A vital part of the strategy was to get public support for re-establishing a top modern track for track-cycling. Because of the broad recruitment base found in road cycling, and the centralized niche strategy employed in developing selected cyclists, only one track was needed. Leaders in the cycle federation, in close cooperation with facilitators from Team Denmark, were the entrepreneurs behind this strategy. The story illustrates how a competitive sport, in the need of a particular and

defined form of support, appears as an 'ideal case' for a centralized elite sport body as Team Denmark. In such cases specialized support and relatively small but highly targeted investments are likely to pay off. Danish track cycling is an example of how specific infrastructure and competence in combination with strict priorities can foster success despite a shrinking recruitment base. It is worth noting that the number of track cyclists, and the number of competing road cyclists, diminished during the recent elite sport success.

### *Top-down or bottom-up?*

One should be careful to draw definite conclusions based on three cases from different time periods and founded on diverse data material. Looking at the three cases together, however, it seems clear that even within a quite homogeneous Scandinavian context, there are different paths to elite sport success. Not only did the paths to success differ, but also the context in which these developments took place. Additionally, the stories represent 'successes' in quite different meanings of the word and in quite different sports. The Danish and Swedish stories seem in many ways to be opposites in terms of strategy and scope. Nevertheless, both the centralized niche strategy adopted by central leaders in Danish cycling and Team Denmark, and the evolving wave of elite golf players nurtured within a more decentralized Swedish sport model, resulted in continued international success.

The three individual stories should not be seen as representative for a specific Swedish, Norwegian and Danish way of promoting elite sport development; the stories do not reflect typical national differences between the three countries. They can rather be seen as different typologies based on a continuum (bottom-up / top-down), which seem to be combined and blended in different ways across Scandinavia, leading to more or less successful processes. The divergence of the three stories might help to kill the myth that 'one size fits all'. It seems clear that societal, organizational and sport-specific contexts should be taken into account when trying to understand why particular efforts or strategies succeed or not. It is also worth noting that the three cases do not support the widespread notion ('virtuous cycle') that successful elite sport as such will generate mass sport, or the other way around. The relationship is definitively not that simple.

Common features across the stories are first of all that the three sports had a broad foundation within the population, both as mass sport activities and in terms of public interest. Second, the elite sport successes symbolized societal values beyond the achievements as such, like voluntarism (Swedish golf), gender equality (Norwegian handball) and notions of national identity (cycling in Denmark). Third, it seemed to be a relatively low level of controversies between elite sport

and mass sport efforts during the success periods (Andersen and Ronglan 2012). Conflicting priorities between elite and mass sport are an ongoing concern within Scandinavian sport in general, however, this appeared not to be a central issue in these cases. This indicates that the development took place in a context of high organizational and societal legitimacy.

### **Scandinavian elite sport: legitimacy under pressure?**

Success in elite sport can be understood in different ways. A simple way is to measure it purely as medals achieved in major international competitions. The assumption seems to be that medals as such will bring national pride. At least in a Scandinavian context it could be argued that such an understanding of 'outcome', which seems to be an increasingly dominant perspective internationally (Grix and Carmichael 2012), is too narrow. The societal importance of sporting achievements – outcome in a wider sense – has to include reflections on whether the ways in which results were achieved, are regarded valuable or not. This directs the attention towards national perspectives on what kinds of sports are important (for different reasons), and public judgments on the processes leading to the performance. To put it simple: maybe it is not the total number of medals that is crucial (at least to small countries), but *which* medals (outcome legitimacy) as well as *how* they are achieved (input legitimacy). A prime example of the latter is of course doping, clearly expressed in the current Danish debate following the scandals revealed in international cycling. The former admiration of Danish track cycling achievements is today rapidly declining as a consequence of recent Danish doping disclosures, leading to public confessions to rebuild trust (Thing and Ronglan 2014). A parallel with even wider consequences is the 'crisis of legitimacy' caused by the public's response to Finnish skiers doping violations in 2001, heavily contributing to the breakdown of the skiing federation (Lämsä 2012). Although doping may be considered among the extreme violations: such examples may illustrate the significance of input legitimacy when it comes to elite sport in Scandinavia.

As stated in the introduction, public acceptance and support to the elite sport system as such can be regarded vital to input legitimacy. Given the nature of modern elite sport, it is quite obvious that the distance between the characteristics of a voluntary sport movement on the one hand and the requirements needed to succeed in elite sport on the other, is increasing. This growing gap is a global trend. However, particularly challenging within the Scandinavian model is that the tensions between 'sport for all' and international competitiveness have to be managed largely within a united organizational framework. Because the 'elite sport system' and the 'mass sport system' is heavily overlapping there is a reciprocal influence; decisions and actions to strengthen elite sport directly

influence preconditions for mass sport. In such interweaved structure input legitimacy (related to elite sport) has to be looked upon more broadly than in sport models with a clearer division between mass and elite. In short: input legitimacy becomes more vital to social legitimacy. While the elite sport bodies tend to emphasize outcome in a narrow sense (medals) to substantiate their role and strengthen organizational legitimacy, the significance of their policies, decisions and actions (input) should not be underestimated as a main source of social legitimacy.

One example of how this interweaving between mass and elite is expressed is the ongoing debate on youth sport and talent development; a particularly hot issue because youth sport is equally important from both perspectives (participation and performance). The traditional ideal for children and youth sport in Scandinavia has been multi-sport community-based clubs promoting broad participation, sports sampling and late specialization (Støckel, Strandbu, Solenes, Jørgensen and Fransson 2010). Until recently, this has been regarded beneficial both for mass participation and talent development (Storm, Henriksen and Krogh 2012). However, from an elite sport perspective this ideal is increasingly contested (Helle-Valle 2008, Sjöblom and Norberg 2012) because it is argued to be poorly suited to meet the demands of today's elite sport. Furthermore, it is claimed that if cultivating elite athletes is wanted we need to take a closer look at the quality of the youth sport work: there is a need to spot talents earlier and provide professional coaches at an early stage of the preadolescents' careers (Aambø 2006).

Because such suggestions from elite sport spokesmen – earlier specialization and more centralized and professionalized talent development efforts – do not merely affect elite sport but simultaneously alter the conditions for youth sport in general, legitimation efforts have to follow two lines. It should be substantiated that the changes are productive both regarding talent development and to the sports movement in a wider sense. This is indeed a difficult exercise, because there are obvious conflicts of interests and different logics at play here. Take earlier specialization: there is a solid documentation pointing to the downside of early specialization, for example lack of enjoyment and drop-out from sports (Baker 2003). This contradicts essential aims legitimizing the sport movement as such.

A similar ambiguity is present concerning more centralized and professionalized talent development efforts. Scandinavian sport is typically decentralized through geographical spread of clubs, ensuring a service for many youngsters and promoting multi-faceted local developmental arenas. However, centralized talent development implies that talents are encouraged to move to specific and targeted elite sport locations. Decisive human capital; athletes, professional coaches and other expertise, are clustered to enhance quality and knowledge transfer (Andersen 2012). There is

little doubt that the elite sport centers have contributed in developing Scandinavian elite athletes (Andersen and Ronglan 2012), but an open question is to what extent this centralization of resources affects the local clubs. One possibility is an increased spread of competence throughout the organization; but equally possible is an emptying of local resources (talented athletes and professional expertise) as they move or are recruited to targeted centralized locations. It may be demanding to implement talent development programs in ways that strengthen rather than deteriorate the clubs as local development arenas. If they are stretched too far, centralized efforts may undermine the foundation of talent development: youth sport in general, in a decentralized voluntary organization.

The dilemmas embedded in youth sport (participation vs performance) are to a certain extent debated internally in Scandinavian sport organizations (Steen-Johnsen & Hanstad 2008). Such debates involve elements of legitimation efforts *within* the field (organizational legitimacy), for example when the elite sport bodies work to gain support for their engagement in youth sport. However, in the *public* discourse on sport in Scandinavia such dilemmas are undercommunicated (Helle-Valle 2008). Instead, the link between mass and elite sport is emphasized. From the perspective of the central sport leaders the unity is essential to maintain, because a 'united sport movement' in size and scope represents a powerful societal actor (Enjolras and Waldahl 2010). The presentation of a united front increases political influence and justifies substantial public support at an arm's length distance. In securing the organizations' monopoly in the field of organized competitive sport (Bergsgard and Norberg 2010) the image of elite sport as an integrated extension of the voluntary movement is favorable. However, this harmonized public rhetoric obscures increasing internal contradictions stemming from the growing gap discussed above. Today there are strong public expectations to be competitive at the international scene, massively conveyed by the media but additionally articulated in policy documents. Still, a public discourse on how this should be done in a way that safeguard elite sport as well as mass sport concerns is hardly evident. A danger of such lacking discourse is a slow and 'unnoticeable' step-by-step movement (policy drift) towards an increasingly comprehensive elite sport system with a subsequent weakening of elite sports' social legitimacy.

The Scandinavian countries are yet not there. The targeted elite sport bodies are still modest and have supplemented the traditional overall organization of sport rather than changed it in a substantial way. It is fair to claim that so far, in terms of elite sport, the competitive advantage in Scandinavia has not been a comprehensive elite sport system, but an ability to utilize the potential embedded in the popular movement to *also* create some elite sport achievements. The elite sport bodies have definitively contributed to refine this ability. Today, both the international elite sport

environment and organizational interests represent strong forces towards a further expansion of targeted elite sport systems. However, maintaining and displaying a close link between local community sport and elite sport is highly valued in Scandinavia (Bairner 2010). This requires a finely tuned balance when it comes to developing elite sports in Scandinavia within the current institutional arrangements.

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