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International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

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Available online: 15 Nov 2011

To cite this article: Jonathan Grix & Fiona Carmichael (2011): Why do governments invest in elite sport? A polemic, International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, DOI:10.1080/19406940.2011.627358

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2011.627358>



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Why do governments invest in elite sport? A polemic

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Elite sport currently enjoys high levels of investment in many advanced capitalist countries. The primary aim of this piece is to introduce and unpack the reasons generally given by states for prioritizing and investing in elite sport. While our core focus is the UK sport policy sector, many of the discussions will be relevant for other, advanced liberal capitalist systems (e.g. Australia and Canada) and even the now defunct dictatorships (e.g. the Soviet Union and the GDR). We show how commonsensical propositions (e.g. 'elite sport success promotes participation among citizens') are not always based on wide, existing research and evidence. The philosophy behind the United Kingdom's model of sport – and that of several other advanced states – we term a 'virtuous cycle' of sport, whereby elite sport success is seen to lead to both international prestige for the nation, a 'feel-good factor' among the population and, importantly, to an increase in participation among the masses. This, in turn, leads to a healthier nation and to a wider pool of people from which to pick the champions of the future. This article takes a closer look at the assumptions underlying such a model of sport.

Keywords: investment in elite sport; participation in sport; 'virtuous cycle' of sport; government; sport policy

Introduction

Changes in policy priority occur often and in a wide variety of policy sectors. The late Mick Green was one of the first scholars to shed light on the changing sport policy discourses in the United Kingdom, highlighting the shift away from a policy built on a sentiment of 'sport for all' to an increasing focus on elite sport as early as the mid-1990s (Green 2004). The following develops this theme further by focusing on the reasons given by governments for investing in elite sport. Since London secured the hosting of the 2012 Olympics in 2005, all sport policy has become permeated with a concern for elite-level sports. Whilst Green and others have skilfully outlined the contours of ever-changing sport policy (Houlihan 1997, Green 2004, 2006), the simple question as to why governments invest in elite sport in the first place remains unanswered. The reason why this is the case, we believe, lies in the positive, discursive nature in which elite sport policy is framed, allowing few possibilities for thinking 'otherwise' (Green 2004, p. 367). That is, the question is rarely put, as 'sport' in and of itself is understood as an intrinsically 'good' thing; yet, investments of over £300 million for a 3-year period (2009–2012) in any other policy sector would command a great deal of explanation and justification (for figures, broken down by sport discipline, see UK Sport (2008a)).

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Given the nature of the subject matter, the following discussion is often polemical – following [Morrell \(2008\)](#) – in the sense that it does not offer a complete and thorough review of all the relevant literature around elite sport. It does, however, offer a badly needed ‘counterpoint’ (Morrell 2008, p. 614) to a ‘given’ fact: sport is in and of itself good and investment in elite sport is intrinsically good (see also Coalter 2007, p. 42). The point is not to argue the opposite, but simply to seek the rationale behind governments’ investment in performance sport. We develop our argument by drawing on the literature around ‘policy as discourse’ and the discursive construction of sport policy, whereby certain discourses set the parameters of what is and what is not conceived as possible. [Green \(2004\)](#), building on the early literature around the theme of the discursive construction of sport policy related to sport development, remarks:

Taken together, such insights [from the early literature] are useful in that they help sensitise us to the ways in which sport policy has been/is discursively constructed; the argument being that such constructions underlie the privileging of certain interests while marginalising others. (Green 2004, p. 376)

This is not to suggest that people are simply manipulated by government, ‘more that discourse may set the limits to what it is possible to think, and thus the understandings of the choices that can be made’ ([Newman 2005](#), p. 128). Discursive practices manifest themselves in specific agendas prioritized by government at specific times. Sport policy has witnessed a number of swift changes and shifts in priority, none more so than the current focus on the elite sport agenda and ‘sport for sport’s sake’ ([Collins 2010](#)).

The primary aim in what follows is to introduce and assess the reasons generally given by states for prioritizing and investing in elite sport. While our core focus is the UK sport policy sector, many of the discussions will be relevant for other, advanced liberal capitalist systems (e.g. Australia and Canada) and even the now defunct dictatorships (e.g. the Soviet Union and the GDR). We show how commonsensical propositions (e.g. ‘elite sport success promotes participation among citizens’) are not always based on wide, existing research and evidence. We conceptualize the underlying philosophy of current elite sports development (ESD) systems by invoking the notion of a ‘virtuous cycle of sport’. In brief, this holds that investment in elite sport promotes mass sport participation, which, in turn, apart from the obvious health benefits, provides a greater ‘pool’ from which elite champions of the future are likely to be drawn. We examine the hypothesized causal links that make up this cycle below.

The article unfolds as follows: we set the scene by briefly introducing the UK sport policy sector before turning to the chief reasons given for investment in elite sport, which we have arranged under three broad – and often overlapping – areas: (1) elite sport investment and mass participation in sport and physical activity (as the latter is *the* key Olympic legacy priority for London 2012); (2) promoting a ‘feel-good’ factor and international prestige; and (3) mass participation, mega-events and elite role models. Although we focus on the United Kingdom as a case study, much of the debate and policy discourse around the justification for elite sport investment is similar to other ESD systems, analysing, where possible, other countries’ experience. The article draws on, and investigates, official government documents on sport policy.

The UK sport policy sector

The institutional landscape of sport policy in the United Kingdom is complex, but for this article the following brief overview will suffice as a way of contextualizing the subsequent

discussion of government's elite sport investment. The sport policy community in the United Kingdom has changed in a short period of time from a relatively unknown and dispersed sector tucked away in an obscure government department, to a significant cross-cutting area of policy in Whitehall. Since the inception of the Labour Government in 1997, 'Sport' has featured in the title of a government department (the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, DCMS), grass-roots sport, including school sports, has moved up the political agenda, and elite sport has seen an unprecedented intervention and prioritization by the state. The announcement of London as the host of the 2012 Olympics in 2005 added impetus to the process of politicization of sport policy *already underway*. This decision can be understood as the catalyst for a change in the focus of sport policy in the United Kingdom away from the general impact of sport in society towards a 'sport for sports sake' agenda (Brookes and Wiggan 2009, p. 402), whereby elite sport's increasing political salience is clear. However, as suggested above, it is important to note that the trend towards central government control of this policy sector has been underway since the mid-1990s and not just since the announcement of London as the host of the 2012 Olympics. Between the Labour Party's reign, 1997–2010, sport policy has witnessed unprecedented government intervention in both elite and grass-roots sport policy.

A recent streamlining of the complex sport policy landscape has led to a clearer overview of which organization does what. Treasury funding and lottery funding for sport (first introduced in 1995 – a decision influenced by the then Conservative Prime Minister John Major, 1990–1997) is distributed via two 'arm's length' sport agencies, Sport England for grass-roots and UK Sport for elite, including Olympic, sports. Both are accountable to the DCMS, which in turn is, as a government department, accountable to the treasury. Throughout the delivery chain, for both elite and grass-roots sport, government targets are set and must be adhered to if organizations want government funding. UK Sport and Sport England are in the near future set to be brought together by the UK coalition government into one, unified body.

While the announcement of London as the host of the 2012 Olympic Games in 2005 added impetus to this elite policy focus, the rationale for investment in elite sport remained and remains unclear, under-researched and generally uncritically accepted. The policy discourse around the desire for world-class performance sport and the investment in achieving elite success is positive, up-beat and rarely challenged (for exceptions, see Coalter 2007, Collins 2010).¹ Successive policy documents have continued to stress the importance of elite sport in increasingly confident terms. In *Game plan*, for example, investment in high-performance sport was said to lead to a number of positive outcomes (see below for a discussion of this; DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002, p. 117). This was superseded by one of the latest official government documents, a confident publication termed *Playing to win: a new era for sport* (DCMS 2008a), which placed performance and excellence very much at its core. The elite policy discourse is, of course, part of the wider spread of New Public Management that has shaped both how sport is governed (Grix 2009, Houlihan and Green 2009) financed and developed. The 'new' governance arrangements via government arm's length agencies have focused on tangible and measurable 'targets' that ensure national governing bodies fulfil government-led priorities and not necessarily those that are best for the sport or wider public. The study of the 'governance' of sport does not tell us *why* states invest in elite sport, but it shows us *how* government go about implementing their policy strategies, usually via asymmetrical and resource-dependent relationships with stakeholders (see Rose 1999, Grix 2010, Goodwin and Grix 2011).

The international success of other nations in elite sport appears to have had an effect on the shift in priority and policy discourse towards elite sport policy, especially the success of the Australian team in Sydney. *Game plan* states:

We can learn lessons from Australia. Their purposeful pursuit of sporting excellence, sustained by Government in partnership with sporting bodies, has resulted in Australia becoming, on a per capita basis, by far the most successful sporting nation in the world. (Game Plan/Strategy Unit 2002, p. 7)

Interestingly, Australia has only recently begun to reverse their sport policy by re-assessing 'funding priorities' away from a focus on elite sport to a more balanced policy across community and elite sports (Australian Government, Independent Sport Panel 2009, pp. 6–7).

Government rationale for investment in elite sport

Why should government invest in high performance sport? ... as a driver of the "feelgood factor" and the image of the UK abroad; as a driver for grassroots participation, whereby sporting heroes inspire participation. (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002, p. 117)

The majority of (western) advanced ESD systems appear to be based on the premise of what we term a 'virtuous cycle of sport'. This cycle, as an elite policy discourse, has a convincing logic of circularity to it that appears commonsensical. It is such that competing in the global 'sporting arms race'² appears to be an unquestionable 'given'. The virtuous cycle of sport touches and builds upon similar phenomena as the 'double pyramid theory' as described by Van Bottenburg³ and by authors in the so-called grey literature (conference papers, in-house papers and so on). The 'double pyramid theory' simply states that 'thousands of people practising sport at the base lead to a few Olympic champions and, at the same time the existence of champion role models encourages thousands of people to take up some form of sport' (Van Bottenburg 2002, p. 2; see also Hanstad and Skille 2010). The notion of a virtuous cycle of sport takes this further, first by presenting the relationship between elite and mass sport as self-reinforcing and circular (see Figure 1). We also embellish the model with reasons and motives behind investment in elite sport by governments (e.g. in order to gain international prestige). Moreover, we put forward the philosophy underpinning this cycle as the chief justificatory discourse behind investment in elite sport by states.

Thus, the virtuous cycle of sport holds that elite success on the international stage leads to prestige and elite sport contributes to a collective sense of identity; this, then, boosts a greater mass sport participation, leading to a healthier populace; this, in turn, provides a

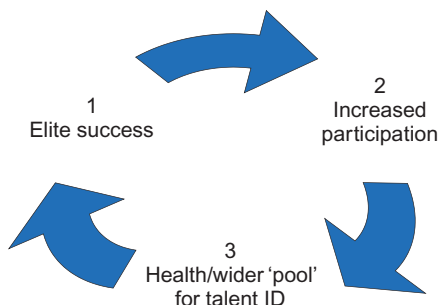


Figure 1. The 'virtuous cycle' of sport.

bigger ‘pool’ of talent from which to choose the elite stars of the future and which ensures elite success. The process then starts over again. If we understand elite policy discourse as a virtuous cycle of sport, it helps explain governments’ over-emphasis on the ability of elite sport success to effect so much change (domestically and internationally).

Elite sport investment

Funding for elite sport in Britain rose exponentially after Labour’s inception to office in 1997 and is set to continue up to the 2012 Olympics. In the 4 years prior to the Athens Games (2000) the UK government invested £70.1 million. With a haul of 30 medals (9 gold medals), this meant that each medal cost the tax-payer approximately £2.30 million each (see Houlihan and Green 2008, for similar calculations). For the Beijing Games the sum increased to £75 million, and the total medals won increased to 47 (£1.6 million per medal). In an unprecedented move, UK Sport, the government agency responsible for distributing elite sport funding, has been allocated £304.4 million of public and lottery funding for the Olympic funding cycle 2008–2012 (UK Sport 2008a), together with another £100 million to be sought from the private sector, adds up to around £400 million invested in elite sport in this period. UK Sport’s ‘no compromise’ approach to funding, focusing on people who can reach the podium, was seen as part of GB’s success at the Beijing Olympics. So much so, that the Lawn Tennis Association has recently turned to them for help to ‘overcome decades of underachievement’ (Guardian 2010). Presumably, it is hoped that success at elite-level tennis will both inspire people to take up tennis and improve England’s standing abroad. Interestingly, even the once-in-a-lifetime combination of German stars, Boris Becker, Michael Stich and Steffi Graff, was unable to inspire the take-up of tennis among the masses (see Feddersen *et al.* 2009).

The pattern of funding is revealing: the more money invested, the more medals Britain wins. This has been likened to a type of ‘sporting arms race’, as governments in pursuit of more medals invest further into elite sport because rival nations do, which in turn ratchets up further investment (Collins and Green 2007, p. 9, De Bosscher *et al.* 2008).

Participation and elite sport

Increasingly, policy discourse in the United Kingdom points to, and revolves around, the ability of elite sport success to drive mass participation, a causal relationship that is difficult to substantiate but one which has gained ‘widespread acceptance’ (Stewart *et al.* 2005, p. 55). For example, when asked by the chairman of the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts to explain why Great Britain invested so much public money in supporting elite athletes for the Beijing Olympics in 2008, Liz Nicholl (Director of Performance at UK Sport) summed up the widespread sentiment of the virtuous cycle of sport by stating:

I would say that between five and nine million people watched Kelly Holmes win a gold medal and Steve Redgrave win a medal and why was there such a fantastic impact when we won the Ashes and the Rugby World Cup? It really does have a huge impact on people in this country in motivating them to participate in sport and compete in sport. That is why we do it. We like winners and that is what we are investing in and success comes at a price. (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts 2006, p. Q16)

Increased sports participation was a core plank of New Labour sport policy from 1997 to 2010 and remains the key focus for the new coalition government up to the 2012 Olympics.

Public delivery agreement 22 (HM Treasury 2007), effectively a contract between the Treasury and specific government departments to deliver on the funds they are allocated, explicitly highlighted the need for the DCMS to contribute to the creation of a world-class system for physical education and sport in the run up to the 2012 Olympic Games. Apart from putting structures for competition and the teaching of sport in place, most of the DCMS' tasks involve 'engaging', 'encouraging', 'extending' (sporting provision) and 'inspiring' youngsters to take up sport (HM Treasury 2007, p. 14).

Participation is at the heart of Sport England's new strategy for 2008–2011 (Sport England 2008). The agency's core task lies in 'delivering' '1 million people doing more sport by 2012–13' (Sport England 2008, p. 4). That is, not one million people in addition to those already participating, but, using the measure of three sessions of 'moderate' sport a week for at least 30 minutes, one million people increasing their sporting participation up to the three times a week level. UK Sport, the government agency responsible for elite sport funding, also understands their remit as inspiring the public to take up sport, following the success of Team GB who they sponsor. In a press statement released 4 months after Britain's most successful Olympics ever (Team GB finished fourth place overall, collecting a total of 47 medals – 19 gold, 13 silver and 15 bronze), John Steele, at the time CEO of UK Sport, remarked on the findings of a survey in which the British public showed pride in British sporting success by saying that:

These results confirm that when it comes to sport we are a nation that craves international success ... As the lead body in the UK for elite sport, UK Sport's approach is to concentrate firmly on achieving success and aim to invest wisely to keep our best athletes ahead of the pack. In doing so, it would seem that we are clearly in tune with the public mood and *the result will hopefully be a more inspired, active and healthy nation.* (UK Sport 2008b, our emphasis)

Elite sport investment is usually justified on the basis that individual and team successes in major competitions have wider social benefits in terms of a 'feel-good factor' and by encouraging participation rates in sports and physical activities in the population at large. This relationship, coupled with claims relating to wider socio-economic benefits of sport more generally is a large part of the argument for government funding of elite sports and elite sporting competitions such as the Olympics. However, evidence obtained from currently available data, including the new Sport England Active People Survey (2010; see Carmichael and Grix forthcoming), make it difficult to assess the validity of the claims that success at the elite level raises participation rates in the population at large or that there are wider benefits of increased participation in sport and fitness activities.

Expecting that elite sport engenders sport participation chimes with the former Sport Councils' strategy to boost participation in physical activity and it was highlighted in the Coe Commission's (1985) report on British sports preparation for the Olympics. This argument, that elite athletes have the power to inspire the less talented, rests on demonstration effects which arise due to particularly inspirational or creative moments (see Weed *et al.* (2009), for more on demonstration effects). As such, these can be assumed to have the kind of positive impacts associated with creativity more generally (Florida 2002). In this context, creativity has been defined in terms of the ability to transform, to make a creative transformation or change (Eisenberg *et al.* 2004, Eisenberg 2006). According to this definition a creative activity needs to be original and as a result creative people transform the environment that they are active in. Eisenberg *et al.* (2004) argue that this idea of creativity is as relevant to sport as any other environment such as music, linguistics and mathematics. As such creative performers are those who transform their sport in such a way that it is conceived and played

differently. For example, Eisenberg *et al.* describe Dick Fosbury's approach to high jumping as an example of creativity in sport since his approach was innovative and different from all previous approaches (2004, p. 3).

This argument is supported by Gardner's (1983) theory of creativity which claims that there are multiple intelligences made up of specific skills and abilities. According to this view the bodily kinaesthetic skills and abilities of athletes should be considered as much a form of intelligence as the logical intelligence of scientists. Athletes who are highly intelligent in this sense and who are also creative can transform and improve the sporting environment in which they operate in much the same way as innovative scientists can change their world. They do this by providing 'a different way of looking at sport' (Eisenberg *et al.* 2004, p. 9). Such creative changes are clearly a way for success at the elite level to have a wider impact on the population at large by generating a 'feel-good factor' and by increasing interest and spectator demand for a particular sport or sports more generally. In addition, the success of particular individuals is said to lead them to be represented as role models who are able to motivate members of particular groups among the population (e.g. the young, women or ethnic minorities).

Furthermore, since participants in elite sport are essentially entertainers or performers, they, along with artists and writers, may be conceived of as members of Florida's (2002) creative classes, contributing, for instance to a city's Bohemian index. This association may be linked to the potential in sport for the kind of creative changes that lie outside more everyday existences but nevertheless impact on many people through the centrality of sport in their lives and the emotional claim sport makes on them. Alternatively, Florida (2002) claims that creative people are drawn to places and communities where they can participate in sport and outdoor activities implying that it is not participation in sport in itself that leads to creative change but rather that creative people gravitate towards opportunities for sport. Considerations such as these, which highlight the creative input of elite sports participants, imply a direct link from elite sports to participation in the population at large.

Herein lies the problem with the 'elite sport'—'participation' causality. It sounds eminently sensible, but there is little evidence to support it. Short-term empirical evidence appears to attest to the ability of certain forms of elite success to inspire the masses, as Andy Murray's recent (2009 and 2010) moderate success at Wimbledon seems to show. According to *Game plan*, 'Many sports report an upsurge in interest following international success, particularly when televised. Intuitively this makes sense and major sporting figures are often regarded as role models to inspire young people' (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002, p. 72). Likewise, sports-cotland's expenditure on elite sport is justified in terms of its catalytic effect: 'As role models, high performance athletes contribute by encouraging people to play sport, and by boosting the aspirations of those already involved' (2003, p. 19). However, the key question is not whether second-hand success stimulates short-term participation, but whether engagement is maintained. It certainly did seem the case that the British Cycling Association experienced a dramatic increase in members following the overwhelming success of Team GB cycling in Beijing and Olympic track cycling champions Chris Hoy, Bradley Wiggins and Rebecca Romero (seven track Golds in Beijing between them) seemed to have sparked a short-term boom in visitors to velodromes throughout the United Kingdom (Guardian 2008). However, British Cycling membership figures have been increasing steadily, year-on-year since 2004 and Olympic success in 2008 does not appear to have significantly affected this trend (Greenwood 2009; telephone discussion with Terry Greenwood, Membership Secretary of the Governing Body of British Cycling, 7 September 2009).

Evidence for the long-term effects of elite sport success on participation is hard to come by. A report commissioned by Sport Canada, for example came to the conclusion that 'there is little evidence to support the anecdotal claims that high performance sport leads to social

benefits such as building national pride. . . [and] encouraging healthy behaviours' (Bloom *et al.* 2006, cited in Sam (2009), p. 502). This is interesting in view of the fact that most ESDs attempt to excel at elite sport, whilst increasing mass participation and providing the facilities and provision for both. This was a balance that even the East German 'miracle' could not manage, as, contrary to common belief, elite sport was kept hermetically sealed from the public (Dennis and Grix forthcoming). In the case of the United States, Australia and Canada, research shows that 'participation consistently loses out to youth and elite sport' (Green 2007, Collins 2010).

Participation for health and community cohesion

It is easy to see why the government and other policy providers would be interested in raising levels of physical activity and sport, usually in the belief that such activity contributes to the health of a nation thereby easing the burden on the National Health Service (e.g. DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002, Sport England 2006, CCPR 2009). Participation in sport is, after all, seen as crucial to the health of the nation and the Public Service Agreement target of getting one million more people doing three 30-minute sessions of sport per week at a moderate level (from April 2008 to March 2011) is designed to achieve health gains among participants (National Audit Office 2010, p. 4). The evidence for the claim that elite sport investment influences mass participation may be tenuous, but the aim is laudable.

Indeed, there is strong evidence of the intrinsic health benefits of sport participation (Oughton and Tacon 2006). A large literature provides evidence that a lack of participation in sport and physical activity impacts negatively on health by reinforcing the occurrence of obesity and a number of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular diseases and diabetes (Gratton and Tice 1989, Vuori and Fentem 1995, Gratton and Taylor 2005, Coalter 2007). Linked to this evidence, the European Commission (2007, p. 8) claims that the sport movement has a greater influence than any other social movement on participation in health-enhancing physical activity. While improvements in health potentially benefits the individual in terms of earnings and well-being, there are also wider economic benefits linked to productivity gains and lower costs of healthcare (Pratt *et al.* 2000, Wang *et al.* 2005). In the United Kingdom, these gains have been highlighted in *Game plan* (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002) which concludes that the relation between sports participation and health is the main argument for government promotion of increased physical activity.

Participation in sport has also been claimed to enhance community cohesion through the development of social capital and social networks that support regeneration and inclusion. This potential for enhancing social cohesion by bonding social groups is arguably stronger in relation to participation in recreational team sports than in individual sports (Putnam 2000). There may also be a role for sports volunteering in developing civic participation and sports clubs may be able to contribute to social inclusion and development (Collins 2010). Community cohesion is also thought to sustain social capital and Coalter (2007, p. 49) claims that it is this link that underpins a shift in policy from 'developing sport *in* communities to developing communities *through* sport'. However, he argues that the use of the concept of social capital in community-oriented initiatives (such as those of Sport England) is vague (on the problems of using the concept see Grix (2001)).

Promoting a 'feel-good factor'

There is no question throughout *Game plan* (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002), or the more recent *Playing to win* (DCMS 2008a), of whether international success through sport should be

strived for. Rather, the treatise discusses the *process* of how this can be best achieved. The dominance of the elite sport discourse emanating from government policy documents, sports council strategies and reports into funding elite sport appears to allow little room for dissenters (e.g. National Audit Office 2005). It is interesting, then, that the concepts put forward to summarize the key benefits of elite sport investment are extremely difficult to pin down. *Game plan* adds to the conceptual slippage when it suggests that whilst the quantity of medals won at the Olympics is of great importance, one must not neglect the ‘quality’ of a victory:

‘Quality’ can be taken to be the extent to which victory produces the feelgood factor and national pride (as these are the main public benefits of high performance sport). If it is accepted that the more popular the sport, the greater the amount of feelgood which follows, then ‘quality’ medals are those obtained in the most popular sports. (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002, p. 120–122)

Although this does not explain what the ‘feel-good’ factor is, it does offer an insight into what the (previous) government thought the concept implies. On this reading, the ‘feel-good factor’ seems to be a variable which can be created and which is able to change in amount over time, and although it is admitted that it is ‘difficult to quantify’ (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002, p. 14), there seems little room for doubting that it can have a powerful causal effect.

As far as we aware, there has never been an attempt to define and measure the ‘feel-good factor’. John Steele (2009), former CEO of UK Sport, comes close to an ‘official’ definition when he spoke of the ‘the euphoria of a full Lords Cricket Ground a couple of weeks ago when a single Ashes test was won’. Although the ‘feel-good factor’ is difficult to pin down, the elite-driven discourse permeating much of UK sport policy gives the impression that its existence is not in doubt.⁴ Just because there is no academic evidence of a ‘feel-good factor’ or no agreed way of capturing or measuring it does not mean that it does not exist. Collective experiences of sporting achievement have long been thought to ‘bind’ a nation, albeit temporarily, to the extent that successive governments have insisted on a list of ‘Crown Jewels’ of specific, and nationally important, sporting events that ought to be available on free-to-air television and are protected under the 1996 Broadcasting Act. These include the Summer Olympics, the FIFA World Cup and the European Football Championships, the Grand National, Wimbledon and the FA Cup Final (Independent Advisory Panel to the Secretary of State, Department of Media and Culture 2009, point 170). This panel also recommended that the Home and Away FIFA Qualification matches, Cricket’s home Ashes test matches and the Open Golf Championship ought to be added to the protected list because of their perceived ‘national resonance’ (Independent Advisory Panel to the Secretary of State, Department of Media and Culture 2009, point 170, p. 128). Interestingly, the panel suggested removing one sentence from the previous criterion for selecting sports for the list which originally read ‘it [the sport chosen] is an event which serves to unite the nation’, because ‘uniting the nation’ was ‘however desirable ... aspirational not evidential’ (Independent Advisory Panel to the Secretary of State, Department of Media and Culture 2009, point 170, pp. 128–129).

International ‘image’ abroad and international prestige

There has long been a sense that sport can put states on the map. This was played out most clearly during the Cold War with the political use of sport and the instrumentalization of sport for international recognition and legitimacy a regular occurrence. Nowhere was this better executed than by East Germany. Success in elite sport was intended to promote the

tiny state of 17 million citizens and gaining it desperately needed recognition, as it was constantly in the shadow of its richer and bigger neighbour, West Germany. Examples of sport as a central part of nation-building abound – take Australia and their attempts to construct a sense of community around sporting success (Stewart *et al.* 2005, p. 5) – but none compare with the efforts of the illegitimate state of East Germany, which, void of a ‘national’ history or culture, set out to first gain international recognition and acceptance as an independent state. This it did by making an incredibly swift and impressive impact on the world of elite sport, improving from seven summer Olympic medals in 1956 (as part of a ‘unified’ German team), to a staggering 103 at the state’s last Olympics in Seoul in 1988 (Dennis and Grix forthcoming).

The United Kingdom – along with many states, including emerging nation states in the Balkan and Baltic regions (Bloyce and Smith 2010, p. 134) – appears less interested in showing off its political system, than climbing up medal tables, primarily with the intention of enhancing its ‘image’ abroad. The medal table rankings – important to states during the Cold War – continue to act as a barometer of a state’s sporting prowess. Hilvoorde *et al.* (2010) are correct when they state that ‘The medals index does have major symbolic meanings attached to it’, as witnessed by the 2008 Beijing Games where, according to China, it is they who led the table and according to the United States, China was second behind them (on the various ways of adding up the medals total see Hilvoorde *et al.* (2010), p. 92). Bergsgard *et al.* (2007, p. 165) suggest that ‘the causal relationship between international sporting success and the image of the UK/England abroad is unclear. . .’, yet this does not appear to be in question. One of the key reasons sport is thought to possess the power to bind people around collective moments and emotions and to illuminate a state’s ‘image’ abroad is because of the nature of sport itself. Riordan (1999, pp. 49–50) sums up sport thus:

It [sport] extends and unites wider sections of the population than probably any other social activity. It is easily understood and enjoyed, cutting across social, economic, educational, ethnic, religious and language barriers. It permits some emotional release (reasonably) safely [and] it can be relatively cheap. . . .’

There does appear to be some evidence, albeit very difficult to quantify, of sport’s ability to bind a nation or a sporting event to change perceptions of the hosting nation. As a general rule, the examples where sport has functioned successfully in this manner are with states that have an image problem to start with: South Africa and political apartheid, Germany and its struggle to come to terms with its past and, most recently, South Africa’s hosting of the World Cup, all serve as indicative cases. Mandela in a Springbok Rugby shirt has come to symbolize sport’s power to heal deep racial wounds; Germany’s hosting of the FIFA World Cup in 2006 appears to have brought about a change in the negative manner in which the British Press report on Germany and the Germans to the extent that the latest England–Germany clash in South Africa, summer 2010, produced hardly any negative reporting on Germany, with the majority of outlets commenting more on their playing style (see Akem 2010). The successful managing of the 2010 FIFA World Cup and the lack of predicted violence around the event looks set to do for South Africa what the previous World Cup did for Germany.

Of mega-events and role models

Mega-events and participation?

A large part of the stated legacy of staging the forthcoming 2012 Olympic Games in London is to produce an upward trend in participation among the population. Here too, the logic is

that hosting a mega-event will have a long-term impact on participation rates in sports. Such claims for participation in sport and the effects of elite success and the staging of mega-events on the rates of take-up of sport appear, again, both commonsensical and laudable. However, how do they stand up to scrutiny and which ‘evidence’ are they based upon? Research on the topic of mega sporting events inspiring mass participation is inconclusive. A recent report (2004) went so far as to suggest that all ‘the evidence (for such a causal effect, authors) shows that past Olympics failed to bring with them a sustained increase in participation’ (Vigor *et al.* 2004, p. xiii). Government documents point to success in elite sporting activities and the sponsorship of sporting mega-events as having the potential to generate wider social benefits in three main ways. First, success of a national team or an individual in elite sports may be associated with a general ‘feel-good factor’ due to improved national morale and improved prestige abroad (see above). Both of these are assumed to have positive economic impacts (Coe 1985). Second, it is often argued that large sporting events and new sports facilities can encourage economic development and regeneration through multiplier effects (Gratton and Taylor 2001, Gratton and Henry 2001, Coaffee forthcoming, for a discussion of previous Olympic legacies). Third, individual or team success can increase interest and support for a particular sport and thereby encourage participation in the population at large.

London East Research Institute (2007) suggested that the effects of elite sporting events on community participation are complex to assess, and noted that there is a lack of a trustworthy method for doing so despite the potentially testable benefits of hosting such an event. Similarly, Coalter’s review of the literature found that ‘most of the evidence suggests that major sporting events have no inevitably positive impact on levels of sports participation’ (Coalter 2004, p. 11). [Girginov and Hills](#) (2008, p. 2100) came to a similar conclusion to Coalter after reviewing global (IOC), national (DCMS) and local (five London Olympic Boroughs) strategic legacy plans: ‘existing evidence reveals the lack of positive effects of the Olympic Games on sports participation’. EdComs (2007) also found no clear evidence that hosting events encourages participation in physical activity. Interestingly, it was *Game plan* itself that provided the clearest conclusion: ‘hosting events is not an effective, value for money, method of achieving a sustained increase in mass participation’ (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002), a sentiment echoed by Vigor *et al.* (2004), cited above. As Collins (2010) clearly states ‘there is no evidence of the short-lived spectacle of the Games ever sustainably promoting greater participation or health benefits’ (see also Coalter 2004, Weed *et al.* 2009), while Coalter (2007, p. 142) alludes to the difficulty in ‘measuring’ the impact of mega-events, suggesting that ‘many of the claimed benefits for large-scale events are either intangible, or extremely difficult to define precisely, measure and attribute directly to the events’. Weed *et al.* (2009), in their very detailed systematic review of evidence for the likely physical activity legacy of the London 2012 Games, state:

Inconclusive evidence exists relating to the role of elite success in boosting participation. . . . The evidence suggests that sporting events are one of multiple factors, that are not all well understood, that collectively impact upon behaviour in physical activity, sport and health. (2009, p. 9)

The authors go on to surmise that a lack of evidence does not necessarily mean a mega-event cannot impact participation and, in fact, for London this is the first time a specific participation strategy has been put in place. In their parlance, the UK Government will need to ‘leverage’ certain factors so that the Olympics have the desired impact; indeed, ‘leveraging’ is one of their key, and most often cited, recommendations. Yet, the most likely impact of the Games is to be in its demonstration effects – this tends to be a rise in the frequency of

participation in sport among those people *who are already involved in sport or those who used to participate* (Weed *et al.* 2009, p. 55; our emphasis).

Despite a lack of evidence, the notion that mega-events can increase physical activity and sport participation among the general public remains part of the dominant elite-driven 'sport for sport's sake' agenda and continues to shape sport policy discourse and sideline other, competing discourses and agendas. One of the more recent UK Government documents on the London Olympics and its legacy boldly articulates the problematic causality of 'mega-event = participation' by stating categorically that the games:

...will help to unlock talent. And the first priority of the Games is to make the UK a world-leading sporting nation. We hope to see people becoming increasingly active, with a goal of seeing two million people more active by 2012 through focused investment in our sporting infrastructure and better support and information for people wanting to be active. The new focus on sporting excellence in England will reinvigorate clubs and coaching, which will attract and bring on young sporting talent. (DCMS 2008b, p. 3)

It is interesting to note that 6 years prior to this, *Game plan*, Labour's manifesto on sport (2002) was peppered with doubts about the causal relationship between big events and participation. For example, the foreword to *Game plan* claims that international sporting success 'boosts the profile of a sport and increases interest in participation' (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002, p. 9). Later in that document, however, there is a clarification that 'the interactions between participation, international competition and hosting events are unclear' (2002, p. 14). The authors go on to write that 'international success does not appear to stimulate *sustained* increases in participation' (DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002; emphasis added), and blame the paucity of data for preventing them from offering 'robust and compelling conclusions' (2002, p. 72) in support of sporting success and major events as catalysts for increased participation. The search for what constitutes 'evidence' to substantiate the current dominant sport discourse appears to be a recurring theme in sport studies literature; this is compounded by the lack of clarity in government elite-driven discourse that does not always clearly distinguish between participation in 'physical activity' or a more formal 'sport', as scholars tend to (cf. Coalter 2007, Weed *et al.* 2009).

Role models and participation?

The Select Committee Report on Drugs and Role Models in Sport (Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2004) appeared very clear about the relationship between sports stars and wider engagement in sport, stating: 'It is clear that the vast majority of sporting heroes – and the signals emanating from sport more generally – promote highly laudable examples and values in terms of elite sporting achievement, the general benefits of sporting participation and other personal development goals' (2004, p. 50, cited in Lyle 2009, p. 18). The academic literature on the topic, however, provides limited evidence that explores the relationship between elite performers and mass participation in sport (Lyle 2009). There is even less evidence within the context of sports participation. Payne *et al.*'s (2003) search of the literature 'failed to identify any substantive articles that evaluated the effectiveness of sporting role model programs in improving participation in sport' (2003, p. 15). Lyle's (2009) review explicitly built upon Payne *et al.*'s (2003) work and was also unable to identify any research that could establish the link between sporting role models and participation. He concluded,

It is questionable whether sporting success is likely to have a general effect on participation (since this fails to acknowledge the specificity of initiation and recruitment, and does not adhere to good principles of modeling), and partly explains the likelihood of greater impact on existing participants. (Lyle 2009, p. 6)⁵

The lack of evidence for the causal relationship between role models and participation levels did not prevent the ‘widespread acceptance’ of the claim that ‘the creation of national heroes would “inspire others to emulate them” ’ in the case of Australia’s investment program into elite sport and the establishment of the East German inspired Australian Institute of Sport in 1981 (Stewart *et al.* 2005, pp. 54–55). It is this type of ‘widespread acceptance’ that permeates much elite sport policy discourse and underpins the ‘virtuous cycle of sport’ (Stewart *et al.* 2005, p. 64), although Australia of late appears to have learnt from experience, as claims about elite success inspiring normal citizens to emulate their heroes have been more recently ‘listed as a bonus in the light of flimsy evidence for the relationship’ (Stewart *et al.* 2005, p. 187).

The study undertaken by Feddersen, alluded to earlier, came up with the interesting results that membership numbers of tennis clubs in Germany actually *went down* during the golden era of Becker, Stich and Graff (Feddersen *et al.* 2009, p. 16). Of interest here is the study’s use of club membership as an indicator of participation, as opposed to the sheer number of people reported as taking part in the sport more broadly. Arguably, club membership is a more robust indicator of longer-term participation rates and interestingly, some of the ‘success stories’ of growing participation recorded by Sport England’s Active People’s Survey (e.g. athletics) are not accompanied by any significant rise in people joining clubs (Carmichael and Grix (forthcoming), see Van Bottenburg (2002) on club membership and elite sport success). Hanstad and Skille (2010, p. 66) also use club membership as the key indicator when testing whether elite sport impacts on mass sport. They conclude that the relationship between elite performers, their performance and mass sport *may* impact on mass sport, but this causal relationship is complicated by a number of other variables, including the financial health of a particular NGB and the priorities they set.

Hindson *et al.* (1994) raise a further issue with the role model hypothesis by questioning the extent to which the competitive climate associated with elite sport could be effective in promoting mass participation. They suggest that, far from increasing motivation, it is equally possible that sporting excellence can reduce non-participants’ feelings of self-efficacy, leading them to conclude that they do not have the necessary skills and competence to participate in sport (see also Bandura 1997). Boardley’s work on self-efficacy theory and the likelihood of London, 2012, raising participation rates, elaborates this point:

... observing athletes successfully performing difficult tasks and experiencing positive resultant outcomes at the London games is only likely to positively impact the beliefs of those people who perceive themselves to be similar to those who are competing. As the majority of people who will be viewing the games are unlikely to consider themselves similar to the elite athletes competing in the games any impact of vicarious experience on mass sport participation is likely to be minimal. (Boardley forthcoming)

Anecdotal evidence does seem to support the view that people are often inspired by watching specific pivotal moments in sport, for example a champion athlete breaking a world record or achieving an outstanding feat. However, the stories generally are of people who go

on to become champions themselves and who were, at the time of witnessing the enlightening event, already involved in sport.

Concluding remarks

We concur with Green (2006, p. 233) who suggests:

The storyline that elite sporting success motivates the generality of the population to participate and compete is what might be termed a ‘usual suspect’ in any discussions of the ways in which funding for elite development is allocated.

We would go a step further and suggest that in the 5 years since Green’s article, the discourse around sport in general and elite sport in particular has reached a point at which it could be described as ‘evangelical’ (Coalter 2010). Why is it then, given the unsubstantiated claims made on behalf of many sport interventions that the sport discourse in the United Kingdom and beyond remains intact? Most advanced Western systems of sport rest on similar assumptions to the United Kingdom; that is, elite sport success is thought to lead to a better image abroad, bolster national identity and to stimulate domestic mass participation; this, in turn, leads to a healthy nation and a wider pool from which to choose future elite stars from; this, again, leads to increased elite sport success (see also Stewart *et al.* (2005), pp. 63–64, for a similar idea relating to Australia). We advanced the notion of a ‘virtuous cycle’ of sport to capture the underlying philosophy of the sporting ‘arms race’. Our key point here is in conceptualizing and synthesizing the driver behind why states invest in elite sport in the first place. By offering a clearer conceptualization of this process than the loose ‘double pyramid theory’, which does not account for the complex and ambiguous relationship between elite and mass sport (Van Bottenburg 2002, p. 20), we contribute to existing debates on governments’ sport policy priorities. We do not, however, advocate this model of sport investment over any other. In fact, we critique it as being, in part, based on a *mis-reading* of the relationship between mass and elite sport in the successful East European sporting nations, in particular, East Germany (Grix 2008, Dennis and Grix forthcoming).

Taking a broader view in which to contextualize the investment in elite sport in the United Kingdom, it is instructive to consider other states both past and present. With East Germany, the rationale for elite sport investment was relatively straightforward: a lack of legitimacy at a time of the Cold War and a lack of widespread recognition fuelled the desire to make people sit up and take notice via international sporting success, whatever it took to achieve it. For emerging states, such as the Balkans, the link between success (or even simply participation) on the international sport’s field – often using long dormant insignia (a state’s colours, flags, emblems, etc.) – is an understandable desire and part of a re-emerging national identity. Isolated or (relatively) newly formed states, like Australia and Canada, have sought to use sport as a cornerstone of national identity creation, with the former often describing itself as a ‘sporting nation’, despite exhibiting many of the problems of other advanced capitalist states, for example high levels of obesity and low mass sport participation. None of these reasons appear to fit the United Kingdom. Bergsgard *et al.* (2007, p. 165) conclude that the decision to give such a high priority to elite sport in the United Kingdom is primarily driven by political and ideological choice; it would appear that this choice is not restricted to any particular political party, for subsequent governments from 1995 to 2011 have continued to uphold an elite-led sport policy discourse. This discursively constructed discourse has ensured the privileging of the virtuous cycle of sport and, despite the austerity of the times, it shows little sign of waning.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank the anonymous referees and the co-editor for their constructive comments and for pointing us to additional material. We also thank Richard Bailey for his help with an earlier draft of this article, in particular the section on role models.

Notes

1. Two good, journalistic exceptions to this discourse are Matthew Syed in *the Times* (16 October 08), 'Unacceptable cost of heroes' Olympic success'; and Simon Jenkins in *the Guardian* (24 October 08), 'Trim the fat and cut the crap. Tough times demand an austerity Olympics'.
2. *Collins and Green (2007)*. The Australian Institute of Sport, p. 9.
3. Van Bottenburg 2002.
4. In an interview for a recent project on County Sport Partnerships, a former Sport England Regional Manager had this to say: 'I think generally it is recognized that if you have success it creates a sense of well-being and sporting success is something that generates debate and you could argue that you have extremes of it. So major football success could lead to tribalism maybe but England or GB being successful with a gold medal around somebody's neck is generally considered in sporting circles – and I'm not speaking for government but I'm assuming also in government circles – to bring a degree of warmth and good feeling to the nation. If you want to be devious then you could probably argue the fact that maybe it's a smoke screen for other issues' (interview with main author, June 2009).
5. It is worthwhile considering the Foreword to Lyle's report, attributed to the 'Research Unit' of Sportscotland. Its author does not dismiss Lyle's findings out of hand, but rather turns to 'experience (albeit based on commonsense or intuitive assumptions)' (Lyle 2009, p. 3) to justify the pursuit of further support of the idea.

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