

In a Peak Fitness Condition?

**The Danish Elite Sports Model and the Role of Team Denmark
- Evaluation Results, Challenges and the Future Way Ahead**

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Abstract

Introduction

Senior Academic Researcher Rasmus K. Storm, from the Danish Institute for Sports Studies, has just completed an extensive evaluation of Team Denmark's support model (the evaluation report can be downloaded from www.idan.dk or www.teamdanmark.dk).

The central questions have been: Does Danish elite sport function in a way that enables Denmark to compete for medals at large international championships in the long term? What is the basis for a strong elite environment? And how does the Danish elite model cope with these parameters? The answers are to be found in this presentation.

Synopsis for the Presentation

The presentation is structured as follows:

- First, I give a short introduction to the presentation and introduce the presentation index
- Next, I give the key findings of the research project concerning Danish elite sport and Team Denmark
- This brings me to a go through of the empirical findings
- Finally I discuss the future ways ahead for the Danish elite sports model

Presentation

Introduction (Slide 1)

It is a pleasure for me to give this presentation. The subject of elite sports systems and the Danish model seems to be a hot topic of discussion these days. Is the funding of Team Danmark sufficient? Is the Danish elite sports model suited for the challenges of tomorrow? And how is Denmark to find new ways in the growing international sporting arms race we have just heard of?

These lines are just a few of a series of questions arising from the work I and my colleagues at the Danish Institute for Sports Studies have carried out on the subject. In this presentation, I will try to give at least some preliminary answers.

Unfortunately, I did not have time to finish a paper for the conference, but my notes for the presentation are quite detailed. Send me an email and I will mail them to you. You can also obtain a hard copy at the reception together with the slides.

I will answer any questions after the presentation.

Presentation Index (Slide 2)

My presentation is structured as shown on the slide:

- 1) First I give you the key empirical findings from our evaluation of Team Danmark.
- 2) This leads to a brief introduction to sports policy factors leading to international sporting success.
- 3) Taking these findings to the fore, I evaluate the Danish fitness condition seen in relation to these critical factors.
- 4) Finally I sum up and give some suggestive solutions to the problems facing the Danish elite sports model and Team Danmark.

Key Findings (Slide 3)

The key findings from our project can be summarized in three main conclusions:

1. First of all we conclude that given the present circumstances Team Danmark must be considered fit.
2. Still, though, Denmark is loosing ground in the international sporting arms race. This is primarily due to stagnation in the funding portfolio of Danish elite sport seen in relation to other nations.
3. This fact forces Team Danmark to sharpen its focus on the different areas of its assignments, especially the areas identified in the evaluation. As the price of a medal is getting higher and higher, efficiency becomes a key word in strengthening the effort to win gold.

International Findings (Slide 4)

What is to be done? To answer this question we need to identify the factors leading to international sporting success. Fortunately the international research gives us some valuable insights in relation to which it is possible to weigh the Danish case.

The slide shows a brief figure of some research relevant for this. It is not at complete review, but a summery of some of the newest research in the field.

As you can see all the shown researchers identify funding as the overall critical factor for international sporting success. In other words: 'money in, equals medals out'.

The second critical factor identified is simplicity of administration and a clear understanding of the role of different agencies (and federations). Seen in relation to the Danish elite sports model this means that Team Danmark needs to give attention to simplicity in its own administration as well as in the procedures developed to support lower level elite sports agencies, the federations and athletes.

Also, it is important to build up a shared understanding concerning the responsibilities related to different aspects of elite sport development within the elite sports matrix and between the different agencies and federations.

The third critical factor is talent identification and talent development. Especially a small country like Denmark needs to give attention to this factor, as you can not rely on the small population size to give a high number of talents without taking a strategic approach.

The fourth critical factor is competition opportunities. This is also a critical factor recognized by a number of researchers. This factor points to the importance of a competition calendar fitting the needs of the elite athletes. In a small country like Denmark international competition is hard to find. Therefore there is a necessity to travel and participate in relevant international competitions.

The fifth critical factor is elite facility provision. This is referring to the given country's ability to provide and give access to specialised facilities for training. Often this has a build in tension between mass participation and the specific needs of the elite sport athletes.

Finally the international research - in this approach at least - identifies sports science and medicine support services as a core element in a suited elite sports model.

These theoretical findings bring us to the concrete case of the Danish elite sports model, Team Danmark and its performance measured against the identified factors. The question is: how are things going, and what is the Danish elite sports model to improve?

Administration and the Role of Different Agencies (slide 5)

Putting the question of funding aside for a moment, I start with the problem concerning simplicity of administration.

Simplicity of Administration?

Our research finds Team Danmark working in a proper manner with a serious approach to the elite sports development in general. The institution is effective. However, there seems to be an

ineffective use of resources when it comes to steering the lower elite sports agencies and federations supported by Team Denmark.

Our recommendations in this respect are to loosen the control procedures and instead find a more simplistic way to evaluate the potential for continued support of the athletes and their respective federation.

At the moment the consultants inside Team Denmark, as well as the personnel employed in the federations, are dedicating too much time to administrative purposes. Taking resources away from development schemes, the time and resources could be directed towards the needs of the athletes, and not towards paperwork behind the desk.

The Role of Different Agencies (and Federations)

Secondly, we identify a potential for a better and clearer understanding concerning the role of the different agencies (federations) in respect to talent development.

Our research suggests that the different agencies and federations - besides agreeing that all agencies (federations) need to put more effort into talent development - do not hold a clear picture of who holds responsibility and what this responsibility includes.

Some federations put Team Denmark in charge of talent development while others put themselves. This means that Team Denmark and the federations are not working in the same direction. A clearer understanding of responsibilities and roles needs to be developed here.

Talent Development (Slide 6)

This brings me to another aspect of talent development. Another key finding in our work stresses a side effect in the current elite sports model that needs to be adjusted in some way.

Performance Orientation Hinders Talent Development

In respect to financial support, Team Danmark has to a certain degree followed the international path of institutionalizing a more performance orientated approach to elite sport support. The demand for medals has been strengthened and the federations fear cutbacks in funding should the expected goals not be fulfilled.

Unfortunately, this has a negative side effect. In the race for the next medal the federations put all their resources into securing the best athletes' opportunities for getting international sporting success. In other words, they put their faith in the best athletes' ability to secure future funding.

This means that the resources allocated for new talents are insufficient. It becomes more difficult to create the necessary flow in talent development as the process of lifting the talents to the international level of competition lacks funding, resources and focus.

Even though, the problem does not exist in the large and well developed Danish sports such as team handball and soccer, it can affect the long term ability to keep the overall pace in the international sporting arms race for Denmark on a whole.

Splitting the Financial Support in Two?

Splitting the financial support in a performance orientated portfolio and a basis support aimed especially at talent development programs is a possible solution to this problem.

Competition Opportunities and Facilities (Slide 7)

With regard to competition opportunities and facilities, our findings suggest that the Danish elite sports facilities need more attention, but the resources provided to Team Danmark are insufficient to take the next step to improve this.

In Denmark the primary responsibility for elite sport facility development lies at the municipal level. The municipalities are at the same time the primary welfare service provider in Denmark.

This brings about the classic problem concerning the tension between mass participation and elite access. As local tax payers do not necessarily want to pay for elite sports facilities, municipal politicians often prioritize mass access to facilities over elite sport access.

A new initiative trying to establish a more formal corporation between Team Denmark and the municipal level is a step in the right direction. Still, though, the current situation needs improvements to reach an international level. This is indeed a future challenge. But it is clear that Team Denmark cannot improve the overall facility standard without significant help from the municipal as well as the state level.

With regard to training opportunities Denmark as a small country has a disadvantage. With a relatively small population it is impossible to find the relevant level of competition in all sports on Danish ground.

This puts the athletes in a situation where they need to travel to the relevant international tournaments to compete and prepare for future challenges. A significant sum of money must be allocated for this in the future.

Sports Science and Sports Medicine Support (Slide 8)

Sports Science and Sports Medicine Support concern the systematic gathering and dissemination of scientific information in a long range of areas. Sports nutrition, talent identification and talent development, sports psychology and sports physiology; biomechanics and so on are main areas here.

In general the sports medicine support as well as the sports science area is a question of resources, and the long term return of investment.

Team Denmark has to find a balance between investments in research and the use of already accepted knowledge, thus giving attention to the newest result on the one hand and on the other hand securing that new research projects finds the best knowl-

edge in the future. Here it is important to have a long term perspective.

Showing a picture of a high level of sports medicine support and a fair research support program, the evaluation finds the Danish elite sports model suited for the future.

The use of research and the development of new projects point in right direction. One field, however, needs to be adjusted and improved right away. That is the field of sports psychology which seems lacking a significant focus.

A more structured and pro-active use of the information already gathered by Team Danmark from the federations could also help create a more fruitful and strategic approach to elite sports development in Denmark.

At the moment the information is - broadly speaking - only used for decisions regarding the inclusion or exclusion of the federations in the support portfolio of Team Danmark. Analysis of the gathered information could be used in a pro-active way to identify relevant projects for future development.

This is important as the international research finds the use of information and knowledge a key factor to keep the pace in the international sporting arms race.

Governance Perspectives & the Way Ahead (Slide 9)

The brief introduction to the main empirical findings brings me to the main question of governance perspectives in relation to the Danish elite sports model. Besides the identified areas mentioned earlier in my presentation, the biggest question arising from the project is the question of funding.

More Funding?

Denmark is facing a stronger and stronger international elite sports environment and a lack of international results. This is due to a relatively low funding portfolio compared to the international situation.

This does not mean, however, that the public expenditure necessarily needs to be raised to balance the score. Seen in a political perspective this is a matter of priorities between medals and - for example - a strong (public) health care system, good schools, enhancing growth in other sectors of the economy and so on.

To quote the international research: *the reality is that international sport is a global issue not a national issue. Consequently, the rules of the game are dictated by what rival nations are doing, not on the basis of what an individual nation is doing now compared with what it did in the past. The key question facing all nations taking a strategic approach to elite sport is: 'to what extent do we wish to be part of this game?'*" (UK Sport 2006: 16).

Our recommendations in the evaluation do not reject the idea of more funding. On the other hand, we do argue that setting sporting goals more appropriate seen in relation to the population size of Denmark, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the direct money input to Team Danmark could be a solution to the problem of the decreasing Danish medal portfolio also identified in the report.

The above combined with a market share approach - as outlined by UK sport and Veerle De Bosscher - developed to measure the Danish sporting success, will give the politicians a better benchmark for an evaluation of the medals gained as well as an evaluation of the work of Team Danmark in the future.

Should the political emphasis on gold remain constant, and is Denmark to gain more gold medals in the future, then growing funding is the necessary solution.

This could take form as an increase in the public expenditure, but focussing on private sponsorship issues is another approach. A combination of increasing public expenditure and a higher sponsorship portfolio is another.

But then again I want to stress, that this is a matter of political priorities. As I see it, there are no scientific necessities inherent

in the possible answers to the question: to what extent is international sporting success the ultimate goal, and how are we to meet the given level of this demand? The ambitions for the future as well as the level of resources allocated to fulfil these ambitions are to be set by politicians.

To Sum Up:

- The Danish market share of medals are decreasing – Denmark is losing ground in the international sporting arms race
- Due to increasing international competition, the prize of medals are getting higher and higher
- This raises a fundamental question of funding
- The answer is a matter of political priorities
- Further political discussion must be undertaken to clear this matter.

Thank you!

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