

## A figurational perspective on the comparison of three national judo systems

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### Abstract:

This paper draws on a doctoral study relating to the management of national sport organisations in a global commercialised context. Within this increasingly global, commercialised and professionalised context, governments are investing significant resources to capitalise on the potential socio-economic and political benefits that could be derived from elite sport participation. Subsequently, the resources of elite sport systems are strategically managed to achieve specific performance outcomes. Therefore, this research addresses the following question: How does that management of national elite sport systems compare in a globalised and commercialised sports context? This descriptive, inter-case comparative analysis involves a transnational concurrent mixed-methods research design. Interviews with a purposive sample of ten key decision-makers include coaches from Judo South Africa (n=3), the British Judo Association (n=3) and the Netherlands Judo Federation (n=2), and one executive member from Judo South Africa and the British Judo Association (n=2). Main findings include that a figurational analysis of global and national influences translated into differential degrees of professionalization of judo systems in support of key competitive outcomes with strategic management, human resource development and access to high quality physical resources. In the context of professionalised elite sport systems, these factors combine to varying degrees in order to provide athletes with access to highly efficient long-term athlete development programmes. Evidently, managers should capitalise on available resources within their unique sociocultural, economic and political environments. This paper informs current discourses, illuminates possibilities for future research, and offers insights for strategic decision-making within the open, dynamic environments of elite sport systems.

**Key Words:** *Globalization; professionalism; management; elite sport; commercialization*

### Introduction

Globalization and the national manifestations thereof, inform prominent discourses related to the development of modern society, and holds significant relevance for professional management within the elite sport sector (Dickson & Malaia-Santos, 2016). Within the context of broad trends of globalization, competitive sport in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century increasingly reflects globalized trends related to professionalization from a traditionally amateur context. Such trends include employing athletes as migrating workers, requiring business models to capitalise on the commodification and public media inherent in the sport-industrial-complex (Maguire, 2011). Modern sports yield significant socio-economic and political influences in promoting global and nationalist agendas, hence nations are investing substantially in achieving strategic outcomes (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2017). Global and national realities thus influence strategic management processes directed at the delivering of successful events and athlete performances within an ever-changing and demanding environment.

Therefore, modern sport is a complex evolutionary and multidimensional global phenomenon that relates to a figurational sociology perspective of the management of sport systems (Elias & Dunning, 2008; Maguire, 2008). Power lies within economic and political influences with cascading effects from global (international sport federations) to national levels (national sport federations). The value-embeddedness of such social constructions presents unique characteristics of elite sport (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2017). From a sociological stance, the highly dynamic, open environment underpins strategic decision-making, structural adaptation and diverse competitive sport practices (Houlihan & Zheng, 2013; Chelladurai, 2014; Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2017).

The contemporary sport market and growing professionalism in the work environment, imply that government sport systems have a significant role to play to remain competitive, relevant and ensure an enabling environment for long-term coach (LTCD) and athlete development (LTAD) (Houlihan & Malcolm, 2015). Within this context, many national sport organisations may display a managerial hybridity of being trapped between professionalism and amateurism (Watson, 2013).

Sport managers have to make sense of this complex management environment in order to effectively and strategically manage elite sport systems (Sotiriadou, Gowthorp & De Bosscher, 2014). These sport systems

require the contextual management of human, physical, financial, and information resources that are underpinned by principles of good governance, and culminate in performance pathways that result in successful elite sport performance (De Bosscher et al. 2006; Böhlke & Robinson, 2009; Balyi et al. 2016). In a developing country such as South Africa, for example, race-based politics and a drive for social transformation form part of a national priority of inclusion and nation building. This influences national team selection processes, and could influence team performance. Furthermore, in developing economies such as those in Africa, resources such as finances are relatively scarce in comparison to more developed countries in Western Europe.

### ***Elite Sport Systems in the Context of Globalization and Professionalization***

One of the key drivers for professionalization of sport is commercialisation, where athletes can be contracted as well-paid employees and/or athletes get varying levels of financial support (Beech & Chadwick, 2013). In the process of creating successful athletes in such systems, numerous organisations and stakeholders invest multiple resources related to participation in events, training in specialised facilities, long-term coaching development, and performance pathways that include talent identification and development to elite level (Rees et al. 2006; AIS, 2018).

Professional sport organisations, such as those in Great Britain and the Netherlands, have implemented structured performance pathways from community level to institutionalised leagues and performance centres. These centres are relatively well resourced. Having access to diverse income streams supported by different partnerships, such the National Lottery, sponsors from the corporate sector and the Ministry of Sport. Official funding partners of Great Britain Sport include the National Lottery and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (UK Sport, 2019). In the Netherlands, funding for sport is generated mainly through local authorities, the business sector, the Ministry of Sport, the Dutch Lottery and sponsors (NOC\*NSF, n.d.). In South Africa, funding is accessed through, for example, the National Lottery, the Ministry of Sport and Recreation, local governments and sponsors.

This study reports on a comparative analysis of the management of national elite judo systems of the Netherlands (*Judobond Nederland* - JBN), England (which forms part of the British Judo Association – BJA) and South Africa (Judo South Africa – JSA), within the context of global figurations. Great Britain (incorporating England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) is 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Netherlands 17<sup>th</sup> and South Africa 37<sup>th</sup> on the all-time Summer Olympic Games medal table (SR/Olympics, 2016).

Furthermore, the Netherlands are ranked 6<sup>th</sup> and Great Britain 10<sup>th</sup> for the Summer Olympic Games in judo (SR/Olympics, 2016). England has won all 19 Olympic judo medals for Great Britain (SR/Olympics, 2016). South Africa has never won a Summer Olympic Games medal in judo, and as a result remains unranked. The Netherlands is the only one of the three countries to have won Olympic gold medals (n=4) for judo. The choice of the three national systems is based on the differential level of international success of competing athletes. The differences in the performance of elite judo athletes from the three countries could be accounted for by the implementation of management strategies to unlock the full potential of available resources and create an enabling environment for elite (Sánchez-García, 2016).

The focus in this study is on the management of elite judo systems within the global figuration of increasing professionalism. It addresses the gap in the body of knowledge related to contextual management of elite sport systems. Whilst other studies such as by Nolte, Burnett and Hollander (2017) have emphasised the importance of resource management within LTAD programmes of elite sport systems from a resource dependence theory, this paper argues for a comprehensive and more complex understanding of the management of elite sport systems as shaped by global, societal and sport-related influences. This is achieved by addressing the following question: How does that management of national elite sport systems compare in a globalised and commercialised sports context? Based on the implications for practice as identified in the literature, the methodology of this study is described accordingly.

### ***Figurations***

Effective management in professional sport organisations is reflective of the strategic drives, processes, system resources and multiple-constituency models (Eydi, 2015; Barth, Emrich & Daumann, 2018). Such models respectively emphasise the achievement of goals, desired outcomes supported by access to required resources and incorporating multiple perspectives of organisational effectiveness. Chelladurai (2014) advocates for a dynamic systems perspective that incorporates these models into a unified vision relevant to the interlocking social realities and external influences. In essence these systems serve as a reduced form of reality.

Figuration theory focuses on the understanding of structures that are created by mutually dependent individuals and groups and how they transform due to varying degrees of interdependency and power (Quintaneiro, 2005). As a result, the figuration theory informs the description of structures showing a relationship dimension as the latter are transformed due to the increase or decrease of (stakeholder) interdependency underpinned by power relations (Quintaneiro, 2005). The theory provides a descriptive framework for understanding the phenomena of systems in the development of sport and society, and their position within a broad, global disposition. Systems are affected continuously as they are in articulation with global influences. The influences are evident in recognisable social processes (figurations) with associated

localised consequences (Elias, 1978; Giulianotti, Hognestad & Spaaij, 2016).

When utilising the figurational approach for explaining modern competitive sport, a mechanical concept of causality is avoided (Featherstone, 1987). The sociological framework provides analytical features that address existing dichotomies and reductionist views of management (Murphy, Sheard & Waddington, 2000).

### **Material & methods**

This study adopted a transnational concurrent mixed-methods research design that is appropriate for comparative sport studies, as the designs that determine similarities and differences regard their unit of analysis as unique and bounded (Henry et al. 2005; Cresswell & Plano-Clark, 2007). The selection of document analysis and semi-structured interviews generated descriptive and narrative data. Semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely with one executive member of the British and South African judo federations (n=2). Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a purposive random sample of elite judo coaches from South Africa (n=3), the Netherlands (n=2) and England (n=3) at national training centres in their respective countries. This gave voice to the experiences and orientations towards professionalism of decision-makers in judo inherent in the global-national articulation of influence, termed glocalisation (Roudometof, 2016). Qualitative data also communicate lived-reality experiences and contextual information in an integrated way (Hammond, 2005; Carter et al. 2014). The embedded comparative case study approach underpins this study with the main unit of analysis being the high performance judo systems of JSA, the JBN and the BJA.

Ethical clearance for this research was obtained from the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Johannesburg. Ethical clearance number: REC-01-172-2015.

### **Results and discussion**

The analyses of the qualitative research data articulates with the main discourses in the management of national sport organisations and refer to management, long-term athlete development and performance pathways, access to resources, and infrastructure, competitions and human resources.

#### ***Management***

Considerations related to professional management include the need for a clear strategy, adequate funding for executing a strategic plan, regular monitoring and evaluation and a sound plan and implementation of pathways to success. Challenges in the South African context emerge as indicated by a South African national coach who said: ‘...there is no national programme’. This narrative reflects on the amateur and volunteer status of Judo South Africa’s (JSA) management structure comprised of part-time staff and characterised by a lack of coordinated and goal-directed planning and implementation of long-term strategies. This may be attributed to South Africa’s isolation during the Apartheid years (1964 to 1994) compared to its counterparts in England and the Netherlands that continued to compete internationally. They competed at Senior World Judo Championships in all male events (1956-1985), female events (1980-1986) and combined events (1987-2018) based on strategically driven long-term athlete development (LTAD).

#### ***Long-Term Athlete Development and Performance Pathways***

An executive member from the BJA confirmed that long-term strategies are essential to success at elite level with the following narrative: ‘...our eight-year strategy was really focused on getting our first gold medal in Tokyo’ (at the 2020 Olympic Games). It is evident that success at elite level requires a long-term, highly coordinated and strategic process.

Regarding the Dutch system, there is a complete set of criteria for judokas to qualify for the national team and the elite events, such as the Olympic Games. The selection process is performance-based, starts at cadet (u/18) level and includes numerous tournaments. The following narrative from a Dutch elite coach presents a reflection on the process:

The best are selected to fight the Cadet European Championships and the Cadet World Championships. From club level, there are about 60 cadets in the national squad, which is narrowed down to about 19 for the selection tournaments.

The overall selection process and performance driven system facilitate elite success, and culminates in qualification for the Olympic Games. Performance management evident in the Dutch and British systems correlates with recommendations for success made by Fletcher and Arnold (2011). These systems reflect professionalism towards policy development (De Bosscher et al. 2006; Houlihan & Green, 2008); contextual benchmarking (Böhlke & Robinson, 2009); complex systems management (Mele, Pels & Polsese, 2010; Smith, 2016); resource management (Shibli, Gratton & Bingham, 2012); and creating athlete pathways (Gulbin et al. 2013).

The socio-economic context of South Africa compounds the challenges related to professionalization. Girginov (2010) shows how contexts influence the strategic management of resources and affect the creation of an enabling environment. These resources are managed according to politically driven agendas, such as the redress legacy of Apartheid through quota systems (a system of team selection in sport that requires a representative number of athletes from all races), which complicates resource management (Miller, 2017).

## *Access to Resources*

### *Finances*

Coaches provided insight on strategic alliances with stakeholders, such as national governing institutions and organisations that provide essential financial resources and administrative support. In South Africa, coaches indicated that there is limited support from government institutions. Managers and coaches in JSA are highly dependent on limited direct income generation (hosting tournaments) and subsidies. A coach explained that: ‘...the [judo] federation generally relies on the entry fees from our national trials to contribute to tour costs of coaches and managers.’

This narrative reflects on a substantially limited network of financial resources that JSA accesses, leading to an over-reliance on membership fees. This places a significant financial burden on members of the Federation, and the limited membership (approximately 3000) results in limited access to finances. Comparatively, a British executive member indicated that realignment with the National Lottery contributed to the professionalization of sports, including:

The biggest change in the England sport system can be seen pre-97 and post-97, when the system professionalised as a result of massive financial investment from the National Lottery.

The investment focused on three aspects - sport science, facilities and coaching staff.

Within the context of the highly commodified and professional era of competitive sport, it has implications for the travel demands of managers and coaches accompanying athletes to international events. Financial support for managers and coaches is evident.

The JBN is less government dependent and has a strategic plan to access diverse funding, for example, through government agencies, such as the National Lottery (Nolte et al. 2017). A rather favourable situation also exists in Great Britain, where performance-based criteria are used to determine the level of financial security of sport organisations, especially leading up to elite competitions, such as the Tokyo Olympic Games (UK Sport, 2019).

### *Infrastructure, Competitions and Human Resources*

Access to state of the art and accessible infrastructure is key to international sporting success. One Dutch coach explained that they were building a National Training Centre in Papendal (a district in East Netherlands), which is in close proximity to Germany and Belgium. South Africa is rather isolated (geographically) from international competitions and thus needs a highly focused approach to delivering an effective sport system, which includes greater access to international competitions and different stakeholders (De Bosscher et al. 2015). One aspect of performance management in a professionalised sport system is the presence of skilled employees, particularly coaches and technical staff (Heathfield, 2019).

### *Coaches*

Options and career paths of coaches have clear links to the professionalization of the BJA and the JBN. In the South African context, similar opportunities for professional coaching careers within the national federation’s structures do not exist. However, there are professional coaches operating in the private sector outside of the national federation’s framework (Nolte et al. 2017).

Varying levels of professionalization significantly impact on the extent of implementation of LTAD and LTCD. Highly knowledgeable coaches are required to produce high quality elite athletes. Evidence of the professionalization of human resource structures in the BJA is substantiated in the following claim of a BJA coach:

The pyramid of reaching top performance includes full-time national coaches at the centre of excellence, who strive for continued coaching excellence, with the support of the national federation.

This narrative reflects on the professional system that exists in the BJA that requires resource support from the national federation. These resources should include coach development and education to sustain the national programme and provide stable employment of coaches.

The Dutch judo system provides for full-time employees funded by the National Olympic Committee and the JBN. One Dutch coach indicated that: ‘...there are high minimum coaching level requirements to be a JBN coach’. This indicates that it is essential to have a coach-education system whereby coaches can progress to a higher level. The number of qualified coaches in the BJA includes level 1 (n=300), level 2 (n=601) and level 3 (n=201), compared to level 1 (n=114), level 2 (n=54) and level 3 (n=28) in JSA (Nolte, 2018). There is a significant drop-off in numbers as coaching level increases, showing a lack of depth and professionalism.

The existence and implementation of JSA’s LTAD and LTCD programmes are considerably limited as indicated by a South African coach: ‘We have internationally qualified coaches, but very little specific high performance coaching knowledge in the country.’ Volunteerism at national level has numerous consequences for the judo system, exacerbated by the lack of resources and low retention rate in the coach-education system.

Bayle and Robinson (2007) indicate that the effective performance of sport organisations depends on maintaining a balance between full-time and volunteer staff within the organisation. This phenomenon is absent in the South African system, negatively affecting professional service provision to athletes (Aćimović et al.

2013) that impacts on LTAD processes and their sports career trajectories (De Bosscher et al. 2006; Gulbin et al. 2013).

#### *Technical staff*

De Bosscher et al. (2006) incorporate scientific research on pillar 9 of the SPLISS model – a professionalised resource associated with elite sport (Canadian Sports Institute, 2014). The results of this study indicate the significant alignment of the BJA and JBN elite sport systems with such scientific support. The coaches of the BJA and JBN confirmed the necessity of such services for having a competitive advantage. A Dutch coach provided an insightful narrative, indicating that: ‘Players will get things like strength and conditioning coaches, individual nutrition plans, and lifestyle consultants.’

These specialised and diverse services are essential to creating a sustainable performance environment. Although there is recognition within JSA that scientific support is necessary, the implementation is limited. A South African coach indicated that:

There isn’t a high performance centre for judo, but we use the SASCOC centre in Bloemfontein for our yearly national training camp. The centre provides ...training facilities and sport science services free of charge.

The latter statement refers to the periodic or ad hoc availability of scientific support, which could impact on sustainable service delivery in an elite sport system. Houlihan and Zheng (2013) indicate that a substantial proportion of investment at elite level is allocated towards the development of sport science support for athletes. It is clear that creating elite sport champions is not only dependent on an athlete’s natural talent, but also on the quality of the scientific support received to condition athletes adequately for elite performance (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009).

#### **Conclusion**

Figurational theory provides a framework for understanding the participation and performance of elite athletes in a globalized and increasingly professionalised international sporting environment. In the context of global figurations related to the increasing commodification of elite sport, athletes are becoming more professional due to many factors and influences. However, the management of elite sport systems has remained relatively isolated within local contexts, and is substantially less professional than the athletes within the system. Elite athletes gain competitive advantage when the management of elite sport systems is more professionalised, and geographically positioned closer to other successful systems that provide a high level of competition and knowledge exchange.

The above-mentioned findings translate into differential practices reflecting varying degrees of specialisation. The Dutch and British Judo systems are positioned well to capitalise on the advantage they have over a significantly more geographically isolated South African judo system. This contributes to a higher degree of human resource specialisation, access to highly specialised facilities and efficient long-term development pathways for athlete and coaches. South African sport systems have to adhere to a political agenda of social transformation and nation building in addition to various socio-economic challenges. Despite a significantly less professional system of management in South Africa, there are individual coaches who benefit from international projects and have obtained high-level professional qualifications.

With regard to the management of elite sport systems such as those present in Judo South Africa, it is essential to adopt a model of gradual specialisation in combination with the availability of resources. At national executive level, the professionalization of staff members is a key priority, with an initial focus on employing a national technical director and significantly enhancing the coach-education process. The professional management of elite sport systems is not isolated from national and global developments and it is a strategic imperative for sporting success to operate in an enabling performance environment with adequate access to strategic resources, multi-stakeholder engagement and long-term plan implementation. Evidently, future studies of management systems would benefit from the sociological insight provided by theories such as the figurational theory. This gives understanding of globalisation as a multi-directional, complex flow of resources, experiences and knowledge.

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