Elite sport development systems and playing to win: uniformity and diversity in international approaches

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This paper explores the former Eastern Bloc’s (primarily the GDR and the Soviet Union) supremacy in developing elite sporting excellence and traces the ‘flow’ of elements of such systems to selected Western nation-states. The national elite sport development systems discussed in the West are: Europe (UK, France and Spain), North America (Canada, United States) and Australia. A tentative conceptualization of ‘centre’ (West) and ‘semi-periphery’ (Eastern Bloc) states is outlined in relation to these global sporting flows. Discussion focuses on whether we are currently witnessing a trend towards uniformity in (global) elite sport development systems, or whether room remains for diversity in the development of these systems in different countries. The methods employed for the generation of data include study visits and interviews with key personnel responsible for French, Spanish and UK elite sports institutes. In addition, a comprehensive review of secondary sources is employed to discuss the notion of a uniform, elite sport development model and the efficiency of different systems. Insights from the globalization and figurational/process sociology literature underpin our discussion of elite sport development systems in selected Western nation-states. Analysis of the data reveals that, in the development of elite sport systems in the West, many antecedents of the former Eastern Bloc’s ‘managed approach’ to elite sport are increasingly apparent. A number of these antecedents are outlined that point to increasing similarities between countries in the West and to the putative emergence of a uniform (global) model of elite sport development. These similarities are analysed and provide evidence for best practice and ‘efficiency gains’ in Western elite sport systems. However, it has also been found that there remains a certain diversity to each country’s elite sport development system: the United States – minimal government intervention; and France – sport as public service; are key examples of this phenomenon.

Introduction

From 1952 to 1988 the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Soviet Bloc countries (hereinafter referred to as the Eastern Bloc) were in the vanguard of developing sporting excellence, as exemplified, for example, in the number of medals won at the Olympic Games. For the purposes of this paper, these Eastern Bloc countries are conceived of as ‘semi-peripherally’, in
contrast to countries such as Canada, United States, Australia and Western European states, which are conceived of here as countries at the ‘core’ or ‘centre’. Explanation of this non-geographical delineation follows below. A number of previous studies towards the end of this era have compared different country’s elite sport development systems (cf. Du Randt, 1993; Gratton, 1990) and the pre-requisites for international success (cf. Broom, 1991; Clumpner, 1994). However, all of these studies are located in the context of Eastern Bloc achievements at the Olympic Games.

What factors then account for the increased drive for sporting excellence in the West? Space does not permit an in-depth account of this phenomenon here, and for a more detailed analysis of these factors see, for example, Houlihan (1997) and Riordan (1986). However, a significant point to note is that in contrast to the Eastern Bloc, Western concerns for promoting sporting excellence have not been easy to define (Riordan, 1986). A number of factors have been suggested for this less defined approach to elite sport development in the West. They include: fragmented organizational structures; competing and conflicting ideologies about the role of sport; and the lack of state integration into sports institutions (Horne et al., 1999).

None the less, Western states have increasingly taken the development of sporting excellence seriously and, as Houlihan (1997) notes with regard to two of the Western countries under consideration here, ‘Australia, and to a lesser extent Canada, have both adopted policies of elite squad development which are very close to the Soviet model in a number of key respects . . .’ (1997, p. 6). Moreover, in the United Kingdom (UK), the Department for Culture, Media and Sport’s (DCMS) recent sport policy document, in its section on ‘sporting excellence,’ states that, ‘We can no longer rely on chance and goodwill. We need to learn the lessons of our competitor nations and have the most professional system for talent development and support of sporting excellence’ (DCMS, 2000, p. 15).

This paper therefore provides some preliminary observations into the contention that a theoretical framework focusing on the links between a figurational/process-sociology perspective and research into globalization processes (cf. Maguire, 1990, 1993, 1994, 1999), can help to illustrate the argument that global sporting ‘flows’ (regarding what can be termed, ‘a managed approach’, to developing sporting excellence) have flowed from Eastern Bloc states (semi-periphery) to Western (centres). This flow from (semi-) periphery to centre is in contrast to those authors focusing on ‘Modernization’ (Guttmann, 1991) or ‘cultural imperialism’ – incorporating terms such as ‘Americanization’ or ‘Westernization’ (Klein, 1989; Mangan, 1986) – these authors’ point of convergence, more generally, is on flows from centre to periphery. Moreover, as Maguire (1999) notes, ‘The modernization approach also tends to assert that the ‘effects’ of these trends leads to homogenization. Societies in different parts of the globe ‘eventually’ follow the Western model of development’ (1999, p. 16). Thus, following Maguire’s figurational approach to globalization processes and sporting flows, we present evidence from elite sport development systems in the West in support
of the thesis that, ‘. . . homogeneity, at least in any simple sense, is not a sufficient explanation of observed events’ (Maguire, 1994, p. 401).

The theoretical underpinning of the paper draws on the work of Elias (1939/1994) and those writers (cf. Mennell, 1990; Goudsblom and Mennell, 1998; Maguire, 1999) that have been influenced by Elias’s approach. The analysis is developed with reference to the twin figurational concepts of ‘diminishing contrasts’ and ‘increasing varieties’, and with specific reference to elite sport development systems in the following Western centres: Europe (UK, France and Spain), North America (Canada and United States) and Australia. Moreover, as Maguire (1994) observes, ‘This approach rejects the idea that the spread or diffusion of styles depends solely on the activities of established groups’ (1994, p. 404). For our purposes, Maguire’s notion of ‘established groups’ can be related to our Western centres. This approach also invokes the idea of the commingling of Western and non-Western cultures, which is viewed as:

A two-way process of cultural interaction crosses the semipermeable barriers that established groups – both within Western societies and between them and non-Western societies – deploy to maintain their distinctiveness, power and prestige. The more they become interconnected with outsider groups, the more they depend on them for social tasks. (Maguire, 1994, p. 404)

Understood in this light, then, these insights suggest that globalization processes involve multidirectional movements of people, practices, customs and ideas (cf. Appadurai, 1990). Our discussion employs and extends these insights, and focuses on whether we are witnessing a trend towards a (globally) uniform model of elite sport development (diminishing contrasts), or whether there is room for diversity (increasing varieties) in national elite sport systems, given the embracing of semi-peripheral (Eastern Bloc) sporting ‘flows’ by countries at the centre. In utilizing the above concepts of diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties, our approach is thus shaped by Maguire’s comment that, ‘Concepts such as diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties arguably steer the analysis between the excesses of homogenization and heterogenization’ (1999, p. 41).

Study visits and interviews have been conducted with key personnel responsible for French, Spanish and UK elite sports institutes. This data, combined with a comprehensive search of literature sources, is used to discuss the contention that nation-states in the West have embraced key features of the Eastern Bloc’s elite sport development systems, primarily over the period 1952 to 1988. This movement, or flow, as noted above, is in contrast to a number of accounts that trace such global flows from centre to periphery.

It should be noted here that our research into the linkages between elite sport development systems, figurational/process sociology perspectives and globalization processes is in its incipient stage. Thus, this paper should be read as just ‘one symptom of a beginning’ (Élias, 1989 quoted in Dunning and Rojek, 1992, p. 235), rather than the end of a road of discovery. Therefore, the following three sections represent some introductory remarks about the contribution of process sociology, the global sport figuration and
the ‘rationalization/scientization’ of sport in relation to East–West elite sport systems. The second part of the paper develops the argument around whether we are witnessing a trend towards uniformity in elite sport development systems – diminishing contrasts – or whether there is room for diversity – increasing varieties – within such systems.

**Globalization and figurational/process-sociology**

Jarvie and Maguire (1994) suggest that figurational sociologists focus attention on the study of people in the plural, namely, the interdependence between human beings. Such chains of interdependencies are formed by the plans and intentions of individuals out of which something emerges which was neither planned nor intended by any one individual social group. The concept of figuration is important here. Jarvie and Maguire (1994) refer to the latter as:

... the webs of interdependence which link and both constrain the actions of individuals. Though produced and reproduced by acting individuals, the long-term structure and dynamics of figurations cannot be explained solely in terms of the properties of individuals. By figuration is meant the totality of the relationships which, created by interdependent people as a whole, undergo different magnitudes of development over time. (p. 133)

From a figurational/process sociology perspective, every aspect of social reality – people’s living conditions, beliefs, knowledge and actions – is intertwined with developing globalization processes. These processes include the emergence of a global economy, a transnational cosmopolitan culture and a range of international social movements. For process-sociology, the illustrative frame of reference is global in perspective (Maguire, 1999). Our analysis of the global development of elite sport systems in discrete nation-states can be viewed in a similar light. As Featherstone and Lash (1995) observe, we must, ‘... move away from social change conceived as the internal development of societies to focusing on change as the outcome of struggles between the members of a figuration of interdependent and competing nation-states’ and then, ‘add to this an understanding of the intensification of trans-societal flows which are pushing towards a borderless global economy’ (p. 2).

The following discussion draws on Maguire’s (1990, 1993, 1994, 1999) work on global sport processes, which suggests that the representatives of culture communicate/compete today in a more interdependent manner than in the past. From a figurational perspective such long-term globalization trends involve broad, multi-faceted processes. In essence a monicausal approach is rejected. Such processes are viewed as the result of a complex interweaving of intended and unintended practices. For example, a shifting group of power balances, including ethnic allies and foes, contour such global exchanges. The latter also includes ideological practices by individuals and key state officials. Thus, with regard to the Eastern Bloc’s (early) domination of the development of sporting excellence, we can see elements of such ideological practice. As Dennis (1999) observes with regard to the GDR:
Sport was expected not only to contribute to the well-being of GDR citizens and the reproduction of labour but also to the development of key characteristics of the socialist personality such as discipline, honesty, a collective spirit and a willingness to defend the homeland. Furthermore, the successes in international competition and a high level of popular participation in sport were intended to demonstrate the superiority of the socialist system over capitalism. (p. 576)

In the GDR, these ideological practices were inextricably interwoven with the actions of ‘powerful’ individuals. Moreover, an example of an unintended consequence to such practices was evident in the GDR, where leading state organs failed to achieve their intended high participation rates. Dennis (1999) notes that The Socialist Unity Party of Germany, ‘... failed to attain its stated goal of “sport for everyone, in every place, several times a week”’ (p. 577). Many East Germans deliberately abstained from institutionalized sport as they regarded sport as a leisure activity to be pursued individually or in a family group. This perspective is also reflected by Riordan (1993), commenting on the GDR and the Soviet Union, ‘... at home there were many who were sceptical of, even hostile to, the world domination policy, especially through the Olympic Games’ (p. 43). Moreover, Houlihan (1994) notes a further unintended consequence of the Eastern Bloc’s drive for elite sporting success; namely, that the methods adopted to achieve such success actually reinforced the capitalist system that it was intended to oppose:

... the investment in sport in the GDR, Cuba and the Soviet Union was partly justified in terms of demonstrating the superiority of the socialist way of life. This was achieved by being more competitive than western teams or athletes, more determined to win medals, and more concerned with record times. Thus far from replacing the capitalist values embodied in international sport the communist states integrated themselves into the very system of values they were opposing. (p. 184)

Sport has thus been used by states to say very different things about themselves, about others and to each other. Moreover, as noted above, such states may be unaware that the shared language they are using has its own inherent structure which affects what may be said and how it may be said (Houlihan, 1994). Conceived of in this way, globalization processes involve multidirectional movements of people, practices, customs and ideas. Yet, as Maguire (1999) observes, although the globe can be understood as an interdependent whole, in different figurational fields there are established (centre) and outsider (peripheral) groups and nation-states each competing for dominant positions. Therefore, consideration will now be given to what Maguire has termed the ‘Global Sports Figuration’.

The global sports figuration

At the level of global elite sport, success in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries involves a contest between systems located within a global figuration (Maguire, 1999). A number of aspects have been identified which are key to such sporting success and which are pertinent to the focus of
this paper. These include: the identification of human resources (athletes); methods of coaching and training; efficiency of the sport organization; and the depth of knowledge of sport medicine and sport science. These aspects will be discussed in more depth below: the contention being that, in their relatively recent drive for (global) elite sporting excellence, many Western nation-states have embraced elements of the Eastern Bloc’s managed approach to sporting supremacy.

Key to our analysis is Maguire’s (1999) suggestion that over time there has been a move towards the emergence of a global achievement sport monoculture, where administrators, coaches and teachers promote achievement of sport values and ideologies and where competitions/tournaments increasingly reflect commodified and rationalized forms. The focus of our discussion – elite sport/the Olympics – is cited as an exemplar of this global sport system (MacAlloon, 1991). Reflecting the centre-periphery conceptualization of this paper, Maguire (1999) suggests that, within the global sport figuration, nation-states, ‘... can be grouped, more or less along political, economic and cultural lines, into core, semi-periphery and peripheral Blocs’ (p. 91). Our delineation (see pp. 1–2 in this paper), follows Maguire, who locates Western Europe, North America and Australia at the core of most team and individual-based sport, while socialist (Eastern Bloc countries) are located as semi-peripheral countries. Peripheral countries, for Maguire include most Islamic nations, many African countries and those from South Asia. It should be noted that although our conceptualization broadly follows Maguire’s, it should be viewed as a heuristic device: in other words, a guiding framework within which the ensuing discussion can proceed.

One of the key issues under consideration within this conceptualization and, indeed, one of the key issues at the centre of the debate surrounding the globalization discourse generally, is that of homogeneity and heterogeneity. As Appadurai (1990) observes, ‘The central problem of today’s global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization’ (p. 295). Writing at the juncture in European history when the Cold War was in retreat and reflecting the above discussion regarding the Eastern Bloc’s ideological use of sport, Appadurai notes, presciently, that, ‘... fears of homogenization can be exploited by nation-states . . . by posing global commoditization (or capitalism, or some other such external enemy) as more ‘real’ than the threat of its own hegemonic strategies’ (1990: p. 296). Evidence of the rejection of such hegemonic strategies with regard to elite sport in the Eastern Bloc is summarized nearly by Riordan (1993):

Paradoxically, the sporting success of East European nations, particularly in the Olympic Games and particularly the USSR and GDR, increasingly undermined the ideological basis of the sport supremacy policy among the populations of those countries. (p. 43)

In essence, to many ordinary people (in the Eastern Bloc) the Olympic Games represented all that was bad in the communist regime’s policies – for example, politics and ideology, hypocrisy and sham and the grossly distorted allocation of national resources (Riordan, 1993). Moreover, if we follow the line taken
by authors such as Appadurai, we may well have to re-conceptualize our notion of centre-periphery models, ‘The new global cultural economy has to be understood as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing centre-periphery models’ (Appadurai, 1990, p. 296). Indeed, it might be argued that in highlighting these flows of managed approaches to elite sport development from East to West it may, in part, reflect what Hall (1991) has termed the ‘de-centring of the West’. Therefore, it is to these (long-term) flows and, more specifically, to the development of what we now know as modern, rationalized ‘achievement sport’ (Maguire, 1999, p. 66) between nation-states, that attention now turns.

The rationalization and scientization of sport: Eastern Bloc antecedents to Western elite sport development systems

The issue of rationalized sport is pertinent to the focus of this paper and requires further consideration. Commenting on the diffusion of English pastimes to continental Europe and beyond, Elias (1986) addressed the connections between ‘sportization’ and ‘civilizing processes’ – the term sportization is used here to describe the transformation of English pastimes into sport and the export of some of them on a global scale. As Maguire (1999) has noted, as these sportization processes unfolded across Europe one of the key characteristics was, ‘... the emergence and diffusion of a specific body culture that centres on ‘achievement sport’, in either its elite or leisure-level forms’ (p. 66). A key feature of such a process is the emphasis on achievement striving, which is linked to, and reinforced by, a quest for excellence, embodied in the notion of the ‘ultimate performance’. Pursuit of the ultimate performance appears to rest on what Maguire has termed, ‘the myth of the superman – a performance so great that it eclipses the efforts of ‘mere mortals’” (Maguire, 1999, p. 66, original italics). Moreover, instructive to this paper’s comparative approach is Maguire’s comment that:

Though varying in intensity across time and different societies, this subculture is also marked by rationalization and scientization processes. The most efficient and technically competent display has to be developed that would produce the ‘optimal performance’. (1999: p. 66)

The argument being developed here is that it was in the semi-peripheral (in our terms) Eastern Bloc where such rationalization and scientization processes were taken to unprecedented lengths, and thus formed the underlying basis for the Soviet Union’s and GDR’s achievements at the Olympic Games between 1952 and 1988. Moreover, it is argued that such processes have been (and are being) embraced by Western nation-states (in our terms, the centre). This is not to argue that these Western states have merely ‘copied’ Eastern Bloc approaches, rather it is to suggest that a form of policy transfer (cf. Dolowitz and Marsh 1996, 2000) may have occurred. In relation to this, Schembri (1998) raises some instructive contextual considerations, which help to guide the ensuing analysis:
One country adopting another’s sport system does so at their peril. Foreign models should be for comparison and to trigger thoughts, not for prescription or adoption. Social, cultural, historical and political factors are all important considerations in shaping the architecture of a country’s sport system. (p. 8)

Indeed, we have argued elsewhere that there is increasing evidence that policy transfer is now apparent between the Western countries under investigation here (Green and Oakley, 2001). Space precludes an analysis of the policy transfer literature in relation to elite sport development systems in this paper, however, this is an issue that warrants further research following the evidence presented here.

Returning to the above discussion on long-term global processes, the figurational aspects of the civilizing process and, in particular, Maguire’s pertinent comment regarding the myth of the superman, Mangan (1999) provides an insightful account of the beginnings of such bodily development – especially in nineteenth century Germany, but also in Victorian Britain. We can also discern here the unintended consequences of the bourgeois civilizing process, namely, ‘the cult of male honour’ (Mangan, 1999, p. 7) embodied in regression towards violence. Thus, it could be argued that Mangan’s analysis of masculine body culture in *Shaping the Superman* highlights the value of taking a long-term approach to the antecedents of elite sport development in Germany. In essence, the influence of such antecedents shaped the GDR’s scientifically systematic approach to the development of its elite athletes. Krüger provides an instructive insight into the relatively early adoption of such sporting rationalization and scientization processes, ‘... talent selection based on genetic tests was the basis for the athletic success of the small German Democratic Republic after 1968 – using the same anthropometric procedures developed by the racial scientists prior to 1945’ (Krüger, 1999, p. 44).

It was not only in the GDR that the Eastern Bloc states were ahead of the West in the process of elite sport development, ‘In the Soviet Union, the official promotion of competitive sport began in the 1930s’ (Hoberman, 1993, p. 18). Moreover, reflecting the earlier discussion on the Eastern Bloc’s use of sport for ideological reasons during the Cold War, Hoberman goes on to note that the GDR created an unrivalled high-performance sports establishment with the clear aim of winning international stature and domestic credibility for the Communist regime, ‘it is now known that the East German authorities mobilized over a thousand scientists, physicians and trainers in its programme to develop successful athletes by means of anabolic steroids’ (1993, p. 19). Indeed, it could be argued that, in both the East and West, a further ‘unintended consequence’ of such programmes is the increased widespread use of performance enhancing drugs. Hoberman indicates the repercussions of the latter for Canadian sport:

Here, as in East Germany, steroids became nothing less than a national security issue. Consequently, the Dubin Commission of Inquiry . . . was in large measure an exercise in political damage control – a wholly unintended consequence of
Notwithstanding the influence of performance enhancing drugs, the GDR’s international reputation was based on elite sporting success. During its 45 years existence, the GDR developed and applied a highly sophisticated system to produce top-level athletes in its quest for international sporting acclaim (Merkel, 1995, 1999). Merkel cites research, conducted in the main by West German sport scientists, in highlighting four key ingredients of the GDR’s ‘sporting miracle’:

- scientifically organized and rational selection of boys and girls in their early childhood;
- best possible facilities and an organized approach to coaching and training;
- extensive networks of support by highly qualified scientists from all relevant branches;
- efforts in a very restricted range of sports, particularly the Olympic sports, and those where there was some kind of evidence of a ‘German tradition’ (Merkel, 1995, p. 100).

This brings us to the second part of the paper: namely, our contention that there has been a diminishing of contrasts between the utilization of the above four ingredients used by Eastern Bloc states (and the GDR in particular) and the key features of many of the West’s top sporting nations in the development of their elite sport systems. This contention gives some credence to the concept of diminishing contrasts noted earlier. However, there is also the concept of increasing varieties to consider. Therefore, the second part of the paper takes the analysis one stage further in discussing whether the trend in the West towards embracing Eastern Bloc antecedents to elite sport is leading towards a globally uniform model of elite sport development (diminishing contrasts) or whether there remains room for elements of diversity (increasing varieties) in discrete Western nation-state models.

Towards a uniform model of elite sport development?

In investigating this area, Clumpner’s (1994) study that identified pre-requisites for Olympic success is a useful starting point but it is evident that systems have become more professional, targeted and ‘managed’ in their approach since Clumpner was writing. The development of elite sport institute networks has, in particular, become more sophisticated during the last decade. A more recent attempt to identify aspects common to successful elite sport development systems was made by Moreland (1998), Director of the UK Sports Institute (UKSI) project, who was at the time active in analysing the practice in other countries that might be transferable to the UK. Indeed, our preliminary findings have been validated in an interview with Moreland (1999), from which the data below (items 1–10) was generated. All of the countries in this study are at various stages in the development of their
elite sport system, yet a number of similarities in approach can be discerned which point to the emergence of a (tentative) uniform model of elite sport development. These similarities in approach to elite sport in our Western ‘centres’ are as follows:

1. a clear understanding about the role of the different agencies involved and an effective communication network which maintains the system;
2. simplicity of administration through common sporting and political boundaries;
3. an effective system for the statistical identification and monitoring of the progress of talented and elite athletes;
4. provision of sports services to create an excellence culture in which all members of the team (athletes, coaches, managers, scientists) can interact with one another in a formal and informal way;
5. well structured competitive programmes with ongoing international exposure;
6. well developed and specific facilities with priority access for elite athletes;
7. the targeting of resources on a relatively small number of sports through identifying those that have a real chance of success at world level;
8. comprehensive planning for each sports needs;
9. a recognition that excellence costs, with appropriate funding for infrastructure and people; and
10. lifestyle support and preparation for life after sport.

Several similarities to Eastern Bloc approaches outlined earlier are apparent here. For example, in the case of items 1, 3, 7 and 8, Riordan (1991) notes that:

The search for talent in the leading communist nations has been based on a centrally planned (and, especially in the GDR, computer-assisted) system of selecting, testing, grading and sifting over a long period. The overall approach to talent identification tends to focus on establishing a model for each sport and event. (p. 88)

The 10 items listed above will now be further amplified by drawing on the varieties of managed approaches in the Western states under consideration and, in so doing, will also provide evidence for the efficiency gains in the ‘production’ of Olympic medals over four Olympiads shown in Figure 1. Comparisons and contrasts will also be made with the Eastern Bloc approaches discussed above. For a more in-depth consideration of measuring efficiency/effectiveness regarding output of Olympic medals, see, for example, Den Butter and Van der Tak (1995) and Gratton (1990).

With regard to Figure 1, results have been used from the summer Olympic Games only as this removes the bias towards the alpine sport nations that is evident when the more specialized winter Games are also included. For
example, Norway won 81% of its 32 medals during 1996 and 1998 at the winter Olympics. Furthermore, medal details from the 1988, 1992, 1996 and 2000 summer Games are used to give some longitudinal perspective in an era

Fig. 1. Record of summer Olympic medals won per million of population over four Olympiads, (1988–2000) for selected countries.
free from major boycotts. Results from these four Games reveal the relative improvements or otherwise of six selected nations, namely: Canada, United States, Australia, UK, France and Spain. What is also clear from Figure 1 (see inset) was the efficiency of the GDR, and other Eastern Bloc countries, in producing Olympic medals (data on these countries have only been included for 1988, the last Games before the ‘fall’ of the Eastern Bloc).

Australia demonstrates the most notable sustained improvement in efficiency. Two factors can be identified as political and financial catalysts for developing their elite sport system; first, a poor Australian team performance at the Olympic Games of 1976, at which no gold medals were won and, second, the bidding and hosting of the Olympic Games in Sydney 2000. Such catalysts are not unusual, and in recent decades the hosting of the Olympic Games has boosted the elite sport systems of Canada (1976), Korea (1988) and Spain (1992). France, from a position of relative under-performance in 1988, has also demonstrated marked improvements in efficiency and is now highly regarded in the international sporting world with similar successes in football, rugby and tennis. Whilst the UK’s decline is noticeable, up to 1996, the considerable improvement at Sydney 2000 demonstrates what is possible with political commitment and funding. The United States normally heads the medal table, but is shown by this method to be modest in its efficiency. On the one hand it could be argued that these relative efficiency gains in Olympic medal counts reflect the comments in the Introduction to this paper regarding the West’s increasing drive for developing elite sport systems over recent years, and the embracing of Eastern Bloc antecedents to developing such systems. On the other hand, this data raises questions for further research, in particular, questions surrounding the relative decline of Spain (post-1992) and Canada (in 2000). Notwithstanding the latter observation, it is now appropriate to discuss the ten ‘items’ highlighted above in more detail.

In efficient and effective sport systems links are in place between funding agents and those leading programmes; roles and relationships are clearly defined and understood. The challenge posed by item 1 is for all partners (a typical set of partners being government/state departments, national Olympic committee, disabled sport organizations, national governing bodies, coaching bodies, and sport science/medicine providers) to understand their role and avoid duplication or conflict. In Australia, a National Elite Sport Council has been established for this very purpose, supported by a forward-looking information technology system that allows rapid electronic communication of data. In the UK, a web-based information system and electronic network is being developed to service the UKSI network. However, it is worth noting that with regard to efficient and effective sport systems and the GDR, Gratton observed in 1990 that, ‘Probably the most efficient country in producing Olympic champions, in relation to its resources of 17 million people, is the German Democratic Republic’ (1990, p. 54).

Communication between agencies is easiest when sporting and political boundaries co-exist (item 2), as is the case in France. Co-ordination is more problematic when different states or regions have a degree of political autonomy, as is the case in Canada, Australia and Spain – all federal systems.
It becomes a real challenge when faced with the political and sporting autonomy of the UK with four international sporting nations and one Olympic team. This mosaic of different interests is likely to hinder the development of a truly Olympic-focused national elite sport system (cf. Godfrey and Holtham, 1999). As revealed above, there was a common purpose between sporting and political boundaries underlying the Eastern Bloc rationale for achieving ‘sporting supremacy’: centralized control and the ideology of communism were key factors in this respect.

Modern technology also has a role to play in tracking-systems that monitor the progress of junior, as well as senior athletes (item 3). Monitoring takes two forms; first, the monitoring of results against world norms to predict progress towards being the best in the world. Second, is the statistical tracking of national growth and junior performance characteristics to help predict adult stature and suitability for different sports. For example, this type of monitoring is apparent in Spain, where former northern European norms are inaccurate in identifying talented young performers (Moreland, no date). Australia is by far the most developed in this respect with 10 staff working on a centrally-funded ‘Talent Search Programme’ which aims to identify potential performers from outside a sport’s participant base. This is achieved by an annual invitation to each of Australia’s 2,000 high schools to participate; on average around 800 reply. The co-ordinators then conduct eight tests on some 10,000 youngsters, usually around the age of 14. After a second round of selective testing children are inducted into the most physiologically suitable sport of their choice which, if they show aptitude, may mean they undertake 1 or 2 years of intensive training. To date, this system has been most successful in identifying international talent in athletics, cycling and women’s weightlifting, including junior world championships and an Olympic gold medal in women’s rowing (Robinson, 1997).

Reflecting the Eastern Bloc approach discussed earlier, Deborah Hoare, who leads the Australian programme, has been accused of mass-producing champions out of a production line. However, her response is unequivocal:

We have certainly had that comment placed on us; this is a very eastern European approach, you are taking the choice away from kids. But that really is not true. We are all about providing opportunity . . . Today if you want to be competitive at the elite level you have got to be innovative. (Hoare, quoted in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1997)

With regard to item 4, the synergy benefits and excellence culture of multi-sport institute environments in which all aspects of elite support/provision work together are particularly evident in the French, Spanish and Australian National Institutes (Moreland, 1999). Indeed, the ongoing development of the Canadian institute network recognizes that, ‘. . . centres promote and facilitate interaction among providers, and among athletes and coaches from different sports’ (Sport Canada, 1999). Those who advocate central institute facilities, at which a number of elite sport squads are located, frequently quote such benefits. Indeed, it could be argued that Eastern Bloc harbingers to Western sports institutes/academies were centralized excellence centres and
sports schools for young children. Broom’s (1991) comparative study of aspiring performance athletes reflects this notion, ‘There is no doubt that the modified education arrangements being made in Western countries are assisting talented young athletes to strive for excellence’ (p. 33).

Item 5 might appear obvious from a Eurocentric perspective but it should be recognized that most international competition is based in the northern hemisphere and making gradual incremental progress at international competition is an expensive undertaking for southern hemisphere athletes. A further costly element is the dedicated use of facilities (item 6) available at French, Australian and United States Institutes, whereas shared facilities in Canada and the UK, often with universities, is more cost effective but not so totally focused on athlete success. However, in the UK, for example, the ongoing implementation of the UKSI network reveals the importance now being placed on the dedicated use of elite sport facilities (Walker, 2001, p. 1). With regard to the Eastern Bloc, it was highlighted earlier that one of the four key ingredients of the GDR’s ‘sporting miracle’ was, ‘The best possible facilities and an organized approach to coaching and training’ (Merkel, 1995, p. 100). Moreover, with respect to the importance given to coaches in the Eastern Bloc, Gratton (1990) cites research by Riordan (1977) in observing that:

It is a full-time profession with a fully developed career structure. It is well-supported by part-time staff lower down, but these also obtain financial rewards. Such central direction, though clearly successful for communist countries, is not a viable policy alternative for Western nations. (Gratton, 1990, p. 62)

Interestingly, although Gratton suggested in 1990 that such central direction is not an option for Western states, he goes on to note that Canada, ‘... has directed resources centrally to this end’ (1990, p. 63). Indeed, Hoberman notes Canada’s relatively early mirroring of Eastern Bloc approaches, ‘... for years after its triumph at the 1978 Commonwealth Games, Canada was frequently referred to as “the East Germany of the Commonwealth”’ (1993, p. 19). More pertinently, over 10 years after Gratton was writing, the UK’s DCMS published: A sporting future for all (DCMS, 2000). With the above comments regarding Eastern Bloc approaches in mind, two excerpts from A sporting future for all give credence to our argument that there is now increasing evidence of a ‘flow’ of these Eastern Bloc approaches regarding elite sport development to the West. The DCMS state that:

Success at international level requires careful planning and thorough preparation for the performer, the coach and the sport. The changes required to achieve a new level of excellence will take time. They require a significant change in culture in many sports and they will only be achieved through consistent, sustained funding and support. (2000, p. 44)

Coaching is central to the development of excellence. The coach has to be able to co-ordinate and manage other coaches, sports scientists and sports medicine personnel, deal with the media and provide constant mentoring and support for
their performers. In search of the best possible coaches some sports have recruited and employed coaches from abroad. (2000. p. 45)

The targeting of resources (item 7) is an important strategic issue. Spain has made excellent use of its funds by rigorous setting of performance targets and analysis of relevant international data, leading to a focused effort on 28 potential medallists in 1992 and 17 in 1996. It is testament to their detailed planning that they won 22 and 16 medals in the respective Olympics and only one athlete was outside of the predicted target group mentioned earlier (Moreland, 1998). All of the Western nation-states studied attempt to do this, to a greater or lesser degree. However, there is also the more long-term strategy of targeting ‘softer’ medals particularly in some women’s disciplines, at which Australia leads the way. Women’s Rowing, Judo and Weightlifting have been targeted in this way. Again, reflecting the Eastern Bloc’s managed approach outlined above, this aspect has also been recommended by Godfrey and Holtham (1999) as a cost-effective approach for the UK, ‘Not only is it a matter of equality and likely to promote improved social attitudes but, as the former Communist countries showed, it can be extremely cost effective since many countries neglect women’s sport’ (p. 23).

Items 8 and 9 need to be in place as every sport has its specialist requirements. In France, for example, elite funding for athletes is available for training partners without whose commitment and co-operation potential Olympic champions would struggle – for example, in judo. The support of specific sport requirements and appropriate funding also manifests itself in the buying-in of world experts and coaches to lead national teams, and the global flow of such labour has increased throughout the last decade (cf. Maguire, 1999; Maguire and Stead, 1998). For example, the UK has recruited former East German, New Zealand, Canadian and French coaches during this period. Some sports have also successfully lobbied for their own national sport-specific institutes based on their own needs, most notably in gymnastics, sailing, equestrianism, canoeing and rowing. All of these sports are heavily equipment- or specialized facility-based.

Also implicit in item 9 is the universal adoption of performance criterion-based funding of elite athletes with subsistence, training, equipment and educational aspects. Space does not permit a full discussion of such funding systems but two of the main issues are firstly, the extent, if any, of means-testing and second, the amount of support for up-and-coming athletes. Support for elite athletes in the GDR was somewhat different. Clumpner cites research by Krüger in observing the social conditions underpinning the GDR’s sporting supremacy:

The more the facts are known, the more it becomes obvious that half of the success was due to the social conditions . . . You had to wait 10 years for a car (often 20) for a new apartment as are (sic) ordinary, but as an athlete you were rewarded for your services by the same item instantaneously. (1990, quoted in Clumpner, 1994, p. 362)

Therefore, in contrast to the Eastern Bloc, where athletes received financial assistance from the state, Western countries have been forced to develop
financial assistance programmes that contribute to expenses for elite sport development (Broom, 1991). It is clear, however, that the actors involved in developing Western elite sport models have recognized the importance of committed and sustained funding. In the UK, for example, it is now recognized that elite sporting excellence, ‘will only be achieved through consistent, sustained funding and support’ (DCMS, 2000, p. 44). However, doubts must remain as to whether Western nation-states will be able to provide the levels of funding for elite sport that were apparent under the ideologically-motivated doctrine of Eastern Bloc communism. For example, a recent review of funding for elite sport in the UK argued that, ‘all is not well with sport in the UK’, with a key recommendation of the Review Group being that, ‘there is an urgent requirement for additional Exchequer funding of £10 million per annum to be provided for the UK Sports Council (UK Sport) from this current financial year through to 2004/05’ (Cunningham, 2001, pp. 3–4).

Adequate funding systems are also reinforced with lifestyle support programmes for elite athletes (item 10). Such programmes contain all or some of the following elements: career advice; educational support, along with personal finance; and media and presentation skills training. In France, the Institut National du Sport et de l’Education Physique (National Institute of Sports and Physical Education (INSEP)) is the main provider of these services, which include a range of vocational qualifications for athletes and a unique form of ‘retirement’ funding to assist those in the transition from elite sport to life after sport (Michel, 1996). The UKSI has recognized the importance of this item by contracting into the Athlete Career Education (ACE) programme developed in the Australian Institutes. Taking this duplication a stage further the former Australian National Manager of ACE has been recruited to lead the ACE UK programme. The development of the Canadian Institute network also recognizes the importance of, ‘... the holistic development of high performance athletes, so that their athletic performance goals are pursued in parallel with their personal, social and career development’ (Sport Canada, 1999).

The notion of ‘lifestyle support’ for athletes is perhaps one area of the recent Western approaches that does not have Eastern Bloc antecedents. Indeed, it could be argued that the Eastern Bloc’s infamous use of drugs to achieve sporting supremacy resulted in the harmful exploitation of athletes with no apparent thought given to their lives after sport. This conjecture is reinforced by the fervent admonition delivered to a group of elite athletes in 1987 in the GDR by the one-time sport Czar Manfred Ewald:

In the capitalist countries doping is being practised in an increasingly unpredictable manner. For that reason our own sports medicine must also make its contribution. And from the athletes I expect both creativity and a willingness to take risks. (Ewald, quoted in Hoberman, 1993, p. 26)

Moreover, as Hoberman concludes, ‘Ewald’s evident meaning was that he expected athletes to participate in experiments with anabolic steroids, and that is exactly what happened on a massive scale’ (1993, p. 26). The corollary
of this approach is that Manfred Ewald has been charged with 142 cases of grievous bodily harm (Karacs, 2000).

Conclusions

It is worth re-emphasizing that the aim of this paper was to provide some introductory observations regarding contentions surrounding whether we are currently witnessing a trend towards uniformity in the (global) development of elite sport systems (and presaged on Eastern Bloc antecedents), and/or whether there is room for diversity in such systems. Moreover, it should also be noted that any conclusions drawn here are necessarily constrained by the lack of a larger empirical data set. Clearly, further research across a broader spectrum of key actors is required before any substantive conclusions can be made on a scale that might be deemed representative or generalizable in strict methodological terms. However, notwithstanding these limitations, some initial conclusions can now be drawn, in order to contribute to a clearer focus, and a framework for further research into the interconnections between globalization, figurational/process sociology and elite sport development systems.

The key proposition put forward here is that there has been a ‘global sporting flow’ from the Eastern Bloc with regard to managed approaches to elite sport development; in our conceptualization from ‘semi-periphery’ to ‘centre’. The analysis has focused on whether this is pointing towards a uniform (global) model of elite sport development (diminishing contrasts) or whether there is room for diversity (increasing varieties) in such developments. In utilizing the twin figurational concepts of diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties our analysis has attempted to avoid the excesses of homogenization and heterogenization (cf. Maguire, 1994, 1999). Following the figurational/process sociology perspective, it has also been argued that there is a need to adopt a long-term developmental approach to such a study. For example, the influences behind the relatively early adoption of a centrally managed approach to elite sport in the Eastern Bloc have been discussed; key influences in this respect were the ideological doctrine of communism and the development of talented athletes based on genetic tests.

The role of elite sport development systems, in nation-states that can afford them, is now becoming firmly established. A number of factors have been identified that could be regarded as uniform in all countries, reflecting the concept of diminishing contrasts noted above. More often than not though, it is the traditions and patterns of government involvement in sport that shape the sport system(s) in each country, thereby reflecting the increasing varieties aspect of the figurational concept highlighted earlier. For example, the evolution of the UKSI as an agency to co-ordinate the UK’s existing regional facilities and develop new ones has developed from its original concept, which was to mirror Australia’s (originally conceived) centrally organized system. The unique patterns of UK sports governance and increasing political devolution in the late 1990s are reflected in the structure of the regional institute network. The United States – minimal government intervention –
(Chalip and Johnson, 1996) and France – sport as public service – (Michel, 1996) are further examples of this phenomenon. This paper has also identified Australia and France as being particularly efficient in relation to the production of Olympic medals. This is not only due to the funding they have devoted to elite sport, but also to the length of time they have been active in this area (Australia since 1981 and France since 1976). The interface between government commitment to funding and sport practice is represented by institute networks and, in this respect Australia, in particular, has been innovative in its preparation for hosting the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. For example, firstly, the targeting of resources towards ‘softer medals’ in the women’s disciplines may have a marked effect in years to come. Longitudinal study of women’s medal tables in the future, using methods similar to those adopted in this paper, will be able to test this strategy. Secondly, the use of ever more sophisticated talent identification methods through voluntary physiological screening programmes in schools could have a profound effect on elite sport in the twenty-first century.

The choice of target sports in different countries also accounts for national variations, albeit limited to Olympic sports, for example, fencing in France. In the UK, such targeting policies have only recently come to the fore. Godfrey and Holtham (1999) suggest that, ‘A limited number of sports will have been identified, based on cultural and sporting criteria’ (p. 11). Clearly, such cultural and sporting criteria will vary from country to country. Thus, with reference to the paper’s theoretical framework, it could be argued that we are not only witnessing a globalization of (Olympic) sports, but also the increasing diversity of sports cultures.

To conclude, it is worth pointing to an area for future research in this field. Houlihan (1997), in a comparison of national sports policies, notes the increasing similarities between the former totalitarian regimes discussed here and countries such as Australia and Canada and, at the same time may well be signposting the way forward for future, policy-related research into elite sport development in different countries. The Eastern Bloc elite sport policies cited by Houlihan include the systematic sifting of school-age children as a means of identifying the potential elite, the development of specialist academies and the use of public money to support individual elite athletes – all elements discussed in this paper. In summary, Houlihan suggests that:

This pattern of policy similarity prompts a fresh set of hypotheses regarding the source of that similarity. For example, whether the Australian approach is the result of borrowing a successful communist model or is a largely unavoidable outcome of the nature of the objective, i.e. the objective can only be achieved in a very limited number of ways. (1997: p. 7)

Clearly, there are areas of policy response in this field that remain under-researched and it is hoped that this paper has outlined some of the main areas of contention for research in the future. Thus, on the one hand, it remains to be seen whether the West’s increasingly insatiable desire for elite sporting excellence, on the scale achieved by the Eastern Bloc, results in a (globally) uniform approach to building models of elite sport development. On the
other hand, however, the argument developed throughout this paper is the belief that it would be erroneous to preclude the possibility of diversity, uniqueness or distinctiveness from any future debate on the global development of elite sport systems in different countries.

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