

# Advancing Sport Management Education and Research

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## Introduction

The aim of this contribution is to highlight some of the challenges sport management research faces in its development towards becoming an academic discipline. My own involvement in this process can be traced back to the 1990s, when I was asked after changing positions whether I am willing to teach on “Personnel Management” in the “Sportökonomie” programme offered the University of Bayreuth (Germany). Far ahead of other universities in Germany professors at the University of Bayreuth realized the upcoming needs of the sport industry for more substantial education of professional leaders working on the interfaces between the various institutions in sport and corporate businesses. Those leaders should have fundamental knowledge about business administration, legal issues and sport science, later to be considered as the three pillars of “Sportökonomie”-education at the University of Bayreuth. Involving law, business administration and sport sciences the inter-disciplinary study programme on “Sportökonomie” was offered in 1985 for the first time. In its 30 years after inauguration, the programme is now considered to be one of the most prestigious programmes offered by the University of Bayreuth. Over the time it has been restructured and today does adapt to the requirements of Bachelor- and Masters-study programmes according to the Bologna Process in Europe. However in its initial years the programme and research in the field was driven to large extent by the intellectual imagination of for example Professor Dr. Heymo Böhler (Marketing), Professor Dr. Jochen Sigloch (Taxation), Professor Dr. Bernhard Pfister (Civil Law) or Professor Dr. Klaus Zieschang (Sport Sciences), but rather quickly the industry development itself developed into a vast field for research itself.

The early years of the “Sportökonomie” programme witnessed the transition process from amateur sports, where participants are entirely engaged without any form of remuneration, to semi-professional sports and to professional sports, spear headed by the United States and the United Kingdom. Just to point one example; English professional football clearly did become more business-like in the 1990s. Following the stock market flotations of Tottenham Hotspur and Manchester United in the 1980s, twenty English clubs listed between 1995 and 1997. During the same time many clubs were acquired by new owners who openly expressed an interest in profit. While fans bemoaned the steep rises in ticket prices and the migration of broadcast rights from free-to-air television to more profitable pay television, increased revenues were used to finance a substantial investment program in new stadiums (over GBP 2.5 billion between 1992 and 2008,

almost entirely privately financed)(Deloitte 2009: 48). Further, and as Szymanski (2010: 72) points out: “The development of modern sport went hand in hand with the development of modern consumer capitalism, which had become the world’s dominant economic system by the end of the twentieth century. But modern sport is not a by-product of modern capitalism, or merely a charming exemplar: its structures and forms co-evolved with the institutions of modern capitalism, and thus the understanding of modern sporting institutions is essential to the understanding of modern society”.

### Creating opportunities

While attending conferences in international business in Stockholm during 2002 and 2003 – in the meanwhile I was working for the German Institute for Japanese Studies, a research institute of the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, based in Tokyo – and discussing the international development of sports during the breaks Professor Sten Söderman (Stockholm University, School of Business, Stockholm, Sweden) we discovered a shared interest in how management concepts could be applied and might function (or not) in sports. Before that we had met at several conferences. Our backgrounds were rather similar focusing on sensitivity and pre-understanding of sports based on own experiences combined with several years of academic research, writing and teaching on international business and industry experience from working abroad, especially in Asia. We agreed that despite the well documented economic impact of sports in media and the mismanagement at club level often reported by journalists, academic research papers on sports management were rarely seen at top management conferences. Sport management and research on the nexus between business and sports simply had not made its way to well established Business Schools’ management curricula and research agendas at that time.

Our early ambition was to bring sport management research from a specialist niche market and focused conferences into international management conferences as the industry increasingly developed towards internationalization, professionalization and commercialization. By doing so, we aimed to develop and establish research on sports and business as a serious new stream of management research in the hope that it would later be broadly accepted in leading Business Schools (and I might consider as for today, this is still an ongoing process). We’ve been fully aware at that time that a lot of qualified research in sports has been done and is visible e.g. in economics, sociology and physical education, but not within mainstream business administration. In the following years we presented our research on sport and business with posters, interactive and competitive papers not only at sports conferences (in order to get feed- back from sports specialists) but also at various highly ranked management conferences worldwide (to relate to the latest theoretical research in the field). Besides we also organized well received panels e.g. on “Sport Businesses and Sport: Facing the Challenges of Internationalization“ in 2008 (Academy of International Business Conference, Indianapolis, USA) and on “Targeting the International Audience: Challenges Facing Sports Managers“ (Academy of International Business Conference 2009, Milano, Italy), special issues on „Mega-Sporting Events in Asia: Impacts on Society, Business & Management“ (Asian Business & Management, just

ahead of the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008) and on „Developing International Sport“ (International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship, 2008) were published by us subsequently.

In 2008 our competitive proposal to organize an academic track on “Sport as a Business: internationalisation, professionalization, commercialisation“ was accepted for the European Academy of Management (EURAM) Annual Meeting at the University of Liverpool, Liverpool (UK). For the first time in the history of EURAM a scientific paper submission track on the business and management aspects of sports was accepted. At the actual conference in spring 2009 the track was well received, far beyond our expectations. Plenty of high profile papers, interesting discussions and a stimulating atmosphere during the conference constituted the most important platform in our knowledge development endeavours. This achievement and the fulfilment of the organizational requirements stated by EURAM has led to the founding of a Strategic Interest Group (SIG) named after the initial track on “Sport as a Business”, but recently renamed into “Managing Sport” as to emphasize the management aspects of its programme. The EURAM SIG on “Managing Sport” has in the meanwhile defined itself as a network of academics, practitioners, athletes and sport officials whose interests revolve around aspects of internationalization, professionalization and commercialization of sports in theory and in practice. The “Managing Sport” SIG, which is chaired since its inauguration by Sten Söderman and myself is function as a catalyst for building and disseminating new ideas around the business of sports, by particularly aiming at: (1) promoting research and education in the fields of sports business and management in Europe, with special emphasis on international comparisons; (2) to foster an understanding of the role of professionalization and commercialisation of sport in European economy and society; (3) to encourage the exchange of research results, practical experience, and ideas; (4) to support the development of international research collaborations; and (5) to disseminate research results through a variety of channels.

As part of the annual EURAM conference the SIG on “Managing Sport” with two standing tracks on “Sport Governance” and “Managing Events” together with a “General track on Managing Sport”, attracts since 2010 each year a sustainable amount of high quality full-paper submissions. We are grateful to Emerald Group Publishing (the publishing house of “*Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*”) for supporting this development by sponsoring an annual best paper award and a best reviewer award at the conference. This also allows a consistent stream of publications in “*Sport, Business and Management: An International Journal*” (see the special issues edited by Dolles and Söderman, 2011a, 2012, 2014; Senaux, 2013; Winand and Dolles, 2015). The anthology on “Sport as a Business” (Dolles and Söderman, 2011b) and the “Handbook of Research on Sport and Business” (Söderman and Dolles, 2013) also have also been influenced by the stimulating discussions at EURAM. In 2016 the EURAM conference will be held in Paris (June 1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>) and we hope to attract a substantial amount of high quality full-paper submissions again. As for myself, I received a professorship in international Business at the University of Gothenburg, School of Business Economics and Law (Gothenburg, Sweden) in 2009 and was appointed in 2012 at Molde University College, Specialized University in Logistics (Molde, Norway) to become the first professor in Sports

Management in Scandinavia, with the task to further develop the Bachelor and Master's programmes in sports and event management at Molde University College.

### Outlook -advancing sport management research

Sport has variously developed across the world as a ceremony, a celebration, a physical pursuit, a leisure activity and increasingly a business, as argued by us (Dolles and Söderman, 2013). In the world of contemporary sport we are able to claim that at its elite end at least, sport's management is complex because the product it delivers to participants and fans is so idiosyncratic. This claim has to be accompanied by the view that while professional sport is in large just another form of business, it has a range of special features that demand a customised set of practices to ensure its effective operation. Traditionally, the major difference between business and sport was the importance of profit and return-on-investment for business, and the preference for winning and on-field success for sport. While it is clear that winning is sovereign in professional sport, there is a growing recognition that revenue and profits, and the resources that money attracts, are the keys to successful performance. While corporatisation of sport over recent years may have resolved the dilemma of how to balance profits against performance, no such solution has been secured for the issue of quality in sport.

The ambiguous nature of sport quality is exemplified in the ways in which different stakeholders approach it and the striking differences how sport is organized and governed across the globe. For example, many club officials and die-hard fans view quality primarily in terms of consistent winning, whereas regulators and the run-of-the-mill sports follower are more likely to perceive quality in terms of competitive balance and outcome uncertainty. But does the North American perspective on administering competitive balance fit with the system of open-leagues in Europe? Added to this ambiguity is the complicating fact that the core sport product is now surrounded by services and merchandise that are used to provide a more consistent and multi-faceted sport experience. Finally, professional sport today is embedded in a fundamental structural and operational paradox which complicates its management at every strategic turn. It arises out of the fact that sport's commercial progress and subsequent corporatisation is a two-edged sword. While on one hand it allows sport to tap into new markets by changing its shape and features, on the other hand it fractures all those traditions that made it attractive to fans in the first place. While professional sport is still both similar to and different from so-called conventional business, their key features and contextual weightings are changing. Both business and sport are concerned with widening their market share, building profits, and strengthening the brand.

Professional sport has undergone significant structural and operational change over the last decade, however it still has enough idiosyncratic features to justify a customised set of management practices. At one extreme, even at its most hard-core professional level, sport has been re-organised as a not-for profit cultural practice that delivers a range of memorable experiences and social benefits that the commercial for-profit sector under-supplies. At the other extreme it is built around a set of market-driven forces that make it just

another product situated in a competitive marketplace delivering just another package of ephemeral, banal and for the most part, forgettable, experiences to its customers. At the same time, and under both of these extreme structural circumstances there are still a number of idiosyncratic features that give sport its special character, and that reveal themselves in both the profit and non-profit sector. To conclude: First, a failure to recognise sport as a business will produce poor performance, and second, management strategies that gives no recognition to its special features, will fail to deliver optimal outcomes (Dolles and Söderman, 2013).

The prevailing appeal of sport is such that a wide range of institutions, organisations, bodies, clubs, teams and individuals are both affected by and involved in sport. As for the role that academics and researchers can play in this development there are clear opportunities for them to make a contribution (ibid.). The need to think in a creative, value-adding, innovative way is one way in which academics can help, as well as in providing opinion leadership on the subject of managing complexity. Harnessing the power of mobile media among elite professional sports as well as other levels of sport poses some interesting questions that scholars can help to answer. This may include how phenomena such as social networking and viral marketing can contribute to the organisational and commercial development of sport. Underpinning these are issues pertaining to the ways in which customers – fans, spectators or otherwise – actually consume sport and what motivates them to do so. As the sport market fragments into a multitude of clear and distinct segments, the need for customer understanding will grow. The closeness to market that this implies is something that academic researchers are particularly adept at achieving.

Sport management researchers must devote time to understand the mega-shifts that increasingly appear to characterise the changing nature of sport and its environment. The growth of social networking, for instance, is something that has taken many organisations aback. The role of sport in addressing gender issues needs to be addressed in research. In recent years, there has been a significant shift from advocating for “gender equity in sport” towards using “sport for gender equity and personal development” (Swiss Academy for Development, 2013). Sport has the transformative potential to challenge or alter gender norms.

Further, important product or management innovations might be one of reasons why to lose the competitive edge in sport. While the expected positive effects of innovation strategies are well documented and supported empirically within industry and services research in the field of innovation and sports is still very limited; just consider the development and implementation of enhanced sports products (like the later banned performance-aiding swim suits as used during the Beijing Olympic Games in swimming), aspects of the ‘dark-side’ of sports (like using drugs and innovative ways of drug-testing), techno-doping ( the South African runner Oscar Pistorius who uses carbon fibre prostheses has blurs the line between the Olympics and Paralympics. He took part in the London Olympics, where he reached the 400 meters semi-finals, but his critics argue he had an unfair advantage because his prostheses are lighter than human legs and have been optimized for running on all surfaces), the development of sporting facilities (like wave-crushing lane ropes to diminish and deflect waves in the pool, which helps swimmers to swim faster as they do not need to battle

the waves), or the development of new forms of sports (like long-boarding, kite-surfing, ski halfpipe, ski slopestyle or T20 cricket).

Being able to predict such developments, identifying how sport organizations should respond, and the way in which technology can help to accentuate and enhance the fundamental features of sport can become a route through which researchers are able to make significant empirical and theoretical contributions to the advancement of sport management research.

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