# SWEDISH ELITE SPORT

## External evaluation

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Rasmus K. Storm,
Troels Kollerup Jensen &
Klaus Nielsen

Idrættens
Analyseinstitut

Danish Institute for Sports Studies

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**Authors**
Rasmus K. Storm, Troels Kollerup Jensen and Klaus Nielsen

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Frederiksgade 78B, 2.
DK-8000 Aarhus C
T: +45 3266 1030
E: idan@idan.dk
W: www.idan.dk

# Content

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Finally, we hope that we – through the production of this report – have been able to meet the high expectations that the stakeholders in Swedish elite sport have expressed towards our study in the sessions we have had with (many) of them.

We wish the best for the Swedish elite sport system and hope our analysis and recommendations are useful.

The Danish Institute for Sports Studies

Rasmus K. Storm, Klaus Nielsen, and Troels Kollerup Jensen.

# Executive summary

## Introduction

Major changes in national elite sport systems most often happen when a country suffers what is perceived as disastrously poor results in the Olympic Games, or when it wins a bid to host an Olympic Games. The failed Swedish bid to host the Winter Olympics in 2030 has removed one factor that could have facilitated major changes. Further, Sweden is performing well in international elite sport. There is no crisis in this respect. It may therefore not be the best time to reform Swedish elite sport.

However, there are signs of decline in many sports, and compared to its Nordic neighbours in Norway and Denmark, Swedish competitiveness is declining. In many respects, Sweden is underperforming and has the potential to do better in elite sport. Other small and medium-sized countries with similar societal and cultural backgrounds and of similar sizes are clearly outperforming Sweden. These countries, including New Zealand and the Netherlands, have developed elite sport systems that seem better equipped to cope with the challenges emanating from sharpened competition and an increased number of countries investing considerable sums in elite sport internationally.

Recently, the Swedish Olympic Committee (SOK) and the Swedish Sports Confederation (RF) have taken initiatives to improve the situation. The consensus around #elitidrott2030 is promising. A pledge for increased government funding is linked to an 8-point strategy with explicit performance goals. This is a clear step forward, but merely an initial step. It could be the first stage of the development of a system in accordance with what international research has identified as a 'best practice' elite sport system. However, many difficult decisions are waiting, and the process can easily be derailed when entrenched vested interests are challenged.

## The purpose of this study

This study is commissioned by the Swedish Research Council for Sport Science on behalf of the Swedish Government to conduct a comprehensive academic analysis of the overall conditions and prerequisites regarding Swedish elite sport. The main questions of the project are as follows:

1. How can the Swedish elite sport system be characterised, and in what ways does it differ from the corresponding systems in Denmark, Norway, and Finland?
2. Is the Swedish elite sport system efficient compared to the other Nordic countries regarding international elite sport success in relevant disciplines?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Swedish elite sport system in relation to its ability to conduct a long-term competitive and sustainable elite sport operation?

The conceptual framework of the study is inspired by the international SPLISS study (De Bosscher et al., 2006, 2015) with an account of the features of elite sport systems separated

into nine 'pillars' (funding, governance, mass participation, talent identification and development, training facilities, coach provision and coach development, athletic and post-athletic career support, access to national and international competitions, and scientific research). While Sweden is doing well on some of the pillars of elite sport systems – particularly regarding mass participation (pillar 3) – the country lags in relation to several other pillars covered in this study.

## Results

One of the critical factors is the lack of resources resulting from a relatively low level of targeted governmental financial support for elite sport – but also because of relatively modest sponsorship funding. With respect to targeted financial support for elite sport, Sweden has fewer resources available than Norway and Denmark. This does not mean that the support for elite sport in Sweden is negligible. There is much indirect financial support, for instance, state funding of sports facilities and the national sport gymnasium (idrottsgymnasium) structure.

However, the direct financial support for the development of many of the pillars of the elite sport system is relatively low compared to other similar countries. A redistribution of already existing resources may certainly contribute to improving the situation. However, significant increased funding of elite sport in Sweden is crucial if Sweden is to sustain or improve its current level of international competitiveness in elite sports.

Even so, the funding issue is not the most critical factor. There is no clear link between finance and performance. The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, and Denmark have improved the international competitiveness of their elite sport systems without a massive injection of new resources. The most crucial factor behind these success stories is not increased funding but rather better governance and organisation of the system, leading to more efficient use of resources. This may also be a prerequisite for increased funding from both the government and private sponsors.

Internationally, there is widespread consensus among practitioners (leaders, performance directors, coaches, specialist support providers, athletes) that centralisation, or efficient collaboration that secures the same effects, is what is needed. This view is shared among almost all the interviewed Swedish stakeholders who find that the existing organisational structure is not fit for purpose. Almost everybody complains about the 'double command system', the lack of clarity, the inefficiencies, and even the 'turf wars' between the organisations. Few defend the system, and no one would presumably create such a system if they could start from scratch.

It is a precondition for a well-functioning elite sport system that it is governed by an independent professional organisation capable of developing and implementing clear criteria for elite sport support in the short term as well as building and nurturing the system for the future. Successful elite sport organisations have clear mandates from either the government or the sports organisations, guaranteeing independence or arm's length relations.

Such structures can be initiated top-down through legislation as in Denmark or bottom-up through cooperation between sports organisations as in Norway, New Zealand, and the Netherlands. Experience has shown that different paths may lead to similarly efficient outcomes.

It is clear from the evidence collected in this study that there is widespread consensus about what is needed. The problem is not where to go, although some of the specifics are of course controversial, but rather how to get there from where we are. The path to a successful development of a more fit-for-purpose elite sport system is complicated by various factors in the Swedish context. There are forces of inertia, vested interests, and specific concerns that make it difficult to move from the existing unsatisfactory situation to a better future. There is also a worry that a future organisational solution may clash with the principle of organisational autonomy. The arm's length principle is strongly embedded in the functioning of voluntary organisations in the Nordic countries, and perhaps strongest in Sweden.

There are other concerns founded on strong ideological norms, which may complicate the development of a suitable elite sport model. Egalitarian norms are strongly embedded in the Swedish welfare state and society. This influences sport in many ways. For instance, it may hinder the implementation of one of the policies that characterise more successful elite sport systems – an allocation of funding, which is guided by efficiency in relation to explicit performance goals. This involves a level of selectivity towards support for sports with better prospects of success. This runs counter to traditional principles of financial support guided by membership numbers.

Further, the legitimacy of elite sport is contested in Sweden, in contrast to Denmark and especially Norway. Elite sport success does not seem to matter that much in Sweden compared to most other countries. This is linked to what may be titled 'lagom' nationalism.

This is the reason why a reform of the elite sport system needs to be primarily about organisational issues, reallocation of funds already available for elite sport and only rather modest new funding. Requests for increased funding for elite sport are probably still not politically acceptable if they involve less funding for sport for all.

Anyway, it is difficult to achieve significant improvements in relation to the other pillars of the elite sport system without a substantial influx of new funding. Comparisons with other countries indicate that there is a potential for increased sponsorship funding with a better-organised sponsorship and media strategy.

One of the areas where increased funding is crucial is in improving the socio-economic situation of athletes. Superstars in many individual sports do not have any problems in this respect, and contract players in football and ice hockey are also well off. However, the majority of Swedish elite athletes find themselves in an unenviable socio-economic situation with low and uncertain incomes, being dependent on economic and other support from

wives/husbands or parents and having to do without contributions to pension plans and social security as seen in normal employment contracts.

The prospective elite athletes are well catered for until they complete the secondary education level. If they succeed in entering the top-level elite in an Olympic sport that receives individual funding as part of the 'Topp och Talang' programme, they will receive support. However, there is a gap of several years where no support is available apart from limited support from federations, clubs, and personal sponsorships.

Most interviewees mentioned coaches and coach development as another important area, in which Sweden is lagging behind other countries. Improvements in this respect are crucial for strengthening the international competitiveness of the Swedish elite sport system. Sweden has many well-qualified coaches up to the level of idrottsgymnasier and to some extent at the club level as well. However, there are too few elite sport coaches, and many of them are not well-qualified.

Often, they lack a strong educational background and have little knowledge of sports science. The fundamental problem is that the careers of Swedish elite sport coaches are precarious. There are no secure career paths, and the socio-economic prospects of coaches are uncertain. There is a lack of incentives to choose a career as an elite sport coach.

There is widespread agreement that Sweden is also lagging behind the other Nordic countries in relation to scientific sports research, sports science support, and innovation in elite sport. Generally, coordination with academia is limited. Unlike other leading countries, Sweden does not have elite sport research centres integrated with national training centres apart from the cooperation between the university and the winter sports centre in Östersund.

Training facilities are generally of high quality in Sweden. In particular, the availability of good quality training facilities that are open for everybody is very good. The location of elite training facilities is more problematic. There are national training centres in some sports, but this is only supplemented with a well-coordinated regional structure in a few sports such as athletics. There is a well-functioning winter sports centre in Östersund. However, in summer sports there are no cross-sports centralised national training centres similar to Olympiatoppen in Norway or the High-Performance Training Centre in Finland. This means a lack of cross-sports learning processes that contribute significantly to the strength of the Norwegian elite sport system.

RF has a development centre in Bosön, which has the potential to function as an important training centre with high-quality specialist expertise in sports physiology, medicine, and psychology as well as testing expertise and equipment. However, the training facilities are rather basic and are not used much for training camps, which was part of the original rationale for the centre. The reason is partly the location and the lack of specialist training facilities, but mostly that it is expensive to stay there. A vicious cycle seems to make Bosön increasingly marginal and less relevant for Swedish elite sport. A significant injection of

resources is needed to turn the tables and initiate virtuous cycles. In the absence of this, the alternative is a reformulation of its purpose as well as a reallocation of resources satisfying elite sport needs.

It is the impression from the interviews and available materials for this study that talent recruitment and talent development function well in Sweden. It is linked to the strong base of grassroot sport in Sweden. One of the strengths of the Swedish system is the national sports gymnasium (RIG) structure. The structure is well-established and well-funded. The number of young athletes taking their secondary education at RIGs is high, also compared to similar institutions in other Nordic countries and beyond. However, the RIG model could function better from the perspective of the international competitiveness of Swedish elite sport.

### The Swedish performance output

The study includes a detailed account of the output of the Swedish elite sport system in terms of performance in international competitions. This covers Summer and Winter Olympics and Paralympics as well as the major team sports and individual sports. The Swedish elite sport system is still capable of producing medallists in many sports and disciplines in the Olympics and other major championships. However, some sports that did well in the past are no longer competitive internationally, and there are fewer Olympic sports with medal potential than previously. Some of the most successful individual sports, most prominently tennis, have experienced a momentous decline.

In most sports, Sweden was traditionally clearly ahead of the other Nordic countries and, in most sports, challenged mainly by Finland. The Finnish challenge has faded away, but the gap between Sweden on one side and Norway and Denmark on the other, has closed, and in many sports where Sweden was previously dominant, it is now second or third best among the Nordic countries.

This is also the case in many team sports. Sweden was previously dominant at the world level and clearly the best Nordic country in men's ice hockey and men's handball, but has now been surpassed by Finland and Denmark, respectively. Sweden was also until the 1980s the undisputed leading Nordic country in men's football but has since been challenged/surpassed by Denmark. The Swedish ice hockey team has not done well recently but has such a strong basis in Sweden that this crisis may well be a temporary blip.
On the other hand, the women's ice hockey team has lost ground in a way that seems more permanent. In parasport, Sweden is leading among the Nordic countries, but the performance of all Nordic countries is worse in parasport compared to able-bodies sport. There is an obvious potential for improvement in Paralympic sports.

When relevant, the Swedish system and its performance are discussed and compared to other relevant nations – mainly the Nordic countries – Denmark, Norway, and Finland – to understand strengths and weaknesses that potentially can be addressed to keep or improve Swedish international performance. In addition, a dedicated comparative section follows the analysis of the Swedish system. This section sums up the relevant information

presented through the report to flesh out specific strengths and weaknesses of the Nordic nations.

## Recommendations

In summary, this study of the current situation of elite sport in Sweden leads to the following list of recommendations:

- Sweden should adopt a 'best practice' organisational structure – either by copying one or a combination of the successful, centralised models (such as the ones in Norway, Denmark, and New Zealand) – or, if this is rejected as it has previously been the case, a collaborative, coordinated model. This could take the form of a strict implementation of #elitidrott2023. However, this requires a level of agreement and institutional entrepreneurship and an absence of 'turf wars', which has not previously characterised the Swedish elite sport organisations.

- In any case, a professional elite sport organisation with operational responsibility for the support and development of top-level elite sports seems to be a precondition for a successful elite sport system in the contemporary and future situation. Close links to applied sports science and national training centres, as well as a level of selectivity in terms of support of specific sports, are among the predominant characteristics of such an organisation.

- If a collaborative, coordinated model is preferred in Sweden, the operational professionalism of the elite sport organisation must be secured, as well as a well-functioning collaborative structure, for instance by means of a monitoring board with overall responsibility. It may strengthen the legitimacy of the elite sport organisation if the stakeholders in Swedish elite sport have an overall say in the organisation. In addition to representatives from the sports organisations, the board could also include representatives from relevant NGOs and perhaps also a representative from the ministry responsible for sports, linked to possible dedicated new funding for elite sport.

- The organisational location of such an organisation could be within RF, similar to the situation in New Zealand. Alternatively, it could be part of SOK, or it could be a formally independent organisation. This is not important. The crucial things are the establishment of (i) a professional organisation with operational responsibility for elite sport at the top level, and (ii) a structure that facilitates collaboration and coordination with the general sports system. Of course, the consequences for SOK are widely different depending on the organisational context. If the new organisation is part of RF, or if it is independent, the responsibilities of SOK will be narrowed down to organising the Swedish participation in the Olympic Games, etc. This solution resembles what has been the case in Denmark since 1993.

- Increased governmental funding is crucial, although not as important as organisational change. Such funding should be linked to a programme for strategic change,

commitment to performance goals and credible plans for matching increased government funding with increased private sponsorships. Requests for increased funding of elite sports should be linked to structural reform and reallocation of existing funds for elite sport, without reduced funding for grassroot sports.

- Increased funding for elite sport will be easier to accomplish if the legitimacy of elite sport in Sweden is increased, and if more political decision-makers become interested in or even committed to the strengthening of elite sport. Increased legitimacy may be achieved through sustained campaigning, and clever networking may foster increased political support for elite sport.

- In accordance with existing welfare state norms, emphasis should be put on the poor socio-economic conditions of the athletes and their well-being as a strong argument for increased government funding.

- The new model should adopt a sharper selectivity in the allocation of funds between federations. This should mainly focus on Olympic sports with limited commercial potential, but it should not in principle exclude non-Olympic sports nor support for promising athletes in non-prioritised Olympic sports federations. However, support for non-Olympic sports should concentrate on sports which are particularly important in Sweden based on history, tradition, memberships or regional importance.

- Another cost-neutral initiative is the development of proper metrics for measuring performance in relation to goals. This should involve the exclusion of highly arbitrary composite measures such as 'Greatest Sporting Nations' from the official performance goals. Separate goals for Olympic and Paralympic (summer and winter) sports should be supplemented with specific goals for team sports and separate measures for non-Olympic sports. Of course, the new performance goals should be operationalised as specific metrics, which are monitored regularly.

### Additional recommendations

The following list of further recommendations is presented in a sequence of declining priority.

- Upgrading coach education and development – and improving the career paths for coaches – by systematically combining part-time employment in different contexts.

- Upgrading of sports science and practical science-based support for elite sport through long-term collaboration with and targeted funding of efforts concentrated in a limited number of universities interested in committed strategic collaboration.

- Improving the socio-economic conditions of promising athletes in the gap between the completion of their secondary education and the potential involvement in the Topp och Talang programme through individual economic support.

- Either major increased funding for Bosön to make it possible to function as an important national training centre – or reallocating the elite sport-related funding of Bosön for other purposes, possibly a new well-resourced national elite training and testing centre.

- A root and branch reorganisation of the idrottsgymnasium model. This may include a relatively small reduction of places and some savings that can be used for other ways of strengthening the elite sport system.

- Better integration of immigrants and refugees to strengthen the recruitment of new talent. Government funding of integration could be supported by targeted initiatives by sport clubs and federations.

- Widening and better coordination of practical cooperation with universities about exam postponements and similar practical measures to better facilitate studying while pursuing an elite sport career.

- Limited extra funding and a new organisational unit to strengthen Sweden's chances of hosting major championships.

# Introduction

Centrum för Idrottsforskning (CIF) has asked The Danish Institute for Sports Studies (Idan) and professor Klaus Nielsen to evaluate the Swedish elite sports system from an international perspective.

The project is commissioned by the Swedish Government to conduct a comprehensive academic analysis of the overall conditions and prerequisites regarding Swedish elite sport.

The main questions of the project are as follows:

1. How can the Swedish elite sport system be characterised, and in what ways does it differ from the corresponding sports systems in Denmark, Norway, and Finland?

2. Is the Swedish elite sport system efficient compared to the other Nordic countries when measured by international elite sport success in relevant disciplines?

3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Swedish elite sport system in relation to its ability to conduct a long-term competitive and sustainable elite sports operation?

The focus is on both Olympic and Paralympic sports – and other sports culturally relevant to Sweden.

To address the research questions, the report progresses as follows[1]: First, the analytical framework of the evaluation is presented, followed by an outline of the materials and methods used. The Swedish elite sport system is then examined following the structure laid out in the theoretical framework section.

When relevant, the Swedish system and its performance are discussed and compared to other relevant nations – mainly the Nordic countries, Denmark, Norway, and Finland – to understand strengths and weaknesses that can potentially be addressed to keep or improve Swedish international performance. In addition, a dedicated comparative section follows the analysis of the Swedish system. This section sums up all relevant information presented through the report to flesh out specific strengths and weaknesses of the Nordic nations.

In the final sections of the evaluation, results are discussed and summed up, and implications for and (potential) future perspectives of Swedish elite sport are presented together with relevant recommendations.

[1] Some parts of this report repeat text from previous works by the authors. This is mainly done in the theoretical section, which largely is a copy of the equivalent section in Storm & Nielsen (2022). Some other parts of the report are repetitions of previous works, however, reformulated using ChatGPT. This is mainly the case in the short introductions in each of the pillar sections that repeat the overall relevance of assessing the respective pillars from Storm & Nielsen (2022). Some parts of the output section also repeat text from previous studies by the authors.

Conclusions and recommendations are also summarised in the executive summary at the beginning of the report.

# Analytical framework

This evaluation uses the '**S**ports **P**olicy **F**actors **L**eading to **I**nternational **S**porting **S**uccess' (SPLISS) framework (De Bosscher et al., 2006, 2008, 2015) to structure and direct the research process and data gathering, making it the analytical foundation and theoretical underpinning of the study.

However, the time constraints of the evaluation have prevented the collection of data on the same scale as the full SPLISS programme, which utilises an extensive data approach to contrast selected elite sport systems internationally.

If fully implemented, the SPLISS framework would encompass information on 96 Critical Success Factors and 750 subfactors. Further, it would include insights from athletes, coaches, and performance directors regarding the specific elite sport system under examination, a scope that exceeds the resources available for this evaluation.

Nevertheless, the framework, along with its pillar structure, is employed to organise and guide the work, connecting the gathered materials (please refer to the materials and methods section) to form a consistent image of the Swedish elite sport system and its performance. The chosen approach offers several advantages.

First, the SPLISS framework stands as a state-of-the-art and frequently utilised framework for understanding how countries achieve international sporting success. Second, the authors of this report have successfully applied the framework in the evaluation of elite sports in Denmark (Storm et al., 2016), Finland (Storm & Nielsen, 2022) and Greenland (Storm & Nielsen, 2023). It has also been used specifically to look into Swedish elite sport (Norberg, 2012; Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020).

Third, the utilisation of this framework allows for the examination of structural, cultural, and societal elements that shape the Swedish elite sport system, its operations, and its performance. This approach provides a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Swedish performance compared to an evaluation that solely focuses on the organisational structure of the elite sport system.

In short, the SPLISS approach is based on the anticipation that determinants of international sporting success can be found on three distinct levels: The macro-, meso-, and micro-levels (De Bosscher et al., 2010).

Factors on the macro-level are characteristics that influence a nation's capabilities to be competitive in the global sporting arms race but are difficult to change in the short run (De Bosscher et al., 2008). Cultural aspects, societal structure, wealth, population base, and political characteristics of a nation – which affect its competitiveness in international elite sports – are such macro-level conditions that can only be changed in the long run.

However, these factors are essential to building national medal capabilities. According to De Bosscher et al. (2006) and Storm and Nielsen (2010), they account for roughly 50% of the differences between the medal portfolios of nations.

Factors on the meso- and micro-level are determinants that can explain the success not captured by macro-level factors. At the micro-level, the athletes' immediate environment and personal characteristics affect medal potential. At the meso-level, the specific characteristics of a nation's elite sports policies affect the capabilities. In the SPLISS model, the meso-level factors or pillars comprise:

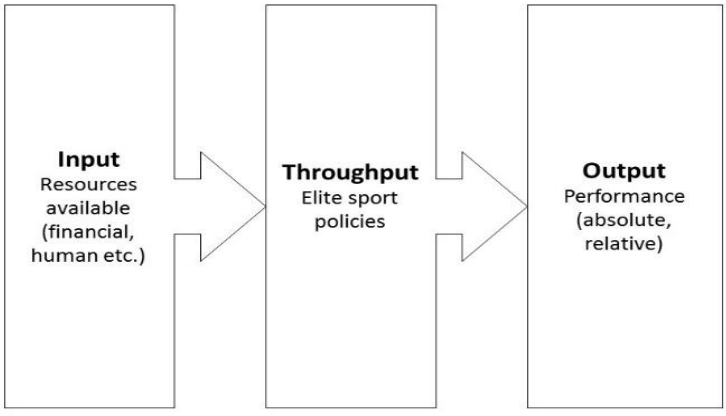
- Pillar 1: Direct national financial input into the system
- Pillar 2: Organisation and structure of elite sports policies in the nation
- Pillar 3: National mass sports participation levels and foundation
- Pillar 4: The national talent identification and development systems
- Pillar 5: The national support of athletes' career and post-career
- Pillar 6: Training facilities
- Pillar 7: Coaching provision and coach(ing) development
- Pillar 8: Access to national and international competitions of athletes
- Pillar 9: Scientific research programmes on and innovation of elite sport

According to De Bosscher et al. (2015), the importance of the meso-policy level has been increasing in relation to international sporting success over the years.

## Assessing the Swedish elite sport system

Through an examination and assessment of the macro-, meso-, and micro-level elements of the Swedish elite sport system, a unified image of the system can be constructed and subsequently contrasted with international trends and other countries. For the particular evaluation of the system, the report adheres to the model displayed in figure 1.

**Figure 1: Model for assessing the performance of the Swedish elite sport system**




Source: The model is reproduced from Storm et al. (2016)

As can be seen, the success of nations in international elite sports is established when an input that comes in the form of different resources (for example, at the macro-level in the form of societal wealth and the national population base or as micro-level attributes such as talented athletes), is improved by throughputs into output, which is prizes or medals won in international tournaments. The throughputs of the model consist of the national (elite) sports policies in a given nation and are found at the meso-level.

The report is structured around figure 1, where input (at various levels) is examined first, followed by analyses of throughput and output.

## Limitations of applying the SPLISS approach

Despite the apparent advantages of the SPLISS approach, some limitations need to be mentioned here.

First, it is important to stress that the SPLISS approach focuses on the Olympic Games and the factors that determine success in these disciplines. While it is likely that the factors behind success in other disciplines are similar, the problem with using this framework is that it tends to tone down organisational matters and challenges – and sports – outside the Olympic programme.

Further, and to a large extent, the SPLISS approach does not consider the internationally most commercialised sports – for example, soccer.

These issues constitute some limitations in this report concerning the scope and focus, and due to resource constraints, we have not been able to correct them much. However, we look into a broader set of disciplines in the output section to understand Swedish performance. Further, we aim to include issues related to both commercial sports and minor disciplines when relevant throughout the analysis. More on this later.

Second, it's vital to recognise that the SPLISS framework, although highly beneficial for obtaining a unified comprehension of contemporary elite sport systems' functioning, falls short in adequately considering contextual and historical factors (Henry et al., 2020).

Elite sport systems are shaped within historical, cultural, and national contexts, and these aspects must be acknowledged to comprehend them and direct future progress. Thus, we begin by outlining some macro-level background developments and cultural issues that are relevant for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the Swedish system before we proceed to analyse its contemporary input, throughput, and output.

The macro-level examinations together with the analysis of each of the nine pillars at the meso-level follow the presentation of the materials and methods employed in this evaluation.

# Materials and methods

## Desk research and literature review

The project is mainly carried out using existing materials, and most of the evaluation is therefore produced as desk research and by reviewing existing (research) literature and data.

The main sources used are published (academic) book chapters and journal papers on the Swedish elite sport system, research reports, policy papers and governmental reports. The literature used spans over the most recent decades to make the most updated analysis possible.

However, for the brief overall historical section examining the historical development of the Swedish elite sport system, sources going further back are included. The complete list of literature used can be found in the literature references list at the back of the report.

## Online interviews

In addition to using published materials, 12 online interviews (using MS Teams) have been conducted to get deeper insights into the Swedish elite sport system. The interviewees include experts on international elite sport and stakeholders in Swedish elite sport. The duration of the interviews was between 60 to 90 minutes, and close to all were recorded and used as background information for the analysis.

Persons cited directly in this report have cross-checked and approved their citations. All interviews were conducted from September to December 2023. A complete list of all online interviews can be seen in appendix 1.

## Research visit to Sweden

In addition to the online interviews, a range of interviews with key stakeholders in the Swedish elite sport system (11 interviews with 23 persons in total) were conducted during a five-day research visit to Sweden from 23 to 27 October 2023.

Some of the interviews had a workshop form with two to five stakeholders from or related to the Swedish elite sport system (for example, specific sports federations) and the Danish researchers as participants.

The complete programme for the research visit can be found in appendix 2. All interviews have been recorded and used as background information for the analysis. Persons cited directly in this report have cross-checked and approved their citations.

## The use of interview data in the report

Insights on the Swedish elite sport system gained from the interviews are essential information that assists the analysis in building a comprehensive understanding of relevant

issues. However, it is important to understand that as some interviewees are stakeholders in the system, their statements and argumentation are often based on specific interests. For example, when arguing that the system lacks funding or that some initiatives are necessary if Sweden is to be competitive in international elite sport in the future.

While perspectives from stakeholders are not necessarily wrong, they are often built on very particular perspectives, not always (fully) holding for closer and more objective scrutiny. At least seen through a critical academic lens, stakeholder statements must be discussed critically and dealt with appropriately in the analysis.

In this report, we aim to mark when citations or other types of statements represent stakeholders' views. We do this in three ways: First, by writing if the interviewee is a stakeholder – thereby flagging that a specific interest potentially influences the stated views. Second, by deliberately specifying in the text that the statement/citation is stated 'according to [one or another interviewee]' or that the statement/citation is 'argued by [one or another interviewee]'. Finally, when presented, we discuss the statements critically to assess what value the given statement can be given in the overall analysis. This approach should clarify how the interviews are used to form our analysis, the main conclusions, and the connected recommendations.

## Objective data

To review the performance of Swedish elite athletes (including parasport), objective data on historical results from an extensive range of Olympic and Paralympic disciplines is deployed. The data used is based on the work by Storm and Nielsen (2010), Storm, Nielsen, and Thomsen (2016), and Storm and Nielsen (2023), and updated with the most recent results in 2023. Online available data sources have assisted this work.

In order to achieve a more complete analysis of the international competitiveness of the Swedish elite sport system, these data are supplemented with data on disciplines outside the Olympic and Paralympic programme that are popular and culturally relevant in Sweden – e.g. bandy, tennis, golf, road cycling, and football (soccer).

A brief introduction to how competitiveness in international elite sport can be measured and applied to the analysis performed in this report can be found in the output section.

## The external view and its implications

The perspective in this report is explicitly the 'outside view in', which has implications for the analysis performed.

First and foremost, the research focuses on recent and contemporary problems identified in the collected data and materials. The report focuses on the overall and general problems characterising the system as a whole – as seen from the outside. It does not dig deep into details, for example, regarding sports-specific issues or historical developments (unless they are essential to the analysis and its conclusions).

Second, it is important to stress that the report emphasises overall similarities and differences across the Nordic countries. A thorough analysis of the Swedish sports system (as a whole) compared to the other relevant nations – like the Nordic countries – has previously been done by authors like Stenbacka et al. (2018) and Andersen and Ronglan (2011), who analysed Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

The findings from these published comparative studies (together with other sources) are used and updated with additional recent materials to become the most comprehensive and updated comparison. However, detailed developments and minor issues related to the Swedish situation have not received that much focus due to this prioritisation.

Connected to the above reflections, it is important to stress that the report has been prepared within resource and time constraints. The implications are that the report only presents the problems and challenges that have appeared in the data, interviews conducted, and materials (including reports and academic publications) available. Other issues not identified in the research process might exist and may be necessary to investigate and address in the future.

For example, not all sports or disciplines at an elite level in Sweden have been interviewed, and issues related to those not included are potentially not represented here. The data materials used represent only a selection of stakeholders and do not go deep into how each federation works with elite sport. This is a limitation of the evaluation. Further, athletes have not been interviewed either and issues related to their specific situation may, therefore, not have been identified appropriately.

Briefly summarised, the focus is on the most critical challenges identified in the data and materials. However, by including interviews with researchers and academic literature together with objective data and analyses of policy documents, we believe that the most critical problems and challenges for Swedish elite sport are addressed in the analysis.

## Paralympic sport

The evaluation considers Paralympic sport as an integrated part of the analysis. As expected, the evaluation shows differences and similarities in how well the Swedish elite sport system supports and nurtures the development of Paralympic athletes compared to able-bodied athletes.

If the parasport situation differs from how the systems work in general, this is reported in the respective sections. The report only touches on issues identified during the data collection and analysis. Additional problems concerning Paralympic sport are not dealt with.

# Macro-level background: A brief overview of the development of the Swedish elite sport system

## Introduction

Research literature on the Swedish elite sport system, its organisational structure, foundations, and resources remains scarce (Norberg, 2012). However, some exist and supplemented with the conducted interviews, reports, and grey literature, a consistent picture can be given.

In this section, we briefly describe the overall development of the Swedish sport system and the parts dealing with elite sport. Further, we aim to understand the cultural issues that somehow constitute the foundation of the Swedish (elite) sport system and determine its functioning.

We touch briefly on organisational issues in this section only to return to look more thoroughly into that in the section dealing with pillar 2: Governance, organisation, and management of elite sport.

## Overall development of the (elite) sport system in Sweden

The sports system in Sweden is a one-pillar umbrella system consisting of all national federations (currently 72), and with mass participation/grassroots sports[2] and elite sport as part of the same organisation: The Swedish Sports Confederation (Riksidrottsförbundet (RF)) founded in 1903 (Lindroth, 1974). RF is an independent organisation aiming to develop its own policies and regulate and support Swedish sports (Skille, 2011).

RF receives significant public funding to cover its activities and redistributes a large part of it to national federations (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012). In contrast to Finland (until recently, when Finland changed its funding scheme), Denmark, and Norway, state funding has – except for some limited periods (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016) – been based on tax revenues (Skille, 2011) instead of profits from (state-controlled) gambling and lotteries (more on funding follows in the section on pillar 1: Financial investments).

The role of the RF was established as early as the 1930s and has since been progressively formalised. A regulation was created in the late 1990s, and since 2009, the RF's mission has also been regulated by the administrative law giving RF the right to develop, steer, and allocate resources in Swedish sport.

In this sense, RF can be considered a (semi-)governmental organisation with day-to-day activities controlled by a board (executive committee), which is democratically elected – biennially based on nomination from the membership federations. The responsibilities of RF are – besides administering and allocating public funds:

[2] In this report, we use 'mass participation' and 'grassroots sports' interchangeably.

> "(…) to represent voluntary and membership-based club sport in communication with authorities and service affiliated authorities, officials and the surrounding society, to support and service affiliated organisations, (…) stimulate sport development and research, coordinate social and ethical issues, lead and coordinate the anti-doping work, coordinate international cooperation, protect sport's historical legacy and to act as government authority for 51 upper secondary elite sports schools with some 1200 students in 30 sports."
>
> (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016, p. 522)

Besides managing the elite sport schools, RF runs a range of other elite sport activities, for example regional training centres – e.g. a development and training centre based in Bosön, Stockholm including research and expert support for athletes. Relevant tasks related to the education of coaches, sport managers, instructors, and leaders in the sport environment are delegated to SISU Sport Education, a non-profit support organisation, which also comprises a College of Sport and a publishing company (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012).

Working in parallel with RF – but on elite sport only – The Swedish Olympic Committee (Sveriges Olympiska Kommitté (SOK)) is the supreme authority for the Olympic movement in Sweden and consists of 38 member federations and 18 recognised federations (i.e. federations that are recognised by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) but not currently on the Olympic programme). SOK was founded in 1913.

SOK prepares and operates the Swedish participation in the Olympic Games and works to develop and keep the Olympic team competitive. It also works on talent identification and development. It is an independent organisation with its main funding coming from commercial partnerships. Further, the organisation receives public subsidies to cover costs associated with preparing and sending athletes to the Olympics (more on funding in the section on pillar 1). Today, this (public) funding is allocated to SOK through RF.

It is important to note that RF – compared to SOK – has a broad scope of activities, including the development of mass participation and grassroots sports, while SOK only focuses on elite sport – specifically Olympic sports.

SOK's focus on Olympic sports differs from – for example – Denmark, where Team Danmark (which is an independent state organisation), is also responsible for sports outside the Olympic programme (even though much focus is put on Olympic sports).[3]

The Swedish Parasport Federation and the Swedish Paralympic Committee (Svenska Parasportförbundet & Sveriges Paralympiska Kommitté) are in charge of the Paralympics, while the Swedish Deaf Sports Federation is in charge of the participation in the Deaflympics.

[3] See more on similarities and differences in organisation and management related issues across the Nordic countries later.

According to Norberg and Sjöblom (2012), up until the 1970s, elite sport development in Sweden was sporadic and mostly taken care of by the federations. In the mid-1980s, SOK took the initiative to coordinate and arrange knowledge transfer between the federations to make experiences in one sport benefit another. Further, regional training centres were established and the first Swedish strategic document on elite sport was formulated by RF.

Due to disappointing results in the Winter Olympic Games in Albertville (1992), Lillehammer (1994), and Nagano (1998) and a failed bid for hosting the Summer Olympic Games in 2004 in Stockholm (decided by the IOC in 1997 to the benefit of Athens) – a mental state of crisis had started to develop around Swedish elite sport (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012).

At that time, SOK and a range of companies had prepared a support funding programme to support athletes for the 2004 Games in case it was to be hosted in Stockholm. A critical moment materialised at the Nagano Games, where the Swedish sports minister and sponsor representatives from some Swedish companies witnessed a failed Swedish opportunity to get a medal in alpine skiing. One of the interviewed stakeholders remembers:

> "The situation was, in the Nagano Games, we had the sports minister and the chairman of the marketing company that worked for the companies [that were part of the Stockholm 2004 plan, ed.] present. And I remember that we were in the alpine course, and we had a good chance for a medal, but failed. And (…) the minister, he screamed 'We have to do something' and we, we said 'All right, we have a programme because we made it for developing the top sports, in case we had the 2004 Games [in Stockhom, ed.)', and he said 'All right, come to my office on Thursday'. And we went there, and then there was a meeting the same evening and the government said OK, we will support. And that was a breakthrough at that time. Also, these companies [behind the support programme, ed.] their chairman had challenged the minister at the same Games in Nagano, saying 'If you put in money, we put in', and that was the start of the Topp och Talang programme [top and talent programme, ed.] that we have worked with since [in SOK, ed.]".
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

Put differently: To heal the national failures, both government and industry sponsors agreed to provide funds to improve international competitiveness. The situation of experiencing repeated failures can – first and foremost – be interpreted as a societal 'dislocation' (Storm & Wagner, 2015; Wagner & Storm, 2021) demanding action to bring the crisis to rest.

Secondly, and consequently, the demanded action that came in the form of pouring in state-level funding paved the way for future earmarked state-level funds used directly for high-performance sport in Sweden. This happened despite a general Swedish ambivalence towards elite sport and a prior reluctance to provide financial support and develop elite sport policies due to Swedish norms of equality (more on this later):

> "On an overarching sports policy level it meant a breakthrough for the principle that state support can also be used directly to strengthen the international competitiveness of Swedish elite sports."
>
> (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012, p. 75)

Put differently – and as mentioned earlier – the crisis created a decisive moment for Swedish elite sport, which ended up benefitting the system and pushing towards further institutionalisation. One of the interviewed stakeholders argues:

> "It was the first time ever that the government decided to put some money into elite sports. And the irony was that it was a social democratic government who historically and traditionally have found it very difficult to talk about elite, not just in sport, but as a whole."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

It is not entirely correct that it was the first time the Swedish government decided to spend money directly on elite sport. It happened already in connection with the Olympics in 1912 in Stockholm, where significant state-level funding was invested. Further, since the 1970s, state-level funding has been provided to Swedish upper-secondary sport schools (idrottsgymnasier), which will be touched upon later (Sjöblom & Fahlén, 2010).

What the interviewee intends to argue is that this is the first time in (late) modern history that the state earmarked state grants for direct support of elite athletes. However, compared to Denmark, where public (state-level) funding was provided with the establishment of Team Danmark already in 1984 (Ibsen et al., 2010), it is reasonable to argue that the political will in Sweden to allocate financial support directly and deliberately to elite sport development at the highest level came later.

The focus on supporting elite sport directly has, at least, been more pronounced in Denmark and with a clearer intent to increase international performance. Especially following the turn of the millennium (Storm, 2012).

The most recent reform of Swedish elite sport was decided in 2009 and included increased and earmarked state funding – lottery money from the Swedish national gambling company ('Svenska Spel') – further underpinning the system (Norberg, 2012).

Three main points are highlighted from a study of this reform. First, the reform aided the awareness and knowledge regarding Swedish elite sport, how it is run, and the structural conditions it rests upon. Second, the funding that followed the reform gave an increased financial input into Swedish elite sport reaching its highest level. Third, it forced the stakeholders of Swedish elite sport to cooperate more and coordinate their efforts. In total, this can be interpreted as another step in the development and institutionalisation of the system.

It is important, however, to stress that since the end of 2012, there has been no direct earmarked state-level funding for elite sport in Sweden besides those funds given to national

A-team activities, which are directed to SOK via RF. Since 2012, SOK has run its high-performance programme [Topp och Talang-program, ed.] with commercial money only. One of the interviewed stakeholders argues:

> "The Swedish Government never since 1998 to 2004 directed governmental money directly to top sports. From 2009, the government supported after a special decision via Svenska Spel for a period of three years. So, the history of direct financial support and the importance of top sports is not really there. Recently, the confederation [RF, ed.] put their foot in the door in the [Governmental, ed.] budget for 2024 asking for 100 million [SEK, ed.] because of all these reasons [outlined in the #elitidrott2030 plan, ed] and we will see what happens with that".
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

## The question of performance goals in Swedish elite sport

While the elements contained in the 2009 reform represent clear improvements of the Swedish system in the late 2000s, Norberg and Sjöblom (2012) point to the absence of clear goals for the programme as one of its weaknesses.

Today, there are still no overall state-sanctioned goals for Swedish elite sport performance. In both Sweden and the other Nordic countries covered in this report, governments have generally abstained from setting clear development goals in relation to international competitiveness.

In Denmark, the Ministry of Culture (e.g. Danish Ministry of Culture, 2022) has for many years had performance goals written down in an agreement with Team Danmark directing the work of the organisation.

However, the performance goals are currently very broad and vaguely formulated covering a range of inter-related goals such as athlete well-being, talent development, and support, and Team Danmark must work to ensure that the Danish elite sport environment is in a world-class position in selected parameters. The situation is in this respect very similar to the historical Swedish one in regard to overall policy and performance targets.

In the Nordic countries, it is mainly the organisations working in the elite sport system in the respective nations that have put up specific performance goals based on their ambitions.

For example, in Finland, the goal was to become the best Nordic country in 2020. More specific goals were set in the 2017-2020 strategic plan developed by the Finish Olympic Committee where the targets were ten medals in the Olympic Games, ten medals in the Paralympic Games and one team sport qualified for the Tokyo Summer Olympics [in 2020(1), ed.].

However, no formal evaluation of these performance goals has been carried out by any official body in Finland. Most importantly, no rewards or sanctions were imposed in relation

to the targets and therefore no steering or management was implemented to correct undesired developments or direct them in any specific direction (Storm & Nielsen, 2022).
The absence of clear, politically set targets that are evaluated against performance is also the case in Sweden, as mentioned above. However, there is some monitoring of factors relevant to elite sport. Centrum för idrottsforskning (CIF) has recently reported on Swedish elite sport (Centrum för Idrottsforskning, 2023) including indicators on talent development, costs on national A-team activities, and the number of medals awarded to Swedish athletes in international tournaments.

Further, CIF has over the years produced annual reports on various issues related to sport – for example on the effect of COVID-19 (e.g. Centrum för idrottsforskning, 2022), on good governance (e.g. Centrum för idrottsforskning, 2021), and on participation in grassroots sports among Swedish youth (e.g. Centrum för Idrottsforskning, 2020).

The reports have included sections on Swedish elite sport and international competitiveness. In the 2010-2017 period, CIF monitored the medal capabilities of Swedish athletes specifically (Centrum för idrottsforskning, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018).

Still, policy implications of this monitoring have over the years appeared to be relatively absent. It should be mentioned, though, that recent developments include some overall performance targets related to Swedish competitiveness formulated in the #elitidrott2030 plan (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020) that was decided at the RF general assembly in 2021. The performance targets, which can be seen as an answer to the missing overall policy goals pointed to earlier, include future goals for Sweden to reach:

- top 5 as a Winter Olympic nation
- top 20 as a Summer Olympic nation
- top 20 as a Paralympic nation, summer, and winter
- top 10 in the global ranking, 'Greatest Sporting Nation'.

Further, according to one of the interviewees, SOK has put up targets for Swedish elite sport to signal ambition related to the overall strategic goals.

We will get back to how well Sweden performs on these targets in the output section and discuss the implications of the recent developments related to the #elitidrott2023 plan and the associated goal setting in the coming sections. Here, we will only note that despite these recent developments, the formulation of overall performance targets related to elite sport in Sweden has been vague, as one of the interviewed stakeholders argues:

> "There is no ambition at all at the political level related to Sweden being a good (elite) sport nation."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

## The autonomy of the sports system

There are many potential explanations related to the general absence of overall and politically sanctioned performance targets in Swedish elite sport, one of them being the strong autonomy of the sports sector that generally characterises its relation to the rest of Swedish society.

According to Norberg and Sjöblom (2012), this autonomy is an institutionalised feature of Swedish sports policy, with the political system accepting that the sports system and its stakeholders, to a large extent, have the responsibility of dealing with its own affairs without (much) external interference. In this setting, politicians should not intervene and mainly provide funding, leaving the sports system to itself. Setting performance-related steering targets is largely inconsistent with this.

According to one of the interviewed researchers, it is because of the institutionalised autonomy of the system that no one inside the sports system has argued that overall performance goals should be set politically, even if it meant additional funds from the state. The problem is double bounded. It represents a deadlock and makes reforms difficult – besides explaining why no clear performance goals exist.

On the one hand, the sports system does not want interference (but autonomy) and fears that if politicians are getting ambitions on behalf of the sports system (including elite sport) – or the sports system demands that the politicians should care more and put up ambitions and additional funding – it could lead to politicians setting policy goals that the system then needs to meet in a way it does not agree on – or that are not in its best interest.

On the other hand, the political system respects the autonomy of the sports system and does not interfere or put up strict performance targets. In some sense there is an ambivalence towards change on both sides: Inside the (elite) sport system because of the wish for autonomy and the fear of intervention if the elite sport system demands more money, and in the political system because of the respect for the system's autonomy.

The consequence of this double-bound ambivalence is that it somehow conserves the situation and the elite sport system because existing powerful stakeholders fear that if demands are imposed from the outside, it could potentially have negative consequences for them.

Due to the voting system in RF, which is related to the membership sizes of the federations, the largest federations are in control and are not interested in any reforms that could potentially change that situation, according to several of the interviewed stakeholders and researchers.

Another explanatory factor related to the missing performance targets is the above-mentioned Swedish ambivalence towards elite sport, which is founded on societal norms of equality. Recognising the complex influence of such factors is crucial for understanding the Swedish system, guiding its future advancement, and overcoming its weaknesses. Therefore, it is relevant to examine overarching historical and cultural factors that have

influenced the role and legitimacy of elite sport in Swedish society, and in the coming section, we investigate these cultural issues.

After our examination, we will delve into a detailed analysis of the Swedish system's current components, including its inputs, the throughput pillars, and the output it can produce. In these sections, especially in the section on pillar 2, we will aim to supplement the overall cultural and historical developments examination – outlined in the coming section – with additional insights into power struggles to give a coherent understanding of the Swedish elite sport system, its strengths and weaknesses.

## Cultural issues: The impact of prominence and legitimacy of elite sport in Sweden

It is clear from the interviews, the literature, and the materials available for this evaluation that cultural issues play a role in how Swedish elite sport is managed and nurtured. The system is – as elite sport systems in other nations – embedded in a social and cultural context (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010) affecting its functioning and how the system emphasises different overall goals (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012; Storm & Nielsen, 2022).

Specific cultural aspects related to how elite sport is legitimised, positioned, and culturally approached have consequences in Sweden – as is the case in the other Nordic countries (Ronglan, 2015) included for comparison.

In the following, we limit ourselves to delving into two interconnected traits: 1) The egalitarian and decommodifying welfare state norms characteristic of Swedish society and 2) the 'Lagom nationalism' we identify as being central to the cultural backdrop on which the elite sport system is developed.

### Egalitarian norms of the Swedish welfare state and society

Swedish society, deeply rooted in (social democratic) egalitarian values, places a significant emphasis on creating an environment where every individual is treated equally and has the same rights and opportunities. This egalitarian ethos is not just a cultural or societal sentiment but is deeply embedded in the institutions, income distribution, and policies of the country (Bergh, 2014).

According to Svanborg-Sjövall (2014), there is a harmonious blend of egalitarianism with a liberal focus on self-determination in Sweden. This means that while the Swedish welfare state strives to ensure that everyone starts on an equal footing, it also respects and promotes the individual's right to make choices about their own lives.

The manifestation of these norms can be seen in the Swedish welfare state programmes. They are not just about providing a safety net for the vulnerable and people incapable of caring for themselves – even though it is one of the most important components of the welfare state (Björnberg & Latta, 2007). They are designed to ensure that every person,

regardless of their background, has equal opportunities to prosper and obtain a meaningful and fulfilling life (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012).

This includes access to quality education, healthcare, social services, and – related to the issues dealt with in this evaluation – sport facilities and activities. 'Meaningful leisure', a buzzword dominating the political sphere from 1946 to the late 1970s, is seen to create healthy and educated democratic citizens (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016). Significant public funding was given in that period to push such a development.

The welfare state, in this context, acts as a levelling tool, aiming to minimise disparities in wealth, health, or opportunities. Obtaining gender equality – especially in the job market – is part of this welfare state scheme (Esping-Andersen, 1990b; Lundberg & Mark, 2001).

Furthermore, the Swedish welfare model is often lauded for its comprehensive nature. From early childhood education to elderly care, the state aims to support its citizens at every stage of their lives. It is not just about assisting but about ensuring that every Swedish citizen has the tools and opportunities they need to realise themselves in the way they choose independently.

Sport has a significant function in this egalitarian welfare state paradigm. However, it is not the role of elite sport that is at the core of the system (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012). Rather, grassroots sport and mass participation is seen as an element in achieving general welfare among the Swedish population:

> "It must always be remembered that (…) embedded in the Swedish psyche is the idea that sport is, first of all, a means of maintaining physical well-being."
>
> (Bairner, 2001, p. 150)

Another – and closely connected – characteristic of the Swedish sport system is the high level of public financial support at local and national levels. In short, sport is to contribute to physical and mental health and the democratic development and fostering of Swedish youth (Andersson & Carlsson, 2009).

In many other nations, typically used arguments for public support for elite sport are that it contributes to various means such as national pride, tourism, or job creation because international sporting success improves the image of the nation (Storm & Jakobsen, 2020, 2024). This is not – at least to the same degree as in other nations – the case in Sweden.

> "As an illustrative example, the regulation that regulates the state support for sports lacks any writing on elite sports, instead one can read that the subsidies must promote public health, gender equality and democratic values."
>
> (Bjärsholm & Norberg, 2021, p. 4)

Therefore, sport for all values have been dominating Swedish sport since the beginning of the twentieth century (Sjöblom & Fahlén, 2010). One of the interviewed stakeholders

argues that elite sport success is not as valued in Sweden as in other countries. It is not as culturally accepted:

> "It's like in some way not fine to be the best. Everyone should sort of be included. That's one thing, and many think that elite sports is Zlatan Ibrahimovic, having Ferrari cars, etc., and then you think why one should support that [with state funds, ed.]?"
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

The focus on mass participation and grassroots sport does not mean that there is no place for elite sport in the Swedish welfare society. However, it is important to stress that the approach to elite sport issues is significantly impacted by egalitarian norms (Bjärsholm & Norberg, 2021).

As expressed by one of the interviewed researchers, the Swedish way of dealing with the development of elite athletes is to ensure that persons from all disciplines can find a way to the highest national or international level of competitiveness. The approach is more about providing the structural platform on which the individual can develop their talent and flourish than obtaining international sporting success per se (Norberg, 2012).

Swedes are certainly happy when their athletes are successful, but the focus on international sporting success for the nation is not culturally at the forefront "(…) because success in many ways is against their [the Swedish, ed.] nature" (Bairner, 2001, p. 161).

Seen in relation to the welfare state regimes typology developed by Esping-Andersen (1990b, 1990a), Swedish society clearly belongs to the cluster of nations where principles of universalism and decommodification stand as (perhaps the most) significant (societal) norms. They penetrate all social activities, with the welfare regime being labelled as the "social democratic regime type" (Deeming, 2017; Lundberg & Mark, 2001).

The social democratic regime type stands in contrast to the liberal and residual welfare state regime (e.g. in the US, Canada, and Australia) and the conservative welfare state regime (e.g. France, Germany, and Italy) – which both value nationalism (and the role of sport in the construction of nationalism; we return to this question below), and liberal/conservative values, and which put the individual strive for success more at the core of what is relevant of pursuing from a broader societal perspective (the liberal and the conservative welfare state regimes also have less redistributive and less generous financial support programmes than the social democratic welfare state regime) (Esping-Andersen, 1990a, 1990b).

The strong focus on decommodification[4] and universalism in the social democratic welfare state regime can be identified in many areas of Swedish sports policy. This is seen not only through the intense focus on and public support for mass participation and grassroots sports but also through the intense focus on social aspects related to the athletes – e.g. on

[4] It should be mentioned that Lundbergh and Mark (2001) argue that the Swedish welfare state is also characterised by re-commodification, i.e. securing as much as possible of the population works to finance the welfare state programmes.

their social and economic conditions and on the importance of dual careers (more on this later in the section on pillar 5) - expressing concerns of decommodification - and in the talent identification and talent development system (more on this in the section on pillar 4) expressing universalism and (social) support.

Universalism is also reflected in the overall goals of the Swedish elite sport system: To qualify as many athletes for the Olympics as possible to ensure that a broad set of elite athletes have the opportunity to participate in the Games. One of the interviewees argues:

> "In Sweden, there is a belief that you need to have broad financial support, also when we talk about elite sport. There is an understanding that you need to have a broadness in the way you support. For the individual federations, it is important to qualify for the Olympics and that in itself can be a legitimate criterion for the Swedish Olympic Committee [SOK, ed.]. Over time, Sweden has managed to qualify many teams. You have a lot of people in team sports and individual sports but there is a lack of good results. It is a political trade-off in terms of having broad participation [sending a large team, ed.] or getting into the top 8 or sending potential medallists."
>
> (Interviewed expert)

Interpreted into the context of welfare regime types, norms of universalism are clearly expressed in an elite sport system that aims to include as many athletes as possible in the Olympic teams.

Norms of liberalism are also at stake in correspondence with the earlier described norms of self-determination, but universalism and decommodification stand as the hegemonic values of the system. There is a hierarchy of norms, with the social democratic ones subordinating other values.

The Swedish approach stands in contrast to the model that has dominated Danish elite sport since the start of the 2000s, where entering a large team to, say, the Olympics has not been that important. Instead, the Danish Olympic team participants have been more strictly selected based on their potential to run for podium positions.

This is evidenced by the fact that the support programme developed by Team Danmark came to be more focussed on results in the early 2000s (Lerborg, 2002; Storm et al., 2016). At that time, the number of supported athletes and federations was cut down. Further, Denmark dropped the B-level qualification measures around that time.

According to one of the interviewees, this was part of a strategy to increase the chances among those who qualified to win medals instead of sending a large team where a majority would not have a chance of succeeding. The policy changes were part of an overall strategy of putting more focus on international sporting success and getting awarded more top podium positions.

> "So (…) in Denmark at the time, we removed those B-demands, (…), because in principle you could field many participants each time who basically didn't have a chance getting

> anywhere near A-finals, and it resulted in a lower level [of national competitiveness, ed.]. Instead, we chose to bring those athletes that had a real chance to compete at this championship or upcoming championships."
>
> (Interviewed expert)

By making inclusion criteria tougher and creating a more 'money in return for medals' oriented strategy each federation in Denmark had to focus more on sporting success and on delivering those results. In parallel, Team Danmark clearly signalled that otherwise, failing federations would risk being excluded from financial support (Storm, 2012).

Put differently, performing and winning medals at the highest level came into focus in Denmark at that time, and a sharper prioritisation paradigm related to resources was implemented to achieve these results. It represented a step away from the Danish elite sport policy of universalism towards an approach where winners are rewarded and financial incentives – in line with a (neo-liberal) new public management approach – are institutionalised (Storm, 2012).[5]

It is imperative to stress that Sweden has focussed on international sporting success as well. For example, a government bill in 1998 formulated expectations of higher levels of international competitiveness (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016).

However, expectations – compared to the Danish situation – regarding international sporting success have been very vaguely formulated according to several of the interviewees. Further, it remains clear that in the last two decades, Denmark has taken some steps away from the egalitarian and universalistic approach that – as in Sweden – dominated Danish elite sport before the year 2000.

There are indications that the Swedish system over the recent years has been taking some of the same steps as Denmark did 20 years ago reallocating more resources out of the overall available resources to elite sport and aiming to implement a sharper prioritisation paradigm. This fact is witnessed by several of the interviewees and by policy documents. We will get back to this later.

### Sport and 'lagom' nationalism in Sweden: 'To be Swedish is unSwedish'

The described historical approach of egalitarian support to elite sport in Sweden can be further understood by looking deeper into a specific cultural concept that determines the position of elite sport in Swedish society: The concept of 'lagom'.

Lagom is a cultural term meaning something like 'Not too much, not too little – just right' (Barinaga, 1999, p. 7). It captures central cultural traits expressed in the way the Swedish

[5] Denmark belongs – as Sweden - to the social democratic welfare state regime in Esping-Andersen's (Esping-Andersen, 1990a, 1990b) typology. However, due to a neo-liberal shift in Danish politics from the early 2000s and forward, the Danish welfare system and Team Danmark policies developed in a new (and more liberal) direction. Several new public management reforms were also implemented in the elite sport system during these years (Storm, 2012). Still, some critical elements have remained the core of the system in Denmark. For example, social issues and issues related to the well-being of the athletes.

elite sport system operates and functions in relation to Swedish society. In this sense, it has a significant impact on the system.

As mentioned earlier, there is an ambivalence related to elite issues in Sweden (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012) explaining why direct state-level funding for elite sport came relatively late. Put differently, it is to some extent against Swedish nature to win because you stand out (too much) and in this sense differentiate yourself from others:

> "In normal life, lagom renders into the paradoxical individual desire for being somehow different but without sticking out too much."
>
> (Barinaga, 1999, p. 8)

The consequence of lagom, universalism and egalitarian norms (the latest two are described earlier) is that hierarchies – and the differences they express – are to a large extent to be limited and are not culturally valued (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012). This balance fuels the above-mentioned ambivalence towards elite activities.

In a society where lagom is a central cultural trait and differences are to be toned down, elite sporting results – which in essence are produced to express differences between persons, nations or organisations – are not valued as much as in other nations, where winners (of competitions) are attached significant value and seen as heroes or stars – for example in the US or Australia (Brones, 2017) where a liberal welfare regime is dominating including more individualistic – and less equalitarian – norms.

Put differently, the value of being successful is moderated and adjusted to meet acceptable cultural levels in accordance with the Law of Jante ('Jantelagen'). Jantelagen is a well-known and culturally institutionalised Scandinavian phenomenon, consisting of an unwritten set of rules and norms where people are expected to be humble, refrain from bragging about their achievements, and are "(…) ill-advised to dwell on their own personal success" (Bairner, 2001, p. 152). In such a cultural setting striving for elite sport success is not that valued and subordinated to other societal norms.

The positive side of lagom and Jantelagen is that defeat is dealt with sympathetically. For example, the Swedes cheered their opponents when the Swedish men's national soccer team was defeated by Brazil in the 1958 World Cup final and were satisfied even though the Swedish soccer team failed to win the semifinals in the 1994 World Cups hosted in the US (Bairner, 2001).

> "It is not every nation that can be as magnanimous in defeat, particularly when such a significant sporting trophy is involved."
>
> (Bairner, 2001, p. 152)

Put differently, reaching a high position in the tournament was 'good enough' as the Swedes were culturally disposed to be gracious for what was in fact achieved. In many

other nations sport plays a much more significant role in the social construction of national identity.[6]

Sport has had a function in modern society of creating a sense of social belonging with the state as its geographical denominator (Bairner, 1996). For example, in the US or in the former Soviet Union where citizens needed a common identity to overshadow other geographical, racial, and cultural differences (Storm & Jakobsen, 2020).

However, compared to (for example) Norway, national identity construction through sport is much more toned down in Sweden (Bairner, 2001). Due to the many years under foreign rule, Norway has historically been much more nationalistic and has used (elite) sport to express that.[7] Sweden's historic policy of neutrality somehow affects the way sport is used in terms of constructing national identity.

According to Goksør (1997), Sweden is a well-established nation that sees itself as 'Nordic in Europe', with a lesser focus on Swedishness and a diminution of national identity. Put differently, Sweden is much more 'lagom', than many other nations in relation to the importance of nationalism, including the role sport plays in relation to national identity. It is to a large extent inconsistent with Swedish culture to construct a strong national identity through (international elite) sport (success).

This is not to say that Sweden as a nation does not associate itself with sport. According to Bairner (1996, 2001), Sweden has historically had international sporting success in a range of disciplines such as tennis, golf, soccer, and ice hockey (more in this in the output section), has hosted numerous international sporting events and has had many persons working in international sports organisations influencing world sports – besides seeing sport for all as an integrated part of its welfare state programmes. But to understand the position of elite sport in Sweden, it is important to understand how Swedes see themselves positioned in global society and what norms dominate Swedish society.

> "The Swedes are proud of their nation but usually in a relatively gentle manner. This is largely due to the fact that nationalism in general, at least of the overtly political variety, has been of only limited importance to Swedes in the modern era."
>
> (Bairner, 2001, p. 161)

The consequence of this 'lagom nationalism' is that Swedes put less political and cultural focus on achieving international sporting success than seen in other nations. It is not that important, and in some sense, it is un-Swedish to do so.

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[6] For many years back in the 1980s and 1990s, Denmark was famous for the 'Rooligan-movement', where national soccer fans were laid back and relaxed and never expressed sporting failure through aggression. This is a Danish equivalent to 'Lagom-nationalism'. Today, this movement has faded from Danish culture.
[7] You could argue the same to be the case in relation to Denmark, which was invaded during World War II and historically has lost significant parts of geographical land.

The focus of the elite sport system is rather on building elite sport support programmes that are in correspondence with the social democratic welfare regime type and Swedish social norms of ensuring the possibility for self-determination of the people, i.e. establishing support programmes on the principles of universalism and decommodification to arrive at a 'gentler' approach to achieving (international) elite sport success.

In Denmark, the path towards establishing a high-performance support system – with the establishment of Team Danmark – only materialised when social democratic decommodification norms were integrated into the law on Danish elite sport. Without these elements, the law would never have been approved by the Danish parliament (Hansen, 2012; Løvstrup & Hansen, 2002). In this way, Denmark merged norms of universalism, equality, and support for the elite.

The equivalent situation came in Sweden years later based on the earlier described crisis. But it is important to stress that public support was provided in the same balanced way as in Denmark to unite the Swedish norms described earlier. One of the interviewed stakeholders argues:

> "... and the stroke of genius by the Olympic Committee [SOK, ed.], together with the government at the time, was that they didn't create a new sort of elite sport system [with an explicit focus on achieving international sporting success, ed.]. They created what they called a talent development support programme. And this was the birth of the SOK's so-called Topp och Talang programme."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

The creation of a talent programme is consistent with the earlier described approach to elite sport in Sweden, where support for elite sport is not about improving the chances of winning for the nation as such, but rather ensuring that each individual can prosper and develop their talent.

"And the irony was that it was a Swedish social democratic government who historically and traditionally have found it very difficult to talk about elite, not just in sport, but as a whole" [interviewed stakeholder], which delivered the funding. However, by delivering the funding packaged as a talent development programme, cultural lagom and the earlier described welfare state norms of universalism was satisfied.

This being said, there are indications of a more performance-orientated approach to elite sport these years. Swedish society appears to be moving more to the right of the political spectrum now (Elgenius & Wannerhag, 2018), further making way for developments as seen in Denmark.

Some of the ambivalence related to elite sport appears to be disappearing. Combined with additional development factors, this could potentially lead to elite sport policy changes. There are already significant changes taking place. Some interviewees argue that the Swedish elite sport system faces a paradigm shift. Policy documents indicate the same change at the RF level.

In the following section, we will touch upon this. In the concluding sections of the report, we will investigate the consequences of the recent developments and discuss potential ways the Swedish system can build a long-term sustainable system in correspondence with Swedish norms.

## A recent paradigm shift?

As in the other Nordic countries, elite sport has during the last decades been given a more prominent position within the overall national sports systems in Sweden (Bergsgard & Norberg, 2010). Also in Swedish society, elite sport is now much more culturally legitimised than 20 years ago. According to one of the interviewed researchers:

> "We now have a completely different political climate in our country in many ways compared to the 50s, 60s, 70s, and 80s. Today in Sweden, there is a whole different acceptance of the desire and ambition to excel in sports, and it's more natural or at least less controversial to say that the state, with the help of tax funds, should support Sweden's aspiration to win gold medals. Looking at the Swedish research historically on this, in the 70s and 80s, it was utterly impossible to hold that opinion. I believe that if such research was conducted today, the support would look completely different. (…) There is now a different level of acceptance, both among citizens and within various layers of the sports movement, that it is reasonable to also allocate specific funds to achieve this goal, specifically for international gold medals. Politically speaking, if we consider the parties currently in power, I would guess that the prevailing view is more positive towards the idea of investing tax money in elite sports. This is due to several reasons: firstly, because it is a bit more right-wing oriented, and also because it is more identity-politically inclined, emphasizing the importance of Swedishness. Sweden's cultural heritage, of which sports is naturally a strong part, is important. These are significant matters, and therefore it is essential to show that Sweden is a competent nation, if one may express it in that way."
>
> (Interviewed researcher)

Several societal developments have affected the Swedish 'Zeitgeist', making way for a shift in how elite sport is financially supported and nurtured. In short, a recent change in the allocation of money within the RF system has been decided, indicating that the Swedish system aims to take some of the same steps as Denmark witnessed approximately 20 years ago. Increased reallocation has already been made within the system over the years, with elite sport activities getting more funding. However, the recent move that includes prioritising more between the federations in terms of funding is a new step.

We return to financial and organisational issues in the sections on pillar 1 and pillar 2 to flesh out further how elite sport is funded and supported in Sweden. However, briefly sketched, both RF and SOK provide support services and various direct or indirect financial support to the athletes.

While the SOK support is targeted at Olympic sports, the support provided by RF is broader and has, up until now, been allocated with regard to the needs of the federations. Some of the financial support has been based on performance, and some has been based on a dialogue between the elite departments in RF, SOK (and SPK) and each of the

federations. Service and expert services have also been founded on dialogue and are not related to whether the federations have athletes in the Olympic disciplines or not.

However, according to several interviewees, a significant new step in another direction was taken as the general assembly in RF decided on a new allocation programme for the federations in May 2023 based on the ideas laid out in the #eliteidrott2030 plan (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020).

At that time, according to the interviewed stakeholders, it was unclear to many of the federations what kind of consequences the new plan would have on the smaller federations, but the consequence was a stronger prioritisation of the elite sport support among the federations in a way not seen in Swedish sport before. While a compensating programme has been decided for a range of federations, which due to the new decisions lost their funding for elite sport activities[8], the idea inherent in the #eliteidrott2030 plan illustrates that the sports system to some extent is affected by broader societal tendencies.

According to the #eliteidrott2030 plan (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020), the current situation is no longer sufficient to keep Swedish elite sport competitive. The programme highlights that a significant reinforcement of financial resources for Swedish elite sport is necessary. RF, SOK, and SPK set in the plan an objective of increasing the financial support to Swedish elite sport from 185 million a year to 450 million a year (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020).

Also, the new programme identifies eight areas in need of improvement and – as a vision for Swedish elite sport – sets out to deal with them, including provision of new resources to the federations, a strengthening of the strategic and long-term management of federations, improved socioeconomic conditions for athletes, a stronger link to scientific research, improved and developed trainer and leadership programmes, adequate and improved development environments for athletes' training and matching, competent and attentive coaches for young athletes, and a "central" support system for the development of athletes and teams.

In addition, and as mentioned earlier, specific performance goals for Swedish elite sport are set. Furthermore, to get financial support from RF, the specific federations must meet the criteria of being either an Olympic sport (summer/winter) or included in the Greatest Sporting Nation[9] rankings (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020).

The new approach has significant consequences for some of the federations. One of the interviewed stakeholders argues:

[8] https://www.rf.se/nyhetsarkiv/nyheter/2023-12-01-elitidrottsstod---sjalvkritik-leder-till-nytt-overgangsstod
[9] www.greatestsportingnation.com

> "The situation has rapidly changed this year since a decision in May [2023, ed.] (…). RF made a decision regarding how and who will get money for elite sports, and now it is practically only Olympic sports. From having at least something to work with [in terms of funding, ed.], we have nothing from next year, absolutely zero (…) because we are not an Olympic sport."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

As mentioned earlier, in late 2023, the federations affected by the new programme were able to put significant pressure on RF to change the decisions made at the general assembly. At the time of writing this report, RF has agreed to a compensation package – at least temporarily for 2024 and 2025 – and to discuss an alternative future solution and allocation of funding.[10] Further, the relevance of using the Greatest Sporting Nation ranking will be discussed in 2024 with the stakeholders.[11]

While it at the time of finishing this report is unclear which exact solution will be reached in the future, this very recent incident is a testimony to the institutionalised norms of universalism dominating Swedish society indicating that norms of universalism still prevail and that new development paths are not currently taking any clear institutionalised form.

However, it remains clear that the new programme #eliteidrott2030 – and the ideas of allocating differently – somehow represents a change in the way (at least some parts of) the system thinks about how elite sport support should be provided in Sweden. In regard to the specific programme, one of the interviewed stakeholders argues:

> "I call it a paradigm shift. We have moved from what the respective federations see as important for them to take the next step (in their development, ed.). That was the reasoning before. Now, the reasoning is the other way around: How well do we [the federations, ed.] succeed in meeting the overarching goals *they* set. (…) What should one say? From the federations' wishes and needs to more like 'can you as a federation contribute to us reaching the overall goal or not, and if you can't, then you are not entitled to support'. It's a significant change [in the allocation of financial support, ed."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

It is very likely that societal developments have helped push the new thinking forward. At the overall macro level, the earlier described Swedish norms of equality and 'lagom nationalism' have been challenged since the 1980s, however, especially following the fall of the Iron Curtain and since the turn of the century.

Bairner (2001) argues that due to increasing immigration (Eger, 2010), the financial crisis (Österholm, 2010), the membership of the European Union (in 1995) (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016), and the end of the Cold War cultural and political changes – including deregulation, liberalisation, and privatisation (Fahlén et al., 2015) – are occurring in Sweden.

[10] The excluded federations have put down their critical acclaims in a proposal that was to be decided upon at an extraordinary assembly on 23 January (Svenska Flygsportförbundet mfl., 2024)
[11] Please also see our discussion of the Greatest Sporting Nation-list in the output section.

> "Whatever the past has revealed, however, Sweden has changed sufficiently in recent times for doubts to emerge concerning the long-term relevance of lagom, Jantelagen, folkhemmet, and, by implication, the Swedish Model."
>
> (Bairner, 2001, p. 153)

These changes not only affect and transform the Swedish model away from the archetypical welfare state type described by Esping-Andersen (1990a, 1990b), they also currently appear to be affecting the Swedish elite sport system (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016).

There are other factors adding explanatory power to the appearance of new thinking in the elite sport system. One of the interviewed stakeholders argues that there is a saying regarding the earlier described autonomy of the sports system in Sweden:

> "(…) that means that to ask for more money and at the same time say: 'don't touch us'. That is not so easy. Instead, you have to show you have the will to change your own allocation of money inside it [the system, ed.]. This is something that has been raised over the last few years: Let us try to show that we allocate more money – even if it's not very much more – for top sports to show the government that this is important for Swedish sport. If I were on the governmental side, I would say 'OK, show us you prioritise this, and then we will think it over. But if you don't prioritise it yourself, why should we [the government, ed.] do it?'"
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

It is reasonable to assume that the new strategy and way of thinking at the RF and SOK levels generally are affected by structural changes in overall societal culture. The described societal changes have in other words paved the way for challenging the previous Swedish pathway. In addition, the elite sport system's own observations on the current international situation have pushed the strategy forward too. One of the interviewed stakeholders argues:

> "Well, I think it's because of what we've seen with the global arms race and more countries investing greater resources, and then it's been said, if we want to see an effect from our investments, we need to invest more in fewer federations. If we in terms of total funds remain on the same level, then we need to allocate what we have to fewer, so we can compete, so it's like getting more bang for the buck, meaning you don't just spread out funds to everyone and everything. That's something one can easily understand. It's more about the way it's done."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

One of the interviewed researchers argues in the same way:

> "It's problematic and uncomfortable to be worse than our brothers and sisters in Denmark, Finland, and Norway, especially in sports that have a strong cultural grounding. This includes football, skiing, and ice hockey. Currently, in football, at least for the men, things are not going well. And when we are beaten in both cross-country and alpine skiing by both Norwegian men and women, the debate often intensifies in the media, from sports organisations, and also from general pundits, about how Sweden, once a

> formidable sports nation, is now underperforming. Then it's easy to jump to conclusions about support and funding priorities, even though there's often a lack of deep knowledge about the actual situation. Thus, there is a tendency to call for more funding and to emulate what is seen in other countries. Perhaps not in Denmark, Norway, and Finland, but in other countries where there are stricter priorities. Often with the argument, 'Why should we give money to orienteering, which isn't even an Olympic sport, or why should we invest in something else that is perceived as lacking cultural or competitive validity?' Today, we see countries like Switzerland or the Netherlands making very clear choices about which sports to support and which not to."
>
> (Interviewed researcher)

According to other interviewees, RF has focused more and more on elite sport over the recent years in accordance with the overall cultural development described earlier:

> "Over time, RF may have prioritised elite sports more, where they previously kept a little bit to themselves. So, my impression is (…) that they [RF] have tried to play a greater role in elite sports."
>
> (Interviewed expert)

The development is not only related to increased focus on elite sport and prioritisation. Also, financial reallocation within the overall RF budget has been a consequence in recent years. We get back to this in the section on pillar 1: Financial investments, only to mention here that following 2012, earlier ear-marked state-level funding to elite sport has not been discontinued.[12] Since then, the drop in public financing has been adjusted through the reallocation of funds from other areas – i.e. grassroots sports – within the sports system itself.

## Summing up

In this section, we have dived into the historical and cultural backdrop related to the development of the Swedish elite sport system. We have learned that systematic support of Swedish elite athletes came relatively late and that norms of equality and 'lagom nationalism' – including ambivalence towards elite sport – meant that direct earmarked state-level financial support for elite sport needed a crisis of failure to become institutionalised and accepted.

Recently, a new way of thinking about support appears to be unfolding with more prioritised financial support in the RF system as witnessed by the new decisions by its general assembly in 2023 – based on the #elitidrott2030 plan – expressing and made possible by societal developments and trends. These decisions are taken within the sports system and not imposed from the outside to push further development with a higher emphasis on elite sport and prioritisation in Sweden.

[12] Still, other sources of funding directed to elite sport exist, for example, funding for the Riksidrottsgymnasierna (around 43 million SEK in 2022) and for anti-doping issues (around 45 million SEK in 2022) (Centrum för Idrottsforskning, 2023).

In connection with this, it is important to note that today, no dedicated public funding is directed (deliberately) towards elite sport in Sweden. Funding for elite sport is prioritised within the system itself and out of the funding the sports system has available from various sources (including public funds).

This element expresses the ambivalence towards elite sport still existing in Swedish society even though some developmental trends point towards a higher acceptance of elite sport and public involvement.

The ambivalence is also expressed through the compensation package, which was established because of the decision to change the financial allocation mechanism in the RF system, showing how norms of universalism still prevail and have not yet been fully challenged or accepted. This being said, the process still shows that new ways of thinking in relation to the allocation of funding in Sweden appear to be present and can potentially change critical aspects of how elite sport is being nurtured in Sweden.

In the coming sections, we dig deeper into the Swedish throughputs by examining pillars 1-9 in our analytical framework. Following this, we investigate the elite sport systems of Denmark, Norway, and Finland to understand organisational differences across the systems.

In the discussion and concluding sections of the report, we use our findings to flesh out the strengths and weaknesses of the Swedish system to end up with a range of recommendations that also takes Swedish tradition, norms, and the welfare regime type of the nation into consideration.

# Macro- and meso-level input: Resources available to the Swedish elite sport system

## Introduction

On the input side of any national elite (para)sport system, resources are important to gain a satisfying output. In short, the available resources determine to a very high degree how successful a nation is in terms of international sporting success (De Bosscher et al., 2015).

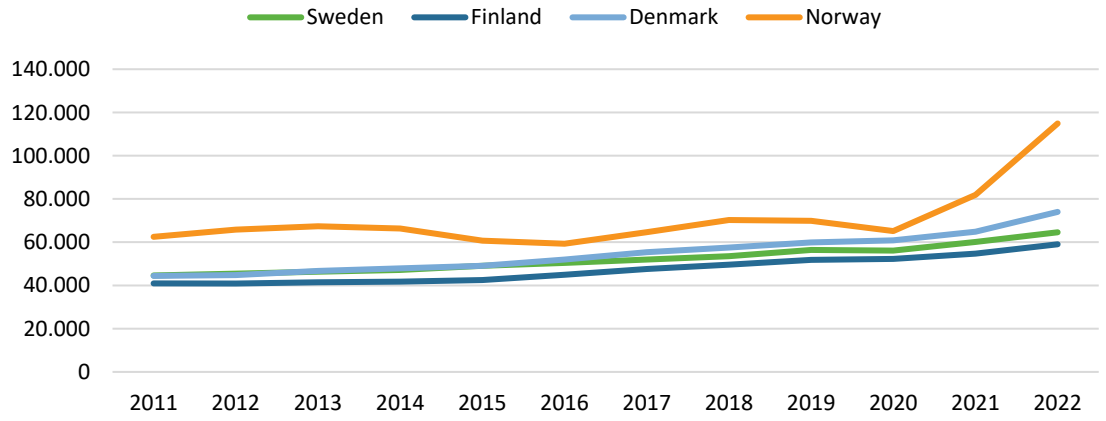
In accordance with our analytical framework, we, therefore, consider the number of resources available to Swedish elite sport to understand what one can reasonably expect regarding the performance potential. Later, the expectations will be related to the (objective) output to assess whether the resources are used efficiently or if there is room for improvement.

Resources can come in various forms. However, in elite sports, the two most important ones are financial resources and human capital. Based on this, we operationalise the question of available input by studying the macro-level resources – national wealth and population – and the meso-level direct and indirect financial resources available to the Swedish system. We also compare the level of available resources to other relevant nations where data is available.

## National wealth and population

Sweden is a wealthy nation compared to other nations (Bergh, 2014). In the World Bank database, Sweden appears among the high-income nations. In a Nordic context, Sweden ranks as number three. This can be seen in figure 2, illustrating Swedish GDP per Capita (PPP-values) development compared to other selected Nordic countries in the 2011-2022 period.

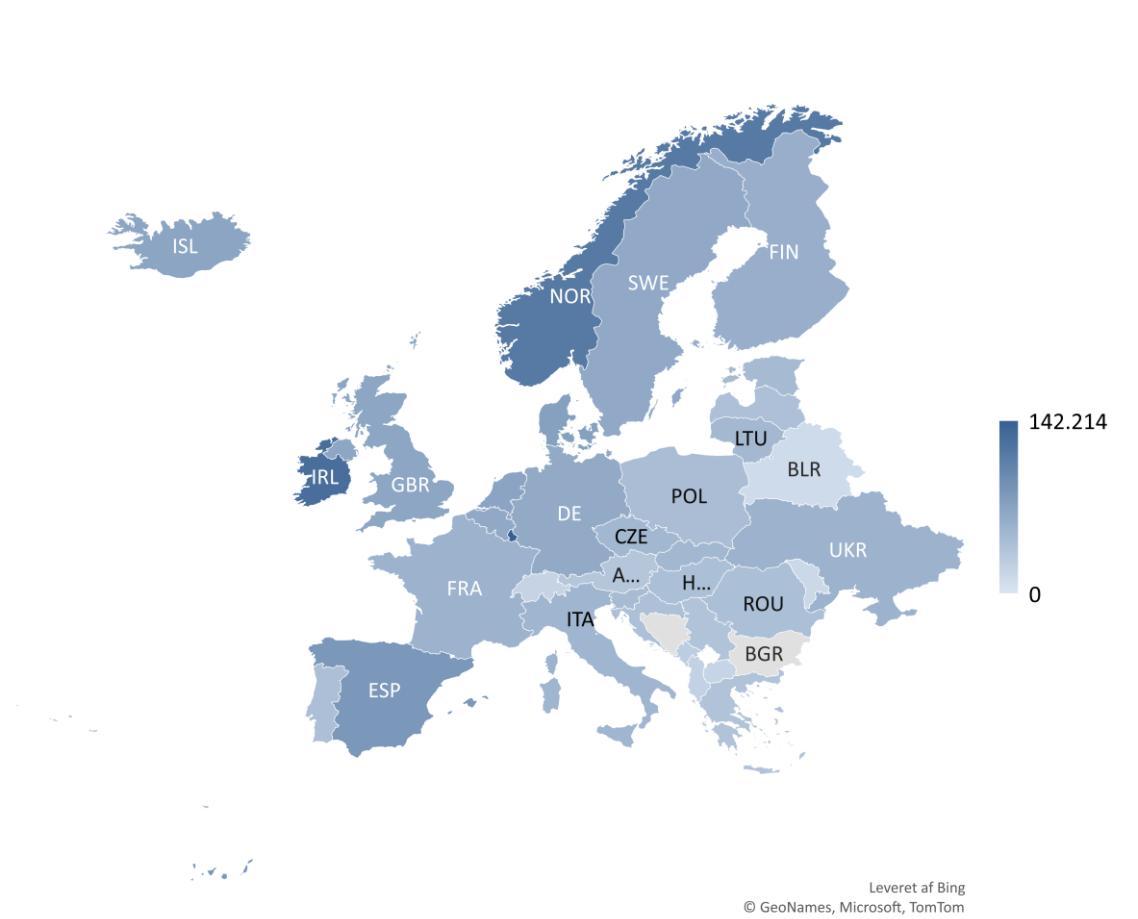
**Figure 2: GDP/Cap (PPP) Development in Sweden and other Nordic Countries 2011-2022**




Source: WorldBank.org. GDP, (PPP) (values are displayed in current international $)

Even though Sweden is less wealthy than Denmark and Norway, Sweden is among the richest countries when compared to other European nations. For example, Germany and Belgium, which hold equivalent GDP per capita levels. This can be read from figure 3 displaying GDP (PPP) per Capita for selected European countries. This gives the expectation of a high level of performance output.

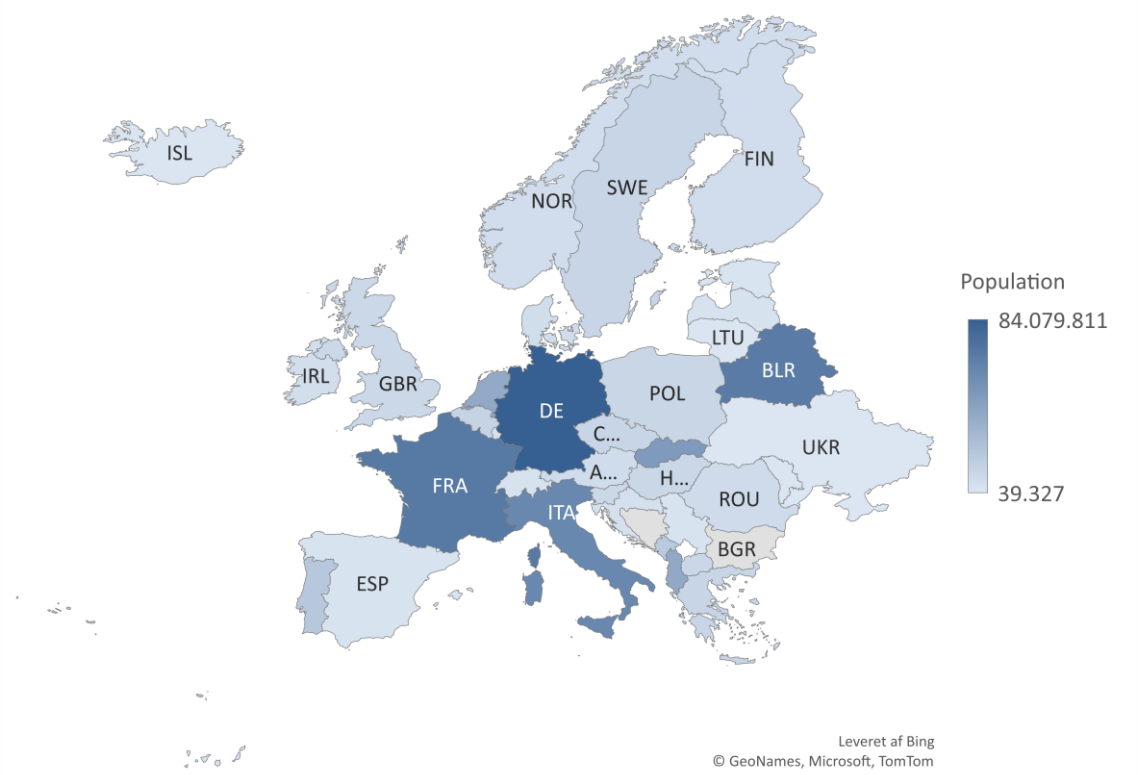
**Figure 3: GDP/Cap (PPP) for European Countries 2022**




Source: WorldBank.org. GDP, (PPP) (values are displayed in current international $). *Insufficient data for Kosovo.

As mentioned earlier, human capital resources are essential to becoming successful in international elite sport. In this matter, Sweden is better off than its neighbouring nations. With around 10.5 million inhabitants, the expectation is a higher performance output. Figure 4 displays the size of the Swedish population compared to other selected European countries.

**Figure 4: Population size in selected European countries**

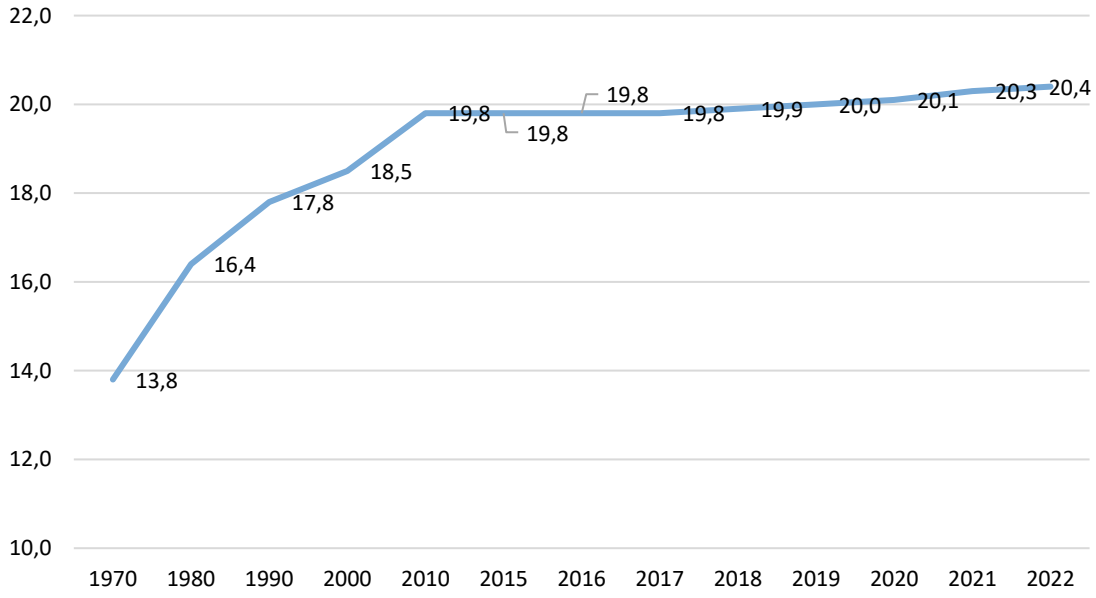



Source: WorldBank.org. Total Population 2022.

According to the conducted interviews, the demographic development of the Swedish population is also a challenge. As in many other European countries, the population is getting older, with the share of younger age groups decreasing.

The effect of this development is that there is a smaller talent pool to recruit from in the future, a fact confirmed by objective statistics displayed in figure 5 showing the development in the share of +65-year-olds from 1970 to 2022.

**Figure 5: Population share of +65-year-olds in Sweden 1970-2023 (%)**




Source: www.statista.com

In a longer perspective, this development seems to continue with this age group reaching 26% 50 years from now:

> "20% of the population in 2021 was 65 years or over. This proportion is estimated at 23% in 2040 and 26% in 2070."

(Statistics Sweeden, 2023)

However, according to Motel-Klingebiel et al. (2023), Sweden is also characterised by high fertility rates and immigration of mainly younger people leading to increases in the population level and a more balanced age structure.

According to Statistics Sweden, the Swedish population is estimated to increase over the coming years totalling 11.4 million in 2040. However, depending on the inflow of immigrants the development can be as high as 12.1.[13]

While the population share of children aged 0-15 years and people aged 25-65 years decrease, and the oldest age group (65+) increases, it is estimated that the age group between 16-25 will remain at the same level in the future, at around 10%of the population (Statistics Sweeden, 2022). This is the age group from where future talents for elite sport is to be picked.

In total, the populational development makes the ageing demographic issues less of a challenge to Swedish elite sport because the stable share of people aged 16-25 years will result

[13] https://www.scb.se/en/finding-statistics/statistics-by-subject-area/population/population-projections/population-projections/pong/statistical-news/the-future-population-of-sweden-20222070/

in a numerically higher number of people in that specific age group when the overall population increases.

## Pillar 1: Financial investments

While the general wealth of a nation and the population size are essential macro-structural determinants of international sporting success, it is the direct and indirect financial resources allocated – out of the total national wealth – that matter most. The higher the absolute amount of funding allocated to elite sports, the higher the probability of winning medals.

As will be stressed later, this doesn't mean that other issues don't matter. They do. For example, organisational and managerial problems are essential and correcting those – i.e. implementing good management – can compensate for lower direct or indirect financial input. However, higher investment in elite sport significantly correlates with international sporting success.

In the SPLISS-framework, this issue is captured in pillar 1 which "…examines public expenditures on sport and elite sport at national level by government, lotteries, NOCs and nationally co-ordinated sponsorship" (De Bosscher et al., 2015, p. 109).[14]

It is important to understand that only nationally coordinated funding from government, lotteries, and the national Olympic committee (NOC) is included in this pillar.[15]

Other local level or indirect funding streams – be they public (for example provided by municipalities) or private (for example provided by sponsors) – that (potentially) add to increasing the chances of international sporting success are not part of the approach presented here.

Private sponsorship or media rights income gained by national federations are not included either. This is because it is tricky and close to impossible to get a coherent picture of such revenue streams. It requires a high level of data detail that is not possible to reach within the resource constraints of the evaluation.

Further, reliable data is absent on some of the relevant aspects. Therefore, the international comparison presented here is not unproblematic because it leaves out certain dimensions that from an ideal perspective should be included.

Finally, precision in the presented data might vary from nation to nation included. The reader should consider such issues when going over this part of the analysis as it only gives an overall perspective on certain funding streams. We aim to comment on this where relevant.

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[14] Expenditures for Paralympic sports are included.

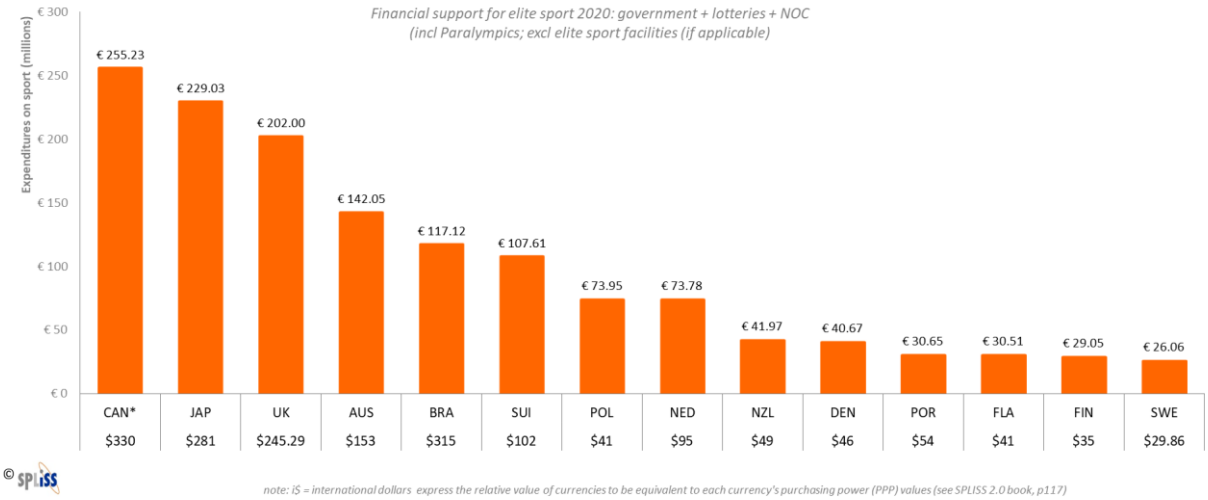
[15] This being said, it is important to stress that in this report, we deal with (nationally coordinated) governmental funding for all elite sports. Not only the Olympic disciplines.

## National level funding

According to Bjärsholm and Norberg (2021), overall funding for sport (including grassroots sport and elite sport) in Sweden has – contrary to other European countries – increased since the 1990s. Today the governmental support for sport is around SEK 2 billion compared to around SEK 450 million at the end of the 1990s. In addition, in 2022, close to 800 million SEK were directed to various other programmes, such as international programmes, anti-doping issues, targeted programmes for increasing mass participation in Sweden, upper secondary sport schools (idrottsgymnasier), and the like (Centrum för Idrottsforskning, 2023). At the municipal level, financial support roughly amounts to SEK 10 billion today (Bjärsholm & Norberg, 2021).

In a recent light version of the SPLISS study (De Bosscher & Shibli, 2021) produced after the 2021 Tokyo Games, which only focuses on pillar 1, it is revealed that Sweden is the nation among the 14 participating nations that comparatively pours the least amount of direct financial resources into their elite sport system. Canada and Japan take the lead. This can be seen in figure 6.

**Figure 6: Nationally coordinated elite sports expenditure for participating SPLISS nations, 2020**

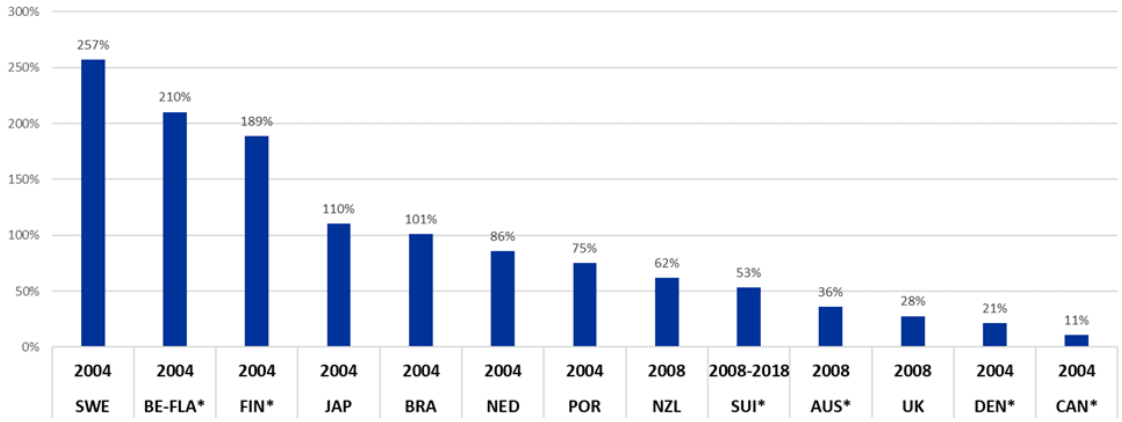



Source: Reproduced from De Bosscher & Shibli (2021). Nationally coordinated elite sports expenditure in 2020. (NB! Belgium is handled in two separate administrative areas: Flandern and Wallonia).

Strikingly, the nationally coordinated funding for elite sport is significantly lower (€26 million) than that of Denmark (€41 million), even though Denmark is a smaller country in terms of population (5.9 million). Also, Finland (€29 million) has a (slightly) higher funding despite also being a smaller nation in terms of inhabitants (5.5 million).

Over the years, however, there has been a significant increase in funding for Swedish elite sport compared to other nations included in the comparison. This can be seen in figure 7.

**Figure 7: Change in elite sport expenditures (12 nations) in 2020 since 2004 or the earliest point in time of data available**




Source: Reproduced from De Bosscher & Shibli (2021). Nationally coordinated elite sports expenditure in 2020.

Again, it is essential to understand that the figures only include nationally coordinated (state-level) financial support. As mentioned earlier, each federation can have additional revenue streams going towards elite sport from sponsorship or other channels depending on how popular the sports are, or how much media exposure they have (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020). The above figures do – in other words – not give the complete picture of the total funding available for Swedish elite sport.

For example, the Swedish Football Federation (Svenska Fotbollförbundet) and the Swedish Biathlon Federation (Svenska Skidskytteförbundet) have a tiny share of their activities financed by national (public) funding because they can rely on commercial sponsorships and income from media rights sales. However, no international comparative statistics are available to better understand these differences across nations. National figures will be dealt with later.

It should be noted that in 2009, funding was cut by the Swedish state only to be increased for the 2009 to 2013 period due to an extraordinary public grant of SEK 212 million (around €19 million) in total to increase international competitiveness. As mentioned earlier, this grant was funding coming from Svenska Spel. Following 2013, this grant was not renewed meaning that since then, rearrangements have been made within the Swedish sports system itself to adjust for the decreased public spending. According to another of the interviewed stakeholders, Swedish sport has been able to,

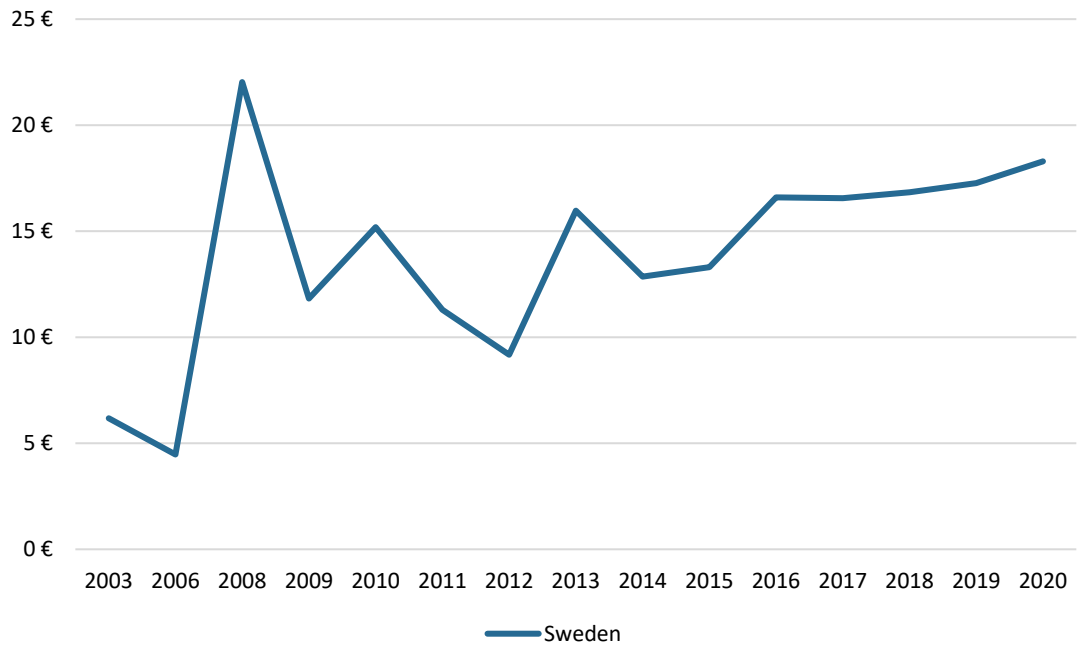
> "rearrange some of the total funding [to elite sport in Sweden overall, ed.] so that even though this specific elite sport funding [from the government, ed.] disappeared in 2012 - I would say that in 2013 and 2014 we had a dip in elite sports funding because that was kind of a direct reaction from the government pulling this funding – but in 2015 and onwards, we have managed to increase the funding back to the level we had before 2012, and even higher actually. But it is not specifically elite sports funding, it has more been sort of rearranging our budget posts in sport as a whole. So, I think if we look at the total

funding for high-performance sports, it is higher today than it was in 2009. But we can also look at other international figures and see that the increase that Sweden has had in high-performance sport has not matched other countries. The increase in funding in other countries is quicker than what we have. So, in relative terms, I think we're still falling behind."

(Interviewed stakeholder)

The numeric development in funding for Swedish elite sport from 2003 to 2020 can be seen in figure 8.

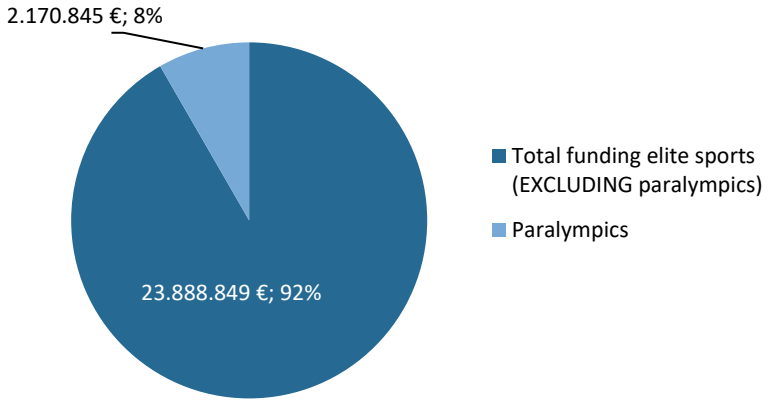
**Figure 8: Development in nationally coordinated elite sport expenditures for Sweden 2003-2020 (in million euro).**




Source: Reproduced from De Bosscher & Shibli (2021). Nationally coordinated elite sports expenditure in 2020. Running prices.

The share of Paralympic expenditures out of the total expenditures for 2020 is displayed in figure 9:

**Figure 9: Nationally Coordinated Expenditures: Able-bodied versus Paralympic share of elite sport expenditure, 2020**




Source: Reproduced from De Bosscher & Shibli (2021).

The Swedish Sports Confederation did a comparison in 2020 with four other nations: United Kingdom (1,7 SEK billion /year), Canada (SEK 500 million/year), Denmark (SEK 250 million/year) and Schwitzerland (SEK 650 million/year) clearly showing that the budget for elite sport in Sweden (SEK 210 million) is lacking significantly behind all these nations except Denmark (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020).

Further, taking into consideration that for example Denmark primarily uses its budget on summer Olympic disciplines (Storm et al., 2016), while the funding in Sweden is used on both summer and winter sports disciplines, the total Swedish budget is not high.

Other public sources of funding add to the SPLISS data. As mentioned earlier, around 43 million SEK (approx. €3,78 million) go to Idrottsgymnasiums and 45 million SEK (approx. €3,95 million) go to anti-doping issues.[16] Further, 22 million SEK (approx. €1,95 million) is directed to research in sports.[17] There can potentially be other sources, however, this study has not been able to locate them specifically.

Even though the figures should be taken with appropriate caution, having in mind that the international level of elite sport-related inputs has increased in many nations (De Bosscher & Shibli, 2021), the numbers give the expectation of a relatively modest Swedish elite sport performance output.

We will look further into this issue in the output section to understand how well the Swedish elite sport system transforms its available resources into medal success in international tournaments.

[16] It should be noted that it can be discussed whether funding for anti-doping activities is important to international competitiveness in elite sport for nations.
[17] It should be noted here that it is debatable whether funding for research in general is important to international competitiveness in elite sport for nations. Some research certainly is, while other types of research is not, or only to a limited degree.

## Commercial sources of revenue

In addition to the nationally coordinated funding, Swedish elite sport has sponsorship income coming from private sources and partners. According to the interviewees, sponsorships for elite sport are, however, difficult to get.

It is mainly the biggest and most highly exposed sports, such as soccer, team handball, and ice hockey that are capable of attracting significant sponsorship revenue. The vast majority of other sports, also prestigious ones on the Olympic programme, face a much more difficult situation (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012). One of the interviewees representing some of the smaller sports in Sweden without much media exposure argues:

> "We don't even get on the news when we achieve big international medals. So, who would want to sponsor us? No one because we don't have any TV time. We don't have any arenas. We don't have any big things going on when the media is not covering it."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

Seen in a broader perspective, several of the interviewed researchers comment that the problem of attracting sponsorship revenues is a fundamental one. It is not only an issue for minor sports. It is a more general one, and connected to Swedish culture:

> "The weakness is commercial. It is the commercially relatively lower interest [in Sweden, ed.] that means the money that is pumped into other countries' elite sport systems [is much higher, ed.]. We do not prioritise that in Sweden regardless of whether the business community would consider putting money on the table – as we see happens in other countries. The situation is well connected to how our society is constructed fundamentally. It is simply not important to be the best in the world at – for example – biathlon [to the Swedes, ed.]."
>
> (Interviewed researcher)

The interviewee argues that due to the earlier mentioned egalitarian norms of the Swedish welfare society, general prestige and – therefore – commercial value attached to elite sport is not prominent.

> "It is clear that our business community grew up in a Swedish society that has been characterised by 100 years of social democratic rule. I think it is connected in that way (…). It is not important."
>
> (Interviewed researcher)

Another of the interviewees argues that cultural norms in Sweden determine an approach where the focus is on giving people equal opportunities and helping the less fortunate; not on supporting them to excel in elite-oriented activities. These norms also apply to much of the business environment.

> "To get support from commercial actors is quite difficult. (…) There is also a big trend when we go and talk to companies and ask if they want to support our elite sport. It is much more difficult than if you want to support parasport, for example."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

Despite leaving the impression that getting commercial income is a challenge in Sweden, the available data and materials reveal that Swedish elite sport can sign some sponsorship deals. One of the interviewees argues that in his opinion, there is a potential for getting additional funding from Swedish companies.

According to the web magazine and resource Sport & Affärer (2023a) in 2017 the value of sponsorships in Sweden was estimated to be around SEK 5 billion [equivalent to €445 million]. 70%of this value was directed towards sport.

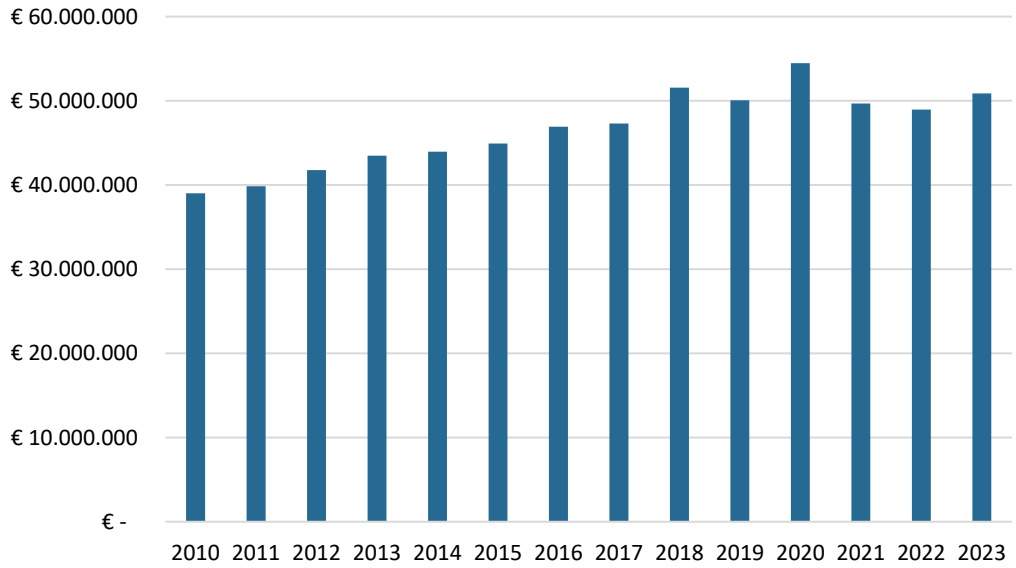
The commercial income (sponsorship and alike) from activities in the Swedish Olympic Committee currently amounts to approximately SEK 80-90 million pr. year (equivalent to €7-8 million) coming from a group of sponsors consisting of around 17 companies (Swedish Olympic Committé, 2020, 2021, 2022). This income is part of the (direct) nationally coordinated financial funding outlined earlier.

These figures are supplemented by commercial revenues at the federation and club level. Detailed data on commercial income at the federation level is available for the 2010-2023 period from Sport & Affärer (2010c, 2011c, 2012b, 2013b, 2014b, 2015c, 2016c, 2017c, 2018c, 2019c, 2020c, 2021c, 2022b, 2023c).

Figure 10 gives an overview of the total income from sponsorships in the 75 federations included in the data.[18]

[18] In the figures, 69 to 71 federations have been included each year over the period displayed. All federations included have had sponsorships above or close to 50.000 SEK. The rest (for-six federations depending on the year) have not had any significant sponsorship income in the given years.

**Figure 10: Total sponsorship revenue in Swedish federations from 2010-2023, 2023 prices**




Source: Sport & Affärer 2010-2023. Figures are displayed in 2023 prices using the Consumer Price Index from Statistics Sweden.

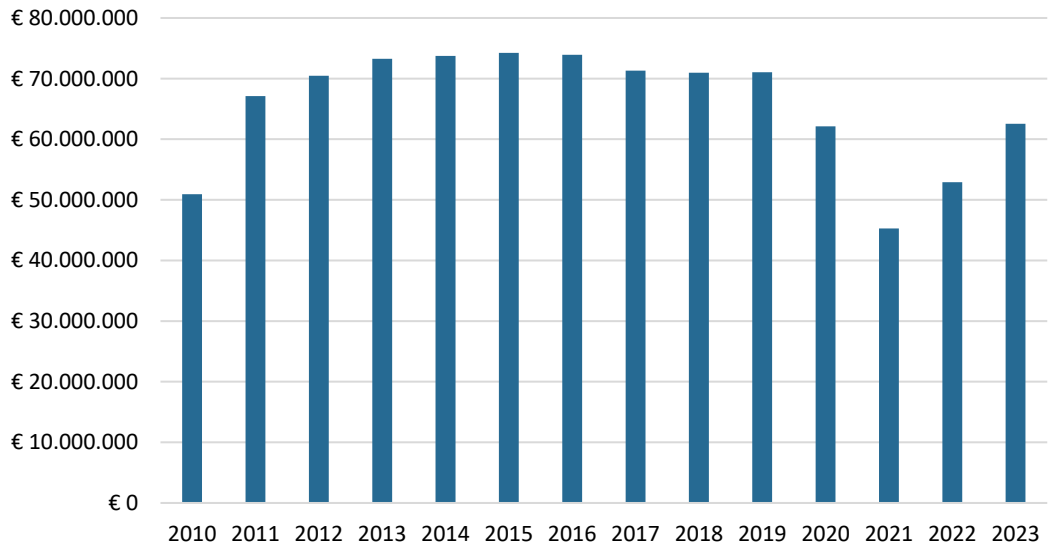
As can be seen, there has been a steady increase in the sponsorship income in the Swedish federations since 2010. Sponsorship revenues peaked in 2020 and slightly decreased following COVID-19 in 2020. In 2023, the federations had €51 million (578 million SEK) in sponsorship revenues compared to €39 million (454 million SEK) in 2010. This is equivalent to a 30% increase in the period displayed in the figure.

The Swedish federations for football (190 million SEK), skiing (98 million SEK), ice hockey (60 million SEK), team handball (42 million SEK), biathlon (39,2 million SEK), golf (28 million SEK), athletics (23,4 million SEK), equestrian (21 million SEK), car & motor sport (9,37 million SEK), basketball (9,3 million SEK), tennis (7,1 million SEK), swimming (6,2 million SEK), and table tennis (4 million SEK) are among the federations with the highest commercial income from sponsorship in 2023,[19] as well as being among the federations with the highest degree of media exposure.

At the club level, there is not as detailed data. However, Sport & Affärer (2010b, 2010a, 2011b, 2011a, 2012a, 2013a, 2014a, 2015a, 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2023b) have collected data among selected top clubs in terms of sponsorship revenues (top 15 in men's leagues; top 5 in women's leagues) in sports such as ice hockey, basketball, handball, floorball, and soccer. Aggregated sponsorship revenues in these 20 top clubs can be read from figure 11 for the 2010 to 2023 period.

[19] Income from the sale of media rights is not included. Neither are sponsorships on specific events. This means that some of the federations have significantly more funds at their disposal than reflected in the figures.

**Figure 11: Total sponsorship revenue in Swedish top 15 clubs (men) and top 5 clubs (women) 2010-2023, 2023 prices**




Source: Sport & Affärer (2010-2023). Figures are displayed in 2023 prices using the Consumer Price Index from Statistics Sweden. The figure includes men's top 15 clubs and women's top 5 clubs in terms of sponsorship revenues. Each year holds a specific set of clubs because those that are part of the top vary from year to year. Income from participation in international tournaments, such as the UEFA Champions League is included. *Data is only available for 14 clubs in 2010.

Total sponsorship revenues peaked in 2015 and have obviously been affected by COVID-19 from 2020 and on. Ice hockey clubs and soccer clubs are dominating the figures with the highest revenues.

While not giving the full picture – as clubs below the top 15/5 threshold are not included and there is no available data on media rights income (or match day income for that matter) – the figures draw up some proportions of commercial income in Swedish top-level sport at club level.

## Summing up

Even though the funding for Swedish elite sport has increased over the years, the absolute amount of nationally coordinated funding is low compared to other nations. While the available data should be taken with appropriate caution, it still leaves the impression that Sweden is a rich Western nation that allocates relatively few direct economic resources for elite sport.

While no comparative data is available for commercial income, in recent years the total income appears to have been growing when looking at these revenue streams at the level of the federations. However, there is a polarisation going on where the big federations take a bigger share of the financial cake.

At the club level, COVID-19 has resulted in a decline in sponsorships among the top-level clubs. In addition, high-level sponsorship income is mainly available in the sports with the

highest media exposure, for example, soccer, team handball and ice hockey. For the majority of sports, commercial income is available at the federation level, however, the income is not that high.

In total, the available data gives the expectation of a relatively low output in terms of international elite sport success that can only be compensated through other pillars by indirect forms of input and efficient or smart management in these areas that – in total – make up the quality of the system. We will look further into this in the coming sections that deal with the meso-level throughput.

# Meso-level throughput: Resource management

In the analytical framework for this evaluation, the national elite sport system is located and also evaluated at the meso-level. This level comprises national sports policies and initiatives that can be changed in the short run to create competitive advantages for the nation in question.

As mentioned earlier, population size and national wealth factors (measured by DGP/cap) are characteristics at the macro-level, which are essential to international sporting success. Still, they can only be changed in the long run. To improve international performance sports managers, politicians, and stakeholders responsible for national elite sport must therefore focus on the meso-level.

In this section of the evaluation, we assess pillar 2 to pillar 9 of our analytical framework to get a coherent picture of how well the Swedish system manages its available resources. Later, in the discussion section, the results of this assessment will be related to the output of the Swedish system to understand the causes of the current level of performance.

## Pillar 2: Governance, organisation, and management of elite sports policies

The need for control and coordination is more pronounced in elite sport than in other sports settings. This can be achieved through proper structures and processes of the elite sport system's governance, organisation, and management.

According to the SPLISS study, there is a significant correlation between medal performances and the score on this pillar. A key finding in the first SPLISS study was that:

> "(…) countries with only one national coordinating body responsible for elite sport (and not sport for all) such as UK Sport or Olympiatoppen in Norway, have an advantage over countries where decision-making responsibilities are split between different organisations."
>
> (De Bosscher et al., 2008, p. 135)

This conclusion is modified in the second study. Instead, it is concluded that "it is not the countries with the most centralised approach that performs best, but rather those who best coordinate activities and collaborate with different partners" (De Bosscher et al., 2015, p. 135).

Essentially, having an excellent organisational setup with efficient coordination of tasks and clear responsibilities disseminated throughout the national elite sport system – and understood by its stakeholders – improves the chances of achieving international sporting success.

Having a single organisation responsible at the top is not of the highest importance. However, in Sweden, issues related to efficiency, coordination, and cooperation among

stakeholders and organisations make this pillar a prime arena of problems that need to be addressed.

## Results: A double command system

First and foremost, it is clear from the interviews and materials available for the evaluation that Swedish elite sport is run with tasks and responsibilities related to elite sport divided between two organisations.[20] As mentioned earlier in the section on the overall development of the elite sport system, RF and SOK work with elite sport. However, they approach it from different perspectives.

One of the interviewed researchers argues that RF represents norms of equality where resources for elite sport are allocated from the perspective of giving all federations and athletes means to succeed: "All should have equal opportunities", i.e. an approach in correspondence with the egalitarian norms of Swedish society described earlier.

The approach taken by SOK is to intervene on the highest level and to add support for those athletes who can make it to the international level. Further, SOK only deals with Olympic sports, not those outside the Olympic family (except for some recognised sports). Seen this way, the Swedish system combines the norms of equality described earlier with a focus on elite – and a 'prioritisation' – at the top. One of the interviewed stakeholders argues:

> "There is like a base support system with government funding [in RF, ed.] and then on top of that for the Olympic and possibly some of the Paralympic athletes, there's additional commercial funding that can be used for sort of individual support [provided by SOK and SPK, ed.]. And also, it's a similar situation with sort of the non-monetary support structure where there's, I mean similar to Team Denmark and Olympiatoppen and so forth: We [RF, ed.] also support physiology, psychology and sports medicine and provide a basic support that can be accessed by every federation, and then the Olympic Committee [SOK, ed.] have its own staff and its own support personnel that can sort of add on to that."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

While the interviewee quoted above sees some clear advantages of the dual support system, the materials and interviews available for this evaluation point to several issues attached to the current organisation and cooperation between RF and SOK. One of them is that there is insufficient cooperation between the organisations. One of the interviewed researchers describes the organisational setup this way:

[20] The system might instead be called a 'three-part command system' because the federations are part of the organisational setup. To the athletes, this adds another dimension to the complexity. As mentioned in the materials and methods section, it has been impossible to dive into how each of the Swedish federations works with elite sport. This constitutes a limitation of the evaluation. However, because the federations are the primary organisation of the athletes and assist them in pursuing their careers as athletes, we keep the double command metaphor as a description of how the athletes *and* the federations together see the system working.

> "In our interpretation, the Swedish Sports Confederation [RF, ed.] takes the assignment as an umbrella organisation - and as the main receiver of governmental money – with the overall responsibility towards sports for all. There should be a social democratic distribution of money, while the Swedish Olympic Committee (SOK, ed.) on the other hand understand its mission in a different way, partly because the assignment comes from other parties [i.e. not the state, and to some extent from the Olympic movement, ed.]. That is perhaps a part of the bigger problem."
>
> (Interviewed researcher)

RF also takes responsibility for elite sport, but in a much more general sense compared to SOK, which focuses on the athletes with current medal potential – and talents that can become successful within a short(er) time span. As mentioned, and most importantly, SOK only deals with Olympic sports and therefore has a narrower approach. Each organisation sees its prime mandate differently and this central difference between the two organisations is the core issue in Swedish elite sport, according to the interviewee.

The described division of tasks and responsibilities between the two organisations could potentially work, as outlined by the SPLISS studies referred to earlier, but in practice, there have been significant issues over the years and problems associated with the current situation.

Because guiding objectives for the federations involved are coming from different stakeholders, Swedish elite sport appears to not work in the same direction. The tasks and responsibilities are not shared or coordinated efficiently. For example, the two organisations have different elite sport development programmes and do not coordinate the efforts.

Even though #elitidrott2023, in some sense, constitutes an attempt to conduct a master plan for Swedish elite sport, no reasonable organisational plan dividing tasks and responsibilities between SOK and RF exists. Who takes the primary responsibility for testing athletes? Who identifies relevant experts to assist the athletes, or who decides on research and development? It all appears unclear and dependent on the context. According to some of the interviewed stakeholders, one organisation does not know what the other is doing.

To many of the federations, the current organisational setup constitutes a complex system that demands some 'creativity' to manoeuvre. One of the interviewed researchers clearly argues that the current organisation constitutes a:

> "… double command [system, ed.] that still prevails (…), that is, what goes on between the Swedish Sports Confederation on one side and the Swedish Olympic and Paralympic Committee on the other side. And it is the same today and just as relevant, if not more."
>
> (Interviewed researcher)

Another stakeholder working in one of the federations argues:

> "One can say the major difference between Denmark and Sweden is this duality we have over here [in Sweden, ed.] with the National Sports Confederation's elite department and

SOK, which are two separate entities that have started to coordinate but are still two different systems. We cannot ignore that."

(Interviewed stakeholder)

Managing the complexity – serving two masters or finding a suitable way in the programmes of two independent bodies – demands a lot of resources from the federations. It can be done, and there can be some advantages to it because RF has supported disciplines that are not part of the Olympic programme (and therefore is not entitled to support from SOK, ed.).

However, the complexity of management needed to get enough resources to build a sustainable elite sport programme at the federation level is high in this dual – or 'double command' – setting.

According to Norberg (2012) one of the central issues of the current organisation is that there is no coherent and overall national plan for the development of elite sport. There is in other words no uniform system (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012). This is not only on the overall political level but also at the policy level of the two organisations. Instead, and put briefly, athletes and federations operate and gain support in a twilight zone between SOK and RF.

Many interviewees argue that having two organisations is simply inefficient and a waste of resources because they, to a large extent, work in parallel with different tasks and responsibilities. They do not work very strongly together or coordinate their efforts in any systematic way. However, other interviewed stakeholders argue that changing the system would not make a difference – at least in the current organisation, it is not that big of an issue. It is rather insufficient resources that is the problem:

"I would say that emphasis #1 (…) would be to have more resources in the distribution system we have, and if we have that, maybe there is efficiency in changing some of the boxes a bit to fit in each other better. (…) Today, we have a much better cooperation [between SOK and RF, ed.]... but, a change to a more result-oriented distribution system of the governmental money for top sport is very much needed!"

(Interviewed stakeholder)

As mentioned earlier, it can be argued that the #elitidrott2030 plan (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020) represents an attempt to implement better cooperation between RF and SOK to align the efforts and build some kind of national strategic plan in accordance with the learnings from the SPLISS studies.

The plan is developed in cooperation between RF, SOK, and the SPK. It analyses the current Swedish elite sport system and contains perspectives on how the Swedish system is to be run in the future.[21] Several of the interviewees are positive towards the plan. One of the interviewed stakeholders argues:

[21] Please see the earlier section on the recent paradigm shift for more on #eliteidrott2030.

"The programme of Elite Sports 2030 [#elitidrott20230, ed.] and the eight points in that (…). I think it is a really good document and good for me and our sport. We identify approximately those eight areas as well (…). I think it summarises where we need to go with Swedish sport in a good way. So that's a good programme."

(Interviewed stakeholder)

Still, it's the clear impression from the materials and interviews at hand that there are disagreements on tasks and responsibilities between SOK and RF related to the development of different areas of the Swedish elite sport system (Centrum för Idrottsforskning, 2023). It is also clear from the interviews conducted that cooperation needs to be improved. According to one of the interviewed stakeholders, there are significant current knowledge gaps across RF and SOK:

"The problem is that we don't do what we should do. It's like having kids. If they argue which it is like sometimes, you just have to as a parent say enough is enough. Stop! No one ever told us it's enough. Let's work together. Let's start with ABC because we are a family here (…). There is no parent in this question. I am a parent in my organisation, and they have a parent, and we never married. (…) It's pretty complicated."

(Interviewed stakeholder)

In addition, there have been several historical – and open – power struggles and conflicts between RF and SOK as well (S. S. Andersen & Ronglan, 2011). According to the stakeholders interviewed, some years ago, the cooperation between SOK and RF was very dysfunctional. Today, things have improved, according to some of the interviewed stakeholders, and only minor issues persist.

"[Earlier, ed.], the relationship in Swedish sport was at an all-time low. There were big frictions between the Swedish Sports Confederation [RF, ed.] and the Swedish Olympic Committee [SOK, ed.] and part of it was caused by the government making some changes that I think the government saw necessary to make and that kind of changed the dynamics and the roles a little bit. And I am pleased to say that we kind of left a lot of that friction behind and we're in a better state. That's not to say that we're yet in a perfect state."

(Interviewed stakeholder)

Even though the two organisations are cooperating better today than previously, there are still issues and conflicts hindering the efficient allocation of resources. Some of the other interviewees are very critical and argue specifically for a different organisational setup. They argue that there are still significant power struggles between the two organisations and between specific persons in the two organisations. Some even argue that the conflicts are bigger today. One of the interviewed researchers reflects:

"Long-standing battle lines stretching back decades are often tied to personal conflicts. These conflicts arise from the fact that many influential individuals have maintained their powerful positions for a very long time. This situation, instead of fostering mutual understanding as one might expect over time, has unfortunately led to a defensive

stance. The communication lines are crucial here, as it becomes evident that there are different perspectives on the best path to achieving international sporting success."

(Interviewed researcher)

The reasons behind the (personal) conflict(s) can – according to the same interviewee – be boiled down to the fundamental difference between RF and SOK pointed to above: RF sees itself as the overarching institution with the mandate of dealing with sport as such in Sweden – including elite sport.

RF wants a single organisation, not two. In contrast, SOK is not aligned with that understanding and finds that its organisational mandate and mission is to deal with elite sport. A mandate it feels has been given by both the part of Swedish sport that is working with elite-level activities and the International Olympic Committee (IOC).

Put differently, RF and SOK have inconsistent perspectives that also give rise to personal conflicts based on power-related questions of who is entitled to be the prime organisation concerning Swedish elite sport in the first place.

Another of the interviewees argues that the basic conflict stems from different voting systems in RF and SOK. In SOK, the federations have one vote each whereas in RF the number of votes (at the general assembly) is weighted in accordance with the number of members in the federations. The large federations don't want to lose influence in relation to elite sport, which they would if SOK had the sole responsibility for elite sport, and this element has been a driver of conflict across the organisations historically.

Some interviewees opposing the current organisational structure even stress that SOK constitutes an untransparent, highly top-steered organisation, where informal and formal sanctions are used against critics of the organisation or its employees, and where self-supplying networks run the SOK organisation behind a staffage shield of democratic processes.

According to the most critical interviewees, not only does this lead to inefficiencies in SOK and between SOK and RF, but also to improper development and absence of new impulses from science, management, and (new) people in SOK. This can in turn lead to a lower output level with decreasing international results.[22]

The evaluation team has not been able to test the degree to which the criticism of SOK is true. It also has not been possible to test if the cooperation is better or worse today than previously. While some interviewees argue that the environment of cooperation between SOK and RF is much better today than previously, others strongly disagree.

[22] It should be noted that while no critisism of the role of RF has been raised by the interviewees included, we cannot say for sure whether there are parallel problems related to RF as pointed out towards SOK. Future studies should look into this.

What is clear, however, is that significant lines of conflict appear to exist in Swedish elite sport. These conflicts hinder optimal cooperation between the involved organisations and stakeholders in the system. This issue is a problem that needs to be addressed.

### Summing up

This section has dealt with the question of organisation in the Swedish elite sport system. The findings clearly point out inefficiencies and problems associated with how the two organisations – RF and SOK – are positioned in Swedish elite sport.

The problems are founded in fundamental (conflict-related) questions about who has – and should have – the primary responsibility in the Swedish elite sport system, and how different tasks should be divided between these stakeholders. Over the years, this fundamental issue appears to be the backdrop on which many other questions are dealt with.

It appears that the development of Swedish elite sport is constrained by this deadlock. In the discussion and concluding sections, we will look more into how questions of organisation should be dealt with in the future to better release the potential of Swedish elite sport.

## Pillar 3: Sport participation and foundation

A high level of sports participation and physical activity among a nation's population is important because it builds a (potential) talent pool from where (future) athletes can be recruited. Other things being equal, this enhances the chances of international sporting success (De Bosscher, 2007).

A sound system foundation must be in place to achieve a high level of physical activity and mass participation. This means that organised sports and programmes at various levels should be institutionalised. For example, in the form of sports clubs and associations which organise sports activities for children, adolescents, and adults (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

Private sector initiatives – for example in the form of fitness centres and gyms – or school programmes for physical activity and sport contribute to a robust platform structure catering for a potentially high level of mass participation (Storm & Hansen, 2021). Still, for elite sport, participation through organised sports, i.e. sports clubs and associations, is the most important element because the international elite sport system is based on this structure.

### Results

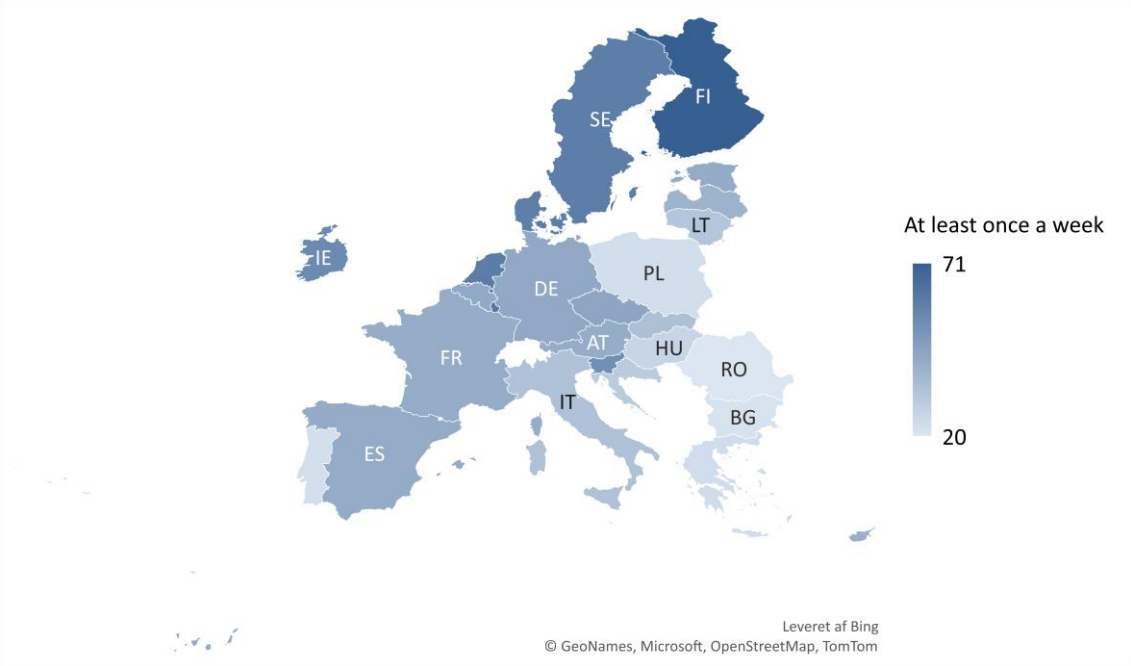
Figure 12 displays the variances in sports involvement across EU member states. The map depicts the proportions of citizens (aged +15 years) who partake in sport or exercise at least once a week based on data from the Special Eurobarometer 525 on Sport and Physical Activity collected in 2022 (European Commission, 2022).

Noteworthy differences among nations can be seen with high levels of participation observed in the Nordic countries (see also: Skille, 2011), Ireland, the Netherlands,

Luxembourg, and Slovenia. These are trailed by central European countries, characterised by moderate participation rates.

Conversely, the eastern European nations and Portugal exhibit the lowest levels of participation. Most importantly, Sweden is among the nations with the highest participation rates, only surpassed by Finland.

**Figure 12: Proportion of citizens who engage in sport or exercise at least once a week (%), selected European countries**




Source: European Commission (2022). Question: 'How often do you exercise or play sport?' (n = 26,578).

According to a recent governmental report (Sverige Kommittén för främjande av ökad fysisk aktivitet [The Committee for the Promotion of Physical Activity in Sweden]), 2023), two-thirds of the Swedish population consider themselves in good health and two-thirds of Swedish adults (+17 years) report that they are active at least 150 minutes per week[23], which is the level recommended by the World Health Organisation (WHO). However, people with a lower socio-economic status are less physically active compared to people with a higher socio-economic status.

Further, and according to Nyberg (2017), many teenagers do not meet the Swedish recommendations of at least 60 minutes of physical activity with medium to high intensity per day. The situation worsens with (increasing) age. The overall impression is that general participation patterns in Sweden have worsened over the years for this age group.

[23] According to the report these results are self-reported and usually higher than results found in studies using accelerometers and more objective measuring approaches.

According to Lundvall and Sundblad (2017), societal developments like urbanisation, increasing use of digital media and screen time have negatively affected the amount of time children and young people are physically active or doing sports. Not only does this affect their health, but it can also have longer-term consequences for Swedish competitiveness in international elite sport.

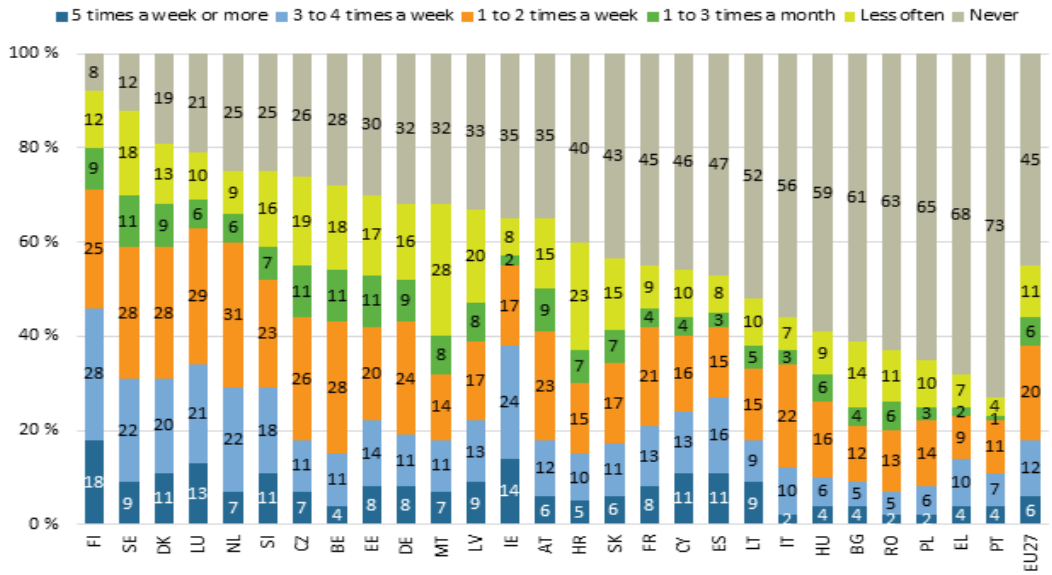
Today, among children and youth [0-17 years] only two out of ten are physically active one hour a day as recommended by the Swedish authorities (Sverige Kommittén för främjande av ökad fysisk aktivitet [The Committee for the Promotion of Physical Activity in Sweden]), 2023).

Girls are less physically active than boys and there are large regional differences across the country as well, which is also related to the socio-economic factors. As for the population as a whole, a lower socio-economic status among parents is associated with lower participation rates and memberships for children and youth in sports clubs and associations (see also: Norberg, 2023).

Digging deeper into the Eurobarometer data – covering people aged +15 years – figures show that Portugal stands out among the surveyed European countries with 73% of individuals never engaged in sports or exercise. On the other end of the spectrum, and as mentioned earlier, Finland has the highest participation rate, with only 8% abstaining from sports or exercise altogether and a significant 46% participating three or more times a week.

This can be seen in, figure 13 displaying the proportion of EU citizens who exercise or play sport by frequency and country. Finland is in the lead, followed by Sweden and Denmark.

**Figure 13: Proportion of EU citizens who do exercise or play sport by frequency and country (%)**




Source: European Commission (2022). Question: 'How often do you exercise or play sport?' (n = 26,578).

In 2012, 31% of the Swedish population (age: 16-84 years) were members of a sports club, which – as mentioned earlier – constitutes the foundation of the sports system and the platform from where potential talents are recruited and developed (association) (Norberg, 2012).

Further, close to all Swedish children (2012: 82%) had been a member of a sports club at that time (Norberg, 2012). They had also tried out several sports.

Since 2013, there have been adjustments to the national metrics measuring club membership making it difficult to draw direct comparisons and identify trends. However, according to RF, between 2015 and 2021, 35 to 37% of the Swedish population (aged 6-80 years) had been a member of a sports club/association. According to Bjärsholm and Norberg (2021) in 2021, there were around 3.1 million individual members active in "at least one of the ~18,000 local sports clubs" (p. 4).

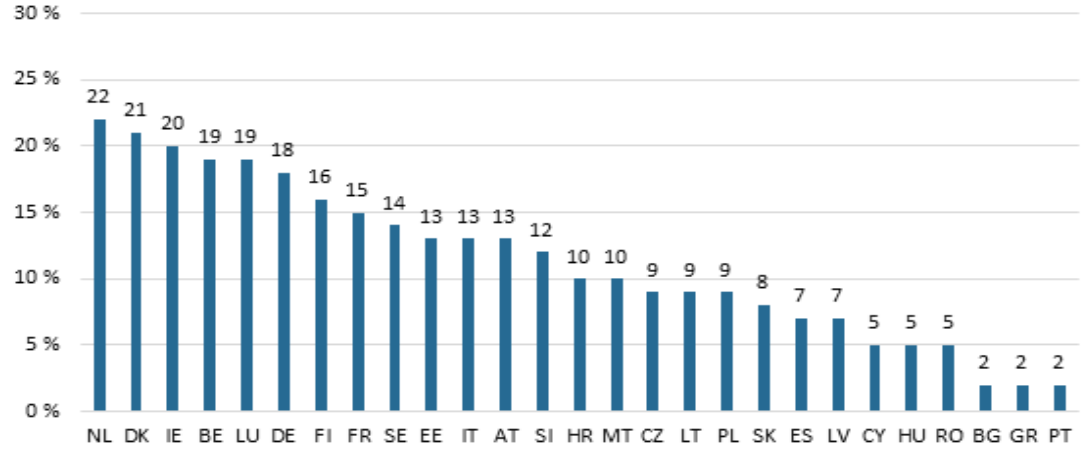
According to one of the interviewed researchers, the large number of members is one of the comparative advantages of the Swedish system:

> "In Sweden, we have 3 million memberships. It would take any other country in the world 100 years to reach the same level. This is one pillar, or a foundation, that might be changing but is incredibly difficult for another country to replicate – if we're talking about trying to take advantage of other countries' successful methods."
>
> (Interviewed researcher)

For children and youth specifically (aged 7-25), the most recent data from RF reveals that around 1 million are members of clubs and associations, and approximately 10,000 of these clubs and associations receive financial support for having activities focusing on this group of members.

Figure 14 shows that 14% of the +15-year-olds in Sweden are members of sports clubs today. This is a small decline compared to earlier. In the previous Eurobarometer survey from 2018, this share was 16% (Storm & Nielsen, 2022). Even though this indicates a small decline, the figures are roughly the same.

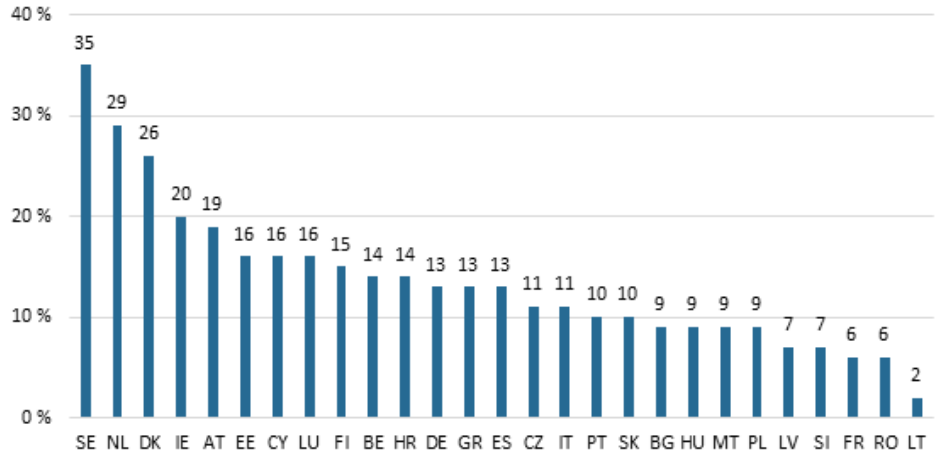
**Figure 14: Share of the adult population that is a member of a sports club (%)**




Source: European Commission (2022). Question: 'Are you a member of any of the following clubs where you participate in sport or recreational physical activity?' – Sport club (n = 26,578).

There is an explanation for the overall European decline. In 16 European member states, individuals tend to attend health or fitness centres more frequently than regular sports clubs. This tendency is most pronounced in Sweden, where 35% of respondents (adults) hold such memberships. This can be seen in figure 15.

**Figure 15: Health and fitness centre memberships by country (%)**




Source: European Commission (2022). Question: 'Are you a member of any of the following clubs where you participate in sport or recreational physical activity?' – Health or fitness centre (n = 26,578).

Additionally, there is a higher prevalence of health and fitness centre enrolments in the northern regions of Europe, than in countries situated in the southern and eastern parts. In other words, memberships in non-profit sports clubs seem to have been substituted by health and fitness centre memberships in the for-profit sector in the Nordic countries including Sweden. This could indicate a counter-trend modifying the overall decline referred to earlier.

Still, this development could present a potential issue concerning Swedish competitiveness in international elite sports, as members of fitness centres exercise outside the system that typically serves as the foundation for talent recruitment and development.

This issue may be particularly problematic for the group of younger adults, as it potentially reduces the available talent pool. Still, membership figures appear stable, as mentioned earlier. Instead, the high level of memberships in fitness centres can be interpreted as a lost potential for the elite sport system concerning this age group.

Other observations support this problem. According to Norberg and Walgren (2023), participation in *un*organised sport is common among young people in the age group 15-16 years. 50% reported this in a survey conducted in 2019. For around 47% in the same age group, doing sport in a commercial fitness centre was also common. Participation in sport in sports clubs or associations was down to third place among the respondents.

Further issues are also a cause of concern. Despite Sweden being among the most physically active in Europe, participation levels have been declining in the longer run for adults affecting their fitness level.

For example, tests among 350,000 adult Swedes show that the share of people with a low cardiorespiratory condition has increased from 27% to 46% between 1995-2017 (Ekblom-Bak et al., 2019). Combined with the findings presented earlier on children and young people, it is reasonable to argue that the general fitness level is in decline in Sweden.

### The relationship between international elite sports success and mass participation and its importance to the elite sport system

While the fostering of mass participation appears to be imperative for creating a talent pool and subsequently achieving international sporting success for a nation, it is also often argued that successful nations, athletes, or sports teams inspire children, young people, and adults to exercise or take up sport themselves (De Bosscher et al., 2013). The argumentation is usually brought into the sphere of elite sport policy because stakeholders aim to legitimise (public) subsidies for elite sport.

Regarding Swedish sport, this argumentation has been used to legitimise the funding of elite sport in an egalitarian welfare society (Norberg, 2012; Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012).

Today, it is still part of the argument put forward by some of the stakeholders. However, it was not a very apparent argument in the interviews conducted for this evaluation. In fact, several stakeholders were aware that there is no automatic relationship between elite sport success and grassroots and mass participation sports.

This is in correspondence with existing research documents (e.g. Storm et al., 2018; Storm & Holum, 2021) which underline that this only occurs under certain circumstances and that the effect is small when present. The inspirational value of elite sport is mainly temporary,

affects only small subsets of the population, and must be leveraged by other means to have any significant effect (Storm & Denstadli, 2024).

Other stronger factors determine mass participation growth, and using an elusive effect of elite sport success on mass participation as an argument is at best misguided and can lead to wrong policy decisions.

### Summing up

Sports participation is high in Sweden, and Sweden is among the top nations in Europe in this regard. The number of members in sports clubs and associations is also at a high level. However, a large proportion of participation is done outside the organised sports clubs, and this can have a negative effect on Swedish international competitiveness.

Further, there is evidence to support that participation patterns – seen in a long perspective – are developing in the wrong direction with the Swedes generally becoming less fit with many children, young people, and adults not meeting recommendations for physical activity and sport.

Still, the above-presented Swedish participation data leaves the impression that the Swedish elite sport system stands on a firm platform and is well off compared to the international situation.

Despite the negative development in participation patterns, Sweden is still a well-performing nation on this pillar with stable and high membership figures in sports clubs and associations, a high level of members in commercial fitness centres, and a generally high level of participation.

In the coming section, we now turn to examine how well the Swedish elite sport system utilises this good platform by identifying talents and developing them to the highest level.

## Pillar 4: Talent identification and development

> "Taking into account the outlined aspects to talent development, pillar 4 is concerned with the national strategies towards the identification of young talents and how talent development is facilitated in (…) different nations."
>
> (De Bosscher et al., 2015, p. 198)

Talent identification and development is essential, especially for small countries, because the talent pool is comparatively lower than in nations with large populations. With Sweden being the largest country among those included for comparison, the need for a successful talent identification and development system remains important despite the high number of inhabitants, the high level of memberships in sports clubs (grassroots sports) and fitness centres, and the generally high level of physical activity compared to the other Nordic countries.

Further, in relation to rival nations in Europe and on other continents, Sweden is still a small country, and keeping up competitiveness in an international context therefore requires a focus on this pillar.

## Results

Internationally there has been a debate about what is the most optimal way to develop athletic skills and talents. The central matter is whether early talent identification and specialisation (in one sport) is the best policy to achieve international sporting success, or if diversified training in various youth sports should be the approach to talent development (Schubring et al., 2022).

In Sweden, as in other Nordic countries, this discussion appears to be affected by the earlier described welfare state norms and approach to sport in general. Developing talented athletes is based on securing broad participation in a variety of sports in the early and adolescent years so that children and young people get to try out different sports, become comfortable with physical activity, and increase their well-being.

Therefore, late specialisation is the main characteristic of the Swedish model and is in correspondence with the dominating societal norms where children and young people should be guided on play rather than (towards elite sport) performance (Norberg & Sjöblom, 2012).

This doesn't mean that specific sports do not pick and develop talents early on (more on this below). However, there is no overall national policy for the identification or development of talents, and – therefore – the responsibility is primarily placed at the level of the federations (S. S. Andersen et al., 2015). In this sense, the Swedish elite sport system differs from other international systems through a focus on decentralisation and a lack of a homogeneous development model (Schubring et al., 2022).

Sweden does not appear in either SPLISS 1.0 or 2.0 studies. Therefore, it is difficult to make a comparison to the other Nordic countries. However, a Swedish working group has recently assessed the Swedish ranking compared to the other countries (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020). The authors of this report have in-depth knowledge of the Swedish elite sport system. However, it must be added that the assessment of the Swedish system in the report is not based on a thorough data-driven methodology like the SPLISS approach.

The ranking of Sweden in relation to the countries included in the SPLISS research has a stronger subjective element than the country rankings in the SPLISS reports 1.0 and 2.0. Perhaps, the evaluation was also influenced by the potential role of the report as evidence for the need for reform and more support for Swedish elite sport. Anyway, with these caveats we include the findings in this report.

According to the study, Sweden is doing slightly worse than other Nordic countries such as Denmark and Norway. Keeping in mind that the latest SPLISS study may not reflect the

current strengths and weaknesses of the talent system in the different Nordic countries, the results must be taken with appropriate caution. For example, the data from Denmark is a part of the study from 2015 (SPLISS 2.0) (De Bosscher et al., 2015), whereas Norway's data came from the first study in 2008 (SPLISS 1.0) (De Bosscher et al., 2008).

Still, the impression based on the available literature and the interviews conducted is that the development and identification of talent – despite the focus on late specialisation and play – still seems to function quite well and on a relatively large scale in Sweden – also compared to the other Nordic countries. In all Nordic countries, including Sweden, national regulations forbid sports-specific specialisation towards elite development before the age of 13 (S. S. Andersen et al., 2015).

Therefore, and according to the interviewees, the most common time to specialise in a specific sport is around the age of 15 (with differences across sports). A study by Fahlström et al. (2015) confirms this. In addition, the study finds that the majority of national A-team athletes in the sports studied have played multiple sports before focusing on their primary sport – as would also be expected from the earlier-mentioned characteristics of the Swedish system.

According to the interviews conducted, one of the critical areas in this pillar is the existence of programmes regarding the combination of elite sport and studies at the upper secondary and university levels. While mainly related to dual career issues examined in the section on pillar 5, the educational system still plays a significant supporting role in Sweden's identification and talent development system, making it relevant to look deeper into this here.

As will be shown, the educational system plays a critical role in enabling talents to develop their career. Further, it supports the development of the athletes with the effects of this being generally positive. However, there are also issues related to this pillar that need to be addressed.

### RIGs and NIUs

A general assumption is that it is necessary to achieve 10,000 hours of intentional training over more than ten years to acquire a top-level competence in sport (S. S. Andersen et al., 2015). Because the average Swedish athlete starts developing their elite career around the fifteenth year, they invest a significant amount of time in sport over a life phase, which collides with studies on secondary and tertiary levels (De Bosscher et al., 2008).

Fortunately, in Sweden, the educational system consists of various programmes designed for this situation. For example, upper secondary sport schools ('idrottsgymnasier') were established in the late 1970s with state funding (Sjöblom & Fahlén, 2010).

As of 2020, the total number of these schools is 536, and they aim to support athletes in acquiring an education while also participating in sporting activities at a high level. Two different national programmes are institutionalised and differ in recruitment focus and number.

The National Sports Gymnasiums (RIG) are recruiting talent on a national scale who are considered to have the potential to reach the international level as senior athletes. Further, the Nationally Approved Sports Programmes (NIU) at what is mentioned by the interviewees as 'elite sport friendly gymnasiums' have a broader recruitment profile focusing on athletes who have the potential of reaching the national level as seniors (P. G. Fahlström et al., 2023).

The student-athletes on both RIG and NIU can attend the normal education programme at the schools with a specialisation in 'special sports'. Courses embedded in this specialisation can amount to 700 points out of the 2,500 points that are needed to pass the final exams over three years. Courses have a majority of points in training and competition science, including specialisation in a specific sport and a small subject on leadership.

The number of points that are available in the 'special sports' specialisation varies across schools, however. This means that student-athletes do not have the same privileges regarding extra training and time to focus on their specific development path (Ferry & Andersson, 2021).

Despite these issues, the sports school programme appears to be a significant support system for elite sport providing flexibility for the athletes and assisting them in developing their talent. Compared to Denmark, the programme is much wider and reaches a lot more athletes even when taking differences in population size across Sweden and Denmark into account.

In Denmark, specific formal points-giving courses are not available. Instead, the student-athletes are given extra time for training and competitions. Further, they can get assistance related to schoolwork and exams (Storm & Eske, 2022).

Today, around 600 athletes annually are approved to become a part of the Team Danmark support programme that entitles students to study on flexible terms (Team Danmark, 2021). However, not all Danish athletes take advantage of the programme.

In Sweden, a total of 15,200 approved studentships are on offer at the 54 RIGs and 482 NIUs. Most of the schools that offer courses in 'special sports' are municipal (Ferry & Andersson, 2021).

The figures indicate a policy support structure that focuses on broader recruitment in Sweden compared to Denmark, even though most of the students are studying at NIUs and therefore do not have the objective of developing their elite talents for the international level.

It is important to note that other differences exist. For example, Danish athletes have so far been granted an extra year to finish their studies, while Swedish athletes are on standard

study time and can apply for one extra year at RIGs (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2023a). Still, the Swedish system appears to be much more substantial and wider than in Denmark.

One of the reasons behind Sweden having a great number of available studentships is the indirect finances provided. According to one of our interviewees, the schools get financial support from the National Agency for Education based on the number of students they have, while the federations approve the students for the respective programmes. This gives the federations an incentive to approve submissions because they do not carry any of the cost for sending the athletes for the programmes.

> "They [the schools, ed.] apply for that status to become an NIU, and then we as a federation can choose to say yes or no. If yes, then it [the assignment, ed.] goes to the school system, which often says yes, and then one contribution is included per student. (…) If we say yes, it will cost us nothing. So, this NIU system has grown enormously. Through the programme, you can receive special education in a specific sport. So, if you have ten students, and you get 15,000 per student, then you [the schools, ed.] have 150,000 for hiring a full-time coach or teacher. (…) For the sports clubs, it has been very important because the trainer/teacher is often employed there. Sports clubs often find it difficult to get a full-time employee, and NIU is a good contribution to this. Then the coach can have these hours [at NIU, ed.] while working at the sports clubs at the same time."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

The programme is not only an advantage for the students, but it can also indirectly support the signing of a coach who can work part-time as a teacher at one of the sports schools and part-time as a coach in a local club.

It is important to note, however, that the direction of the programme will potentially change soon. The Swedish Ministry of Education and Research has reviewed the programmes and suggested a clearer, more transparent, and more sustainable system.

In addition, RF has announced a research and development project where admission and selection will be examined, and the quality of these processes will be developed further (Ferry & Andersson, 2021).

Overall, there are different views on the role the programme plays in talent development. According to one of the interviewees, the programme has not been developed over time and is not up to date, especially there is a missing link to talent development on the national team level. The schools do not have the right offers for the athletes, and the targeted athletes are not the ones who end up as top performers in terms of sporting results as seniors (C. Nyberg et al., 2023). One of the interviewed stakeholders expresses their thoughts on the quality of the programme in this way:

> "I think the sports gymnasiums have been very important for some sports' talent base, but not for all sports. The sports gymnasiums need to be reframed for the future, at least for some sports. Some have to be changed, to be more tailor-made."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

Other interviewed stakeholders see the schools as being a great foundation for development, especially in sports such as biathlon, where the athletes have a clear pathway through the sports schools and into the university in Östersund, where the national skiing centre is located.

### A critical transition phase: From junior to senior

According to the interviewed stakeholders, the transition from lower to upper secondary education is important for the athletes' chances to reach the highest level across many sports in Sweden.

It represents a crucial transition point for many talents between the ages of 15 and 16 years and therefore needs extra attention. Many of the interviewees argue that the Swedish system needs improvement to make sure the athletes are supported in this phase.

The transition phase from upper secondary education to higher education is another area in need of extra attention. Depending on the sport, this transition is often connected to the transition between junior and senior, according to available literature and several of the interviews conducted. This aspect will be addressed more thoroughly in the section on pillar 5.

### A biased recruitment of talent?

It is of great importance to have an adequate and diverse selection process to find all the potential talents in different sports. As mentioned earlier, the responsibility for selecting athletes lies mainly with the sports federations.

According to the interviewees, the quality of the selection and development of athletes varies across different sports based on the financial power of their respective federations. In the context of football, the Swedish Football Federation works with a broad recruitment of potential players because it doesn't want to miss out. The federation has employees in every district who have inside knowledge about which talented players appear in different age groups. This represents a very thorough and high-quality approach.

In other minor sports, a major problem regarding efficient talent development lies in the context of prioritising a small elite at the top. According to several interviewees, focusing on a few top athletes to make (short-term) results, creates a gap for upcoming generations due to the lack of focus on the talent below the top.

For example, in wrestling, according the one of the interviewees, the prioritisation of a national team at the top Olympic level resulted in a lack of funding towards the next generation of talented wrestlers who took medals in the junior categories, but then for some reason stopped. The wrestling federation didn't have the means to address both the top-level athletes and 'upcoming' ones at the same time leading to a gap in the talent stream. Other interviewees from smaller sports have similar examples illustrating the short-term/long-

term dilemma that characterises the situation, especially for sports that do not have many resources themselves but are dependent on SOK for funding.

When looking at the aspect of inclusion in the RIG and NIU programmes, the selection of student-athletes happens on a methodical and detailed basis in terms of specific guidelines by RF that are being used by coaches and teachers at the sports schools. It is the special sports teachers who are responsible for the actual selection of student-athletes on nomination from the federations.

A majority of the students have a Swedish background and have parents with a high level of education and a good socio-economic background. A majority of the student-athletes are part of team sports, and it seems that sports with many athletes have better conditions in creating dual career programmes (Kjær et al., 2022).

Many sports do not live up to the demands of balancing genders – i.e. that 40% of students must be from the underrepresented gender. Instead, there seems to be an underrepresentation of either boys or girls in different kinds of sports.

The relative age effect is also of importance when looking at the selection of who is included in the programmes. There is a risk that talented athletes born in the early months of the year are viewed as more talented and this can have a direct influence on the selection (P. G. Fahlström et al., 2023).
According to Ferry (2023), the programmes at the university level also attract a rather homogenous group of students. Compared to all university students in Sweden, a higher amount of the students are men and have parents with a high level of education.

There are fewer student-athletes with a non-Swedish background (Ferry, 2023), which may hinder the development of talent and may indicate a social and ethnic bias in the recruitment of students at this level. Not only might it lower the possibility of recruiting talents, but it is also inconsistent with the norms of universalism in the Swedish welfare state regime.

A study on talent identification in Swedish football has challenged the hypothesis that it is an objective and rational process. According to the study, the identification of talent is based on feelings – on what feels right among the persons in charge – and is influenced by the practical knowledge which people have from previous encounters, experiences, and interpretations of what elite football is all about (Lund & Söderström, 2017).

The importance of practical sense is also at stake when selecting student-athletes for the sports gymnasiums. The actual admission processes for different sports at the schools vary enormously, and what they have in common is that it is a challenge to assess who is best suited for the available courses. A lot of possible improvements have been suggested as part of making the process more formalised, systematic, and transparent (P. G. Fahlström et al., 2023).

In general, the group of student-athletes consists of a larger proportion of boys than girls. Further, a majority are Swedish-born and from a good socio-economic background, as mentioned earlier. In addition, the student-athletes have better study grades compared to other students in the gymnasiums (Ferry & Andersson, 2021).

### Summing up

Seen from an overall perspective, the Swedish talent identification and development system seems to function quite well. The programmes that are embedded in the educational system, especially the RIG's and NIU's are a great support for talented athletes in a crucial time in their development.

The identification of talented athletes is working well on an overall basis, and the main responsibility lies with the specific sports clubs and federations. However, a biased recruitment system is also identified with athletes from good socio-economic conditions and ethnic Swedish backgrounds being in the majority in the programmes. At the university level, this appears to be even more pronounced.

The problems with the talent and identification system in Sweden appear to be bigger in smaller sports, where studying at the RIG's and NIU's has been seen to be a very important part of the path to becoming an elite athlete. However, recently, awareness has been made of the fact that many top athletes today have not attended the programmes.

Still, the overall impression, even with the challenges identified, is that the talent identification and development system is working relatively well in Sweden. This doesn't mean that there is no room for improvement. There are still issues to be addressed, especially in relation to identification and securing a broad recruitment of talents.

Also, there are issues related to the short-term focus on international results, especially for smaller sports with fewer resources. The problem is that by focusing on short-term results and allocating resources to this, there is a risk of missing out on future talents and developing them to the highest level.

In the next section, we will dive further into how top athletes are being supported both during and after their careers.

## Pillar 5: Athletic career and post-career support

> "Pillar 5 deals with the support services athletes receive once they start to perform at senior level and how they are prepared for life after sport."
>
> (De Bosscher et al., 2015, p. 135)

At the stage in their career, where athletes are on the brink of being fully developed as talents (between the ages 20-30), they begin participating in big international tournaments and spend a significant – and increasing – amount of time on their sport (Schubring et al., 2022).

At the same time, the athletes undergo identity-related changes in the transition from adolescence to adulthood and experience changes in the character of their social networks, challenges of combining sport with studies/work and, finally, the transition from the athletic career to post-career roles.

Taking these issues into consideration is imperative. Countries that support athletes during and after their careers tend to be more successful (De Bosscher et al., 2015). There are additional benefits associated with dual-career programmes as they increase athletes' well-being, reduce stress, and improve general health and social networks. In the long run, such programmes can also ease the transition to life after elite sport (Bankel et al., 2018).

Many countries support the development of talents and offer targeted support to top athletes during their careers at the top level. Others provide support to a broader set of athletes at various stages of their careers in a more holistic approach involving post-career support as well. In this section, we deal with the Swedish approach to athletic career and post-career support.

## Results

It is the general impression that the Swedish elite sport system has a well-working and broad dual career programme at the senior level. Still, there are issues, one of them being that the programme only supports the athletes during their careers. In terms of post-career support, no programme exists (Stambulova et al., 2007).

There are other issues as well, especially related to the economic situation of the athletes. In a social democratic welfare state regime type with a strong focus on decommodification, it could be expected to see a higher level of financial support despite there being various programmes in place to assist the athletes.

The working group referred to earlier (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020), has looked into dual career issues, however, mainly on the aspect of post-career support. According to their study, Sweden's performance on this pillar is relatively low compared to Denmark and Norway.

There are several reasons for the low Swedish score. For example, on the national team level, athletes need to pay for training camps etc., creating a huge economic burden for the individual.

Athletes can apply for a student grand and loan if they study at least 50% fulltime (Centrala studiestödsnämnden, 2023) at university level. It is also possible for the student-athlete to get a scholarship of around 50,000 SEK per year, but it is currently only available for 50 persons in total (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2023c). Further, the students enrolled are allowed to lower the intensity of their studies, so they can study for a longer period of time. Compared to the dual-career system at the gymnasium level, the student-athletes are not supported with more coaching and training as part of the programme.

At the university level, dual-career programmes were launched in 2014 in which athletes could focus on their sporting career in combination with studies on flexible terms. However, Sweden has not had the same level of quality on this programme as on the programmes at the gymnasium level even though some universities have worked with the facilitation of elite athletes' dual careers for many years:

> "When it comes to dual careers at the university level, however, Sweden's approach has not been as methodical as it has been at the gymnasium level. As it stands, some universities have many years of experience in facilitating elite athletes' dual careers (on a broadly contractual basis), while others have only recently begun to work systematically to help students combine high-performance sport and university studies."
>
> (Bankel et al., 2018, p. 5)

The development of dual-career support at the university level looks similar to the one at the gymnasium level with the introduction of the Swedish National Sports Universities (RIU) and Elite Sports Friendly Universities (EVL). Overall, the regulations set by RF to become a sports university differ between the two types.

RIUs are obliged to support dual careers, do research in the field of sports, and offer educational programmes for RF while EVLs are only required to support dual careers (Bankel et al., 2018).

In order to become a student-athlete at RIUs or EVLs, the athletes have to be part of the national team in their respective sport or have the potential to be included. From 2018 to 2022, eight and ten universities across Sweden were approved as being RIUs and EVLs, respectively (Bankel et al., 2018). Furthermore, six RIUs and 13 EVLs are in place for the period 2022-2026 (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2023c). In general, there are different requirements to become an RIU or EVL university.

According to a number of interviewees, the main weakness in the Swedish elite sport system can be identified around the gap between the junior and senior levels and is influenced by a lack of qualified coaches and financial support. According to Stambulova (2009), the transition from junior to senior is one of the most challenging career transitions for athletes, making it imperative to address.

According to the interviewees, when the support at the upper secondary education level stops, then the next level of support is weak or absent. For many athletes in smaller sports, the dual-career pathway is the only solution to a sustainable future after the end of the elite sport career making it imperative to address weaknesses here. One of the interviewed stakeholders argues:

> "The RIU system is still not a system. It is just something that they say (our school is trying to adapt). Every time we have some issues, the school says this is a high-quality education. We can't change this (…). I think we need government support, and they need to

> build a couple of centres where you can focus on the support (…). They can say (at every high-level education) that we are a support-friendly school and there are no obligations."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

Other stakeholders argue in a similar way that the programmes at gymnasium level should inspire the development of university-level programmes with greater collaboration between sports clubs and universities, as is done in the RIGs (upper secondary education, Riksidrottsgymnasium) with a great number of coaches. It is important in the context of more qualified coaches for the athletes going from junior to senior.

In general, the impression from the interviews conducted is that some sports face issues with communication and getting university support when problems arise. Universities are not obligated to help specific athletes and are focusing their resources on educational issues. A more centralised structure consisting of elite sport centres, where support can be given more directly when relevant, is suggested by some of the interviewees.

### Individual-based support for athletes

According to De Bosscher et al. (2015), individual support services are available at a high level in most countries included in the SPLISS studies, but the assessment of the quality is only average in the sample of nations. Further, these support services are more accessible for top athletes than for lower-ranked athletes.

According to the interviewees, this issue is also present in the Swedish elite sport system, especially when looking at minor sports where financial prioritisation has to be made because of minimal funding.

According to a number of interviewed coaches, the prioritisation of the top elite makes it difficult to support the lower-ranked athletes. It creates a gap between generations, where some of the young talents are excluded from support because there are insufficient funds.

Especially in sports with long career paths, financial support for the top elite can last for years giving support for other upcomers in the same period a lower priority. The direct consequence is that it leads to a greater number of dropouts among young talents.

A challenge for many smaller sports federations is that their primary financial income to build and sustain elite sport programmes comes from SOK, where specific criteria for performance (potential or current medalist) or potential performance (the possibility of reaching the world top within three-six years) applies (Dahlberg & Kalén, 2022). These criteria make it difficult for smaller federations to focus on broader support for athletes as financial support from SOK only applies to the top elite.

Several studies have looked further into the experiences of student-athletes when trying to cope with a dual career, especially in the early years of their sporting career (Kjær et al., 2023; Linnér et al., 2021). It seems that a lot of emphasis is put on the importance of getting an academic education in combination with elite sports, where other options such as part-

time employment in industry or business are not supported through the established national programmes.

According to several interviewees, a lack of flexible options for elite athletes during their senior years is a problem because the only visible pathway is through academia. For athletes with other ambitions than an academic career, the missing alternatives can result in drop-outs because the current pathway is not attractive.

More flexible options for elite athletes are therefore required, especially a greater collaboration with businesses and industries or other forms of education to give the Swedish elite athletes the possibility to have a flexible working schedule. Some of the same problems exist in Denmark (Storm et al., 2020). In other Scandinavian countries, some studies have also identified problems in relation to motherhood and athletic careers (e.g. Bergström et al., 2023).

SOK has different programmes in place that focus on supporting the individual athlete both from the gap between junior to senior and further during their careers. To make it easier to pursue a top-level career, a funding programme named 'Olympic Offensiv' was created for young and promising athletes that had the potential to secure a spot in the Topp och Talang programme mentioned earlier.

Currently, 149 athletes are part of this Topp och Talang programme. The main objective of the programme is to make it possible for athletes to fully focus on their journey towards sporting success regardless of their own income or the finances of their sports (Dahlberg & Kalén, 2022).

The support is based on an individual development plan, which is designed in collaboration with the athlete, coaches, and sports leaders at the specific federation. The plan is evaluated each year to ensure that the athletes are of high international quality and progress accordingly (Dahlberg & Kalén, 2022).

The supported athletes are 27.5 years on average. There seems to be a prioritisation in supporting younger athletes as a response to the problems associated with the challenges facing upcoming athletes even though the average age of entering the programme was 22.5 years (Dahlberg & Kalén, 2022).

The Olympic Offensiv programme started in the summer of 2019 to increase support to talents that could compete at Winter Olympics in 2026 and 2030. More specific financial support to certain winter sports such as skating, curling, biathlon, and ice hockey was launched in 2020. Further, a dedicated sports manager was hired to develop talent and function as support for coaches in winter sports.

On the summer side, sports such as athletics, swimming, wrestling, and judo were prioritised in 2022 to optimise success at the Olympics in 2028 and 2032 (Sveriges Olympiska Kommitté, 2019).

Furthermore, the education of coaches and an extra effort towards female trainers was put on the agenda. In addition, extra focus on research and development is part of this programme. The lack of qualified coaches has been mentioned in numerous interviews as a weakness for athletes in their early senior years. The section on pillar 7 will give a more detailed dive into coaching support and development.

### Socio-economic conditions

Despite the availability of financial support and dual career opportunities, major challenges have been reported related to the socio-economic conditions of athletes. First, and as mentioned earlier, the number of athletes covered by financial support programmes is relatively small with around 200 athletes in total.

A significant weakness in Swedish elite sport is the financial conditions for many athletes, especially for those on the level below the top elite. According to a majority of the interviewees, many athletes struggle to make a living in the early part of their career, especially in combination with challenges in making the jump to the senior level or trying to cope with a dual career. Later on, athletes may have problems keeping up with people their age in terms of income. Planning for a family is another issue mentioned by several of the interviewees.

According to Dohlsten et al. (2021), many athletes decide to work part-time in order to ensure a balance between recovery, training, and competition with a loss of money as a result. Also, trying to combine elite sports with work is perceived to be more challenging than establishing a dual career by attending university.

Financial support from sponsors or parents also plays a major role in the sustainability of the athletes' careers where lack of results can negatively affect their financial situation (Dohlsten et al., 2021).

### Summing up

In this section, we have identified several issues related to athletic and post-career support. One key area seems to be concentrated around the gap between junior and senior levels, especially in the minor sports where resources are few and the small federations tend to prioritise resources towards the top elite resulting in a lack of support towards the athletes on the level below.

Also, dual career programmes for elite athletes are mainly relevant for athletes following an academic path while other flexible options for supporting athletes are lacking. Better collaboration between businesses and sports federations is wanted, so athletes have more opportunities to make a living while doing elite sport.

In general, many elite athletes have a hard time making a living while doing elite sports. Support programmes from SOK give career support – also financially – for the top elite and

promising athletes on the brink of delivering results in the near future. Also, a handful of scholarships are handed to elite athletes by the RF.

A focus on short-term results affects the long-term development of athletes, especially in the early senior years where elite athletes need to deliver results in order to get support. This is not sustainable for many athletes in the long run.

## Pillar 6: Training facilities

Pillar 6 is about "national coordination and planning of elite sport facilities and the network of high-quality national and regional facilities".

(De Bosscher et al., 2015, p. 262)

The availability and quality of training facilities are important for elite sport success. Other studies show that a high score on this pillar correlates significantly with international sporting success, particularly in summer sports (De Bosscher et al., 2015).

In the country comparison in the SPLISS 2.0 report (which did not include Sweden and Norway), Finland and Denmark are ranked close to average in this respect (De Bosscher et al., 2015). One of the interviewees, who has in-depth knowledge of training facilities in all Nordic countries, considers the training facilities in Finland to be the best among the Nordic countries (Storm & Nielsen, 2022).

In the report by Riksidrottsförbundet (2020) on Swedish elite sport, the training facilities for Swedish elite athletes are ranked lower than other comparable countries. The training facilities in Norway and Denmark are seen to be level with the best-performing countries.

### Results

The interviews with stakeholders show a general satisfaction with the available training facilities. Although some facilities do not have the capacity to fulfil all needs, the interviewees argue that Swedish athletes can train in adequate training facilities, when they like, and wherever they prefer.

The availability of training facilities is an important competitive strength of the Swedish elite sport system, although societal changes in terms of massive urbanisation create challenges related to the use and maintenance of facilities, especially in the countryside:

> "I would say that facilities are one key element of strength in the Swedish system (...). Over the last 40 years, we have seen some changes in society that will affect the strength of this pillar, because we [Sweden, ed.] have had a massive urbanisation rate which means that the easily accessible facilities that were in the countryside, very few people live there and the facilities aren't used the same way, and not kept the same way because municipalities and councils cannot really afford to keep them up to date (…) but overall one of the strong pillars in Sweden."

(Interviewed stakeholder)

The quality of training facilities is also considered at a generally high level according to other interviewed stakeholders.

It was part of the social democratic welfare state ideal to make good quality sports facilities available to all independent of status, income, and location. The massive building of such facilities – both in schools and municipal facilities built and owned by local governments – in the first half of the 20th century is an important part of the reason why Sweden became an early superpower in the era of amateur sports.

Apart from the availability and quality of the facilities, their location is also crucial in relation to elite sports. The facilities must be of top quality and close to the places where the elite athletes train.

In Finland, this is a a big problem as the well-sourced sports institutes are located in places where young people are reluctant to live (Storm & Nielsen, 2022). Similarly, in Sweden, there is a problem with the location of Bosön, which is the RFs development centre. According to its website, this is a place,

> "where Swedish sports are developed through education, tests, training, and meetings. Bosön is an inspiring and unique meeting place for development. Here, special sports associations invest in training, tests, and meetings. Sports associations come here to train and be inspired. (…) Bosön is a unique meeting place for development and growing in the sports environment."

The training facilities at Bosön are of good general quality, with a high-quality test centre, equipment and highly skilled personnel. However, for many sports, the centre is not equipped with the special facilities which are required. Also, its location outside of Stockholm is not attractive enough for athletes to come there regularly.

In the interviews, several representatives of sports federations expressed that they do not consider Bosön to be an attractive training centre partly because of the lack of specialised facilities, but mainly because use and accommodation are considered too expensive and daily travel to and from Bosön too time-consuming. The federations pay for travel, accommodation and use of testing equipment, but this has proven insufficient to finance the facilities.

It seems that there is a vicious cycle in play. Fewer than expected use the centre, which makes it difficult to mobilise the investment required to get the facilities up to the standards required for the federations to use it.

As an effect, accommodation has been outsourced to a private company which raised the fees to balance the books and searched for other customers. The increased accommodation fees further reduced the use of the facilities for training.

The result has been that only a few sports federations use the facilities for training camps. It was mentioned by a representative from a federation that they chose to have a training

camp in Greece instead of Bosön for financial reasons. The gymnastics federation uses Bosön once a year and occasionally for testing but does not consider this essential.

Bosön is mostly useful in relation to youth and grassroot sports as it includes a folk high school specialised in sports (Bosön Idrottsfolkhögskola), and it also works well in relation to parasport including paralympic athletes. In relation to elite sports, it mainly functions as a test centre.

In terms of the intended function as a national training centre, Bosön does not function well. This contrasts with Olympiatoppen in Norway and also the new High-Performance Training Centre in Finland. Sweden does not have a well-sourced national training centre with centralised learning across sports.

However, there are separate training centres for individual sports or groups of sports. Several interviewees highlight the training centre in Östersund for skiing and biathlon as very successful and an example of best practice in this respect. Many of the skiers and most of the biathletes are based there and train together with access to top-quality facilities and excellent coaches and specialised experts. Other examples are the centre for combat sports in Malmö and two successful sailing schools.

There are also local elite sport centres in collaboration with universities, municipalities, and regions in different parts of Sweden:

> "There are these elite sport centres that started out in the late 90's, and we have a number of those (…). They are run by the municipality in collaboration with universities (…). It can be a municipality in collaboration with regions as well. We have in Stockholm, Malmö, Falun, Östersund, Luleå, Örebro et cetera (…). Stockholm can be seen as a complement to our national training centre [in Bosön, ed.]."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

However, only in the case of Östersund does a majority of the targeted elite athletes live close to the training centres. This is seldom the case with the other training centres, which obviously reduces their functionality.

In terms of availability and quality of training facilities, there are problems related to the needs of specific sports. Some of these issues were raised during the interviews. There are problems with access to facilities for team sports in the major cities. The football federation needs more football fields, in particular full-size indoor fields. The wrestling federation misses the facilities at the wrestling academies previously located in military units. The shooting federation is currently lacking ammunition as a knock-on effect from the war in Ukraine. Figure skaters cannot use ice rinks enough and at adequate times because of the prioritisation of ice hockey. The athletics federation needs more indoor facilities, but is otherwise well equipped with up-to-date training facilities in six performance centres spread around Sweden. Of course, these are only examples.

### Summing up

The interviews with stakeholders and other data collected in this study do not confirm the low evaluation of training facilities outlined in the preamble to this section. Training facilities in Sweden are generally of a high quality, but there are of course wishes and needs for better availability and an updating of the quality of training facilities in many sports. In particular, the availability of good quality training facilities everywhere and for everybody is very good in Sweden.

The location of training facilities for elite athletes is more problematic. Apart from the centralised training centre for skiers and biathletes in Östersund, there are no functioning national training centres in Sweden, which is consequently lacking the combined effects of daily cooperation and learning that follows from the centralisation of coaches, athletes, and systematic expertise as well as high-quality facilities as seen in the other Nordic countries, in particular Norway.

## Pillar 7: Coach provision and coach development

> "There are strong and significant correlations between the overall quality of coaching provision in the sample nations and medal-winning success in Olympic Sports."
>
> (De Bosscher et al., 2015)

For athletes to succeed in national and international tournaments, they must be coached well. A central task of a national elite sports policy is to ensure that the quantity and quality of coaches are as high as possible at all levels of the system. Data from the SPLISS project shows that all the most successful elite sport systems have many coaches at different levels and high quality in the education and development of coaches (De Bosscher et al., 2015).

The provision and development of coaches can be secured in many ways, for example, by developing coach recruitment and education systems and by paying them or in other ways ensuring that they can devote enough time as coaches, build their skills, and even make a living from the profession.

In the earlier mentioned report by RF, the included Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark and Norway) are all ranked lower than the other eight included countries, with Sweden at a lower level than Norway and Denmark (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020). This is broadly in line with other studies. In the SPLISS study, Denmark is one of the countries with the lowest rank in this respect, while Finland is ranked higher (De Bosscher et al., 2015).

### Results

The strength of the Swedish elite sport system in relation to coaching lies at the level of children and young athletes who meet professional and well-educated coaches much earlier than, for example, is the case in Denmark. One of the interviewees argue:

> "My impression is that teachers [in primary- or secondary schools in Sweden, ed.] have a great coaching education. It is on a professionally high level. In Denmark, it is an academic who has trained to be a high school teacher but does not necessarily have competencies in sports didactics or the sport-specific knowledge that is required."
>
> (Interviewed expert)

Sweden is well-supplied with sports coaches for children and young people. In relation to elite sport there are many coaches at the level of upper secondary education (Idrottsgymnasier). There are also coaches for the top elite if they are part of the Topp och Talang programme.

The main problem with the availability of coaches, therefore, occurs in the gap in an athlete's career between the completion of their upper secondary education and the entry into the group of top senior athletes. There is also a lack of part-time coaches employed at the regional level.

Access to high-quality coaching is unevenly divided across different sports. Economically strong federations such as football, ice hockey and skiing have numerous professional coaches with responsibility for elite sport. In other sports, there are few, if any, full-time coaches and their responsibilities cover other athletes as well as elite athletes.

Swedish elite athletes are generally not supported by as many coaches as athletes from their main competitors at international championships, according to the interviewees. A perhaps extreme example is wrestling, where the team from Kyrgyzstan brought a staff including 25 coaches to the World Championships in 2023, whereas the Swedish team had only four coaches.

In addition to the availability of coaches, there are significant issues related to the education and development of elite coaches. In 2010, a survey mapped the education of elite coaches in Sweden. Based on the responses from 30 of the 69 sports federations, it was estimated that around half of the federations did not have any meaningful elite coach education. The other half had various forms and lengths of training, from separate sessions to whole structured programmes (Dartsch & Pihlblad, 2012).

The general education system (universities and upper secondary schools) offers sports coach education, but not related to elite sport. The same is the case with folk high schools. In the 1970s, universities started to be engaged in the education of sports leaders and coaches. Sports management education became part of the curriculum (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016), and coach authorisation was introduced in 1994 (Sjöblom & Fahlén, 2010).

There were/are also a few dedicated elite coaching courses organised by RF, but the capacity of these new courses is low. It is concluded by Sjöblom and Fahlén (2010) that many sports federations do not have their own education of elite coaches, the general offers for elite sport coach education are few, and the quality is low. The situation has improved

somewhat, but the lack of education and development of coaches for elite athletes is still a major problem.

Several stakeholders emphasise that Swedish coaches do not receive enough education and that more and better coach education is a much-needed means for improving the international competitiveness of the Swedish elite sport system. Much is happening in some sports federations, but coordination and more initiatives are required at the system level.

SOK and RF recognise the need for investment in this area. SOK will increase investment in coaches in the context of the Topp och Talang programme. They have proclaimed an Olympic offensive for coaches and have employed new staff responsible for developing this field.

In addition to the availability and education of coaches, another issue is job prospects for coaches. The career prospects for professional coaches are limited and insecure. Most elite coaches are employed part-time, and there are few such jobs in the sports federations.

Many elite coaches make a living by combining coaching with a part-time job in a high school. Whereas this is applied systematically in Norway, it is more ad hoc and individualised in Sweden. Better pay, full-time employment options and improved job security would make an elite coach career more attractive. Currently, it is likely that many potential elite coaches do not start or continue an elite coach career for that reason.

There are specific problems connected with the coaching of parasport athletes. Many elite coaches have no particular training related to parasport athletes and often feel uncertain about how to coach them:

> "Coaching para-athletes is challenging as it involves other physical and technical aspects besides optimising athletic performance. In the past, there was no education directed towards elite parasport athletes. This has been rectified in recent years. However, there are still only a few dedicated coaches for athletes at the elite level in parasport."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

## Summing up

The interviewed stakeholders see improvements in coaching and coach education and development as one of the most important means of strengthening the international competitiveness of Swedish elite sport.

There are many good coaches for children and young people in Sweden. Young athletes come into contact with professional coaches at an early age. This is a significant strength of the Swedish system.

However, coaching is less developed for athletes in the crucial stage of an elite career between the completion of upper secondary school and reaching the top layer of senior

athletes. The absence of a well-developed coach education system hampers the quality of elite coaches. This is an area which is recognised as in need of major improvement.

Another problem is the lack of attractive career paths for elite coaches, and there are important special issues regarding parasport, as well. Educated and dedicated parasport coaches are still in short supply.

## Pillar 8: National and international competition/events

> "Pillar 8 is concerned with the number of international events organised, the strategic planning behind it, the opportunities for athletes to participate in international competition and national competition level."
>
> (De Bosscher et al., 2015)

Competing in national and international tournaments is important for athletes to become competitive and succeed. An essential part of developing a successful elite sport system is, therefore, the system's ability to organise and structure a relevant competition schedule for the athletes. It is essential for the best athletes to compete regularly and against the best to gain the necessary experience and learn how to improve for future tournaments. In several sports, participating in specific competitions is also required to improve rankings and qualify for the major international championships.

Staging international events is part of this pillar (De Bosscher et al., 2015). It is well-known from many studies that hosting sporting events gives the athletes of the hosting nation a competitive advantage (Bernard & Busse, 2004; Scelles et al., 2020). Improving the international standings of a nation can, therefore, be achieved strategically by hosting international events. For the athletes, competing in friendly environments – in their home country – can benefit their career development and prepare them for future challenges.

In relation to this pillar, Sweden's ranking is similar to Norway's and at level with the best-performing nations (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2023b). The results from SPLISS 2.0 also indicate that all Nordic countries have good national competition schedules and ample opportunities for participating in international competitions. Finland and Denmark are two of the highest-ranked countries in this respect (De Bosscher et al., 2015).

### Results

Sweden has a well-developed national tournament structure. In an international comparison, this is primarily a strength at the youth athlete level. This is the case even though competitive youth sport has been, and to some extent still is, controversial in the Swedish context, where concern for equal opportunities and aversion against dividing children into groups according to abilities prevail.

In general, Swedish elite athletes also have sufficient opportunities to take part in an adequate number of top-level international competitions. This is especially the case for medal-winning Olympic sports. For instance, the curling federation can frequently send their top players to participate in the major tournaments in Canada.

However, the relatively modest public and private funding of many sports federations compared to other countries including the other Nordic countries, makes it necessary for them to economise on participation in international competitions.

The interviews provide evidence that in some sports, Swedish athletes are only able to take part in some World Cup competitions, whereas, for example, the Danish athletes take part in all of them. The wrestling federation experiences problems caused by the increased prevalence of international top-level competitions outside of Europe with the associated increase in the costs of participation. Many federations, for example the gymnastics federation, have strict criteria for which international competitions they can take part in.

In parasport, there are much fewer athletes, which makes it more difficult to organise national tournaments. A solution has been found in table tennis, where parasport athletes take part in competitions in the ordinary league system.

The problems of organising regular competitions are most acute in para-team sports such as basketball, rugby, and floorball. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the problems as the number of active parasport athletes decreased, which caused the closure of some teams and the non-viability of some leagues. The issues vary across different parasports.

In parasport, swimming experience problems with organising tournaments because of insufficient access to swimming pools. Cycling is highlighted by some of the interviewees as a sport that has succeeded well in organising regular competitions.
Participation in international competitions is very costly, in general, three times as expensive per athlete compared to non-disabled athletes.

Sweden is host to many international competitions in various sports each year. Two of the major annual events are the Diamond League athletics event and the Beijer Hockey Games. These have become possible through long-lasting corporate sponsorships.

Hosting international events often functions as a competitive advantage for the host nation, not only at the event itself but also in general and in the long run. For instance, hosting Diamond League events in athletics improves access for Swedish track and field athletes to events elsewhere.

There is no government funding for a dedicated organisation to attract major championships and other international events like the Danish organisation Sport Event Denmark.[24] However, RF functions in the same way as Sport Event Denmark with regard to support in relation to the planning and organisation of actual events through guidance, sparring, knowledge transfer, and financial support of prior sustainability studies and applications.

[24] https://www.sporteventdenmark.com/

A new strategy for attracting international sporting events to Sweden was approved a few years ago. The strategy aims at doubling the number of good quality bids for international events, developing more well-developed destinations for such events, and increasing the economic tourism effects of the respective events together with relevant business organisations.

So far, major events have only been possible with significant support from sponsors. The continuation of the events is vulnerable as it is dependent on largely unpredictable decisions by single sponsors. It is not unusual that events are discontinued because of failure to find an alternative sponsor when a long-time sponsor withdraws.

In some cases, this can have major impacts on the sport as such. An extreme example is Swedish road cycling, which suffered a major blow when the annual Post Giro cycling stage race was discontinued after the main sponsor withdrew and no alternative to the race was found. This was a contributing, if not a major, factor that initiated the downward spiral of Swedish elite road cycling.

### Summing up

Generally, Swedish athletes have access to well-developed national tournaments at all age levels and opportunities to participate in adequate international competitions.

However, economic pressure creates problems in this respect especially for small federations. Organising national tournaments within parasport is more difficult, especially in para-team sports. A well-functioning solution has been found in table tennis, where parasport athletes participate in the ordinary league system.

Sweden has only recently developed a strategy for winning bids to host international sports events, and there is no dedicated government funding for this purpose as in some other countries. However, RF provides support and guidance for the planning and organising of such events.

## Pillar 9: Sport science support, scientific research, and innovation in elite sport

The use of scientific research for performance enhancement in elite sport has received increasing international attention in the last decades. This is one of the areas where improvements can increase a nation's international competitiveness. According to the SPLISS-study:

> "The best-performing nations in summer sports and winter sports generally score well in scientific research and innovation. They have a national sport research centre, and co-ordinate, disseminate and communicate scientific information well."
>
> (De Bosscher et al., 2015)

In the earlier mentioned report by RF (2020), Sweden's situation with regard to this pillar is evaluated and compared to 11 other selected countries. The United Kingdom and Australia

are ranked the highest in relation to this pillar among the selected countries. Norway and Denmark are also performing well, while Sweden is at the bottom of the class with the worst ranking.

### Results

All interviewed stakeholders agree that this is an area where Sweden is lagging, also in relation to the other Nordic countries, and improvements in this respect are among the three or four most important changes needed to strengthen the competitiveness of the Swedish elite sport system.

Strengthening the pillar is also part of the elite sport programme #elitidrott2030 (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020). One of the eight strategic goals is:

> "a stronger coupling to sports research of sufficient quality as well as practice-oriented and possible to apply in elite sport – this is meant in turn to increase the competence level of coaches and other leaders in various areas."
>
> (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020)

According to some of the interviewees, this issue is linked to the relatively weak educational background of coaches, which means that they are unable to interact properly with academia. It is also linked to the development of Swedish academia. Previously, Sweden had a strong position in sports-related research with world-leading academics with close cooperation with Swedish athletes and coaches, but this has disappeared.

> "Sport science and research is an area which is a weakness. This is maybe because of a lack of academic tradition in the Swedish system. There have traditionally been few coaches who have been educated at a level where they can effectively interact with the academic system. This is interesting because if you go a bit back in time, say 40-50 years, there was a strong tradition in Sweden of researchers very closely involved with sports. You can go back to Per-Olof Aastrand, Bengt Saltin, Björn Ekblom and Per Rehnström – highly qualified academics working very closely with sport. This was a strong aspect of the Swedish system which we have lost lately."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

Today, university research is only weakly connected to the practical issues of elite performance and development. This is partly because the incentives for university researchers to engage with sports at a practical level have decreased. The reward and promotion system of university research has developed in a way that gives high priority to academic publications and little emphasis on the practical application of knowledge. However, problems are also caused by a lack of willingness by the sports system to invest in this cooperation.

> "This is probably both because the sport hasn't been able to keep up with the academic development and also, I think because academics has become like an isolated profession where to become a very strong academic, you almost don't have the time to interact with the practitioners of sport…. Sports federations have rarely prioritised support for re

search and cooperation with academics. If they have to choose between this and a training camp, the money will always go to the training camp."

(Interviewed stakeholder)

#elitidrott2030 intends to break with this low priority of sports research. The strategic goal is the mobilisation of increased funding for elite sport-related research projects followed by practical application. This includes the application of existing knowledge as well as the development of new knowledge. It is the goal of sports federations to develop competence centres in cooperation with academia, developing and using new knowledge adapted to the needs and conditions of the specific sports.

In most developed countries, elite sport research centres are integrated with national training centres. Among the countries covered by the SPLISS study, Brazil, Finland, and South Korea are the only countries where this is not the case. Olympiatoppen is the foremost example among the Nordic countries of a successful integration of research in the context of a national research centre, which seems to be instrumental in strengthening the practical application of academic research and a continuous learning culture (S. S. Andersen & Ronglan, 2011).

Bosön is RF's training, education, and development centre. This could, in principle, function as a cooperation and learning centre. It has excellent facilities and strong expertise in physiology, biomechanics, sports medicine and sports psychology, with links to universities.

However, it only functions as such a centre to a limited degree. Bosön functions well as a place for testing. The staff is highly qualified, but there are only a few of them. More important, and as mentioned earlier, few athletes come there. The original idea was that federations should use Bosön for training camps, but only a few of them do so for cost reasons.

The capacity utilisation is pretty low, in particular in relation to the original purpose, and it contributes only marginally to the strengthening of the practical application of the science-based knowledge of relevance for elite sports.

There are examples of strong integration of sports science in an elite sport context in Sweden. The most successful case is the winter sports centre in Östersund, where practically relevant science-based knowledge is developed in cooperation with the university. This is linked to the daily presence of the top athletes, best practice facilities, investments, and a strong willingness to cooperate.

Crucial new knowledge about training methods, physiological and biomechanical aspects of skiing, material, clothing and waxing of skis has followed. There are also examples of more specialised research cooperation with specific federations or regional sports

communities. Several examples, including the winter sports centrum in Östersund, are described in Dartsch and Pihlblad (2012).

However, there are not many centres of excellence at the level of the sports federations. There are some movements in this direction, for instance, in judo and wrestling, but generally, this is up to the local clubs, which are spread around the country.

There are other examples of universities engaging with elite sport. In the interviews, the universities of Luleå and Malmö are mentioned as good examples, and athletics has cooperation with universities in all its seven regional centres around Sweden. However, usually, the engagement does not extend beyond postponement of exams, etc. Generally, there are numerous such arrangements, but they are developed separately for each university with no overall framing and coordination.

> "Better coordination with universities has top priority (…). There is good cooperation with some universities, but no real coordination that has an impact, and there are today no resources at all for this purpose. It is really up to each university what to do, and mostly they use it to profile themselves as a sports university."
>
> (Interviewed stakeholder)

Centrum för Idrottsforskning (CIF) has an important role as a sector institution for sports research, but there are limits to what it can do with only modest funding. There are also examples of relevant academic research, including PhD projects. These are new and isolated examples. Previously, there was little contact and little understanding.

> "Research in biomechanics, sports medicine, physiology, nutrition, and psychology has a much higher status and is more in demand than more broad social science research."
>
> (Interviewed researcher)

There are new initiatives by SOK and RF to improve the situation. SOK has decided to give priority to the strengthening of practical research as part of the Topp och Talang programme to support athletes and coaches with respect to training and performance optimisation.[25]

As part of its investment in research and education, SOK provides support to six strong Swedish sports researchers, including Andreas Almqvist, professor at Luleå University of Technology, who together with SOK and the national waxing team is aiming to develop the world's fastest skis. Further, the co-funding of elite sport doctoral students is on its way.

> "We are starting now to make changes by creating opportunities for what we call elite sport doctoral students who have part of their role in a federation and another part in academia. This is at least one way of bridging the gap. I think that another weakness is that what is perceived as a lack of funding is at least to some extent a lack of priority. Sport federations rarely prioritise funding into sports-related research."

[25] https://sok.se/idrottsstod---topp-och-talang/olympisk-offensiv/forskning-och-utveckling.html.

(Interviewed stakeholder)

However, these initiatives are still few and not backed by substantial injection of resources.

Elite parasport is in a disadvantaged situation concerning most of the SPLISS pillars, but in relation to this pillar, it is doing relatively well. Östersund University is seen as particularly helpful in relation to, for instance, the development of equipment and skiing techniques adapted for disabled athletes.

Further, there has been a significant increase in student dissertations about parasport at various universities.

### Summing up

There is widespread agreement that Sweden is lacking in scientific research, sport science support, and innovation in elite sport, not only compared to big countries but also to the other Nordic countries.

Many other countries have elite sport research centres integrated with national training centres. Sweden has neither. Apart from the winter sports centre in Östersund, there are some isolated examples of cooperation with universities around the development and application of research, which is practically relevant for elite sport, but with little coordination and systematic learning.

Coordination with academia is also limited. However, new initiatives are coming with more focus on research and development.

# Output: The performance and competitiveness of the Swedish elite sport system

Sweden has a glorious past in elite sports. In the years 1908-1952, Sweden was among the four best nations in seven out of nine Olympic Summer Games. Sweden has also traditionally been among the top medal-winning nations in the Olympic Winter Games. Although such dominance has long gone, Sweden is still ranked as number 12 on the all-time Summer Olympics medals table and number seven on the all-time Winter Olympics medals table.

Sweden is an Olympic superpower measured in total (Summer and Winter) Olympic medals per capita 1896-2020 – ranked behind only Norway and Finland. Sweden has also been prominent in some big team sports, particularly ice hockey, football, and handball. In addition, Swedish athletes have excelled in big individual sports such as tennis and golf and various other sports.

The following analysis of the output of the Swedish elite sport system will look at the development of the international competitiveness of Swedish elite sports, in general, and in comparison with other countries. In particular, the results of the Olympic Games will be studied in detail. The analysis includes not only medals but also top-8 results and other general performance indicators.

In addition, Sweden's performance in major team sports is analysed in some detail. The analysis also covers Swedish athletes' results in other sports and paralympic sports. Ideally, international elite sport competitiveness measures should include all sports, and weighing the results in different sports and disciplines should reflect the relative popularity of each discipline and sport. The following analysis will consist of two such measures.

When analysing the development of the international competitiveness of Swedish elite sports, it is essential to interpret the trends in a broader context. It is evident that the international context matters. Until the 1950s, elite sport was almost entirely an activity for amateurs in a small number of Western countries. From the 1950s until the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, international elite sports results were heavily influenced by the Cold War with its unequal conditions as an effect of state amateurism and widespread doping in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union (Dennis & Grix, 2012).

This changed in the 1990s after the breakdown of communism. Boycotts heavily influenced the results of the Olympic Games in 1980 and 1984. Since the 1990s, the number of participating countries has increased (including 15 and 7 new countries after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, respectively), and many other new countries, not least in Asia, have become competitive. This has radically changed the competitive conditions, more so in some disciplines than others. Further, in recent decades, government funding of

elite sports has increased substantially in many countries, altering and sharpening international competition (De Bosscher et al., 2006).

The changing competitive landscape significantly impacts the international performance of Swedish athletes. Until the 1950s, Sweden was a superpower in international elite sports aided by its strong tradition of voluntary clubs, mass participation, and relatively high living standards. The Swedish share of medals declined radically during the period when state amateurism flourished in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

In recent decades, the competition has sharpened considerably due to the emergence of far more medal-winning countries, commercialisation, and the increased government investment in elite sport success meaning that 'the price of gold' has increased significantly (Hogan & Norton, 2000). This constitutes another challenge for Swedish elite sport.

It is evident that the changing international environment strongly influences the historical fluctuations in performance, so comparing the current international standing of Swedish elite sport with results before 1990 is of little relevance. However, it is relevant to analyse the development of the international competitiveness of Swedish elite sport since then. To some extent, this reflects how successfully the Swedish elite sport system has coped with the new challenges in the last three decades.

It is also relevant to compare Sweden with countries of approximately similar size and similar economic, social, and cultural development levels. In the following analysis, we will compare with the other Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, and Finland in the Summer Olympic Games; Norway and Finland in the Winter Olympic Games). In addition, we will, to some extent, include data for New Zealand and the Netherlands.

This can be used as a yardstick for what might be possible as these countries (apart from Finland) currently are the most successful among countries resembling Sweden (although it should, of course, be taken into account that the population of Sweden is twice as large as the population of New Zealand, whereas it is about 60% higher in the Netherlands).

## The Olympic Summer Games

Most international elite sport competitiveness analyses focus on results in the Olympic Games or, more generally, on sports and disciplines at the Olympic Summer and Winter Games. There are good reasons for this focus. Olympic sports attract much political and media attention because of the visibility and popularity of the Olympic Games.

The results in Olympic sports are generally seen as a reliable indicator of the performance level of national elite sport systems (Storm et al., 2016). The worldwide increase in government funding of elite sports is mainly motivated by efforts to improve performance and medal tallies in the Olympics. Consequently, the level of competition is much higher in Olympic sports than in other sports.

There are several ways to measure national performance at the Olympic Games. First, the medal table shows the ranking of nations according to first gold medals, then silver medals in case of equal numbers of gold medals, and finally bronze medals in case of equal numbers of silver medals. It is most often this measure, which is prominent in the media. However, it is a flawed measure that attaches disproportional weight to gold medals in relation to other medals. It means, for instance, that a nation with only gold medals is ranked higher than nations with no gold medals but many other medals.

A second measure ranks nations by the number of medals. This does not suffer from the flaws of the medal table, but it may be seen as flawed in another way as it attaches equal weight to all medals. In any case, both measures distinguish sharply between medals and places just outside the medals. Often, there are only marginal differences between medals and a place as number four or five, and this may be caused by sheer coincidence and marginal factors that do not reflect real differences in competitiveness.

A third measure considers this by including rankings close to the medals. In the following, we include such a measure including top-8 rankings in all Olympic disciplines with declining weights (gold: 8 points, silver: 7 points, bronze: 6 points, number 4: 5 points … number 8: 1 point).

The following analysis applies all three measures in an evaluation of the development of Swedish performance in the Olympic Games. The Games only take place every fourth year. These are important milestones. However, focusing only on results in the Olympic Games while ignoring what happens in the years in between the Olympics may give a distorted impression of the development of national competitiveness. Compensating this problem, we supplement the measures based on the performance in the Olympic Games with the same measures based on results in the Olympic disciplines in the years between the Olympics.[26]

## The Olympic Summer Games: Medal table

Table 1 shows the medal table rankings for Sweden and comparable countries in all Olympic Summer Games since 1908. Sweden was among the best four nations in the three Olympics in the 1920s and maintained a very high ranking in all Olympics in the 1930s and the first two Olympics after World War II.

[26] Number of medals and top-8 points are calculated for each year in-between the Olympic Games. Results from world championships, world cups, world rankings or similar competitions are included for each of the disciplines at the programme of the forthcoming Olympic Games. The results are modified to fit the Olympics when the number of participants per discipline and the competition criteria (for instance whether there is a bronze medal match or two bronze medals) in the world championships in the years in-between the Olympic Games are different from the Olympics.

**Table 1: Medal table ranking in Olympic Summer Games 1920-2020**

| Games | Finland | Denmark | Norway | Sweden | New Zealand | The Netherlands |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1908 | 13 | 16 | 8 | 3 | Part of Australasia | 17 |
| 1912 | 4 | 14 | 8 | 2 | Part of Australasia | 18 |
| 1920 | 4 | 10 | 6 | 2 | 22 | 9 |
| 1924 | 2 | 12 | 7 | 8 | 23 | 9 |
| 1928 | 3 | 13 | 19 | 4 | 24 | 8 |
| 1932 | 7 | 20 | No medals | 4 | 22 | 13 |
| 1936 | 5 | 23 | 18 | 7 | 20 | 9 |
| 1948 | 6 | 10 | 19 | 2 | No medals | 11 |
| 1952 | 8 | 15 | 10 | 4 | 24 | 29 |
| 1956 | 13 | 20 | 22 | 6 | 16 | No participation |
| 1960 | 17 | 13 | 21 | 16 | 14 | 28 |
| 1964 | 12 | 18 | No medals | 17 | 12 | 15 |
| 1968 | 24 | 22 | 25 | 20 | 27 | 17 |
| 1972 | 14 | 25 | 21 | 11 | 23 | 16 |
| 1976 | 11 | 24 | 21 | 12 | 18 | 29 |
| 1980 | 12 | 16 | No participation | 11 | No medals | 30 |
| 1984 | 15 | 27 | 28 | 16 | 8 | 13 |
| 1988 | 25 | 23 | 21 | 32 | 18 | 22 |
| 1992 | 29 | 30 | 22 | 27 | 28 | 20 |
| 1996 | 40 | 19 | 30 | 29 | 26 | 15 |
| 2000 | 31 | 30 | 19 | 18 | 46 | 8 |
| 2004 | 62 | 34 | 17 | 19 | 24 | 18 |
| 2008 | 44 | 30 | 22 | 55 | 25 | 11 |
| 2012 | 60 | 29 | 35 | 37 | 15 | 12 |
| 2016 | 78 | 28 | 74 | 29 | 19 | 11 |
| 2020 | 85 | 25 | 20 | 23 | 13 | 7 |

Source: Data extracted from various websites.

Sweden was among the top 10 nations in the medal table in every Olympic Games until 1956. Sweden has never been in the top 10 again but remained in the top 20 in every Olympics until 1984. Since then, Sweden's ranking has stabilised around number 30 (average rankings in 1988-96, 2000-08, and 2012-20 were 29, 32, and 30, respectively). The decline reflects a lower number of medals despite a significant increase in the number of medal events.

The other Nordic countries have contrasting development trends. Finland was ranked level with Sweden in the Olympics in the mid-war period. After hosting the Olympics in 1952,

Finland was never again in the top 10 but remained in the top 20 in every Olympics until 1988, apart from 1968. This trend is similar to the development of Sweden's ranking. However, since then, Finland's ranking has not stabilised at a lower level as it did in Sweden but rather declined significantly from 31 (average 1988-96) to 46 (average 2000-08) and 74 (average 2012-20).

Norway's ranking has been remarkably stable. It has been ranked as number 18-25 in all Olympics since 1928 apart from a few outliers (1952, 1984, 1996 and 2012-16). Similarly, Denmark's ranking has not varied much over the years. Denmark was ranked among the top 25 nations in all Olympics until 1980 with an average rank of number 17. In the ten Olympics since then, Denmark's average ranking has been number 27.5 with very little deviation from the average but with marginal improvements in the last four Olympics.

Table 1 also shows New Zealand's rankings. Contrary to all the Nordic countries, New Zealand has improved its ranking significantly in the last three Olympics and has become a top-20 nation. The Netherlands has also increased its ranking considerably from an average of number 21 in 1976-1996 to number 11 in 2000-2020. In the 2020 Olympics, its ranking was the highest ever at number 7.

Table 2 shows the number of medals won in each Olympic Summer Games. The development trends are broadly the same as for rankings in the medal table. However, the number of Swedish medals shows more clearly than the medal table rankings that the Swedish performance level has declined in the 2000s. The average number of medals declined from 12 (1980-20) to 8 (2004-2020).

This decline in the number of medals has happened despite a massive increase in the number of events in the Olympic Summer Games from 129 in 1936, to 203 in 1980, 300 in 2000, and 339 in 2022.

**Table 2: Medals in Olympic Summer Games 1920-2020**

| Games | Finland | Denmark | Norway | Sweden | New Zealand | The Nether-lands |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1908 | 5 | 5 | 8 | 25 | Part of Australasia | 23 |
| 1912 | 26 | 12 | 10 | 65 | Part of Australasia | 11 |
| 1920 | 26 | 13 | 31 | 64 | 1 | 10 |
| 1924 | 34 | 9 | 10 | 29 | 1 | 9 |
| 1928 | 37 | 6 | 4 | 25 | 1 | 8 |
| 1932 | 25 | 6 | 0 | 23 | 1 | 13 |
| 1936 | 25 | 5 | 6 | 20 | 1 | 9 |
| 1948 | 19 | 20 | 7 | 44 | No medals | 16 |
| 1952 | 20 | 6 | 5 | 35 | 3 | 5 |
| 1956 | 22 | 4 | 3 | 19 | 2 | No participa-tion |
| 1960 | 15 | 6 | 1 | 6 | 3 | 3 |
| 1964 | 5 | 6 | No medals | 8 | 5 | 10 |
| 1968 | 5 | 8 | 2 | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| 1972 | 4 | 1 | 4 | 16 | 3 | 5 |
| 1976 | 8 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 5 |
| 1980 | 6 | 5 | No partici-pation | 2 | No medals | 3 |
| 1984 | 8 | 6 | 3 | 19 | 11 | 13 |
| 1988 | 12 | 4 | 5 | 11 | 13 | 9 |
| 1992 | 4 | 6 | 7 | 12 | 10 | 15 |
| 1996 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 6 | 19 |
| 2000 | 4 | 6 | 10 | 12 | 4 | 25 |
| 2004 | 4 | 8 | 6 | 7 | 5 | 22 |
| 2008 | 2 | 7 | 9 | 5 | 9 | 16 |
| 2012 | 4 | 9 | 4 | 8 | 13 | 20 |
| 2016 | 3 | 15 | 4 | 11 | 18 | 19 |
| 2020 | 1 | 11 | 8 | 9 | 20 | 36 |

Source: Data extracted from various websites.

The declining performance of Finnish athletes in the Summer Olympics is evident when measured in terms of medals won in each Games. In the mid-war period, Finland never won less than 25 medals. Finland won more than ten medals in all Games in the period 1948-1960, and since then, only in 1988. The average number of medals declined to 4.3 per Games in 1992-2004 and further to only 2.5 in the last four Olympics.

Among the Nordic countries, Denmark stands out in relation to medals won. Denmark was never a superpower in Olympic sports, and until the last two Olympics, Denmark had

never won more than ten medals – apart from the atypical 1948 Games. In the period 1952-2000, the number of medals won by Danish athletes was remarkably stable, with 5.2 medals on average per Games. Since then, the average has increased to ten medals per Game, with 15 and 11 medals in the last two Games.

Until the collapse of state amateurism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Norway's performance was stable at a relatively low level. In the period 1952-1988, Norway never won more than five medals per Games. With the changed competitive context, this improved to an average of eight medals per Games in 1992-2008. Norway was again at this level in 2020 after two sub-par Games.

New Zealand did not win more than five medals in any Games until 1984. Its improvement since then has been particularly significant in the last two Olympics, with 18 and 20 medals, respectively. Sweden won more medals than the Netherlands in every Olympic Summer Games until 1988 (apart from 1964 and 1968). Since then, the Netherlands has won more medals in every Games. In 2020, it was three times as many.

Because of the increased number of sports and disciplines at the Olympic programme, there have been more medals to compete for over time. To maintain the same share of medals as in 1972, a country should win 80% more medals in 2020 to win an equal share of the total medals. In other words, a country may win the same number of medals as in previous years, but its international competitiveness may still fall as measured by its share of total medals. Table 3 shows the development of this share.

**Table 3: Share of total medals at Olympic Summer Games, 1972-2020, selected nations**

| | Finland | Denmark | Norway | Sweden | New Zealand | The Netherlands |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1972-1996 (average) | 1.0% | 0.6% | 0.6% | 1.7% | 1.0% | 1.4% |
| 2000 | 0.4% | 0.6% | 1.1% | 1.3% | 0.4% | 2.7% |
| 2004 | 0.4% | 0.9% | 0.6% | 0.8% | 0.5% | 2.4% |
| 2008 | 0.2% | 0.7% | 0.9% | 0.5% | 0.9% | 1.7% |
| 2012 | 0.4% | 0.9% | 0.4% | 0.8% | 1.4% | 2.1% |
| 2016 | 0.3% | 1.5% | 0.4% | 1.1% | 1.9% | 2.0% |
| 2020 | 0.1% | 1.0% | 0.7% | 0.8% | 1.9% | 3.3% |

Source: Data extracted from various websites.

It shows that the Nordic countries' medal share declined from 3.9% in 1972-1996 (average) to 2.6% in 2020. Sweden's share in 2020 was only half of what it was in 1972-1996 (average). It seems to have stabilised around 0.8%. Denmark is the only Nordic country with an increased medal share, but this improvement is marginal compared to the massive increase in New Zealand's and the Netherlands' share of medals.

Top-8 points show the extent to which each nation is competitive at a high level in a broad range of events. Whereas the data for medal table rankings and number of medals are

heavily influenced by small margins and other factors that have little to do with international competitiveness, this is much less the case for data that includes rankings in the top 8 per event. For small nations, this is particularly relevant as an indicator of the capability of an elite sport system to promote excellence across sports.

Table 4 shows the development in the top 8 points for the Nordic countries, New Zealand and the Netherlands. The trends are clear. Since 2000, Sweden has not been at the same level as in 1964-2000. Its performance declined in the 2000s but has improved constantly, although marginally, in the last three Summer Olympics. Finland is the only country experiencing a significant decline. Since 2000, its average sum of the top-8 points in the Olympics is about one-third of the average in the period 1964-1996. Norway has improved much since 2000 compared to 1964-1996.

**Table 4: Top-8 points in Olympic Summer Games 1996-2020, selected nations**

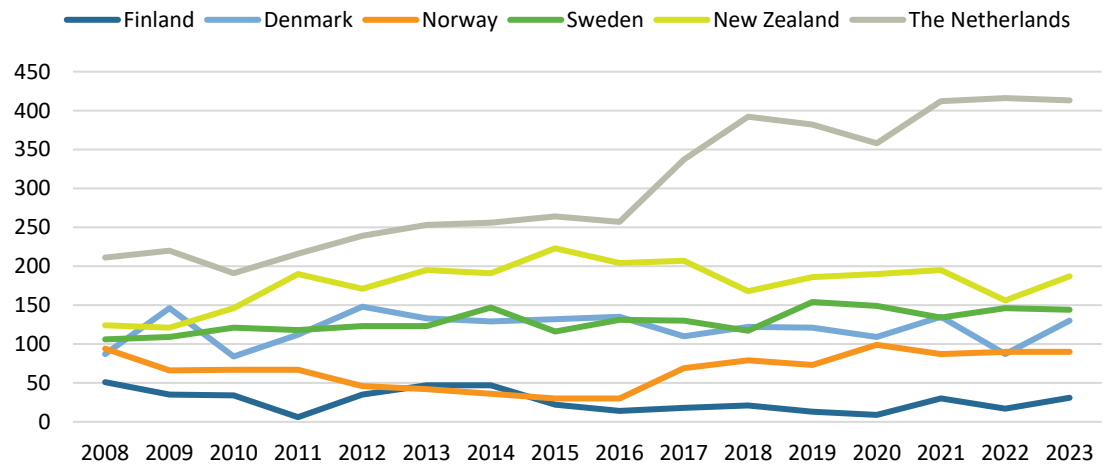
| Games | Finland | Denmark | Norway | Sweden | New Zealand | The Netherlands |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1964-1996 (average) | 92 | 68 | 71 | 160 | 71 | 117 |
| 2000 | 48 | 92 | 80 | 145 | 63 | 275 |
| 2004 | 21 | 98 | 68 | 127 | 96 | 230 |
| 2008 | 51 | 87 | 94 | 106 | 124 | 211 |
| 2012 | 35 | 148 | 46 | 123 | 171 | 239 |
| 2016 | 14 | 135 | 30 | 131 | 204 | 257 |
| 2020 | 30 | 135 | 87 | 134 | 195 | 421 |

Source: Data extracted from various websites.

Denmark has increased its top-8 points significantly in the last three Olympics and is now the best Nordic nation by this measure. New Zealand has experienced a steady increase of top-8 points since 2000 and is now clearly at a higher level than the Nordic countries. The Netherlands is even more so. By this measure, it is even close to surpassing neighbouring Germany.

Figure 16 shows the top-8 points for every year since 2008. Calculating the figures in the years between the Olympic Games can be seen as a kind of simulated Olympic Games. For each discipline, the top-8 rankings in the annual world championships or the official world rankings are added up to a sum equivalent to what it would have been if there had been an Olympic Games in those years.

**Figure 16: Annual top-8 points in Olympic Summer sports 2008-2023, selected nations**




Source: Own calculations.

The figure is meant to supplement the data in table 4. The data fluctuates from year to year, but generally, top-8 points in the years in between the Olympic Games are at level with the results at the Olympic Games. However, there are differences, and some trends are more evident than in table 4.

Denmark does consistently better at the Olympic Games than in the preceding years in each Olympic cycle. Whereas Sweden and Denmark are at the same level, with the lead oscillating back and forth from year to year, Denmark has had the lead in all of the three last Olympics. Sweden has performed marginally better in the Olympic Games than in the years before each Games, whereas New Zealand has no clear trend. The decline in the top-8 points for Finland is also evident from these data.

The top-8 performance of the Netherlands in the years before and after the 2020 Olympics is at level with the high figure in this Games, which indicates that the huge improvement of its points is no fluke and may well indicate that the country is now at a significantly higher performance level than previously.

Norway represents the most remarkable development. Norway's top-8 points declined steadily in the period 2008-2016 and was even close to the low Finnish level. However, since then the level has increased significantly, and Norway is now with regard to top-8 points almost at the level with Sweden and Denmark.

Sweden achieved the same number of top-8 points in the two subsequent years as in the Tokyo Olympics. To some extent, this is an illusion of stability as Sweden benefitted from the exclusion of Russian athletes from most international sports in 2022 and 2023. The stability reflects an actual moderate decline. However, according to other measures (medal table and number of medals), Sweden did very well in the two years since the last Olympics, as can be seen in table 5, including results from the Olympics in 2021 and simulated Olympics in the following two years.

**Table 5: Swedish medals in the Olympics 2021 and 'simulated' Olympics in 2022 and 2023**

| | Gold | Silver | Bronze | Medals |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2021 | 3 | 6 | 0 | 9 |
| 2022 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 10 |
| 2023 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 11 |

Source: Data extracted from various websites.

## Sweden in the Olympic Summer Games: Medal-winning sports

Table 6 shows in which sports Sweden won medals in the Olympic Summer Games in the period 1920-2020(1). The medals by only two sports (wrestling and athletics with 80 and 63 medals, respectively) add up to more than a third (35%) of all Swedish Olympic medals. The share of medals won by these two sports has declined but still constitutes around 25% of the total number of medals. It is not surprising that this share has declined. It is perhaps more surprising that the decline has not been more significant.

**Table 6: Sweden's medals by summer sports 1920-2020(1)**

| | Total | 1920-1952 | 1956-1988 | 1992-2020(1) |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wrestling | 80 | 54 | 17 | 9 |
| Athletics | 63 | 45 | 9 | 9 |
| Equestrian | 39 | 27 | 6 | 6 |
| Shooting | 35 | 23 | 7 | 5 |
| Swimming | 35 | 12 | 11 | 12 |
| Sailing | 32 | 14 | 10 | 8 |
| Canoeing | 30 | 10 | 13 | 7 |
| Modern pentathlon | 18 | 14 | 4 | 0 |
| Cycling | 16 | 8 | 4 | 4 |
| Boxing | 11 | 8 | 3 | 0 |
| Diving | 11 | 8 | 3 | 0 |
| Fencing | 7 | 4 | 3 | 0 |
| Gymnastics | 6 | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Football | 5 | 3 | 0 | 2 |
| Handball | 4 | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Weightlifting | 4 | 3 | 1 | 0 |
| Table tennis | 3 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Tennis | 3 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Archery | 2 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Golf | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Rowing | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Water polo | **1** | **1** | **0** | **0** |
| Triathlon | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| **Total** | 408 | 237 | 99 | 72 |

Source: Data extracted from various websites.

The decline in the number of Swedish medals in wrestling is related to the increased international competition in the sport due to the breakdown of the Soviet Union, which has made it much more difficult to win medals. Whereas the wrestlers from Sweden and other countries before 1992 only had one opponent from the Soviet Union, they have since then had opponents from the 15 nations that previously constituted the Soviet Union. Almost all of them win medals and are competitive in wrestling internationally.

Remarkably, Sweden has been able to remain competitive in athletics. Few technological and material constraints make it possible for far more countries to be competitive in athletics than in other sports. Also, many countries with a far larger number of athletes have become competitive and European nations win significantly fewer medals than previously.

In the last decades, Sweden has also excelled in one of the other high-prestige Olympic sports with a harsh competitive environment and few relative advantages related to equipment. Swedish swimmers have won more medals than athletes in any other sport since 1992. Although a third of the medals are won by one athlete (Sarah Sjöstrand), the eight residual medals still indicate high competitiveness.

Other sports have consistently been winning medals and are still doing so, such as sailing and equestrian. In the last decades, Swedish teams have also done very well in handball (men) and football (women) in the Olympics.

Generally, Sweden has been capable of sustaining competitiveness in sports with particularly challenging changes in the international competitive context and consistently winning medals across many sports. However, there are some worrying signs. In some sports in which Swedish athletes have won many medals previously, Sweden has experienced a sharp decline in competitiveness in recent years. This is the case for cycling, canoeing, modern pentathlon, rowing, and fencing.

It seems that a smaller number of sports will be able to win medals for Sweden at future Olympic Games. It appears that the Swedish elite sport system may not be capable of maintaining a broad-based elite and may become more dependent on a sustained medal-winning capability by a more limited number of sports.

### The Olympic Summer Games: Actual versus expected performance

Different nations have varying preconditions for doing well in elite sports. As mentioned in the earlier section on macro-level input, prior research (de Cocq et al., 2021; Storm et al., 2016) has shown that the international competitiveness of an elite sport system is dependent on how big and rich a country is.

It is self-evident that economic strength and population size influence how well a nation performs in international elite sport competitions. Research shows that these two variables can explain about half of the difference in competitiveness. Other macro conditions such as political system, geography, population density, religion, and other cultural factors also impact how well a nation performs in elite sport.

The Danish Institute for Sports Studies has developed a method for evaluating whether nations do better or worse than you would expect from more or less advantageous macro conditions such as population and income level. The method compares the expected performance in the Olympic Summer Games with the actual outcomes.

In the calculations of a nation's expected performance, two of the variables are GDP per capita and population. Differences in religion and political system are also included in a regression model[27] which models the relation between these variables and actual performance as measured by top-8 points.

Table 7 shows the residuals for the ten nations with the highest residuals in 2016, 2019, 2021 and 2022, i.e., the most 'overperforming' countries in these years. In addition to the last two Olympics, the table covers the years immediately before and after the Olympics in Tokyo.[28]

**Table 7: Ranking of nations according to 'residual'**

| | 2016 | | 2019 | | 2021 | | 2022 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Ranking | Residual | Ranking | Residual | Ranking | Residual | Ranking | Residual |
| Jamaica | 1 | 2.65 | 1 | 2.49 | 1 | 2.33 | 1 | 2.48 |
| Grenada | 4 | 1.61 | 3 | 1.64 | 10 | 1.06 | 2 | 2.07 |
| Mongolia | 11 | 1.23 | 9 | 1.20 | 3 | 1.44 | 3 | 1.82 |
| Ethiopia | 7 | 1.59 | 7 | 1.26 | 14 | 0.95 | 4 | 1.49 |
| Eritrea | | | | | 50 | 0.31 | 5 | 1.46 |
| Australia | 8 | 1.49 | 5 | 1.46 | 5 | 1.41 | 6 | 1.36 |
| Kenya | 2 | 2.14 | 2 | 1.68 | 6 | 1.34 | 7 | 1.36 |
| Netherlands | 13 | 1.18 | 8 | 1.22 | 7 | 1.32 | 8 | 1.28 |
| New Zealand | 3 | 1.90 | 4 | 1.48 | 3 | 1.44 | 9 | 1.24 |
| Kyrgyzstan | | | | | 9 | 1.21 | 10 | 1.26 |

[27] The regression model calculates the expected top-8 performance for a specific year based on the included nation's population, GDP, population density, and whether the nations were part of the Eastern bloc, are communist, or Muslim. The expected calculated performance is compared to the actual performance to show whether each of the included nations 'punch below or above their weight'. Model specifications are explained in Storm, Nielsen, and Thomsen (2016).

[28] Literally, 2020 was the year immediately before the Olympics in 2021. However, this year is not taken into account, as most world championships were cancelled in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Great Britain | 5 | 1.59 | 10 | 1.13 | 8 | 1.25 | 12 | 1.19 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| Sweden | 24 | 0.82 | 30 | 0.67 | 43 | 0.49 | 30 | 0.58 |
| Norway | 81 | -0.57 | 53 | 0.01 | 54 | 0.26 | 41 | 0.30 |
| Denmark | 12 | 1.21 | 25 | 0.76 | 28 | 0.74 | 43 | 0.29 |
| Finland | 94 | -0.95 | 102 | -1.34 | 83 | -0.59 | 94 | -1.14 |

Source: Own calculations. Ranking according to 'residual', i.e., over/underperformance in Olympic Summer sports in relation to macro-level conditions. The table includes the residuals for the ten highest ranked nations in 2022 plus Great Britain and the Nordic countries.

The two highest-ranked nations in 2022 were Jamaica and Grenada. Kenya is another nation that is consistently among the most overperforming countries. These countries are 'monocultures' with respect to elite sports, like several other countries on the list. This means that they are only competitive in one or a few sports/disciplines. Among the countries with the ten highest residuals, only the Netherlands, New Zealand, Australia, and Great Britain have a broad-based elite sport system with medals and top-8 points in many sports.

The table also shows the residuals for the Nordic countries in the four years covered by the table. The figures show that Sweden consistently overperforms. Norway underperformed in 2016, where it had an unusually poor Summer Olympics, but has since then overperformed. Apart from 2022, Denmark has consistently had the highest residual among the Nordic countries. Finland, on the other hand, is consistently underperforming.

In ranking countries according to the residuals' size, the Nordic countries are ranked a bit lower than the ranking according to medals and top-8 points. This reflects the high relative GDP per capita in these nations.

## The Olympic Winter Games: Medal table, number of medals and top-8 points

In this section, Sweden's performance in the Olympic Winter Games will be analysed by applying the same measures as used above. The section includes tables with data similar to those included in the analysis of Sweden's performance in the Olympic Summer Games. However, the different measures show – to a large extent – identical patterns. Hence, the presentation of the analysis is much briefer and more condensed than the analysis of the tables above covering the Summer Games.

Further, no calculations of overperformance/underperformance (residuals) exist for the Winter Olympics sports, because the low number of participating nations in the Winter Olympics makes the modelling procedures problematic. The international comparison involves only Norway and Sweden, as Denmark and New Zealand are irrelevant in this respect. The Netherlands is also left out as it is (almost) a monoculture in winter sports, being solely competitive in speed skating and short-track skating.

Table 8 shows that Sweden's ranking on the medal table has fluctuated over the years, often without a clear trend. However, there was a decline in 1992-2002, when Sweden was not ranked above number ten in any of the four Games. Since then, the level has been raised. Sweden has been ranked higher than number ten in four of the five latest Games. In the most recent Olympic Winter Games in 2022, Sweden achieved a ranking as number five. The ranking has not been higher at any Games since 1948.

**Tabel 8: Medal table ranking in Olympic Winter Games 1924-2022, selected nations**

| Games | Finland | Norway | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1924 | 2 | 1 | 7 |
| 1928 | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| 1932 | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| 1936 | 4 | 1 | 3 |
| 1948 | 8 | 1 | 1 |
| 1952 | 3 | 1 | 10 |
| 1956 | 3 | 7 | 5 |
| 1960 | 6 | 4 | 5 |
| 1964 | 4 | 3 | 7 |
| 1968 | 10 | 1 | 7 |
| 1972 | 15 | 7 | 10 |
| 1976 | 6 | 4 | 14 |
| 1980 | 7 | 8 | 5 |
| 1984 | 4 | 6 | 5 |
| 1988 | 4 | 12 | 5 |
| 1992 | 8 | 3 | 13 |
| 1994 | 16 | 2 | 10 |
| 1998 | 11 | 2 | 17 |
| 2002 | 8 | 1 | 19 |
| 2006 | 19 | 13 | 6 |
| 2010 | 24 | 4 | 7 |
| 2014 | 18 | 2 | 14 |
| 2018 | 18 | 1 | 6 |
| 2022 | 16 | 1 | 5 |

Source: Data extracted from various websites.

This reflects an increase in the number of medals, as shown in table 9. In each of the last five Olympic Winter Games, Sweden has won more medals than in any previous Games, with a record-high medal tally of 18 in the most recent Games.

**Table 9: Medals in Olympic Winter Games 1924-2020, selected nations**

| Games | Finland | Norway | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1924 | 11 | 17 | 2 |
| 1928 | 4 | 15 | 5 |
| 1932 | 3 | 10 | 3 |
| 1936 | 6 | 15 | 7 |
| 1948 | 6 | 10 | 10 |
| 1952 | 9 | 16 | 4 |
| 1956 | 7 | 4 | 10 |
| 1960 | 8 | 6 | 7 |
| 1964 | 10 | 15 | 7 |
| 1968 | 5 | 14 | 8 |
| 1972 | 5 | 12 | 4 |
| 1976 | 7 | 7 | 2 |
| 1980 | 9 | 10 | 4 |
| 1984 | 13 | 9 | 8 |
| 1988 | 7 | 5 | 6 |
| 1992 | 7 | 20 | 4 |
| 1994 | 6 | 26 | 3 |
| 1998 | 12 | 25 | 3 |
| 2002 | 7 | 25 | 7 |
| 2006 | 9 | 19 | 14 |
| 2010 | 5 | 23 | 11 |
| 2014 | 5 | 26 | 15 |
| 2018 | 6 | 39 | 14 |
| 2022 | 8 | 37 | 18 |

Source: Data extracted from various websites.

Norway was the top-ranked nation in five of the first six Winter Olympics and again in 1968. However, in the period 1956-1988, winter sports athletes from the Nordic countries were handicapped by unequal conditions in the competition with the state-funded and often doped athletes from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, which meant lower rankings and a declining share of the medals. In 1992, the situation changed radically with the collapse of the support systems in the former communist countries, together with the establishment of Olympiatoppen and the extraordinary efforts before hosting the Games in 1994. Since then, Norway has been ranked first or second and, apart from 2006, is consistently among the top four nations.

On the other hand, Finland has dropped down the rankings. In the last five Winter Olympics, its lowest ranking was 24 and the highest 16, which is far from past Games until 1994, when it was almost in the top-10. Its medal tally has also declined, but not very much. Finland still wins medals in cross-country skiing and, in the last two decades, has also won medals in ice hockey. However, it is not in contention in traditional strongholds such as ski

jumping and neither in the new sports added to the Winter Olympics programme in the most recent decades.

The number of new sports and disciplines has expanded in the Winter Olympics even more than in the Summer Olympics. The total number of medals has more than tripled from 1972 (105 medals) to 2022 (328 medals). This means that the increase in the number of Swedish and Norwegian medals in recent Olympics does not represent a similar increase in the share of total medals, and the near stability of Finnish medals reflects a declining medal share. This is shown in table 10.

**Table 10: Share of total medals at Olympics Winter Games, 1972-2020, selected nations**

| | Finland | Norway | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1972-1998 (average) | 5.7% | 10.0% | 3.0% |
| 2002 | 3.0% | 10.7% | 3.0% |
| 2006 | 3.6% | 7.5% | 5.6% |
| 2010 | 1.9% | 8.9% | 4.3% |
| 2014 | 1.7% | 8.9% | 5.1% |
| 2018 | 2.0% | 12.7% | 4.6% |
| 2022 | 2.4% | 11.3% | 5.5% |

Source: Data extracted from various websites.

The Swedish medal share has increased in the last five Winter Olympics, but not very much. Norway has increased its medal share in the last two Olympics compared to the previous four Olympics. It is now almost at levels with its medals share at the Lillehammer Olympics in 1994 (14.2%). Finland experienced a mini-revival in the last two Olympics, but the improvement is modest regarding medal share.

Table 11 shows data about the performances measured by top-8 points. The table shows the same trends as with medals, although they are less drastic. Norway and Sweden have significantly increased their top-8 points sum in the last two Olympics. Sweden has more than double the top-8 points of Finland and a little more than half of the Norwegian top-8 points.

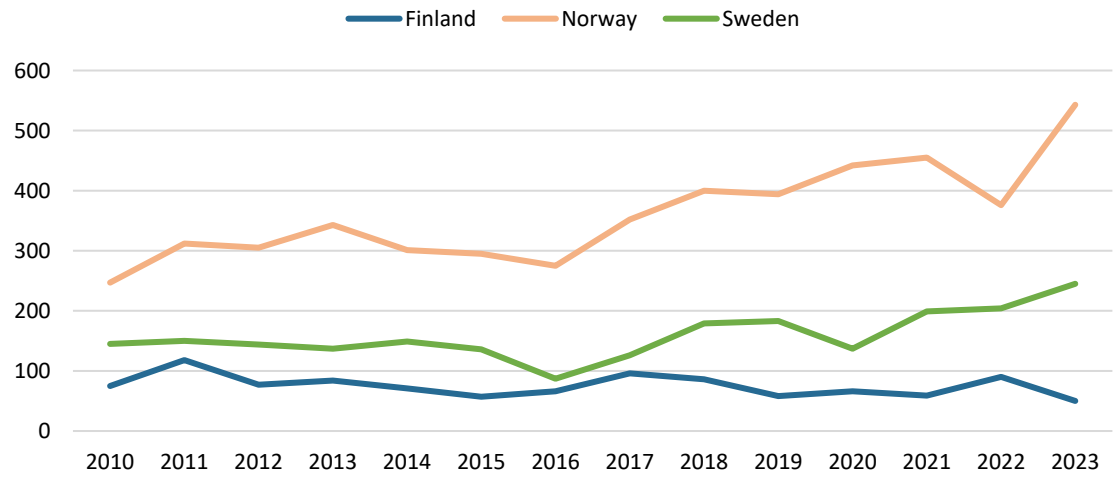
**Table 11: Top-8 points in Olympic Winter Games 1998-2022, selected nations**

| Games | Finland | Norway | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1998 | 117 | 243 | 42 |
| 2002 | 102 | 266 | 79 |
| 2006 | 110 | 239 | 150 |
| 2010 | 75 | 247 | 145 |
| 2014 | 71 | 301 | 149 |
| 2018 | 86 | 400 | 179 |
| 2022 | 90 | 376 | 204 |

Source: Data extracted from relevant websites.

Figure 17 provides data on the top-8 points in all years including the years in-between the Olympic Games. The figure shows that Sweden has been able to raise its level in the last two Olympic Winter Games compared to the results in the preceding years in the Olympic cycle.

**Figure 17: Annual top-8 points in Olympic Winter sports 2010-2023**




Source: Own calculations.

## Sweden in the Olympic Winter Games: Medal-winning sports

Cross-country skiing is by far the sport where Sweden has won the most medals in the Olympic Winter Games. In total, 84 of the 182 Swedish medals (46%) have been won by its cross-country skiers.

**Table 12: Sweden's medals by winter sports, 1924-2022**

| | 1924-2022 | 2002 | 2006 | 2010 | 2014 | 2018 | 2022 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cross-country skiing | 84 | 1 | 5 | 7 | 11 | 6 | 4 |
| Alpine skiing | 19 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 1 |
| Biathlon | 18 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 4 |
| Speed skating | 18 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Ice hockey | 11 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Curling | 11 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Figure skating | 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Freestyle skiing | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| Nordic combined | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Ski jumping | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Snowboarding | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 182 | 7 | 14 | 11 | 15 | 14 | 18 |

Source: Data extracted from relevant websites.

Historically, Sweden has won medals across a broad range of sports in the Winter Games. The second, third, and fourth-most medals have been won in alpine skiing, biathlon and speed skating. Whereas Swedish alpine skiers and biathletes are still medal contenders, this is no longer the case for Swedish speed skaters. Apart from the exceptional talent of Nils van der Poel, who won two gold medals in 2022, no Swedish speed skaters have been close to the medals in the last twenty years. On the other hand, in the previous two Games, biathlon has become one of the most medal-winning Swedish winter sports, with almost as many medals as the cross-country skiers.

The Swedish male ice hockey team has often won medals at the Olympics. However, they have only been among the medallists in one of the last four Games. The female ice hockey team last won a medal in 2006, but their ranking has deteriorated in the previous decade.

Curling is a relatively new Olympic sport. It has only been on the programme since 1998. It has become one of the most successful Swedish sports. Swedish teams have won medals in nine of the 16 Olympic curling competitions, including five of the last six.

Sweden has improved its ranking and the number of medals it has won in the Olympic Winter Games. However, Sweden has increasingly become dependent on relatively few sports. Swedish athletes are far from being competitive in many of the disciplines at the Olympic Games. Sweden has potential in the new alpine disciplines (freestyle and snowboarding). Still, it is unlikely that Sweden can become competitive in the near future in other sports where Sweden is far from the top level internationally.

## Team sports

Team sports do not contribute much to the total number of events at the Olympics, with only eight team sports (both men and women) in the Summer Olympic programme and

two team sports (both men and women) in the Winter Olympic programme. The number of team sport events in the 2024 Summer Olympics (14) is actually lower than the number of disciplines and medal sets in judo (15). This may be seen as a flaw when using the Olympic results as an indicator of the international competitiveness of nations' elite sport systems.

In the context of evaluating the performance of elite sport systems, it may be argued that team sports should be given much more weight. In other words, if a country does well in popular team sports with a large geographical spread, many participants, media interest, sponsorships, and private investments, this might compensate for poor performance in individual Olympic sports.

An example of a country which performs strongly in many popular team sports but ranks low concerning results in the Olympics is Argentina. The South American country wins less than a handful of medals in the Olympic Games but is world champions in the most popular sport in the world, football. In addition, it is among the best-performing nations in other popular team sports such as rugby union, basketball, volleyball, and hockey.

It is not possible to aggregate measures for success in big team sports with results and rankings in the Olympic Games. We will, therefore, provide a separate evaluation of the standings of the Swedish national teams in team sports in a Nordic comparison.

Sweden is among the best nations in the world in ice hockey (men), handball and football (women). In ice hockey, Sweden won medals in the three first world championship tournaments (which doubled up at the Olympic Games) in 1920-28 but did not feature among the medallists again until after World War II. From 1947 onwards, Sweden has consistently been among the top 3 teams in the annual world championships with a total of 35 medals (8 gold, 20 silver and 17).

Whereas the Soviet Union and Canada were arguably the best ice hockey nations in the world until the collapse of the Soviet Union, Sweden was at the level just below the two leading nations together with the Czech Republic. Sweden did not win its first world championships until 1987 but won more world titles than any other nation in the period 1991-2018 (7 of 18 titles).

However, after wins in two successive world championships in 2017 and 2018, Sweden has not been able to qualify for the semifinals in any of the last five world championships/Olympic Games. Sweden has been outperformed by Finland, which has traditionally been second best in this Nordic rivalry. It remains to be seen if this title draught is more than a temporary mini-crisis.

The female Swedish ice hockey team has experienced a more permanent decline in performance level. Sweden won medals in eight of the first 12 world championships for women from 1990-2009. However, Sweden has not ended in the top 4 in any of the ten subsequent championship tournaments.

In handball, Denmark and Norway are currently among the top nations in the world for both men and women. Sweden is also among the top nations in men's handball and comes close in women's handball. Sweden had the most successful men's handball team in two periods, first with medals (two gold) in all the first five world championships 1938-1964 - and later in the years 1990-2002, where Sweden won medals (two golds) in six consecutive world championships and four of five European championships.

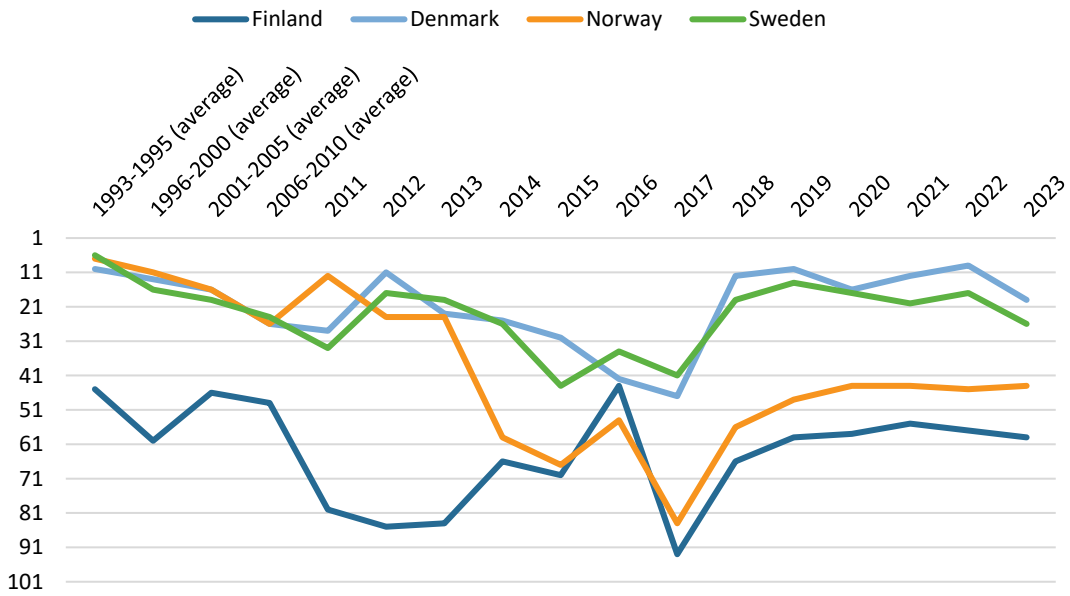
Since then, Sweden has only won one medal in international championships until 2018 (a silver medal in the Olympics in 2012) but won the European championship in 2022. Denmark has surpassed Sweden in men's handball in the last two decades, and Norway has caught up with Sweden.

Norway has consistently been the most successful nation in women's handball in international championships. Denmark has also experienced success, peaking with three consecutive Olympic titles in 1996-2004. Sweden has only won two medals in European championships and none in the Olympics and world championships.

Sweden has historically experienced much success in men's football. Sweden has been among the medallists three times in FIFA's World Cup (1950, 1958, and 1994). Success has been more modest in the last three decades, although Sweden has qualified for most final tournaments in World Cups and European championships.

Figure 18 shows FIFA's world ranking for men's teams. Sweden and Denmark have consistently been ranked higher than Norway and Finland.

**Figure 18: FIFA world ranking, men**



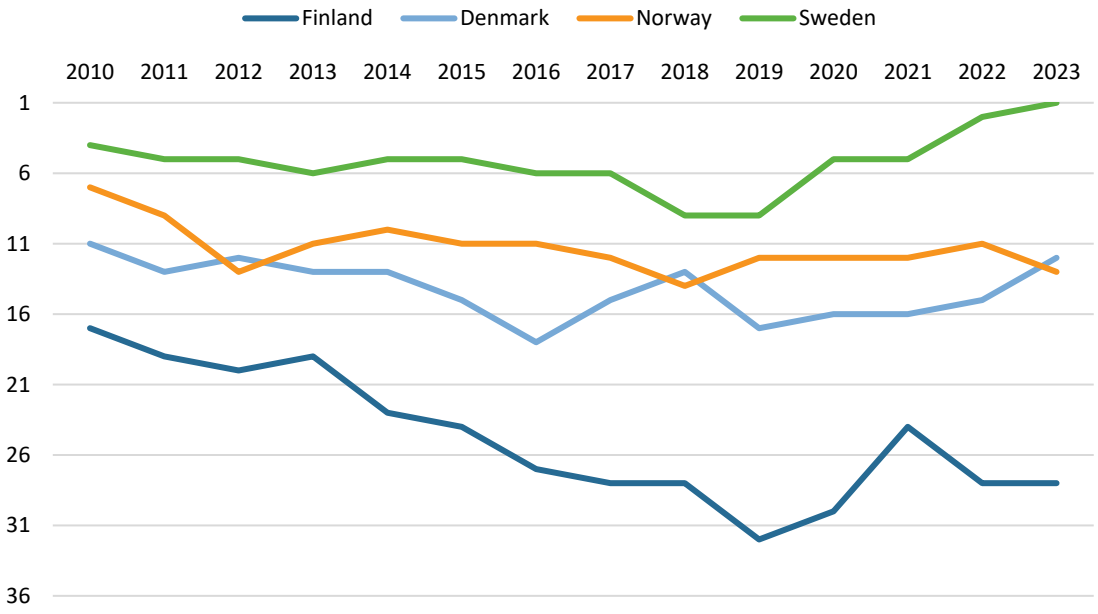

Source: Figures and calculations based on the first FIFA ranking each year: www.fifa.com. Ranking on the X-axis.

Sweden, Denmark and Norway have qualified for the FIFA World Cup 12, 6, and 3 times, respectively. Sweden and Denmark have qualified for the European championships 11 and 12 times, respectively. Norway and Finland have both only qualified once for the European championship. Finland has never qualified for the FIFA World Cup.

Swedish women's football has won many medals in international championships (medals in five of nine world cups, nine of 13 European championships and both of the two most recent Olympics). Figure 19 shows FIFA's world ranking of women's teams since 2010. Sweden has consistently been among the very best teams in FIFA's official rankings.

Norway has historically been at the same level as Sweden in women's football (medals in two Olympics, four World Cups, and nine European championships). However, Norway has not been able to maintain such a high level. Since 2007, it has only won one medal (Euro 2013). Figure 19 shows a gradual decline since 2010. Norway is now at level with Denmark (six medals in total in European championships), who has been stable around number 10-15 in the world ranking in the last 10-15 years with one championship medal (Euros 2017). Finland has never been at the same level as their Nordic neighbours but has one medal in the European championships and has qualified for four European championship finals.

**Figure 19: FIFA world ranking 2010-2022, women**




Source: Figures and calculations based on the first FIFA ranking each year: www.fifa.com, the first year of ranking was 2003. Ranking on the X-axis.

In basketball and volleyball, the Nordic countries are not among the top nations at the world or European level, although Finland comes close in men's basketball. Finland is by far the best Nordic country in men's basketball – ranked as number 20 in the world and number 13 in Europe in 2023. It has participated in 18 of 42 European championship finals. Sweden is currently ranked at a lowly 49th place in the FIBA official ranking, having

qualified for ten European championship finals but none of them recently. Sweden is doing better in women's basketball as the best Nordic country, with a clear upward trend in the last 10-15 years. Sweden has qualified for four of the previous six European championship finals and is currently ranked number 27 in the world and number 15 in Europe.

The Finnish men's volleyball team is clearly better than its Nordic competitors. It has qualified for all of the last ten European championship final tournaments, with fourth place being the peak. It is currently number 20 in FIVB's world ranking. Sweden was once best among the Nordic countries and was at the top level in Europe with a silver medal at the 1989 European championships.

However, Swedish volleyball has experienced a massive decline since then. It has not qualified for the finals since 1993. In 2023, Sweden was number 66 in FIVB's ranking, which is much lower than Denmark (number 48), who qualified for the 2023 European championship final tournament. As in basketball, the female Swedish volleyball team does relatively better than the men's team. Sweden is clearly better than the other Nordic countries with a rising trend. The Swedish women's team qualified for the last two final tournamnets of the European championship (ranked number 8 in 2021). Sweden is currently ranked number 27 (Finland: 47; Denmark 49) in FIVB's world ranking.

Sweden is not competitive internationally in the three Olympic team sports which have not been mentioned so far (field hockey, rugby 7s, and water polo). The best tournament result was 16th place in the European men's water polo championships in 1970. Two of the most popular team sports worldwide (cricket and rugby union) are not included in the Olympics. Sweden has a low current rank at number 56 in men's (Twenty20) cricket (lower than the other three Nordic countries). However, in rugby union, Sweden is by far the best Nordic country for both men and women, with high current world rankings as number 19 (men) and number 36 (women).

However, Sweden excels in two other team sports, which are also not part of the Olympics. In Sweden, floorball (or Innebandy) is a trendy sport. Sweden is currently ranked number one in the world in both men's and women's floorball. Sweden has won ten of 14 men's championships, including the last two. Finland is next best with four world titles. In the women's championships, Sweden has won ten of 13 championships, including the last one in 2022. However, Finland won two of the previous three titles. Both in men's and women's floorball, Sweden is not as dominant as in the past, being challenged by Finland (both men and women) and Switzerland (women), but is still clearly number one.

Bandy is a sport dominated by Russia and Sweden. Sweden has won 13 world championships against 26 for the Soviet Union/Russia. Only Finland, with one gold, has broken the hegemony of these two countries. Sweden is the current world champion and ranked number one in the world.

## Individual sports

In some of the most popular individual sports, the Olympics is not the most important competition. This is the case with tennis, golf and road cycling, where the Grand Slam tournaments, the Majors, the Grand Tours and the classic one-day races have higher prestige. Sweden was previously far ahead of the other Nordic countries and did very well in the past in all three sports, especially in tennis and golf. However, Sweden's competitiveness has deteriorated significantly in tennis and road cycling although only modestly so in golf. Both Denmark and Norway are now at a much higher level in road cycling and have more top-ranked tennis players than Sweden. Swedish golf players are still the best among the Nordic countries, although Denmark is not far behind.

Swedish tennis players won 23 of 72 grand slam titles in men's single from 1972-1992. However, it is even more compelling evidence of this extraordinary Swedish success story that Sweden reached the final in the Davis Cup seven years in a row (1983-89). The decline since then has been steep. By the end of 2023, Sweden had no (male or female) tennis players ranked in the top 100 and only two (male and female) players in the top 300.

Swedish cyclists are still present at the highest level in women's road cycling, but the men have experienced a decline, which is almost as steep as for tennis. Until the 1980s, Swedish road cyclists were among the winners in Grand Tours, world championships and Olympic Games, and Swedish riders were dominant in the annual Nordic championships. However, by the end of 2023, there were no Swedish riders in the top 500 in the world ranking and no Swedish riders in the UCI World Tour teams.

Whereas Swedish tennis and road cycling have experienced strongly deteriorating performance, Swedish golf is still doing well. Swedish golf players are still ranked in the top 100 in the world ranking (four male and four female players by the end of 2023).

Tennis and golf were identified as the ultimate Swedish elite sport success stories in the 1970s-1990s (Wijk, 2012). One of the main reasons for this success was the fact that what was previously sports for the well-off became people's sports with widespread access earlier in Sweden than in other countries.

There are other popular individual sports worth mentioning: table tennis and orienteering. In table tennis, Sweden has performed consistently well at the highest level in Europe and occasionally in world-level competitions. Orienteering is a popular non-Olympic sport in which Sweden is competitive at the highest level internationally, with currently four male and four female athletes among the top 10 world ranking. Sweden has historically won more medals in orienteering than any other country, with Norway as the primary challenger. Sweden has maintained its leading position in the sport, as shown by the fact that the Swedish relay teams have won the world title in five and four of the six most recent championships for men and women, respectively.

Sweden wins many medals in several other non-Olympic sports/disciplines. Prime examples are motorboat sports and some martial arts.

## Paralympics/parasport

Table 13 and table 14 show the rankings of the Nordic countries in the medal tables in the Summer and Winter Paralympics. The rankings have a declining trend for all Nordic countries in both the Summer and Winter Paralympics. Tables 13 and 15 show the number of medals won by athletes from the Nordic countries in the Summer and Winter Paralympics, respectively.

Sweden was in the top 10 in all Summer Paralympics in 1976-92 and was ranked highest among the Nordic countries in most (9 of 14) Summer Paralympics. However, in the last two Summer Paralympics, its ranking has been much lower.

**Table 13: Medal table ranking in Summer Paralympics 1960-2020, selected nations**

| Games | Finland | Denmark | Norway | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1960 | 15 | No participation | 6 | No medals |
| 1964 | No participation | No participation | No participation | 17 |
| 1968 | No medals | No medals | 13 | 17 |
| 1972 | 28 | No medals | 22 | 14 |
| 1976 | 13 | 24 | 16 | 9 |
| 1980 | 17 | 21 | 10 | 7 |
| 1984 | 15 | 10 | 10 | 4 |
| 1988 | 22 | 11 | 23 | 6 |
| 1992 | 17 | 11 | 10 | 9 |
| 1996 | 30 | 24 | 17 | 13 |
| 2000 | 43 | 19 | 40 | 29 |
| 2004 | 33 | 29 | 38 | 21 |
| 2008 | 40 | 35 | 43 | 24 |
| 2012 | 27 | 50 | 35 | 29 |
| 2016 | 56 | 51 | 32 | 49 |
| 2020 | 52 | 40 | 47 | 50 |

Source: Data extracted from relevant websites.

**Table** shows a huge decline in the number of medals won by athletes from all Nordic countries in each Paralympic Games. This is mostly an effect of the sharp reduction in the number of events and medal sets in the Paralympics, but it is also caused by a decline in the competitiveness of the Nordic countries. Sweden has won more medals than the other Nordic countries in all but two Summer Paralympics.

**Table 14: Medals in Summer Paralympics, 1960-2020, Nordic nations**

| Games | Finland | Denmark | Norway | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1960 | 1 | No participation | 16 | No medals |
| 1964 | No participation | No participation | No medals | 1 |
| 1968 | No medals | No medals | 9 | 11 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1972 | 3 | No medals | 10 | 17 |
| 1976 | 50 | 6 | 19 | 74 |
| 1980 | 40 | 17 | 36 | 91 |
| 1984 | 59 | 59 | 90 | 160 |
| 1988 | 50 | 64 | 37 | 103 |
| 1992 | 25 | 46 | 33 | 68 |
| 1996 | 13 | 41 | 20 | 37 |
| 2000 | 10 | 30 | 15 | 21 |
| 2004 | 8 | 15 | 5 | 21 |
| 2008 | 6 | 9 | 7 | 12 |
| 2012 | 6 | 5 | 8 | 12 |
| 2016 | 3 | 7 | 8 | 10 |
| 2020 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 8 |

Source: Data extracted from relevant websites.

In the first eight Winter Paralympics, Finland and Norway were always ranked in the top 10. However, only once in the last five Winter Paralympics has a Nordic country been in the top 10. Sweden has consistently performed at a lower level than both Norway and Finland in the Winter Paralympics.

**Table 15: Medal table ranking in Winter Paralympics 1960-2022, selected nations**

| Games | Finland | Norway | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1976 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 1980 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| 1984 | 2 | 3 | 6 |
| 1988 | 4 | 1 | 9 |
| 1992 | 5 | 7 | 12 |
| 1994 | 7 | 1 | 8 |
| 1998 | 9 | 1 | 19 |
| 2002 | 9 | 3 | 19 |
| 2006 | No medals | 12 | 19 |
| 2010 | 17 | 12 | 19 |
| 2014 | 16 | 11 | 11 |
| 2018 | 16 | 14 | 24 |
| 2022 | 13 | 8 | 12 |

Source: Data extracted from relevant websites.

**Table 16: Medals in Winter Paralympics 1960-2022, selected nations**

| Games | Finland | Norway | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1976 | 22 | 12 | 20 |
| 1980 | 35 | 54 | 16 |
| 1984 | 34 | 41 | 14 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1988 | 25 | 60 | 15 |
| 1992 | 14 | 14 | 4 |
| 1994 | 25 | 64 | 8 |
| 1998 | 19 | 40 | 6 |
| 2002 | 8 | 19 | 9 |
| 2006 | No medals | 5 | 1 |
| 2010 | 2 | 6 | 2 |
| 2014 | 1 | 4 | 4 |
| 2018 | 3 | 8 | 1 |
| 2022 | 2 | 7 | 7 |

Source: Data extracted from relevant websites.

Table 17 compares the Nordic countries' medal share in the Olympics and Paralympics (both Summer and Winter) in the last three Games. The share is much lower in the Paralympic Games than in the Olympic Games. The total medal share is 1.7% versus 2.9% in the Summer Games – and 6.2% versus 18.0% in the Winter Games.

**Table 17: Share of Nordic countries' total medals at Olympic and Paralympic Summer and Winter Games 2012-2020**

| | Finland | Denmark | Norway | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Summer Olympic Games | 0.3% | 1.2% | 0.5% | 0.9% |
| Summer Paralympic Games | 0.3% | 0.4% | 0.4% | 0.6% |
| Winter Olympic Games | 2.0% | - | 11.0% | 5.1% |
| Winter Paralympic Games | 1.6% | - | 2.7% | 1.9% |

Source: Data extracted from relevant websites.

Another data set, Greatest Sporting Nation (more on this data later), includes other competitions in an overall ranking of countries in parasport. This shows a similar ranking of the Nordic countries in 2021: Sweden (23), Denmark (34), Norway (39) and Finland (43).
Both according to this measure and in the rankings in the Paralympics, Sweden is ranked significantly lower in Paralympics/parasport than in Olympics/general sport. The same is the case with the other Nordic countries.

It is to some extent surprising that the Nordic welfare states, with their well-developed support systems for people with disabilities, are not doing better and are doing worse than in the Olympics. This may be because the material incentive for becoming a successful paralympic athlete is much higher in other countries where the marginal benefits of success are much higher than in the Nordic welfare states.

During the interviews with stakeholders, it was mentioned that another contributing factor to the relatively poor performance of Swedish parasport is that Sweden has not been involved in military conflicts with injuries in the last couple of centuries. Further, security related to traffic (e.g. cars and transport accidents) has significantly increased over the years. Combined with campaigning towards youth, this has lowered the number of injuries and their severeness.

## Composite measures

It is difficult and probably impossible to develop a measure for elite sports performance that aggregates athletes' performance in all sports using different weights for each sport and each discipline within each sport to make a sort of appropriate index for the strength of each national elite sport system.

Two such composite measures exist: 'Greatest Sporting Nations'[29] and 'World Sports Ranking' (previously 'World Ranking of Nations in Elite Sport').[30] The ranking of the Nordic countries in the two composite measures is shown in figure 20 and 21.

The attempts to develop such aggregate measures, including non-Olympic sports, other events than world championships and weighing of different sports and disciplines, are interesting and admirable.

However, the methodologies used are controversial. For instance, the composite measure 'Greatest Sporting Nations' results in a highly arbitrary ranking. Both the inclusion/exclusion of sports/disciplines and the weighting of the included sports/disciplines are entirely subjective, and much of it seems arbitrary. One example is the way results in road cycling are included. The three Grand Tours (Tour de France, Giro d'Italia and Vuelta a España) are included, whereas the one-day classics are not included – not even the five 'monuments', which have almost an equal level of prestige as the grand tours.

In many other sports, the choices about inclusion are similarly at odds with the relative prestige of events among insiders of the respective sports. For instance, in handball, only results from the Olympic Games and world championships are included, whereas results from the equally prestigious European championships are not. In football, the ranking of nations in 2023 is based on an arbitrary and incoherent mix of results from the FIFA Women's World Cup, UEFA's Nations League, and the CONCACAF's Gold Cup. This means, for instance, that no results by South American nations, including the world champion Argentina, are included.

It also appears unreasonable to simply add up results from both summer and winter sports, knowing that this gives countries with good conditions for winter sports a relative advantage. The weight and inclusion/exclusion of minor sports (for instance, minigolf) and

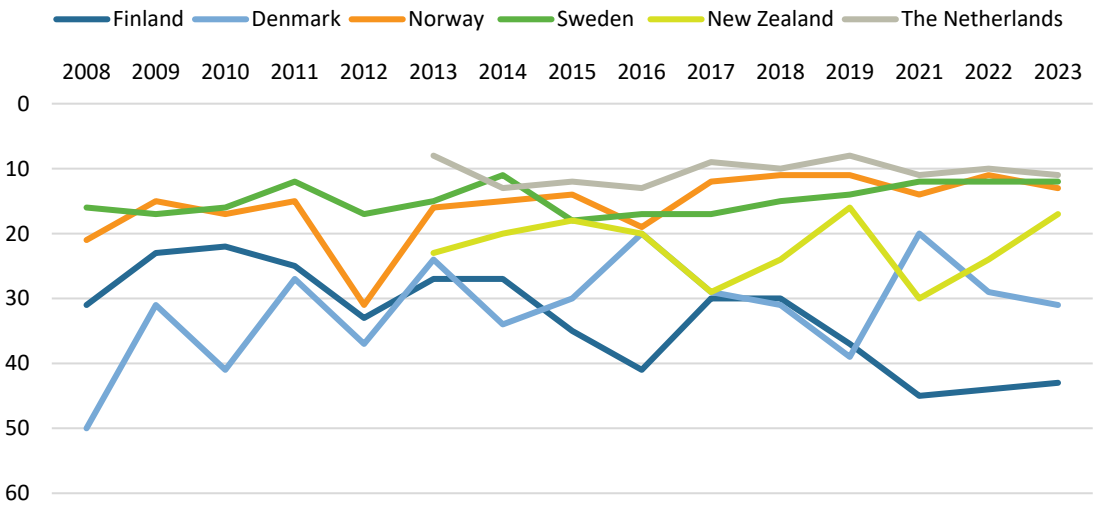
[29] http://greatestsportingnations.com.
[30] https://www.sportranking.world/ See also: Nassif (2018), and Nassif and Raspaud (2023).

sports with very little international spread (for instance, floorball and bandy) can also be seen as subjective and problematic.

Another composite measure is the 'World Sports Ranking' (previously 'World Ranking of Nations in Elite Sport'). This ranking is more scientifically based (Nassif, 2018), and the measure seems to have fewer purely arbitrary elements weighing different sports and disciplines according to popularity and universality. Anyway, similar to Greatest Sporting Nations, it is still fundamentally a subjective exercise based on more or less arbitrary decisions regarding the inclusion/exclusion of sports and disciplines and the inclusion and weighing of events.

The 'Greatest Sporting Nation' ranks Sweden and Norway higher than the other Nordic countries. The reason for the higher ranking compared to Denmark is partly the inclusion of results in winter sports. The most recent figures show that Sweden is ranked marginally higher than Norway, but both countries are highly ranked (number 11 and 13, respectively), whereas Denmark is also among the 20 highest-ranked nations.

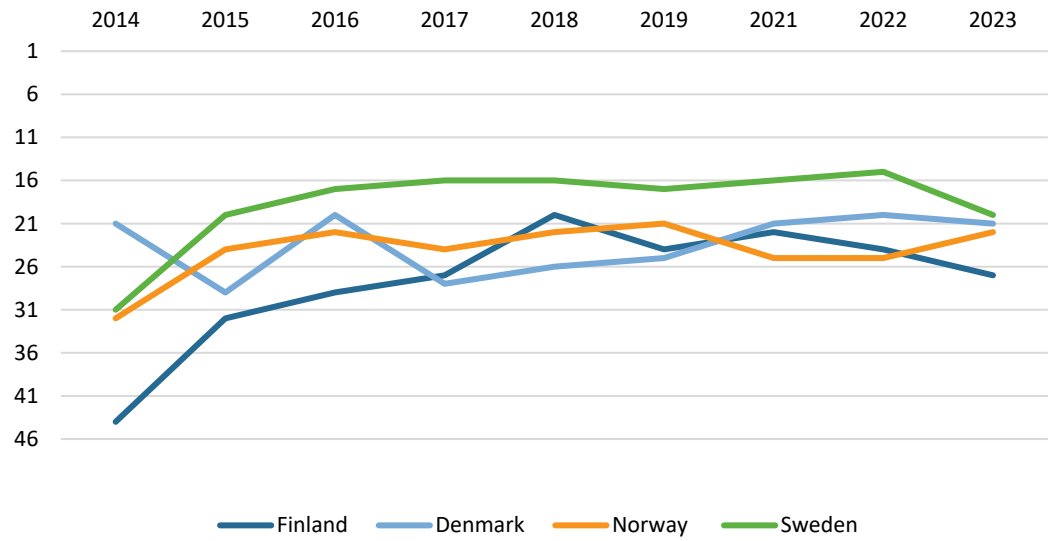
**Figure 20: 'Greatest Sporting Nation' standings 2008-2021**




Source: https://greatestsportingnation.com/. Ranking on the X-axis.

In the 'World Sports Ranking' Sweden is ranked at a higher level than the other three Nordic countries, which are approximately at the same level.

**Figure 21: The 'World Sports Ranking' 2014- 2023[31]**




Source: https://www.worldsportranking.info/. Ranking on the X-axis.

## Goals and performance

In the strategy programme #elitidrott2030 (Riksidrottsförbundet [Swedish Sports Confederation], 2020), the Swedish sports organisation committed to explicit performance goals for the first time. As mentioned earlier, the objectives are articulated in relative terms, that is, about Sweden's position in relation to other nations in 2030:

- Top 5 as Winter Olympics nation
- Top 10 in the ranking by Greatest Sporting Nations
- Top 20 as Paralympic nation (both winter and summer)
- Top 20 as Summer Olympics nation

The performance goals are precise but not as accurate as they appear. We assume that the reason why the term 'as' is used rather than 'in' before Winter Olympics, Paralympic and Summer Olympics nations is that also results in the Olympic disciplines in the years in-between the Olympics are included. These are not objective results. There are subjective choices to make.

The Danish Institute for Sports Studies has developed a measure for calculating a simulated Olympic Games by adding up all results in the Olympic disciplines in non-Olympic years using results from world championships and world rankings.[32] This approach is probably the best measurement method if comparison of performance development over time is the purpose.

[31] At the time of writing this report updated data from this ranking is not available.
[32] See Nielsen and Storm (2023; 2024).

However, this does not cover the Paralympics, and in this case, it is far more difficult to develop a sort of objective measure in the years in between the Paralympic Games as there are neither world championships nor official rankings in many of the disciplines in the years between the Paralympics.

In addition, it is not clear what ranking criteria should be used. Top 5/top 10/top 20 can be in relation to the medal table, number of medals, top-8 points, or other broader measures. Swedish elite sport may live up to the strategic goals according to some of the ranking criteria and not others.

As outlined in the previous section, the methodology used in calculating the ranking in the Greatest Sporting Nations measure is subjective and, in many ways, arbitrary. Using such a questionable subjective measure alongside more objective measures such as results in the Olympic Games and simulated Olympic results in non-Olympic years does not seem reasonable.

Table 18 outlines how Sweden performed in the Summer Olympics (held in) 2021 and the Winter Olympics in 2022, as well as in (the simulated Olympics in) 2022 and 2023 (summer sports) and 2021 and 2023 (winter sports) using the metrics used by the Danish Institute for Sports Studies. Not only medal table ranking but also ranking according to number of medals and top 8 points are used. In relation to parasport, there is yet no way to simulate the Paralympics, so this only includes the last two Paralympic Games.

**Table 18: Sweden's performance and goals (rankings)**

| | 2021 | 2022 | 2023 | Goal |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Winter Olympics | Medal table: 5<br>Medals: 7<br>Top 8 points: 9 | Medal table: 5<br>Medals: 6<br>Top 8 points: 9 | Medal table: 6<br>Medals: 5<br>Top 8 points: 9 | Top 5 |
| Greatest Sporting Nations | 12 | 12 | 12 | Top 10 |
| Winter Paralympics | | Medal table: 12<br>Medals: 8 | | Top 20 |
| Summer Paralympics | Medal table: 50<br>Medals: 39 | | | Top 20 |
| Summer Olympics | Medal table: 23<br>Medals: 26<br>Top 8 points: 22 | Medal table: 17<br>Medals: 27<br>Top 8 points: 20 | Medal table: 14<br>Medals: 22<br>Top 8 points: 20 | Top 20 |

Source: Data extracted from relevant websites.

The table shows that the ranking of Sweden does not vary much from year to year apart from an upward trend in Sumer Olympic sports in the recent two years. Sweden lived up to the goal of a top 5 ranking in the last Winter Olympics as well as for Winter Olympic sports in the preceding year. However, this is only the case in terms of medal table ranking. In both 2021 and 2022, Sweden was ranked outside of the top 5 in terms of number of medals as well as top-8 points.

In 2023, Sweden was in top 5 in the ranking according to the number of medals only, but this would not have been the case if Russian athletes had participated in the Olympic winter sport world championships in 2023. In relation to all three measures, Sweden is close to a top 5 ranking but not quite there.

Sweden competes with countries that are competitive across most winter sports (Switzerland, Austria, Italy and France) as well the dominant skating nation (Netherlands) in efforts to reach a top 5 ranking after the big four winter sports nations (Norway, USA, Canada and Germany).

Reaching the goal of a top 5 ranking is difficult and a longer-term prospect as it requires increased competitiveness in some of the sports and disciplines where Sweden is far from the medals and does not even qualify for the Olympics.

In the Summer Olympics (held in) 2021, Sweden was ranked outside top 20 for all three measures. However, in the following year, Sweden lived up to the goal of a top 20 ranking in terms of both medal table ranking and top-8 points ranking but not in terms of number of medals.

The same is the case in 2023. However, this year Sweden improved its ranking substantially in terms of both medal table and number of medals. In other words, it is ambiguous whether the actual results live up to the goals, but the improved results in the most recent years point in that direction.

In relation to the Paralympics, it is more straightforward. Sweden lives up to the relatively unambitious goals for winter sports by a large margin but is far from living up to the goals for summer sports. Sweden is close to living up to the goals regarding the Greatest Sporting Nations ranking with a stable position as number 12.

## Summing up

There is no single objective method for measuring how well Sweden is performing in international sport competitions. In this chapter, several measures have been used to analyse the development of the international competitiveness of the Swedish elite sport system, in a way which is as complete and nuanced as possible.

Sweden was a superpower in international elite sport until around 1960. Understandably, the performance level of Swedish elite sport was significantly lower after the end of the 'golden age' of amateurism with the breakout of the Cold War and the associated struggle between societal systems in the sphere of sports.

This is reflected in the Swedish medal tally, which has fluctuated since then. After an improvement in the 1980s and 1990s, the level stabilised at around ten medals per Summer Games in the last two decades. In the Winter Games, Sweden has gained ground in the most recent Games with a higher ranking, more medals than ever before, and a more modest increase in the share of medals.

In a Nordic comparison, Sweden is still doing well in the Olympics, although Denmark has surpassed Sweden in the most recent Summer Olympics. The gulf between Norway and Sweden as successful winter sports nations has grown. Denmark and Norway have generally improved relative to Sweden, whereas Finland has fallen behind.

New Zealand and the Netherlands are the most successful countries with approximately the same population size and similar culture and societal structure. The recent Olympic achievements of Norway, Denmark, New Zealand, and the Netherlands indicate the potential for significant improvements in Swedish performance in case of appropriate reform of the Swedish elite sport system.

The Swedish performance in the last three decades must be seen in a broader perspective. Historically, a large share of the Swedish medals has come from only two sports (wrestling and athletics). In both sports, the international competition has been radically sharpened – in wrestling as a result of the fragmentation of what was previously the Soviet Union, and in athletics because of the involvement of a number of new competitive nations.

The Swedish medal tally was obviously deemed to shrink for this reason. In athletics, however, this has not happened. It is impressive that Swedish track and field athletes are still able to regularly win medals in one of the (if not the) most universal and heavily contested Olympic sport.

The Swedish elite sport system is still capable of producing medalists in many sports/disciplines in the Olympics and other major championships. However, some sports that did well in the past are no longer competitive internationally, and there are fewer Olympic sports with medal potential than previously. Some of the most successful individual sports, most prominently tennis, have experienced a momentous decline.

In most sports, Sweden was traditionally clearly ahead of the other Nordic countries and, in most sports, challenged mainly by Finland. The Finnish challenge has faded away, but the gap between Sweden on one side and Norway and Denmark on the other has closed, and in many sports where Sweden was previously dominant, it is now second or third best among the Nordic countries.

This is also the case in many team sports. Sweden was previously dominant at the world level and clearly the best Nordic country in men's ice hockey and men's handball, but has now been surpassed by Finland and Denmark, respectively. Sweden was also until the 1980s the undisputed leading Nordic country in men's football but has since been challenged/surpassed by Denmark. The Swedish ice hockey team has not done well recently but has such a strong basis in Sweden that this crisis may well be a temporary blip. On the other hand, the women's ice hockey team has lost ground in a way that seems more permanent.

Apart from ice hockey, the women's teams generally do better than the men in team sports, with the world-leading women's football team as the prime example. The same trend is visible in several individual sports as well. Female athletes are more internationally competitive than their male colleagues in many sports, perhaps most prominently in cross-country skiing and swimming.

In parasport, Sweden is leading among the Nordic countries, but the performance of all Nordic countries is worse in parasport compared to able-bodies sport. There is an obvious potential for improvement in Paralympic sports.

# Elite Sport in the (other) Nordic countries: A comparison

## Introduction

The four Nordic countries are very similar in many respects. This is the case concerning values, culture, politics, societal structure, social coherence, and the predominance of a broad-based egalitarian welfare state. The elite sport systems are embedded in this common societal context and have important common elements.

In all four countries, voluntary activities in local clubs constitute the foundation, and neither commercial sports activities nor university-based sports are as important as in many other countries. Public authorities support the clubs financially, and local governments provide mostly community-based facilities.

The sports movement developed as part of the welfare state and is deeply rooted in egalitarian values. In elite sports, the ideal of amateurism was unchallenged and prevailed longer than in most other countries. This began to change in the 1970s.

However, these commonalities do not mean that the organisational forms are similar. The differences are striking. This is well described in Andersen & Ronglan (2011):

> "Not only are there differences among national sport systems, they also often run counter to dominant patterns of political and societal organisations within each country. Sweden, known for its ability to adapt to international challenges, has over the last decades had the most stable overall structures within the domain of sport. Finland has perhaps the strongest tradition for centralisation of authority, but in this period, the elite sport system has become increasingly fragmented. In contrast, Norway with the strongest tradition for decentralisation and egalitarianism has developed the most centralised elite sport system. In Denmark, where the state has been most reluctant to intervene in the economy and society, we find a state institution for elite sport supported by special legislation. In the other countries, the state keeps an arm's length distance."
>
> (S. S. Andersen & Ronglan, 2011, p. 11)

This is a description of the situation in the early 2010s. The situation is still more or less the same. However, the differences are likely to become smaller because of recent changes/planned changes in Sweden and Finland, which have adopted or plan to adopt elements of the Norwegian and Danish systems. The recent tentative convergence has been partly initiated by the relative improvement of international elite sport performance in Norway, Denmark, and other countries with a similar unified and centralised model compared to Sweden, Finland, and other countries with a more segmented, decentralised structure.

This part of the report outlines the differences and commonalities among the elite sport systems in the four Nordic countries. First, there is a brief description of the main features of the systems and the way they have emerged and developed in Finland, Denmark, and Norway. The overview is meant to supplement the more detailed analysis of the characteristics of the Swedish elite sport system to facilitate the comparison of the four countries in

the following sections. The Nordic comparison is organised around table 19 that summarises the main differences/commonalities in relation to relevant dimensions. The concluding section draws up the main commonalities and differences.

## Finland

In all the Nordic countries, the sports movement was segmented into class-based organisations in the first half of the 20th century. Finland is the only Nordic country where this was still the case until recently. The split between the Finnish Workers' Sports Federation and the 'bourgeois' Finnish Central Sports Organisation did not hinder the participation of the best Finnish athletes in the Olympic Games, but cooperation was sparse in other areas. The differences have faded away, and the working-class association is now part of Finland's unitary confederation of sports federations as in the other Nordic countries. Still, the sector remains complex, with many stakeholders and organisations operating independently. The overall structure is unsettled and fragmented.

The structure around 2010 is described in Andersen & Ronglan (2011):

> "… the current confederation, TUC, established in the mid-1990s, is weak in terms of authority and operational responsibilities. It mainly provides services for individual sports associations. The overall tendency is towards more autonomy for increasingly specialised independent sports associations that include both competitive and recreational activities. The National Olympic Committee is independent and has a limited role in ongoing elite development."
>
> (S. S. Andersen & Ronglan, 2011, p. 21)

Finland did not become an independent nation-state until after World War I, followed by a disastrous civil war. Elite sport functioned as an instrument to foster a national identity and had a high level of legitimacy in the following decades. Meanwhile, public policy became more and more oriented towards mass participation.

The Sport Act of 1979 created the foundation for an increased distribution of government funding to the sports movement as well as massive construction of new sports facilities. Elite sport was given less priority, and the economic crisis following the breakdown of the Soviet Union made the situation worse.

In 1992, the Finnish Central Sports Organisation went bankrupt, and organisational confusion prevailed for some years. Finnish elite sport suffered another blow when a doping scandal in 2002 had long-lasting negative legitimacy impacts. Private funding through sponsorship almost dried up as a result which further worsened the economic resources available for elite sport. Then, the funding crisis and organisational failure prompted a break with the arm's length principle.

> "… during this period the role of the state increased in Finnish sport. According to Mäkinen et al. (2016) tensions and conflicts about sports moved from having a political character founded in class and language-based differences (and organisations) … to be more incorporated into the state administration. Targets and goals were now set by the

> state and government apparatus, with the main sports organisations having less significance and not being in the lead."
>
> (Storm & Nielsen, 2022)

In the late 2000s, there was a push to modernise the Finnish sports system. Historically, public funding has been the most significant financial contributor to sport. The increasing demand for activities organised by the market and the organisational fragmentation with many independent organisations and overlapping management procedures, combined with low-performance output in medals, initiated government-led reforms.

In 2010, a dedicated elite sports reform group created by the Finnish Ministry of Culture and Education recommended the forming of an independent elite sports unit entitled 'the High-Performance Unit' (HPU), which was founded and positioned inside the Finnish Olympic Committee in 2013. After a period with two central sports organisations – the Finnish Olympic Committee (FOC) (including the HPU) and the Finnish Sports Confederation (FSC) – with unclarity concerning their respective roles, the two organisations merged in 2017 under the name of the Finnish Olympic Committee.

The current Finnish system operates as a combination of state-led and organisational-led elements or – as described by Lehtonen et al. (2021) and Mäkinen (2019) – as a network.

In the most recent period of Finnish elite sport (2017-2021), steps have been taken towards a more precise composition of this model of collaboration and coordination guided by the state. Important changes have been made within elite sport strategy. It has become explicitly athlete-oriented, i.e., putting athlete needs at the centre of the support system.

The network idea has been more clearly articulated among the stakeholders and in the available government reports defining the roles and responsibilities of the actors in the elite sports network. Further, performance targets have been defined for the first time, six Olympic training centres were selected, a new competence programme was developed, and a sharper prioritisation of the use of funds has been introduced.

Successful implementation of the new policies is far from guaranteed, and several severe problems have not yet been addressed, but it is evident that much progress has been made in the last decade. Finland may be moving towards an almost ideal-type example of an elite sport system without a unified structure but instead based on collaboration and coordination within an elaborate network structure.

## Denmark

Danish elite sport was until recently relatively unsuccessful in international competitions compared to the other Nordic countries. Denmark has never been a superpower in sports, as Sweden and Finland previously were in summer sports, and Norway continues to be in winter sports. That said, sport for all has a strong tradition in Denmark, pioneering the development of gymnastics as part of a healthy lifestyle, performance excellence in team gymnastics, and engaging in sports activities in folk high schools.

The expansion of welfare state services in the 1970s led to a boom in the building of freely accessible facilities and activity-based financial support of sports clubs. High sports participation and the many new facilities provided good foundations for elite sports, and part of the subsidies for the sports federation went to the elite. However, until the 1980s, there was no dedicated financial support for elite sport. The organisation of sports was segmented in Denmark. In addition to the National Olympic Committee, there was not one but four umbrella organisations. Whereas the Sports Confederation of Denmark (DIF) covered both sport for all and elite sport, the other three organisations only covered grassroots sports (Hansen, 2012, pp. 44–47). This limited the available resources for elite sport. In addition, Denmark was one of the countries where amateurism as an ideal was strongest, which further hampered the competitiveness of Danish elite sport.

This changed radically in the 1980s. The crucial turning point was the legislation of the Elite Sport Act in 1984. The Act introduced a new independent state organisation, Team Danmark with formal responsibility for elite sport development as well as new binding criteria for the way the organisation should implement elite sport policy. The activities of Team Danmark received separate governmental funding.

The declining competitiveness of Danish elite sport, as evidenced, for instance, by poor results in the Olympic Games (only four medals in total in the two Summer Olympics in the 1970s), was partly what motivated the new legislation. Still, the aim of improving the international competitiveness of Danish athletes did not play a major role in the process that led the Parliament to introduce the Elite Sport Act. It was rather welfare state-related concerns for athletes related to the increasing professionalisation and other trends in modern elite sport. The act involved financial support for top athletes linked to a dual career requirement that involved taking formal education alongside the elite sport career as a requirement for support.

It also included a 15-year age limit for granting support, as well as restrictions on support to sports with specific problematic practices. It was, to a large extent, the overall aim that support for elite sport should be ethically and socially justifiable that galvanised support from politicians who had previously shown no interest and even hostility towards elite sport. In other words, the new law represented an extension of the social democratic welfare state even if it formally broke with deep-rooted egalitarian principles applied to the domain of sport (Hansen, 2012).

The power granted to an independent organisation was not always welcomed by the Sports Confederation of Denmark (Danmarks Idrætsforbund, DIF), which made several attempts to convince politicians to change Team Danmark's status to become part of DIF. One attempt involved engaging a big consultancy and accounting firm to provide evidence and arguments for such an integration.

A protracted and conflictual but eventually successful process by Team Danmark in the 2000s involved making the support model more selective. This involved the identification of a small number of sports federations, which were to be provided with the highest level

of support, as well as a less supported second layer of sports and additional support for individual and promising young athletes in other sports. The new, more targeted approach cut the support for a range of federations that had previously received a share of the money.

In 2004, the Elite Sport Act was revised in a way which reduced the independence of Team Danmark by changing the composition of the board so that half of its members would be appointed by DIF and the other half by the Danish Ministry of Culture. The amendment involved greater state influence. It also secured DIF influence, which it has used in several strategic decisions since then. This has caused a more collaborative climate, and there have since then been no attempts to challenge the operative independence of Team Danmark.

The revision of the Act in 2004 involved a few other changes including abolishment of the 15-year age limit, which was seen as making it impossible for Denmark to compete in international elite sports. However, it maintained the welfare state-motivated overall principles. At the same time, the revision reflected a "significant change in mentality … in Denmark, one that was not solely related to the world of sport or unique to the Danish society" (Hansen, 2012, p. 59).

> "The Danish welfare model gradually changed in the 1980s. As in the rest of Western Europe, new liberal thinking had become widespread in line with a differentiation of the population. The middle class became the dominant political factor in Denmark, and the concept of social equality was pushed into the background. Instead, career processes in which people were paid according to effort and merit became the dominant ideal … (As a result, support for) elite sport became stronger than ever before."
>
> (Hansen, 2012, p. 60)

In 2001, elite sport was written into Government policy papers for the first time, outlining the new government's programme and strategic priorities:

> "Danish elite sport's potential for making its mark internationally must be strengthened. Through an ethical, socially and economically justifiable development of elite sport, Team Danmark in cooperation with voluntary organisations, must be ensured the opportunities to provide elite athletes with the optimal conditions."
>
> (Hansen, 2012, p. 61)

A minor revision of the Act was introduced in 2021 as a response to media reports and investigative reports about the abuse and harassment of young female swimmers. The reform provided athletes and coaches an opportunity to raise concerns about unacceptable behaviour in elite sport training supported by Team Danmark to a new independent function, located in Anti Doping Denmark.[33] This illustrates that the principle of socially justifiable support functions as a powerful means for raising concerns and implementing changes through a political process. Another reform introduced by Team Danmark was a system for whistleblowers to raise concerns and a procedure for processing them. Team Danmark has

[33] EliteSupport (antidoping.dk)

also developed an Ethical Code of Conduct as a proactive means to counteract the emergence of problematic practices.

The liberal turn of the Danish welfare state can be seen as leading to a stricter focus on international success in daily operations and the rhetoric of Team Danmark (Storm, 2012). Four-year plans including performance goals became part of the contracts agreed by the Danish Ministry of Culture and Team Danmark for each Olympic cycle.

However, it has always been a predominant feature in the Danish elite sport model that athletes' welfare is of primary significance alongside international success. Team Danmark has articulated the vision of being the best place in the world for an athlete to play elite sport. Further, in its strategy for 2022-2024, the explicit focus is to optimise not only the conditions for sporting success but also the athletes' development as harmonious human beings.

## Norway

Norwegian elite athletes have always been prominent in winter sports, but Norway has recently developed into the world's most successful winter sports nation. Norway's international standing in summer sports is at a lower level, but Norwegian athletes have had regular success in many sports including handball, athletics and cycling. The successes originate from entrepreneurial efforts within the sports movement in the late 1980s that resulted in an integration of the Norwegian Olympic Committee into the Norwegian Confederation of Sport Federations (NIF) and the development of a unified and centralised elite sport system centred around a new organisation responsible for elite sports, Olympiatoppen.

The emergence of this system happened even if the predominant perception of elite sport was similar to the situation in the other Nordic countries. Elite sport in Norway existed in an environment strongly dominated by values such as amateurism, voluntarism, and grassroot sport, and elite sport had to struggle for its legitimacy similar to the situation in the other Nordic countries. Elite sport gained legitimacy momentarily as a result of Norway hosting the Olympic Winter Games in 1952. However, no major changes happened until the 1970s and 1980s. A Parliamentary White Paper in 1973 (St.meld nr.8 [1973-74], St.meld nr.52 [1973-74]) recognised elite sport as an inherent part of sport for all ("*Also the winners belong to 'all'*"), which opened up for state support for elite sport. From 1978, the National Budget included specific funding for elite sport (scholarships to top athletes). In the 1970s, various proposals, such as the establishment of a top sports centre, were suggested but rejected by the NIF.

The situation gradually changed, and at least three main factors caused the establishment of what was called 'the Norwegian model', including Olympiatoppen in the late 1980s. First, it was accepted by the sports organisations that Norwegian elite sport had to adapt to the uniform structures and practices that had emerged in all successful countries in modern elite sport, while also maintaining crucial characteristics of the Norwegian model. The acceptance of the necessity of adapting to the realities of elite sport was coupled with efforts

to do it in a way that did not diverge from the core ideals of keeping elite sport within the broader sports movement.

Second, the so-called Project 88 was successful in putting focus on the conditions of the athletes with the aim of allowing top athletes to live a normal life and have some security for the future after the end of their sporting careers. This caused a substantial increase in the funds for individual scholarships to athletes.

These two factors were similar to the welfare state-based rationale behind the Danish Elite Sport Act, but the third factor was more predominant and partly unique for Norway. The concerns for improving the international performance of its athletes were far more important in Norway. This was partly caused by a sharp decline in the international competitiveness of Norwegian elite sport as evidenced by poor results in the Olympic Games, most dramatically in the Winter Games in 1988, where Norway did not win a single gold medal. IOC's decision to allocate the hosting of the Games in 1994 to Lillehammer further brought home the realisation that something radical had to be done to strengthen the Norwegian elite sport system.

This was realised with financial state support but without legislation and state intervention as in Denmark. The arm's length principle was maintained as NIF and the Norwegian Olympic Committee jointly managed to create a new model (The Olympic Top Sports programme) around a new centre for top sports (Olympiatoppen), which was allocated the overall responsibility for Norwegian elite sport.

Olympiatoppen introduced an until then unseen element of professionalism in the management of elite sport. The focus on the athletes was supplemented with an increasing focus on strengthening the competencies of coaches and leaders. The influence the elected leaders in sports organisations had on decisions was reduced in favour of decision-making by knowledgeable professionals.

Elite athletes were provided with expert resources, including medical support. Well-equipped training centres became centres not only for training and support but also for knowledge development. Olympiatoppen is located close to the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences (Norges Idrætshøjskole, NIH), which facilitates a continuous flow of knowledge from science to elite sport and vice versa. Competence flow and learning rather than increased flows of money are seen as the main characteristics of this new Norwegian model of elite sport support.

> "Olympiatoppen used significant resources to apply and develop new competences. In some sports, Norwegian athletes obtained a significant advantage, as for example at ski-preparation and altitude training. [Further, ed.] a joint project with Olympiatoppen and the Norwegian Ski Association generated knowledge regarding altitude level, duration of training camps and intensity of training, etc. … Such improvements also provided advantages in biathlon."
>
> (Goksøyr & Hanstad, 2012, p. 37)

The knowledge obtained through the application of science in one sport spills over easily to other sports within the centralised cooperation of Olympiatoppen and the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences. The most dominant and unique characteristic of the Norwegian elite sport system is joint learning through such processes aided by a high degree of cooperation and active exchange across sports. Generalist coaches in the programme play a key role by actively challenging and supporting coaches in individual sports. The Olympic Top Sports programme has "transformed a loose and fragmented network into a cluster" (S. S. Andersen, 2012, p. 239).

The Norwegian model is not free from conflicts, including power struggles, personality clashes, 'turf wars' as well as inter-sport and inter-organisational rivalry that could easily derail the whole project (Goksøyr & Hanstad, 2012; Stensbøl, 2010). Its success has been accomplished through entrepreneurial joint efforts by leaders in sports organisations. It seems that the role of the leader of Olympiatoppen from 1991 to 2004, Bjørge Stensbøl, was especially important (Sandner, 2015, 2018).

While the main tenets of the system have been in place for decades, incremental reform is an ongoing process with continuous evaluation and adaptation of practice. The most recent developments concern a strategy plan for Olympiatoppen 2022-2028, including 10-15 development projects in cooperation with the federations and quality assurance of the activities of four to six secondary schools giving priority to sports.

Further, a new organisational structure of Olympiatoppen was enacted in the autumn of 2022. In addition, a more consequential project is the planned establishment in Oslo of a new national training centre, which is intended to significantly improve the capacity, quality of research and expert resources supplied by the Norwegian School of Sport Science (NIH) in cooperation with Olympiatoppen.

The organisation of elite sport diverges radically from mass sport. Operational professionalism takes centre stage in elite sport, whereas bottom-up democratic decision-making characterises the general sports movement. However, the ideals of the mass sport-centered Norwegian sports movement still permeate the way top sport is perceived and legitimised in Norway. For instance, top athletes need to be, or at least appear to be, humble and modest, refraining from extravagance to show that they are part of the people. The top athletes are expected to act appropriately, and a doping scandal as the one that rocked Finnish elite sport for a decade, can be expected to have equally disastrous impacts in Norway.

## An overall comparison of the elite sport systems in Finland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden

Table 19 contains a short schematic characterisation of elements of the four Nordic elite sport systems. Brief elaborations follow in the subsequent text.

**Table 19: Schematic comparison of elite sport systems in Finland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden**

| | Finland | Denmark | Norway | Sweden |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Role of broad voluntary movement | High | High | High | High |
| Mass participation | High | High | High | High |
| Unified centralised structure | Low | High | High | Low |
| Professional organisation with operational autonomy | Medium | High | High | Medium/low |
| Cooperation and coordination | Low – but improving | High | High | Low – but improving |
| Role of the state | High | High/medium | Medium | Low |
| Autonomy of sports organisations | Low | Medium/high | High | High |
| Egalitarianism | Medium/high | Medium/high | High | High |
| Legitimacy of elite sport | Low | Medium/high | High | Medium |
| 'Nationalism' | Medium | Medium | High | Low ('lagom') |
| Results/international competitiveness | Low | Medium, increasing | High | Medium, stagnating |
| Impact of poor results on reform | Low | High | High | Medium |
| State financial support | Medium | Medium/high | Medium/high | Low |
| Private sponsorships and donations | Low | Medium/high | Medium/high | Medium/low |
| Targeting of support | Low- but increasing | High | Medium/high | Low - but increasing |
| Performance goals | Yes – but lacks detail and no follow-up | Yes | Yes | Yes – new with flaws |
| Talent recruitment and development | Medium | Medium | Medium/high | Medium/high |
| Athletes' financial support | Medium | Medium | Medium | Medium/low |
| Support of dual careers | Medium, improving | High | High | High |
| Availability and quality of training facilities | High | Medium/high | High | Medium/high |
| Location of training facilities | Medium | Low | High | Medium |
| Learning across sports | Low | Medium | High | Low |
| Coaches and coach development | Low, but improving | Medium/low | High | Medium/low |
| Access to national and international competitions | High | High | High | Medium/high |
| Research, sport science, technology and expert resources | Medium/high | Medium/high | High | Medium |

## Mass participation and the voluntary sports movement

The Nordic countries have common features which are unique in comparison with other countries. The voluntary sports movement with local clubs provides a strong foundation for elite sport, and the Nordic countries excel in relation to mass participation. This is reflected in figures for how often people in different countries play sport presented in the section on pillar 3. Among European Union member countries, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark clearly have the highest shares of the population who are active in sports. Norway is no doubt at a similarly high level. This creates a strong foundation for elite sport.

## Governance and organisation

As detailed in the preceding country sections and this report in general, there are, however, huge differences between Norway and Denmark on the one side, and Sweden and Finland on the other in relation to governance and the organisation of the elite sport system. Whereas there is a unified structure and a high degree of centralisation in Norway and Denmark, decision-making is decentralised with a segmented organisational structure in Sweden and Finland.

However, during the last decade, Finland, and in recent years also Sweden, have seen a movement towards a substitute to the unified, centralised model with more collaboration and better coordination among the decentralised decision-making units. This involves developing some of the same organisational solutions as in Norway and Denmark through other organisational means.

## Professional organisation with operational autonomy

One of the primary characteristics of the most successful elite sport systems is the existence of an operationally autonomous professional organisation with overall responsibility for elite sport strategy, coordination, and allocation of support. UK Sport was an early inspiration, and all four Nordic countries apart from Sweden have such organisations. Team Danmark (since 1984) and Olympiatoppen (since 1988) are well-established organisations. The High-Performance Unit in Finland has existed for less than a decade and is less developed. In Sweden, SOK exercises some of the tasks of an overall strategic organisation with a level of professionalism, but responsibilities are mostly shared between organisations, and the division of labour is contested.

Professionalism is also encouraged/enforced beyond the elite sport organisation itself. In all four Nordic countries, it is a precondition for the support of the federations, that they have a minimum level of professionalism in place. This is enacted through negotiations around possible support where the federations must provide evidence of professional strategic plans and planned implementation. Team Danmark and Olympiatoppen also demand internal organisational reform in federations as a precondition for receiving support. In small federations, streamlining their ways of organising elite sport is enforced through the employment of at least a full-time sports director and a full-time head coach as a condition for support. The motivation is to ensure a more professional interaction between Team Danmark and the federations. Similar arrangements have recently been initiated in Finland and Sweden.

## Cooperation and coordination

It is a crucial precondition for success that the central elite sport organisation can cooperate well with the national confederations of sports federations and the sports federations themselves. These are potentially conflictual relationships. It seems to work best in Norway, partly because of the high general approval rates regarding Olympiatoppen. In Denmark, after two decades of perpetual conflict, a modus vivendi was found with a composition of the board that gives DIF the right to appoint half of its members. Both Finland and Sweden attempt to achieve inter-organisational coordination and cooperation without a central organisation. This has generally been difficult. In Finland, organisational instability and confusion have hampered cooperation and led to zero-sum strategies such as separate lobbying for specific state funding. In Sweden, the relationship between SOK and RF has been highly conflictual. In the last decade, the situation has improved, in both Sweden and Finland, but relationships are still unsettled.

## Role of the state

The role of the state in elite sport varies a lot across the Nordic countries. Denmark is a special case in the sense that Team Danmark is an independent state institution regulated by the Elite Sport Act. In the other Nordic countries, there are arm's length relationships between the state and the sports organisations. The state provides financial support, but does not interfere. The Danish Ministry of Culture appoints half of the members of the board of Team Danmark including the chairman. However, whereas the establishment of Team Danmark to a large extent was a result of entrepreneurial activity of the civil servant responsible for sport in the Danish Ministry of Culture (Hansen, 2012, p. 50), as well as party politics, the active role of the state in relation to elite sport has been modest since then apart from the process around a few revisions of the Elite Sport Act.

The role of the state has been greater in Finland, at least in the last two decades. State activism followed the failures of the sports organisations to formulate and implement appropriate and coherent sports policies. The result has been a multitude of policy and strategy papers and investigative reports. Far more civil servants and associated researchers are employed by the ministry responsible for sport (Ministry of Education) than in the other Nordic countries. The role of the state is more withdrawn in Norway and Sweden, but politicians in Norway are more openly supportive of elite sport and willing to follow up with financial and other forms of support.

## Autonomy of sports organisations

The degree of autonomy of the organisations responsible for elite sport is the mirror image of the role of the state. In Finland, the degree of autonomy is relatively low because of the predominant role of state activism and the weakness of the sports organisations. Despite the legislative constraints and the formal break with the arm's length principle, the sports organisations have more autonomy in Denmark because of the de facto withdrawal of the state from actual interference except in the event of obvious politically sensitive issues. In Norway and Sweden, on the other hand, the relations with the state are still characterised by the arm's length principle. The Norwegian state has engaged more with elite sport

issues than is the case in Sweden, but without limiting the autonomy of the sports organisations.

### Egalitarianism

In all Nordic countries, the ideal of egalitarianism has an important although weakening impact on the respective elite sport systems. The ideal is central in the social democratic, universal welfare state. It has historically led to the absolute predominance of mass sport and inherent scepticism towards elite sports.

It created a solid foundation for elite sports success through mass participation, availability of facilities and the ideal of providing equal opportunities to excel in elite sport. However, it hindered, postponed, or weakened the adoption of other means of competing successfully in elite sports. More liberal versions of the welfare states have gained ground, especially in Denmark and Finland.

### Legitimacy of elite sport and 'nationalism'

The legitimacy of elite sports increased as a result of this development. In all Nordic countries, elite sport has struggled to gain legitimacy. In Sweden and especially in Finland, this still has an impact on the development of elite sports. In Norway and Denmark, the legitimacy of elite sport has been high for some time, although adherence to egalitarian norms is still a precondition for legitimacy, at least in Norway. However, the discourse on elite sport in Norway has stressed how it is inherently an organic part of the sports movement despite professionalism and practices with very little similarity with mass sports.

Public enthusiasm and feelings of pride when a nation's elite athletes perform well are at different levels and take different forms in the four Nordic countries. Such expressions of nationalism are quite moderate in Sweden. You may call this 'lagom nationalism'. It is far more prominent in Norway. This also has an impact on government policies and the size of private sponsorships.

### International competitiveness and impacts of poor results on reform

As detailed in the previous chapter, there is a clear pattern in the relative developments of international competitiveness of the four Nordic elite sport systems. Norway, Sweden, and Denmark are all doing well, whereas Finland has fallen behind in both summer and winter sports. While good international performances are typically celebrated as indications that the underlying systems work well, poor performances often initiate soul-searching and eventually reform.

Poor results may be seen as part of the reason for the reforms that led to later success, particularly the initiation of Team Danmark and Olympiatoppen. Denmark experienced very poor results in the 1970s, which was a part of the background for the White Paper, that led to the Elite Sport Act and Team Danmark. The poor results in the Olympics in the 1980s had an even more significant impact in Norway. The choice of Lillehammer as host for the 1994 Olympics further strengthened the need for major change.

Sweden has not experienced a similarly dramatic decline in performance, at least not since the 1950s. Further, since 1912, none of the Swedish bids to host the Summer and Winter Olympics have been successful, so the typical causes for root and branch reform have not materialised. The relatively relaxed Swedish attitude to success and failure in elite sport has also weakened the impetus to initiate major reforms of the system.

## State financial support

It is very difficult to find reliable comparable figures for state financial support of elite sport. This makes it almost impossible to compare the Nordic countries with countries, which have completely different ways of supporting elite sport. For instance, how is it possible to compare countries, whose funding of elite sport is primarily through the national lottery, to countries where most elite athletes are employed by the military or the police, with comparable funding hidden in these institutions' budgets?

Inter-Nordic comparison is also inherently difficult. The budgets of the organisations responsible for elite sport only (Team Danmark, Olympiatoppen, the High-Performance Unit and SOK) are transparent, which is also the case for financial support through sponsorships. However, it is not easy to deduce the sports federations' share of the state funding that goes to elite sport. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that this funding is likely to be higher than the more dedicated elite sport support.

Further, there are a lot of other types of indirect support of elite sport such as the building of facilities, the funding of the idrottsgymnasium model, and, in a wider sense, also part of the funding of mass sport. These hidden and indirect forms of financial support are likely significantly higher in the Nordic countries than elsewhere.

However, we only have reliable figures for the direct targeted funding for elite sport. In the SPLISS study (see the section on pillar 1), the Nordic countries are among the countries with the lowest level of state funding for elite sport. Finland and Sweden are the lowest with €29 million and €26 million, respectively. Denmark is not much higher with €46 million. Another recent study including Denmark and Norway has the direct funding of Team Danmark and Olympiatoppen at almost the same level (Skadborg, 2023). If the total support for DIF and NIF is added, Norway is significantly ahead.

The combined support for Olympiatoppen and NIF is three times higher than the support received by Team Danmark and DIF. In Norway, the financial support for Olympiatoppen and NIF increased by 135% from 2014 to 2022, whereas the support for Team Danmark and DIF only increased by 6% in the same period. The support for Team Danmark has been stagnant for several years and decreased in 2022. However, in 2023, the organisation received a major boost from a significant increase in funding through the state budget of 70 million DKK, as well as a 60 million DKK donation from a private foundation.

In summary, the direct funding of the dedicated Nordic elite sport organisations is relatively low. It is highest and increasing in Denmark and Norway with an almost equal amount of resources available for Team Danmark and Olympiatoppen, but the elite

activities of the sport federations receive more funding in Norway than in Denmark. The direct funding of elite sport in Finland and Sweden has been relatively stable in recent years. In per capita terms, the support is lowest in Sweden.

### Private sponsorships and donations

Funding through private sponsorships and donations reflects differences between the Nordic countries in relation to the legitimacy of elite sport. It is much lower in Finland than in the other three countries, and it is highest in Norway and Denmark. In Denmark, it has increased significantly in recent years, and this funding source is now percentage-wise larger than in the other Nordic countries. In Sweden, SOK is almost fully reliant on private sponsorships, which clearly constrains its activities in a less favourable economic climate.

Most private sponsorships go to the most popular team sports – football in all four countries, ice hockey in Sweden and Finland, handball in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway, and basketball in Finland. The only individual Olympic sports that receive sizable funding through sponsorships are skiing and biathlon in Norway. In Norway, only a small percentage of the funding of the football (10%), skiing (18%), handball (19%) and biathlon (19%) federations derives from state funding (Sandner, 2023). The majority of the residual funding comes from sponsorships. The concentration of private funding on mainly a few team sports has become more pronounced in recent years, which is in line with a similar concentration of media rights income on a small number of sports. This has made dependence on private funding precarious, as in the case of SOK.

### Targeting of support

One of the most controversial aspects of the practices in the currently most successful elite sport systems is selectivity in funding. Funds are concentrated on sports which produce good results and have medal potential. Both Denmark and Norway initiated selectivity in the funding of sports 20-25 years ago. It did not happen without conflicts and temporary backlash. In Denmark, Olympic and non-Olympic sports which lost support joined efforts and campaigned for a more even level of funding, although unsuccessfully. In Finland, targeting support is a relatively new phenomenon, and in Sweden, performance-related selectivity in the support of the federations was only introduced in relation to #elitidrott2030. Allocation of RI funding had previously been proportional to memberships. The organised resistance to the proposed targeting has similarities with past developments in Denmark. It remains to be seen if the ensuing partial retreat was a temporary backlash or a death knell of the efforts to reform the system.

It is worth adding that opposition to this aspect of reforming the elite sport system may well be motivated by other concerns than naked self-interest. In Denmark, the resistance referred to the unintended exclusion of federations from the requirements to develop sports in a socially justifiable way which was and is the main rationale for the Elite Sport Act. Further, it was argued that it was unreasonable to exclude popular team sports such as basketball and volleyball from support because of their low international ranking and absence of medal prospects, while niche sports with medal prospects were included.

It raises the question of whether it matters in which sports the medals are won. It seems that the emerging consensus is that results in sports with tradition and mass participation are regarded as more important and consequently more worthy of support than sports without tradition and with relatively few participants and little general interest. The established targeting of funding in Denmark and Norway focuses mainly on Olympic and Paralympic sports. However, a few non-Olympics sports are also included.

The actual targeting of sports in the four Nordic countries has many similarities. They all distinguish between three types of federation support: (a) world-class federations with proven medal-winning capabilities; (b) international federations with top 8 rankings and potential medal winners; and (c) developing federations with future potential. The level of support varies with most support of the world-class federations. The concentration of support is highest in Denmark with fewest federations receiving support. It is a little lower in Norway, and the selectivity is less narrow in Finland and Sweden.

### Performance goals

The articulation of performance goals is part of the process of negotiation about strategy and implementation between the elite sports organisations and the sports federations. Performance goals are also developed at an aggregate level by Team Danmark, Olympiatoppen, the High-Performance Unit and SOK. The goals have taken different forms.

Denmark and Norway use nation rankings (for instance top 3 in Winter Olympics sports or top 25 and top 5 among nations with less than 10 million inhabitants in Summer Olympic sports) as performance metrics, whereas the performance goals in Finland use absolute measures in the form of medal counts. SOK has only recently articulated measures akin to the ranking measures used by Denmark and Norway. Like in Denmark and Norway, it includes parasports and like Finland it includes a composite measure (Greatest Sporting Nations). The metrics in all countries are somewhat arbitrary and need more detail. As shown in the preceding output chapter, the composite measures are particularly subjective and arbitrary and should rather be avoided, not only for that reason but also because they are impossible to translate into operational means.

It should indeed be the ambition to follow up performance goals with operational means. Goals should be separated into and based on realistic goals for specific federations and if possible individual athletes. Without such follow-up, the goals are merely a signal of broad, inconsequential aspirations. Team Danmark and Olympiatoppen have created disaggregated goals based on the overall performance goals. This is not the case with Finland and Sweden's more loosely developed performance goals. Another difference between the Nordic countries is whether over- or underperformance in relation to the goals has consequences for future support. There are no such subsequent evaluations and future consequences in Finland and Sweden, but some tentative elements have been introduced by Denmark and Norway in strategy negotiations with the federations. These are, however, far from the radical forms implemented by UK sport, for instance, where a drop in performance level has immediate consequences in the form of loss or reduction of support.

An example of what not to do is the very ambitious and completely unrealistic goal set by the Finnish Olympic Committee in 2012 of becoming the best sporting nation among the Nordic countries by the end of the 2017-2020 period. The goal setting was casual, lacked appropriate mechanisms of implementation and failed miserably.

## Talent recruitment and development

The identification and recruitment of talent takes place at the club level in all four Nordic countries. Early recruitment and participation in elite sport training programmes is against the ethical codes of conduct that frame elite sport. Sports federations become involved in talent development when the potential elite athletes become older. From its inception, Team Danmark operated with a 15-year age limit, which was later modified. In Norway, there is a 12-year age limit for some forms of support.

An important element in talent development in all four countries is the sports-oriented upper secondary school (idrottsgymnasium) structure, where young athletes get into contact with professional coaches at a relatively early age. This is more developed in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries. The structure is more elaborate with a high number of schools and far more young people going through the programme. Further, there are many good coaches at this level.

However, the current evaluation of the school structure from an elite sport perspective also sees a relatively high share of current top athletes who did not take a secondary education at an idrottsgymnasium. Norway also has an elaborate structure of sports-oriented secondary schools with good coaches. However, the volume is smaller than in Sweden, also in per capita terms, and many of the top athletes have not taken advantage of this opportunity for structured talent development aimed at prospective athletes at the age of 15-19 years. Actually, only about 30% of the Norwegian participants in the most recent Olympics took this educational path.

Finland has a highly elaborate structure of sports institutes, sports academies and star clubs which should potentially provide excellent opportunities for high-quality age-specific talent development. However, the location of the sports institutes is a disadvantage, which means that a relatively modest share of youth athletes choose to attend the institutes. Denmark also has a structure where young athletes have the opportunity to spend more time on training while attending secondary schools compared to other secondary schools. The volume is relatively modest. However, several of the traditional folk high schools have specialised in specific sports, and many young athletes follow courses offered by these schools, for instance, as part of a gap year.

The most critical stage in relation to talent development is the period after secondary education before reaching a level that qualifies for inclusion in, for example, the Topp och Talang programme in Sweden. In this stage, support from parents, clubs, and federations is crucial. In this respect, the Nordic countries are confronted with the same problems, and the issues are more or less the same.

### Athletes' financial support

Stipends for individual athletes were one of the earliest forms of support introduced by the Nordic elite sport organisations. It was obvious that in a world of increased professionalisation with full-time athletes supported by the state in many countries, individual financial support was required if talents should have the chance of becoming competitive in international elite sport. This has developed into broadly similar forms of support in all four countries. The level of support differs in accordance with the performance level of athletes with world-class athletes receiving the highest amounts.

In Sweden, stipends are a central part of the Topp och Talang programme. The number of athletes who benefit from this kind of support does not differ much across the Nordic countries. However, the level of support is lower in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries, and the dire socio-economic conditions of most elite athletes are a major argument for increased financial support.

### Support of dual careers

In accordance with the common adherence to welfare state ideals, all four countries provide more support for dual careers than elsewhere. Part of these efforts consists of encouragement, support, and indeed an element of nudging for elite athletes to study for a degree or take a vocational training programme simultaneously with their elite sport career. The elite sport organisations engage in efforts to ensure the flexibility needed to follow a dual career path in relation to exams and other assessments and requirements of in-class attendance. Other forms of dual career support consist of personal advice and guidance during and after the end of the elite sport career.

This is clearly a relative strength of the Nordic elite sport systems compared to other countries. Dual career support is high in all four countries. In Denmark it has been an important part of the efforts to ensure a socially justifiable form of elite sport with the explicit ambition that athletes are able to support themselves after the end of a sporting career. It is also a consequence of the explicit goal to weigh the athletes' needs as much in elite sport support as sporting success.

Efforts to ensure that athletes can live up to family obligations alongside an elite sport career can be seen as an extension of the dual career support. A special case is support for mothers making it possible for female athletes to continue their elite sports careers after giving birth. It is a strength of the Norwegian elite sport model, that both male and female top athletes are able to have longer careers than in other countries. This is partly because of the dedicated post-birth support of athletes. Team Denmark has recently introduced a new dedicated family support scheme with the same purpose.

### Availability and quality of training facilities

Another strength of the Nordic elite sport systems is the availability and quality of the training facilities resulting from the welfare-state-motivated publicly funded construction and maintenance of sports facilities. This characterises all four countries. One of the interviewees, who has in-depth knowledge of the elite sport systems in all Nordic countries,

considers the facilities in Finland the best among the Nordic countries, though the other countries come close.

Facilities that are freely accessible for organised sports activities exist everywhere, and the general quality is high. However, in terms of elite sport access, the situation is not always ideal. This concerns, in particular, access to swimming pools and ice rinks where satisfying competing demands for access often leaves elite athletes with less-than-ideal training schedules. Elite sport demands are sometimes not compatible with the needs of mass sports.

Training centres organised solely for elite sport are needed. In Finland, such national training centres exist for summer sports in Helsinki and for winter sports in Vuokatti. In Norway, a well-functioning national training centre is located in Oslo, supplemented by a network of regional training centres. In Denmark, national training centres exist for many sports. Plans for a national training centre for many sports were aborted because of a disagreement between Team Danmark and DIF about the location. In Sweden, Bosön was intended as a cross-sport national training centre, but it does not function as such. Athletics and a few other sports have a well-functioning system of regional training centres, and a cross-sport centre for combat sports exists in Malmö in addition to the advanced winter sports centre in Östersund. However, these are exceptions. In most sports, there are no similar training centres.

### Location of training facilities

The geography of the Nordic countries constitutes a challenge in relation to training centres. Denmark is an exception with its small size and short distances. The geographical dimension of the supply of training centres is understandably less developed in Denmark, although Team Danmark cooperates with designated elite sports municipalities in the development of the local support framework for elite athletes.

In Norway, the central Olympiatoppen in Oslo is supplemented with eight regional centres. The activities of the regional centres are closely coordinated with the central Olympiatoppen. In 2021, the regional centres had 51 employees in total, whereas the centre in Oslo had 84 employees.

Finland has the most extensively developed decentral structure with sports institutes, sports academies and star clubs. The quality of the sports institutes is good, but the locations of the institutes is a big problem. They are located in rural areas, but most aspiring young athletes prefer to live in urban areas, so the facilities of the sports institutes are underused.

Sweden has a similar issue with Bosön, which does not fulfil the original purpose of being a national training centre. The winter sports centre in Östersund functions well, and there are some centres for summer sports. This works well particularly for athletics. However, these are exceptions, and a coordinated overall system is lacking.

## Learning across sports

It is stressed by stakeholders as well as researchers that the continuous fostering of reliable learning from experience is one of the defining characteristics of the Norwegian elite sport system (Andersen, 2012). The organisation of Norwegian elite sport involves a high degree of cooperation and active exchange across sports.

> "Olympiatoppen is the core organisation that supports such processes through formal authority and as a competence-Centre, that also serves as shared learning arena. Breaking down the barriers between specialist cultures has been central in building a national elite sports culture. The active challenging of specific plans and approaches in individual sports, based on experiences from many different sports, is often said to be the most important task."
>
> (S. S. Andersen, 2012, p. 238)

The idea is to learn from both small and major failures and to modify and strengthen the efforts of elite sports development that traditionally take place within the silos of the national sports federations.

Although learning across sports does not have the same prominent role in Danish elite sports, it is an effort that Team Danmark explicitly aims to copy through systematic knowledge transfer and interaction in cross-federation training sessions, workshops, and conferences. Similar activities take place in Sweden and Finland, but not to the same extent as in Denmark.

## Coaches and coach development

This is an area where the Nordic countries are lagging. This may to some extent be a consequence of the common history of a sports movement with predominantly voluntary activities and amateurism. The coaches were volunteers, and coaching as a profession was for long an alien element. In any case, many studies indicate that all four countries are relatively inferior with respect to coaching and coach development for elite sports.

In a report from RF in 2020, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden are all in this respect ranked lower than all the other eight countries included in the study. The SPLISS study ranks Denmark lower than all other countries in the study and Finland only a little better.

Another report (Skadborg, 2023) identifies huge differences between Denmark and Norway in relation to coaches and coach development. Norway has far more coaches and a clear focus and strategy for improving the situation. Norway is therefore in a better situation than the other Nordic countries in relation to coach development. In 2018, Olympiatoppen initiated a long-term strategy designed to upgrade coaching (Trænerløftet). In addition to the focus on increasing the number of coaches and raising the competence level of coaches, the programme also takes steps to strengthen coaching as a profession. Forms of employment combining elite and mass sport coaching are being supported.

Like Norway, Finland also puts much emphasis on better coaching. This is one of the three priority aims in its 2021-2024 strategy. This is not the case in Denmark, where the strategy

documents for 2022-2024 are strangely silent about the need for improvement of this important part of the elite sport system.

Sweden has a relatively high number of coaches at the level of children and youth but does not have many coaches with a dedicated focus on elite athletes.

### Access to national and international competitions

Athletes in all four Nordic countries have good access to national and international competitions at the level and frequency needed to be competitive. However, some Swedish federations note that cost concerns make them skip participation in some world championship competitions, whereas Danish athletes do not have similar constraints.

### Research, sport science, technology, and expert resources

Sweden is not performing as well as the other Nordic countries in relation to these aspects of a successful elite sport system. In the RF report comparing the systems of 12 countries, Sweden is ranked at the bottom, whereas Norway and Denmark are both doing well. The SPLISS study ranks both Finland and Denmark highly in relation to research, sport science and innovation compared to other small countries.

Sweden was among the pioneers in sports science in the past but has fallen behind the best-performing systems, according to the SPLISS study. Some nations have an elite sport research centre integrated with a national training centre. This is the case in Norway. In Sweden, Bosön is officially RF's training, education and development centre, which might have developed into an important part of the system with its combination of training, testing and expert resources. Unfortunately, this is far from the current reality. Apart from the winter sport centre in Östersund where the local university is developing new knowledge as well as practical application of relevant sport science, there are only isolated examples of sports-relevant research projects and PhDs with little coordination or systematic learning.

There are, however, good examples of knowledge transfer, and CIF serves an important function as the state institution responsible for sports research. However, there is only modest interest among universities to engage in cooperation, and RF and SOK have so far not been willing to invest resources in support of such projects.

Finland has a good standing in sports science with a strongly performing university in Jyväskylä. However, it suffers from governance problems. Improvements in goal setting, strategy, implementation, and network governance are needed.

Team Danmark characterises itself as a knowledge organisation in close cooperation with researchers, athletes, coaches, and federations. It has performed well in relation to the application of sports science through the competencies of expert resources. The links to sports science have been strengthened through the recent investment of 40 million DKK in five researcher networks. The funding for this initiative originates from a donation from a private foundation that, in 2022, further increased its donation with 50 million DKK earmarked for the acquisition of research facilities and equipment. Performance analyses and adaptation of new technology have also been given high priority. The activities of Team Danmark in this area have been significantly boosted in recent years.

Norway is doing even better in this respect. Whereas Team Danmark has a staff of approximately 50 (full-year equivalents) expert resources, Olympiatoppen has 150. Norway has a strong position in relation to the development of sports science and new technology with a focus on winter sports.

Olympiatoppen is planning to expand and renew its existing national training centre linked to the Norwegian School of Sport Science. Team Danmark plans to establish a Team Danmark house, where athletes, coaches, experts, and researchers can meet, develop, and transfer new knowledge. It appears that Norway and Denmark are far ahead of their Nordic neighbours in this field.

## Differences, commonalities, and convergence

There are many differences between the four Nordic elite sport systems. This is clear in relation to several of the many dimensions of the elite sport system as summarised in Table 19. The most distinct differences concern organisation and governance, where different historical paths have resulted in radically different structures. Moments of path-shaping decisions formed the development of the Danish and Norwegian systems into different versions of a unified and centralised elite sports structure led by a professional organisation with operational autonomy. Finland and Sweden have followed a similar path-dependent trajectory leading to completely different forms of governance and organisations.

However, the differences between the Nordic countries are much less pronounced in relation to the other specific system elements. In many of the elements the differences are minimal, and in most respects, the four countries are converging. In most of these cases, Finland and Sweden are converging towards the solutions chosen by Denmark and Norway. This reflects a general trend of harmonisation and conversion towards the generally recognised best practice in international elite sport (Green & Oakley, 2001).

In the Nordic context, it is also evident that there is a process of inter-country learning. For instance, Team Danmark has learned from Olympiatoppen with respect to the institutionalisation of cross-sport learning processes, and Olympiatoppen has learned from Team Danmark in other respects where Denmark has been a first-mover. Finland and Sweden have learned from Norway and Denmark in several respects, and this report, as well as a similar report about Finland in 2022, indicates a willingness to learn from the experiences of the other Nordic countries.

In spite of the predominant convergence processes, there are still significant differences in the way different types of best practices are implemented in different contexts. This is reflected in the differences in relation to the functioning of the four specific systems as shown in the rows of the table.

# Conclusion, discussion, and recommendations: What can or should be done?

Sweden is performing well in international elite sport. There is no crisis in this respect. Actually, in recent years, the results in Olympic sports have improved. However, there are signs of a decline in many sports - also compared to their Nordic neighbours in Norway and Denmark. In many respects, Sweden is underperforming and has the potential to do better in elite sport. Other small and medium-sized countries with similar societal and cultural backgrounds are clearly outperforming Sweden.

These countries, including New Zealand and the Netherlands, have developed elite sport systems that seem better equipped to cope with the challenges of sharpened competition and an increased number of countries investing considerable sums in elite sport. While Sweden is doing well in relation to some of the pillars of elite sport systems – particularly, mass participation (pillar 3) – the country lags behind in relation to several other pillars covered in this study.

## Financial and organisational issues

One of the critical factors is the lack of resources resulting from a relatively low level of governmental financial support targeted elite sport – but also because of relatively modest sponsorship funding. With respect to financial support, Swedish elite sport has fewer resources available than Norway and Denmark. This does not mean that the support for elite sport in Sweden is negligible. There is much indirect financial support, for instance, state funding of sports facilities and the national upper secondary sports school (idrottsgymnasium) structure. However, the direct financial support for the development of many of the pillars of the elite sport system is relatively small compared to other similar countries. A redistribution of already existing resources may certainly contribute to improving the situation. However, significantly increased funding of elite sport in Sweden is crucial if Sweden is to sustain or improve its current level of international competitiveness in elite sports.

Anyway, the funding issue is not the most critical factor. There is no clear link between finance and performance. The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, and Denmark have improved the international competitiveness of their elite sport systems without a massive injection of new resources. The most crucial factor behind these success stories is not increased funding but rather better governance and organisation of the system, leading to more efficient use of resources. While more funding will undoubtedly help, it seems evident that major changes in governance and organisation are crucial for succeeding in the efforts to maintain or improve the international standing of Swedish elite sport. Reform of governance and organisation leading to increased efficiency in the use of available resources and better results may also be a prerequisite for increased funding from both the government and private sponsors.

## The best way of organising elite sport systems

Research results clearly identify the 'best practice' organisational features that correlate with elite sports success. The key finding in the first of the SPLISS studies was that "countries with only one national coordinating elite sport body responsible for elite sport (…) have an advantage over countries where decision-making responsibilities are split between different organisations" (De Bosscher et al., 2008, p. 135). The conclusion is modified in the second study. It is concluded that it is not necessarily the countries with the most centralised approach who do best "but rather those who best coordinate activities and collaborate with different partners" (De Bosscher et al., 2015).

Sweden is clearly at a disadvantage in this respect. The system is not centralised, as SOK, POK, RF, the Swedish Paralympic Committee and the sports federations share responsibilities for elite sport. This would not be a problem if these organisations could collaborate and coordinate activities efficiently. However, this has so far not been the case.

Internationally, there is widespread consensus among practitioners (leaders, performance directors, coaches, specialist support providers, athletes) that centralisation, or efficient collaboration that secures the same effects, is what is needed. This view is shared among almost all of the interviewed Swedish stakeholders who find that the existing organisational structure is not fit for purpose. Almost everybody complains about the 'double command system', the lack of clarity, the inefficiencies, and even the 'turf wars' between the organisations. Few defend the system, and no one would presumably create such a system if they could start from scratch.

It is a precondition for a well-functioning elite sport system that it is governed by an independent professional organisation capable of developing and implementing clear criteria for elite sport support in the short term as well as building and nurturing the system for the future. Successful elite sport organisations have clear mandates from either the government or the sports organisations, guaranteeing independence or arm's length relations. Such structures can be initiated top-down through legislation as in Denmark or bottom-up through cooperation between sports organisations as in Norway, New Zealand, and the Netherlands. Experience has shown that different paths may lead to similar outcomes.

The independence of successful elite sport organisations is circumscribed and often contested. The decisions of an elite sport organisation have consequences beyond elite sport, and it is understandable that the broader sports organisations want to have some influence on the decision-making of the elite sport organisation. However, the capabilities of the elite sports organisation to make efficient decisions must be circumscribed rather than compromised. The experience of countries with well-functioning elite sports organisations shows the potential for disruption as well as successful means to contain the potential organisational conflicts. For instance, in the past, the Sports Confederation of Denmark (DIF) made several attempts to integrate Team Danmark into DIF, but a sustainable modus vivendi was reached in 2004 with a new structure of the board of Team Danmark consisting of an equal number of members appointed by DIF and the Danish Ministry of Culture, respectively.

## Reforming the organisation of Swedish elite sport

It is not the best time to reform the Swedish system. Major changes in national elite sport systems most often happen either when a country experiences what is perceived as disastrously poor results in the Olympic Games or other major competitions or before a country becomes the host of an Olympic Games. None of these conditions are in play in Sweden at the moment. Swedish elite sport experiences, to some extent, a decline in terms of international competitiveness, but this is far from being (perceived as) disastrous. Further, the failed Swedish bid to host the Winter Olympics in 2030 has removed one factor that could have facilitated major changes.

Recently, however, SOK and RF have taken initiatives to improve the situation. The consensus around #elitidrott2030 is promising. A pledge for increased government funding is linked to an 8-point strategy with explicit performance goals. This is a clear step forward but merely an initial step. It could be the first stage of the development of a system in accordance with the 'best practice' organisational features identified by the SPLISS project – a structure that "coordinates activities and collaborates with different partners". However, many difficult decisions are waiting, and the process can easily be derailed when entrenched vested interests are challenged.

Experience from other countries (the Netherlands and Norway) shows that efficient organisational centralisation, as well as efficient collaboration and coordination, can arise from within the organised sports system itself, but this requires strong institutional entrepreneurship and, to some extent, willingness to dispense from narrow organisational self-interest in pursuit of the common good.

It is unlikely that the needed organisational changes can be realised without a challenge to the inertia of the existing system. This could well be in the form of a precondition for increased public funding of elite sports. Funding could be increased on the condition of clear and specific reforms of the elite sport system including a thorough change of governance and organisation of the system. It is difficult and maybe also unfair to achieve this by redistributing funds from mass sport to elite sport.

The increase in public support should be linked with matching private funding similar to the #elitidrott2030 strategy. Increased public funding may seem unrealistic in the current economic climate. However, the money involved constitutes only a very modest share of the government budget. Proper institutional entrepreneurship by leading persons within the sport system (similar to the role played by Bjørge Stensbøl in the development of Olympiatoppen in Norway), together with mobilisation of political support (as happened in Denmark when Team Danmark was introduced) could do the trick.

In any case, the 'best practice' is no doubt a centralised model like High-Performance Sport New Zealand, Olympiatoppen or Team Danmark, or a strongly coordinated collaborative model as the one developed jointly by the Dutch NOC and the national sports federations in the Netherlands. It is clear from the evidence collected in this study, including the conducted interviews, that there is a widespread consensus that this is what is needed. The

problem is not where to go, although some of the specifics are of course controversial, but rather how to get there from where we are.

There are forces of inertia, vested interests, and specific concerns that make it difficult to move from the existing unsatisfactory situation to a better future. There is also a worry that a future organisational solution may clash with the principle of organisational autonomy. The arm's length principle is strongly embedded in the functioning of voluntary organisations in the Nordic countries, and perhaps strongest in Sweden. There is some anxiety and resistance to more governmental funding if it is linked to performance goals that, in practice, limit organisational autonomy.

This concern has roots in the norms of grassroots democracy. The clubs constitute the lowest level of a chain of democratically elected leadership at different levels, and RF can be seen as ultimately based on club-level democratic decision-making. Although this may be an idealised image of processes where only a limited number of individuals participate in the actual decision-making, the link between autonomy and democracy provides strong legitimacy to the existing arm's length principle.

A new way of organising elite sport in Sweden may require a modification of the existing autonomy. Such a modification has already happened in relation to mass sport where the funding of formally autonomous sports organisations has in practice been linked to performance in relation to broader societal goals such as health, social cohesion, and integration. A similar, limited modification of autonomy and democracy following increased government money does not seem to be a big issue, although some stakeholders may present it as such.

## Egalitarianism and selectivity

There are other concerns founded on strong ideological norms, which may hinder the development of a fit-for-purpose elite sports organisation. As demonstrated earlier in this report, egalitarian norms are strongly embedded in the Swedish welfare state and society. This influences sport in many ways. It hinders the implementation of one of the policies that characterise more successful elite sport systems. They have all introduced an allocation of funding, which is guided by efficiency in relation to explicit performance goals. This involves a level of selectivity in relation to support for sports with better prospects of success, even if it varies how narrow the selectivity is.

This runs counter to traditional principles of financial support guided by membership numbers. Some prioritisation in the allocation of funding is introduced in #elitidrott2030, although it is still only modestly selective compared to the most successful systems. The subsequent backlash, when some of the federations losing support successfully mobilised resistance to change, shows how difficult it is to change the status quo.

This reflects a reference to egalitarian norms, which is in itself selective. Egalitarianism could well be interpreted differently. In order to create equal opportunities for being competitive, different sports should be treated unequally with respect to support. It is obvious

that the level of competition, and consequently the costs of the measures required to be competitive, are much higher in Olympic sports than in non-Olympic sports. It is also obvious that most Olympic sports have much less self-generated funding than the big team sports (in particular, football and ice hockey), and the support needs are much lower in these sports and other commercially successful sports than in other sports. For these reasons, it is in accordance with this interpretation of egalitarianism to give priority to the support of the less commercially successful Olympic sports.

The deep-rooted Swedish egalitarian norms also mean that priority is given to the provision of facilities and other support guided by an ideal of equal access and equal opportunities to play sports independent of income, status, or location. It is also in accordance with the equality principle that everybody should have equal opportunities to excel. However, specific support for elite sport has always lacked legitimacy, at least in comparison with support for sport for all. However, this situation seems to have changed, and it seems that elite sports have gained more legitimacy over time.

However, it is still, for legitimacy reasons, difficult to argue for a redistribution of government funds from sport for all to sport for the few (elite sport). This is the reason why a reform of the elite sport system needs to be primarily about organisational issues, reallocation of funds already available for elite sport, and only rather modest new funding. Requests for increased funding for elite sport are probably still not politically acceptable if they involve less funding for sport for all.

## More financial support

Yet, there are indeed good reasons for increased financial support, and it isn't easy to achieve significant improvements in relation to the other pillars of the elite sport system without a substantial influx of new funding. Comparisons with other countries indicate that there is a potential for increased sponsorship funding. Although football and ice hockey are attracting an increased share of the private money coupled with the increasing media focus on these two team sports, a comparison with other countries indicates that a better-organised sponsorship and media strategy may create new opportunities for increased sponsorships for all sports.

One of the areas where increased funding is crucial is in improving the socio-economic situation of athletes. Superstars in many individual sports do not have any problems in this respect, and contract players in football and ice hockey are also well off. However, the majority of Swedish elite athletes find themselves in an unenviable socio-economic situation with low and uncertain incomes, being dependent on economic and other support from wives/husbands or parents, and having to do without the contributions to pension plans and social security one sees in normal employment contracts.

The prospective elite athletes are well catered for until they complete the secondary education level. If they then later succeed in entering the top-level elite in an Olympic sport that receives individual funding as part of the Topp och Talang programme, they will receive support – although the support is less generous than in the most successful countries,

which are similar to Sweden in terms of population, income, social structure, and social norms.

However, there is a gap of several years where no support is available apart from limited support from federations, clubs, and personal sponsorships. Many make ends meet through the government grants or loans they get when studying at the university in addition to the private support from partners and parents. The poor and uncertain socio-economic situation, however, causes many athletes to exit the elite sport system before they get an opportunity to receive individual support. Some level of support to bridge the gap between the levels of idrottsgymnasier and the Topp och Talang programme is mentioned by most stakeholders as a top priority change.

Most interviewees mentioned coaches and coach development as another important area, in which Sweden is lagging behind. Improvements in this respect are crucial for strengthening the international competitiveness of the Swedish elite sport system. Sweden has many well-qualified coaches up to the level of idrottsgymnasier and to some extent at the club level as well. However, there are too few elite sport coaches, and many of them are not well-qualified. Often, they lack a stronger educational background and have little knowledge of sports science.

## Coaches and coach development

A strengthening of coaches' education and development can improve the current situation, where the supply of quality education is limited or non-existent in most of the federations. However, this will not solve the fundamental problem that the careers of Swedish elite sport coaches are precarious. There are no secure career paths, and the socio-economic prospects of coaches are uncertain. There is a lack of incentives to choose a career as an elite sport coach. Ideally, more coaches should be educated, and the education should be based on applied sports science.

Further, the coaching profession should have the same labour market security as other professions. However, this would require a significant injection of funding, which is no doubt unrealistic at present. A more realistic initiative with short-term impacts is the copying of the systematic pursuit of combined employment (mainly the combination of idrottsgymnasium/federation or club/federation) which exists in Sweden but has been implemented in a more systematic way in Norway.

There is widespread agreement that Sweden is also lagging behind the other Nordic countries in relation to scientific sports research, sports science support, and innovation in elite sport. Generally, coordination with academia is limited. Unlike other leading countries, Sweden does not have elite sport research centres integrated with national training centres apart from the winter sports centre in Östersund, although Bosön has the potential to function as such.

This is of course linked to the relatively low education level of most coaches, but it has also to do with a reluctance within academia towards engaging with elite sport, partly because

of the university promotion system centred around 'publish or perish', which acts as a disincentive towards such activities. Further, the sports federations have not given much priority to funding a practical application of sports science. New initiatives are on the way with more focus on research and development, but far more is needed.

## Strengths and weaknesses

Training facilities are generally of high quality in Sweden. In particular, the availability of high-quality training facilities open for everybody is very good. The location of elite training facilities is more problematic. There are national training centres in some sports, but this is only supplemented with a well-coordinated regional structure in a few sports such as athletics, which has seven regional training centres.

There is a well-functioning winter sports centre in Östersund. However, in summer sports there are no cross-sport centralised national training centres similar to Olympiatoppen in Norway, or the High-Performance Training Centre in Finland. This means a lack of cross-sport learning processes that contribute significantly to the strength of the Norwegian elite sport system.

RF has a development centre in Bosön, which has the potential to function as an important training centre with high-quality specialist expertise in sports physiology, medicine, and psychology as well as testing expertise and equipment. However, the training facilities are rather basic and are not used much for training camps, which was part of the original rationale for the centre. The reason is partly the location and the lack of specialist training facilities, but mostly that it is expensive to stay there. A vicious cycle seems to make Bosön increasingly marginal and less relevant for Swedish elite sport. A significant injection of resources is needed to turn the tables and initiate virtuous cycles. In the absence of this, the alternative is a reformulation of its purpose as well as a reallocation of resources satisfying elite sport needs.

It is the impression from the interviews and available materials that talent recruitment and talent development function well in Sweden. Traditionally, late specialisation has characterised talent recruitment in accordance with Swedish welfare state ideals. There are some contrary tendencies, but this trait of Swedish talent recruitment is still alive and well. There do not seem to be reasons for changes in this respect as part of the efforts to improve the functionality of the elite sport system. One of the strengths of the Swedish system is the national sports gymnasium (RIG) structure.

The structure is well-established and well-funded. The number of young athletes taking their secondary education at RIGs is high, also compared to similar institutions in other Nordic countries and beyond. However, the RIG model could function better from the perspective of the international competitiveness of Swedish elite sports. Studies show that, for various reasons, many top athletes choose not to take advantage of the possibility of taking their secondary education at an RIG. Several interviewees were critical of aspects of the system. It is seen to have ossified to some extent, and a restructuring of the system from scratch is seen as advantageous from the perspective of elite sport performance.

## Tournaments and integration of talents

Swedish athletes have access to well-developed national tournaments at all age levels as well as opportunities to take part in adequate international competitions, although economic pressure creates problems in this respect for small federations. Hosting international sports events such as Diamond League events in athletics improves access to events elsewhere. Sweden has only recently developed a strategy for winning bids to host international sports events. RF provides support and guidance for the planning and organisation of such events. However, there is no dedicated government funding for this purpose as in Denmark and other countries. It would improve the chances of winning bids if such funding was available even at a moderate scale.

The main strength of the Swedish and other Nordic elite sport systems is the high sports participation among children and youth in sports clubs which are well supported locally. This creates a huge pool of potential elite athletes. In addition, the welfare state ideals with concern for equal opportunities have caused the government to build facilities and provide coaches/teachers that provide access to sport for all at a good quality level. There are worrying issues related to sports participation among children and youth resulting from lifestyle changes such as less physically active lives. However, these are common trends for all developed countries, and mass participation is still a relative advantage for Sweden and the other Nordic countries.

One problematic aspect of sports participation in Sweden is the failure to integrate immigrants and refugees. This is less of a problem in sports like football and basketball, but sports participation among people with other backgrounds than Swedish is also lower in these sports. The problem is seemingly most pronounced in winter sports. Very few of the 'new' Swedes are familiar with winter sports, and climate change means that they seldom experience snow nowadays as most of them are living in cities like Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö without much if any snowfall. The ski federation bemoans the fact that very few immigrants could imagine skiing. There seems to be a potential for changing this through special efforts which would result in better integration but also be a way of broadening recruitment and developing new talent.

## Performance management and metrics

#eliteidrott2030 represents novel developments in many respects. One such development is the articulation of goals for results measured by rankings. This is an important development as it introduces specific performance measures which may lead to necessary commitments as part of efforts to attract more financial resources.

However, this must be followed up by realistic concrete goals for each sport, covering different time scales as well as a specification of possible consequences in case the sport fails to live up to the goals. The goals should also be followed up with specification of the concrete metrics used in evaluating whether the performance lives up to the goals. It is not clear what top-5 or top-20 really means unless the precise metrics (medal table ranking, ranking according to the number of medals, or a broader measure such as top-8 points or top-8 places) are specified.

Further, it is important to clarify which results to include and how to add up in years between Olympic Games. It may seem preferable if all results, including non-Olympic and minor sports, could be included in a composite performance measure. This is the reason for adding goals regarding Sweden's ranking on the Greatest Sporting Nations scale. Although this is in principle a good idea, it is recommended to avoid including this or other such arbitrary measures based on often dubious subjective decisions. It is rather recommended to develop clear, separate performance measures for team sports and for non-Olympic sports in addition to using the more objective measures for Olympic and Paralympic sports.

## Summing up recommendations

In summary, this study of the current situation of elite sport in Sweden leads to the following list of recommendations.

- Sweden should adopt a 'best practice' organisational structure – either by copying one or a combination of the successful, centralised models (such as the ones in Norway, Denmark, and New Zealand) – or, if this is rejected as it has previously been the case, a collaborative, coordinated model. This could take the form of a strict implementation of #elitidrott2023. However, this requires a level of agreement and institutional entrepreneurship and an absence of 'turf wars', which has not previously characterised the Swedish elite sport organisations.

- In any case, a professional elite sport organisation with operational responsibility for the support and development of top-level elite sports seems to be a precondition for a successful elite sport system in the contemporary and future situation. Close links to applied sports science and national training centres, as well as a level of selectivity in terms of support of specific sports, are among the predominant characteristics of such an organisation. This may happen through legislation, as in Denmark, or through joint action by the sports confederations and federations. If a collaborative, coordinated model is preferred in Sweden, the operational professionalism of the elite sport organisation must be secured, as well as a well-functioning collaborative structure, for instance by means of a monitoring board with overall responsibility. It may strengthen the legitimacy of the elite sport organisation if the stakeholders in Swedish elite sport have an overall say in the organisation. In addition to representatives from the sports organisations, the board could also include representatives from relevant NGOs and perhaps also a representative from the ministry responsible for sports, linked to possible dedicated new funding for elite sport.

- The organisational location of such an organisation is not important. It could be within the national sports confederation (RF) similar to the situation in New Zealand, it could be part of SOK, or it could be a formally independent organisation. This is not important. The crucial thing is the establishment of a professional organisation with operational responsibilities for elite sport at the top level which has a structure that facilitates collaboration and coordination with the general sports system. Of course, the consequences for SOK are widely different depending on the

organisational context. If the new organisation is part of RF, or if it is independent, the responsibilities of SOK will be narrowed down to organising the Swedish participation in the Olympic Games, etc. This solution resembles what has been the case in Denmark since 1993.

- The search for increased governmental funding should be linked to a programme for strategic changes, commitment to performance goals, and matching increases in private sponsorships. Reforms and reallocation of existing funds for elite sport, as well as no or only a minimal reduction of funding for mass sports, should be linked to requests for increased funding of elite sport.

- Increased funding for elite sport will be easier to accomplish if the legitimacy of elite sport in Sweden is increased and if more political decision-makers become interested in or even committed to the strengthening of elite sport. Increased legitimacy may be achieved through sustained campaigning, and clever networking may foster political actors sympathetic to the idea of more support for elite sport.

- In accordance with existing welfare state norms, emphasis should be put on the poor socio-economic conditions of the athletes and their well-being as an argument for increased government funding.

- The new model should adopt a sharper prioritisation of the allocation of funds between federations, which is part of the 'best practice'. This should mainly focus on Olympic sports with limited commercial potential, but it should not in principle exclude non-Olympic sports nor support for promising athletes in non-prioritised Olympic sports federations. However, support for non-Olympic sports should concentrate on sports which are particularly important in Sweden based on history, tradition, memberships, or regional importance. This is a cost-neutral reform.

- Another cost-neutral initiative is the development of proper metrics for measuring performance in relation to goals. This should involve the exclusion of highly arbitrary composite measures such as 'Greatest Sporting Nations' from the official performance goals. Separate goals for Olympic and Paralympic (summer and winter) sports should be supplemented with specific goals for team sports and separate measures for non-Olympic sports. Of course, the new performance goals should be operationalised as specific metrics, which are regularly monitored.

The following list of further recommendations is presented in a sequence of declining priority.

- Upgrading coach education and development – and improving the career paths for coaches – by systematically combining part-time employment in different contexts.

- Upgrading of sports science and practical science-based support for elite sport through long-term collaboration with and targeted funding of efforts concentrated

in a limited number of universities interested in committed strategic collaboration.

- Improving the socio-economic conditions of promising athletes in the gap between the completion of their secondary education and the potential involvement in the Topp och Talang programme through individual economic support.

- Either major increased funding for Bosön to make it possible to function as an important national training centre – or reallocating the elite sport-related funding of Bosön for other purposes, possibly a new well-resourced national elite training and testing centre.

- A root and branch reorganisation of the idrottsgymnasium model. This may include a relatively small reduction of places and some savings that can be used for other ways of strengthening the elite sport system.

- Better integration of immigrants and refugees may strengthen the mass sport foundation of elite sport and the recruitment of new talent. Government funding of integration could be supported by targeted initiatives by sport clubs and federations.

- Widening and better coordination of practical cooperation with universities about exam postponements and similar practical measures to better facilitate studying while pursuing an elite sport career.

- Limited extra funding and a new organisational unit to strengthen Sweden's chances of hosting major championships.

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# Appendix 1: Interviews conducted

| # | Date | Person | Organisation | Form | Duration |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | 07.09.2023 | Peter Mattsson | Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) | Online | 84 minutes. |
| 2. | 14.09.2023 | Peter Reinebo | Swedish Olympic Committee (SOK) | Online | 120 minutes. |
| 3. | 15.09.2023 | Per Palmström | Swedish Fencing Federation/SOK board | Online | 73 minutes |
| 4. | 19.09.2023 | Hans Säfström | Swedish Parasport Federation | Online | 63 minutes |
| 5. | 21.09.2023 | Malin Eggertz Forsmark | Swedish Olympic Committee (SOK) | Online | 55 minutes |
| 6. | 02.10.2023 | Michael Andersen | Former CEO of Team Danmark. Independent consultant. | Online | 47 minutes |
| 7. | 03.10.2023 | Josef Fahlén | Umeå University | Online | 57 minutes |
| 8. | 09.10.2023 | Knud Skadborg | Former Head of Research of Team Danmark. Independent consultant. | Online | 93 minutes |
| 9. | 13.10.2023 | Lars Tore Ronglan | Norwegian School of Sport Sciences | Online | 74 minutes |
| 10. | 10.11.2023 | Carolina Lundqvist | Linköping University | Online | 72 minutes |
| 11. | 30.11.2023 | Anna-Maria Uusitalo<br>Anders Byström | Swedish Biathlon Federation<br>Swedish Ski Federation | Online | 60 minutes |
| 12. | 08.12.2023 | Hartmut Sandner | Independent research professional | Online | 90 minutes |

# Appendix 2: Research visit programme and interviews

EVALUATION OF ELITE SPORTS IN SWEDEN: International evalutation
Study trip 23rd –27th October 2023, Stockholm

Rasmus Storm, Klaus Nielsen & Troels Kollerup

**MONDAY 23.10.**

9.00 Transport to Stockholm

**Session 1: Swedish Sport Federation & GIH**
*Location: Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, GIH (Stockholm), Room 4405*

16.00 Interview with
- **Liselotte Ohlson**, Director of Elite Sports, Swedish Sport Confederation

**TUESDAY 24.10.**

**Session 2: Swedish Research Counsil for Sport Science**
*Location: Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, GIH (Stockholm), Room 4306*

09.00 Meeting with:
- **Johan Norberg,** Professor in Sport Science
- **Lina Wahlgren,** Analyst
- **Christine Dartsch Nilsson,** Executive Manager

**Session 3: Swedish Olympic Committee**
*Location: Swedish Olympic Committee, Sofiatornet, Olympiastadion (Stockholm)*

11.00 Interview with
- **Peter Reinebo**, Director of Sports, Swedish Olympic Committee
- **Johan Flodin**, Director of R&D, Swedish Olympic Committee

12.15 Lunch

12.45 Interview with
- **Magnus Grävare**, head coach, Swedish Sailing Federation
- **Zacharias Tallroth,** head coach, Swedish Wrestling Federation
- **Jonas Edman**, head coach, Swedish Shooting Federation
- **Fredrik Lindberg**, head coach, Swedish Curling Federation
- **Carina Skoog**, coach & sport contacts, Swedish Olympic Committee

- **Henrik Forsberg**, coach & sport contacts, Swedish Olympic Committee

**Session 4: Swedish Football Federation**
*Location: Swedish Football Federation, Evenemangsgatan 31, Solna (Stockholm)*

15.30 Interview with stakeholders

~17.00 Transport to the hotel

**WEDNESSDAY 24.10.**

**Session 5: Bosön Development Center for Swedish Sport Confederation**
*Location: Bosön, Bosövägen 1-5, Lidingö (Stockholm)*

07.45 Transport to Bosön

09.00 Interview with
- **Tobias Elgh,** Coordinator for support of performance development
- **Emma Lindblom**, Head of Sport Nutrition
- **Daniele Cardinale**, Head of Sport Physiology
- **Göran Kenttä**, Head of Sport Phycology

10.30 Coffee break and snacks

10.45 Facility tour in Bosön

11.30 Interview/tour with

- **Linda Nilsson**, Specialist in Sport Medicine
- **Other specialist** in Biomechanics & Motion Analysis

12.15 Lunch

13.15 Interview with
- **Susanne Wolmesjö,** Coordinator and developer of the National Sports University

~15.00 Transport to the hotel

**THURSDAY 26.10.**

**Session 6: Sport Federations**
*Location: Swedish Sports Confederation, Idrottens Hus, Skansbrogratan 7 – 1st floor (Stockholm)*

08.00 Transport to Idrottens Hus

09.00 Interview (online) with

- **Hanna Fogelström**, Head of National Team, Swedish Handball Federation
- **Ola Lindgren**, Head of Swedish Golf Team, Swedish Golf Federation

10.45 Break

11.00 Interview with

- **Håkon Carlsson**, Head of National Team, Swedish Orienteering Federation
- **Dejan Mirkovic**, Sports Director, Swedish Athletics Federation

12.30 Lunch

13.00 Interview with

- **Helena Plüss**, Sports Director, Swedish Budo and Martial Arts Federation
- **Leif Karlsson**, Secretary-general, Swedish Cycling Federation

14.45 Break

15.00 Interview with

- **Jonas Juhl Christiansen,** Elite Manager, Swedish Gymnastics Federation

~17.00 Transport to the hotel

**FRIDAY 27.10.**

**Session 7: Swedish Parasport**

*Location: Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences, GIH (Stockholm), Room 4405*

10.00 Walk from hotel

10.30 Interview with

- **Anna Bjerkefors**, Researcher & teacher, Swedish School of Sports and Health Sciences, GIH

~11.45 Transport to Copenhagen/London

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Analyseinstitut