Paper presentation

Abstract title: The Local and Global Context of Sport Success: A Case Study of Icelandic Handball

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Preferred session: Sports

Equipment required: A projector and sound.

Keywords:
sport success, local context, globalisation

Abstract:
Iceland is the smallest country ever to win an Olympic medal in team sport. It happened when the Icelandic national handball team won a silver medal at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing.

The paper reports on a case study that shows how local and global processes can interact to produce a successful tradition in team handball. The paper explores how specific Icelandic social and cultural characteristics have combined with certain international factors to create the success of this small country in Olympic team handball competition. The findings show that Iceland does not have any physical advantage over other teams, which indicated that success of the team is due to other factors. The study then identifies key local factors behind Iceland’s success, including the emphasis on games, the role of cultural values, the role of tacit knowledge and craftsmanship, and the “small society effect”. Finally, the study identifies key social mechanisms that arise out of the interplay of local and global factors to produce a successful handball tradition. These mechanisms include the social structure of opportunities to succeed, global sources of prestige and recognition, the role of the Matthew Effect, role models and a stereotype lift. It is concluded that a specific mixture of local and global factors have produced a sport tradition that enables such a small country to win an Olympic team medal.