



International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing

ISSN online: 1740-2808 - ISSN print: 1475-8962

<https://www.inderscience.com/ijsmm>

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DOI: [10.1504/IJSM.2024.10060951](https://doi.org/10.1504/IJSM.2024.10060951)

Article History:

Received:	25 February 2022
Last revised:	17 July 2023
Accepted:	25 August 2023
Published online:	19 December 2023

The leadership of high-performance directors in the governance structure of Danish elite sport

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the role of high-performance directors (HPDs) as leaders and how governance affects their decision-making process. This qualitative study consists of nine semi-structured interviews conducted in 2019–2020 with HPDs and other key personnel in Danish elite sport. The inter-organisational relationship between national sport organisations and Team Danmark, Denmark's national high-performance sport organisation, constitutes a valuable research context to examine governance and leadership in elite sport. The analysis of the empirical research shows that HPDs in Danish elite sport lead in a context that provides both restrictions and opportunities. The organisational structure provides HPDs with opportunities but, at the same time, restricts the overall framework for HPDs as leaders, illustrating how leadership and governance are interconnected.

Keywords: governance; leadership; elite sport; high-performance director; HPD; trust; collective leadership; Denmark.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Bennich Grønkjær, A. (2024) 'The leadership of high-performance directors in the governance structure of Danish elite sport', *Int. J. Sport Management and Marketing*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp.40–57.

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1 Introduction

National sport organisations (NSOs) employ high-performance directors (HPDs) to manage and lead elite sport programs (Grønkjær and Hanstad, 2022; Smith and Smolianov, 2016; Sotiriadou, 2013) and how they influence athletes' performance, thus, results in elite sport. Therefore, HPDs have a central role in a network of organisations where formal and informal factors influence the options for leadership (Andersen et al., 2022a). On the organisational level, HPDs operate in a federal-based governance model, often with a volunteer-led board in charge of the NSO (O'Boyle et al., 2020). In addition, the social and cultural context influences HPDs' leadership (Fletcher and Arnold, 2015), e.g., the national sporting culture, the structure of the sport, the political contexts and the

traditions of the NSO (Andersen et al., 2022b; Andersen and Ronglan, 2012; Hansen et al., 2021).

Empirical research can provide insights into how leaders in elite sport collaborate with volunteers in the NSO structure and governing bodies, what opportunities and constraints the collaboration can have for leadership and, indirectly, the results on both the playing field for athletes and coaches and in the board rooms. Ferkins et al. (2018) and O'Boyle et al. (2020) argue that the NSO structure is multi-layered and that leadership can benefit from being collaborative and collective. Thus, the multilevel perspective used in this study can add to the theoretical development of leadership in the sporting domain (Welty Peachey et al., 2015).

The present study examines how HPDs collaborate with Team Danmark (TD), Denmark's national high-performance sport organisation. While Danish NSOs have internal, sport-specific expectations, TD has external expectations, and the organisations define the governance structure. The national elite sport system and the NSOs' governance process influence the leadership opportunities for HPDs and vice versa (Dowling et al., 2018). HPDs are crucial in Danish elite sport, positioned in a network of affiliations, relationships, and mixed expectations. The organisational and governance structure affects how HPDs lead. At the same time, HPDs' decision-making influences the governance process (Erakovic and Jackson, 2012; Jackson and Parry, 2018).

The present study's research question is: What consequences does governance have for HPDs' role as leaders and their decision-making? The inter-organisational relationship between NSOs and TD constitutes a valuable research context for examining elite sport governance and leadership. To understand the leadership role of HPDs within Danish elite sport, I undertook a qualitative study, interviewing senior personnel (three employees from TD and the HPDs from six NSOs). The selected NSOs are among the best performing in the Danish system. As there is limited research focusing on governance and leadership as an interaction (Erakovic and Jackson, 2012; Ferkins et al., 2018), from empirical evidence, this study contributes to our understanding of how governance and leadership affect each other in the sporting context. Dowling et al. (2018) highlight that we need a broader approach to sport governance than that of management and board leadership. Recently, O'Boyle et al. (2020) stated that more research on governance and leadership is needed to understand both fields and how they connect, especially for the unique multi-layered, volunteer-led structure of NSOs.

2 Literature review

As nations compete for medals and allocate more resources to develop athletes and teams, the significance of leadership increases (Green and Oakley, 2001; Reiche, 2016; Hansen et al., 2021; Houlihan and Chapman, 2015; Houlihan and Zheng, 2013). The national context, available resources, and policies directly impact elite sport systems (Andersen and Ronglan, 2012; Andersen et al., 2022c; Augestad et al., 2006). Previous studies primarily focused on the essence of elite sport development, emphasising factors like sport policy and investments that lead to international sporting success (Green and Houlihan, 2005; Green and Oakley, 2001). These include the provision of funding and support by national elite sport organisations to NSOs. Additionally, elite sport systems encompass various components such as high-performance and talent programs,

state-of-the-art facilities, dual-career options for athletes, well-defined competition structures, and scientific research (Andersen et al., 2015; De Bosscher et al., 2008, 2015).

Recent research highlights the importance of considering contextual factors, such as policies, institutional practices, and national sport culture, when addressing leadership and management in elite sport (Andersen et al., 2015, 2022a; Sotiriadou and De Bosscher, 2018). Additionally, understanding how resources for development and performance are obtained and utilised is crucial. Collaboration between organisations is key in providing NSO resources (Babiak and Thibault, 2009; Babiak et al., 2018). NSOs must produce successful results to access economic and staff support from national elite sport programs. To accomplish this, NSOs have transitioned from being led primarily by volunteers to employing staff members who oversee and manage elite sport (Andersen et al., 2022c; Böhlke et al., 2009; Smith and Smolianov, 2016; Sotiriadou, 2013).

Professional leaders and managers are essential in handling the system's increasing complexity (Arnold et al., 2015; Böhlke et al., 2009). Within elite sport systems, the role of a HPD has emerged due to system development (Smolianov et al., 2022; Sotiriadou, 2013). The HPD is responsible for leading and managing coaches, supporting staff teams and overseeing operations (Sotiriadou, 2013; Smith and Smolianov, 2016). An HPD requires knowledge of the specific sport and various disciplines represented by sport-specific experts. According to Sotiriadou and De Bosscher (2018), these individuals form part of the organisational line within NSOs, where strategies and policies are developed to achieve sustainable performance. The scope of decision-making for the HPD is influenced by the organisational level, particularly in NSOs, where board members often volunteer their time (O'Boyle et al., 2020). This internal context aligns with the multilevel conceptual model of leadership in sport proposed by Welty Peachey et al. (2015).

Despite the advancement in research on both leadership and governance in sport, the existing literature on elite sport systems have overlooked how NSOs collaborate and communicate with other stakeholders in the elite sport system (Babiak et al., 2018; Hansen, 2015; Sotiriadou and De Bosscher, 2018).

3 Conceptual framework

Ferkins et al. (2018) see leadership as a collective process necessary for governance research. This aligns with the multilevel conceptual model of leadership in sport management (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Bjørndal (2017) explains that sport organisational models can be multi-centric and have multi-dimensional governing structures with overlapping responsibilities.

Leadership processes are affected by the specific sport context. For example, board members, directors, coaches, supporting staff, athletes, clubs, fans, and others influence the leadership processes. Thus, "what is perceived as the best way of leading and organising elite sport systems and elite athletes must be understood in light of the societal context within which the organisation and individuals operate" (Hansen et al., 2022).

At the level of elite sport, it is crucial to understand the interconnection between the organisation's culture and the requirements of performance management (Molan et al., 2018). For NSOs, the organisation of both sport for all and elite sport, as well as the values found therein, create opportunities and obstacles (Andersen et al., 2022b). Political finesse is needed for leaders to handle different interests and for stakeholders to reach a

common understanding of interests, results, and aspirations (Hartley et al., 2019). The NSO's strategic aims, as determined by the board or external organisations (such as TD), can influence the high-performance level (Molan et al., 2021).

There are numerous understandings of the concept of governance (Ansell and Torfing, 2016). One is that "governance is the exercise of power in the management of an organisation" [Lam, (2014), p.20]. Erakovic and Jackson (2012, p.79) argue that leadership and governance "are integral parts of the governance discussions, as we cannot see how directors can operate without providing leadership to the organisations that they are appointed to guard, support and advise". In addition, governance is viewed as a "process in which an organisation, network of organisations or a society steers itself, allocates resources and exercises control and coordination" (Ferkins and Van Bottenburg, 2013). Like other organisations, interest groups fight for influence in an NSO (Houlihan, 2022), impacting how effective the governance can be (Lam, 2014).

Leadership is seen as a vital research concept in the federal sport governance network that is influenced by interwoven relationships (O'Boyle et al., 2020) and a culture of self-rule and upholding one's interests (Shilbury et al., 2016). Leadership is connected to the governance process, which occurs as actors collectively use their combined insights, resources, and competencies to administer and steer the organisation in complex contexts (Ansell and Torfing, 2016; Geeraert and Van Eekeren, 2022; van Eekeren, 2021). Thus, governance is part of the leadership process.

Shilbury et al. (2016) explain the governance model as a sport code in which volunteers govern and manage a non-profit sport organisation. Known as the federal model, this model has experienced increased professionalisation, which entails a more business-like approach (Dowling et al., 2014) due to the increase in access to external resources, opportunities, and demands (Houlihan and Green, 2007; Nagel et al., 2015). Such developments provide a challenge for both governance and leadership. Kikulis (2000) illustrated that the involvement and influence of paid executives on policies, strategic decisions, and managerial processes have contributed to the disruption and deconstruction of the traditional decision-making structure in NSOs. According to Sharpe et al. (2018, p.220), "Governance structures used during the amateur era of sport need to be updated and modernized to effectively fit with current best practice models as amateur models of governance are incompatible with the needs of professional sport organizations".

Especially in the public sector, we find different governance paradigms. As sport is deeply connected to the public sphere, the paradigms also appear in sport (van Eekeren, 2021). The sport sector is affected by an expansive trend where NSOs are a contractual and social connection to the policy level of governmental agencies (Hoye and Cuskelly, 2007). Sam (2015, p.24) explains that "performance regimes fit neatly with elite sport because, on the surface, there are clear indications and benchmarks that can be linked to an even clearer bottom line – medals".

New public management (NPM) is one of the most dominant governance regimes in the public domain. It is also found in sport (Sam, 2015). In NPM, key aspects are management by objectives through standards and performance measures, increasing bureaucracy, and centralised control (Torfing et al., 2020). In contrast is new public governance (NPG), characterised by a collaborative approach to governance where trust and empowerment are a large part of the leadership and management process (Torfing et al., 2020). In other words, NPG involves cooperation, dialogue, and input from various stakeholders.

As in public organisations in general, sport leaders and directors are part of a system run by politicians. Their authority is embedded in a social context (Houlihan, 2022). An organisational setting like this creates a normative and institutional framework for the leader. Therefore, “it is important for them to decode and understand the roles of the politicians and employees in each paradigm to know what is expected of them and to harvest the full potential of a given paradigm” (Torfing et al., 2020). O’Boyle et al. (2020) stress that there is a need for more knowledge of multi-layered leadership at the levels of the board, organisation, and inter-organisational relations. Both research and practice “find it difficult to depict what leadership in governance ‘looks like’ and how to convey a distinction between governance actions and leadership behaviors” [O’Boyle et al., (2020), p.3] as leadership and governance complement each other. A leader plays a part in developing the organisation’s structure, policies, procedures, and, by extension, its culture. Decision-making, managing personnel, and the performance of teams are part of the governance and leadership processes (Erakovic and Jackson, 2012; Welty Peachey et al., 2015).

To summarise, governance is an organisational frame defined at the top of an organisation. It influences leadership processes at all levels of the organisation. Contextual factors need to be considered when analysing leadership and governance. For the study presented in this article, leadership is regarded as a collective, social, and relational experience. Governance is also viewed as a joint effort structured around objectives and measures of performance, as with NPM. Governance can also be driven by trust and empowerment, as with the principles of NPG.

4 Materials and methods

This article is based on a qualitative study. I completed semi-structured interviews with six HPDs in different Danish NSOs and three representatives from TD from June 2019 to November 2020. Five of the six HPDs were still employed at the time of the interviews. Five of the six HPDs are among the most experienced HPDs in Danish elite sport. All six HPDs represent some NSOs performing at the highest level in international elite sport and, thus, in TD’s support system. Of the three TD employees, one had a position at the very top of the organisation, and the second worked as a consultant. The third TD representative was an ex-employee with considerable experience at the organisation’s top for almost a decade. All nine informants had expert knowledge about the phenomenon I wanted to investigate. In addition, they could reflectively express their experience and views (Palinkas et al., 2015). Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the participants’ anonymity. The HPDs have been coded as HPD1 to HPD6, and the TD participants as TD1 to TD3.

The interviews are a source of data representing the voices and views of the people working with the national teams. I analysed the interview data and constructed knowledge about the phenomenon I was interested in Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). The interviews all lasted approximately one hour. I used an interview guide as a starting point, and the interviews followed a common structure. To some degree, each interview took its own direction, allowing me to explore specific topics in greater depth. However, the interviews did stay within the frame of the study.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, the analysis is supported by information gathered from reports from the Danish Institute for Sports Studies (Storm et al., 2021,

2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2014). On commission from TD, the institute has analysed the athletes', coaches' and HPDs' views on TD yearly since 2013 (except in 2019 and 2020). Document analysis can add contextual and other information to verify findings from the interview data (Bowen, 2009). As qualitative research, the study presents stories provided by the informants but created and interpreted by me, the researcher, during the data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). As such, the meaning created is a presentation of my interpretation, which presents a picture of Danish elite sport's leadership and governance process.

4.1 Live coding

The interviews were transcribed and then analysed using a coding process inspired by the concept of live coding (Locke et al., 2015). Step one was to read the interviews a few times to revisit the information in each of them. This allowed me to reflect on all the interviews. Step two was to map the material and then identify codes. Closely connected to this process, I identified themes from the dataset in step three. Using the live coding process, I could keep the representation of ideas in the data. Discovering and validating is "a mutually constituted duality working together within an open-ended, forward-looking, trial-and-error theorizing process" (Locke et al., 2015). In this process, the data can 'talk back' to our understanding and analysis of the material. The next step was to do a thematic analysis (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017), and the themes were used to guide my analysis, presented later in the article. The interviews were translated from Danish to English by the author.

4.2 Insider research

Although I, as the researcher, guided the direction of the interview, I was also a participant and part of the process when collecting and interpreting the data (Corbin and Strauss, 2014). From 2010 to 2016, I worked as an HPD in a Danish NSO. I knew five of the six HPDs interviewed for this study from work relations during my time as an HPD. I was also familiar with the TD representatives. The connection to these people made contacting them and arranging interviews easy. Before the study, I understood the Danish elite sport system and the NSO and TD model. When I collected and later interpreted data, I engaged in insider research. Researchers engage in insider research using qualitative methods to study their current or former organisations, communities, or social groups. Being close to – or 'inside' – the field of research can give the advantage of 'native' understanding of the organisation under study and potentially helpful experience from the environment. However, it can also create bias. In general, bias cannot be separated from the qualitative methods as the researcher brings assumptions to the field, thereby holding the bias internally. Suppose the data are translated carelessly and without reflecting on the element of being an inside researcher. In that case, the analysis and conclusions can be misleading (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007).

5 Contextual background – elite sport in Denmark

Leadership is a social construction embedded in the social, geographical, and historical context (Osborn et al., 2002). The following paragraph explains some critical aspects of

the Danish social context and the specific context of Danish sport. The social democratic welfare state shapes the model for volunteer organisations and the sport movement in Denmark (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In the Danish system, the state handles social security through the public sector, and its political culture has a consensus-seeking approach. Citizens have universal rights to welfare options, e.g., free healthcare and education, funded by relatively high levels of taxation (Torfing et al., 2020). The government and local authorities support voluntary organisations such as sport clubs through economic distribution and sporting facilities (Bergsgard and Norberg, 2010). The universal and egalitarian aspects of sport are vital in Danish sport policy. This also goes for elite sport, which has become ‘accepted as an independent cultural phenomenon’ (Bergsgard and Norberg, 2010).

The Sports Confederation of Denmark (Danmarks Idrætsforbund, DIF) and TD are the two major organisations that oversee elite sport in Denmark. DIF is an umbrella federation that distributes funding to its 62 NSO members. TD is a public organisation regulated by law and formally accountable to the Ministry of Culture. The State, DIF, and sponsors are the primary funding providers to TD (Hansen, 2012; Storm, 2012). Thus, the policies and economic support of the Danish state influence sport in Denmark (Andersen and Ronglan, 2012; Andersen et al., 2015), and, as in other countries, government involvement is accepted (Houlihan, 1997).

In 2022, TD supported the elite sport program for 24 of the 62 NSOs (Team_Danmark, 2021), as these NSOs are considered to match the requirements for TD support. To receive support, NSOs need to agree on overall targets made by TD. Implementing the HPD figure in the NSO’s organisation exemplifies this partnership. The HPD operates at the heart of the governance structure, handling the strategic level, decisions made by the NSO board, day-to-day operations, and long-term collaboration with TD.

The members of the NSO elect the board during an annual general meeting (Ibsen and Seippel, 2010). The HPD handles collaboration between the NSO and TD and oversees the national teams, talent development programs, coaches, and other support staff appointed by the NSO (Grønkjær and Hanstad, 2022). In addition, the literature suggests that the HPD handles ongoing planning, monitoring, analysis, and assessment to meet the goals and objectives (Smith and Smolianov, 2019; Sotiriadou, 2013; Hansen, 2015; Skille and Chroni, 2018; Grønkjær and Hanstad, 2022). This structural arrangement is in accordance with the findings on the elite sport system from (Oakley and Green, 2001) and, later, the SPLISS project (De Bosscher et al., 2015, 2008).

TD has clear objectives that an NSO must endorse to qualify for support and funding for elite sport development. The objectives are based on a broader base than mere results. According to TD:

“The tasks of the NSOs, as well as the everyday life of the elite athletes and the demands on their surroundings, have generated the need to establish professional operating organisations to ensure the athletes’ opportunity to reach the international top elite in a societal and socially responsible manner.”
(Bloomgreen, 2016, my translation)

In short, TD’s concept of support is a roadmap for how the NSOs should define their strategy for elite sport. TD directs Danish elite sport development through objectives and targets that the NSOs need to follow to maintain their collaboration with TD (Storm, 2012).

6 Findings and discussion

“Many NSOs have totally depended on TD, who determined the playing field [for elite sport development]” (TD3). The statement illustrates the governance relationship between TD and the NSOs in Danish elite sport. It is connected to this study’s research question: What consequences does governance have for HPDs’ role as leaders and their decision-making? Thus, the following section discusses how HPDs operate as leaders of the elite sport program in the NSO context and what this means for HPDs’ decision-making process. I discuss how the governance process of the NSO and the NSO-TD relationship offers opportunities and restrictions for HPDs in steering, allocating resources, and controlling the elite sport program (Ferkins and Van Bottenburg, 2013).

6.1 The external context: empowerment with restrictions

TD provide selected Danish NSOs resources to strengthen the NSO organisation to align with TD’s strategic focus on developing Danish elite sport. A similar relationship was found between government departments and agencies and NSOs in Australia and the UK, where programs were designed to empower and give (qualified) autonomy to NSOs. The nature of this autonomy was centralised targets and sanctions (Green and Houlihan, 2005). This process is also visible in a study of the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) and Summer Olympic NSOs. The organisations collaborate to develop high-performance athletes and win Olympic medals. Still, they may disagree on how to reach the goals. The ASC use NPM tools to measure and direct the performance of the NSO annually (Gowthorp et al., 2017). As argued in the following, the Danish structure is comparable to these examples. It makes the relationship between Danish NSOs and TD challenging.

In Denmark, every NSO has its strategy approved by the board. The HPD makes the blueprint of the elite sport strategy based on input from, e.g., national team coaches and others. In addition, the blueprint is informed by TD’s general strategic guidelines (e.g., Bloomgreen, 2016). The NSOs receive resources from TD. However, the allocation comes with objectives from TD. Since the NSOs are responsible for the outcomes, this creates a structural imbalance in the governance relationship. According to HPD4, “The dependency ratio has become tremendously large, but that is on the economic dependency ratio. Not in other areas (...), the elite department becomes dependent on TD”. HPD3 also sees this: ‘What is interesting about it is the relationship of authority’. He elaborates that working with the experts from TD is a collaboration on unequal terms. Since they have a different employer, HPD3 cannot instruct the experts. “It is a collaboration, and we work together to achieve the goal, so why is it only us who are responsible for whether we win the medals? That is where authority comes in”.

The organisational structure provides HPDs with opportunities but also restricts the overall framework for HPDs as leaders, thus illustrating how leadership and governance are interconnected (Erakovic and Jackson, 2012). TD wants NSOs to make long-term plans. The HPDs interviewed for the present study favour this. Still, they also find it challenging to balance their future ambitions with today’s resources. According to HPD1, “The year 2024 is what TD talks about – the long perspective. However, it is always short-term when we talk about money”. The medal targets in elite sport systems are a vital issue. Success in terms of international medals opens (more) prioritised funding. The HPD participants acknowledge that the high-performance plan and budget include NPM

tools as measurement, evaluation, and medal targets. Due to their dependency on TD, translating objectives on performance budgeting can hinder organisational learning since NSOs are too afraid to make mistakes. Sam (2015) illustrated this point from the elite sport system in New Zealand. The HPDs in the Danish system argue that they need a long-term platform, including funding, to further develop the elite sport program. In other words, they seek a change from management based on objectives and performance measures and control, as seen in the NPM regime, to more trust and empowerment-based governance, like that of the NPG regime (Torfing et al., 2020).

TD is aware of the dilemma in the governance approach. According to TD2, “As sports consultants, we challenge and help the HPDs make sense of their work and go in the right direction”. The relationship is unique since TD is the most significant funding contributor to NSOs. Therefore, TD must consider how and to what extent they try to influence the NSO. As TD3 explains, “It really is a fine balance how much autonomy the NSO have. It is a balance you must constantly challenge. It depends a lot on the status of the NSO”.

TD provides NSOs with either direct support through funding or indirect support through experts in sports psychology, strength coaching, physiotherapy, nutrition, innovation analysis, and medicine. Both forms of support are of high value for the NSOs. TD is expected to offer the NSO elite programs the most up-to-date knowledge. However, HPD3 is happy to have some of these expert services in-house: “We are delighted. This way, we can control the resources 100% to certify what is needed in our national teamwork and strategic plan”. His experience with the services provided by TD is much less flexible: “It is like take it or leave it”. Similarly, HPD5 decided some years ago to hire an expert from ‘outside’ the system instead of using the resources available from TD, saying, “I needed to fight for my decision, and it took 3–4 years to have TD accept it”.

In some situations, the TD system influences HPDs’ decisions to a large degree. However, we also see that HPDs are willing to take responsibility based on their experience with the specific high-performance plan and the context. Therefore, in leadership and governance, HPDs’ influence is critical to obtain and make the best of the resources to plan for development (and success). According to the Danish Institute for Sports Studies reports, the TD consultants’ role has changed from that of a controller to a more dialogue-oriented partner (Storm et al., 2016). TD is viewed as a co-player (Storm et al., 2018). Despite this, no matter how good and trusting the collaboration between the HPD and the TD consultant is, TD will always be in a position where they need to prioritise. TD1 explains: “We have to find a link between trusting collaboration, where we know each other’s role and are fully aware of it and know very well that at some point the consultant says that no, we cannot do this”. Hence, leadership in the Danish elite sport system is a joint effort (Ferkins et al., 2018; Welty Peachey et al., 2015; Yammarino, 2013). The HPD, on behalf of the NSO, has a collaborative relationship. However, TD has the final authority in this cooperation.

6.2 The inter-organisational context: Space for leadership through the use of governance

Some HPDs use TD to influence the political level at the NSOs to make changes that the HPDs find necessary. Thus, the influence of the HPD as a leader is crucial – and so is the use of political finesse (Hartley et al., 2019). At one point, HPD4 wanted to raise the

level of aspiration for athletes and coaches in the elite and talent group – and for the NSO in general. HPD4 had TD set an unprecedented goal for the number of World Championship medals, which the NSO had to reach to further expand its collaboration with TD. This way, the HPD, in cooperation with TD, used the measurement and targets in a way that resembled the NPM regime. HPD2 adopted a similar strategy to strengthen the eligibility requirements for an athlete to qualify for the NSO's elite program. Both HPDs used TD strategically to fulfil what they saw as the potential for their elite programs. A report from 2018 stresses the same point. "Team Denmark is often used as leverage to get decisions implemented in the [NSOs], and TD is praised for being a good partner for the coaches and sports managers when decisions have to be made in the [NSOs]" (Storm et al., 2018).

The development of NSOs impacts how the organisations are governed and led. Due to the funding from TD, NSOs have a relatively large budget for elite sport compared to their total budget. This imbalance can create challenges as only a few of the members of the NSO are qualified for the elite sport program and can benefit from these resources. The HPD administers the budget and executes the NSO policy. As a result, the distance between elite sport and sport for all can be substantial, for instance, regarding how resources should be used, as Ferkins and Van Bottenburg (2013) discuss. HPD4 learned that the elite sport program became a bubble inside the NSO. In this bubble, the elite athletes and coaches flourished. Simultaneously, the elite sport program distanced itself increasingly from the general NSO, making it vulnerable to criticism regarding its strategy and implementation. In addition, the staff in the elite program developed a distrust of the NSO politicians. They feared the board would make 'crazy decisions' due to a lack of insights into elite sport. This situation exemplifies the multilevel leadership perspective (Welty Peachey et al., 2015). To align this to the NSO in general, HPD4 needed to communicate at the public and political level, especially as the budget and resources for the elite sport program continued to increase. Most of the revenue came from TD. By delivering good results and reaching the targets agreed on in other ways, the NSO continued to receive the needed funding. The HPD thus plays an essential role in making the elite program a part of the NSO overall – not merely a particular unit detached from the rest of the organisation. As TD1 states, "You need an understanding of the political level to do that".

In some cases, the elite sport department of the NSO develops and grows faster than the traditional structure of the NSO. In such cases, NSOs go from being managed by volunteers to employing numerous people, as Sharpe et al. (2018) illustrated. Such development increases the risk that the translation of objectives in the governance process can differ from actor to actor. For example, shortly after HPD1 took his job in the NSO, he discovered that the previous HPD and a board member responsible for elite sport defined their ways of doing things without giving much thought to the NSO's formal guidance documents. A replacement on the board occurred when the new HPD entered. The HPD and the board member had to decode the previous decision-making structure and organisational arrangements: "We looked at each other. What do we do? What do you decide, and what do I decide?" (HPD1).

Another example is that HPD2 fought hard to control national team nominations without political interference. "They had to hold on to the nominations because they could decide something. And now they have gotten used to now that I control the elite sport programme" (HPD2). TD recognises this imbalance:

“There are NSOs where a strategy was decided, and we are going that way. Still, the political side is going another way. It simply doesn’t work. You need to be aligned, and it is up to the HPD to ensure you are aligned (TD2).”

The situation differs quite a lot from NSO to NSO. HPD3 feels he is in a relatively good position as a board member assigned to the elite sport area, and this person has had that position for around ten years. According to HPD3, “He knows the area quite well. The rest of the board may have given it less attention because they had confidence in what went on our side and with those politically responsible”. Over the years, HPD2 has come to realise and accept that NSO politicians have other insights and experience with elite sport, and this is where the dialogue needs to start: “A lot is about meeting them in the right place. These political leaders are on another level. They are at the comfort and cosiness level [in sport]”. The level of experience of the HPD becomes part of their authority as it is integrated with the social and political system (Houlihan, 2022). In the HPDs’ experience, the volunteer leaders also want to learn and listen. However, HPDs need to take the time to explain different matters to political leaders. HPD1 states, “Many political leaders in the voluntary sector are there because they are passionate about the sport... It solves many things if you sit down and explain what is going on behind the curtains”. Challenges arise when volunteer leaders want to be part of decision-making processes outside their domains of responsibility.

As head of the elite sport program for the NSO, the HPD becomes a central leader in the organisation. The HPD directs collective leadership within the NSO, especially at the political level and externally in its collaboration with TD. The relationship with the TD consultant can have great value for developing the elite sport program at the NSO and, to some degree, the structure of the NSO itself. Ferkins and Shilbury (2012) note that the board and the executives of an NSO interact in a ‘complex interplay’ when they formulate a strategy and implement it (p.69). In other words, the HPD can use the opportunities in the NSO and TD governance structures to allocate resources and control and coordinate these resources, as illustrated by Ferkins and Van Bottenburg (2013).

6.3 Internal context: governance in a political system

Most of the HPDs interviewed have experienced challenges at the political level. For example, HPD5 considered that his scope of agency is confined: ‘It’s only a few per cent you can change. It is a long haul. For example, if I want to hire a new coach, I must first work with the athletes, TD, the board, the coaching team, and the coach himself’. In addition, the HPD explains that he has been in situations where he had to hire certain people. If he refused, “I might as well resign myself” (HPD5). In this case, the political level interferes with the operation of the HPD. HPD2 shares similar experiences:

“The challenge is that politicians do not want to go the same path. That we do not have the same intentions to achieve the objectives. Because they focus on other things, such as how many members or I want to become president of the board one day.”

TD3 explains that “you often experience political leadership that swings back and forth, and sometimes they take into account the clubs, other times, they do not”. The NSO’s political context influences the autonomy and, thus, the leadership possibilities for the HPD.

What comes to light here is part of the governance process. The democratic and volunteer structure of the federal model involves a range of different participants and interests. Stakeholders for a Danish NSO include regional committees, clubs, coaches, athletes, parents, spectators, sponsors, and media. Thus, pressure from such stakeholders outside the elite sport program influences decisions. When an HPD successfully lobbies or affects the different stakeholders in an NSO, they “are no longer simply critics of the process. They now ‘own’ the decision-making process collectively with other stakeholders” (Ansell and Gash, 2008). In addition, it is an example of how the work and the outputs can be experienced and accepted differently in various parts of an organisation (Sam, 2015; Torfing et al., 2020).

6.4 The HPD as a leader

The role of the NSO in the Danish elite sport system is situated in an interplay of management, leadership, and governance. To be successful, the HPD needs to acknowledge – and to some extent challenge – the status quo of the NSO. Furthermore, the HPD needs the authority to implement the high-performance plan. In some cases, this is done autonomously; in others, the political structure interferes. One HPD says, “I see my task as the leader of leaders or experts” (HPD3). Hansen (2015) defines this role as a ‘gatekeeper’. In elite sport, the gatekeeper coordinates the input and knowledge from experts into the elite sport program and links “domain-specific and system-wide knowledge to better understand the challenges surrounding improvement and innovation” (p.92). The HPD functions as a gatekeeper in the context of Danish elite sport, but the role of the HPD includes more. TD views the HPD as ‘an important leader’ (TD1). TD recognises that the HPD handles many stakeholders: athletes, coaches, politicians, club coaches, etc. According to TD1, “The HPD needs to act in this field, and I think that can be extremely difficult”.

The HPD is also responsible for implementing the strategic level, which requires interaction with the political level to advance strategic documents. Since the HPD is a paid executive, the HPD is often responsible for formulating and writing the strategic plan for elite sport. Once that plan is complete, the NSO board must approve it. At that point, of course, they can raise questions or reject the plan. However, as HPD1 explains, “I can control a lot with the agenda I put forward”. In these cases, the leadership of the HPDs and the governance process are integrated. Here, the HPDs use their power to manage the NSO (Lam, 2014).

Some interviewed HPDs acknowledge that a continuous flow of information to the political level is vital. Significant changes in the elite group on the athletes’ side or issues around a coach are examples of this type of communication. In these cases, informing the board members in advance has proved valuable. Other examples of the HPD actively doing outreach further demonstrate this dynamic. HPD2 learned to “actively find things that I could praise them for. Because the politicians are uplifted when they get praise for things”. When HPD6 started the job, he was aware of his need to have a good relationship with the board: “It was a strategy for me just to have a meeting over a coffee with the politicians on the board that I did not know so well. Just talk to them a bit”. The HPDs try to build a trusting relationship and mutual understanding. From this form of engagement at the political level, the HPDs can have more assertive governance behaviour (Shilbury et al., 2016). It is essential to acknowledge that although the political level of the NSO can be an obstacle to decision-making or change, the same politicians

can also be change advocates and legitimise the HPD's role in the decision-making process (Houlihan, 2022).

The role of the HPD contributes to developing the federal model. As Kikulis (2000) explains, the board 'is a deep structure and core practice that demonstrates traditionality' that has been "established and passed down over the years to become taken for granted [and] providing a source of stability and resistance to change" (p.308). Consequently, it is not enough for the HPD to know the different requirements for elite sport. The HPD also needs to understand the political level of the institutional context and work strategically to develop cooperation therein. TD acknowledged this and worked to strengthen the leadership level for elite sport at the NSOs, especially from 2013 and onwards (Willeberg, 2013). The approach is part of developing competent HPDs in Danish elite sport who operate within challenging contexts. Torfing et al. (2020, p.167) explain that "the particular governance context of a given manager is always specific and embedded in layered and hybrid manifestations of different governance paradigms that are changing over time".

7 Conclusions and implications

This article examines how governance affects HPDs as leaders and their decision-making process. The context of Danish elite sport is embedded in the broader societal culture, as are the frames of the leadership and governance process. Thus, HPDs' decision-making process is influenced by the opportunities, objectives, and demands coming from TD. Furthermore, the NSOs' strategies and goals for elite sport provide opportunities and constraints for HPDs' leadership. Simultaneously, this governance structure protects and supports HPDs as leaders. Thus, the study illustrates how leadership and governance are interconnected (Erakovic and Jackson, 2012).

The analysis of the empirical research provides a perspective on how HPDs need to balance the external and internal context. The interplay of the NSO and TD requires the HPD to try to maximise success, but other interests can moderate this process. The HPD is the link between TD and the NSO board. This means that the HPD must translate objectives, requirements, and opportunities from the TD system to the political level in the NSO. Similarly, the HPD needs to balance the context, strengths, and weaknesses of the NSO with the aims of TD. The HPD uses political skills to harmonise the multi-dimensional practices in this governance process. In other words, the HPD orients the leadership both sideways to the NSO-TD level and upwards to the NSO board.

The political and normative situation differs from NSO to NSO. With a high emphasis on democratic values and a high level of volunteering, the organisational structure influences elite sport governance and leadership possibilities in Danish NSOs. HPDs and coaches in elite sport develop high-level skills within their expertise. Their understanding of today's sport differs from the many volunteers operating in the NSO system. HPDs need to acknowledge and embrace this as a challenge, as it is an essential part of the leadership process to translate the elite sport requirements to those outside the program. The more successful HPDs are in this process, the more supportive the governance structure will likely be.

7.1 Implications for theory and research

The findings of this study illustrate that theory and research should focus on how leadership and governance are connected. The results of this study are in line with the multilevel perspective on leadership as presented by Welty Peachey et al. (2015) and recently discussed in various case studies, e.g., Andersen et al. (2022b), Grønkjær and Hanstad (2022) and Hansen et al. (2022). It also supports Ferkins et al. (2018) that sport governance should be conceptualised as collective leadership. Research on governance and leadership can help us understand both phenomena more deeply (O'Boyle et al., 2020). This study adds to the claim made by Andersen and Ronglan (2012) that the contextual factors on a national level challenge the idea of a uniform elite sport model (De Bosscher et al., 2006; Green and Oakley, 2001). One reason for this is that policies and procedures in governance are influenced by human actions and the inter-relationship aspect of leadership, as argued by Erakovic and Jackson (2012). To my knowledge, this is the first study that draws on conceptual perspectives on governance and leadership in the context of HPDs or similar leaders in national elite sport.

There are limitations of the present study. First, the study could be complemented with insights from members of the boards at the NSOs, especially the presidents and board members with responsibility for elite sport. Their contribution could challenge, add to, and refine the results presented in this study. In addition, HPDs and board members from smaller NSOs would probably provide a somewhat different picture of governance and leadership. Both concerning TD and internally for the NSOs, as they operate in smaller organisations with different budgets. Finally, similar research could also be conducted in other national contexts. Studies like these could broaden our knowledge of what takes place in the elite sport system of today.

7.2 Implications for sport managers and leaders

The study has important practical implications for leaders in sport and their organisations. A leader in elite sport, such as the HPD, must handle the asymmetrical distribution of knowledge, power, and decision-making in the multilevel context of the NSO. To address this challenge, the individual leader and the context the leader operates in need to acknowledge this multilevel perspective. Thus, the NSO board needs to be aware that the role of HPD as a leader reaches further than the context of elite sport only. To be a successful leader in elite sport, the HPD has direct and indirect responsibilities that touch on other NSO areas. Especially involvement with different stakeholders, primarily through interaction with the board. As considerable economic, human, and strategic resources are at stake in elite sport programs, the HPD needs to balance the needs of elite sport with the nature of the traditional volunteer model of an NSO. Therefore, acknowledging that leadership includes these aspects must be part of a recruitment strategy when hiring a new HPD, a director or a similar individual to a leader role in an elite sport organisation. In addition, NSOs and similar – as exemplified by TD – can implement strategies which directly and indirectly affect the leadership development in the organisations they support and collaborate with.

To some degree, leadership is a collective process. The interactions on multi-levels and between organisation represent managerial and leadership implications. As illustrated in the study, the TD consultant can be a trusted partner and a control mechanism. However, the structure will always be unequal as TD is the most significant financial

contributor to NSOs' elite sport programs. In addition, TD promotes a model in which the NSO is measured on various objectives, mainly medals. These findings offer new insights into this challenge in managing elite sport, which is relevant for researchers and practitioners.

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