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CENTRALIZATION IN NATIONAL HIGH-PERFORMANCE
SPORTS SYSTEMS: REASONS, PROCESSES, DIMENSIONS,
CHARACTERISTICS, AND OPEN QUESTIONS



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Centralization in National High-Performance Sports Systems: Reasons, Processes, Dimensions, Characteristics, and Open Questions

(More) Centralization provides for the bundling of tasks that are relevant to the achievement of an institution's goals. Centralization is discussed in almost all areas of life: For example, in politics (more centralized structures in France vs. more decentralized structures in Germany), in economics (centrally planned organization as in the former COMECON-Countries), decentralized decision-making at the individual level in market economies), and at the corporate level.

Objects of centralization can be, for example, decision-making processes, products, personnel and customer groups. In some cases, the aim is to centralize (only) certain objects, while other activities are to remain decentralized, for example. In some cases, centralization in some areas virtually necessitates decentralization in others: For example, centralization by product usually leads to decentralization by sales area.

Synergy effects, specialization advantages and, ultimately, cost degression effects are cited as benefits or advantages of more centralization; duplication of work and infrastructure can be avoided. Decision-making processes can be accelerated and simplified – subordinate or geographically distant units do not participate in the decision-making process. Unified concepts and strategies can be better enforced. "Density effects" must also be taken into account: There often are positive spill-over effects between people with related activities, for example, due to imitation and learning effects, but also due to the exchange of experience, which leads to an increase in the productivity of those involved. However, the decentralization tendencies that have emerged as a result of the Corona pandemic, for example through homeworking, partly question this finding.

One of the disadvantages of centralization is that large centralized companies have high demands on information and decision-making systems because the experience, problems and ideas for solutions that arise decentrally have to reach the decision-makers and therefore often (but not always) react more slowly to external changes. Less consideration may be given to regional peculiarities. Due to the standardization usually associated with centralization the scope for adaptation to specific circumstances may be lost. Centralization can increase the distance of decision-makers from "grassroots" concerns. The non-central units can suffer from devaluation, delegitimization, and demotivation, possibly associated with a long-term decrease of activities. The restricted competition of ideas can lead to a long-term decline in competitiveness, since the reduced competencies of the decentralized employees can inhibit their individual performance development. Centralization leads to a greater burden on central decision-makers because the quantity and complexity of decisions increase. Individuals affected by centralization (in a different location) may experience family relocation problems and additional financial problems. The Corona pandemic and the current China discussion have brought additional arguments into the discussion with contagion risks for (too) many and (too) strong dependencies/blackmail possibilities on centralized procurement. And Ukraine's energy supply, which is based on relatively few large nuclear power plants, illustrates the possible increased susceptibility of certain centralized structures to crises.

The Discussions in Elite Sports: The German Case

The discussion about (more) centralization is also topical in German elite sports. Numerous federations have centralized by bringing coaches and athletes together in one or a few locations. The pro-arguments are initially similar: In addition to the reasons mentioned above, specific cost savings are cited because service functions such as physiotherapy and biomechanics do not have to be provided several times, but only once or a few times. In ski jumping and bobsledding, some centralization seems inevitable because of the high cost of the necessary infrastructures. Topography and natural

resources may also play a role. For example, a Hamburg alpine skier will be forced to join centralized training venues in the Alps. This does not mean that the ski association's training must be completely centralized: Different requirements may apply to cross-country skiers and to alpine skiers.

It is also argued that centralization facilitates the joint development of techniques, which can be particularly important in team sports. Some postulate that decentralized athletes are distracted from training by their social environment and their professional activities. Centralization therefore may result in more concentration on the essentials. The term "essentials" may imply that athletes and officials weigh the importance of athletic success and professional/social concerns differently. Some athletes would counter that family/social harmony can be important for sustained athletic success. With regard to education and profession, the athlete community may be divided: Athletes from some milieus need full concentration; for athletes from other milieus, profession/education and sports success are not contradictory, but rather stimulating: "Exclusively sports" could even hinder their creativity and have a counterproductive effect on sports.

The counter-arguments also tie in with discussions from other areas: The clubs and bases that are not the site of centralization are devalued. The motivation of the trainers, officials and institutions there may suffer. If this work was done on a voluntary basis, it might have to be purchased later at market prices and added to the costs of centralization. In some cases, the (publicly determined) low salary structures mean that there are no sufficiently qualified individuals available to meet the increasing or even unrealistic demands placed on central staff as a result of centralization. However, the qualification of personnel is also important in the case of decentralization: The former president of the German Athletics Association, Helmut Digel, pointedly asks how many top coaches for hammer throwing there would be in Germany to which decentralization could be applied.

Currently, the German Rowing Association's demand that the men's sculls live and train together at the Ratzeburg Rowing Academy from fall 2022 until the 2024 Olympics is

attracting attention. Athletes are resisting, such as the scullers Marc Weber and Oliver Zeidler. In beach volleyball, athletes protest against the federation's demand for centralization in Hamburg. Olympic high bar champion Fabian Hambüchen and Hamburg trampolinists protested early against the centralization plans of the German Gymnastics Federation. Ultimately, these protests are based on the perception that (an unfavorable choice of) centralization locations could result in excessive impairment of the athletes.

Dimensions and Characteristics of Centralization

In sport, centralization has many dimensions and manifestations, which mean that different intensities of centralization might be purposeful in different object areas, in different specializations, and at different times:

- In terms of the age of the athletes, there is some discussion that less centralization might be appropriate for adolescents than for adults because the costs of centralization in terms of family attachment and educational losses might be particularly high. In addition, it is sometimes argued that (possibly due to centralization?) athletes who are successful "too early" may "burn out" and have greater difficulty arriving at the top level of adult sport.
- In the temporal dimension centralization can be discussed
 - in the Olympic cycle: Even opponents of centralization regularly have few complaints when teams are brought together more extensively in Olympic seasons than in non-Olympic seasons.
 - in the annual planning: Bringing teams together a few weeks or months before the target competitions are – depending on the age group – uncontroversial. However, a centralization two years before, as in the Ratzeburg case mentioned above, seems too much for some.
 - in the weekly planning: Merging teams on the weekends seems less problematic to most people, regardless of the age group.
- With regard to the professional dimension, it can be discussed

- whether men and women should be centralized in the same place. For example, all British rowers train in a suburb of London. If men and women are brought together in different locations, it could be discussed whether all disciplines should train in the same place. This may also be related to the number of athletes involved. In German rowing, it has been decided to have separate "lead bases" for male scullers and oarsmen whereas female scullers and oarswomen train at the same location.
- Even within a discipline, there may be opportunities for differentiation. The single sculler benefits less from mergers than a double sculler, where the rowers have to coordinate.

Lothar Trawiel, a successful coach of male scullers for many years, says that quadruple sculls need about 240,000 rowing strokes to harmonize and automate the movements. More strokes would not yield many more benefits. Economists translate this into the law of diminishing marginal productivity of inputs: The first 50,000 common strokes yield very large speed gains, the next 50,000 common strokes also yield speed gains but smaller ones than the first 50,000 strokes, and so on, meaning that no further speed improvements can be expected from more than 240,000 common strokes. Some people would add that additional joint training might even lead to speed losses(!), for example because of overtraining and camp fever.

- Not only additional benefits of centralization and joint training have to be considered, but also (additional) costs. Neither benefits nor costs are to be not only interpreted in purely monetary terms: Rather, benefits are synonymous with advantages, and costs are synonymous with disadvantages. Most athletes who oppose (too much) centralization fear costs or disadvantages in their professional or academic training or private lives. Although new online study programs offer opportunities for smaller locations, large cities and agglomeration areas might be

more suitable for centralization as their educational and professional opportunities are larger.

The question of how the location of centralization is determined is very relevant. One set of determinants is institution-related. "Grandfathering" may play a role: The German men's oars division (more precisely the boat with eight oars) has successfully trained in Dortmund over the past decades. Because of these past successes, Dortmund is considered "set" for the oarsmen. Medal opportunities in the boat classes with two and four rowers will probably continue to be pursued with reduced priority, without the federation having explicitly decided on it. Lost costs may also play a role: Ratzeburg is said to have been designated as a site of centralization by the rowing federation because the federal government of Germany has invested many millions of euros in the renovation of the rowing academy and should not be disappointed.

Another way to determine training centers is person-related. The East German system in rowing, for example, comes to mind: Eight bases trained their athletes in a decentralized manner, following framework training agreements. There were occasional joint training camps for East Germany's top athletes. Apart from that the athletes did not come together until in the spring of an Olympic season to compete in elimination races, which determined the composition of the boats with four and eight rowers, for example. The base and base coach that could send the most athletes to the eight was automatically the central location or coach for this boat category in the respective season. For the relocating athletes this was connected with hardships – but it was clear that any other centralized location was connected with disadvantages for even more athletes.

In today's Germany, employees are allowed to have relatively little locational flexibility. In the end, a person-related centralization in the German system could mean that coaches (and possibly their bases) would have to try to attract as many athletes as possible through convincing training work and the creation of attractive conditions. It is not history and established structures that would count, but the current performance of the trainers, coaches and the environment. Centralization would possibly be permanent, but the allocation decisions would only be temporary. Karl Adam and Emil Beck are

examples that triggered such (voluntary) centralization movements of athletes, although initially on-site institutional structures were missing. The deceased sports photographer Heinrich von der Becke said after decades of work, "Athletes go on their own where the good coaches are."

Institution-related and person-related centralization can lead to the same centralization locations but do not necessarily have to. In rowing, for example, there are highly qualified coaches with whom athletes would like to train, but who refuse to move their center of life to Ratzeburg, the central location determined by the sports federation. If the athletes were forced to train in Ratzeburg, they might not be coached by the optimal trainer.

Efficiency Considerations and Process Orientation

For economists, it is relatively simple: Additional centralization makes sense as long as the (marginal) costs do not exceed its (marginal) benefits. Those locations would be determined to be centralized where the benefit/cost ratio would be maximum. Since costs and benefits are variable quantities over time, the scope and locations of centralization would have to be determined again and again. Although it is difficult to operationalize and quantify the cost and benefit elements of centralization in concrete terms, it is not impossible, and it is a common problem in economic and political environments to work with approximate variables, scenarios and expected values, if necessary.

Some competition-oriented economists, however, would reject such planning and political calculations from the outset: For them, the optimal level of centralization would result from the free play of forces. In agreement with Heinrich von der Becke, they think that at different times – coincidentally or not – coaching personalities mature in different places, attracting athletes and thus bringing about an endogenous but temporary centralization. The prerequisite for such a process would be full competition, which is not limited by (sports federation) specifications, which fix the athletes to central locations. Competition is of central importance in the world of thought of these

economists, especially in the long term: The Nobel Prize winner in economics, Friedrich August von Hayek, coined the term "competition as a discovery process": (Only) competition ensures that the most creative minds prevail at any given time, thus ensuring maximum success in the long term.

This brings us to the interface with philosophy and neighboring disciplines. For representatives from these faculties, the nature and extent of centralization is determined more by the image of man they propagate. For supporters of the "Mature Athlete", the result of the centralization decisions is less likely to be in the foreground. Rather, the process of decision-making is likely to be important: What would be important to some of them would be a process that is not institution-led but (in a free competition without anti-competitive power positions) person-determined, in which new centralization or decentralization developments and balances can be induced or determined by each generation of athletes and coaches.

For many, these categories of thought may be (too) abstract to be used to determine "in a practical way" the optimal degree of centralization and its locations. However, some will agree that there is no "blueprint" for centralization, and that the nature and extent of optimal centralization will depend, for example, on the type of sport (team vs. individual), on the number of athletes involved and their characters, on natural topographies and resources – and that it may change over time.

Centralization: No "Yes or No"

Centralization in elite sport is therefore not a dichotomous decision. Strictly speaking, athletes and officials cannot be "for" or "against" centralization. Rather, it is about the processes of decision-making, about the determination of the areas to be centralized, about the scope and depth of centralization, about the flexibility of modification, and about a consciously granted leeway after the decisions have been made.

In the process of reorganizing German top-level sport, it could be discussed first of all whether central institutions such as the Federal Ministry of the Interior, the DOSB, the newly planned Agency for Competitive Sports or basically each sport should be able to

decide autonomously where and how top-level sport training work is to be centralized within the framework of its financial possibilities. The envisaged Agency for Competitive Sports is to offer "management and promotion of competitive sports in one hand", which could mean a preference for the first alternative. The Federal Ministry of the Interior is already being accused of tending to work for excessive and rigid centralization via funding, as the handling of grants for Olympic training centers and federal performance centers is said to be insufficiently flexible. And the "POTAS" system enforced by the Federal Ministry of the Interior, which categorizes the sports federations into different funding levels, explicitly and implicitly demands "centralization" and gives too little weight to athletic performance and too much to the formal structures of the sports federations.

Next, it must be clarified whether and how the sports federation, which represents the respective sport to the outside world, determines the type and scope of centralization; in particular and to what extent and in which areas any additional centralization processes should be institution-oriented or person-oriented. Decision-making bodies, procedures and reasons, as well as the assumptions behind them, must be presented in a sufficiently transparent manner, and appropriate opportunities for dissatisfied parties to raise objections must be ensured.

It must be asked how it can be guaranteed that sufficiently qualified, competent and accepted personalities work in the decisive bodies and what role the athletes play in the centralization process if it is not person-oriented but institution-oriented. On the one hand, the athletes are the most affected and, in many respects, they are particularly close and often closer to the manifold criteria that can determine the decision than functionaries. The demand of the association "Athletes for Germany" for equal co-determination in all decision-making processes should be seen against this background. On the other hand, athletes could possibly discount the future more than good officials who may think in decades. And: Officials are usually directly or indirectly democratically legitimized; democracy may have its price.

The established centralization structures should be managed and communicated in such a way that they are perceived by the athletes as an attractive offer and not as a demotivating constraint. And it must be ensured that centralization does not lead to the establishment of inappropriate and inefficient positions of power.

What needs to be asked is how the above finding that centralization in some areas requires decentralization in others is implemented. For example, strong centralization in the elite area could call for extensive decentralization in the group of young athletes in order to avoid any demotivating effects, possibly at the price of reduced international success. Nowadays decentralization alone, however, could come too late; rather, significant development support at the club level could be necessary. Helmut Digel discusses, on the basis of "his" athletics, whether a newly conceived "basic athletics" project is needed in the existing club structures, which must also involve the founding of new children's and youth athletics departments. "Start-up" initiatives with an incentive system for the founders of new athletics training groups could be useful.

In the best interest of the sports, sufficient flexibility should be built into centralization concepts to ensure that centralization sites are scrutinized at sufficient intervals. Procedures should be discussed to evaluate decisions objectively and on an ongoing basis rest upon on sporting results at target competitions.

And finally, it should be discussed how, even in periods in which the extent and locations of centralization are fixed, sufficient flexibility remains for the special needs of the athletes for more or less centralization. In an open society with different personalities, it could be discussed how to provide the most suitable conditions for all athletes – for those who feel comfortable in centralized structures and for those who need individual training concepts, so that they are not lost for the formation of national teams.

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