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Could the sentiment of Rio derail an active nation?

Rio Olympic and Paralympic Games was a cause for celebration but there is a risk that the weight of gold could have a damaging effect on community sport and the pursuit of a more active nation. Martyn Allison, Chris Cutforth and Steve Wood explain why so much is at stake.

The last few weeks have been special if you are a sport nut. You could not help be excited by the performances of individuals and teams at Rio. Following this, the whole of the August bank holiday weekend was a national celebration of their achievement to inspire others to have a go. At the time of writing we are awaiting the Paralympics with similar excitement.

This has generated significant fervour, national pride and reflected glory in the national press, within many sports bodies and among the viewing public. We are even told that Great Britain (not forgetting Northern Ireland) is now a “powerhouse” in sport.

But hold on: is it possible that this sentimental moment could trigger policy and funding changes that are detrimental to community sport?

“The legacy”

Over the years there has been much discussion about the value of elite sporting success. Ever since the Olympics and Paralympics were awarded to London we have been continually told about the “legacy” of hosting major sporting events and winning medals at them.

The medal tally from Rio will certainly be used as a clear example of the legacy in terms of elite sport, and our whole approach to performance sport will now be the focus of much national and international attention. Many observers are already questioning what could be achieved in Tokyo with even more investment.

But what actually is this legacy for UK people who fund much of this success?

“Elite sporting success creates mass participation”

For many sports professionals and sports enthusiasts the idea that elite sporting success creates mass participation feels like a perfectly reasonable notion. The concept seems to be that when UK sports people win major events people are inspired and encouraged to take part in more sport, owing to a mixture of the following:

1. sports people becoming role models and inspiring people to be like them
2. people having vicarious experiences (ie feeling the excitement that the sports person experiences), which then makes them want more of the same
3. sports volunteers and professionals becoming motivated to improve coaching structures and learning how to do this (by modelling the successful elite-level practices).

“In a period of limited resources, where we invest will involve difficult political choices. We therefore believe it is important that we expose the implications of what we believe would be the wrong choice.”

“In the run up to the budget announcement we predict there will be some interesting debates about what is more important: more medals to inspire participation or better community engagement to improve activity and health. Some in the sector would suggest we can have both and we must work together as a sector to achieve both. We disagree.”

Moreover, the UK government has even suggested that elite sporting success can trigger positive changes in people's lifestyles, including increased non-sporting physical activity and improved diets, leading to enhanced health and wellbeing.

The trouble is that there is very little robust evidence to prove that this actually works in the long term. There have been a number of academic studies on this subject carried out across the world; for example:

Elite sport and mass participation:

http://www98.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/handle/10072/57329/91705_1.pdf

Why do governments invest in elite sport? A Polemic. International Journal of Sport Policy. March 2012:

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jonathan_Grix/publication/

Most of the studies come to a similar conclusion: the success of a country's sports people and teams does not create sustainable increases in participation in that country, especially among people who do not usually take part in sport (ie most people). Often there is a short-term boom in participation immediately after major sporting events, although in some cases this happens regardless of who wins. Wimbledon is a good example of this. Significantly, the promised London 2012 legacy of increased participation has to date failed and the new government and Sport England strategies have indicated a totally new direction to address the question of improving physical activity, particularly among those in most need or excluded by the current system.

Some sports academics and psychologists even argue that elite sport could be counter-productive in relation to grassroots participation and lifestyle change (eg Hindson et al [1994]). They suggest that, far from increasing motivation, sporting excellence could reduce non-participants' feelings of self-efficacy, leading them to conclude that they do not have the necessary skills and competence to participate in sport (see also Bandura [1997] and Boardley's work on self-efficacy). Perhaps the only people who experience additional motivation are those who are already good at sport? Similarly, it is also possible that some people might feel disengaged from exercise/healthy eating as a result of watching Olympic athletes; their physical appearance just seems too unachievable. Is it not the case that local, less high-profile sporting role models may be equally if not more influential on young people and adults because their achievements are more realistic and attainable?

As all community sports development professionals know, increasing participation in sport is complex and challenging; it is a classic "wicked and messy" issue that is affected by many social and economic factors. Encouraging and supporting people to adopt healthy lifestyles is arguably even more complex. It seems that elite sporting success has a minor impact on both of these challenges. Some argue that it can have a more significant impact if other factors are managed differently. For example, the recent review of county sports partnerships suggests they need to have greater role clarity, reflecting national policies and locally place-driven priorities. Perhaps they are best placed to broker the relationship between elite sport and community sport, for example by helping providers to deliver accessible lifestyle change services and ensuring that the talent pathways are more accessible to young people from disadvantaged communities and groups?

"Elite sporting success creates role models of broader personal development"

We are also told that "sporting heroes" become positive role life models, especially for young people. But why do we think that sports stars make positive life role models?

The main factor behind elite sporting success is an extreme level of

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sustained practice. To 'win' people have to be prepared to sacrifice their families, their friends, their social lives, their bodies and in some cases their education for an obsessive focus on perfection and victory in a very narrow, time-bound activity. This way of thinking and lifestyle is contrary to the principle of personal development and the essence of good health and wellbeing (ie balance and sustainability). Should we be celebrating this type of behaviour, especially in a society in which obsessive/compulsive tendencies seem to be growing (eg the significant growth in eating fads and disorders)?

Young people who are interested in sport are surrounded by media images of many sports stars, not just ones from their own country. If you are a football supporter the chances are that your team will comprise 'heroes' from a variety of countries. During the Olympics, British young people were supporting – and inspired by – sports men and women from various countries. So in times of continued austerity can we justify using scarce resources to create more sporting 'heroes'?

Of course, if our sports stars were very high-profile in communities, saying the right things to the right people, there could be more justification for the policy; but does this happen enough? Maybe this should be a condition of elite athletes receiving lottery funding, with the provision of appropriate training advice and support?

So why do we focus on – and fund – elite sporting success?

A few other benefits are often quoted, especially by governments (of all types); for example, elite sporting success improves our economy, the image of our country and our collective mood. Again, there is very little tangible evidence to support these claims, or to define the sustainable value for our communities.

Many of the discussions about why we focus on – and fund – elite sporting success are vague and inconclusive. For some it's not even a question which needs to be answered ("Of course winning medals is a good thing – it shows we've been successful") but if we can't answer this question don't we simply have an elitist policy and philosophy? Or perhaps just circular thinking?

Views on the subject have changed over the years. Are we in danger of allowing a fundamentally flawed sport philosophy and policy to re-emerge and/or to be given credibility? If so this could have a detrimental effect on resource allocation and practice for years to come.

Sporting success in elite sporting events like the Olympics provides fantastic theatre but does that mean we can maintain or increase funding when there are so many more important priorities?

What does perceived success in the Rio Olympics now mean for sport funding?

Never before has the stark contrast between community sport and elite sport been so clearly exposed, just when the new prime minister and her ministers face financial pressures that have prompted the new chancellor to suggest that the government's budget must be "reset" in the autumn statement.

In the 2015 spending review UK Sport and many other observers were surprised to see a 29% uplift in its exchequer funding (about £13 million a year up to Tokyo), while Sport England, facing the huge challenge of improving the nation's participation levels, received an additional budget of about £2.6 million a year, effectively a standstill budget.

DCMS settlement at the 2015 spending review and reactions to it:

- <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/dcms-settlement-at-the-spending-review-2015>

- <http://www.uksport.gov.uk/news/2010/10/20/uk-sport-reaction-to-comprehensive-spending-review>

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- <http://www.sportandrecreation.org.uk/news/parliament/sports-funding-protected-in-spending-review>
- <http://www.bbc.com/sport/34925048>

Commentators in the press have observed that these funding levels will now need to be confirmed in the autumn budget. However, we suspect it will be a brave prime minister and chancellor who now take money away from elite sport in the run up to the next Olympic and Paralympic Games.

As the budget announcement approaches we predict there will be some interesting debates about what is more important: more medals to inspire participation, or better community engagement to improve activity and health. Some in the sector would suggest we can have both and we must work together as a sector to achieve both. We disagree. We think we have two very different aspirations focused on totally different aims and outcomes, and targeted at totally different individuals. In a period of limited resources, where we invest will involve difficult political choices. We therefore believe it is important that we expose the implications of what we believe would be the wrong choice.

This year Sport England has total funding of about £326 million a year, of which about £240 million comes from the lottery. Could the spending review in the autumn now see a reduction in its exchequer funding of £80 million a year to cover some of the UK Sport increase? Alternatively, if the government decides to protect the announced funding increase to UK Sport ahead of Tokyo, is there a possibility that this could be achieved by rebalancing the relative lottery allocations to the detriment of Sport England? So is it possible that the impact of Rio could be an overall reduction in the funding available to Sport England before it even starts to implement its new Active Nation strategy?

The Sport England strategy has indicated new funding priorities. A large proportion of the current Sport England budget goes to the national governing bodies of sport (NGB). Between 2013 and 2017 they invested £493 million in 46 sports including club development, facility development and talent development.

2013-17 whole sport plan investments Sport England:
<https://www.sportengland.org/our-work/national-governing-bodies/sports-we-invest-in/2013-17-whole-sport-plan-investments/>

Going forward the strategy indicates that there will be changes to the funding approach. It states: "We will collaborate and fund where there is genuine common purpose with any type of organisation that can deliver the desired outcomes... We will look for partners who understand these [non-participating] groups best. They will not necessarily be deliverers of sport and activity nor will activity take place in traditional sports settings." The strategy indicates that the investment in the traditional NGB market will need to reduce in order to support these new providers. In the present climate created by Rio will there be the same enthusiasm to switch resources from NGBs when faced with claims that future medal winners will not be able to come through the club-to-country pyramid if reduced funding puts future talent identification and development at risk? How will the press respond if funding which previously went to clubs is reduced and the money is awarded to organisations and community groups offering 'non-sporting' physical activity?

Why do these switches in funding matter?

While switches in national funding between Sport England and UK Sport may appear to be marginal, there are a number of reasons why any increased pressure on Sport England funding matters, notwithstanding the message it would send about relative priorities to the sector. Here are four.

First, anyone who has worked successfully with hard-to-reach
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communities will tell you that it is difficult work. In our opinion it needs the same (or even greater) levels of resourcing, technical and managerial skills and leadership as it does to produce a gold-medal athlete. The process is essentially the same: System Thinking, continuous improvement and service/product innovation to achieve excellent outcomes. It is interesting that, with a few notable exceptions, NGBs that can deliver gold medals have not had the same success increasing participation in their sport or addressing equity. Why this is the case is another interesting debate.

To achieve the goals of the new Sport England strategy we will need the same leadership and management commitment, competency and investment that goes into winning medals. The community challenge is not a cheaper, second-division challenge. Without adequate resources the challenge will be even harder, if not impossible.

Second, cost or price is the primary, but not the sole, barrier to participation among disadvantaged and under-represented groups. Culture and attitudes of providers are also key, which is why Sport England is looking to invest in organisations other than NGBs and sport clubs.

Public sector service providers, whether they are 'in-house', trust or contractors, are increasingly being asked to deliver subsidy-free services by their council clients. Local government funding for sport and leisure has fallen from £1.4 billion to £1 billion since 2009/10, a reduction of 29%, with more reductions of a similar level still to come.

There is evidence within the National Benchmarking Service that while this has improved operational 'efficiency', it is having a detrimental impact on effectiveness in terms of equity of access. The poorer you are, the more likely you are now to be excluded from public sport and leisure facilities (let alone private ones) because you cannot afford the entrance fee, buy the clothing and equipment you need, or travel to venues. If you are disabled and need special support, cost can also rule you out or limit the access providers can offer you. If you are black you are more likely to be poor so you are also more likely to be excluded by price as well as cultural barriers. Sport development functions have been reduced or lost entirely in many councils, and grant funding to community organisations has been seriously curtailed, together limiting the overall offer to those in greatest need:

Where next for local delivery of the Olympic legacy and community sport? LGIU Aug 2015:

<http://www.lgiu.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Where-next-for-local-delivery-of-the-Olympic-legacy-and-community-sport.docx>

Going forward, Sport England funding will inevitably have to be used to help subsidise access, either within mainstream providers through designed but inclusive programming, or by funding organisations who work exclusively with their target audiences. With less resource available, the range of interventions will be more limited and the overall impact will be less.

Third, the health sector has now started to accept that physical activity is a key factor in improving health and preventing or delaying poor health. However, the case has not been made everywhere; more needs to be done to demonstrate the impact and build better relationships between sport and physical activity providers and commissioners in clinical commissioning groups (CCG), public health and adult social care. Sport, as opposed to other forms of physical activity, is often perceived by commissioners as a barrier to building these relationships; it is often seen as an elitist activity, operated by a sector more interested in making the active more active than the inactive active. Providers find they must repackage services so they are attractive to those with health needs if health sector funding is to be made available to them.

The health sector itself is currently under huge financial pressure. The opportunity to redirect funding to prevention will be limited in the short if not the medium term. Public health budgets are now in councils and, while initially ring-fenced, they are now being raided to help meet the required budget reduction targets set by government; and more cuts are predicted in the autumn statement. The Kings Fund has recently released an analysis of public health budgets showing that physical activity and obesity funding for adults have been cut by 15-20% while funding for children has stood still:

Local government public health budgets: a time for turning? Kings Fund Aug 2016
<http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2016/08/local-government-public-health-budgets>

In this situation sport and physical activity providers are increasingly being expected to co-fund or co-produce health-related programmes but targeted at those with priority health needs. Without access to resources, sports providers will find it increasingly difficult to enter this market. The days when they could expect to be simply commissioned and funded to deliver programmes may at best be on hold. Without adequate resources Sport England will find it increasingly difficult to stimulate activity programmes at the health interface and have the impact hoped for within the strategy.

Finally, our experience suggests that the management and leadership capability across the sector still needs to be developed if the challenges in the Sport England strategy are to be met. Arguably there is a need to offer significant capacity-building support alongside capital and revenue funding to key organisations responsible for delivering a more active nation. The strategy and subsequent reviews have highlighted specific needs in terms of improving workforce development, evidence and data management, use of new technology, quality assurance systems and leadership development. In many areas there is a lack of influence relating to sport at the strategic tables, meaning that many local people are being denied the opportunities and benefits that come with participating in sport and being physically active.

A lack of resources will seriously hinder any capacity-building ability, including support for CIMSPA. However, it is clear to us that the delivery of medals in organisations such as British Cycling has come about as a result of a commitment to and investment in organisational excellence, continuous improvement and systems thinking. With adequate resources could this learning not be transferred to other organisations working in the community sector to improve their performance?

Let's stop and think before it is too late

While the images of Rio are fantastic, they will inherently create a demand to increase funding to maintain or better our position in Tokyo. The claims that medals increase participation, improve health and achieve other social, economic and educational benefits are unproven; at best they inspire more elite performers.

The London 2012 Olympics has helped to create a continuous, self-fuelling drive for more and more medals. It is very easy to become caught up in this journey, swept along by the excitement about sport in the UK, but surely we now have to stop and think carefully about our sport policy and philosophy, and the associated funding decisions.

If the country can afford to invest in medals so be it, but please not at the expense of Sport England and community sport in general. If we switch resources now we will undermine and perhaps even derail achieving a more active nation.

We would welcome hearing other views on this topic and to stimulate debate we offer the following questions:

1. What is the case for continued exchequer and lottery investment into elite sport in the present economic climate?
2. What is an appropriate balance of public (lottery and exchequer) funding for community and elite sport?
3. What could we do to agree a more coherent, evidence-based sports policy and philosophy? Whose responsibility is it to provide the evidence and in what forms?
4. How can we work collectively to maximise the positive impact of Rio and future Olympic and Paralympic Games?
5. What expectations should be placed on elite athletes in return for receipt of public funding?
6. How can sports organisations learn from the examples set by the elite coaching teams and the medal winners?

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