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THE CHALLENGE OF COMMERCIALIZATION AND PROFESSIONALIZATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE GOVERNANCE OF TEN SPORTS LEAGUES IN FINLAND

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Aim and Research Questions

The aim of this study is to analyse the organization and governance of the semi-professional and professional sport leagues in Finland. Study covers both men's and women's leagues in football, ice-hockey, basketball, Finnish baseball, and floorball. Research questions are: 1) What kind of governance models do leagues have? 2) how do the different governance models differ? and 3) How have the organizers of the leagues responded to the growing expectations of commercialization and professionalization?

Theoretical Background and Literature Review

There exist two basic models for managing professional leagues in team sports, which are characterized as either emphasizing financial gain (profit-maximization) or emphasizing sporting success (utility-maximization). Leagues of the first model occur especially in North America, where professional sports are organized into independent, closed model league organizations. The latter, the European league model, is based on an open league model, where promotion and relegation to different league levels according to their sporting results is possible. (Szymanski 2010).

Henry and Lee (2004) identified three interrelated approaches to governance: systemic, organizational, and political. This study focuses on the systemic and political approaches. Governance refers to the league's organizational structures, decision-making processes, and collaboration with stakeholders to ensure the league's vitality as well as long-term goals. The commercialization and professionalization are the forces challenging traditional European model of sport, in which the focus have been on idealism and voluntarism. The collision of these different logics has been analyzed and reported in many studies (Gammelsaeter 2010). One solution for the dilemma is cooperative governance, where the clubs competing at the league, are active also for management of the league (Dietl, Franck, Hasan & Lang 2009).

Research Design, Methodology and Data Analysis

This sub study is part of a larger research project on professionalisation of five Finnish team sports. The data of this study were gathered first by collecting official documents (annual reports, strategies) from the league organizations and national federations between years 2010-2020. Second, data about the governance was collected by nine semi-structured interviews with the persons responsible for the league management (seven men and two women). Interviews, lasted between 50 and 120 minutes, were conducted by researcher with the Microsoft teams. Data was analyzed first by describing each case separately, after which the cases were compared with each other in terms of 1) organization and decision-making

structures of the league, 2) key stakeholders and level of cooperation and 3) main governance issues.

Results and Discussion

Four different governance models were identified among the leagues. First men's ice-hockey league, Liiga, is currently governed by an independent organization, Ice-hockey SM-League Ltd, which is owned by 15 league clubs. Liiga operates as a closed league. In addition, Liiga and Finnish Hockey Association (FIHA) work closely together to develop the sport.

In football both men's and women's leagues operations are run by separate association, in which the league clubs are members. These leagues are not independent but are in many ways integrated with the national football federation. The national federations of Finnish baseball, floorball and basketball have all founded a separate marketing company to sell media and market rights of the leagues.

The gender equality is closest in Finnish baseball. In all other sports, marketing efforts are mainly directed to support men's leagues. The cap is widest at the ice-hockey, where the women's league is governed by the Finnish ice-hockey federation. Staff, responsible for the development of women's ice hockey, are working unofficially with the teams to develop the league.

All the men's leagues involved in this study strive strategically and commercially to develop their operations and improve their position in the field of professional sports. The sports share some common goals, such as improving arena facilities, social media, and digitalization, but also differ significantly. Where floorball aims to increase the number of league matches and international visibility, basketball has reduced the number of league matches and invested in the TV-production.

Conclusion, Contribution, and Implication

The governance model of the men's hockey league is a kind of Finnish application of North American and European professional sports. The strength of this model is the close relationship with the Liiga and FIHA. In its current form, this relationship is balanced and, as a result, both the national league and the national team have been successful.

In all other leagues, development has been more short-lived and the optimal competition models or marketing strategies has been sought in various ways. One major challenge seems to the lack of "league-thinking" capacity among the heterogenous field of league clubs. The league-thinking is the ability for the league club to develop both its own activities and participate in the league level development. One long-term solutions for better development capacity of the league and its teams could be education programs aimed for the club management and marketing.

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