

A LETTER FROM

NORWAY

Combining continuity and novelty: building sustained success

– Written by Lars Tore Ronglan, Norway

On 18 December 2013, Norway lost the quarter final in the women's World Championship in handball against the hosting nation Serbia in front of 16,000 cheering home supporters. After winning medals in nine championships in a row, Norway ended outside the podium. While some Norwegian newspapers wrote about a huge disappointment and a 'shocking result', others questioned if the championship in 2013 initiated 'an end of a golden era'. Well, time will tell. This letter will not speculate on future scenarios, but look back to describe and briefly discuss the remarkable history of women's handball in Norway. After the international breakthrough in 1986, when the national team quite surprisingly won their first World Championship medal, Norway has dominated international handball internationally. How has this been possible?

THE SUSTAINED SUCCESS OF THE NORWEGIAN NATIONAL TEAM

International handball is dominated by European teams. During the last three decades a total of 30 international play-off tournaments in women's handball have been held:

- 13 World Championships (WCs).
- 10 European Championships (ECs).
- 7 Olympic Games.

Out of these 30 Championships, Norway has qualified for 29 (they missed out on qualifying for the Olympics in 2004). The team has won 22 medals: 9 gold, 8 silver and 5 bronze medals. This medal count, winning 22 medals of 30 possible, makes Norway the most definitively successful nation during this period. Other major medallists are the Soviet Union/Russia (12), Denmark (12), South Korea (10) and Hungary (8) (Figure 1).

DEVELOPMENT OF HANDBALL AS A WOMEN'S SPORT

In European countries such as France, Spain, Germany and Sweden, handball is foremost considered a men's sport. However – and no matter how rough and physically demanding handball is – in Norway this is quite different. The Norwegian Handball Federation (NHF) was established in 1937 and right from the start, the NHF member list was made up by a majority of women.

When the first international match was played between Norway and Sweden in Oslo in 1939, there were 10,000 spectators who witnessed a Swedish win 3-1! The fast-growing popularity of the new game was reflected in a newspaper title from the late 1930s, stating that "handball has become the women's football"¹.

Even though over the decades handball developed into a contact sport, the NHF today still consists of about 67% girls and women. This composition of members, along with international success and extensive media coverage, has contributed to an understanding of the game as a typical women's sport in Norway. Conversely, many years of poor results and absence from international championships has resulted in scarce media coverage and significantly less popularity for the Norwegian men's team².

MEDIA COVERAGE AND POPULARITY

Over the last few decades, the women's national team has reached and maintained huge media coverage and tremendous public interest. Norway's biggest newspaper stated a couple of years ago that the women's handball team is the most popular sporting team in the country – regardless of sport and gender. Beside skiing and men's football, women's handball is seen



Image by: Kon-Tiki Museum 2010

as a national sport. From the late 1990s to date, in a country of approximately 5 million inhabitants, televised international women's games have attracted between 1.3 and 1.6 million viewers. The team, as well as coaches and star players, have won a number of domestic sport prizes during the last decade, such as 'Team of the Year', 'Coach of the Year' and 'Athlete of the Year'. The best women handball players are sports celebrities in Norway.

The public interest is reflected in the stands at the annual international championships. Regardless of which country hosts the event, a red horde of Norwegian fans follows the team. Equipped with red team shirts, cow bells and Viking helmets, the crowd supports the team and handball is symbolised as a part of Norwegian tradition and culture.

EXPLAINING INTERNATIONAL DOMINANCE
What can explain this 30-year golden era of Norwegian women's handball? In terms of international results it is important to notice that Norway was far from a super power some decades ago. On the contrary, during the 1960s, 1970s and even until the mid-1980s, the national team hardly qualified for the World Championships and

Olympic tournaments. The breakthrough happened with a bronze medal in the World Championships in 1986.

Without claiming a complete explanation, I will point to some important aspects underlying the success story from the mid-1980s and onwards. Data has been generated through a research project examining examples of sustained successes, including Norwegian women's handball, in the Nordic countries³. Related to the handball story, the following aspects are emphasised:

1. a long-term organisational strategy,
2. continuity in leadership,
3. a holistic coaching philosophy⁴.

1. A LONG-TERM ORGANISATIONAL STRATEGY

If an athletic success is going to be more than just a single event, the performer has to stabilise the performance on a higher level than it used to be. The necessity to transcend current performance is 'the core of the logic of competing'⁵, marking elite sport in general. In this way, the first years after the breakthrough in 1986 was characterised by a narrow focus aimed at revisiting the podium, thereby confirming that the team belonged to the international elite. Within

the federation (NHF), the short-term strategy was to maximise the team's preparations for each upcoming championship; the number of training camps increased, participation in international tournaments was intensified, the support staff grew (analytical team, medical staff etc), and players moved from amateurism to semi-professionalism. This professionalisation process was facilitated by a growing public and commercial interest in the team.



However, the short-term strategy was accompanied by a long-term strategy adopted by the federation, guided by clear priorities. Here, the main objective was to uphold performance level and results, not only from one championship to the next,

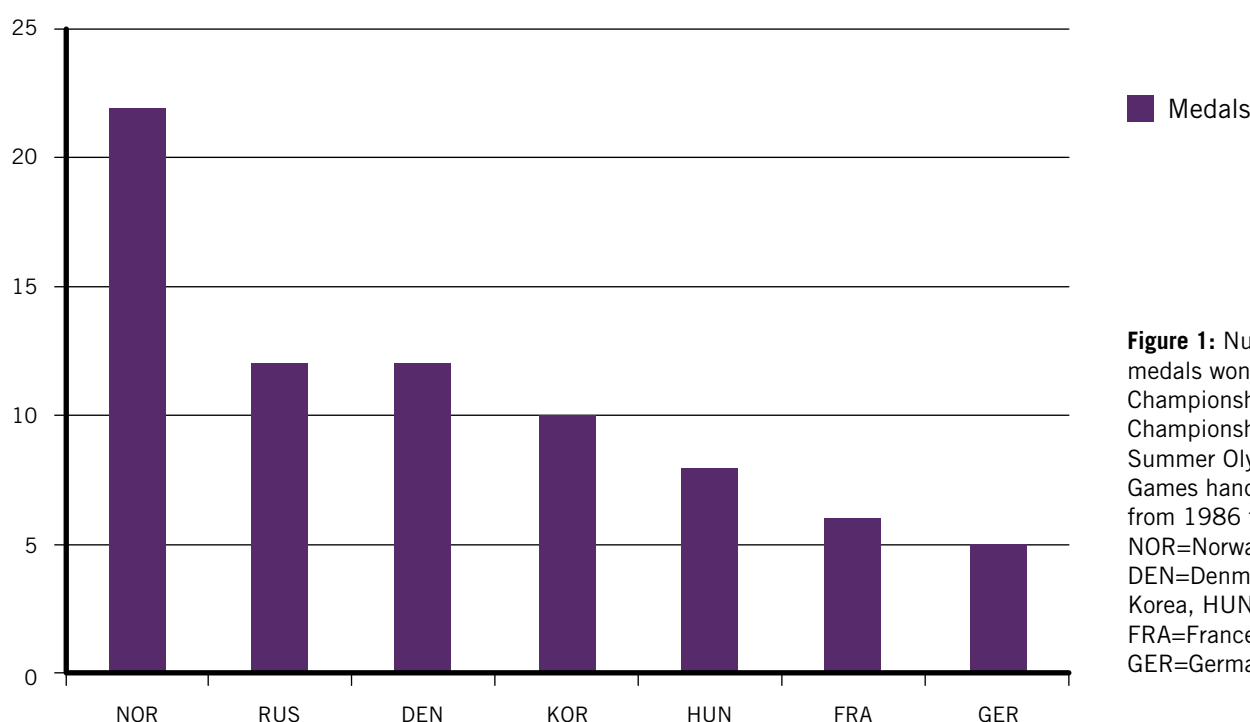


Figure 1: Number of medals won in European Championships, World Championships and Summer Olympic Games handball events from 1986 to 2013. NOR=Norway, RUS=Russia, DEN=Denmark, KOR=South Korea, HUN=Hungary, FRA=France, GER=Germany.



The long-term organisational strategy was facilitated by an extraordinary stability in NHF's leader group



but in a sustainable way over a longer period of time. This implied a more profound institutionalisation process, where the 'success formula' was clearly anchored within the handball organisation. The institutionalisation process included two important dimensions: a more consistent and structured talent work, and an increased co-operation with Olympiatoppen (the overall elite sporting body in Norway).

Establishing a solid talent development system was considered crucial in order to facilitate success in the long-term. NHF used considerable energy to hire competent national youth coaches. Besides being responsible for junior and youth national teams, these coaches also supported a network of regional talent groups and coaches. The activities within and across this nationwide network implied that talent development received a more clear focus in the regional departments of the federation. At the same time the talent system as a whole was centralised, as the NHF-hired coaches co-ordinated the activity, designed the content of the programmes and contributed in educating the talent coaches.

The increased co-operation with Olympiatoppen meant that the national team regularly used Olympiatoppen's training centre in Oslo for training camps

and testing. Here, networks with athletes and coaches from other sports were developed and substantial knowledge exchange took place. Collaboration between the national team and other successful sport milieus in Norway was intensified. The competence provided by Olympiatoppen involved coaching support, medical expertise, nutrition and physical training programmes. Also, closer relations between the NHF and research groups at Norwegian School of Sport Sciences contributed significantly in preventing injuries and optimising recovery after training and matches^{6,7}. This expertise was decisive during a period where training loads and match intensity was heavily increased.

2. CONTINUITY IN LEADERSHIP

The long-term organisational strategy to maintain success was facilitated by an extraordinary stability in NHF's leader group during the 1990s and 2000s. The General Secretary of the federation occupied his position from mid 1980s until 2003. Further, only two individuals held the position as President of the federation during the same period. Last but not least, only two head coaches were in charge of the team from 1984 to 2009: S.T. Jacobsen for 9 years and M. Breivik for 15 years. This rather unusual stability in leadership positions compared to sport organisations in general contributed to predictability and made it

easier to stick to the long-term strategies chosen in the late 1980s.

The career of the current senior head coach, T. Hergeirsson, may illustrate how continuity was emphasised and exploited in the organisation. He was hired as a full-time coach in the federation in 1994, and worked as a junior national coach in close contact with the senior coaches during the 1990s. Each player entering the senior team in the latter 1990s had experiences from training camps and junior championships led by Hergeirsson. In 2001, he became assistant coach at the senior team; a position he held until he was hired as head coach when Breivik resigned in 2009. The example demonstrates how consistency in leadership and coaching was obtained.

It is not possible to tell the success story of Norwegian handball without highlighting Niels Hertzberg, the General Secretary of the federation from 1984 until 2003. Hertzberg was regarded as the architect behind the strategies and was central in the recruitment of key persons during these decades. He was a former national coach himself, and possessed both handball competence and organisational competence necessary to build sustained sporting success. He had acquired a wide international network within the world of handball, and emphasised knowledge

exchange across borders and cultures. His openness to learn from others brought new ideas into the Norwegian handball culture.

3. A HOLISTIC COACHING PHILOSOPHY

One of Hertzerg's basic ideas was to adopt a certain type of management, emphasising competence and delegation of responsibility to skilled employees. This kind of leadership was further developed and realised through national coach Breivik and her coaching practice. Breivik's extensive leadership period as head coach was marked by a genuinely holistic coaching philosophy. Central elements were to stimulate players' autonomy and empowerment. Thus, she worked towards a balanced and healthy performance enhancement that also involved other arenas in the players' life. The idea was to educate players to become independent individuals able to develop in several areas and acquire a foundation for living a full life in the longer term. This implied focusing on injury prevention, facilitating formal education beside the players' sporting career, and making it possible to combine commitment to elite sport with family life. The holistic vision can be summarised this way:

Athletic development should be accompanied by development as a human being. This way it is easier to reach your full performance potential as an athlete.

Such a holistic approach to coaching and development of elite sport performances is in line with Olympiatoppen's philosophy and thinking. Although it seems to differ a bit from the more authoritarian coaching practices still dominating international elite team sport⁸, it echoes basic values in Norwegian society and culture. This way, the basis underlying the handball story has made the success sustainable in two ways: in terms of results in the long-term and in terms of legitimacy and significance to the Norwegian public. To put it simply, the popularity of the handball team stems not purely from the results achieved, but also from *the way* the results have been achieved.

CONCLUSION

The nearly 30-year period of sustained success by Norway's national team for women's handball has been possible due to long-term strategies and hard work. An important part of the success formula has been the ability to balance continuity and renewal. The handball federation and the women's team have, over the last decades, managed to combine continuity of key personnel and coaching principles with necessary innovation. The latter has required a continuous focus on research, knowledge development and knowledge exchange. Time will show if they manage the balance as well in the coming years.

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