



An examination of the elite development pathways for male golfers in Ireland

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Abstract

In recent years Irish men's professional golf has enjoyed global success, resulting in increased focus on golfer development and talent pathways in Ireland. Using the SPLISS model as a guiding framework, the aim of this study is to examine the organisational factors in the male amateur high performance golf pathway that contribute to or inhibit international sporting success. A mixed-methods approach was employed consisting of player (N=597; n=109) and coach (N=27; n=27) questionnaires, focus groups and semi-structured qualitative interviews with junior (n=5) and adult (n=2) players, parents (n=2), coaches (n=27) and physiotherapists (n=2). While the system performed well in areas such as coaching and competition, a lack of programme planning and organisation resulted in poor communication and incoherent policy from regional to national level. This research represents a significant move forward in terms of a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the (pre) elite development pathways for golfers. A contribution is made to the small number of country/sport specific studies using the SPLISS model focusing on the meso organisational level.

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Introduction

Publically funded sports organisations, or national governing bodies (NGBs) of sport face significant challenges in managing mass participation and elite sport goals both locally and nationally (Green, 2009; Smolianov, Gallo & Naylor, 2014; Smolianov, Murphy, McMahon & Naylor, 2015). In terms of elite or high performance sport, a number of attempts have been made to ascertain the components of success in identifying, developing and preparing athletes for international sporting success, all of which comprise an elite sports development system (ESD) (De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg & Shibli, 2006; Green & Houlihan 2005; Oakley & Green 2001). While there is much evidence corroborated on ESD from micro (athlete) and macro (social/economic/cultural) perspectives, there is less attention paid to the ‘meso’ or policy level of the ESD system (Sotiriadou & Shilbury 2009). Further, scholars in this area have identified the absence of country and sport-specific contextual factors in these examinations (Brouwers, De Bosscher & Sotiriadou, 2012; Brouwers, Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2015b). Taking place at a meso level, this paper investigates the internal organisation processes contributing to elite golf performance in one NGB. In so doing, it makes a contribution to the scarcity of country and sport specific examination of elite sport.

In recent years professional male golfers from the island of Ireland have enjoyed much success. Between them Darren Clarke, Padraig Harrington, Graeme McDowell and Rory McIlroy won 9 major golf titles in 8 years. Along with the reintroduction of golf into the Olympic Games, these achievements have increased the focus on golfer development, talent pathways and the male high performance golf programme in Ireland, thus deeming it worthy of examination. Using the Sports Policy Factors Leading to International Success in Sport (SPLISS) framework as a guide, this study presents stakeholder experiences of the male golfer pathway in Ireland, with a view to identifying how organisational factors can contribute to or inhibit international success in Irish golf. Data from questionnaire, focus groups and individual

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2
3 interviews have been gathered from golfers on national and regional coaching squads, a small
4 selection of parents, governing body employed PGA Professional golf coaches and
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6 physiotherapists within the four regions in Ireland. By mapping these pathways from regional
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8 to national level, this paper will illustrate what a national level pre-professional golf
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10 programme looks like, along with extending knowledge on elite golf processes from an
11
12 organisational perspective.
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16 17 18 19 **Successful Elite Sports Development Systems**

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21 De Bosscher et al. (2006) have defined the macro (social, cultural and political context) and
22
23 micro (individual athlete environment) level factors that lead to international sporting success,
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25 but they concentrate on critical success factors at the meso level (sports organisation and
26
27 policies). Even though meso-level factors such as good sports policies, sound infrastructure,
28
29 well managed resources, and efficient services are most open to influence or change (De
30
31 Bosscher et al., 2006), the meso level has largely been ignored (Brouwers, Sotiriadou & De
32
33 Bosscher, 2015a). Further, Sotiriadou and Shilbury (2009) suggest that only a limited number
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35 of meso level studies have focused on factors that support or inhibit the ESD from an
36
37 organisational point of view. Given the lack of attention given to ESD organisation in the
38
39 literature, this study took place at the meso level, and aims to contribute to the small number
40
41 of country/sport specific studies using the SPLISS model. De Bosscher et al. (2006) suggest
42
43 that there are two types of meso-level study; the focus here is capturing stakeholder views of
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45 the NGB's internal organisation processes and how they contribute to or inhibit international
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47 success.
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54 While there has been much examination of ESD internationally, with the exception of
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56 a small number of studies, there have been very few examinations of elite sport policy in
57
58 specific sports. Table 1 outlines some meso-level sport specific studies on elite sport policy. In
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3 terms of elite sport in Ireland, Duffy, Lyons, Moran, Warrington and MacManus (2006)
4 interviewed 191 Irish athletes and found that system-based factors were rated at a lower level
5 than the role of the athlete themselves, and their support group: “indeed, absent or inadequate
6 funding, facilities, sports science and medical support, training and competition opportunities,
7 and structural or organisational difficulties were perceived by the athletes as barriers to their
8 development” (p.164). Houlihan and Zheng (2015) found that although Ireland has substantial
9 ‘cultural resources’ for sport, it being a small state, there are constraints on strategy choice. In
10 a study (which used SPLISS) of elite sport development policy and the experiences of coaches
11 in Northern Ireland, Liston, Gregg and Lowther (2013) uncovered tension between amateur
12 values around mass participation and sport delivered by volunteers, and elite sport driven by,
13 for example, performance targets and resource prioritisation. The authors suggest that there is
14 a need for further appraisals of elite sport in smaller nations such as Ireland, and
15 acknowledgement of the experiences of coaches and others.
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35 **Pathways in Elite Golf Development**

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37 Development pathways for golfers in Britain and Ireland tend to follow a predictable route
38 from club to county, regional or district squads and onto national or elite squads. A study
39 examining elite male adolescent golfers in England (Hayman, Polman, Taylor, Hemmings &
40 Borkoles 2011) found that international adolescent golfing status involves the interaction of
41 developmental, familial and contextual factors. Stoszowski and Collins (2011) outlined the
42 numerous layers of coaching along the player pathway for male golfers in England. This
43 layering of coaches can cause issues for some players; Branton (2013) found that stability in
44 coach athlete relationships was linked to improved golf performance, whereas golfers who used
45 multiple coaches linked this to an increase in conflicting advice, leading to decreased
46 performance. Coaches in the Stoszowski and Collins (2011) research identified that coach
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3 communication was crucial in the successful development of the golfer. The evidence to date
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5 from golf suggests that good communication and coherent messages can contribute to success
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7 within golf performance systems. Through interviews with professional players, coaches and
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9 other stakeholders, Mattsson, Hassmen, McCullick and Schempp (2007) found that the
10
11 structure and organisation of Swedish golf contributed to its success. Oppositely, Henriksen,
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13 Larsen and Christensen (2014) examined a talent development environment (11 golfers) within
14
15 an underperforming golf team in Denmark, and among other themes, the struggling
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17 environment was characterised by an incoherent organisational culture. Although limited, this
18
19 evidence suggests that good management and organisation supports athlete performance in golf
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21 and other sports, and in return incoherent systems can add to underperformance. Given the lack
22
23 of empirical studies exploring policy, contextual and organisational factors leading to global
24
25 golf success, golf is a fertile ground for exploration.
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33 **Study framework**

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35 A number of models have been used to examine ESD pathways from an organisational and
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37 managerial approach, for example the ARTN (attraction, retention, transition and nurturing)
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39 model (Brouwers et al., 2015a), the holistic ecological approach (Henriksen, Larsen &
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41 Christensen 2014), the ecological dynamics perspective (Pinder, Renshaw & Davids, 2013)
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43 and the ORFOC (organisational resources and first order capabilities) framework (Truyens et
44
45 al., 2014). This study uses SPLISS, the conceptual model of Sports Policy Factors Leading to
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47 International Sporting Success, which is recognised as one of the foremost studies of meso-
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49 level factors influencing success. Initiating the model, De Bosscher et al. (2006) theorised that
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51 elite sporting success is the result of a strategic planning process where countries invest in a
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53 blend of the following nine pillars of sport policy: financial support, integrated approach to
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55 policy development, foundation and participation, talent identification and development
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3 system, athletic and post-career support, training facilities, coaching provision and coach
4 development, national and international competition and scientific research (De Bosscher et
5 al., 2006; De Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli & Bingham 2009; De Bosscher et al.,
6 2011, De Bosscher et al. 2015). The model allows a holistic view of an ESD system by
7 examining inputs, throughputs and outputs. Given the international success of male
8 professional golfers from Ireland (outputs), coupled with the broad ranging task of reviewing
9 the male golfer pathway from regional to national level, potentially encompassing aspects such
10 as finance, grassroots golf, coaching and facilities, SPLISS is an ideal model for this project.
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24 **The Context**

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26 The international performances and profiles of professional male golfers from the island of
27 Ireland precedes this examination. Between them, Darren Clarke, Padraig Harrington, Graeme
28 McDowell and Rory McIlroy won nine major golf titles from 2007 to 2014. Three of these
29 players, Rory McIlroy (Belfast), Darren Clarke (Dungannon), and Graeme McDowell
30 (Portrush) grew up within a round trip area of 150 miles in the north of Ireland. Prior to turning
31 professional, all four golfers played for Ireland at amateur level, representing the NGB – the
32 Golfing Union of Ireland (GUI), the oldest golf union in the world (est. 1891) and the governing
33 body for male golf in Ireland. Not alone has there been professional level success, but the
34 NGB's amateur golf programme has garnered much attention. Shane Lowry became just the
35 third amateur player to win a European Tour event when he won the 2009 Irish Open, while in
36 2015, Paul Dunne led the Open Championship into the final round, also while still an amateur.
37 The global success of male professional and amateur golfers has prompted attention on the
38 golfer development system in Ireland. At the time of data collection the NGB had one national
39 coach, five national squads (with 69 players), 27 regional coaches and 537 players on regional
40 squads. The national coach was the only full time employee; all other coaches worked on a part
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3 time or contractual basis. Aside from some NGB administrators and sport science support, all
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5 volunteer officials and coaches are male, as is the case with participants in this study.
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10 **Research design**

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12 This study aimed to review the Irish male golfer pathway from regional to national level from
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14 a meso perspective, in order to identify the organisational factors that contribute to or inhibit
15
16 international sporting success. To answer the research question it was decided to triangulate a
17
18 spectrum of views from stakeholders in a mixed method approach, similar to that employed by
19
20 Liston et al. (2013). This approach would also follow the methods identified in previous
21
22 investigations (see Table 1), where stakeholders' views were garnered in relation to meso level
23
24 factors. The methodology and data collection techniques were agreed with the high
25
26 performance committee of the NGB. Player and coach questionnaires would be distributed
27
28 initially, and follow up focus groups and/or individual interviews would capture more in-depth
29
30 stakeholder views on the pre-requisites for success from an organisational perspective. Aside
31
32 from the player (n=109) and coach (n=27) questionnaire sample sizes, these stakeholders
33
34 included junior (under eighteen years) (5) and adult (3) players, parents (2), coaches (27) and
35
36 physiotherapists (2). No NGB officials partook any part in the data collection process.
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38 Participation in the research was voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed for players; given
39
40 the smaller number of coaches anonymity was more difficult to achieve. Table 2 details the
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42 stakeholder involvement. All data were collected over a three month period in the off-season.
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44 Ethical approval for the research was sought and approved through the Limerick Institute of
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46 Technology research ethics committee.
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56 **Data collection**

57 *Questionnaires*

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3 Separate player (n=109; response rate 53%) and coach (n=27; response rate 74%)
4 questionnaires were distributed. Both questionnaires were developed online and the questions
5 were approved by the NGB prior to distribution. The player questionnaire had sections on
6 'about you' and 'the NGB', with 14 questions in total. Many of the questions were multiple
7 choice, tick box, closed questions, for example rate the NGB in terms of their coaching
8 programme, talent ID and selection policies, and tournament schedule and support (funding,
9 equipment, facilities). Open ended questions were used to elicit detail on the player's goals,
10 and the NGB strengths or areas for improvement. The regional coach questionnaire was more
11 concise than the player equivalent, again with two sections on 'about you' and 'the NGB'
12 totalling 8 questions. Question formats were similar to the player questionnaire, with mostly
13 closed questions and some open ended questions to elicit more in depth responses, for example,
14 identify three strengths of the NGB in terms of its coaching programme and its domestic and
15 international competition programmes.
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33 The player sample was decided based on player inclusion on a regional or national
34 squad, along with a small number of recently turned professionals. Player squads at regional
35 level were nominated at the discretion of each of the four regions and this followed no
36 consistent or uniform format, age or ability level. Players aged fourteen and under were
37 excluded from the questionnaire sample, while those aged 15-17 were encouraged to fill in the
38 questionnaire alongside their parents. The player questionnaire sample size was 109,
39 comprising 43 national panellists with players from Region 1 (26), Region 2 (4), Region 3 (21),
40 Region 4 (7) and professionals (8). The coach questionnaire sample size was 27, comprising
41 all coaches from Region 1 (5), Region 2 (6), Region 3 (8) and Region 4 (8).
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54 Both questionnaires were distributed by email from the first author, followed up with a
55 reminder email after 3 weeks, and closed a further 3 weeks later. NGB staff and officials also
56 reminded players and coaches to submit their views. The majority of player respondents were
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3 aged 17-18 with 70% still in secondary school, this perhaps a reflection of the younger age
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5 profile entering this elite sport system. While 53% can be considered a good questionnaire
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7 response rate, the full population size (players in national and/or provincial coaching) at the
8
9 time was 597. Thus the questionnaire gathered opinions from just over one tenth of all players
10
11 in coaching, potentially hindering the reliability of the player questionnaire results. The average
12
13 age of the player sample also presents as a study limitation. The coach response rate was 74%
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15 (20/27; 18 valid responses).
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22 *Qualitative data phase*

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24 At the end of each questionnaire players and coaches were invited to take part in a more in-
25
26 depth face to face review process. Following the questionnaire analysis, and similar to (Liston
27
28 et al. 2013), the focus group interview guide was developed from both the survey data and the
29
30 SPLISS critical success factors. While it was difficult to cover every Critical Success Factor
31
32 (CSF) from SPLISS, elements of the nine pillars were considered in the interview guides. Some
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34 questions were more relevant for the players, e.g. “describe the support you receive from the
35
36 NGB?” Other questions were more relevant for the coaches, e.g. “how do the participation
37
38 goals of the NGB feed into the elite player system?
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43 It was agreed that no regional players would be sought for this phase of the research,
44
45 and with one of the three national squads consisting of players aged 14 and under, there
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47 remained just two national squads to achieve a sample. One focus group took place with a
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49 national squad, with 5 players volunteering their involvement. Players from a second national
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51 squad (who had also volunteered their views) were invited to take part in individual semi-
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53 structured interviews, and this resulted in 1 phone interview (player), 1 skype interview (player)
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55 and 2 separate phone interviews (parents of players). Players aged under 18 required prior
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57 consent from parents before taking part in the focus group stage. Interview guides were
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3 developed following the analysis of questionnaire results and in total, six focus groups (1 with
4 players, 4 with coaches, 1 with physiotherapists) and 4 individual player/parent interviews were
5 held. Both player engagements and coach focus groups were recorded using a dictaphone.
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10 Coach focus groups took place in each of the four regions with 5-8 participants in each.
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12 These interactions took place in a challenging environment; some coaches were stalwart in
13 their views, where they persistently challenged aspects of the national coaching programme,
14 while there was also varying levels of critical discussion of regional coaching. The quality of
15 this data were strongly influenced by the interviewer skills and participant personalities. While
16 the opinions of the regional coaches were heard in this study, the voice of the national coach is
17 absent, as were those of the NGB volunteer officials. One region requested to have their two
18 physiotherapists take part in an additional focus group in their region. The data were collected,
19 collated, transcribed and analysed by the first author.
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33 **Data analysis**

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35 With the relatively small samples, questionnaire analysis was easily completed by transferring
36 the data from Survey Monkey to Excel sheets. Data were collated and presented into easily
37 legible formats and an initial report was presented to the NGB. For the qualitative phase audio
38 files from the 6 focus groups and 4 individual interviews were transferred on to a password
39 protected hard drive and transcribed onto Word documents. Following initial familiarisation
40 with the data, thematic analysis was used to search for themes and patterns around the
41 organisational factors that contribute to or inhibit international performance (Braun & Clarke,
42 2006). The first author used open coding, where the data sources were examined line by line
43 for themes. Once themes were grouped, the second author reviewed the data, searching for
44 further themes/subthemes until nothing new emerged and the process was discontinued. ~~Five~~
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~~identification and talent pathways (3), Coaching and coach development, (4) Facilities and (5) Competition. The data is presented in five themes, with specific reference to the most relevant SPLISS pillars, i.e. pillar two (structure and organisation of policies), pillar 4 (talent identification and development), pillar 6 (training facilities), pillar 7 (coaching provision and coach development) and pillar 8 (international competition). In this way, this paper presents an analysis of the organisation of elite amateur golf with reference to these five pillars of SPLISS.~~

In presenting the data, the authors use initials for coaches (C), players (P), parents (Pa) and physiotherapists (Ph). The region number was then combined along with the initial derived from the pseudonyms of the participants' names. Thus C2D would be Darren (D), a coach (C) from region 2. Where the comment came from the questionnaire. Q is added. Because the questionnaire was anonymous for coaches and players, each participant was designated another number for this. Thus C4Q1 is a questionnaire response from coach 1 in region 4. In terms of data presentation, careful consideration had to be given to the inclusion (or not) of focus group comments which were deeply critical of the programme.

Results

~~Five themes emerged from the data, (1) Organisation and communication, (2) Selection, talent identification and talent pathways (3), Coaching and coach development, (4) Facilities and (5) Competition. The data is presented in five themes, with specific reference to the SPLISS pillars most relevant associated with the emerging data-SPLISS pillars, i.e. pillar two (structure and organisation of policies), pillar 4 (talent identification and development), pillar 6 (training facilities), pillar 7 (coaching provision and coach development) and pillar 8 (international competition). In this way, this paper presents an analysis of the organisation of elite amateur golf with reference to these five pillars of SPLISS.~~

Organisation and communication

As alluded to earlier, ESD systems require a strong organisational culture, with good coherence, communication and clear role descriptions for staff. Among the critical success factors for pillar two (structure and organisation of policies) are simplicity of administration, communication with athletes and coaches, and satisfaction of athletes and coaches with NGB communication (De Bosscher et al. 2009). While the national coaching programme in view here is coordinated by full time NGB staff, overseen by NGB volunteer officials and delivered by one full time coach, and as such there was simplicity of administration and little or no qualms from athletes, with one parent saying “it was a great experience for him, it’s well organised” [Pa2].

In contrast, the regional programmes are often both coordinated and overseen by volunteer officials (with some help from perhaps one full time administrator), and delivered by part time coaches. This tended to result in some poor planning and organisation, particularly in Region 1 and coaches there were concerned about the decline in numbers and quality of players, and poor player attendance at coaching sessions. A player commented:

Region 1[sic] training isn’t well run...you’d head down there, there might be too many people and not enough coaches, it’s the middle of December, and you might be on the putting green for two hours to be seen for 15 minutes maybe. That’s just the experience I had... [to improve Region 1 training I’d] reduce the numbers and make sure you get people that actually want to be there. [P2]

Coaches in Regions 1 and 3 identified the poor skill level of players attending provincial coaching, and cited the regions’ poor communication with the clubs as the reason for this

The only communications [junior convenors] would get from Region 3 [sic] are about when they’re picking panels...it’s short and sweet, very little

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3 indication as to what it's for...the junior convenor barely knows what's
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5 going on, the parents barely know what's going on. [C3L]
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8 Basic improvements in programme organisation and management could solve issues identified,
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10 e.g. losing players to other sports, keeping coaches motivated.
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13 We need a plan for the day. Sometimes we pitch up at [coaching location]
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15 and there's no plan. I'm as clueless as anybody, don't know who's gona be
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17 there, could have keys might not have keys, is the door gona be open, what's
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19 gona happen...parents talk to you and you don't know what you're doing.
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22 [C4U]
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25 This lack of planning and organisation is also evident in Region 4, and the coaches directed
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27 blame at the volunteer officials:
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30 The right kids aren't coming to the assessment...you're there for a very short
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32 period of time and you can tell by just looking at them...the letters should be
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34 going out yes to the junior convenor but also to the PGA pro, and if we do
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36 know that the general managers are golf savvy then to them...some of them
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38 didn't have a handicap. [C4W]
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42 These statements seem to indicate the lack of partnership between part time coaches and
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44 volunteer officials in Regions 3 and 4, manifesting in coach frustration, as highlighted
45
46 throughout this review process.
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49 Along with poor planning, organisation and partnership at regional level, there is also
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51 evidence, from coaches, of a lack of communication between national and regional level. One
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53 regional coach expressed frustration at the lack of a relationship with the wider NGB, where
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55 he commented, "if I'm part of a company and the company is doing well and reports good
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57 profits I think you feed that down to all the staff on the ground floor and that doesn't necessarily
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3 happen” [C2T]. There is some discontent from coaches about the lack of a documented
4 coaching plan, strategy or structure at national level, and the lack of clarity on the role of the
5 national coach from a small number of players and coaches in regions 2, 3 and 4. Regardless
6 of communication along the player pathway, there is evidence of a siege mentality with some
7 regional coaches believing they have ‘ownership’ of players:
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15 It still is the major headache whether at national coaching or club
16 coaching...no matter how much communication, no matter what one coach
17 says to the other, ultimately the elephant in the room is still this thing of ‘I’m
18 his coach’. [C2A]
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25 The discourse around coach responsibilities, tension between paid coaches and volunteer
26 officials, coupled with organisational obscurities and a lack of information sharing between
27 regions appear to feed into an incoherent player pathway between regional and national level,
28 something which will be explored in the next section. Overall, significant improvements could
29 be made in planning, organisation and communication in the system.
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39 ***Selection and talent pathways***

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41 This theme is aligned with pillar 4 in the SPLISS framework, where it is expected that there is
42 an effective system for the detection of talent, coordinated planning for the development of
43 potential talent and young talents receive career support for the combination of sports
44 development and academic study (De Bosscher et al. 2009). Most prominent in the data was
45 the difficulty of squad/team selection, and the need for documented criteria, or clarity
46 regarding an order of merit system. While one parent commented “he was disappointed with
47 some selections earlier in his career, but he has always been picked on merit. He knows he’s
48 not going to get picked for everything” [Pa2], selection was a prime issue for players, with
49 many asserting the need for a more transparent system and fewer ‘picks’. One player suggested
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3 “selecting teams should be more structured. Order of merit should play a big part” [PQ19].
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5 During the focus group one player noted:
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8 I don't think there should be any choice, it should be an order of
9 merit...maybe something like the Ryder Cup where you get a pick or two.
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11 There's a grey area there when you're deciding who should be on what team.
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13 Even for everything, like panels, boys' teams, senior teams, there shouldn't
14
15 be any favouritism...I've probably seen a couple of strange decisions over
16
17 the years... [P2]
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22 Regional coaches recognised the need for both selectors and coaches to pick squads and teams.
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24 The coaches in Region 2 were consulted on selection and de-selection for regional and national
25 squads. In contrast, coaches in Region 1 highlighted their lack of involvement and identified
26 their preference for a more prominent role in player selection. Selection for Region 3 squads
27 appeared to be based on handicap, which, according to one coach, can encourage players to
28 cheat, “some panel members at underage level are preventing honest players of a chance of
29 making squads. Should only be based on an order of merit system” [C3Q15]. Region 3 coaches
30 appear to have little input into selection of panels; one coach commented “I think we are
31 probably the only people that should be selecting the squads because we know them and...you
32 can see potential in a player...” [C3H]. Selection in Region 3 could be better organised; the
33 coaches believe the best players are not being selected. There might be a flaw in the regional
34 order of merit system, where players are encouraged to participate in provincial events but can
35 get more points for doing well in county events:
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52 Last year...one of the branch officials told the parents your lad should play
53 in provincial events...and [selection will be] based on that and an order of
54 merit system... and then the team that was picked... on players that didn't
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3 play in the provincial events...I had one lad...he went to all the events, his
4
5 parents cancelled their holidays, and he wasn't picked. [C3G]
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8 Similar to Region 2, coaches rather than officials have more responsibility over squad selection
9
10 in Region 4, though they acknowledged that selection is a difficult issue. While they agreed
11
12 that they should not have responsibility for the selection of teams, they suggested that they
13
14 should be asked for their input on the selection of panels and squads, particularly for those
15
16 players going towards national coaching. The following two quotes illustrate the diverging take
17
18 on this issue; where one coach from Region 4 said "I don't think it's fair to have the coach
19
20 involved, certainly maybe for input but not the casting vote as such" [C4N], another said:
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22

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24
25 There was a kid there a few weeks ago with us...and I'd heard that he was at
26
27 Irish coaching...how does an Irish panel get selected?... it makes sense from
28
29 a coaching panel to ask the coaches what players would benefit from being
30
31 on that panel or who would shine in that environment. [C4U]
32
33

34
35 In terms of the talent pathway, there was some mention of the fact that adult players are being
36
37 isolated from squads, particularly at elite level. Although they had a full programme in place
38
39 for golfers from eight years of age to adult men's level, thus providing a route for both emerging
40
41 talent and late developing adult players, coaches in Region 2 had some concerns with the
42
43 pathway to the national coaching programme. It was suggested that as soon as adult players
44
45 exit regional coaching they fall into a "black hole" [Ph1], whereby unless their performances
46
47 were exceptional to merit a place on the national men's elite panel then the coaching and
48
49 performance programme for these individuals ceased. The programme in Region 1 effectively
50
51 stopped once a player reached 18 years of age. Players in Regions 1 and 4, and coaches in
52
53 Region 2 identified the need to involve adult players and give them an opportunity to progress.
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3 [Region 4] coaching was very good, I got little bits of technical detail, but at
4
5 the same time there's no [Region 4] coaching for senior players. There's
6
7 nothing going on right now. I can understand focusing on the junior players
8
9 but I think they could do something. You turn up to Interpros and you don't
10
11 even know the players. [P1]
12
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14

15 Given the younger age profile from the player questionnaire, it is clear that the NGB has
16
17 prioritised younger golfers for their squads. Even though it is well known that golf is not an
18
19 early specialisation sport, similar to the Ogden and Edwards (2016) study, the ESD in this study
20
21 uses transition points such as adulthood as an exit point for many golfers, while entry points
22
23 are as young as 8 in Region 2. In terms of the pathway to professional golf, some players were
24
25 critical of that link, with one saying "No real link from GUI to the pro game, feel left on your
26
27 own." [PQ52] and another said
28
29
30

31 [When playing abroad] the fact that virtually everything is done for us
32
33 [amateurs] is nice and convenient at the time, but I believe it to be a hindrance
34
35 in the long run. As a pro, players have to take care of and manage themselves
36
37 which is a new experience for many Irish amateurs brought up with [in] the
38
39 GUI. It's tough to find a solution though because taking care of the players
40
41 lends them the best chance to do well as an amateur. [PQ49]
42
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46 In summary, there is an inevitable level of discontent at selection practices, with few solutions
47
48 offered. Not mentioned above, there is a perception among some players and coaches that there
49
50 are curious selection practices for national teams, linked to regional affiliation. Clarification of
51
52 selection criteria and the involvement of coaches in selection could be considered by the NGB.
53
54 Linking to the first theme above, it's possible that better coordination of and communication
55
56 with clubs could better support the golfer talent pathway. Given this evidence, it's possible that
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2
3 the NGB could consider age of entry to the pathway, and possibly do more for both those
4
5 turning professional and those who are close to exiting a squad.
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10 *Coaching and coach development*

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12 This theme is aligned with pillar 7 in the SPLISS framework. The critical success factors
13
14 suggest that there should be a sufficient number of well trained and experienced elite coaches,
15
16 that coaches get opportunities to develop their careers and that the job of coaches is recognised
17
18 as valuable by the NGB (De Bosscher et al. 2009). Players were generally pleased with
19
20 coaching provision. In terms of national coaching, a parent commented “he comes back
21
22 buzzing from the weekend sessions. He really enjoys the standard and constant competition.
23
24 Everyone works together” [Pa1]. A player at the focus group commented:
25
26
27

28
29 [National] training is good...we have so many guys we compete against
30
31 throughout the year. There’s a mixture of everything, there’s off course stuff,
32
33 we did speeches the first time I was here I thought that was helpful...you get
34
35 to play a bit, something you don’t get to do in provincial coaching...if it’s
36
37 the winter time...we get to hit off the grass...it’s always in good condition
38
39 up here. [P2]
40
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43
44 In terms of coaching content at national level, both players and regional coaches suggested that
45
46 the national sessions might require a balance between technical, physical and other golf
47
48 knowledge and activities. While there were few negative comments about regional coaching
49
50 from players, Region 1 players were dissatisfied with access to the coaches and Region 4
51
52 players identified the need for choice and flexibility within their regional sessions.
53
54 Physiotherapists suggested that they needed more time with the players. All regional coaches
55
56 supported the idea of a ‘coaching curriculum’, as long as it was broad, flexible, and considered
57
58 individual and environmental differences. In the years previously in Regions 3 and 4, coaches
59
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2
3 were asked to submit programme suggestions with seemingly few actions from either
4
5 document implemented.
6

7
8 There is a need to keep coaches in ESD systems abreast of best practice and up to date
9
10 knowledge. This study found an appetite for knowledge sharing amongst all of the coaches,
11
12 but most particularly in Regions 1, 3 and 4. While the Region 1 coaches were more interested
13
14 in coach education generally, Region 2 coaches were more invested, in control and further
15
16 along in their educational outcomes, where they discussed the potential for coach specialisms
17
18 and coach to coach collaboration. Regions 2 and 4 coaches requested more opportunities to
19
20 come together within their own coaching teams and the physiotherapists expressed the need
21
22 for them to further collaborate with coaches. Coaches in all provinces were positive about the
23
24 prospect of a coach gathering for all regions, as long as their views are considered and the day
25
26 is well organised and structured.
27
28
29

30
31 Share ideas...in the four [regions] what have you found works...or...ideas
32
33 on what we could do at [Region 4 facility]... there's no real sharing of
34
35 information even among us...you get very isolated in coaching sometimes,
36
37 it's a business, it's competitive, your information's your edge but we've got
38
39 a great opportunity here as a network of people to share anything. [C4U]
40
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43 Coaches in Regions 2 and 4 discussed single versus dual deployment when coaching squads,
44
45 and the possibility of incorporating coach specialisms, or having coaches working to their
46
47 strengths. Coaches in Regions 3 and 4 identified the need for monitoring within their
48
49 programmes, where, for example "there's no accountability for any of the coaches" [C4W].
50
51 While coach roles, responsibilities, engagement and education were contrasting in all regions,
52
53 the evidence suggests general contentment with national and regional coaching provision, and
54
55 great potential for further coach development.
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Facilities

The critical success factors related to Pillar 6 training facilities include the assumption of a national coordination plan where facilities are mapped and the availability of a network of high quality national/regional elite facilities where athletes can train under good conditions and with minimum travel time. Further, athletes and coaches should be satisfied with the quality and availability of training facilities (De Bosscher et al. 2009). There was much praise for national coaching facilities from the players, it was identified as the strongest part of national coaching, “Quality coach, great facilities, allowed freedom to focus on areas to improve” [PQ33]. While players in Region 2 were also satisfied with the coaching facilities (the same training base as national coaching), the quality, availability and location of facilities was identified as an issue in all other regions. In Region 1, players were curtailed by when they could play and practice on the course and were generally dissatisfied with the quality of the facility:

...the facilities are the worst part of it...in the driving range the golf balls are useless you may as well be hitting rocks...they're terrible...the greens are like dreadful... [P3]

In Region 3, one coach lamented the shortage of high quality accessible facilities:

I don't think any of us...have access to a very good short game facility...I've one fairly good player I had to take [Irish international] to [national facility], we went up for a day to practice...there was nowhere that I could take him, it was the week before a very big tournament...we're seriously disadvantaged... [C3B]

At the player focus group one player expressed disappointment with the facilities they use at Region 4 coaching:

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3 The facilities are ok, they're not kept that well; if they were kept well it'd be
4
5 better. The greens are always really wet and there's really long grass. The
6
7 range is good. [P4]
8
9

10 Along with the number of high profile Ryder Cup, European Tour event venues, Ireland has
11
12 over 400 NGB affiliated golf clubs, and many more facilities such as driving ranges. Given
13
14 that financing the NGB coaching programmes was not a major issue, finding suitable facilities
15
16 for NGB coaching should not be difficult.
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22 ***Competition***

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24 In terms of the critical success factors related to Pillar 8 ([inter]national competition), it is
25
26 expected that there would be a national strategy for the organisation of international events in
27
28 the country, that athletes have sufficient opportunity to take part in international competition
29
30 and that the national competition structure provides opportunities for young talent and
31
32 established athletes to compete regularly at the highest level. (De Bosscher et al. 2009).
33
34 Anecdotally, and in golf media circles, it is widely accepted that the competition programme
35
36 is one of the strongest aspects of the ESD programme. This review evidenced positive
37
38 commentary on the strength of competition in Ireland, and the opportunities for travelling to
39
40 international tournaments. One coach commented, "the national schedule is good, more
41
42 strokeplay events are needed. Any opportunity to play overseas is a positive experience for
43
44 young players" [CQ14]. However, concerns were raised about domestic tournament
45
46 scheduling, with regional events "squashed together" [coach survey] and "tournaments
47
48 clashing can cause controversy over team selection" [PQ32]. One player said:
49
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53

54
55 A lot of our home tournaments seem to clash with the bigger international
56
57 tournaments and it does not make a lot of sense, players would love to play
58
59 Irish Close etc. but can't miss the bigger tournaments abroad. [PQ52]
60

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3 In terms of younger squads, there is evidence of anxiety amongst some of these players,
4 particularly in choosing which tournaments to play and balancing tournaments with school
5 commitments. One coach mentioned that the “boys are in a dilemma” [LC], and both players
6 and parents appear to be seeking support in this regard:
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13 There should be more support and direction in setting out the tournament
14 schedule...[my son] played too much and suffered burnout. It’s difficult to
15 reconcile rankings and teams with what tournaments to play. [Pa2]
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20 I had exams for the last month and half, and golf isn’t really in your head
21 because you’ve spent 3-4 months revising and you’ve to go from there to
22 probably the biggest competition of the year and this year it’s probably going
23 to be the same. With the competitions...if you go from exams, where you’re
24 mentally tired, from that straight into a month of golf it’s hard. [P4]
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33 While this area was a major concern of regional coaches, it was raised in all player interactions,
34 showing the level of difficulty players and parents experience.
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39 **Discussion/Conclusion**

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41 Given the success or outputs emanating from this ESD programme, one might assume that the
42 programme under study is world class, or a model programme. While national level facilities,
43 coaching provision and competition are well regarded, there appear to be fundamental issues
44 at the input level of this ESD, particularly in the areas of organisation and communication, and
45 player pathways. There are also a number of prominent areas for refinement in the ‘throughput’
46 phase, including clarity on player selection, balancing athlete support, facility benchmarks,
47 tournament scheduling and the place of science. While geographical differences are inevitable
48 across rural/urban landscapes, the disparities identified clearly led to inconsistencies within the
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3 wider coaching programme, for example in coordinating regional and national player pathways
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5 and the layering of coaches and expertise. The one consistent problem area throughout the
6
7 study is the lack of programme management and organisation, aspects which could potentially
8
9 be hindering further international success.
10
11

12 Closely aligned with the above finding is the need for improved coordination of and
13
14 communication with clubs to better support the golfer talent pathway. Recent evidence
15
16 examining talent development from an organisational perspective supports late development,
17
18 putting clubs to the forefront of talent development. De Bosscher and De Rycke (2017) found
19
20 that successful elite athletes received club and NGB support at a relatively late age, thus
21
22 highlighting the role that clubs play in the development of an athletic career and the need for
23
24 high quality programmes at club level. While it is known that increasing expenditure on elite
25
26 sport and increasing emphasis on the TID process don't often change results (De Bosscher et
27
28 al., 2011), a more diverse resource allocation policy may help to avoid unintended negative
29
30 consequences (De Bosscher, Shibli & Weber, 2018). The reallocation of resources to club level
31
32 in this case could support coach development, prevent the layering of coaches and inevitably
33
34 produce better athletes. This would be particularly salient where there were a number of clubs
35
36 with players on both regional and national panels, for example in Region 1, two 2 clubs had 48
37
38 players in regional coaching and 5 players in national coaching.
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44 Recommendations following this review focused on organisation and management of
45
46 the performance programme in order to provide more clarity and consistency in programme
47
48 delivery. This would include more emphasis on programme planning, organisation and
49
50 communication. It was also suggested that a multi-disciplinary working group could be set up
51
52 to advise on the direction of the programme, with an initial focus on stronger regional
53
54 coordination, opportunities for collaboration and improved monitoring and evaluation.
55
56 Learning from Liston et al. (2013), and the tension between volunteers and professional staff,
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3 while professionalisation in a volunteer driven NGB may reinforce tensions between volunteers
4 and paid staff, recent research on the organisational and management practices of non-profit
5 sports organisations (NPSOs) suggests that it may be necessary to assess or evaluate the
6 individual employee/volunteer contribution as part of a wider organisational approach, in order
7 to help volunteers and employees understand their role in achieving strategic objectives
8 (O'Boyle & Hassan, 2014).
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17 While SPLISS has supported an honest analysis of elite golf here, the close examination
18 of the peculiarities of one amateur sport working across two small politically sensitive states
19 may have tested the framework. This, considering data on the differences in cross-border
20 funding and state approaches to talent development and training facilities – which would have
21 added a further layer to the analysis – were not gathered. The difficulties that emerged in
22 relation to programme organisation and management, as directly related to volunteer and
23 professional conflict is not new to NGBs in Ireland and Northern Ireland, particularly where
24 changes in amateur/professional status have been debated in recent years, particularly in Gaelic
25 games and rugby. As suggested by Liston et al. (2013), future examinations of high
26 performance sport in smaller countries like Ireland and Northern Ireland might require an
27 adapted model version of SPLISS, and learning from this study, one that acknowledges the
28 interactions among the personnel (volunteer and paid) within the system from the foundations
29 of the sport right through to international level.
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47 This study has added to the literature on meso level examinations of ESD, particularly
48 with regard to the small number of country/sport specific studies using the SPLISS model.
49 While there are clear areas for improvement, the programme's coaching provision and
50 competitive tournament schedule are contributing to international success. Just following the
51 review, players from Ireland took five of the ten places on the Great Britain and Ireland Walker
52 Cup team, Ireland won the men's Home Internationals and finished second in the European
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3 Team Championships. However, this study has some parallels with one on Canadian ice-
4 hockey (Ogden & Edwards, 2016), which found that although a considerable number of
5 professional players were produced through the system, the true potential may not be realised.
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7
8 This research represents a significant move forward in terms of a more detailed and nuanced
9 understanding of the current elite and pre-elite development pathways for male Irish golfers.
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Table 1. Sports specific studies on elite sport policy at the meso level

Study	Sport	Research aim(s)/ question(s)	Strategies/ Framework	Methods and stakeholders	Results
Bohlke and Robinson (2009)	Athletics (Sweden) Skiing (Norway)	To evaluate the applicability of benchmarking in understanding elite sport	N/A	50 semi structured interviews along with document analysis	They found that benchmarking should only be used for learning, and not to transfer or replicate elite sport practices across countries or sports.
Brouwers et al. (2015a)	Tennis (Australia)	What are the roles of sport development stakeholders in elite player pathways and how are these pathways modelled in tennis?	ATRN	18 semi structured interviews with international tennis experts	Identified the role of local clubs in talent identification, pointing to the need to revisit the level of support clubs receive and their capacity to deliver optimal development.
Mazzei, Leandro (2015)	Judo (international)	To identify factors at an organisational level that influence international success in high performance judo	SPLISS	33 interviews with stakeholders followed by development of a questionnaire and the collection/analysis of this data	Factors specific to Judo were identified, e.g. tradition and culture of the sport. A model for Judo organisational factors influencing international sport success was developed. Elite level judo depends on the existence and relationship between these factors.
Newland and Kellett (2012)	Triathlon (USA and Australia)	To examine elite sport development processes, structure and delivery	N/A	6 semi structured interviews with NGB representatives	Three overarching meso-level elements are present within elite development both countries, i.e. development processes, development settings and development delivery.
Sotiriadou et al 2013	Sprint Canoe (Australia)	What sport specific policy factors explain Sprint Canoe success?	SPLISS	16 semi structured interviews with stakeholders, e.g. coaches, sport scientists, athletes.	Cultural factors are central to elite sport policy making

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Truyens et al. 2014	Athletics (international)	To identify the organisational resources and first order capabilities that may lead to a competitive advantage in elite athletics	SPLISS	A literature review and 34 interviews with national coaches and high performance directors	List of 98 organisational resources and first order capabilities were identified as the fundamentals to develop a resource based competitive advantage in athletics.
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Table 2 – Stakeholder involvement

	Questionnaire respondents	Individual Interviews	Focus Groups/No. of Participants
Junior players	39	0	1/5
Adult players	15	2	0
Regional coaches	20	0	4/27
Parents	0	2	0
Sport science support	0	0	1/2

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