



European approach to the importance of sports management competencies in women's semi-professional teams

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Abstract

The competencies and skills of a good sports manager have always been a controversial and diverse topic depending on the country and the context in which it is analysed. That is why this research aims to show which are the most valued competencies by sports managers in several European countries, taking into account gender differences. A total of 209 sports managers from semi-professional women's teams participated in the research. They completed a questionnaire in which different dimensions were evaluated, assessing the importance of the different competencies of a sports manager. The results showed that greater importance was given to skills related to the management of sports facilities and less to human resources management. Differences related to gender were scarce, with significant differences found only in the competence of Strategic Planning Management. In conclusion, it is difficult to agree on the importance of the competencies of a good sports manager, while agreeing on the need for analysis in the areas of finance, event management, planning and management of sports facilities.

Keywords: athletes, Europe, females, skills, sport manager.

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Rafa Nadal and Carlos Alcaraz
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of Netherlands during their men's
doubles second round tennis match
at the Paris Olympic Games on
July 30, 2024. (Photo by EFE/EPA/
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Introduction

In Europe, various public sport policies were established under the motto “Sport for All” with the aim of promoting regular sports participation for all individuals without discrimination. These policies were developed to encourage healthy lifestyles and overall well-being (Dichter et al., 2019; Dyreson, 2011). The topic and necessity of professionalizing sports organizations was instantly brought up by this new paradigm of global sports development (Girginov, 2010; López-Carril et al., 2019). The Council of the European Union (EU) has approved statements regarding the significance of sports in fostering active social inclusion. These statements highlight three main areas of focus for enhancing social inclusion through sports: ensuring access to sports for all individuals, maximizing the potential of sports to strengthen communities, social unity, and development, and facilitating international sharing of strategies and approaches (Hylton & Totten, 2013), among which we can include gender equality in sport. Specifically, in terms of equality, at the EU level there are numerous regulatory instruments and public policy documents such as the Recommendations of the Expert Group on Good Governance on Gender Equality in Sport (2016), where it is stated that “policy makers and stakeholders in sport should develop a more comprehensive understanding of the value of gender equality to improve the governance and performance of sport organizations, both from a social and economic point of view”. Likewise, the EU Roadmap for Sport 2017-2020 promotes gender equality in sport, as well as the benefits and challenges of the digital single market for better financing and commercialization of sport in its second priority related to the economic dimension of sport. From this perspective, the need arises to analyse which are the main competencies and skills that a future professional must possess or improve in order to manage and work in sports organisations (Sesinando et al., 2022).

Despite these policies, some research highlights that the attributes associated with a successful manager are still linked to masculinity, making it difficult for women to access leadership positions (Campuzano, 2019). This indicates a resistance to gender balance in sports governance, also due to the sports capital and habits of board members, and their ability to use this to normalize judgments that may exclude women (Knoppers et al., 2021; Pérez-Chuecos & Rodríguez-Ferrán, 2021). Additionally, other barriers they face include difficulty in achieving a work-life balance; social and traditional roles; preconceived ideas about women in management positions; gender discrimination; the existence of male predominance in sports and cultural environments, as well as the devaluation of women's skills (Albu & Grigore, 2020).

Recent studies indicate that sport management as a multidisciplinary field encompasses various areas such as sports economy, sports law, leadership, accounting, sports marketing, event planning, auditing, public policies, and many others (Teixeira et al., 2019; Zanatta et al., 2018). However, there is a great variety regarding the manager's competencies, due to the different cultures and contexts in which sports management takes place. Previous investigations attached greater importance to certain skills such as sport-related theory and foundations, foreign language and learning ability and management techniques (Ko et al., 2011). Competencies that are deemed most important in the United States include budgeting, setting priorities, delegation skills, planning, and personnel evaluation (Case & Branch, 2003), while in Portugal, highlighted competencies include planning, resources management, leadership, specialized knowledge, and ethical behavior (Joaquim et al., 2011). Strategic planning skills and relationship marketing were other skills suggested by Brazilians researchers (Sordi & Theobald, 2017). In this research, we used a validated questionnaire (Isai, 2015) to identify the competencies perceived as essential by the sport managers from different European countries among which the following stand out, some of them coinciding with previous investigations (Quero-Calero et al., 2022): Sport Facility, Marketing and Financial, Strategic Planning, Research, Human Resources and Event Management.

In accordance with the above, there is no clear consensus on the skills and competencies that a sports manager should possess to ensure better economy of resources, even less so for managers of women's teams. For this reason, the general aim of this research was to analyse the perceived importance of sport management competencies of managers/directors of semi-professional women's sports teams. The specific objectives were as follows: a) to find out the differences between genders with respect to the perceived importance of sport management competencies, and b) to determine the differences between managers from different European countries with respect to the perceived importance of sport management competencies.

Method

This study is cross-sectional, descriptive, and quantitative. All participants were also asked to provide written informed consent before participating in the study, which had been previously approved by the ethics committee of the Catholic University of Murcia (Spain) following current legislation (CE112002), in accordance with the code from the World Medical Association and the Declaration of Helsinki.

Participants

A total of 209 managers/directors of semi-professional women's sports teams participated in the survey ($Z = 95\%$; $e = 6.8\%$), with 57.9% of them being women ($n = 121$) and 42.1% being men ($n = 88$) and mean age 38.89 ± 9.00 . The majority (84.2%) of respondents had a college degree (50.2% had a bachelor's, 26.8% had a master's, and 7.2% had a PhD). In terms of origin, there were 44 respondents from Spain ($n = 21.1\%$), 44 from Bulgaria ($n = 21.1\%$), 41 from Germany ($n = 19.6\%$), 40 from Italy ($n = 19.1\%$), and 40 from Croatia ($n = 19.1\%$).

Based on the sample's accessibility and willingness to engage in the study, non-probability through convenience sampling was used. The following were the inclusion requirements: older than 18 years, manage or direct a semi-professional women's sports European team and more than a year's worth of experience in this job.

Instruments and material

The questionnaire created by Isai (2015) was used to examine how important various competencies were thought to be by sport managers. There were 24 items total in the tool, which were broken down into six distinct factors: F1 *Sport Facility Management* (7 items), F2 *Marketing and Financial Management* (6 items), F3 *Strategic Planning Management* (4 items), F4 *Event Management* (3 items), F5 *Human Resources Management* (2 items), and F6 *Research* (2 items). The response options ranged from 1 (not at all important, unnecessary) to 7 points (very important, crucial) on a Likert scale. Cronbach's alpha was used to analyse the instrument's internal consistency (F1 $\alpha = .90$; F2 $\alpha = .87$; F3 $\alpha = .92$; F4 $\alpha = .92$; F5 $\alpha = .90$; and F6 $\alpha = .88$), considered as high (Corbetta, 2007).

Procedure

Data collection took place over a six-week period (from 1 June to 12 July 2020). Participants received the survey electronically through the Google Forms® survey platform. As long as participants met the requirements for inclusion and there was no financial or academic incentive for them to participate, there were no restrictions on participation. Anonymity was also ensured during the data processing and analysis.

Data analysis

Using the Lilliefors significance correction of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the distribution of the data was analysed, and a value of less than .05 was obtained. As a result, non-parametric statistical tests were employed for the corresponding analysis of the data because the data did not adhere to the normality assumptions. Two different sorts of analysis were done in order to address the study's goal. The quantitative variables' descriptive analysis (mean and standard deviation) came first. Second, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis H were used to analyse the variables in relation to the respondent's gender and home country, respectively. The SPSS® Statistics v.27.0 software suite was used to conduct the statistical analysis.

Results

According to the perceived significance of the competencies that make up the elements of the questionnaire, the study's findings are shown below: F1 *Sport Facility Management* has seven items, followed by F2 *Marketing and Financial Management*, six items, F3 *Strategic Planning Management*, four items, F4 *Event Management*, three items, for F5 *Human Resources Management*, and two items for F6 *Research*. The link between the variables was also examined in regard to the respondent's gender and country of origin.

Concerning the general descriptive results, the competencies to which managers gave most importance are those related to *Sport Facility Management* (F1; 6.21 ± 0.67). On the contrary, those related to *Human Resources Management* (F5; 5.73 ± 1.08) were the worst rated by respondents (Table 1).

Regarding the perceived importance of each of the items that make up the factors, sport managers gave the highest value to the competencies related to *Implementing actions to prevent incidents and accidents* (F1; 6.48 ± 0.78) followed by *Developing strategies for minimizing the impact of potential risks* (F1; 6.46 ± 0.72). On the contrary, the least rated were those concerning *Defining and setting up quality standards for employees* (5.71 ± 1.12) and *Fostering data analysis for research purposes* (5.71 ± 1.16), followed by *Evaluating employee performance based on results* (5.76 ± 1.15).

The results according to the gender of the respondents (Table 2) showed that male sport managers gave a higher mean score in the rating of perceived importance in all the factors analysed. However, statistically significant differences ($U = 4,394.00$; $p = .028$; $r = .152$) with respect to the female gender were only found in F3 (*Strategic Planning Management*).

Table 1
Descriptive results of the perceived importance of sport management competencies.

Factors	$\bar{X} \pm SD$	Min	Max
1. Sport Facility Management	6.21 $\pm$ 0.67	3.57	7.00
Implementing a proper plan for preserving equipment	6.07 $\pm$ 0.91	3	7
Implementing appropriate means of storing equipment and supplies	6.07 $\pm$ 0.82	4	7
Implementing actions to prevent incidents and accidents	6.48 $\pm$ 0.78	3	7
Developing actions to prevent misuse of facilities	6.06 $\pm$ 0.90	2	7
Developing strategies for minimizing the impact of potential risks	6.46 $\pm$ 0.72	2	7
Maintaining and repairing facilities	6.04 $\pm$ 0.99	3	7
Conducting routine inspections of facilities and equipment	6.31 $\pm$ 0.80	3	7
2. Marketing and Financial Management	6.11 $\pm$ 0.75	1.83	7.00
Applying accounting principles in the organization and developing a financial plan	6.23 $\pm$ 0.94	1	7
Analyzing financial reports for decision making	6.00 $\pm$ 0.93	2	7
Preparing and defending a budget proposal	6.00 $\pm$ 0.92	2	7
Preparing financial reports	5.83 $\pm$ 1.09	1	7
Utilizing sponsorships to support sport activities	6.34 $\pm$ 0.88	1	7
Preparing and defending sponsorship proposals	6.27 $\pm$ 1.00	1	7
3. Strategic Planning Management	6.09 $\pm$ 0.75	4.25	7.00
Translating strategies into clear objectives, tactics, and action plans	6.11 $\pm$ 0.82	4	7
Using indicators to measure advance of strategies and helping decision making	6.07 $\pm$ 0.82	3	7
Managing the implementation and organization of project activities	6.08 $\pm$ 0.87	3	7
Managing work teams to effectively achieve the project goals	6.13 $\pm$ 0.80	4	7
4. Event Management	6.11 $\pm$ 0.87	3.67	7.00
Scheduling sport activities (sport competitions, sport clinics, conferences, seminars, etc.)	6.24 $\pm$ 0.86	4	7
Conducting an event needs assessment	5.87 $\pm$ 1.10	4	7
Coordinating event's units such as planning, communication, booking, etc.	6.22 $\pm$ 0.84	3	7
5. Human Resources Management	5.73 $\pm$ 1.08	2.50	7.00
Evaluating employee performance based on results	5.76 $\pm$ 1.15	1	7
Defining and setting up quality standards for employees	5.71 $\pm$ 1.12	2	7
6. Research	5.88 $\pm$ 1.02	1.00	7.00
Establishing strategic alliances with universities	6.06 $\pm$ 0.98	1	7
Fostering data analysis for research purposes	5.71 $\pm$ 1.16	1	7

Table 2

Descriptive results of the perceived importance of sport management competencies according to gender.

Factors	$\bar{X} \pm SD$	Gender		<i>U</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
		Female	Male			
1. Sport Facility Management	6.21 ± 0.67	6.17 ± 0.63	6.27 ± 0.72	4,685.00	.103	.135
2. Marketing and Financial Management	6.11 ± 0.75	6.11 ± 0.66	6.12 ± 0.87	4,943.50	.061	.374
3. Strategic Planning Management	6.09 ± 0.75	6.00 ± 0.75	6.22 ± 0.73	4,394.00	.152	.028*
4. Event Management	6.11 ± 0.87	6.03 ± 0.88	6.21 ± 0.85	4,620.50	.115	.095
5. Human Resources Management	5.73 ± 1.08	5.68 ± 1.05	5.81 ± 1.13	4,883.00	.072	.297
6. Research	5.88 ± 1.02	5.86 ± 0.92	5.91 ± 1.14	4,984.50	.056	.421

Note. Significance level **p* < .05 ***p* < .01 ****p* < .001.

Table 3

Descriptive results of the perceived importance of sport management competencies according to country.

Factors	Country					<i>H</i>	E_R^2	<i>p</i>
	Spain	Italy	Croatia	Bulgaria	Germany			
1. Sport Facility Management	6.16 ± 0.63	6.06 ± 0.43	6.90 ± 0.22	6.22 ± 0.81	5.73 ± 0.49	83.793	.403	< .001***
2. Marketing and Financial Management	6.02 ± 0.83	6.13 ± 0.42	6.72 ± 0.41	6.00 ± 1.00	5.74 ± 0.50	53.112	.255	< .001***
3. Strategic Planning Management	6.06 ± 0.65	5.68 ± 0.61	6.83 ± 0.39	6.35 ± 0.67	5.55 ± 0.59	81.337	.391	< .001***
4. Event Management	6.27 ± 0.81	5.38 ± 0.66	6.89 ± 0.29	6.45 ± 0.65	5.52 ± 0.80	98.829	.475	< .001***
5. Human Resources Management	5.97 ± 0.73	4.85 ± 0.84	6.88 ± 0.33	6.10 ± 0.85	4.84 ± 0.91	110.761	.533	< .001***
6. Research	5.89 ± 1.15	5.15 ± 0.69	6.88 ± 0.35	6.30 ± 0.75	5.17 ± 0.72	102.259	.492	< .001***

Note. Significance level **p* < .05 ***p* < .01 ****p* < .001.

Finally, with regard to the results according to the surveyed sport managers' home country, statistically significant differences were detected in all the factors analysed (F1 $H = 83.793$, $E_R^2 = .403$, $p < .001$; F2 $H = 53.112$, $E_R^2 = .255$, $p < .001$; F3 $H = 81.337$, $E_R^2 = .391$, $p < .001$; F4 $H = 98.829$, $E_R^2 = .475$, $p < .001$; F5 $H = 110.761$, $E_R^2 = .533$, $p < .001$; F6 $H = 102.259$, $E_R^2 = .492$, $p < .001$) (Table 3).

Regarding the most highly rated competencies, Spanish managers gave a higher importance to the competence related to *Event Management* (6.27 ± 0.81), as did respondents from Bulgaria (6.45 ± 0.65). The Italians rated more positively the competencies related to *Marketing and Financial Management* (6.13 ± 0.42) as well as respondents from Germany (5.74 ± 0.50). Finally, and matching the highest value given to one of the competencies, Croatian managers considered

the most important one to be *Sport Facility Management* (6.90 ± 0.22). In relation to the lowest rated competencies, Bulgarian (6.00 ± 1.00) and Croatian (6.72 ± 0.41) sport managers considered these to be related to *Marketing and Financial Management*. For Italy (4.85 ± 0.84) and Germany (4.84 ± 0.91), they agreed on the lowest value for perceived importance to *Human Resources Management*. Finally, the Spanish managers (5.89 ± 1.15) considered less important the competencies related to *Research*.

Discussion

The areas of concern for sport managers are diverse and call for a variety of difficult-to-define skills because they differ depending on the organization's structure, the culture, and the

national policies (Lis & Tomanek, 2020). The primary goal of this study was to examine how directors and managers of semi-professional women's sports teams in Europe perceive the importance of sport management competencies.

Six competency elements (sport facility management, marketing and financial management, strategic planning management, event management, human resources management, and research) for sport managers in Guatemalan sport organizations were included based on the study of Isai (2015). In this regard, the sport managers surveyed gave a higher importance to the competencies related to *Sport Facility Management*, while those related to *Human Resources Management*, were given a lower score. In the same line, previous research highlighted facility maintenance management as one of the competencies most valued by sport club managers to perform a competent work, as well as equipment management and risk management (Batista et al., 2016; Eksteen et al., 2013). In relation to the latter, the items most highly valued by respondents within the Sport Facility Management factor were *Implementing actions to prevent incidents and accidents* followed by *Developing strategies for minimising the impact of potential risks*. In this respect, in the research carried out by Case and Branch (2003), sport facility managers gave greater importance to the competencies related to safety and security needs assessment and risk management for the development of their functions. Regarding the importance of the competence related to *Human Resources Management*, previous studies show contradictory results since, for example, while the research by Koustelios (2005) on the managerial competencies of sport club managers in Greece, coincides in indicating this competence as the least valued, the study by Eksteen et al. (2013) of sports club managers in South Africa, places generating job descriptions, managing employee training and managing induction of employees as some of the competencies that are given greater importance. Despite the results obtained, sport managers should improve or acquire human resources skills (Sordi & Theobald, 2017), as it is one of the specific managerial activities in which they invest more time (Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004).

In relation to the gender of sports managers, there is a growing number of women occupying positions of leadership, high responsibility, and expertise, thus making the issue of gender equal representation a topical subject (Piggott & Pike, 2020; Swanson et al., 2020). Nevertheless, research from earlier studies shows that male gender is still prominent among professionals active in sports management despite a recent surge in female sport managers (Azevêdo & Spessoto, 2009; Batista et al., 2016; Da Cunha Bastos et al., 2006; De Miranda et al., 2017; Dragos & Cristea, 2016; Eksteen et al., 2013; Filho et al., 2013; Ko et al., 2011; Retar et al., 2013; Ross &

Schurger, 2007; Santos et al., 2022; Sarmiento et al., 2006; Sesinando et al., 2022; Tripolitsioti, 2005), coinciding with the gender stereotypes associated with the sporting context (Granda Vera et al., 2018; Martínez-Abajo et al., 2020). In this study, there are more women than men, a circumstance that coincides with other studies such as those conducted by Mohammadi et al. (2016) and Mohammadi and Dehkordi (2013). This could be due to female sport organization employees having more positive attitudes towards women managers, which can help overcome the barriers faced by women in advancing to top managerial positions (Chullen et al., 2017; Koca & Öztürk, 2015; Sertkaya et al., 2013).

In relation to the importance given to the competencies according to gender, men give on average higher scores to all the factors than women, and both genders coincide in the highest and lowest scores, with no differences with respect to the overall results. In this case, statistical differences are only detected with respect to the *Strategic Planning Management* competency, which is scored significantly higher by men. Gender differences are also not significant in terms of the time sport managers spend on specific management activities (Whisenant & Pedersen, 2004). While earlier studies have identified gender-specific obstacles that women encounter in their career paths, especially gender bias and inadequate institutional support, and the lack of respect and acknowledgment, some participants have reported that gaining credibility in a work culture dominated by men has been a significant challenge (Ross & Schurger, 2007).

Finally, the last objective was to determine the differences between managers from different European countries with respect to the perceived importance of sport management competencies. In this respect, there are statistical differences between countries in relation to the scores given to each of the competencies analysed. Specifically, the most rated competencies are *Event Management* for Spain and Bulgaria, *Marketing and Financial Management* for Italy and Germany and *Sport Facility Management* for Croatia. On the contrary, the less rated are *Marketing and Financial Management* for Bulgaria and Croatia, *Human Resources Management* for Italy and Germany and *Research* for Spain. Previous research suggests that variations in competencies required and those perceived as significant by practitioners and academics can be attributed to cultural and contextual differences (Ko et al., 2011). Therefore, it is important to consider the specific context of competency studies in sport management as there are significant differences between national cultures and results cannot be generalized to other countries. Studies reveal a difference in assessed competencies among managers of different nationalities, which can be attributed to cultural differences (Boutet et al., 2000; Chong, 2008).

Conclusions

Based on the provided search results, it is evident that the importance of sport management skills for directors and managers of semi-professional women's sports teams in Europe places more emphasis on competencies related to managing sports facilities and less on those related to managing human resources. Gender differences are only significantly different with regard to competencies related to strategic planning management, with men giving greater importance to these competencies than women. Additionally, significant differences in the scores awarded can be detected between the countries where sport managers work, although Italy and Germany coincide in the most and least important management competencies.

The results of this research will enable the development and implementation of sports and educational policies tailored to the socio-cultural context of the country, as well as to the specific needs of semi-professional female sports team managers. Similarly, the obtained results serve as a starting point for future research in the field.

Nevertheless, the study has some limitations, such as the small number of participating countries, which is essentially due to the consortium of countries that participated in the European project. It would be recommendable for future research to increase the number of participating countries. Another limitation of this research would be the fact that no comparisons have been made between managers of female and male teams. Furthermore, educational courses and further studies focusing on the competencies of sport managers would be advisable, not only among managers and directors, but also among athletes and all parties involved in sport, in order to be able to detect weaknesses and strengths to be taken into account by sports managers of women's teams.

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