

## **A comparative study of elitism in sport between France, United Kingdom and the United States of America.**

The nature of elite sport is at the very top of the sports ladder, it is one in which the performers are no longer doing it to achieve intrinsic goals but are trying to perform for their country, where the pressure is great and all the countries eyes are on you to do well.

There is an obvious difference between France, United Kingdom and the United States, this represented in the way in which each country performs in each world wide sporting event at elite level. In this essay I will find out and justify the reasons why the US always manage to win the Olympics, why France have one so many football championships in recent years. But most importantly why it seems that the UK in these present times are lacking in top level sport performances and why there haven't been any national trophies won by a UK national team in a long time.

Before I can take the look at the most successful of the three countries I have to assess the nature of an elite sport before I can accurately make a judgement of them. I'm going to look at the eight areas, which demonstrate this, the most. The commercial aspect of the sports within that country, the pressure that each sports performer has in each country, the globalisation of the sports they play, the deviance in sport than can occur, the political aspects of a sport, the nationalism and patriotism that each country shows and the grass roots of each countries main sports.

I think that nowadays in this era of a consumer based society that any sport will not be able to survive without some form of commercial sponsorship. We only have to look on sky sports or any sports coverage to figure this out. For example the English football leagues changed in to become a more commercialised sport. The division one was changed into the Premiership and now is called the Carling Premiership. You can watch the sky sports network and watch Aussie rules which is sponsored by Fosters Lager, you can watch the new comer into the professional era in 1995, being rugby and it's commercial league the Zurich Premiership. The Olympics, the World Cup, The Superbowl, they all have major sponsors and it is a massive fight to sponsor these events. With these sort of sports becoming so commercialised and the way in which televisions have become so popular it has lead to spectatorism and so commercial messages can be fed to the public through this. The other form of commercialisation is the way in which each team now sponsors a logo or two on the sports kit they wear e.g. Tottenham and Holsten Pils, Anna Kournikova and the massive amount of money she makes for wearing certain clothes. Commercialisation has occurred all over the world, in France, the UK but nowhere as much as in the US, the home of the capitalist ideals, that dominate the western world. For an advertisement during the Superbowl it cost an amazing \$3 million for 30 seconds, yet companies still buy the slots because so many people are watching. Commercialisation is such a major part of the nature of elite sport.

An elite sports person has to in a lot of cases perform to earn their livelihood, as in all jobs the money is right at the top and you have to perform well to get there. This obviously leads to a great amount of pressure being put on the performer both intrinsically and

extrinsically. There is an intrinsic pressure that you perform well for yourself and so you can go out there and earn a lot of money. There is also an extrinsic pressure of having people watch you, being the coaches, the international selectors and the spectators. You, have to perform in front of these to get a good image and name so you can make it to the top of the ladder. Obviously this pressure is of a great amount; you could argue that pressure enhances your game but it all depends of what personality characteristics you have developed. Too much pressure can lead to over arousal and anxiety as shown on the “inverted U theory”. Such pressure is shown by the way in which the spectators react to events. It was not long ago that the Tottenham fans were booing their manager, after a while the management sacked him. The only way in which we judge the team’s performance is whether they have won or lost. People have been having digs at English sport for some time now because as a nation they have not won anything, no world cups, no European championships, not many medals at the Olympics or world championships, poor cricket results. All of this adds pressure to the performers as they don’t want to let there country down. The American public feels the same and that's why all American teams have ‘the win at all costs’ ethic. Yet I feel that neither France nor America feel as much pressure as they have one international trophy and this is something for the public to focus on.

With so much pressure on the performers it leads to deviance in sport, when winning is all that matters for some athletes, they do not care how they achieve it. This can be through taking performance enhancing drugs or cheating whilst playing the game. It leaves sport with a bad name and is one of the only downfalls of sport in this professional era, it sends the wrong message to young children puts the sport into disrepute. A place where performance-enhancing drugs are found a lot is in athletics where only your body’s capabilities can actually judge where you finish. There are so many performance enhancing drugs out there and so many examples of sports people taking them, one of the most memorable is Ben Johnston in the 1988 Seoul Olympic games where after winning the 100m in a world record 9.79 secs he was tested positive for taking anabolic steroids. There are many other instances and bans for taking steroids, a more recent controversy was at the Edmonton World Championships in which, Paula Radcliffe was demonstrating against the long distance runner Yegorova running when she had been tested positive for the human hormone EPO, which increase the oxygen carrying capacity and there helps an endurance athlete. Other drugs which are taken are stimulants in particular amphetamines which increase alertness and physical ability, used in gymnastics because of the strength to size ration needed. Other examples are the use of diuretics in boxing and judo to get into a different weight division. There are so many drugs on the market and I'm sure there are some used which can not yet be detected by tests. This is the temptation for top athletes to go to, because of the pressures to win. You can not condone this but you can at least understand why these athletes do it, they risk doing damage to their bodies just to win. Other deviance include cheating in the game whether this be through ‘gamesmanship’ or downright cheating it emphasises the ‘win at all costs’ theory. This could be through the professional foul in football or the match fixing in cricket they all are down to the will to succeed no matter how and ultimately the money from winning. The clubs encourage this by offering the players win bonuses, so ultimately in every country this happens, but whom can you blame the fans, the clubs, the players or maybe even the governments?

With sport being more globalized it can be used as a political tool. The Olympics are meant to be a time when all wars are stopped and the countries play to the traditional Olympic spirit. This shows that sport can have major political implications, and the Olympics have been

used in many other ways to demonstrate a particular argument. Certain governments can use political tactics in a sporting context to exercise their beliefs. The USA and the USSR both boycotted each others Olympic games at the time of the Cold War and the satellites used in outer space. Also when South Africa was in apartheid it was boycotted and the black people were not allowed to play in national sport and so all non-white and communist nations boycotted the country and many white nations would not send any national teams there. So again sport is shown to have great political. The 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin were a chance for Adolf Hitler to show off his Aryan "master" Race but this failed when Jesse Owens, a black athlete managed to win many medals. Countries have realised that sport is an object in which the public of a nation can, in effect, see which country is better than another and so it has become very important, for the countries to do well in national sport competitions. Most countries feel this matter of importance and so a lot of the government money is put into sport each year. There is a Minister of Sport in the British Government so again sport is shown as an important factor to consider when running a country.

In France, UK and the US some ethnic groups are poorly represented in certain areas of sport within those countries. Within the UK there is a strong feeling of discontent of the English from the Celts, being the Scots, Welsh and Irish. All have certain emotions against England due to events in the past and this makes competition between the home nations very emotive and they only ever join up 4 years in rugby to become the British Lions. However, the French find it a lot easier as there is only one major racial group and the community 'has a very strong sense of national identity'. The USA has developed different sports for different race it seems that basketball is predominantly a black sport where as baseball is played by a lot of Italians. The US government encourages 'every cultural group living in the USA...to keep its ethnic identity.' So when a team reaches the Superbowl from one conference they have the support of the whole of that conference as they take on the other conference. However, what all of these countries has in common is when the sports performers are chosen for their country they are proud to represent it. All three of the nations have a strong nationalistic appeal, and this leads onto patriotism. Patriotism is when you feel strongly for your country and you support them for what they do. This is particularly emphasised in sport especially when the elite sports performers are in action. You'll find this when supporters will travel all over the world to watch their team play. Most recently was the British Lions tour to Australia, there were so many British fans that it was commented on that it seemed like a home crowd, that shows patriotism and the way in which the supporters feel so strongly about their country doing well. However, this can have its bad points such as the behaviour of football hooligans who let their patriotic feelings go too far. Another example of bad behaviour of supporters due to an over zealous love for their country was in the Atlanta '96 games where the American fans only cheered for the American gymnasts, and this was commented on. This again shows how much sport means so much to people, especially when watching elite athletes perform.

For each country to do well they need a grass roots scheme where children of a young age can take up sport and be thoroughly enthralled to play the game so they aim to become an elite performer. There needs to be a set-up so any performer that is good enough can progress up the ladder to become an elite performer. To gain top elite athletes you need a wide base to choose from and this would be so there is more competition between athletes. Therefore the athletes that get away from the rest would be more able and determined performers. This obviously is what is needed to gain a top-level athlete to perform on a world stage. I think that this diagram depicts better what I mean.

RED = Grass root level where there are a lot of players of a low skill level, playing for their school or a local team.

BLUE = Playing for a county side or breaking into a senior side which is reasonably high up in the league system. Not so many players but of a better skill level.

YELLOW = Going for trials at a national level but not quite making it and rather playing for a regional side. Very few players of a very high skill level.

GREEN = Hardly any players breaking through to national sides and further. Extremely few numbers of players of an elite skill level.

Each of the three countries I'm am going to talk about employ different grass root schemes and different physical education regimes, to achieve different results. I will now find out the differences between France, UK and the US.

In recent years I would have to say that on world scale the Americans seem to do the best, in the sports they compete in. In the Olympics they are at the top of the medals list every time, they are excellent at golf and they are up and coming in football and rugby. They will improve in football and rugby as the government invests more money in to the sport they will become one of the best teams around. This is due to the fact that they have such a broad amount of players to choose from as the country is so big that let alone just one of the many states is much bigger than the UK and they have 50 of them! Then there is France who always at the top for most national sporting events, they have recently won the European Championships and the World Cup in football, let alone getting to the final of the rugby World Cup. Then there's the UK who always seem to be lingering within the top nations but can never put their fingers on a trophy. So overall, I would say that USA were the more successful at elite level with wins in the Olympics, Golf (personal and team events such as the Ryder Cup), Tennis, Pool etc.

