

Today's leading sporting nations draw heavily on the former East German model

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Most successful modern sporting nations exhibit key characteristics of the system that allowed East Germany to rack up a string of sporting successes from the late 1960s up until the Seoul Olympics of 1988, a year before the state's demise.

This is the conclusion of a major new book that is the first English language text that analyses the East German sport system using original Communist Party and STASI sources.

Dr Jonathan Grix (</staff/profiles/sportex/grix-jonathan.aspx>) (University of Birmingham) and Professor Mike Dennis (University of Wolverhampton) argue that the modern emphasis on state sponsored athletes, the focus on specific sports to maximise a nation's medal return and the emphasis now placed on talent identification all have their roots in the East German model.

Sport under Communism provides a fascinating account of one (small) country's state sponsored drive for sporting success.

Sport became a key priority for the newly formed communist GDR as a way of gaining much needed political legitimacy. For around three decades a country of less than 17 million people became one of the most successful nations in the world at the Summer and Winter Olympics.

The key components in the sports model that East Germany developed have been widely adopted by other nations including:

- The professionalisation of athletes – in the GDR many athletes were given nominal jobs allowing them to train freely
- The East German talent identification system and specialist sports schools have been studied and adapted
- A thorough system of qualified professional coaches and other support
- And a focus on a limited number of events to maximise the number of potential medals

Dr Jonathan Grix from the University of Birmingham explains: *"The GDR is often held up as an example of a state where elite success fostered a culture of participation. This is the argument still used by those who believe that elite sporting success and elite sporting events like the Olympics automatically leave a legacy of participation. The reality in East Germany was very different. Resources were increasingly directed to elite sport at the expense of participation."*

Reading the official documents from archives you see increasing frustration from ordinary people about the lack of sporting provision. The belief that there is a causal link between performance sport and mass participation is flawed."

The researchers conclude that the image of the GDR as a nation where sporting success drove mass participation is a myth. Instead resources were increasingly directed into elite sport at the expense of mass participation, especially as the economy spluttered to a halt in the 1980s.

Professor Mike Dennis adds: *"When people think about sport in the former East Germany they immediately focus on the systematic use of drugs. While the story of sport in the GDR can't be told without reference to the state's extensive and clandestine doping programme the success was based as much on the sports model they developed as on systematic doping."*

Many successful aspects of the East German sports system have been adopted and adapted by countries across the world in striving for sporting success. Such states might not like to acknowledge the influence of the GDR; it exists nonetheless."

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Sport Under Communism: Behind the East German 'Miracle' – by Mike Dennis and Jonathan Grix is published by Palgrave Macmillan.

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