

Still Owning the Podium? The Institutional Work of 'Own the Podium' to Maintain High Performance Sport in Canada

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Organizational theory/culture **Thursday, May 30, 2013** **20-minute oral presentation**
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(Room 408)

Over the past decade high performance sport has enjoyed unprecedented saliency and interest within Canada; an interest that is often taken for granted within the United States. In the last 10 years Canada has witnessed a doubling of Canadian federal government investment into Olympic summer sports programs from \$52,297,871 during the Beijing quadrennial to \$117,512,216 in the lead up to the London 2012 Games (OTP, 2012). More broadly, these changes are symptomatic of what some academics have referred to as the 'global sporting arms race' (DeBosscher et al., 2006; Green, 2005), with many countries now pursuing high performance success, namely at the Olympic Games, as a key policy objective. Central to this high performance drive within Canada has been the establishment of a CAD\$117 million technical program initiative entitled 'Own the Podium (OTP) 2010'. Created collaboratively by the Canadian sporting community in 2005, this technical initiative was initially designed to ensure a successful medal haul at the Vancouver 2012 Winter Olympic Games. Now many years have passed since Canada hosted its third Olympics, and yet OTP still remains a prevalent entity within the Canadian sport system. In fact, OTP has now formalized into a not-for-profit sport organization and by doing so it signaled the establishment of Canada's first ever-independent high performance sport commission.

The purpose of this research is to begin to explore this nascent, but now central organization within Canada, and in doing so contribute to the broader debate surrounding high performance sport development (DeBosscher et al., 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2004, 2005; Whitson & Macintosh, 1990). Scholars have traditionally explained high performance sport development in recent years through broader political shifts (Houlihan & Green, 2008; Macintosh & Whitson, 1990) political advocacy groups (Green & Houlihan, 2004) and unique system design (DeBosscher et al., 2006). The shortcoming of these perspectives is their inability to explain how and why interest in high performance sport is sustained once it becomes a political priority. For example, Canada and the United Kingdom have both recently hosted an Olympic games, and consequently have experienced sustained levels of interest in high performance sport even after the games have ended. This research explains this phenomenon using the concept of Institutional Work, by arguing that key individual actors and agencies have been (and continue to be) actively working to maintain interest high performance sport within many sport systems.

The theoretical concept of Institutional Work is a newly emerging avenue of research within Institutional Theory (cf Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2006, 2009, 2011). The concept of Institutional work can be broken down into its basic components: institutions and work. This research adopts Scott (2001) definition of institutions as "cultural-cognitive, normative and regulative elements that...provide stability and meaning to social life" (p. 48). The concept of work has a number of denotations including intentionality, habit, effort and some form of projective agency to move from one goal to another (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). Institutional work is the "purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2006; p. 215). This study contributes to our understanding of how institutions are maintained. More specifically, the Institutional Maintenance Framework of Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca (2009) is adopted to examine the institutional work of OTP. Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca's (2009) framework outlines six strategies (Enabling, Policing, Deterring, Valorizing/Demonizing, Mythologizing and Embedding/Routinizing). The adoption of this framework enabled the researchers to explore the ways in which OTP, as a now focal high performance actor within the Canadian sport system, has attempted to maintain interest in high performance sport within Canada.

To this end, this research conducted a discourse analysis most closely aligned within Athleide's (1996) approach by triangulating multiple documentation sources (Yin, 1994) that either made reference to, produced by, or was significant to the development of, OTP. Documentation gathered included newspaper articles collected over an Olympic year (November 2011- 2012), any published OTP documentation since its inception (annual reviews, quarterly newsletters, strategic policy documents, manifestos, media packs), as well as key policy documentation

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that led to the emergence or development of OTP (reports, evaluations, federal government policy). A total of 505 pages of data were identified as appropriate for analysis. In line with Yin (1994)'s research strategy, the data were converged and ordered chronologically. The data were then subject to a deductive coding process using the six categories' identified within Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca's (2009) Institutional Maintenance Framework, whilst simultaneously being open the possibility of emergent codes or themes that did not conform to these pre-determined framework categorizations.

Results indicate that five of the six strategy types had been adopted by OTP to promote both itself and high performance sport within the Canadian sport system. These included Enabling strategies (e.g., OTP's creation of high performance advisors and increasing leveraging of the private sector), Policing strategies (e.g., OTP's targeted funding approach, annual sport review structure), Valorizing/Demonizing strategies (e.g., OTP's usage of athlete testimonials, highlighting of world cup/championship success), Mythologizing strategies (e.g., OTP framing of employees as ex-athletes and of its own contributions to the sport system) and Embedding/Routinizing strategies (e.g., OTP's highlighting of sporting community relationships and its own formalization). No evidence was found to indicate OTP had attempted to enact Deterring strategies. In addition, data also indicated that OTP exhibited a strategic approach we have term Incentivising; a potential seventh categorization to Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca's (2009) original framework. Incentivising involved the deliberate use of programs and practices designed by OTP to attract (as opposed to deterring) various stakeholders to follow its mandate (e.g., creation of the Top Secret Program which has now morphed into the Innovation for Gold program).

The research has a number of contributions, both theoretically and practically. From an institutional perspective, specifically that of institutional work, much focus has been on the dichotomous extremes of either institutional creation or institutional deconstruction. This research contributes towards filling the academic void between these two dichotomies to better understand how institutions are being maintained (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2006). In addition, this research provides a theoretical extension to Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca's (2009) framework by identifying a seventh categorization of Incentivising. Incentivising is deemed as a particularly appropriate categorization as much of the work carried out by agents and agencies, especially within the sport sector, are not necessarily constraining, but rather programs and practices are designed to enable and promote self-interests.

From a sport management perspective, and broadly speaking, the notion of Institutional work helps explain why many western countries such as the United Kingdom and Canada have seen the maintenance of high performance interest despite the absence of the mega-event, responsible for the initial increase in public interest (Green & Houlihan, 2005). Moreover within the Canadian context, the notion of Institutional work helps explain why organizations such as OTP still exist despite fulfilling their initial purpose. The findings of this research stress the importance of the strategic work of actors and agents within and around OTP as an explanation of OTP's continued survival. In particular, their ability to promote high performance sport as a primary policy objective within the Canada that has led to sustained interest in high performance sport, the major by-product of which has been a continued need for OTP within the Canadian system. Ultimately this research indicates that success of these types of sport organizations is not solely contingent on whether the initial purpose is fulfilled, but rather its ability of key individual actors to 'carve out' a sustained demand for their programs and services through the enactment of various strategic approaches.

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