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# How to influence national pride? The Olympic medal index as a unifying narrative


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## Abstract

Elite sport is often regarded as one of the main vehicles for articulating national pride and stimulating national cohesion. In this article, we explore a variety of different notions of pride and nationality as related to success in elite sport. We present the results of a public survey, which measured some of the effects on national pride in the Netherlands, related to the men's European Football Championships, the Tour de France, Wimbledon and the Olympic Games in Beijing (all in the summer of 2008). The results suggest that a sense of belonging is a necessary condition that precedes rather than results from sport-related pride. This supports the notion of national pride being a rather stable characteristic of countries, notwithstanding specific situations (such as sport success) that may lead to minor and temporary fluctuations. There seems to be no empirical evidence for the – primarily quantitatively understood – concept of pride (as a 'bucket-notion'), which is often implicit to the political rhetoric used to increase sport funding with the aim of winning more medals to generate an increase in national pride.

## Keywords

narrative, national pride, Olympic medal index, sport

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## Introduction

Calls for increasing investment in elite sport often emphasize the assumed positive effects of elite sport on people's identification with specific communities and on a sense of national pride. In most modern countries, elite sport is regarded as one of the main vehicles for constructing and maintaining an idea of national unity (Bairner, 2001; Blain et al., 1993; Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007; Houlihan, 1997; Maguire and Poulton, 1999; Wong, 2002). Sports offer many unique and different ways to articulate national identities, opening up a broad spectrum of rituals that create a sense of union and national cohesion (Evans and Kelley, 2002; Lechner, 2007a, 2007b; Smith and Kim, 2006). Obtaining sport medals could inspire the public or, as some argue, have a positive impact on the growth of recreational sport or even the economy as a whole. Success in sport is also thought to influence international prestige (Allison and Monnington, 2002). Generally speaking, there seems to be little doubt about these positive effects of success in elite sports on national pride. This could explain the fact that an increasing number of countries explicitly invest in achieving a better position on the Olympic medal index. The globalized urge to strive to achieve peak performance in elite sport has meant that increasingly more money must be invested to win each Olympic medal.

In the Netherlands, sport authorities have been able to gain public support for the national ambition to structurally become a top 10 sporting nation. This has been legitimized by the anticipated positive effects this would have on national cohesion, pride and international prestige (Ministry of Sports, 2008). Moreover, these lofty ambitions related to elite performances have become entangled with the political ambitions to organize the Olympic Games in 2028, exactly a century after the Olympics were held in Amsterdam in 1928.

In this article we will explore different notions of pride and nationality as related to success in elite sport. Some of these relations will be illustrated with some preliminary results of a public survey, which was held at various times during the 'sport summer' of 2008. This survey (involving 300 respondents for each measurement) measured some of the effects related to the men's European Football Championships, the Tour de France, Wimbledon and the Olympic Games in Beijing. Some effects of main sporting events will be discussed in general (the effect on mood, a sense of belonging) and the success of Dutch athletes in particular (on national pride).

The main question that we try to answer is: can national pride be regarded as the effect of sport-related pride or does a sense of belonging to a nation precede instead the possibilities of sport in order to have 'nationalistic effects'? Related questions include: how can we (conceptually) understand the relationship between medals and national pride, other than as just a supposed linear causality: more medals mean more national pride? Does the ranking of Olympic medals have any of the potential that the direct confrontation of one country against the other could have? Are there fundamental differences between the expressive 'storytelling' capacities of sport, on the one hand, and the kind of logic that is used to defend the investments needed to win more medals on the other? Or should we instead consider the medal index as a narrative in itself, with similar capacities to 'unify' and 'identify' as the individual biographies of sport heroes have? Our argument is illustrated by presenting and discussing the primary results of a public survey, held at 12 various times (May–October) during the 'sport summer' of 2008.

## The effect of sport success on (national) pride

Pride is a complex notion, which is related to identity, self-esteem and loyalty, as well as pleasure. For a nation, national pride is the same as self-respect for the individual. In the words of Rorty (1998: 3): 'National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement. Too much national pride can lead to bellicosity and imperialism, just as excessive self respect can produce arrogance.'

If you feel proud, you are happy to be part of 'something', that is also part of your 'self'. Pride is part of a human's 'need to belong' that involves a number of related concerns: caring for offspring, for partners, for a smaller or wider social group, and for institutions such as one's country or one's community of the faithful (Frijda, 2007). Pride is closely related to humiliation; it bears similarities in its relational nature, whereas the feeling of superiority now turns into inferiority. Feeling humiliated may come from resentment, inherent to comparing oneself with others and finding them to have superior power or capacities (Frijda, 2007).

National pride can take many shapes, and could be distinguished on the basis of intensity of the emotions involved. The position that a country occupies on this scale does not directly relate to international success in sport. There is no empirical evidence that indicates the existence of an intrinsic relation between sport success and the role sport plays within a country with regard to national pride. In a comparative study, Evans and Kelley (2002), for example, reveal the significant diversity in the role that sports play in different countries in creating a sense of belonging and pride. Relatively small sporting countries such as New Zealand (26th on last medal index) and Ireland (62nd) rank highly in their pride of national sport heroes. The role of sport success has its own particular meaning in each country; in the case of New Zealand and Ireland, for example, this has to do with a rivalry with Australia and England respectively.

There is some evidence that shows that sport unites people and is capable of generating communal passion and a sense of national identity (Evans and Kelley, 2002; Houlihan, 1997; Smith and Kim, 2006; Wann, 2006; Wong, 2002). However, is it true, as Lechner (2007b: 225) notes, that 'beyond the game, football does little to cement collective identity'. What effects of pride may be measured beyond the game? Some evidence seems to indicate (minor) macro-sociological effects and economical benefits that follow from the positive sentiments caused by sport success (Berument and Yucel, 2005; Edmans et al., 2007). A scientifically based indication of an increase or decrease of national pride following from the results of the Olympic Games (or any other single event) seems to be contradicted by the fact that rankings of national pride are rather stable. Smith and Kim (2006) and Smith and Jarkko (2001) for example, found only moderate changes in national pride during the period between 1995/6 and 2003/04. These results underline the concept of national pride as a rather stable feature. Notwithstanding this stability, it may still be the case that sport plays a crucial role in either maintaining a certain level of national pride or in causing slight changes. The concept of national pride as a relatively stable factor may also be combined with the possibility of rather sudden changes, for example, as a result of events with a large impact (such as '9/11'). In this sense, simply focusing on the impact of sport on national pride has some drawbacks; it always needs to be related to other possible factors that may influence national pride.

## Sport and national identity

Much has been written on the important, if not crucial role that modern sport plays in the sense of belonging to national states. Being a member of a national state can be regarded as a significant part of one's identity. It is also a part that is often 'absent', which particularly comes to the fore in the case of sporting success. In order to experience nationality, one needs exceptional events, celebrations, rituals and ceremonies.

An increasing number of studies focus on modern sport, reflecting and theorizing on complex social phenomena such as globalization, nationalism, transnationalism, cosmopolitanism and glocalization. Sport offers a 'significant subject for global studies, in its dual role as a long-term motor and metric of transnational change' (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2007: 108). One scenario states that in a highly globalized world, we no longer need the national state. Within a globalized society, national states are often conceptualized as 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983), 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) or 'a shield against global pressure' (Maguire, 1994). Sport is often regarded as compensation, a sense of nostalgia or as a cure against the erosion of national identity. Within the other scenario, in a global age, national identities are becoming more and more important. Much of the literature on sport and national identity revolves around this paradox of something that is 'non-existent' and at the same time, thanks to modern sport (heroes), more present than ever.

How does sport contribute to a heightened conscience of nationality? Sport offers a rich source of stories that can in many ways function as a direct mirror of national identity. It seems, but this is also the question posed here, that 'national sports' have more potential to be used as a reflection of nationality than sport events within the Olympic Games.<sup>1</sup> This reflection often has a strong metaphorical character. For example, the French victory in the men's football World Cup 1998 was interpreted as a metaphor for successful multiculturalism. Football became 'a metaphor for an upsurge of general national self-confidence and self-belief' (Dauncy and Hare, 2000: 333). A metaphorical narrative of nationality can be powerful and is not necessarily corrected by circumstances that may contradict this.

Several kinds of mirrors are strengthened and kept alive through national stereotyping in the media (Blain et al., 1993). Rather speculative is the presumption that specific styles of playing (football, for example) reflect nationality (Hand et al., 2000; Winner, 2000). These kinds of descriptions of nationality are not based upon comparison and hypotheses, but become part of the invented tradition itself. Paradoxical to this myth of a national style of play, and of most myths of the uniqueness of a national state, is the fact that what is considered unique is often described in a uniform manner. Dauncy and Hare (2000), for example, characterize the French style, being influenced by the Uruguayans (of the 1924 Olympic Games), as combining artistry, entertainment, virtuosity and the effectiveness and realism of professionals. Although several variations are possible and not all qualifications apply to all nations (the Dutch style has often been described as artistic and entertaining, but without the effectiveness and realism). This also illustrates the paradox of defining the 'unique nationality' in a rather standard manner. 'They express that uniquely superior wholeness in remarkably similar fashion' (Lechner, 2007b: 220). This uniformity underlines the hypotheses of *glocalization*. The 'glocally' constructed uniqueness may be considered a synthesis of the 'global' and the 'local'. Globalization forces

national states to formulate their (supposed) uniqueness, in a manner that is in many ways 'scripted' (standardized). It refers to common and standardized models of identity work and identity discourse in relation to national state identity (Meyer, 2000).

The attempt to give each state a supposedly distinctive national 'identity' is not simply a desire that happens to grow locally but instead stems from a global script for how to build a state and bind its citizens as members of one imagined community. (Lechner, 2007a: 358)

How speculative the stories of uniqueness may be, these kinds of identifications with nations are to be taken seriously, because they are, or become, real in their consequences. Even if the mirror tells us something else, we can still blame the mirror that it does not show us 'who we really are'. The fact that a specific mirror of national discourse exist means, in this case, that each new football game can be reflected in this mirror. The 'national mirror' works, not only by telling us who we are, but also by 'showing' the deviations from the idealized picture of a national style. 'Even if national identity is fiction, or an "invented tradition", the very fact that it has been used to define the situation of states makes it real in its consequences' (Lechner, 2007a: 357).

With Elias we could argue that the combination of stories, which are told about the distinctiveness of national states, reflect 'deep-seated national habitus codes' (Elias, 1989). These national habitus codes are not just inventions or arbitrary constructions. These codes are more or less restricted and sculptured by its history, as well as environmental and geographical boundaries. National identities are, for example, not defined by, but certainly limited through specific 'national sport spaces' (Horak and Spitaler, 2003). According to Barthes (2007 [1960]), a national sport is a sport that rises out of the substance of a nation, out of its soil and climate. About kids that are playing ice hockey, Barthes writes: 'The children seem to be fighting, but they are merely learning to inhabit their country' (p. 47).

Returning to the question of how sport success could really affect or even transform conceptions of national pride, one must ask how we can (conceptually) understand the relation between medals and national pride, other than as just a supposed linear causality: more medals mean more national pride? Much of the popular and journalistic writing on sports contributes to the conception of sport success as a direct mirror of national identity. Another discourse on sport and pride, however, suggests that national pride is not so much a mirror, but instead something that can be 'filled' or 'fuelled', for example, by winning more medals. The dominant sport political discourse is built around this 'bucket-notion' of pride. We will further ask how this dominant orientation and an ambition such as 'being in the top 10 of the medal index' relates to other ways of experiencing sport, and possibly, other ways of feeding and confirming feelings of national pride. How does the political focus on the number of medals relate to the concrete stories of individual sporting performances?

## **National identity: medals versus stories**

Why is it that sport – and much less art, music or writing – is generally regarded as the main vehicle for nationalistic sentiments? It can be argued that there is something intrinsic about sport that makes it suitable to be used for the sake of 'national pride'. In very general terms this relates to the standardization of rules on a global scale and the ability to arouse

a wide variety of emotions. Sport is, according to Barthes (2007 [1960]), a spectacle that 'serves the primary social function that theatre once did in antiquity, collecting a city or nation within a shared experience'. It is not so much being proud of some kind of 'national essence'. It is primarily about shared experiences.

In the terminology of Elias and Dunning (1986: 90), sport can be regarded a 'mimetic' activity, 'a social enclave where excitement can be enjoyed without its socially and personally dangerous implications'. Sport offers direct and univocal confrontations that often result in a clear dichotomy between superior versus inferior performance. Moreover, sport has the capacity to produce 'numerically translatable events' (Brown, 1992: 55; quoted in Morgan, 2000: 62). A wide variety of sport narratives can be translated into statistics and national classifications.

Without discussing all intrinsic elements that may explain the 'unifying capacities' of sport, one other element should be mentioned here as well, specifically the similarities that sport bears to war (Jansen and Sabo, 1994). Sport can, for several reasons, be conceptualized as an 'alternative to war'. This comparison relates to the possibilities sports offers to show a direct battle between nations. This battle often contains the logic of a zero-sum game; if 'we' win, 'you' lose, followed by the emotional polarity between pride and pleasure on one side and sadness or even shame and humiliation on the other. Direct confrontations between nations, in particular in national sports, have the ability to arouse strong emotions in a direct manner, and in a less direct way to create a sense of belonging and national pride.

The question is how these intrinsic qualities of sport relate to a more quantified comparison of countries, as is the case in a medal index. One of the most popular reductions of all Olympic performances is the overall comparison of nations on the Olympic medal index. Although one can argue about the objectivity of any ranking, there are some dominant ways of ranking sport success on a global scale. The index for Olympic medals that is most often used is based upon the counting of gold medals first, silver medals second and bronze medals third. This so-called *lexicographic ranking* ignores the total number of medals.

After the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, most American media ranked the US as first based upon the total amount of medals (110 versus 100 for China).<sup>2</sup> Related to this lack of a global standard for a medal index, Johnson (2008) wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*: 'Despite all the high-tech clocks, cameras and sensors, the Olympics still can't give a definitive answer to one basic question: Who is winning the medals race?'

Various methods can be used to measure the performances of elite sports per nation (Bernard and Busse, 2004; Churilov and Flitman, 2006). The best variables to predict performances are population and economic wealth.<sup>3</sup> Each method of ranking has certain limitations in what it is supposed to reflect. The medals index does have major symbolic meanings attached to it. The fact that both China and the US rank their own country first is an indication of the importance given to that index. Internationally, the focus on a medal index is one of the few similarities in the news coverage of the Olympic Games. Although the IOC does not officially recognize the Olympic medal table as an order of merit, there is a significant and global increase in importance of the Olympic medal index. It plays a major role in the media and the rankings are often used to increase investments in sport.

This increasing attention devoted to a medal index, however, does not necessarily mean that the public at large is interested as well. It may even be the case that an increasing investment in elite sport has an adverse effect. In the former DDR, for example, the sport successes were enormous, but the increased number of medals did not lead to greater

national pride (Grix, 2008). Elite sport became such an evident political instrument that the population in general did not feel involved in the performances or even felt some hostility towards the elite athletes who received preferential treatment. The system of elite sport was 'completely cut off and separate from everyday sport', which led to a 'decline of the citizens' acceptance of the lavishly funded elite sports' (Grix, 2008: 408–09).

A medal index may be a good instrument for sport policy, but does it have a function in the arousal of emotions, preceding and accompanying the experience of national pride? Does it have the potential to develop into a narrative itself? A narrative is a specific form of representation, one that accentuates the sequential or syntagmatic nature of meaning (Bruner, 1991; Knight et al., 2005). Narratives consist of different interpretative and explanatory frames, for example, for anticipating the next match, formulating expectations for success or for attributing failure, blame (in case of disappointment), national pride or luck (Jackson and Ponc, 2001). A narrative is more than just one specific sport story. It can be generalized from specific contexts and classified or categorized based upon its specific structure and script. The most important thing about sport narratives is that it is structured around uncertainty. Sport promises an answer to the question 'who will win?' (Whannel, 2008). Sport has an implicit narrative structure that allows for all kinds of representations that are however not only structured by the code winning or losing, but could also involve the winning or losing of respect (Whannel, 2008).

So, can an entire and prolonged event like the Olympic Games, which is structured around many disciplines, also be regarded a narrative, preceded by expectations and followed by relief, confirmation or disappointment? A medal index can be understood as a direct reflection of the performances in the Olympic Games, which can be intermixed with the stories of each medal, even with 'lost medals' and stories of disappointment. The interest in medal indexes is fed by the expected ranking that develops into common knowledge. An increasing number of research studies have been published prior to the start of the Olympics, which predict how many medals a country *should* win. Each country has their own range of expected rankings, related to variables, such as population and wealth, as well as performances in the past.

Both media and sport authorities make the audience believe that athletes are influenced by a general narrative about medals and the performances of colleague athletes. This discourse on 'collective national performance' often contradicts the experiences of athletes themselves. Mark Huizinga, former judo gold winner, for example, says: 'And the idea that all of us together influence the Olympic Games is real nonsense. It really doesn't make a difference to me whether a swimmer or cyclist wins gold or not' (Van Holland and Stouwdam, 2008). Rens Blom, 2005 World Champion in the pole vault similarly explains: 'If you later read that it is going well or badly with the Netherlands. Then I think "with whom?" That medal mirror is complete nonsense, I always ignore it. Every sportsman has his own story to tell' (Van Holland and Stouwdam, 2008).

Nevertheless, individual athletes, who are primarily focused on their own performances, are increasingly under pressure to show a greater awareness that their medal could contribute to a rise on the national medal index. In the media, athletes are asked to explain general trends in the performances of a whole nation.

In their comparative analysis of what they indicate as 'narratives of disappointment', Knight et al. (2005) analysed the specific scripts of expectancy and disappointment in the media of Canada and New Zealand in response to the 2000 Olympic Games. Prospective



framing, speculations about the likely outcomes, is crucial for the experience of emotions, related to winning or losing. It 'serves to set the agenda for audience interest and expectations. [. . .] The pre-contest narrative acts as a benchmark against which actual performances are interpreted.' These expectations 'serve to focus attention on certain athletes in particular and translate failure into disappointment by relating the objectivity of results to the subjectivity of meaning and feeling' (p. 41).

Failures to meet the expectations can be framed in terms of loss and 'nostalgia for a golden past' (Knight et al., 2005: 27). It may sometimes even result in an apparent crisis of national self-confidence (Blain et al., 1993). Sports journalists and sport authorities create a variety of narratives that offer different explanatory interpretative frames, which provide accounts of causes and effects. Explanatory frames ('why did we lose/win?') can be extended from the individual athlete to the coaches, sport institutions, training facilities, funding or even to even broader categories, such as 'the mentality' or 'vitality' of a country. Discourses on the number of medals to be won, which precede the Olympic Games generate 'narratives of expectancy', objectified by the scientific research that indicates relations between sport funding and the number of medals that a country is capable of winning.

Besides the medals themselves, this 'narrative of expectancy' also has the potential to develop into a mirror of national identity. This is what *we*, as a nation, are worth. This is what *we should* win; otherwise *we* fail. Failing to meet the expectations in many cases instigates a narrative of blame. Who is to blame varies and is closely related to the ways that expectations have been embedded prior to each competition. Whatever the final ranking on a medal index is, each narrative (of expectancy) that is focused on the medal index, more or less contributes to the experience of national identity. It creates more awareness that there is a general game going on, transcending all individual sports and performances. Even medals that are won by foreign athletes (by origin) add to the total number of medals won by one nation.

The indexing of medals itself favours a more political discourse on nationality over the more expressive function of sport. According to Morgan (2000), this statistical bent of sport reduces sport as a 'morally rich language of nationalism'.

While this sort of statistical evocation of nation-ness makes for handy referencing and easy comparison, one which allows us to rank nations on a global athletic scale according to their athletic prowess – much as they are ranked on a global economic scale according to their GNP, the argument is that it does not make for strong, morally robust stories, since it limits what sports are able to tell us to what can be plotted on this scale. (pp. 62–3)

There are not many events that are comparable to the Olympic Games in terms of the amount of stories that are (re)told. Many of these may be told as individual stories, but may function as an expression of nationality as well. As such, most of these stories remain within the boundaries of a nation. Only the extraordinary stories (such as the eight gold medals won by US swimmer Michael Phelps and the world records at the 100 metres by Jamaican Usain Bolt) reach people on a global scale. Each country cultivates specific victories or medals that have much expressive value, and in some respects a greater capacity to fuel a sense of national pride.

What is likely to become part of a collective sport memory related to the 2008 Olympic Games is the fact that for the first time China ranked first on the medal index

(according to the most commonly used method of ranking). Without a doubt, this ranking has significant symbolic value and fuels international prestige. However, if asked for a story related to one of the hundred Chinese medals, few people outside of China will be able to give an answer. Even stronger, one of the most emotional stories related to a Chinese athlete was the withdrawal of the 110m hurdler, Liu Xiang. At that time he was one of the most celebrated athletes in China because of his gold medal in the 2004 Olympics in Athens in a prestigious discipline. His withdrawal, watched by a completely filled stadium of Chinese fans, seemed to cause a moment of ‘national shame’. On this occasion, pride functioned as a ‘digital notion’; it was there when he won gold in Athens 2004, but absent when he failed.

## Dutch sporting pride

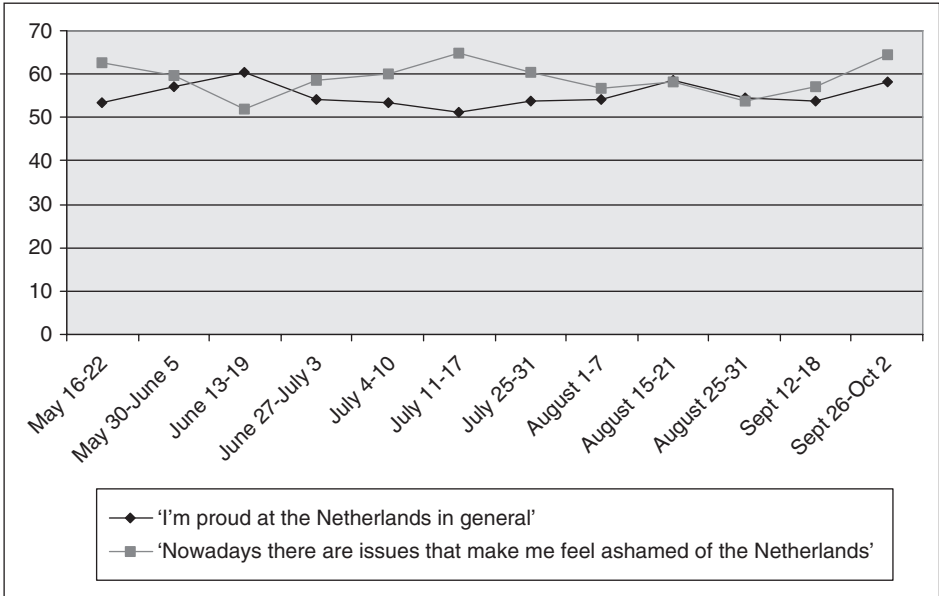
To measure the possible effects of national sporting success on feelings of national belonging and pride, we conducted a survey during the ‘sport summer’ of 2008 among a representative sample of the adult Dutch population ( $N = 350$ ), with 12 repeating measurements. Within each measurement, the respondents were asked various questions about their sense of national pride and belonging and its relationship to sporting success. Respondents were, for example, asked to what extent they agreed with the following theses: ‘I’m proud of the Netherlands in general’, ‘I feel a strong sense of belonging to the Netherlands’ and ‘Nowadays there are issues that make me feel ashamed of the Netherlands’. Respondents were also asked to what extent they felt proud of the Netherlands with respect to specific aspects (see Table 1).

Furthermore, shortly after the four major global sports events of 2008 (the men’s European Football Championships, 7–29 June; the Tour de France, 23 June–6 July; Wimbledon, 5–27 July and the Olympic Games, 8–24 August), respondents were asked to what extent they followed the respective event in the media and how proud they felt of the performances of the Dutch participants. A follow up measurement is planned for winter 2009, summer 2009 and winter 2010 (Winter Olympic Games).

The first results from our survey indicated that, according to the Dutch population, outstanding sport performances by Dutch athletes contributes the most to a sense of national pride, compared to other aspects in society that may contribute to national pride (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Aspects that contribute to a sense of national pride in Dutch adult population, in percentage (completely) agree (cumulative over 12 measurements, 15 May–2 October 2008)

National pride in:	
Sport performances	76
Scientific and technological performances	74
System of social security	56
Performances art and literature	53
Economical performance	51
Democracy	47
Honest and equal treatment of all groups in society	38



**Figure 1.** Senses of national pride and shame in sport summer 2008 (percentage Dutch adults 18+)

Feelings of pride and shame are related to several socio-demographic characteristics, especially age and ethnicity. Older people and ethnic Dutch are more proud of the Netherlands than younger age groups and non-Western ethnicities respectively. National pride is also positively related to sports participation. Some 58 percent of those who agreed to have participated in sports the week before the measurement, felt proud about the Netherlands, as compared with 53 percent of those who had not been active in sport. In Figure 1, the results of feelings of national pride and shame are presented over the total period between 15 May and 2 October.

The graph shows relatively stable levels of expressed national pride and shame. Nevertheless, a small increase in the feelings of national pride can be observed between the first and third measurement, exceeding the percentage of people that experience national shame. In this period, narratives of expectation also play a role, relating to the chances of the Dutch men’s football team in the European Championships. As a national sport, the EC attracts many spectators (live and media) and is known to boost a sense of national identity and belonging among many citizens (‘the orange legion’), that is barely present in everyday life. At the peak of the measured level of expressed national pride (and lowest level of shame), the Dutch team had just clearly beaten France and Italy (finalists of the World Cup in 2006) with an attractive style of play. The ‘narratives of expectation’ and the positive results in the first round, which were above expectation, may have affected, or maybe triggered national feelings of pride and temporarily suppressed feelings of shame. However, the Dutch lost in the second round and therefore a possible longer-lasting impact of winning the European Football Championships could

**Table 2.** Feelings of national pride, shame and belonging related to the media involvement of expressed pride about Dutch athletes in four global summer sports events of 2008, in percentage (completely) agree

	'I'm proud of the Netherlands in general'	'Nowadays there are issues that make me feel ashamed of the Netherlands'	'I feel a strong sense of belonging to the Netherlands'
<i>Followed sport event to some extent through media</i>			
EC men's football			
yes	58	59	67
no	39	62	62
Tour de France			
yes	61	57	56
no	47	60	57
Wimbledon			
yes	61	62	70
no	47	59	63
Olympic Games			
yes	60	55	64
no	31	63	37
<i>Pride in Dutch athletes</i>			
EC men's football			
yes	61	56	74
no	47	68	51
Tour de France			
yes	65	53	70
no	57	67	63
Wimbledon			
yes	69	57	72
no	61	62	72
Olympic Games			
yes	60	55	65
no	24	73	35

not be measured. Another small rise in the expressed feelings of national pride can be witnessed during the period of the Olympic Games, although again the heightened sense of pride does not continue once the sports event is over.

Table 2 shows the relations between expressed national pride, shame and belonging and the extent to which the respondents followed the four global sports events in the summer 2008 in the media and the feelings of pride of the respective performances of the Dutch participants.

People who followed the sport events in the media and those who acknowledged that they were proud of the Dutch athletes in the events are more likely to express feelings of

national pride and belonging. The relations with national shame are inverted. The highest correlations between sporting pride and national pride are witnessed with respect to the large-scale events, namely the European Football Championships and the Olympic Games.

The differences in pride resulting from the men's European Football Championships and the Olympic Games are also interesting. The Olympic Games have a great potential in terms of 'narrative capacities'. The European Football Championships consists of a large number of games as well, but is structured within one overall contest; a contest that is over when the national team has either lost or won the cup. The structure of the European Football Championships consists of one primary storyline, resulting in one clear (anti-)climax. For most people there is one primary team to follow, there is one competition and a limited amount of scenarios. The longer a national team remains successful in the tournament, the more people will be drawn into the celebration of national pride. The Olympic Games are much more fragmented; medals, victories and ceremonies accompany the whole event.

Singular events have a greater storytelling capacity than any medal counting could. Each country cultivates specific victories or medals that have much expressive value, and in some respects a greater capacity to fuel a sense of national pride. For many Dutch spectators, the gold medal of long distance swimmer (10 kilometre marathon swimming) Maarten van der Weijden was one of the most cherished moments of the Beijing 2008 Olympics. Not only was the race itself worth watching and ended in a spectacular sprint, but the entire story of Van der Weijden, who beat leukaemia in 2002, gave his victory heroic elements that transcended the (popularity of the) specific swimming event itself. Van der Weijden, also known as the 'Lance of the Low Countries', was given a 30 to 50 percent chance of survival, but completely recovered after stem cell transplants. After his victory his story covered the entire front page of the *China Daily* under the heading 'Miracle Man'. This story follows the narrative structure of the inspirational victor and survivor. Just like Lance Armstrong, he went through triumph, tragedy, transformation and transcendence to accomplish unprecedented heights (Butryn, 2003). In terms of 'Dutch prestige' this one medal had a far more direct impact than the 12th place on the medal index. The narrative about medal rankings more or less unifies the performances of one nation and is able to encompass the whole event. However, it has little expressive potential to make people more involved during the event itself.

National pride related to a national sport (like football in Europe) differs in many ways from the pride related to an event like the Olympic Games. The medal index in the Olympic Games remains secondary, without a similar climax in the case of the Football Championships. Ignoring the ranking of medals, each nation can still focus on their own athletes and outstanding performances. Sport performances that arouse emotions of national pride are spread over a period of three weeks. Notwithstanding the fact that a large majority of people did at one point feel proud with respect to the performances of Dutch athletes during the Olympic Games, it only slightly affected the general experience of national pride.

The respondents who expressed pride related to Dutch performances in the Tour de France and Wimbledon (mainly older men) also express the highest sense of national pride, even when there were no notable achievements. These results confirm the positive correlations between sports pride and national pride, but do not indicate a positive effect

of national sporting achievements on national pride and belonging. Rather the opposite explanation seems more applicable: national pride and belonging precede the expression of sporting pride.

The results also indicate that national pride and belonging can best be regarded as rather stable characteristics of people and countries that are positively related to sporting pride, but not in a causal way. Feelings of national pride may be triggered by sport performances, but can only slightly be heightened by outstanding performances by athletes, let alone 'bought' by investing more money in an elite sports system to increase the amount of Olympic medals.

## Conclusion

Sport serves as a powerful vehicle for national identity and national pride. Sport is able to unite people in many ways. This could explain the rising global investments in elite sports and the growing importance of the Olympic medal index. This seems obvious, but is surprising as well given the little attention that has been paid thus far to the meaning of a medal index itself and the possible effects that a certain ranking on this medal index could have on the experience of national pride. The direct impact of a medal ranking on national pride seems to be minor. It is not the medals themselves that create a sense of belonging, but merely the stories related to some of the outstanding performances.

Sport events and sport success could be related to national pride in several ways. In this article, three aspects of national pride were distinguished:

- 1) Pride as 'bucket-notion', that is continually changing and may also be 'leaking' in certain circumstances and which turns into shame. This concept of pride is often implicit within the political rhetoric that is used to increase sport funding with the general aim of winning more medals ('more medals means more pride'). However, there does not seem to be empirical evidence for this – primarily quantitatively understood – concept of pride.
- 2) Pride is also considered a 'digital notion'. National pride has a rather stable quantity, it is either there or it is not, it can be either celebrated and vividly experienced or not, depending on the circumstances. This notion contradicts the (political) role that sport is generally meant to play, and the policy of increasing the sport budget in order to win more medals for the good of a sense of national pride.
- 3) National pride is a rather stable characteristic of countries, but there are specific possibilities (such as sport success) that may lead to minor and temporary fluctuations. This last notion seems to be supported the most by the empirical data presented here. In order to have a positive effect on national pride, identifying with sport success must be preceded by a sense of belonging to a specific nation. The strength of this 'sense of belonging' can vary, depending on the importance of the event and depending on the role that narratives of expectation play in the anticipation before the start of the event.

In terms of lasting effects (beyond the 'immediate effect') it is reasonable to assume that there are certain limits in the role that sport success can have in creating a sense

of nationality. This can be very well illustrated by the extremely successful sport system in the former DDR (the 'sports miracle'), where sport success did not relate to an increase of national pride. Interesting for further research would be the question whether there are any explanatory parameters that could in any way predict a certain limit of sport-related pride. Illustrated by the DDR case it seems reasonable that, if there is such a limit, this would be related to the relationship between elite sport and mass sport, and with the sympathy for elite athletes, also when they fail. Crucial for the lasting effect of individual sport narratives, is the experience that the athlete is still 'one of us'.

The Olympic Games offer a wide variety of opportunities to experience national pride. A medal index could develop into a narrative in itself that is in various ways similar in structure to an individual sport narrative (including 'pre-event expectations', anticipation, feeling of pride, disappointment). However, the ranking of Olympic medals does not have any of the potential that the direct confrontation of one country against the other (in a major national sport) could have. Nevertheless, it does play a more significant role in the political and international context and is increasingly considered (in whatever variant) as a benchmark for national success. The rationality of the predictions (how many medals a country *should* win) further strip the potential of being aroused or surprised, the kind of emotions that accompany the direct experience of national pride and a sense of belonging to a certain community. Whereas medal rankings are ideally constructed as a zero-sum game (your winning a medal is losing a medal for us, 'our' market share means less market share for the other) this is, however, not necessarily the logic of national pride, which seems to be a much more stable feature of countries.

## Notes

1. Olympic sports are those sports that are official disciplines in both the summer and winter Olympic Games. National sports are those sports that attract the most attention within one country. These national sports may also be popular sports on a global scale (like soccer) but are not necessarily performed or popular in a global arena like the Olympics. A limited amount of national sports also attract huge national interest during the (Winter) Olympic Games, such as Olympic skiing in Norway or Olympic speed skating in the Netherlands. Some of the huge competitions in the world (such as baseball in the US and soccer around the world) have managed to restrict the popularity of the Olympic variant of the sport.
2. Several combinations of both methods are possible, by adding a weighing factor for each medal, for example by giving four points for each gold medal, two points for a silver and one for a bronze medal. When the number of medals is just related to the number of inhabitants, this would be the top three of the Beijing Olympics: 1. Jamaica, 2. Bahrain and 3. Mongolia.
3. Based on an analysis of several ways to measure national performance in elite sport, De Bosscher et al. (2008) reach the conclusion that market share is the best indicator of a nation's performance. Medals (or other sport performances) are measured as a proportion of the total amount of medals to win. A World Sporting Index, based upon a market share, may be the 'most robust and controllable measure of overall performance' and a 'useful barometer of the broad balance of power within world sport' (p. 60).

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