

# The Fairy Tale of Professional Maltese Sport: Exploring Obstacles and Hindrances in Local Elite Sport Development

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**Abstract:** It is an anomaly to hear of a Maltese athlete who earns a living solely from sport. Culturally, it is almost considered nonsensical for an athlete to consider pursuing sport as a profession. In contrast, Cyprus, Iceland, Luxembourg, and Liechtenstein are four comparable countries that form part of the European Small States and are all under the one million inhabitants mark. Notably, however, each can boast of a number of professional athletes and lucrative results at the highest pinnacle of sports, the Olympic Games. Indeed, Liechtenstein, probably one of the smallest states in Europe with a modest population of 38,244 as opposed to Malta's 416,388 (at the time of writing), has very recently won bronze at the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang, South Korea—their ninth at the winter edition. These anomalies beg the question: is a Maltese world-class athlete a character from a fairy tale? Or is this a sociocultural issue? The themes explored in this paper highlight a number of contrasting, yet impactful differences between the micro-states. Accordingly, using the Malta situation as a lens, we theoretically explore what may impede some populations from being equally competitive as other European micro-states.

**Keywords:** European micro-states; elite sport policy; socio-culture; strategy development; elite sport; sporting culture

## Introduction

This paper is focused on the state of performance sport on the Mediterranean island of Malta; specifically, why this particular culture (in contrast to others of similar size) seems to be punching below its weight in conducting an in-depth consideration of this perhaps parochial issue. However, we see significant potential for the identification and dissemination of positive messages on systems and structures which may be applied to other small states. Indeed, some lessons may even be appropriate for larger countries. Accordingly, we see this theme in general as a valid case for study, whilst addressing the need for generalizable guidance, through the lens of a specific comparative case study.

As reported by the island's media, local sporting entities and individuals have both felt the need to make assumptions about why Malta is falling short in elite sport (Borg 2015; Sansone 2018; Diacono 2018). Immediately, one might state that specific literature is very scarce so, before any conclusions can be reached, an in-depth study on Malta's sporting backdrop is essential. Research on Maltese sport and its athletes has increased (Mangion 2018; Muscat 2017); however, authors have preferred to focus on the betterment of individual physiological and psychological characteristics rather than conducting a critical appraisal of the context. Indeed locally, it is common practice to look at what happens on the field, but rarely what happens off it. Local research has never assessed the possible

challenges and opportunities within a *socio-cultural* or *organisational* setting, nor have we critically evaluated the actions of the more powerful groups. As we hope to demonstrate, this mistake has limited policy and practice through an overly limited focus which has, in turn, led to poor planning and decision-making. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to highlight how to parametrise the challenges faced by a small country like Malta to create and sustain professional athletes. As above, we intend that this case study will offer suggestions for wider applications, as well as specific actions for the first author's home nation.

Reflecting these aims, both specific and generalizable, the following three sections present some relevant constructs for this issue. Firstly, before posing any questions concerning the possibility of developing sport locally, it is important to shed light on how and why political decisions are made, keeping in mind prominent foundational socio-cultural theories. Whether one is involved in sport, or interested in culture and society, one must empathise with the fact that each individual has a different way of interpreting human actions, situations, and events. Therefore, relevant characteristics of successful countries will be discussed and contrasted as well as the values and policies that define and shape their enthusiasm for successful sporting prowess.

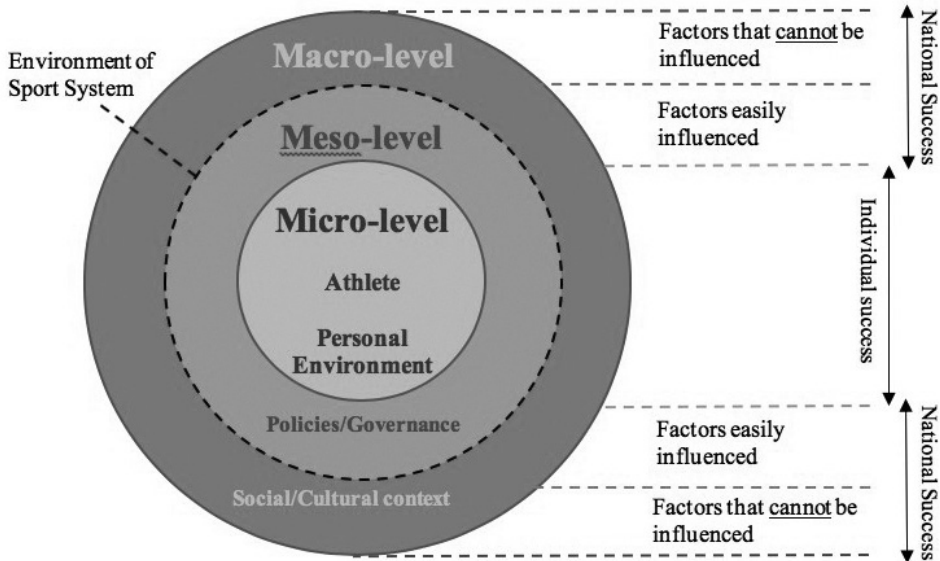
When policy researchers attempt to compare and contrast differences in sport participation, nations often place themselves in traditional groupings, based on variables such as population size. For this reason, the second section will narrow down our selection of countries to European micro-states. Our paper seeks to compare these states by contrasting and making spatial comparisons across national boundaries, demonstrated through varied levels of funding, gross domestic product (GDP), and their sporting outcomes, whilst keeping in mind the nations' history, cultures, and their sport policies.

Thirdly, the Maltese elite sport system itself will be discussed, underpinned by insights from foreign sport policies, which will lead to an array of rhetorical and open-ended questions regarding the occurrences, limitations, and challenges that Malta is currently facing. Examples of such questions are how sport is portrayed in the national Maltese psyche (Bairner 1996), how decisions taken by local governing bodies and the country's policy makers influence local elite sport performance, how sport and exercise is portrayed by the Maltese government, and the perceived value of local elite sport.

### *Tools for Understanding Politics and Social Culture in Sport*

The number of medals won at the Olympic Games has been described by politicians and the media as the best measurement method in high performance sport. Perhaps as a consequence, events at the highest standard have now become a contest of "systems" (Heinilä 1982). In order to understand the *reasoning* behind any form of state sport policy, however, the most prudent decision would be to appreciate the political and administrative structures as well as the states' history, different cultural values, traditions, and the relationships between all stakeholders involved (Andersen and Ronglan 2012; Bergsgard et al. 2007; Green and Houlihan 2005; Houlihan and Green 2008).

In fact, international comparison might be the only way to optimally examine how countries achieve international sporting success (De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg, and Shibli 2006). Such a study will help us provide ways of interpreting and understanding the (at times) complex world of elite sport. In this regard, the model proposed by De Bosscher and De Knop (2003) may provide some structure to this complexity (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** A model showing the factors which determine success (De Bosscher and De Knop 2003)

Given the many approaches that can be taken to envisage sport in society, sport is seldom neutral in context, and understanding why and where different perspectives come from is absolutely necessary. Classical sociological theory suggests that individuals are shaped through their cultural roots, their meaningful relationships or “according to the expectation in particular activities” (Granovetter 1986: 481-510). Moreover, sociological thinking may contribute to the formation of policy, provide the reader with an insightful approach to critique, as well as put away any myths about local sport. During our reading, we kept in mind the simple rationale that no individual, movement, group, or form of governance is able to single-handedly improve elite sport in Malta. Instead, all these factors are points of entry or contribution which may only show a way forward when considered collectively. Furthermore, consideration of different theoretical approaches will also allow us to understand how everybody has contributed, is contributing, and will eventually contribute to the functioning or dysfunction of society in sport.

Research at the macro level is easily quantifiable and accessible in comparison to studies and research at the meso level, with the latter being less summative and making it more of a challenge to analyse, compare, and test the value of any given policy. Indeed, research highlights how studies of factors which affect high-level sport at the macro level have decreased over the past few decades (Bernard and Busse 2000; Stamm and Lamprecht 2000/2001). In brief, we may be experiencing an increasing trend to consider the meso level and cultural factors as important causative elements.

Although factors at the meso level are mostly built upon local sport policies and governance, political systems and policy styles may also reflect global developments. That being said, the winning athlete or team would need to rely on the “performance” of their *national* system, with that system responsible for coordinating the way the country’s resources and tools are productively utilised (De Bosscher et al. 2006) and therefore, by extension, the macro-level factors we discussed earlier. In addition, this level is the one of the three that can be most impactfully altered or changed. *Ex aequo*, athletes have a better chance of

success through effective policy and wise investment decisions. Furthermore, the question of why countries make certain decisions continues to derive from a diverse set of national cultural values and traditions, political and administrative structures, and relationships between governmental and civil society sport organisations (Bergsgard, Houlihan, Mangset, Nødland, and Rommedetvedt 2007). Consequently, it comes as a surprise to us that only a small number of studies have been carried out to examine such socio-structural factors (Eising 1996; Stamm and Lamprecht 2000/2001; Van Bottenburg 2000), or to what end national organisations spend such large amounts of their funds on policies which cannot be empirically tested. Indeed, as highlighted by Oakley and Green (2001: 100), “Further research is required to better understand the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ this tendency occurs”. They continue to emphasize that studies over a longer period of time are necessary.

This lack notwithstanding, the growth in interest over the past decades in aspects of sport politics and policy is a clear demonstration that these tools’ values and structure have supported the achievement of several sporting super powers (Bergsgard et al. 2007; Bloyce and Smith 2010). In order to compete with the world’s best and be successful in reaching the highest possible level of performance, the sport system must be centred on this rationale (Tangen 2004). That being said, the past few decades have witnessed a growing number of similarities in state sport policies. Looking closely at successful countries may allow us to become better educated on their local policy decisions (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Rose 2005). On another note, Heidenheimer et al. (1990) stipulate that becoming knowledgeable on foreign policy practices could result in the total understanding of home policies. However, this discursive section will look beyond elite sport monoculture or these “diminishing contrasts”, investigating instead how less successful countries like Malta might learn and apply relevant strategies from the more successful (Green and Houlihan 2005).

Offering advice on how copying may be optimally employed, Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) state clearly that “borrowers” should focus on “lender” nations which have a history of success. As an example, in 2008, the Italian Olympic team put forward 344 participants for the highly anticipated world games. 170 of these athletes formed part of Italy’s “military contingent”. Seeing how well Italy fared (9th on the medal list, with 26 total medals), the Armed Forces of Malta (AFM), alongside Sport Malta (then called the Council for Sport), introduced a similar initiative whereby elite athletes would be able to serve as soldiers whilst carrying out their necessary training. A total of four athletes joined the army, three of whom formed part of their respective national team, whilst two were preparing for the London 2012 Olympics (the corresponding author being one party); however, the outcomes were not as intended. In short, the unsupportive organisation and infrastructure of the scheme led to a failure in qualifying, and each athlete involved abandoned the scheme (The Malta Independent 2011).

Perhaps relevant to this exemplar, Hall (1986) argues that the impact of an idea is directly related to the strength of the organisation, challenging the rationalist thought that ideas are an independent variable in the policy process. In uncritically adopting the Italian practice to Malta, local administrators might have forgotten the possibility that happenings in one country might be different in another (an example of this is the possibly uncritical import of Australian systems and structures in the early design of the UK sport system – c.f. Collins and Cruickshank 2012). In addition to the potential of putting together new and innovative policy proposals, imported programmes must give the necessary weighting to the local obstacles found at home (Rose 2005) in the hope of avoiding learning the “wrong” lesson, such as the one discussed above. We must keep in mind that no kind of element or notion discussed here can be reformed by sport policy in the short term. At a logical level, you simply cannot impose a champion mentality or a medal winning culture on a country through policy alone.

People's attitudes, beliefs, intentions and goals, feelings, thoughts, and behaviours do not arise in a social vacuum. Rather, they are influenced by the social milieu. Social psychology uses different scientific methods to construct and test theories in an organised way, albeit at times the concepts used are deemed too abstract. To mention a few underlying stereotypes, we might look into Australia's great love for sport, which many say is the reason for their past success. In a similar light, we may also assume that Norway's high volunteering rate, Germany's grit (Bergsgard et al. 2007), and the Dutch focus on pre-determined objectives (Van Praet Rooms, De Bosscher and De Knop 2005) are all valid topics for consideration. Notably in this regard, De Bosscher et al. (2006) continue to state that a country's distinctive traits cannot be accurately summated, nor determine the importance, complexity or the time involved to reach such a desirable state.

At the micro level, one will find the involvement of athletes and their respective coaches. These main stakeholders, coupled with their personal/genetic qualities, are believed to be easier to investigate than to compare states at the meso level: hence the volume of research carried out in order to investigate the factors which are proposed to lead athletes towards the top (Conzelmann and Nagel 2003; De Bosscher and De Knop 2003/2004; Duffy et al. 2001; Gibbons et al. 2003; Greenleaf et al. 2001; Nys et al. 2002; Unierzyski et al. 2003; Van Bottenburg 2000; Van Bottenburg et al. 2004). The combination of genetic build-up and environmental factors, as well as the desirable physical state of an athlete, is believed to be the way an individual might reach the highest peak of sporting success (Seppänen 1981). At times, however, the world of sport suggests that physiology and individual psychology alone are unable to uncover the most peculiar of stories. Of course, these factors must also be seen as an interactive or nested whole, especially given that some form of ripple effect could theoretically take place across all three levels. Indeed, in an ideal structure, the three levels we have discussed will continuously act collectively and should never be segregated from the social or cultural frameworks of the country (De Bosscher et al. 2006).

In view of our preliminary observations, a select amount of literature investigates how large state investments, funding, and sport policy are directly proportional to success in elite sport. However, micro-states like Malta might have other pressing priorities. Although results are hardly summable, choosing the best direction for policy and practice is a challenging task for any government or agency (De Bosscher et al. 2006). It is for this reason that a better understanding of the cultural and social context is needed, especially since research and studies on culture and collective basis of sports performance are limited. Such a comprehensive coverage is also important to avoid the self-fulfilling outcomes from survivorship bias. Indeed, Bailey and Collins (2013) claim that signs of success within a system are often merely an illusion. In fact, they continue to state that "there are no ways of knowing who might have succeeded through different systems, and who... (if) selected from the system... might have (under different circumstances) gone on to achieve high performance" (Bailey and Collins 2013: 249).

### *When Small is Beautiful*

The fundamental notion behind macro-level studies is that each sporting nation has a fair chance to produce the best athletes (Grimes et al. 1974; Kiviahio and Makela 1978; Levine 1974; Morton 2002). Nonetheless, it is clear that the richest and most populated countries continue to find themselves on top of the medal tables (Bernard & Buse 2000; De Bosscher et al. 2003a/2003b; De Bosscher et al. 2008; Johnson and Ali 2002; Kiviahio and Makela 1978; Levine 1974; Morton 2002; Novikov and Maximenko 1972; Suen 1992; Van Bottenburg 2000;). In sport, 'size *does* matter', especially when we consider that, of the 47 (204 in total) countries with a population under one million people which participated in the 2012 Olympic Games, only three won a medal. Of course, the games help to give the smallest of states the rare opportunity of being shoulder to shoulder with the world's best.

Pragmatically, however, according to recent estimates, the USA have a little over 30 million participants in basketball alone (Anon 2017), with a total GDP of around \$19.8 trillion.<sup>1</sup> Malta's GDP as of 2020 lies close to the \$20.6 billion figure, whilst an underrepresented number of 93,767<sup>2</sup> Maltese citizens carry out some form of intensive exercise during their week. Even if these figures are inaccurate, they provide an idea of the sizable difference in participant numbers. Having presented the above topic of population, however, one might argue that the state's total population is irrelevant should the percentage of *active* citizens be greater.

One could argue that it is sensible to delimit comparisons to countries of equivalent size. According to Commonwealth studies, a country with a figure of under 1.5 million people would be referred to as a 'micro-state' (Bailes 2009; Vital 1967). Albeit conceptually simple, the so-called micro-states, that is, the smallest of the small states (Neemia 1995), are not so simple to define and also hard to find (Malta is too small to be included in world maps). There are countless opinions regarding the definition of a small/micro-state (Duursma 1996; Maas 2009; Sutton 2011). To put this trying scenario into perspective, Iceland's total geographical size is approximately 103,000 km<sup>2</sup>, making it larger than Ireland. Notably, even when both countries are put together, they total a population of approximately 6.5 million, as of 2016 (Central Intelligence Agency of America 2018). In contrast, close to 100,000 more people live on the tiny island of Malta. This illustrates that the size of the country is relative, especially since Iceland is one of the most sparsely populated countries in the world.

Table 1 provides a better idea of the numbers we are dealing with in the debate when defining the micro-state against their success at the Olympic Games. Countries are presented in ascending order of geographical size, with a variety of sporting outcomes considered.

<b>Micro-state macro factors</b>				
<b>Micro-state</b>	<b>Geo. Size (km<sup>2</sup>)</b>	<b>GDP per capita (\$) (CIA est. 2020)</b>	<b>Population (CIA est. 2021)</b>	<b>Medals at Olympic games</b>
San Marino	61	60,800	34,467	1 silver and 1 bronze
Liechtenstein	75	139,100 <sup>3</sup>	39,425	2 gold, 2 silver & 6 bronze
Malta	316	39,200	460,891	None
Luxembourg	2,586	110,300	639,589	1 gold and 3 silver
Cyprus	9,251	37,700	1.28 million <sup>4</sup>	1 silver medal
Iceland	103,000	52,300	354,234	2 silver and 2 bronze

**Table 1:** An overview of important figures, which show no significance in international success

Taking these numbers as a point of departure, the smallness of a nation has been associated with the necessity for carefully choosing and prioritising specific objectives in specific

1 All population and GDP figures were retrieved from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html>.

2 Information taken from National Statistics Office, titled 'Lifestyle Survey' (2007), available online on: [https://nso.gov.mt/en/publications/Publications\\_by\\_Unit/Documents/01\\_Methodology\\_and\\_Research/LifeStyle\\_Survey\\_2007.pdf](https://nso.gov.mt/en/publications/Publications_by_Unit/Documents/01_Methodology_and_Research/LifeStyle_Survey_2007.pdf)

3 Information on the Liechtenstein GDP per capita was last investigated in 2008.

4 The total sum of Cypriot population in the government-controlled area and Northern Cyprus

sectors and their economies (Armstrong and Read 1998; Bray 1992;). Yet, with regard to this smallness, Baldur Þórhallson, one of the world's leading political scientists in small states, believes that investigating population size, sovereignty, geographical size, and state wealth lack validity when assessing the country's achievements (Þórhallson 2006). Other factors in play take on more of an influential role than population. To mention but a few, the countries in the above table are made of tightly knit networks, multiplex ties (where people meet and form several groups of activity, such a sport, school, and social gathering), which help in the building of social capital within these small societies. In this regard, Coleman (1988) suggests that sociologists see all social action as an actor conforming by action governed by societal norms, rules, and obligations. As a result, these networks provide the community with influences and opportunities, which at times are missing in larger societies.

Within a small close-knit society where trust is encouraged, knowledge is transferred quicker in the form of socio-cultural influences by emotional bonding and imitation from one person to the next (Christakis and Fowler 2009). Cultural awareness is not a short-term process; ideologies, methods, and practices have been transferred between members of society for a long period of time and, by extension, the complex link between sport associations, sport clubs, and governmental organisations. In the case of Iceland, these rounded strong ties helped build a cultural sport hegemony responsible for the increase in Icelandic athletes playing professional sport abroad and be incredibly successful along the way (Halldorsson 2017).

Largely, football is not strictly considered an Olympic sport. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that the sport exhibits eminence, as well as collectively possessing the highest standard of professionalism (structure, human resources, funding etc.) on the Maltese islands. A recent study (2018) showed that 74% of the Maltese male population has played football at some point throughout their life. In addition to this, a sizeable 50% of all respondents follow local and foreign football, with motorsport (8%) and athletics (6%) ranking second and third respectively. Similarly, the vast successes in Icelandic football have been a global talking point for many impressed parties, particularly since the Icelanders surpassed all expectations and qualified for the European Championships in 2016 and the FIFA World Cup in 2018. Many believe that the hefty investment in football infrastructure and facilities was the reason behind their feat. However, Malta could easily state that, over the past few years, they too have invested in facilities, with artificial pitches sprouting all over the island and athletic tracks in nearly every large state-owned college. Yet, Maltese football has never quite reached the Icelandic standard. In comparison, Cyprus seemed passive in investment, only doing so when competitors became ambitious and began to participate in world-class events. The underlying difference between Malta, Iceland, and Cyprus was that Iceland complemented their new facilities with parallel investments in coaches and supporting sport science and medical teams (REF). Regardless of this, no teams in Iceland are professional, and the islanders set up a coaching scheme which saw a micro-state of no more than 335,000 develop 600 qualified coaches, 400 in fact with UEFA B licences.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the coaches were spread across a spectrum of player skill level. As Dagur Sveinn Dagbjartsson of the Icelandic FA observed: "Here you need a UEFA B licence to coach from Under-10 level up, and half of the UEFA B licence to coach under-eights".<sup>6</sup>

Finance is another factor which follows from, if not a direct reflection of, the country's size, at least in a Western context. In the past few years, professionalisation and commercialisation have helped to increase the financial gap between the richest and the

5 More informational on Iceland's coaching expertise can be found on: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2016/jun/08/iceland-stunning-rise-euro-2016-gylfi-sigurdsson-lars-lagerback> (accessed 22 June 2018).

6 The UEFA B licence is a coaching licence organised by UEFA, the official governing body of football in Europe. The licence is one level below the UEFA A Licence and allows holders to be head coaches of amateur clubs, youths up to age 16, and assistant coaches for professional clubs.

rest. In light of small states' inability to keep up with global leaders, it must be pointed out that micro-states are forced to exercise an amateur sport system, voluntary movements and maintain an amateur sport ethos. Yet, Iceland was able to build a reputable history of sporting achievements due to their direct sport structures, their professional mentality and their cultural and social background (the macro level). However, Halldorsson (2017: 10) simply believes that "national sporting success, such as Iceland's, is a cultural product". By contrast, a slower improvement in performance sport in Cyprus and Malta could boil down to a lack of sporting traditions or a stand-out culture in sport, as well as strategic decision-making on coach development. Indeed, the Icelanders may boldly claim that their mass sport participation levels are as exceptional as their achievements in elite sport.

For previously colonial states like Iceland, Cyprus, and Malta, sport is important in the historical formation of such a young country's national identity (Bairner 2001) and is a widely used method to better their diplomatic position (Arnaud and Riordan 1998; Houlihan 2006; Preuss 2004). Furthermore, micro-states also face issues across all three levels of De Bosscher et al.'s (2003) model, such as a lack of self-efficacy, the inexperience in the world of professional sport, unqualified stakeholders, as well as the nation's vulnerabilities (socio-cultural disinterest in sport, bureaucratic failures, etc). There are also a number of countries which are unable to properly function, were it not for external support.<sup>7</sup> At times, Malta finds itself pressured to compare itself to larger neighbouring states and their organisational structures (Raadschelders 1992), as well as discuss the reasons of how and why major countries invest in sport. Up until a few years ago, Cypriot and Maltese athlete participations were limited at the highest level. Compellingly, international events were attended but paid for by the participant competitors and coaches, as opposed to their respective governing bodies (Shippi 2012). The Maltese Parliamentary Secretary for Research, Innovation, Youth and Sport boldly confessed that 'Hundreds of elite athletes may have been lost over the years' (Ministry for Education and Employment 2016:15). Speaking plainly, under a formulated, modernized and better national policy, these Maltese might not have met this fate. Schembri (1998: 8) reminds us that "Social, cultural, historical and political factors are all important considerations in shaping the architecture of a country's sport system" and that "foreign models should be for comparison and to trigger thoughts, not for prescription or adoption".

Earlier, we deduced that population size and resources have (at least) the *potential* to confer an advantage. However, larger states are also prone to factors at the micro level which could affect their results. From a negative perspective, for example, it has been suggested that larger countries and their athletes are prone to being short-sighted, greedy, or susceptible to their own domestic insecurities (Bergsgard et al. 2007). Therefore, the size of the state in question is merely one of the many concerns when investigating micro-state sport policy systems. Anticipating and isolating domestic issues and priorities, the handling of global pressures as well as the effective management of limited resources (human or financial), might help academics and policy-makers identify and possibly prioritise what is needed for the development of local sport. Importantly, however, we must remember that micro-states are most likely to be policy-takers rather than policy-makers, as well as being largely under-explored by the local academic community (Houlihan and Zheng 2014). Dumiencki (2014) states that research on tiny political entities faces several problems, such as the inability to justify the selection of the research, but also the struggle to make the findings useful and relevant to other researchers. In fact, the literature on the topic is so scarce that we were unable to carry out a genuinely comprehensive comparative study.

7 Kosovo depend on help from the Olympic Solidarity Plan, more information targeted at the promoting Olympic Solidarity, as well as assisting underprivileged athletes and their NOCs. More information can be found on <https://stillmed.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/IOC/Who-We-Are/Commissions/Olympic-Solidarity/2017-2020-OS-Plan-Brochure-ACTIVATED-EN.pdf>

### *The Maltese Situation*

Our consideration of the local scene will be presented through Bronfenbrenner’s (2005) holistic ecological perspectives theory and his most recent publications on the topic. He emphasizes how development is bound by the interrelationship between the process, person, context, and time (PPCT model). Bronfenbrenner continues to highlight how an athlete is embedded within various contexts, some of which are influential in the lead-up to elite status and, by extension, the importance of the role of social environment in young athletes, and their development.

Since Malta’s representation at the GSSE (Games for the Small States of Europe) in Luxembourg in 2013, we have watched Team Malta clinch a total of 10 gold medals in three different editions. By comparison, in last year’s 2017 edition alone, Luxembourg, Cyprus, and Iceland won a total of 38, 30, and 27 gold medals, respectively.<sup>8</sup> The founding eight countries of these games encompassed Andorra, Cyprus, Iceland, Luxembourg, Lichtenstein, Monaco, San Marino, and Malta. The first edition of this multi-sport event that included the disciplines of athletics, basketball, judo, shooting, squash, swimming, table tennis, tennis, volleyball, and yachting was hosted in San Marino in 1985 and, since then, they have been successfully organised every two years (barring the Andorra 2021 COVID-19 stricken edition). In 2009, Montenegro became the 9th member country and hosted the games in 2019.

As Table 2 demonstrates, Iceland has won the most gold and total number of medals so far. In contrast, Malta currently sits in fifth place. Malta’s best outing was in 2003, when it hosted the games for the second time, totalling 44 medals (11 gold, 18 silver, and 15 bronze). It’s only other fourth placing was in Lichtenstein in 2011.

<b>Small nations medals up to 2017</b>				
<b>Nation</b>	<b>Medal Tally</b>			
	<b>Gold</b>	<b>Silver</b>	<b>Bronze</b>	<b>Total</b>
Iceland	452	353	339	1144
Cyprus	438	363	335	1136
Luxembourg	331	335	322	988
Monaco	111	138	204	453
<b>Malta</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>177</b>	<b>363</b>
Liechtenstein	60	68	85	213
San Marino	55	99	127	281
Andorra	44	83	108	235
Montenegro	22	6	12	40

**Table 2:** Number of medals won by each small nation in Europe (European Olympics Committee 2016)

Despite a continually strengthening national economy, low debt-to-GDP ratio and a low degree of unemployment, we suggest that Maltese sport is being let down by different kinds of macro- and meso-level factors. A carefully planned and structured developmental

8 For a more detailed account, visit the GSSE games’ websites <http://www.luxembourg2013.lu>, <http://www.iceland2015.is> and <https://sanmarino2017.sportresult.com/nh/en/-120?type=Main>

process has been implemented by the other “big three” micro-states in Europe (Luxemburg, Iceland, and Cyprus) and has been underway for some years. In contrast, however, Malta has dragged its feet when it comes to implementing strategy at the meso level. In fact, Malta’s very first document on National Sport Policy was only introduced in 2007.<sup>9</sup> The strategic plan’s target areas were the ‘betterment of Malta’s sport culture’ through focusing on the island’s ‘structure’ in sport, ‘culture’, and the ‘economy’. Notably, however, at no point throughout the report is elite performance sport mentioned. Coakley (1998: 434) admitted that “As long as people believe the myth that sport and policies are unrelated, they remain at a disadvantage when rules and policies are made, and funds allocated.” Developing a winning team, as well as changing a state-wide culture and belief, has no time span, but is most-definitely a timely test.

The Maltese Sport Council, then called Kunsill Malti għall-Isport (2012), is Malta’s highest form of authority in local sport. Pursuing sporting excellence, whilst also promoting physical recreation and exercise to a country which in 2015 was found to be “the least physically active country in the world”<sup>10</sup>, is quite a task. Negative statistics such as this and the island’s generally poor showing in international competitions led to the publishing in 2016 of Malta’s second attempt at a national sport strategy, titled “A National Policy for Sport in Malta and Gozo 2017-2027.”

The involvement of performance sport, the state’s interest in improving structure, and a pre-set list of objectives for the next ten years to come, were encouraging.<sup>11</sup> We are led to believe that the document was founded on the study by Green and Houlihan (2006). The authors identified five common needs, which previously led to sporting success at the 2004 Olympics: adequate training facilities, adequate coaching, availability of training time, financial support, and a competent supporting entourage.

Many types of Maltese elite sport are actively reliant on public funds, particularly for the maintenance and development of their facility. Of relevance, however, on such a small island where facilities are limited, there still remains a continuous tension between the needs of elite athletes, club athletes, and the general public. The authors of the 2016 report proposed that a ‘categorization system’ be implemented within local sport, addressing the dire need for transparency. It will be interesting to watch how these sports and their respective athlete levels will be identified and prioritized, however. The report also recognized that athletes who reach a “baseline standard” at small states level be considered an elite athlete. Nevertheless, direct financial support was not envisaged. Instead, the state indirectly funds elite athletes through a number of support programmes. Interestingly, the majority of local elite athletes still choose to finance their sport through their full-time jobs and personal sponsors. It is envisaged that, through more funding at the micro level, more Maltese athletes will reach an international standing. However, barring football, professional Olympic sport in Malta is unheard of, leading to a very limited number of competitions at the highest level. Additionally, fighting for a place on the podium can only be done if training is treated as a full-time commitment (Ibid). Added pressure on local sport councils comes about when the amount of funds invested by larger countries are considered by both athletes and interested others (Houlihan and Zheng 2013). Notably, outspoken officials and coaches as well as athletes who have voiced their concern and spoken about meso-level shortcomings

9 Malta’s first National Policy for Sport titled Re-shaping Sport - Towards Personal Development, Health and Success can be found on [https://education.gov.mt/en/resources/Documents/Policy%20Documents/reshaping\\_sports.pdf](https://education.gov.mt/en/resources/Documents/Policy%20Documents/reshaping_sports.pdf)

10 Today, the Public Policy Institute declared that Malta is the most obese, laziest, and most car-dependent country in the world. For more information on a Maltese Lifestyle, an in-depth article can be found online on <https://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20151216/local/maltese-most-obese-laziest-and-most-car-dependent.595862>

11 Malta’s second National Policy for Sport titled ‘A National Policy for Sport in Malta and Gozo 2017-2027’, can be found online on [www.sport.mt/et/file/.../malta\\_\\_national\\_sports\\_policy\\_201720271.pdf](http://www.sport.mt/et/file/.../malta__national_sports_policy_201720271.pdf)

and unwise investments have been omitted from any kind of organised support (Calleja 2007).

Despite these criticisms, however, there are some initiatives which have received endorsement. For example, the 2016 report strikingly gave mention to the importance of using a 'competent sporting entourage'. Through the hugely popular sport scholarship scheme (funded by the Sport Council), many hopeful Maltese students have travelled abroad to study in different sectors of sport which were, and still are, desperately needed. Upon return, however, no job or opportunities await them, nor did they receive any kind of alternative path—perhaps an example of a good idea not exploited effectively. Another important element in an elite development system and this national policy document is coaching. Funding, support, and better organisation was promised throughout all sporting levels. New initiatives such as the MOC's (Malta Olympic Committee) Coaching Academy came into force, but with an as of yet to be seen impact. Indeed, individuals might argue that elite coaching (and any other profession in sport) in Malta still lacks interest, has been very slow in development, and that it seems unlikely that elite coaching could be a career choice in the near future. As yet, there was no clear mention on how this situation will be resolved. Finally, this document bases many of its recommendations on the implementation of sport science and medicine. Notwithstanding the fact that new graduates are motivated to learn, Malta's resources in this field are very weak to say the least. One would hope that the proposed investors are aware of the expenses entailed, before letting Pandora out of her box. Despite the length of this document, no mention was made on any forms of talent identification schemes, long-term development plans, or how local sport entities will support and encourage the young and promising. In summary, whilst the report offers some promise and a few initiatives, these do not seem to have been fully followed through nor placed against a strategic plan. In fact, due to the lack of stakeholder involvement at the planning phase, heavy criticism ensued, leading to the national government's retraction of this document.

Following increased pressure for a strengthened, improved, shorter, and effective sport policy, the national government took another two years to publish its latest national strategy in 2019, entitled 'Aiming Higher: An Overview of the National Strategy for Sport and Physical Activity in Malta'.<sup>12</sup> Although perhaps too early to expect genuine productivity from a mere eight pages, there is a belief that the policy will constantly need to change as a result of different, unexpected occurrences (such as the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic). To many stakeholders, the 2019 document's validity might have already lapsed—perhaps before we saw any forms of clear improvements.

Probably the most valid factor to consider is the state's level of commitment and ability to be innovative, adaptable, and resilient. One sport research objective is to pinpoint the different influences and relations essential to the social process. Pre-set studies in the hope of rectifying local problems, grey areas, and different social trends will allow for more confident conclusions as to the reason why elite development is struggling or failing to progress as expected. Despite local statistics, literature and studies are inadequately represented. In this paper, we have hopefully demonstrated clear signs to show how issues at the macro level, in particular within the sphere of sport culture, are affecting the development of elite sport in general.

On the basis of our review, we firmly believe that the macro and meso levels are the most potentially impactful and important areas for attention. In this regard, Horne, Tomlinson,

<sup>12</sup> Malta's third National Policy for Sport titled Aiming Higher: An Overview of the National Strategy for Sport and Physical Activity in Malta, <https://www.gov.mt/en/Government/DOI/Press%20Releases/PublishingImages/Pages/2019/May/21/pr191132/PR191132a.pdf>

and Whannel (1998: xv) collectively recommend that “all the scientific understanding of the sporting body and mind in the world is of little use to sport development, unless the nature of the wider social, cultural environment is understood”. In summary, it is imperative to look deeper into Malta’s own national traditions and history, unique strengths as well as weaknesses, that have led to success and disappointments in the past. All the while, we will continue to learn about new types of systems that other countries have adopted to their structure (Böhlke and Robinson 2009); a structure which is entirely dedicated to see the building and betterment of Malta’s elite sport strategy.

## Conclusions

Whilst Maltese athletes were at the Gold Coast Commonwealth Games (2018), former prime minister Joseph Muscat declared that, ‘Participating is all well and good, but it’s not enough. You participate to win... The time has come to truly make sport part of Maltese culture.’ Although not a micro-state, when compared to its neighbour and main sporting rival Australia, the New Zealanders are considered “small”. After a poor show in Athens 2004, SPARC (Sport and Recreation NZ) maintained a positive approach to their high-performance sport. With sport held in high esteem, the New Zealanders accepted their shortcomings, and maintained a David and Goliath approach by declaring that their size and lack of finance should not hinder their attitude or performances, but instead lead them to become “wiser” and “savvier” (SPARC 2006b/2007).

As we have shown, Malta’s size is merely one of the many aspects to consider in our analysis of sport development systems. Having only scratched the surface, we discussed context-specific notions and complexities, whilst taking into account Malta’s background in elite sport. Yet, if we compare Malta to other successful European micro-states, sedentary culture and weak sporting traditions seem to be the largest negative factors for our elite local sport. It is imperative that any individual attempting to understand and strategise the way forward in Maltese elite sport ought to use many of the different paradigms of thought indexed above. Increasing the state’s investment in sport is necessary, yet the changes taking place must be done within a well-designed and finely knit network and implemented with a great deal of cooperation. In retrospect, this is less of a challenge when compared to some of the larger states we have discussed.

Still, one must emphasize that local literature is well needed before making any sort of assumption. An increase in studies tackling systems, approaches, and experiences of different small states will not only help us better understand the sport policy process, but the underlying factors of international relations, diplomacy, and international sport seen through a select group of sport powers. Research and studies will help to fully determine where the secret to success is hidden. Marcel Sturkenboom, former Director of the Dutch National Sport Federation and Olympic Committee, rightfully believed that, ‘If you have the ingredients, you still don’t have a good recipe; how you bring the ingredients together is what counts’ (said live during a symposium on 27 November, 1998).

Keman (2002: 34) states that “the goal of comparative politics is to explain those ‘puzzles’, which cannot be studied without comparing”. Other countries, like Cyprus, Iceland, and Luxembourg have embraced these inspiring words, and have adopted different individual approaches towards the development of their athletes, and, as a result, are reaping the benefits of their investment on an international scale.

As stated by Oakley and Green (2001), as systems continue to move towards a global uniform system, it will become harder for states to be successful should they fall backwards

and/or are reluctant to invest. At the end of the day, Malta still stands to benefit from elite sport on many levels. Despite the potential numerous debates, and the gaps found between this declamation and the realities of local sport, we might collectively agree that developing athletes worthy of Olympic medals requires a carefully planned and long-term strategic plan.

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