



## Sport in Iceland: How Small Nations Achieve International Success

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Sport in Iceland: How Small Nations Achieve International Success**, By V. Halldorsson.  
London, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017, 142pp., £45.00(hardback), ISBN-13: 978-1138681798

Despite significant research focus on high performance in sport, surprisingly few scholars have focused on the sociocultural components of national sporting achievement. Vidar Halldorsson adds to this body of knowledge with a concise analysis of Iceland's international athletic achievements across soccer, basketball and handball, which are remarkable accomplishments for a country with a population of 335,000. With the increasing professionalisation of sport, the rise of 'superteams' and a declining acknowledgement of sport for its intrinsic values, Halldorsson's analysis represents a timely investigation of an alternative state model of sport.

An Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Iceland and a leading researcher on Icelandic sport, Halldorsson is rigorous in his methodological approach. His analysis entails a wide range of research methods, incorporating in-depth interviews, ethnographic observations at many of the Iceland men's football team's most significant professional matches, informal conversations with Icelandic sporting officials and Icelandic cultural experts, analyses of published materials, and his own reflections on living and playing in Iceland. His knowledge of the language and culture gives him unique insights into the country, evident in the wide range of Icelandic written sources used. His deep love for the country permeates the text despite the book's largely academic tone.

Halldorsson outlines how Iceland's traditional focus on amateurism and the intrinsic values of sport – a sport for sport's sake ethic – has recently combined with a growing professionalism and the recruitment of global expertise in coaching. This has resulted in increased organisation among the elite teams and has helped to develop a culture that lends itself to sporting achievement. This culture coalesces with players' national pride, a national ethos of resilience, and athletes' focus on 'playing with their hearts', to foster Iceland's recent achievements. Halldorsson's list of Iceland's participation in recent world championships, particularly the 2-1 win over England in the round-of-16 of the European Men's Football Championship, is undoubtedly impressive. Ironically, the success of the Icelandic teams resulted from 'Icelandic culture' adopting global professional sport structures and Eastern European coaches. The teams' successes derived less from an Icelandic model than from an Icelandic-global hybrid. Indeed, Halldorsson acknowledges that merely playing sport for its own sake, previously espoused in Icelandic culture, does not actually lead to elite international performance. It does, however, lead to the country's incredible rates of sport participation, including 80% of sixth graders playing in organised leagues. The Icelandic model is as noteworthy for these local participation levels as it is for its recent professional achievements.

Halldorsson's arguments are particularly strong when making his case for sport as play. Through accounts of both professional achievements and high participation rates at all ages during the school years, this approach to play appears to be a distinctly Icelandic trait. While many countries can lay claim to sporting achievements, and some can lay claim to high participation rates, few have achieved both, much less with such a small population. Though not supported by any primary studies, this correlation between Iceland's distinct culture of sport and the nation's athletic achievements is persuasive. Halldorsson's account of the community and amateur component of sport is particularly pertinent in contrast to the increasing movement towards sport as a tool for development around much of the rest of the world. He explains, 'due to the common belief that participation in organized sports is beneficial for children and adolescents, the municipalities subsidize club participation fees' (p. 29). The apparent ease with which Iceland passed such a

common sense policy indicates not just a strong sporting culture, but a strong political system more generally. Though Halldorsson briefly touches on the broader culture, a more substantive description of the political and social context of Iceland – including their significant social safety net and particularly strong democratic institutions – would serve to further bolster his arguments. A similarly volunteer-led, government-subsidised sport system is difficult to imagine in a more neoliberal political economy. Though it was not within the scope of Halldorsson's inquiry, an equally compelling case study would be a sociocultural examination of Iceland's high rates of sport participation. For the many countries where government and other agencies bombard the public with messages about personal responsibility to engage in physical activity, a deeper understanding of the Icelandic (or broader Nordic) community model would serve policymakers well.

Halldorsson's knowledge of the nation permits him to see it in depth in a way that few outsiders could. Herein lies both the many strengths and a few weaknesses of the book. His assertion that Icelandic athletes are uniquely hard-working should raise some eyebrows, particularly when he compares them to other countries' athletes and hints at cultural essentialism. Quoting an Icelandic sports agent, he notes, '[The professional teams] look to South America for skilled footballers, to Africa for physically strong players and to the Nordic countries for good characters' (p. 75). His evidence for Iceland's 'uniquely' strong character is entirely anecdotal and his stereotyping of other cultures is suspect. Relatedly, Halldorsson's overall argument would benefit from some insights into the reasons for and implications of the significant gender disparity in Iceland's international achievements. Iceland's women's teams have achieved only two of the country's past 10 international successes, which is especially puzzling in the light of Iceland's high rates of gender parity and its recent status as the first and only country to make it illegal to pay men more than women for the same work.

The final chapter reveals a growing movement that may harm the current Icelandic sport model. A quadrupling in funding for sport last year and the introduction of bonus payments to professional footballers have the potential to lead to the type of commercialisation of sport as evident in many other countries. As Halldorsson admits, one of Icelandic athletes' most noticeable traits is their motivation to participate in sport with no potential economic payoff (Part IV). There may be troubling consequences for Icelandic sporting culture as a result of these changes.

Notwithstanding some minor omissions, Halldorsson effectively situates Iceland's sporting achievements within the country's distinct cultural and social context. His assertions regarding the importance of sociocultural context for elite performance have the potential to encourage further research attention to this topic. As one of a diminishing number of countries willing to maintain a widespread and publicly supported community sporting structure, Iceland provides a successful model of sport for its own intrinsic values.

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