

**The Success of Icelandic Football:
How a tiny nation emerged on the international sports scene**

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Introduction:

It attracted widespread international attention when the men's football national team of Iceland reached the quarterfinals of the European Championship in the summer of 2016. How such a small nation - with a population of around 320.000 - could compete among the best, was the intriguing question that puzzled the football world. Interestingly however, Iceland has not only punched above its weight in men's football in recent years, but in all its major team sports. Thus the key reasons for the success of the men's football team do not lie within football per se, but in how Icelanders approach and play sport in general and how the Icelanders are presently experiencing favorable social conditions to reach historical heights.

Methods:

This presentation is built on a case study on sports in Iceland – which was conducted for the forthcoming book “Sport in Iceland: How small nations achieve international success” (1) - and consisted of formal and informal interviews, ethnographic observations and the use of published material.

Results:

The results show how the different Icelandic national sport teams - which have been successful in international competition in recent years – are driven by the same motivations, display the same characteristics and represent a similar style of play (1, 2). This way of playing has mixed with increased professionalism in Icelandic sports and further been advanced by increased opportunities in the international world of sports.

Discussion & Conclusions:

More generally, this case study highlights how culture works to promote and foster important team elements as essential for tiny nations to be able to benefit from favorable social conditions and pull through to highest level in sport. Interestingly the aforementioned team elements may sometimes be lacking in the bigger and more advanced and professional national sport teams, providing Iceland and important advantage over some of their opponents in team sport competitions – an advantage which is of social nature rather than physical one's.

References:

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