



Science, Movement and Health, Vol. XXIII, ISSUE 2 Supplement, 2023
September 2023, 23 (2): 515-520
Original article

STRATEGIES AND BEST PRACTICES FOR INTERNATIONAL HANDBALL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract:

Aim. Present best practices and strategy development for international handball clubs and national teams. To achieve this aim, we propose to summarize the best practices found during the research phase in a coherent and immediately reproducible way by the coaches.

Method. We searched the following computerized databases: PubMed, Web of Knowledge, Google Scholar, and the websites of National and International Handball Federations. The aim of this review was to specify the elements of team-handball performance based on scientific studies, practical experience, or development strategies of international handball federations

Results. The findings of this study support inclusion and diversity in all areas of education, training, youth, sport, and handball coach training.

Conclusion. Elite handball teams development strategies are based on a cultural approach that actively uses a value system in the development of athletes, teams, and their sport. Scientific research indicates that success in elite handball is based on long-term organizational strategy, continuity in management, and a holistic coaching philosophy

Key words: handball strategies, youth, education, inclusion, coach training.

Introduction

The handball game represents a suitable tool for promoting the sport among children and young people. The "Handball International Education Project" seeks to address this social issue by involving younger generations in this sport, which has grown to become one of the most popular team sports in the world, with over 20 million players worldwide. Competitions such as the EHF Champions League in Europe attract up to 20,000 spectators each year, putting them on par with the World and European Championship finals (<https://epsi.eu/project/hiep/>). Handball training has in its structure a number of components that contribute to the resolution of specific situations from the complex approach to sports training: physical training, technical training, tactical training, psychological training, theoretical training, intellectual training, and education. Knowing the factors that influence the high level handball performance based on scientific studies should concur to the increase in quality of training for coaches and athletes. The handball game is constantly developing, the players aiming for the highest level of performance.

Educational component of handball

Handball is a harmonious combination of motor and cognitive skills. The game takes place against a background of intense mental demands that play a pronounced formative-educational role. It is an important means of physical education that contributes to the achievement of its goals and content and is preferred by students of all ages. Cognitive activities favor obvious intellectual development, which increases the child's receptivity. In school, the game of handball must have a structure that is simple, easy to approach by students, and in close correlation with the morphological, functional, and psychological peculiarities of age. In small classes, the technique and tactics of the handball game must be simple and limited to a minimum of specific motor skills, and as the students progress to higher classes, the game becomes more complex. Simple techniques can be learned quickly, providing immediate satisfaction to students. The handball game is among the most important means of school physical education with a varied and complex content, such as different forms of running, throwing, and jumping. They contribute to the achievement of the objectives of physical education in school, such as

- health strengthening;
- development of motor skills;
- development of analysis capacity, speed of decision, imagination, and creativity;
- development of moral qualities, work team, and responsibility for individual and team activities.

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Handball as a sport discipline

The regulation of the game of handball, in its modern form, dates back to 1920 and is due to Karl Diem, one of the organizers of the 1936 Berlin Olympics, an edition in which handball became an Olympic sport (Raiola, G., Invernizzi, P.L., Scurati, R., & Fattore, S., 2020).

In the first phase, the game took place outdoors, and the teams consisted of 11 players. Later, it began to play indoors, and the number of players became seven for each team. Handball is an extraordinary collective game because it includes players of various somatypes, heights, and weights. Throughout history, it has been proven that even players with a non-typical anthropometric profile can achieve elite-level performance. (https://www.ihf.info/sites/default/files/2020-03/H@S_booklet_0.pdf)

In recent years, handball has become a modern and attractive high-speed game that fascinates more and more spectators. As a sports discipline, handball has undergone a special evolution and development from children and juniors to the highest level of performance. The qualitative and spectacular level has increased and every national and international level competition comes and makes great improvements, which means that more resources are available for improvement. The concept of the game must be constantly updated in accordance with the evolution of the game on the international stage, which implies the development of new training programs. The handball game requires compliance with regulations and precise rules in the spirit of sports ethics and fair play. Understanding the technical and physical requirements specific to the handball game is essential for talent identification, developing and training players in team positions, and obtaining high-level performances. The training process is a special type of a teaching process (mostly for younger players). Accepting this statement, we may consider a coach's activities as teaching behavior that "is a chain of decision making" (Mosston, Ashworth 2002).

Methods

We searched the following computerized databases: PubMed, Web of Knowledge, Google Scholar, and the websites of the National and International Handball Federations. The search terms used to identify studies were handball, development, projects, strategies, preparation, and models of success. The word searches were specifically adjusted to each database for free text words and categorized free terms. The language was limited to English

Inclusion criteria

Studies detected in initial searches were screened using the following inclusion criteria: (1) using elite team-handball performances, (2) analyzing training strategies in handball and best development practice, (3) full-length texts had to be available, (4) if similar tests or analyses were used in several studies, we used only those studies that were close to the first two inclusion criteria, and (5) the number of studies per sub-category was limited.

Examples of good practice federation strategies for developing handball on the international scene

Hungarian Handball Federation

The Handball at School project was involved in this favorable educational-political environment, increasing the educational content with movement material specific to the target group and developing weekly handball exercises from the five physical education lessons (Studia Ubb Educatio Artis Gymn., LXI, 4, 2016, pp. 15-27).

The Hungarian Handball Association launched its project "Handball at school" in September 2013 in 50 schools, with 54 physical education teachers, 1430 students. thanks to favorable experience, the program was expanded in September 2014 to 91 schools and 98 physical education teachers, thus increasing the number of children to 3400. Currently, due to further expansion in 2015, the program continues in 117 schools, with 127 physical education teachers and almost 4565 participation students (grades I-VIII) in 243 groups. Of all participants, 1,435 were in the 2nd-4th grades. The program and the schools that participate in it have become a dominant talent grooming scene in addition to expanding the base of youth handball offerings. Students from the junior section of the participating schools (grades II-IV) in the program learn the basic technical and tactical elements, the rule system of handball twice a week as part of daily physical education. Perform various ball exercises to develop skills and dexterity using light sponge balls and attractive competitions. Physical education teachers participating in the program are trained by the Hungarian Handball Federation, and the schools are equipped with the necessary sports equipment. The results were controlled by the mentor system and the survey and lesson plans sent by the teachers. The conclusions of the project "Handball at school" - which involves two sport-specific classes per week, improved all handball -specific tests such as shooting accuracy and speed coordination skills in all four groups (Studia Ubb Educatio Artis Gymn., LXI, 4, 2016, pp. 15-27).

The Netherlands Handball Federation

The results of the handball teams of the Netherlands are not an accident, a coincidence. Everything was achieved by designing a clear plan. The project was created in 2005 and was nurtured by the Dutch Handball Association in collaboration with the Dutch Olympic Committee. The Handbal Academie is the conveyor belt of young talent, which has provided some of the greatest players in the past 15 years, such as Lois Abbingh, Estavana Polman, Dione Housheer, Tess Wester, and Danick Snelder. The top young players, who are just 15 or 16 years old, are identified and invited to participate in the Handbal Academie. They are training here and playing from Monday to Friday; they can go home on the weekends. We tell every player before coming here that they will stay here for 300 days a year (<https://www.ihf.info/media-center/news/handball-school-and-success-handbalacademie-brings-another-round-plaudits-dutch>). Three years ago, the Netherlands turned heads when they won the IHF Women 's World Championship for the first time in their history. The performance was just the culmination of a series of outstanding results, including a silver medal in Denmark in 2015 and a bronze medal in Germany in 2017, with the same results repeated at the EHF EURO 2016 and EHF EURO 2018.

The Netherlands won the bronze medal at the 2022 IHF Women's Junior World Championship. They finished fourth, just shy of the podium at the 2022 IHF Women's Youth World Championship, with some fantastic performances (<https://www.ihf.info/media-center/news/handball-school-and-success-handbalacademie-brings-another-round-plaudits-dutch>).

Another project of the Handball Federation (NHV) for children under 18 was "Handball Summer 2020". The project ran between May and September 2020 with an estimated 10,000 children participating in the project, with school participation proving particularly successful (<https://www.ihf.info/media-center/news/thousands-children-reached-through-dutch-handball-summer-2020>). The Netherlands showed superb development on the beach. In their first-ever participation in the world flagship event, the IHF Beach Handball World Championships, the Netherlands finished third in the women's competition and won a silver medal at the 2022 IHF Women's Youth Beach Handball World Championship (<https://www.ihf.info/media-center/news/handball-school-and-success-handbalacademie-brings-another-round-plaudits-dutch>).

Spain Handball Federation

For the Spanish, handball is not just a sport, it is part of the country's culture and is one of the most popular sports after football. The Spain National Team is one of the most successful handball teams in the world, having won two World Championships. They are also the only team, besides Sweden, to have successfully defended a European Championship title, having won in 2018 and 2020. As of January 2021, they are reigning double defending European Champions

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spain_men%27s_national_handball_team#:~:text=Spain%20is%20one%20of%20the,reigning%20double%20defending%20European%20Champions.)

The Spanish Handball Federation's strategy development is predicated on several elements, such as talent identification and nurturing, infrastructure provision, stakeholder engagement using technology, and fostering a winning mentality (RFEBM, 2021). First, talent identification and nurturing have been key to RFEBM's strategic development on the way to success. The recommendations of the European Handball Federation suggest that high performance in handball necessitates investing in youth development programs and employing proficient trainers to amplify talent (EHF, 2018). The Spanish handball leagues are structured as follows:

- Liga ASOBAL: the first and top professional handball league, consisting of 16 teams, is one of the strongest handball leagues in Europe.
- División de Honor Plata: This is the second-tier professional league in Spanish handball and comprises 16 teams.
- Liga Guerreras Iberdrola: the top women's handball league in Spain with 14 teams.
- Liga ASOBAL Juvenil: This is a youth-based league for players under 18 years old who dream to play professional handball.
- Liga Nacional de Balonmano Playa: This is a beach handball league played during the summer months on sand courts.
- Copa del Rey: This is a knockout cup competition featuring teams from all divisions of Spanish handball, including amateur and professional teams (<https://www.rfeb.com/>).

Spain's love for handball has seen an increase in fan interest as well as player participation at all levels of competition across each of these leagues. With a great history, culture, and numerous leagues and matches available throughout the year, there are many opportunities to develop talented athletes. In conclusion, the Spanish Handball Federation's strategic development is a confluence of several elements - talent identification and nurturing, provision of quality infrastructure, stakeholder engagement, utilizing technology, fostering a winning mentality, passion, and hard work. This admirable model has not only ushered Spanish handball into an era of unparalleled success but also provides a fitting template for other sporting federations worldwide.

Italy Handball Federation

Handball is not the first sport that comes to mind when we think of Italy, a country famous for its passion for football. However, in recent years, the efforts of the Italian Handball Federation have helped this sport grow in popularity. The development strategy of the federation is to develop handball at the national level and bring Italy to the stage of major international competitions. According to EPSI, the Italian Handball Federation (FIGH) is the governing body of handball and beach handball in Italy. FIGH has been affiliated with the Italian National Olympic Committee (CONI), European Handball Federation (EHF), and International Handball Federation (IHF) since 1968 (<https://epsi.eu/project/italian-handball-federation/>).

According to FIGH, the Sports Directorate of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Education, and 30 Sports Federations have started two projects aimed at the health movement «Scuola Attiva Kids» dedicated to all Italian primary schools and «Scuola Attiva Junior» for secondary schools. About 8 thousand schools, between primary and secondary schools, have joined the project, and one and a half million students are directly involved. Within the project, 612 primary and secondary schools throughout the national territory chose handball, with a total of 2,121 classes and 42,420 students and 326 teachers. The vice president of FIGH, Gianni Cenzi, believes with confidence in the future regarding the development of Italian handball (<https://www.federhandball.it/news/18515-completato-il-ciclo-del-programma-scuola-attiva-oltre-600-scuole-scelgono-la-pallamano.html>).

Greece Handball Federation

The Hellenic Handball Federation (OXE) has created a program to bring Greece back into the world's biggest handball competitions. We created a new database for players, including all the data for the selected players, to measure the development of the athletes.

According to IHF, this program proposes the creation of 2 new handball centers, one for Northern Greece and the other for Southern Greece, where players aged 14 and 16 will join to increase the volume of targeted individual training and develop their future (<https://www.ihf.info/media-center/news/greece-take-big-steps-return-elite>).

The program designed by French Guy Petitgirard has three more main focuses, including an increase in the number of clubs, which will subsequently lead to an increase in the number of handball players. The other two are identifying young players with the proper skills and physical characteristics for handball and the continuous improvement of those already selected. According to the IHF, 41 clubs from 22 cities have already joined the program, with more than 500 players being selected and monitored. In December 2021, over 390 players participated in tournaments held in three different cities, Portaria Pelion, Aigio, and Salamina, with more tournaments scheduled for March and April (<https://www.ihf.info/media-center/news/greece-take-big-steps-return-elite>).

Romanian Handball Federation

Handball is one of the landmarks of Romanian sport, being one of the few sports of the team that, in recent years, has carried Romania's flag internationally, both at the national level, through participation and results at European, World Championships and Olympic Games as well as at club team level. In accordance with FRH, the Romanian Handball Federation aims to be an active partner in implementing the National Strategy for Sport, in correlation with the National Strategy for Handball. In this sense, a rethinking of the approach to identifying talents, training athletes, increasing the number of specialists and improving them, and improving the way of managing material and human resources is necessary. It is necessary to define a coherent and coordinated plan at all competitive levels and establish clear short-medium and long-term objectives, resulting, however, from a coherent, feasible, phased strategic concept. Through efficient organization and financing, F.R.H., through its 8 regional training centers, can support students/athletes who are selected and have a passion for performance handball at European, World, and Olympic championships for women's and men's handball teams. In the period 2023 – 2033, F.R.H. will follow the growth of the performances of the National Teams as a means of promoting Romanian handball with the aim of increasing interest in it sports. Thus, the aim is to increase the number of legitimate athletes in order to expand and stabilize the selection base, as well as to increase the interest of local authorities and companies for the support and financing handball activities in Romania, for all age categories. The development strategy also involves the development of the material base and infrastructure, organization of training courses, training and specialization for coaches, increasing the number of national sports competitions, monitoring and evaluating sports performance, image actions and sports marketing

(https://frh.ro/img_stiri/files/Anexa%204%2021.04%20.pdf)

Nordic Federations (Denmark and Norway)

Handball is a sport that has a long and rich history in the Nordic countries. It originated in Denmark in the early 20th century, and quickly spread to the other Nordic countries of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland (<https://all-things-nordic.com/2023/01/18/a-short-history-of-handball-in-the-nordic-countries/>).

The national teams of Denmark and Norway have all won medals in international competitions. The handball game continues to be played and evolve, becoming an important part of the nordic region's sports culture.

Specifically, studies of sport school programs in Scandinavia have demonstrated that no single stakeholder has sole responsibility for talent identification or development in this context (e.g., Bjørndal & Gjesdal, 2020). The athlete development is located and organized within a multi-centric organizational model, where activities are driven by clubs, schools, and regional and national associations. Scholars recognize organizational culture as an important factor contributing to a consistently high record of accomplishment in terms of producing elite senior athletes from among their junior or youth teams (e.g., Seanor et al., 2017; Ryom et al., 2020).

Denmark Handball Federation

Denmark is the national team with the most success and medals in the sport of handball, with a total of more than 100 overall medals, making them the strongest Handball Federation in the world (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danish_Handball_Federation). The development of this strategy started in 2019 and has been receiving input from all stakeholders of the DHF, with workshops being held featuring coaches on the base of the pyramid, researchers, and players, with the purpose of offering a better understanding of the current paradigm in Danish handball. Eventually, the strategy development was finished at the start of 2023, underlining a key focus – while the players are at the front and center of handball, no player is more important than the team, with creating a united front being at the forefront of the strategy.

The danish handball culture focuses on the community and development of the entire handball player throughout his/her life, and this is expressed, among other things, through a focus on more skill development and less selection.

In addition to the talent strategy itself, the DHF also launched a document – “From Strategy to Action” – which describes the ambitions, desired effect, and primary efforts in four selected areas: collaboration for the whole handball player, more competence development and less selection, diversity, and enthusiasm and motivation.

Norway Handball Federation

Successful national teams, women's and men's handball, are part of the elite of Norwegian sport. Norwegian elite sport culture appears to exemplify this cultural approach by actively employing a value-system in the development

of its athletes, teams, and sports. The women's team has been successful at the international level for more than 30 years (Hemmestad & Jones, 2019; Ronglan, 2012). The Nordic powerhouse is the team with the most medals won in the competition-dominated Mondial handball: 8 Olympic medals, 11 World Championship medals, and 13 European Championship medals (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norway_women%27s_national_handball_team).

According to the coaches, the balance between individual development goals and team objectives is secured by involving the players in the processes of deciding team goals, key values, and rules (norms) that support and clarify the

meaning of values. Therefore, individual skills and competences are developed to strengthen the capacity to achieve team objectives. Within the women's team, the coach facilitates group discussions as the athletes jointly define key values, the content of these values, and rules in accordance with the values (Eivind Å. Skille, Per Øystein Hansen, Frank Abrahamsen & Stilian "Ani" Chroni, 2020). This is based on the values of the Norwegian Handball Association: respect, fair play, commitment, and empowerment. No athlete has prima donna status, the organizational culture of the national team is more important than that of a star player. According to research (Eivind Å. Skille, Per Øystein Hansen, Frank Abrahamsen & Stilian "Ani" Chroni, 2020), the men's coach's role is to choose players that fit well together, who would commit to play under the team's new value-system of "loyalty, precision, and effort" – three concepts that are key elements in Norway's national sports culture. In Norway Handball, between a winning culture and a performance culture, the coaches emphasize the second to gain the first. The culture within handball teams promotes self-leadership to foster athlete responsibility for development (Bjørndal, 2017).

The success and international dominance of the Norwegian women's handball team was explained by Heikkala J.(1993), Andersen S., and Ronglan L.T. (2012). They claim that success was based on:

- *long-term organizational strategy*;
- *continuity in leadership*;
- *a holistic coaching philosophy* (<https://www.aspetar.com/journal/viewarticle.aspx?id=150>).

In the short term, the strategy of the Norwegian Handball Federation (NHF) was to maximize the team's preparations for each upcoming championship; the number of training camps increased, participation in international tournaments intensified, the support staff grew (analytical team, medical staff etc), and players moved from amateurism to semi-professionalism. This professionalization process was facilitated by the growing public and commercial interest in the team. This strategy was accompanied by a long-term strategy, guided by clear priorities. Here, the main objective was to uphold the performance level and results, not only from one championship to the next but also in a sustainable way over a longer period of time. This implied a more profound institutionalization process, where the 'success formulas were clearly anchored within the handball organization. The process included two important dimensions: more consistent and structured talent work and increased cooperation with Olympiatoppen, the overall elite sporting body in Norway. A long-term organizational strategy in Norwegian women's handball requires respect for the core logic of competing (Ronglan, L. T., 2012).

Creating a solid talent development system was considered crucial for long-term success. The NHF hired competent national youth coaches responsible for talent development. At the same time, the talent system as a whole was centralized as the NHF-hired coaches coordinated the activity, designed the content of the programs, and contributed to educating the talent coaches (<https://www.aspetar.com/journal/viewarticle.aspx?id=150>).

The success of NHF was facilitated by extraordinary stability on the technical bench. The actual head coach, T. Hergeirsson was hired as a full-time coach in the federation in 1994 and worked as a junior national coach in close contact with senior coaches. In 2001, he became assistant coach of the senior team and is currently the head coach since April 2009 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%9E%C3%B3rir_Hergeirsson). On the way to great performance, Niels Hertzberg, the General Secretary of the federation from 1984 until 2003, was regarded as the architect behind the strategies and was central in the recruitment of key persons during these decades.

Hertzberg's basic ideas was to adopt a type of management based on competence, delegation of responsibility to skilled employees and stimulate the players to autonomy and empowerment. This holistic vision of Hertzberg is based on the values of Norwegian society and culture. Athletic performance development must be accompanied by development as a human being. Practically, the success and popularity of the handball team stems not only from the results achieved but also from the way the results have been achieved.

Lars Tore Ronglan Ph.D. Associate Professor, Vice Rector Norwegian School of Sport Sciences Oslo, Norway, concludes in his letter (<https://www.aspetar.com/journal/viewarticle.aspx?id=150>) that the success of Norway's National Handball Women's Team for almost 30 years was based on extraordinary stability in NHF's leader group, hard work, a long-term project, balance, and discipline.

Conclusions

Handball is seen not merely as a sport but as a tool to be used in presenting educational strategies aimed at equality, since the deep-seated conception of taking part in sports is tied up with attitudes that are socially and culturally imposed because of their competitive nature. Teachers, coaches, and pupils should be aware of the need for change. Handball within schools, seen from a co-educational angle, should be approached with an eye to its predisposition for the development of social and civic skills. These include respect for game rules, teamwork and solidarity, fair play, commitment, and responsibility. Elite handball teams development strategies are based on a cultural approach that actively uses a value system in the development of athletes, teams, and their sport.

Scientific research indicates that success in elite handball is based on long-term organizational strategy, continuity in management, and a holistic coaching philosophy

Acknowledgements

This scientific research is part of the Handball International Education Project "HIEP" Grant contract 101090905 ERASMUS-SPORT-2022-SCP Cooperation Partnership ERASMUS LUMP SUM GRANT. All authors contributed equally to this publication.

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