



# A SPLISS model-based Examination of GB Taekwondo's International Success Secrets

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## Abstract

**Purpose** This study aims to uncover the key drivers behind the noteworthy accomplishments of UK Taekwondo in international sporting competitions, employing the SPLISS model as a framework, with the objective of undertaking a sport-specific analysis of elite sports progression.

**Method** Drawing upon qualitative document analysis and specifically leveraging content analysis, this research scrutinised the evolution and policies of UK Taekwondo. Data was ground in 23 annual reports from key entities, including UK Sport, GB Taekwondo and British Taekwondo, and information from online resources such as articles, videos, and official websites.

**Results** Through content analysis, this study deciphered 9 crucial policy areas resonating with the SPLISS model within the UK's Taekwondo framework, with Talent Identification (TI) and Talent Development (TD) standing out significantly. Three key findings are suggested. First, post-2008 Beijing Olympics, UK Taekwondo entities, especially GB Taekwondo, demonstrated well-defined roles and sustained financial support. Second, to counteract the challenge of a limited talent pool, the UK launched an innovative 'Fighting Chance' initiative, TI, using a Talent Transfer (TT) strategy. Third, during the early development stage of UK Taekwondo, the expertise of foreign coaches, particularly from South Korea, was solicited to enrich and establish coaching services.

**Conclusion** This study supports the view that sport success strategies should be tailor-made to fit unique social and cultural contexts. This underscores the need for sports managers and policymakers to consider unique factors when developing and applying elite sports policies.

**Keywords** Sport policy, Sport system, development, Taekwondo, SPLISS model

## I . Introduction

There has been a growing competition among nations seeking higher medal counts in major international sporting events, such as the Olympics and the World Cup (De Bosscher, De Knop & Bottenburg, 2007; De

Bosscher, De Knop, van Bottenburg, Shibli & Bingham, 2009; Vaeyens, Güllich, Warr & Philippaerts, 2009). Consequently, many countries allocate substantial resources and energies to enhance their elite sports programmes to secure a dominant position on the global stage. In this respect, this study focuses on the recent significant accomplishments of UK Taekwondo at the international level. According to Sport England (2020a; 2020b), as of 2020, there were only 40,300 Taekwondo

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practitioners aged 16 and above. In contrast, the same age group had 1,816,200 football players. Additionally, for young martial artists (Grades 1-11), the number stood at 455,600, compared to 2,525,300 young football players. The provided figures indicate a smaller Taekwondo participant base in the UK.

However, the GB Taekwondo team has consistently delivered outstanding results in international competitions. The team secured its first World Championship gold in 2001 and has since built an impressive record. This includes a gold and bronze at the London 2012 Olympics, followed by gold, silver, and bronze medals at the Rio 2016 games—a momentum that began with their inaugural Olympic medal in Beijing 2008 (GB Taekwondo, n.d.-a). The UK's dominance was further solidified when it clinched the top spot at the 2016 World Taekwondo Grand Prix with three gold medals and ranked second in 2019 with three gold and a bronze medal. These successes highlight the UK's swift rise in international Taekwondo over the past two decades. Moreover, the team added two silver and one bronze medal to their achievements at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

While the meteoric rise of UK Taekwondo has attracted attention, existing academic literature offers minimal insight into this occurrence. Existing literature underscores the necessity of sports-specific examination into the success of elite sports development and international performance, given the unique contexts and policies inherent to each sport (De Bosscher et al., 2007; De Bosscher et al., 2009; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009). This approach has drawn increasing attention in recent years. For instance, Böhlke & Robinson's (2009) study of cross-country skiing in Norway and athletics in Sweden highlighted the significant role of the socio-cultural context, yet also identified obstacles in using benchmarking for sports system management. Their findings discouraged blind adoption of development systems from successful countries. Similarly, Sotiriadou, Gowthorp & De Bosscher (2014) explored the elite sports policy of

sprint canoe in Australia, a sport with a unique culture rooted in the country's surf lifesaving tradition. They revealed a strong correlation between the sport's culture and its Talent Identification (TI), with top sprint canoe athletes often transitioning from surfing. The study suggested that these cultural factors significantly influence policy-making processes and could serve as a unique competitive advantage for TI.

Previous studies have dissected policies and key determinants of success in various elite sports (Digel, Burk & Fahrner, 2006; Green & Houlihan, 2005); however, no exploration into UK's elite Taekwondo policy has been conducted. In response to the scholarly call for deep, sport-specific policy research (De Bosscher et al., 2007; De Bosscher et al., 2009; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009), this article aims to fill this academic void. Comprehending the policy architecture specific to Taekwondo is vital to understanding UK Taekwondo's remarkable global successes. An in-depth examination of UK's Taekwondo policy and system may illuminate key contributors to its stellar international performances, potentially revealing other influential factors behind global Taekwondo successes. The purpose of this article is to examine the primary elements catalysing GB Taekwondo's rapid advancement in worldwide sporting events by using Sports Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success (SPLISS) (De Bosscher et al., 2015). This article, therefore, includes the key research question: How do elite sports policies and related factors influence UK Taekwondo's international success? This research question seeks to thoroughly investigate the elite sport policy of UK Taekwondo. The findings could provide vital insights for sport policymakers and organisations, helping them refine policies and strategies to strengthen elite sport systems for sustained international success.

This article begins with a literature review centred on the SPLISS model. Subsequently, the adopted methodology is detailed. The paper then presents the primary findings, culminating in a discussion, implications, and an outline of its limitations.

## 1. Classification of Factors Leading International Success in Elite Sports

International sporting success, as conceptualised by De Bosscher & De Knop (2003), is impacted by factors at the macro, meso, and micro levels. This study focuses on the meso level, where sports policies and political dynamics predominantly influence the infrastructural and systemic environment for athletes (De Bosscher, De Knop, Bottenburg & Shibli, 2006). These policies shape support and resources for athletes, potentially driving their success. In circumstances where athletes have equivalent resources, well-structured and adequately funded sports policies become pivotal, ensuring a conducive environment for optimal performance. Therefore, examining GB Taekwondo's international success at the meso level provides valuable insights into the role of policy and politics in their achievements.

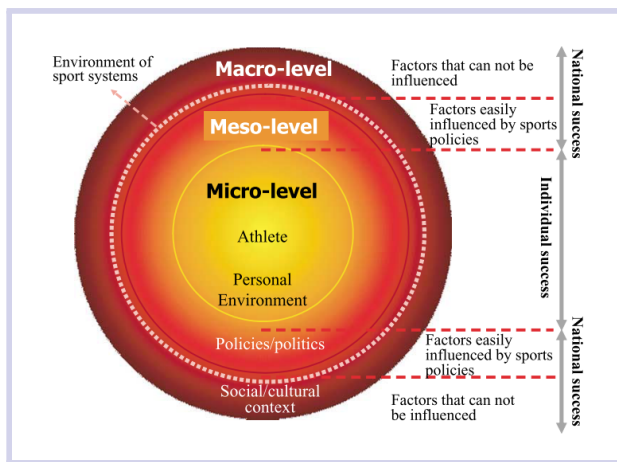


Figure 1. Model of the Relationship between Factors determining individuals and national success

(De Bosscher & De Knop, 2003).

## 2. The SPLISS Model

Several studies have explored the key elements of sports policies to understand the strategies of successful nations (Clumpner, 1994; De Bosscher et al., 2006; De Bosscher et al., 2009; Green & Houlihan, 2005; Green & Oakley, 2001). One notable instrument is the Sports Policy Factors Leading to International Sporting Success

(SPLISS) framework (De Bossechr et al., 2015). This framework identifies nine pillars crucial for international success, including financial support (Pillar 1), integrated policy development (Pillar 2), the athlete development process (Pillars 3-5), training facilities (Pillar 6), coaching provision (Pillar 7), competition opportunities (Pillar 8), and scientific research (Pillar 9) (De Bosscher et al., 2006). De Bosscher, Shibli, Westerbeeck & Bottenburg (2015) further validated the SPLISS model, showing a positive correlation between pillar scores and success in 15 countries, positioning the framework as a comprehensive guide in sports policy areas.

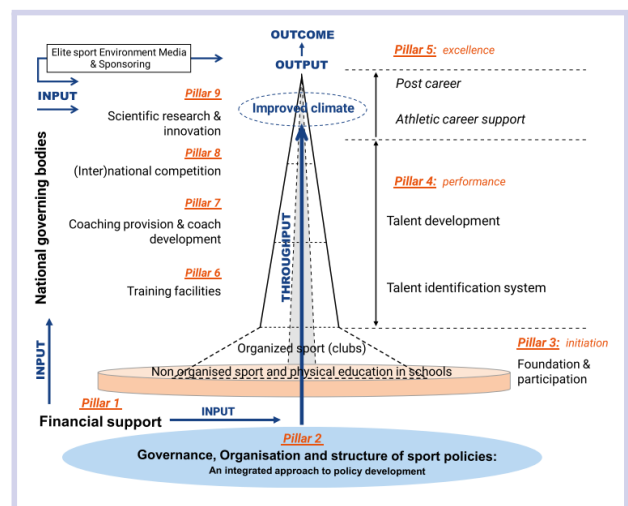


Figure 2. The SPLISS model: the nine pillars of sports policy factors influencing international success

(De Bossechr et al., 2015).

Based on several calls for a sport-specific level of research under the context and policies of each sport, more recent attention focused on the provision of studying elite sports policy at the sports-specific level, using the SPLISS model. Brouwers, Sotiriadou & De Bosscher (2015) examined the interplay of elite sports policy and various factors on international tennis success. They identified two new themes - cultural and commercial environment - as critical to global tennis triumphs. Although the study affirmed the SPLISS model's relevance to tennis, it revealed the diminished role of one pillar - post-career support, attributing this to substantial prize money and sponsorship opportunities in tennis. It underscored the importance of specialised training cen-

ters and high-performance academies, backed by private funding, which facilitated a holistic athlete journey from talent spotting to the elite level. The study recommended policymakers to account for the intersection of private-public cooperation and the cultural-commercial environment for tennis success. Truyens, De Bossher, Heyndels & Westerbeek (2014) explored the role of organisational resources and primary capabilities in fostering competitive excellence in elite athletics. Utilising a two-stage data collection process, the research applied the SPLISS model to categorise these resources and capabilities. The study extended the nine-category SPLISS model with an additional tenth category to represent organisational culture and national climate in elite athletics.

Existing studies emphasise the importance of sport-specific research, as the factors leading to international success can vary based on each sport's distinct environmental and cultural context. Despite its relatively limited participant base, UK Taekwondo has achieved significant international success in recent years. This success positions UK Taekwondo as a fascinating subject for study, particularly as its policies, sporting context, and environmental and cultural influences remain largely uncharted. This research also seeks to assess the relevance of the SPLISS model to Taekwondo, bridging a knowledge gap in the current literature. In essence, this examination aims to uncover the factors driving UK Taekwondo's rapid ascent in global events, with the SPLISS framework serving as the primary analytical lens.

## II. Methods

### 1. Data Collection

This study employed a qualitative document analysis method to explore and contextualise the circumstances surrounding GB Taekwondo and its elite policy and system (Bowen, 2009; Stake, 1995; Atkinson & Coffey, 1997). The data sources included 23 annual reports from

UK Sport (a high-performance sports agency investing in Olympic and Paralympic sport), GB Taekwondo (a high-performance Taekwondo agency), and British Taekwondo (National Governing Body), collected from June to August 2021. Complementary data were gathered from a range of online materials, encompassing policy evaluations, financial reports, and strategic objectives specific to Taekwondo. These digital resources, which include articles, videos, and official website, enriched our overall analysis. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was secured from the authors' institute.

### 2. Data Analysis

This study utilised qualitative content analysis, a widely adopted method in document analysis (Bryman, 2004). Data were processed using Nvivo12, a specialised software for qualitative studies. Its rule-governed processes and its inherent capacity for both inductive and deductive reasoning made it apt for a systematic examination of data (Kohlbacher, 2006; Mayring, 2004; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). After several readings of the data, preliminary coding was conducted (covering areas such as coaching, fighting chance, world-class programme, etc.). This led to the formation of categories (like coaching development, talent identification system, talent development, and so forth) grounded in deductive category formation. Categories were adjusted as necessary, depending on the breadth and depth of supporting data. The concluding phase incorporated conceptual analysis to comprehensively outline each sports policy domain and confirm the alignment with the nine pillars of the SPLISS model (De Bossher et al., 2015; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Consequently, this study generated a unique interpretation regarding the swift international accomplishments of GB Taekwondo. The subsequent section presents the findings of the study.

### 3. Trustworthiness

This study adhered to Guba's (1981) trustworthiness

criteria—credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability—prominent standards for enhancing qualitative research quality (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002). Credibility was fortified by analysing deviant cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994), enriching the study through alternate explanations (Patton, 1999). Findings were juxtaposed with existing knowledge (Silverman, 2000), and a reflective commentary was included (Shenton, 2004) to augment credibility and confirmability. Dependability was addressed by offering a detailed report of the methodology, fostering future work replication (Shenton, 2004). While qualitative research rarely claims generalisability (Curtin & Fossey, 2007), this study's exhaustive methodology description enhances transferability by allowing assessment of its applicability to other contexts.

### III. Results

Following a comprehensive qualitative content analysis and ongoing comparison of the amassed data, this article identified nine policy-related areas. These areas align with the pre-existing concepts entrenched in the SPLISS model, thereby validating the presence of the model's pillars in the context of the UK's Taekwondo policy. Of these policy areas, TI and Talent Development (TD) notably surfaced as the most salient. The findings contribute to an enhanced understanding of the UK's Taekwondo policy and systems in relation to the guiding framework provided by the SPLISS model.

#### 1. Financial Support and Clear division of Roles in Taekwondon Organisations

The funding aspect of UK Taekwondo (SPLISS Pillar 1) has demonstrated a steady progression, especially after the Beijing 2008 Olympics, as reflected in Figure 3. The increased investment aligns with the UK's exceptional performance at the subsequent London and Rio

Olympics. Indeed, since the implementation of National Lottery funding, the UK has garnered 9 Olympic Taekwondo medals (UK Sport, 2023). Concurrently, the structure and organisation of the UK Taekwondo community (SPLISS Pillar 2) have also significantly contributed to this international success. GB Taekwondo, which oversees high-performance Taekwondo, has enhanced efficiency and improved outcomes through its clear division of responsibilities. The organisation's pivotal role in fostering talent, coordinating training programmes, and ensuring optimal preparedness of athletes for international competition underpins the synergy between these two key pillars of the SPLISS model.

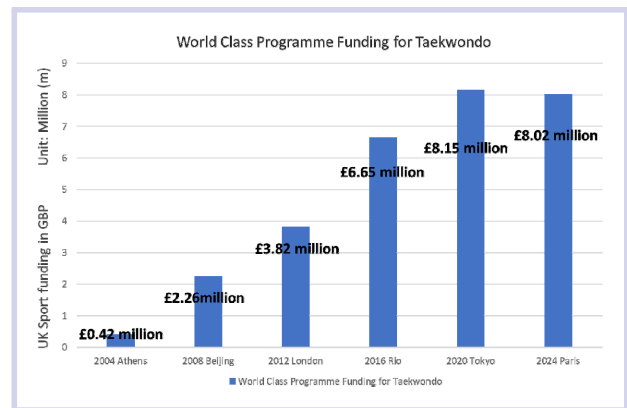


Figure 3. World Class Programme (WSP) Funding for Taekwondo (UK Sport, 2023).

#### 2. Athlete Pathways

The UK's strategy for promoting Taekwondo revolves around key aspects of the Athlete Pathways, which include the foundation and participation components (SPLISS Pillar 3), TI and TD (SPLISS Pillar 4), and (inter)national competition (SPLISS Pillar 8). As of the latest data, 488 World Taekwondo (WT) affiliated clubs are registered with British Taekwondo (British Taekwondo, 2021). However, due to the novelty of WT Taekwondo in the UK in the past decade, there was a limited pool of grassroots participants and potential talent. To overcome this, GB Taekwondo, together with UK Sport and the English Institute of Sport (EIS), has implemented an innovative TI strategy, the 'Fighting Chance' initiative,

which utilises a process known as Talent Transfer (TT). TT is a distinctive strategy that identifies promising athletes, who have already excelled in one sport, and transitions them to another (Collins, Collins, MacNamara & Jones, 2014). Notably, Fighting Chance is an annual open-recruitment initiative that invites not only WT Taekwondo practitioners but also individuals from other martial arts backgrounds, including Kickboxing, Muay Thai, and ITF Taekwondo. Adolescents aged between 13 and 18 years can participate in the GB Taekwondo development programme. Reflecting on the importance of the Fighting Chance initiative, Gary Hall, the Performance Director of GB Taekwondo, emphasised that identifying, recruiting, and transitioning athletes from outside of Taekwondo is essential given the currently limited talent pool (UK Sport, 2014). A testament to the success of this approach is that many of the UK's successful Taekwondo athletes, including Lauren Williams and Lutalo Muhammad, were identified through the Fighting Chance programme and transitioned from different martial arts to WT Taekwondo. In addition to this, the UK has a structured performance pathway for Taekwondo, starting with the Fighting Chance initiative and continuing through TI. The athletes chosen via this TI process enter a TD programme, which eventually leads to their inclusion in the World Class Programme (WCP) following a systematic and long-term professional procedure (see Figure 4).

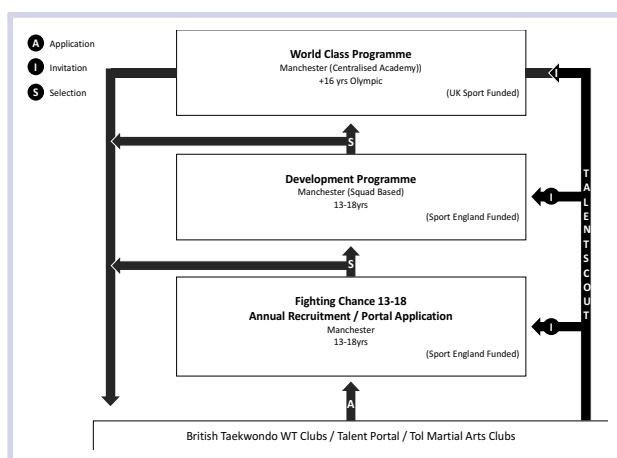


Figure 4. GB Taekwondo Performance Pathways

(GB Taekwondo, n.d.-b).

Furthermore, GB Taekwondo provides athletes opportunities to participate in (inter)national competitions. While the organisation prioritises international competition due to limited national events, they frequently host high-profile international contests. These events, supported by consistent investment from UK Sport, have given British athletes a platform to display their skills on home ground (GB Taekwondo, n.d.-a). Between 2007 and 2019, a total of £3.42 million was invested to facilitate 12 international competitions (UK Sport, 2019). The combination of innovative TI strategies, effective talent transfers, and a strong commitment to host and participate in international events, has navigated through the challenge of a smaller national talent pool. This strategic approach has effectively positioned the UK as a formidable competitor in the international Taekwondo scene.

### 3. Athletic & post-Career Support, and Scientific Research

The EIS provides a broad-spectrum support system for athletes, aligning with SPLISS Pillar 5 and 9. These services, encompassing athletic career support, performance lifestyle service, and various other support offerings, span from physical conditioning, physiotherapy, and soft tissue therapy, to performance analysis, all designed to enhance athletes' performance and recovery. Simultaneously, the EIS also incorporates elements of mentorship and education to foster personal growth and life skills, equipping athletes for life within and beyond the sports arena. This comprehensive approach facilitates a focus on training and effective management of external responsibilities for athletes, thereby amplifying their chances of success in their sporting pursuits.

### 4. Coaching, and Training Facilities

In its early phase around 2013, UK Taekwondo sought to bolster its development by engaging the services of an experienced coach from South Korea, the birthplace of Taekwondo (SPLISS Pillar 7). This coaching expertise



significantly improved the skill levels of young UK athletes, guiding several of them to notable successes, such as double Olympic championships and gold medals in the 2015 and 2017 World Championships (GB Taekwondo, 2018). The engagement of a foreign coach exemplified the UK's successful integration of traditional Taekwondo knowledge into their burgeoning national practice. The melding of this traditional know-how with the UK's talent pool played a key role in enhancing the implementation of the GB Talent Pathway coaching camp. Furthermore, the UK made significant strides in the development of Taekwondo infrastructure with the inauguration of the National Taekwondo Centre in March 2016 (SPLISS Pillar 6). This state-of-the-art facility, made possible through a combined investment of £2.7 million from Manchester City Council, Sport England, and UK Sport, serves as a comprehensive training hub for GB Taekwondo athletes and staff (GB Taekwondo, 2016). The establishment of this centre allowed, for the first time, elite athletes, coaches, and administrators to collaborate within a single facility, further streamlining the processes associated with talent nurturing and development. Currently, the WCP, operating from this centre, provides full-time training for just over 20 athletes (GB Taekwondo, 2023).

## IV. Disuccsion

This discussion section engages in a discourse concerning the distinctive characteristics of the UK's Taekwondo policy and system. The findings underline the applicability of the SPLISS model to Taekwondo and emphasises the significance of financial support, a component of the model proposed by De Bosscher et al. (2006), in achieving international success. An increased influx of funding for Taekwondo in the UK followed the country's first Olympic medal victory at the Beijing Olympics in 2008. Subsequent investment facilitated broader support across various areas, such as the establishment of a world-class National Taekwondo Centre

(NTC), enhancement of scientific research, increased athlete and post-career support, and greater participation in international competitions.

The findings further show three primary sports policies—TI and TD, competitions, and coaching—as significant contributors to the international success of UK Taekwondo. Of these, the athlete pathway and TI and TD emerged as the most influential policy areas, in line with Sotiriadou et al. (2014)'s assertion that the design and implementation of elite sport policy must cater to the specific needs of the sport and the nation's unique context. During Taekwondo's initial growth phase in the UK in the early 2000s, low participation rates were observed due to the sport's novelty. As a response, the UK's TI strategy targeted identifying talented athletes from other martial arts and transitioning their skills to Taekwondo, that is, Talent Transfer, given the limited talent pool. The Fighting Chance initiative adopted an open-recruitment approach, welcoming martial artists from diverse backgrounds, which led to successful identification and cultivation of new talents, enhancing UK's international reputation in Taekwondo. This is consistent with previous research suggesting sport-specific organisation of TI and elite sport development (De Bosscher et al., 2009). This case reflects the successful implementation of TI in the UK, leading to more victories at international Taekwondo events. Competition, as outlined in SPLISS pillar 8, is a critical policy area (Brouwers et al., 2015; Sotiriadou et al., 2014). Despite hosting fewer national competitions compared to other dominant nations in Taekwondo, the UK mitigates this by enabling more opportunities to participate in international events. However, facilitating more grassroots competitions could better prepare athletes for the international stage. The significant growth of Taekwondo in the UK during its early years was expedited by the hiring of a skilled foreign coach from South Korea, Taekwondo's originating country. This strategy could foster international success for newer sports, yet it necessitates addressing potential cultural conflicts through the provision of interpreters or cultural and language education. This article, while comprehensive, is based on a UK-specific context, which

might limit its generalisability. Nonetheless, these findings could hold relevance for other countries with similar sports systems and socio-cultural contexts.

## V. Conclusion

This article aimed to examine the specific policies within Taekwondo that contribute to the UK's international success. Guided by the SPLISS model, this study explored the policy areas that are most relevant to this sport. The results corroborate previous studies that highlight the importance of financial support in achieving success in elite sports (De Bosscher et al., 2015). Furthermore, this research lends credence to the notion proposed by De Bosscher et al. (2009), suggesting that nations should tailor their sporting success strategies according to their distinct cultural contexts. British Taekwondo policies, for example, are uniquely developed to cater to the specific circumstances and requirements of the sport within the country. In the UK, Fighting Chance, TI process, as represented by SPLISS pillar 4, has been customised to align with the country's sporting landscape, through TT.

Notably, the UK government's strategic decision to recruit a coach from South Korea, the origin country of Taekwondo, signifies the adaptive and flexible approach adopted in policy implementation to foster international success. Despite the limited number of domestic Taekwondo tournaments, the UK has managed to compensate for this shortfall by promoting opportunities for international participation. Nonetheless, organising more grassroots competitions could further bolster the UK's international standing in the sport and expand the talent pool. This study's findings underscore that while a set of universal elite sports policies can be applied across various sports and nations, their execution often exhibits adaptations specific to the particular sport and national context. These observations underscore the importance for sports managers and policymakers to consider these unique factors when designing and implementing elite

sports policies. This study thus responds to calls for sport-specific policy analysis (De Bosscher et al., 2007; De Bosscher et al., 2009; Sotiriadou & Shilbury, 2009) and fills a knowledge gap in this domain. Its significance is amplified as it represents a pioneering investigation into elite Taekwondo policy. However, this study relied exclusively on document analysis due to the constraints posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Its exclusive reliance on document analysis, omitting primary data sources like interviews, leaves out the nuanced insights of sports policymakers or GB Taekwondo experts. Future research on Taekwondo policies should adopt a more comprehensive approach, seeking the perspectives of various stakeholders, including staff, coaches, and athletes, by employing complementary methods such as interviews. Such endeavours would offer a deeper dive into the policies' perceived effectiveness and potential areas of enhancement from those entrenched in British Taekwondo.

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## 영국 태권도의 국제적 성공 요인 분석: SPLISS 모델을 중심으로

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### 요약

**목적** 본 연구는 SPLISS 모델을 기반으로 영국 태권도의 국제 스포츠 대회에서의 주목할 만한 성과의 주요 요인을 밝히기 위한 목적으로, 엘리트 스포츠 발전에 대한 특정 중목 분석을 수행하고자 한다.

**방법** 본 연구는 질적 문서 분석을 채택하고 내용 분석을 활용하여 영국 태권도의 발전과 정책을 면밀히 검토했다. 본 연구는 UK Sport, GB Taekwondo 및 British Taekwondo를 포함한 영국의 주요 태권도 관련 및 엘리트 스포츠 기관의 23개 연간 보고서와 기사, 신문보도, 공식 웹사이트와 같은 신뢰 있는 온라인 자원에서의 문서를 기반으로 데이터를 분석했다.

**결과** 본 연구는 질적 내용 분석을 통해 영국의 태권도 체계 내에서 SPLISS 모델과 공명하는 9개의 중요한 정책 및 시스템 영역을 밝혀냈으며, 연구 결과는 영국에서 재능 발굴(Talent Identification) 및 재능 개발(Talent Development)이 두드러지게 나타났다. 특히 분석의 세 가지 주요 결과를 제시한다. 첫째, 2008년 베이징 올림픽 이후, 특히 GB Taekwondo와 같은 영국 태권도 기관들은 명확하게 정의된 역할과 지속적인 재정 지원을 보여주었다. 둘째, 제한된 재능 풀에 대한 도전을 극복하기 위해 영국은 재능 이전(Talent Transfer) 전략을 사용하는 'Fighting Chance'라는 혁신적인 재능 개발 프로젝트를 선보였다. 셋째, 영국 태권도의 초기 개발 단계에서는 대한민국을 포함한 외국인 코치의 전문지식을 요청하여 코칭 서비스를 풍부하게 확립했다.

**결론** 본 연구는 국제무대에서의 엘리트 스포츠 성공 전략이 각기 다른 사회적 및 문화적 맥락에 맞게 맞춤화되어야 함을 보여준다. 이는 엘리트 스포츠 정책을 개발하고 적용할 때 스포츠 관리자와 정책 결정자들이 국가별 고유한 요소들을 고려해야 함을 강조한다.

**주제어** 스포츠 정책, 스포츠 시스템, 스포츠개발, 태권도, SPLISS 모델

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