

ORIGINAL ARTICLE**Identifying and Prioritizing Barriers to the Development of Elite Cycling****Fariba Ahmadi¹, Zeinab Mondalizadeh^{2*}**

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EXTENDED A B S T R A C T**Introduction**

One of the aspects of sport that can create appropriate motivations for people in society, especially young people, to exercise is championship sport. The prevalence of championship sport in all sectors increases social vitality and national productivity, and the promotion of championship sport leads to the name of victorious nations being known worldwide. The development of competitive cycling at the national and transnational levels is an important part of national socio-economic development. In the past decades, there has been a kind of increased awareness among countries and governments about the value of success in championship sport. These successes have been recognized as a valuable resource due to their capacity to help achieve a range of sporting and non-sporting goals. In this regard, Green and Houlihan (2005) state that winning more medals in international competitions leads to an increased sense of national sovereignty, national pride, economic profitability, and diplomatic benefits. Championship cycling is one of the most important disciplines, and countries have shown that, given the prerequisite components of this championship sport, they can lead to development and medal winning in regional and international arenas. A study of the challenges of cycling in Iran shows that implementing these strategies has been accompanied by many difficulties. Cycling, as one of the basic and important sports in the international arena, has a significant capacity to achieve success and improve the status of Iranian sports. However, despite the existence of potential talents and interest among athletes, this discipline has not been able to achieve its worthy and deserved position at the championship level in Iran in Asian and global competitions. The significant gap between the current performance and the actual capacities of this discipline indicates the existence of deep and multidimensional obstacles and challenges. However, no comprehensive and systematic study has been conducted to comprehensively identify and prioritize these obstacles based on their impact and urgency. The lack of such understanding has led to the strategies and policies adopted being often insular, sectional, and lacking the necessary effectiveness. Therefore, the main question of this research is "What are the most important obstacles to the development of cycling at the championship level in Iran and what is the priority of each of these obstacles based on their importance and impact?"

Methodology

This research is based on the purpose of applied research and the data collection method is exploratory, which was conducted in the field using the Delphi approach. The statistical population of the research included heads and vice-heads of boards, managers, experts, coaches, veterans, elite athletes, and professors of Iranian universities, 25 of whom were selected as participants in this research through purposive sampling. In this research, documents, records, and library resources

available in this field were also used, and after reviewing them, information was extracted from them that was used for interview questions and questionnaire components. The Delphi approach was then used. The Delphi approach seeks to create agreement and consensus among participants regarding the items mentioned in the questionnaires. Finally, a questionnaire on obstacles to the development of cycling at the championship level was used, consisting of 5 areas (1- sports facilities and equipment, 2- management and executive, 3- attitude and support, 4- economic, 5- human and environmental) with a five-point Likert scale and a questionnaire on prioritizing obstacles with a 9-point scale.

Findings

The obstacles were economic obstacles, which were identified with items such as the lack of allocation of part of the revenues of organizations and departments to strengthen the cycling championship sport, the lack of sufficient motivation and appropriate returns for private sector investment in cycling, the absence of sponsors to support the cycling team and participate in competitions, the lack of sufficient budget in cycling at the championship and professional levels, the absence of self-sufficient and income-generating cycling clubs, and the problems of importing cycling equipment and gear at the championship level due to economic issues and high prices. Other extracted components were managerial and executive obstacles, which were identified with items such as the lack of security and coordination to ensure the safety of cyclists during training on the roads, poor advertising by the Iranian Broadcasting Corporation in introducing professional and medal-winning cyclists, and the lack of coordination between government agencies and institutions in the field of developing the cycling championship sport. Similarly, the component of facilities and equipment included the lack of a cycling academy for planning and developing the championship sport, the lack of environmental potential, the lack of cycling accessories, and the lack of attention to sports insurance for cyclists. Human and environmental barriers included the lack of attention and insufficiency of training and retraining courses to improve the technical skills of championship cycling coaches and referees, the lack of proper and professional communication between coaches and athletes, and the inattention of officials to the fundamental and professional training of cycling. Finally, the attitudinal and supportive component included the lack of financial and career support for national cycling champions, and appreciate cycling champions and medalists, the lack of local publications and websites dedicated to reporting on cycling and the successes of medalists, and the lack of a program to create a culture of public support for cyclists at the championship level. The results of prioritizing obstacles to the development of cycling at the championship level are also shown in Figure 1. In such a way that the executive management component with a weight of 0.790 ranked first, the economic component with a weight of 0.550 ranked second, the facilities and equipment component with a weight of 0.489 ranked third, the attitudinal and social component with a weight of 0.156 ranked fourth, and the human and environmental component with a weight of 0.065 ranked last. Also, the inconsistency rate was 0.02, which was acceptable.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study was conducted with the aim of identifying and prioritizing the obstacles to the development of championship cycling. The first coefficient of agreement was related to the economic component. Support and sponsorship of championship sports and provision of financial and human resources by the government and participation are considered key points in championship sports. From a theoretical perspective, this situation creates a kind of structural dependence on government resources that contradicts the logic of sustainable sports development. If the government plays the role of a facilitator instead of a direct provider, the opportunity for participation of the private sector and local institutions increases. Therefore, financial strategies based on diversification of revenue sources (sponsoring, branding, public-private partnerships) can increase financial sustainability at the level of federations and boards. The second coefficient of agreement of the present study was related to the component of facilities and equipment. The existence of the

necessary infrastructure and suitable facilities for cycling enthusiasts at the championship level was one of the reasons for the importance among the participants, because if the facilities, equipment, and suitable routes and tracks are available for cyclists to practice, many enthusiasts can practice and from these people, outstanding individuals can be selected to participate in championship arenas. Therefore, improving cycling spaces and routes, improving the quality of cycling equipment and facilities at a standard level, optimizing, improving security, and using technology to build suitable sports spaces such as training tracks can play an important role in the development of this sport. The third coefficient of agreement of the present study was related to the management and executive component. From an analytical perspective, it can be said that the existing management system does not have the characteristics of an adaptive and learning system. In such circumstances, decisions are often made individually, sectionally, and without analytical attachments. Efficient management must be based on data, collective participation, and continuous performance evaluation. It is suggested that the Cycling Federation establish a "Sports Policy Analysis Unit" to collect data, evaluate the performance of the boards, and design regional policies. This approach strengthens vertical coordination between the ministry, the federation, and the boards. The fourth coefficient of agreement in this study is related to the attitudinal and supportive component. Basically, attitudes constitute an important aspect of the working life of managers and officials. Factors such as culture building and the use of advertising, cultural and social barriers are of the greatest importance in the development of cycling in Iranian cities, which is consistent with the results of the present study. Therefore, it can be said that in Iran, cycling is still not recognized as a serious championship sport at the societal level and has little media coverage. This causes public support and citizen participation to decrease. From the perspective of sports policymaking, correcting this situation requires long-term cultural and media planning; Including creating awareness campaigns, holding public events, and more presence of cycling champions in the media for role models. Finally, the last coefficient of agreement was related to the barriers of the human and environmental component. One of the barriers to the development of cycling is the lack of experienced, specialized, and committed coaches, which seems to be the most basic resource of any organization is its human resources. The importance of this factor stems from the fact that it causes the circulation of activities and also creates added value. Without having efficient human resources, no organization will be able to achieve the goals set in any field. In general, the findings of this study show that the development of cycling championships in Iran is affected by a set of structural, cultural, and managerial barriers that operate in a network. Therefore, removing these barriers requires a systemic and cross-sectoral approach, not isolated measures. To achieve this goal, it is suggested that:

1. The Ministry of Sports and the Cycling Federation begin targeted policymaking by developing a "National Roadmap for Championship Cycling" based on the priorities of this research.
2. A private sector participation model should be designed by providing tax and advertising incentives for sponsors.

KEYWORDS

Competitive Cycling, Elite Sport Development, Delphi Method, Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP), Sports Management.

