



Article

Insights from the Evolution of Modern German Sports Policies for the Development of Mass Sports in China

Abstract

This study examines the historical evolution of modern German sports policy, tracing its transformation from early educational reforms and Nazi politicization to the divided models of East and West Germany, and finally to the post-reunification, club-based, socially driven system. It aims to identify policy insights that can inform the development of mass sports in China. The analysis reveals that West Germany's Golden Plan and nationwide fitness campaigns, underpinned by a decentralized club model, fostered broad participation and sustainable foundations for elite sport. In contrast, East Germany's state-centered approach achieved elite success but limited mass involvement. After reunification, Germany prioritized participation-based development to balance social inclusion with competitive excellence. Drawing on these lessons, the paper recommends that China promote the socialization of grassroots sports organizations, integrate market and government mechanisms, enhance multi-tiered competitions, improve public access to sports facilities, and strengthen the dissemination of scientific fitness knowledge. The study concludes that prioritizing mass sports within the national strategy is vital for China's transition from a "large sporting nation" to a "strong sporting nation."

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Germany is widely acknowledged as a traditional powerhouse in sports. It is the only country to have led the gold medal rankings in both the Summer and Winter Olympics and to have won the FIFA World Cup (Orlowski et al., 2016). This achievement highlights Germany's extensive public engagement in sports. However, following the reunification of East and West Germany, the country began to downplay its gold medal strategy, shifting its focus from elite sports achievements to promoting nationwide fitness. Although this shift led Germany to lose its dominance on the Olympic medal table, it marked a significant step in expanding the sports participation base and advancing the goal of nationwide fitness.

Based on recent Olympic results, China has established itself as a major sporting nation internationally. However, the dominance of elite sports has not yet elevated China from a “large sporting nation” to a “strong sporting nation.” The weak foundation of mass sports remains a limitation, and the “gold medal-oriented” approach has distanced the general public from active sports participation (Tan, 2015). Although China and Germany differ in national context and sports management systems, Germany is widely acknowledged as a global sports powerhouse, with its sports policy reforms and developments long at the forefront internationally. Analyzing the evolution of Germany’s sports policies is highly significant for China. It provides guidance for formulating and refining policies tailored to national circumstances, promoting mass sports, and advancing from a “large sporting nation” to a “strong sporting nation.”

1. The Development of German Sports Policies

Modern German sports policies evolved through five distinct stages: the Gymnastics Movement (pre-1871), the Educational Reform Period (1871–1932), Nazi Political Sports (1933–1944), Sports in Divided East and West Germany (1945–1990), and Sports Policies in Unified Germany (post-1990). Sports policies at each stage were shaped by the prevailing social system and reflected the unique institutional characteristics of their respective eras. Since this paper focuses on lessons from the development of modern German mass sports, the discussion starts with the Educational Reform Period.

1.1 The Period of Educational Reform

Germany was one of the first countries to adopt outdoor sports from Britain. Following the unification of the German Empire, the government gradually acknowledged the beneficial effects of outdoor sports and games on military preparedness, and consequently began to integrate outdoor physical activities into national sports policy. In 1882, the Prussian government issued the renowned GutsMuths Directive on Games, employing state policy to promote nationwide public participation in outdoor activities. The German government also advocated for increasing the amount of physical activity among students and encouraged the use of competitive sports and outdoor activities as a means to foster nationalism and patriotism in education. (Krüger, 2014b)

In 1913, the German Imperial Sports Committee introduced the “German Sports Badge System.” This system was established with reference to, and based on, the “Swedish Sports Medal System.” The purpose of this system was to enhance public enthusiasm for participating in sports by organizing mass fitness tests and awarding medals, thereby promoting physical health among the general population. For instance, under the testing standards of that time, adult men only needed to swim 200 meters within six minutes to pass, while the requirement for adolescent boys was even lower—they merely had to complete the distance once to meet the standard. The “German Sports Badge System” remains the most widely participated and influential mass sports initiative in German history, making it an exceptionally successful program. In 1920, after Germany’s defeat in World War I, the country launched the “Golden Plan” for the first time. The “Golden Plan” aimed to promote public health by increasing both the number of participants and the frequency of physical exercise among the population. The plan established specific standards for per capita sports venue area, site selection, and facility specifications in Germany. However, the plan was ultimately terminated due to the rise of Nazi Germany and the outbreak of World War II. Despite its discontinuation, the plan laid a strong foundation for the Federal Republic of Germany to relaunch the “Golden Plan” in subsequent years.

1.2 Nazi Political Sports Oriented Toward Political Objectives

In 1933, after being elected as Chancellor of the Reich, Hitler criticized Germany's educational philosophy toward physical education in *Mein Kampf*, arguing that the nation's sports policy "valued intellectual education over physical training." He believed that "the duty of the state is to make use of youth and to cultivate the future race," implying that national education should focus on physical education and training rather than mere knowledge instillation. The Nazi government ended Germany's longstanding tradition of gymnastics and physical education and launched Nazi political physical education with explicit political objectives (Herzog, 2014). This educational approach, grounded in Nazi principles, was incorporated into the physical education curricula of primary and secondary schools starting in 1937. From that point onward, national consciousness, military awareness, racial awareness, leadership consciousness, and the principle of "optimization" became the central tenets of Nazi political physical education.

Nazi political physical education exhibited three primary characteristics. First, it focused on physical training (Dimeo & Hunt, 2012). Instruction in so-called "useless" scientific knowledge was abandoned, emphasizing the development of physical fitness, with physical education primarily serving a training function. Second, physical education was militarized. During this period, the number of school physical education classes increased significantly. Furthermore, the Nazi government revised primary and secondary school curricula, mandating that, in addition to standard courses, physical education incorporate military-style exercises and long-distance excursions. Third, competitive sports were completely subordinated to political objectives. The Hitler regime used the Olympic Games as a propaganda tool to showcase the strength and superiority of the Germanic people, a goal achieved at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Nazi Germany fielded the largest contingent of athletes in its history and topped the medal table, thereby fulfilling the propaganda objectives of the Hitler regime.

1.3 Sports in Divided East and West Germany

Following Germany's defeat in World War II, the country entered a period of division. Influenced by the two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) adopted distinct approaches in formulating and developing sports policies.

1.3.1 East German Sports Policy Centered on Elite Sports

East Germany's sports policy focused primarily on elite sports (Meier & Mutz, 2016). The East German government leveraged the publicity potential of elite sports to actively promote competitive athletics, using them to inspire public engagement (Meier & Mutz, 2016). East Germany improved its performance in competitive sports by channeling substantial resources into selected Olympic disciplines. For instance, in 1969, the Socialist Unity Party's Politburo of East Germany decided to prioritize individual sports that could yield a large number of Olympic medals, including gymnastics, swimming, athletics, and women's events of relatively lower competitive intensity. During the Cold War, competitive sports became another arena of confrontation between the Eastern and Western blocs. Elite sports served as a state instrument to reinforce ideological control and fulfill the political objectives of the ruling party. East Germany's elite sports system operated under a state-centered model, characterized by four key features: government oversight and regulation, state funding, centralized talent identification, and centralized national training. Elite sports primarily served political objectives, with all efforts concentrated on competitive outcomes, as manifested in the following two aspects.

First, East Germany made substantial investments in elite sports and placed great emphasis on their development. The Central Political Bureau of the Socialist Unity Party held the highest authority over elite sports, while the Central Sports Committee managed its direct administration. Figure 1 presents the organizational structure of East Germany's elite sports system. Under the leadership of the Central Sports Committee, various government departments and social organizations fulfilled their designated functions. Departments subordinate to the Central Sports Committee were primarily responsible for sports research, facility construction, talent identification, and athletic programs within the police and military. Additionally, these departments oversaw the East German Sports Federation, which supervised sports clubs, associations, youth sports schools, and the East German Olympic Committee. East Germany's elite sports management model was centrally regulated and state-

funded, utilizing national resources to promote competitive sports. This model exemplified a quintessential “state-sponsored system(Dennis, 2012).”

Second, mass and school sports were largely neglected. East Germany’s investment in elite sports greatly surpassed that in mass sports. The government aimed to demonstrate its national strength on the Olympic stage and to gain international recognition of East Germany as a legitimate alternative to West Germany(Reiche, 2016). Consequently, East Germany’s sports policies became almost entirely centered on elite athletics. To further support elite athletics, the East German government made extensive investments in the renovation and construction of sports facilities, adding roughly 2,700 new venues between 1975 and 1980. However, to accommodate athletes’ training needs, these facilities were largely inaccessible to the public. As a result, the general public had limited access to exercise facilities, and the number of mass sports competitions declined sharply. The excessive expansion of elite sports in East Germany resulted in an imbalanced and unsustainable sports system, severely constraining mass and school sports. This imbalance explains why, despite East Germany’s outstanding achievements in elite sports, its system was ultimately replaced by the West German model after reunification.

Figure 1. Diagram of East Germany’s Elite Sports System

1.3.2 West German Sports Policy Founded on Mass Participation

The German Sports Federation (DSB) was established in 1950. The state sought to minimize political interference in sports, enabling citizens to freely select their preferred activities through civic organizations. The rapid growth of mass sports in West Germany relied primarily on the creation of a comprehensive management framework and the introduction of innovative sports policies, which can be summarized in two key aspects.

First, the Relaunch of the “Golden Plan.” Germany’s shift in sports development strategy began with the implementation of the “Golden Plan” and the complementary initiative known as the “Second Way of Sports.” Introduced in 1959, the “Golden Plan” aimed to improve public access to sports facilities and create favorable conditions for the growth of mass sports in Germany. The plan called for the construction of 67,000 facilities—31,000 playgrounds for children, 14,700 medium-sized sports fields, 10,400 gymnasiums, 5,500 school gyms, 2,420 outdoor pools, over 2,600 instructional pools, and 50 indoor swimming halls. This impressive scale laid a solid foundation for the steady advancement of German sports in the decades that followed(Meier et al., 2021). The success of initiatives such as the “Golden Plan” required broad social and political support, with funding secured at the national level. Notably, the “Golden Plan” was not government-initiated; instead, it emerged as a bottom-up process in which sports organizations proposed the idea and the government responded. The “Golden Plan” provided extensive infrastructure for public fitness, recreation, and leisure, marking a major milestone in the advancement of mass sports. In the same year, the DSB launched the slogan “The Second Way of Sports,” which marked the beginning of Germany’s first nationwide fitness campaign—widely regarded as the starting point of modern mass sports in the country(Krüger, 2014a).

Second, the repeated implementation of nationwide fitness programs. The success of the first nationwide fitness program gave the German government a “taste of success,” reinforcing its determination to introduce subsequent fitness initiatives. In 1970, the government launched the second fitness program, Exercise Activities. The program aimed to promote public participation in physical activity and to reshape societal attitudes toward fitness. Together, these two nationwide fitness programs shifted the focus of West German sports from elite competition to mass participation, laying the groundwork for the later development of sports clubs across the country. A comparison of East and West German sports policies reveals that East Germany’s elite-sports-centered approach, though effective in achieving rapid competitive success and advancing political objectives, largely ignored the promotion of mass sports, leading to unbalanced and unsustainable development in the national sports system. In contrast, West Germany emphasized mass sports as the foundation for cultivating elite athletic performance. Under this strategy, the West German sports system developed in a balanced and coordinated way, promoting the sustainable advancement of both mass and competitive sports.

1.4 The Improvement and Establishment of a Socially Driven Sports System Based on the Club Model

Germany achieved reunification in 1990. In developing its post-reunification sports strategy, Germany abandoned East Germany's elite-sports-centered model and adopted West Germany's policy emphasizing the development of mass sports. As a result, Germany's sports club model has undergone continuous refinement. To date, roughly one-third of the German population participates in sports clubs (Henke et al., 2014). Within this club-based system, citizens are free to choose their preferred sports, and elite sports have increasingly been aligned with broader social objectives. Consequently, a socially driven sports system grounded in the club model has been progressively improved and firmly established (Wicker & Breuer, 2011). The specific measures underpinning Germany's post-reunification sports policy are outlined below.

First, ensuring the independence of sports organizations and promoting the healthy development of elite sports. Germany manages its sports sector primarily through highly autonomous social organizations operating under a club-based model. The German Constitution guarantees the autonomy of sports organizations, ensuring their freedom from direct government interference. Government departments responsible for sports management play only a supportive role. They assist sports organizations when challenges arise in hosting major events but hold no authority to intervene in their internal affairs. German sports associations consist of multi-level sports federations that play a leading role in formulating and implementing national sports policies, as well as in allocating sports resources. Apart from offering financial assistance through state-run lotteries, federal and state governments largely refrain from intervening in the management of sports organizations, thereby ensuring their full autonomy. In elite sports, Germany no longer pursues results for their own sake. Within the club system, the popularity and participation level of a sport directly influence its competitive standard. Consequently, elite sports in Germany have evolved to align more closely with social development and human-centered values.

Figure 2. Organizational Structure Framework of Sports in Germany

Second, new mass sports development policies were introduced to promote the sustained growth of public sports. Since the 1960s, the German government has consistently launched a series of mass sports initiatives. These include Balancing the Body through Sports—Exercise (1970–1974) and Intelligent Long-Distance Running (1975–1978), which emphasized the importance of public fitness; Aerobic Exercise 130 (1983–1987), which educated citizens about optimal heart rate zones for endurance training; and The Best Exercise is in Clubs (1987–1994), which promoted participation in sports clubs as a primary avenue for physical activity (Krüger, 2013). In summary, the German government has adopted multiple strategies to raise public awareness of the value of physical exercise, frequently disseminating fitness knowledge and skills through nationwide thematic campaigns.

After reunification, Germany did not abandon the development of mass sports. Over the past 30 years, it has repeatedly introduced policies to promote public sports participation, popularize nationwide fitness, and enhance citizens' enthusiasm for physical exercise. In addition to continuing and improving the original "Golden Plan," Germany launched the "Eastern Golden Plan" to accelerate the development of mass sports in the former East German regions and issued the German Sports Guidelines in 2000. In 2002, the German Sports Federation organized the campaign "Sport tut Deutschland gut" ("Sport is Good for Germany") to promote the concept of exercise as beneficial to health, encouraging people to integrate sports into daily life and making sports serve the public. In recent years, with the growing prevalence of obesity—particularly among adolescents—the German government and the German Olympic Sports Confederation jointly launched the "Fitness Instead of Obesity" campaign in 2007, calling on young people to engage more actively in physical exercise to curb the rising trend of childhood obesity. To the German people, the physical and mental well-being of the populace constitutes the foundation for building a healthy nation and is regarded as an indispensable component of national strength.

During this stage, Germany improved and established a socially driven sports system based on the club model. Sports began to serve broader social needs, and mass participation in sports further expanded (Landi et al., 2021). After reunification, Germany continued to support elite sports while promoting nationwide participation to enhance talent development. Mass sports were positioned as the foundation for elite sports. This strategy strengthened and sustained competitive sports, advanced both elite and mass sports simultaneously, and guided German sports toward a more scientific and integrated development path. As a result, Germany became widely recognized as a "sports powerhouse."

2. Implications for the Development of China's Mass Sports Policies

The evolution of China's sports policies reflects a transition from prioritizing elite sports to pursuing balanced development across the entire sports sector; from emphasizing political objectives to addressing human-centered needs; and from striving to be a "sports-major country" to building a "sports-power nation." (Hong & Zhouxiang, 2012) Currently, the development of mass sports in China remains relatively recent, and its policy framework is still in the exploratory stage. In contrast, Germany's mass sports policies have long benefited from broad social participation and have evolved into a relatively mature system. Therefore, examining the evolution of Germany's sports policies and learning from their experience can offer valuable insights for enhancing China's mass sports policy framework.

2.1 Socialization of Grassroots Sports Organizations: Combining the National System with Market Mechanisms

Currently, China's sports system is predominantly managed by government authorities. The advantage of this system lies in the government's ability to steer the direction of sports development, particularly excelling in elite sports. However, this system's drawback is its overemphasis on competitive sports, which may lead to uncoordinated development within the sports industry and impede the growth of mass sports (Zheng et al., 2019). Germany's sports management system is socially driven, offering several advantages for the development of mass sports. Under the guidance of social sports organizations, sports are no longer primarily politically oriented but follow a human-centered approach. Given the differences in national contexts, fully adopting Germany's sports system is impractical for China. Instead, China should establish a sports system with Chinese characteristics, tailored to its national context. Therefore, China could consider: (i) assigning government responsibilities to formulating sports strategies, allocating budgets, and regulating resources, while delegating marketable and popular sports—such as basketball, soccer, table tennis, and badminton—to social sports organizations or associations with appropriate regulatory mechanisms; and (ii) retaining the national system for less marketable and less widely practiced sports, such as shooting, judo, weightlifting, and fencing, thus implementing a differentiated approach. Grassroots sports authorities should shift their functions so that their primary role is to assist associations and provide support, rather than concentrating on elite sports. Resources should be allocated more equitably to promote balanced development across the sports industry. (iii) Establish public service organizations within the sports industry to enhance connections between sports bureaus and various associations, thereby improving governmental efficiency.

2.2 Shifting the Focus: From a "Sports-Major Country" to a "Sports-Power Nation"

China's sports sector is undergoing rapid development. The national system has made significant contributions to the advancement of elite sports. However, achievements in competitive sports alone have not propelled China from a "sports-major country" to a "sports-power nation." The rapid expansion of elite sports has resulted in unbalanced and unsustainable development within the sports industry (Zheng et al., 2019). Relying solely on elite sports is insufficient to advance mass sports in China; conversely, promoting mass sports can support the sustainable development of elite sports. Therefore, achieving healthy, sustainable, and balanced development of China's sports industry requires actively shifting the focus toward mass sports. However, shifting the focus does not imply abandoning elite sports. This requires a coordinated approach: maintaining the current strength of elite sports while increasing investment in mass sports, continuously enhancing institutional safeguards, and promoting coordinated development across the sports industry. This represents a crucial step for China in transitioning from a "sports-major country" to a "sports-power nation" in the new era.

2.3 Establish Comprehensive League Levels and Introduce Mass Sports Competitions

To increase regular participation in physical exercise and promote nationwide fitness, improving the league system and introducing mass-level competitions is a strategy worth considering. Germany's sports league system is highly developed and has become an integral component of its sports infrastructure. In Germany, leagues and clubs operate complementarily, serving as key channels for promoting mass sports, expanding nationwide fitness, and enhancing elite sports performance. The German sports league system comprises seven levels: national leagues are professional, regional leagues are amateur, and ordinary citizens can participate in competitions through membership in sports clubs. Germany organizes national professional leagues across 36 sports disciplines. A comprehensive professional league system provides athletes with higher income and offers additional competition opportunities for the general public. The influence of leagues on mass sports generates a virtuous cycle, boosting participation and promoting the popularization of more sports. Establishing mass sports leagues enhances the competitiveness of mass sports and positively contributes to citizens' quality of life, exercise motivation, and the promotion of nationwide fitness. This demonstrates that a well-structured sports league contributes comprehensively to sports development, serving as the foundation for the sustainability of sports clubs and a crucial component in the growth of mass sports. Therefore, China could consider the following measures: (i) have the government initiate mass sports events, with local associations implementing them and local sports bureaus providing support, to enhance competitiveness and increase public participation in physical activity; (ii) introduce additional amateur-level mass leagues, improve the league system, encourage the public to establish clubs, and support citizens in exercising and competing through club participation, thereby expanding the reach of nationwide fitness.

2.4 Improve Grassroots Mass Sports Facilities and Promote Public Access to State-Owned Sports Venues

China's nationwide fitness movement continues to develop, and fitness venues and facilities have steadily improved (Lu & Xu, 2015). However, a shortage of fitness venues and facilities persists, making it difficult to meet the needs of the general public (Tan, 2015). Germany possesses extensive experience in constructing, managing, and utilizing sports venues. Most German facilities are multifunctional, accommodating football, basketball, volleyball, handball, badminton, and additional sports. This design significantly increases venue utilization, resulting in high usage rates. In Germany, apart from privately owned facilities, all state-built venues are available either free or at minimal cost to the public and sports clubs, facilitating exercise and effectively supporting nationwide fitness. Although China has expanded the construction and enhancement of mass sports facilities following the issuance of the "National Fitness Regulations" and improved public access, existing facilities still fail to universally meet the population's exercise needs. The quality and accessibility of sports venues in China lag behind those in Germany. Insufficient overall resources and low utilization of existing facilities frequently hinder the development of mass sports and the promotion of nationwide fitness. Therefore, China could consider the following measures: (i) increase community sports facilities, enhance grassroots sports infrastructure, provide convenient exercise opportunities for local residents, and broaden the reach of nationwide fitness. (ii) The government should provide subsidies, reduce fees for state-owned venues, implement a public service operational model for sports facilities, and eliminate financial barriers to participation. (iii) Construct new multifunctional venues and schedule different sports at designated time slots to enhance facility utilization.

2.5 Promoting Scientific Fitness Knowledge and Enhancing the Public's Exercise Literacy

With the deepening implementation of China's National Fitness Program, the public has set higher expectations for physical exercise, and how to access scientific fitness knowledge has become a major challenge. Therefore, to enhance the popularization of national fitness, new public sports development policies should be continuously introduced to help citizens truly understand the importance of physical exercise, enabling scientific fitness knowledge and methods to become universal competencies

among the population. At present, although numerous documents in China emphasize the importance of developing mass sports, there is still a lack of policies that can genuinely spark a nationwide fitness movement—a lesson that can be learned from the German government’s experience. Since the 1960s, the German government has introduced new public sports initiatives almost every few years, disseminating fitness knowledge and stimulating public enthusiasm for exercise through mass participation, with remarkable results. In light of this, the following recommendations are proposed: (i) The government should design national fitness activities based on the developmental needs of mass sports, using sporting events as vehicles to impart scientific fitness knowledge, guide public participation, and improve the overall reach of national fitness initiatives; (ii) Encourage and support self-media platforms and public accounts to carry out science-based fitness education activities, promote the integration of “Internet + Fitness,” and use online platforms to publicize national fitness programs, thereby improving the accessibility of scientific fitness knowledge for the public; (iii) Strengthen supervision over various national fitness platforms, promptly rectify any dissemination of inaccurate sports information, and reward those with strong credibility and scientific rigor, so as to guide the public toward accurate fitness knowledge and enhance the scientific nature of mass sports.

3 Conclusion

Drawing on Germany’s experience in developing mass sports is highly valuable for China to enhance the implementation of mass sports initiatives and promote nationwide fitness. A review of Germany’s sports policy evolution reveals that the most important lesson for China is that establishing mass sports policies at the national level forms a critical foundation for the sustainable development of mass sports. Promoting nationwide fitness from a governmental perspective is a long-term and challenging endeavor. Only by genuinely acknowledging the value of sports and integrating it into a national strategy can sports shift from an elite “medal-oriented” focus to a truly public-oriented system. At this critical stage of building a strong sports nation, the government should consider increasing investment in mass sports, enabling widespread public participation to drive the healthy development of the sports industry and advance the goal of becoming a “strong sports nation.” This issue warrants careful consideration.

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