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ABSTRACT

Research Question: The purpose of this paper is to construct knowledge on the working processes of nomination committees (NCs) in sport and analyze their potential to shape board composition. The significance of such an effort lies in its potential to shed light on the processes preceding the structures and practices created for the wielding of power in sport organizations.

Research Methods: This paper reports findings based on telephone interviews with NCs of 64 Swedish national sport organizations.

Results and Findings: The analyses show how NC processes may be distinguished into six components: election of the NC at the general assembly (GA), monitoring of the incumbent board, preparation for nominee identification, assembly of a list of potential nominees, evaluation of potential nominees, and submission of proposed nominees to the GA. Within and across these components, the analyses reveal three aspects particularly powerful in their potential to shape board composition: degree of formalization, network reliance, and transparency.

Implications: These findings have implications for research and practice. Regarding the former, the study provides a baseline description that can be used in future explorations of the NC process and its determinants and effects in varying contexts. As for the latter, the findings suggest that sport organizations carry an untapped potential in considering NCs' shaping potential, regardless of whether an 'adequate' board is one that is equipped to improve organizational efficiency or one that safeguards representation and democracy.

Despite the immense growth of knowledge on the topic of sport governance during the past few decades (for reviews, see Dowling et al., 2018; Parent & Hoye, 2018), several phenomena, although important in practice, remain largely unexplored in research.

Board selection procedures – the processes by which 'individuals are identified, screened, nominated, and elected (or appointed)' to a board (Withers et al., 2012, p. 245) – are one such phenomenon (e.g. Elling et al., 2018; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007; King, 2016; Minikin, 2015). Board selection processes are central to governance simply because they determine board composition (e.g. Clune et al., 2014; Hoye & Cuskelly, 2007). Because the board is the function that 'formally constitutes the pinnacle of organizational power, oversight, and decision-making' (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007, p. 495), incumbents have the formal capability of influencing the orientation and management of sport organizations worldwide. As such, they impact organizational effectiveness (Withers et al., 2012), but they are also key expressions of democratic structures, processes, and ideals. This is particularly so in member-based, federative sport systems, where views on what constitutes 'adequate' board composition are inexplicably linked to concepts like democratic rights and responsibilities, allocation of mandate and accountability, and representation (Enjolras & Wahldahl, 2010).

Regardless of the vantage point from which 'adequate' is defined (efficiency vs democracy/representation), the importance of board composition raises questions around the processes that determine who sits on boards. In this context, an overlooked role is that played by so-called nomination committees (NCs), a governance function that is increasingly used in sport organizations across the world. On a general level, NCs' tasks include identification and selection of board candidates (e.g. Eminet & Guederi, 2010; Kaczmarek et al., 2012; Pirzada et al., 2016, 2017; Ruigrok et al., 2006), and because NCs' proposals are rarely opposed (Withers et al., 2012), they are key gatekeepers in board composition. Nonetheless, little is known about NCs' work.

Our focus was, therefore, on the role played by NCs in board selection processes. We take cue from a small but growing body of corporate NC research (Clune et al., 2014; Walther et al., 2017; Walther & Morner, 2014) in assuming that the ways in which NCs go about their overall task determine who is placed on their ticket and, thus, in most cases, who sits on boards. We proceed with a process research approach (e.g. Langley, 1999; Langley et al., 2013) to our study of NCs' work, meaning we view board composition as an outcome that 'presupposes the occurrence of a series of prior stages' (Langley & Tsoukas, 2010, p. 6). Process research is distinct in its focus on how and why things unfold over time, and it provides 'explanations in terms of the sequence of events leading to an outcome' (Langley, 1999, p. 692) rather than in terms of relationships between variables.

Taking this approach and building on data from interviews with representatives from 64 Swedish national sport organizations' (NSOs) NCs, our purpose is two-fold. We first analyse NC processes in sport organizations as constituted by a series of components (i.e. clusters of activities). Here, we draw on institutional thinking (e.g. Greenwood et al., 2008) to explain the substantive content of these components and their ordering. Second, we discuss key aspects of the NC process that we suggest have particular potential to shape board composition.

The significance of this work lies in its focus on a governance function that, despite its decisive influence, has escaped the attention of sport researchers. More specifically, the study makes two main contributions to research and practice. First, we provide the first-ever comprehensive account of sport NC processes. As such, the study offers a key bridging step to future studies of NC processes, regardless of whether these take

interest in determinants or consequences of NCs' work. Second, by identifying aspects that are high in their shaping potential, we propose directions for future research on the implications of NC processes for board composition. At a more general level, we point to distinguishing features of NC processes in sport, particularly those in federative, member-based, and democratic systems.

Literature review

We approached our topic cognizant of the many reasons sport researchers and practitioners may take an interest in NCs' role in shaping board composition. In increasingly business-like sport contexts, one reason is certainly the (hope of a) link between board composition and board effectiveness (Withers et al., 2012) and organizational performance (Rose, 2007; Siciliano, 1996). However, sport, as Gammelsæter (2020) noted, is not business, but a societal institution with its own innate characteristics. Attempts to analyze sport using mainstream governance frameworks therefore bear the risk of suggesting that sport ought to move closer to the 'mirror' used for evaluation. In sport governance, perhaps chief among sport's specific characteristics is the clash between professionalization/efficiency and democracy/representation (e.g. Sam, 2009; Stenling et al., 2020; Tacon & Walters, 2016).

   Although such tensions are not unique to sport, arguably in no other societal sphere are the two opposites so closely linked in systems that enroll thousands of organizations that span from neighborhood community clubs to the IOC. The limited research that is available on the topic of board composition in sport suggests that in this tug-of-war between conflicting values, criteria associated with professionalization/efficiency (e.g. 'merit') often take precedence over representational concerns (e.g. Enjolras & Wahldahl, 2010; Sam, 2009; Stenling et al., 2020; Tacon & Walters, 2016; Taylor & O'Sullivan, 2009). Although women's underrepresentation on boards has been the focus of most studies (e.g. Adriaanse & Schofield, 2014; Ahn & Cunningham, 2017; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Hovden, 2000, 2010; Strittmatter & Skirstad, 2017), other representational bases (e.g. geography, age, or ethnicity) may be at play in board composition processes as well (Stenling et al., 2020; Tacon & Walters, 2016). As will be clear in our analysis, the subjugation of representational concerns displayed in previous research does not mean that democratic values and principles are empirically or analytically unimportant. This is particularly so in institutional contexts, such as Swedish voluntary sport, which ascribe high value to concepts and practices associated with democratic governance (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016).

NC-Specific research

With the important exceptions of Hovden (2000) and Stenling et al. (2020), who were not processual in their approach, NCs have escaped research attention, but their use can nonetheless be gleaned from sport governance research (Bradbury & O'Boyle, 2015; Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Enjolras & Wahldahl, 2010; Ingram & O'Boyle, 2018). Outside of sport research, only during the past decade have primarily corporate NCs come under scrutiny by governance researchers (e.g. Clune et al., 2014; Eminet & Guederi, 2010; Kaczmarek et al., 2012; Pirzada et al., 2016, 2017; Ruigrok

et al., 2006; Walther et al., 2017; Walther & Morner, 2014). When considering the applicability of these studies, it is important to keep in mind that the rules, practices, meanings, and overall objectives surrounding NCs may differ between general corporate and sport contexts, particularly if the latter are multi-level and democratically governed.

Potential difficulties of transferability aside, available studies on corporate NCs provided useful starting points for our exploration, not least the fundamental insight that NCs indeed make a difference to board composition (e.g. Eminet & Guederi, 2010; Enjolras & Wahldahl, 2010; Kaczmarek et al., 2012; Pirzada et al., 2017; Ruigrok et al., 2006). Complementing research on board composition in sport, corporate NC research has demonstrated that NCs may increase representational diversity with respect to gender and ethnicity on boards. Regarding why NCs make a difference, these studies provided indications that the composition of the NCs influences their proposed board composition, where NC members have a tendency to nominate those who are similar to themselves in certain aspects (Kaczmarek et al., 2012; Pirzada et al., 2016, 2017).

NC process-specific research

The designs utilized in much of the available NC-specific work have tended to 'black-box' the NC's behavioral processes. This has resulted in calls for studies that 'look inside nomination committees' (Walther & Morner, 2014, p. 149) to 'explore at what level of the process, and in what way, nominating committees come to have an impact' (Eminet & Guederi, 2010, p. 571) and 'investigate in detail, for example, the stages of the director nomination and selection processes' (Kaczmarek et al., 2012, p. 485). Given our purpose, the few studies that have responded to this call were of most immediate value to our study, and they showed that 'identification and selection of board candidates' as a task description comes up short in describing the complexities of what it is that NCs actually do.

For example, Walther and Morner (2014) found that corporate NCs indeed hold high responsibility for identifying candidates but that they rarely follow a well-structured process of identification, evaluation vis-à-vis requirement profiles, and internal deliberations and assessments. Rather, most often 'the chairperson recommended a particular candidate to the nomination committee without debate or prior evaluation' (Walther & Morner, 2014, p. 146). Moreover, corporate NCs are often formally responsible toward the stakeholders of the corporation, but contrary to this line of accountability, Walther and Morner found that decisions instead were reported to the board. In a more recent study, Walther et al. (2017) assessed the interrelation between corporate NCs' information-processing and decision quality. Their exploratory design allowed them to demonstrate that decision comprehensiveness depends on how effectively NC members share information, absorb disagreement that stems from outsiders, and integrate different perspectives throughout the nomination process as opposed to managing the process 'tightly and confidentially' (Walther et al., 2017, p. 2209). Finally, Clune et al. (2014) provided the most comprehensive account of the NC process to date. They identified phases that were shared across the 19 U.S. public companies they investigated: (a) ongoing assessments of director skill gaps and director qualifications, involving both the NC, board incumbents and the CEO, and sometimes relying on a skills-grid or –matrix;

(b) gathering of candidate recommendations from the board and at times the CEO, management, and a search consultant; (c) evaluation and ranking of candidates to narrow the pool, carried out by the NC, the CEO, and at times, other board members; and (d) selection decision, commonly carried out by the full board, the CEO, and the NC. Notably, Clune et al. (2014) also found that NC processes vary in formalization (i.e. the extent to which processes are framed and acted upon in a mechanistic way).

Collectively, these studies highlighted three aspects of NC processes of potential relevance for our study. First, NC processes appear to be constituted by distinct tasks, but these may be overlapping rather than sequentially isolated. Second, NC processes are likely to vary in degree of formalization. Finally, NCs and their working processes may be more or less insulated from participation and influence from actors outside of the NC. However, the studies also demonstrate the value of plunging directly into the processes that precede board composition. Nonetheless, it should again be kept in mind that the reviewed work was conducted in corporate contexts. The components identified, their substantive content and underpinning rationales may therefore differ from the NC processes under study here.

Institutional context and research approach

We adopted an inductive process research approach (Langley, 1999) that initially was only loosely framed by an institutional outlook, wherein institutions are understood as shared systems of meaning coupled with associated prescribed patterns of action (e.g. Greenwood et al., 2008). As will become clear throughout the analysis, this outlook is nonetheless analytically important as we approach the centennial Swedish voluntary sports movement, which has been membership-governed since its inception (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016). All boards are voluntary, constituted and elected by members of the organization in question. Elections normally take place at a general assembly (GA) and are assisted by NCs who also are elected at the GA. Beyond the formal structures of bottom-up democratic governance, Swedish sport often claims that all activities are underpinned by volunteerism as an ideal, and societal outcomes are said to stem from the voluntary character of activities and their governance.

Process research is concerned with describing and explaining temporal patterns of events (e.g. Langley & Tsoukas, 2010). Patterns of behavior are at the heart of institutional analysis too (Ostrom, 2010), and the combination of the two therefore meant that we approached our topic with the intent of discerning NC process patterns, and that we understand them as institutionally shaped. That is, we attempt to explain the *activities* that make up NC processes with reference to Swedish sport's institutionalized democratic governance system, and we recognize the *ideational* component of institutions by understanding the explored conduct as infused with the meanings, commonsense knowledge, and logics of appropriateness (e.g. March & Olsen, 1989; Zilber, 2008) available for actors in this system. Beyond focusing our analysis on patterned behavior, the institutional outlook thus afforded us with a tool to explain the NC processes under study.

Although there is a lack of knowledge of sport-NCs' actual working practices, we do have some à priori knowledge of the formal rules that frame Swedish NCs' work. In particular, the bylaws for all NSOs affiliated with the Swedish sport confederation (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2016) state that the NC:

- must consist of members elected by the NSO GA;
- has the task of preparing elections to the NSO GA and must in this work continuously follow the work of the board, the committees, and the auditors;
- must 4 months prior to the GA ask those whose term of office is about to expire whether they wish to stand for another term;
- must 3 months prior to the GA provide to those entitled to vote information on who are resigning and who have declined re-election and request proposals on candidates; and
- must 3 weeks prior to the GA provide to those entitled to vote written information on the total number and names of candidates proposed to the NC and on the list of final candidates sent to the GA.

In addition, affiliated clubs and district sport federations are (2 months prior to the GA at the latest) entitled to propose candidates to the NC and at the GA propose other candidates than those presented by the NC (Riksidrottsförbundet, 2016). These rules are important to keep in mind, but as our analysis will show, NC processes in Swedish sport are patterned and made sense of in ways that go far beyond bylaw stipulations.

Methods

Information on 'what happened and who did what when – that is, events, activities, and choices ordered over time' (Langley, 1999, p. 692) and their meanings are central to process research. To acquire this type of information, we conducted interviews that covered how NCs go about their business. We reached out to all 71 Swedish NSOs' NCs. Representatives (most often the chairperson) of 64 NCs agreed to be interviewed over the telephone (mean length 29 min, see Table 1 in supplemental file for a participant profile). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and in the findings section, I1 refers to Interviewee 1, I2 to Interviewee 2, and so on.

Consistent with a process research approach, the data analysis was guided by our aim to identify and explain cross-NC patterns as such, and we, therefore, refrained from comparing within-NC processes with, for example, NSO size and professionalization level (as a variance research approach would have entailed, see, for example, Langley, 1999).

Thus, in the first analytical step, each transcript was inductively coded in a search for the activities that make up the NC process, with each new distinct activity assigned a code through a comparing and contrasting (Charmaz, 2014) process. Data-driven codes were subsequently clustered by similarity, resulting in nine categories or, as we termed them, components. Next, codes from the initial step were again scrutinized to check each NC's prevalence under each component. This exercise resulted in the removal of three components, leaving six components populated by all NCs (described in the Findings). These were then subjected to an institutional analysis and assessed with an eye toward distinguishing cross-component aspects that we suggest have high board-shaping potential (described in the Discussion). To ensure inter-coder reliability, all steps involved an initial joint coding of a portion of the data material, followed by each author analyzing an assigned portion of the remaining material. Each step was concluded by a joint discussion that also allowed for uncertainties being resolved.

Findings: the components of the NC process

In this section, we unfold our analysis of Swedish NC processes and their institutional underpinning. Arguably, the fact that such a striking cross-NC homogeneity can be observed is in itself indicative of NC processes being institutionalized in the sense of habitualized, patterned behavior (Greenwood et al., 2008). However, beyond this, we make the case that both the NC-function itself and NC processes' substantive content and ascribed meanings can be understood with reference to Swedish sport's democratic governance system and the values associated with it (see Fahlén & Stenling, 2016). The evidence for this is that in contrast to findings from a corporate context (Clune et al., 2014; Walther et al., 2017; Walther & Morner, 2014), the components of the NC process and their overlapping is shaped by the notion of NCs' democratic function. From an ideational standpoint, the institutional character of NC processes is demonstrated through the repeated statements from interviewees concerning representation, responsiveness, and accountability vis-à-vis the membership, membership-provided mandate, and democratic practices, aspects that arguably do not hold the same weight or meaning in contexts other than member-based and federative governance systems.

Following a general description of the interviewees' views of the NC's crucial democratic governance role, this section reports the six shared components of NC processes. It is notable that a persistent theme throughout the interviews was the view that NSO members – the sport clubs represented at the GA – did not recognize the NC's level of influence as gatekeepers to the board, an influence that implies that the NC 'in principle can decide who will be on the board' (I18). Interviewees suggested that because the NC's power is not recognized, its centrality as a democratic and strategic function is undervalued by NSO members. As an illustration, I4 said,

> Our NSO is not special in any way; any NC has a really important function because they can control board composition quite a lot. There's often talk about how the NC election isn't that important, but the NC really has one of the bigger governance functions, because it can determine the board, including who becomes board chair.

According to the interviewees, the NC's power is demonstrated not least through the fact that its proposed ticket is generally voted through at the GA. Following process research thinking (Langley, 1999), this determining influence again highlights the value of explicating how and why NCs go about their business. This is because a favorable vote at the GA represents only the endpoint of an in, most cases, several years-long process that is situated in and shaped by Swedish sport's democratic governance context. It is through this process that the NCs exercise their power and in doing so determine the composition of the ticket that is put to the vote at the GA. Per our analysis, this process can be distinguished into six components: election of the NC at the GA, monitoring of the incumbent board, preparation for nominee identification, assembly of a list of potential nominees, evaluation of potential nominees, and submission of proposed nominees to the GA. As we will highlight throughout, although corporate research has reported lines of accountability being drawn between an NC and board (Clune et al., 2014; Walther & Morner, 2014), the substantive content of the components and their underpinning rationales, demonstrate that Swedish sport NCs consider themselves to be

mandated by, in service of, and accountable to the NSO membership (i.e. clubs and their individual members).

Component 1: election of the NC at the GA

The most foundational evidence of the institutional shaping of NCs is that they are elected (not appointed) at and subordinate to the NSO GA, typically held biannually. This is stipulated in NSO-bylaws, but for NC members it carries the meaning of being mandated by and accountable to the grass-roots membership. Regarding the composition of the NC, the few formal qualifications for NC candidates were rarely mentioned in the interviews. Instead, interviewees referred to informal qualifications as underpinning a person's appropriateness as an NC member. In the sense that they are linked to the idea of NCs being representative of, and responsive to, the membership, these too are linked to the institutional context in which the NC process unfolds. In particular, such informal qualifications relate to, first, representational bases, primarily geographic regions, to which interviewees referred as an ambition to compose an NC that reflects all regions in the country. Second, demonstrating the significance ascribed to NCs being embedded in, and in tune with, the membership, the following additional informal qualifications were cited: a long experience of the sport (i.e. 'knowing' the sport/s), experience of being a (NSO) board member, integrity, and an extended network within the sport (cf. Hovden, 2000). I19, for example, said,

> I've been on the NC for five, six, seven years, and I hope I was elected because of my broad anchoring in [the sport], the knowledge of what goes on in the sport that comes from my long-lasting engagement in the sport.

Once elected, the NC's work process – which only ends at the next GA – begins. A notable feature of this process as a whole is the lack of formalization that surrounds it. Beyond stipulations of timelines, NSO bylaws reportedly revealed little regarding nominee criteria (cf. Stenling et al., 2020) and the process by which NCs ought to conduct their work. It was also rare for NCs to have developed their own guidelines, and in these exceptional cases, 'manuals' were described as elaborations of the bylaws rather than instructions on how the NC should generate a list of and evaluate candidates. However, NC representatives did not seem to find this lack of formalization problematic. On the contrary, interviewees stated that the nomination process benefits from being unregulated and that experience and common sense vouches for NCs' beneficial use of rather significant leeway throughout the process. NCs, interviewees stated, 'don't need guidelines; we know what we're supposed to do' (I31). One reason NCs oppose formalization appeared to stem from the perceived overall difficulty of finding nominees, wherein adding extra guidelines would only worsen the situation. However, lack of formalization should not be taken to indicate a lack of patterned, institutionally meaningful behavior.

Component 2: monitoring of the incumbent board

A second key component of Swedish NCs' work is quite extensive monitoring and evaluation of the incumbent board and its members. Similar to what Clune et al. (2014) found

in the corporate context, interviewees highlighted the ongoing assessment of the board and its work throughout the entire period of mandate. However, because the NCs under study here perceive themselves to be in the service of and accountable to members, their board monitoring and evaluation is carried out on the members' behalf and as part of their democratic mandate – addressing concerns such as whether the board is representative of and properly representing the membership that elected it (cf. Walther & Morner, 2014).

There was a slight variation between NSOs in the execution of this evaluative function, but the most frequent forms were observing NSO board meetings and reading meeting minutes. Regardless of form, however, the purpose of monitoring is retrospective and prospective. It is retrospective in the sense that NCs evaluate how the board works as a group, how individual board members behave, and whether the board is appropriately balanced regarding representational and efficiency aspects. It is prospective in the sense that the observations made are used as input for the more focused preparations for nominee identification. The following quote illustrates this monitoring:

> Well, we follow the board's work closely by participating in board meetings—observing how board members act so that we get an understanding of that aspect. We monitor attendance, behavior in board meetings, whether board members have the integrity and confidence to surrender their position and compromise, whether they have the networks required to connect them with the sport, and so on. (I28)

To complement the observations made at board meetings, many NCs conduct interviews during which board incumbents are asked to review other board members' performance. The monitoring efforts provide a basis for having 'corrective' conversations with board members who are perceived as not performing their duties as expected. However, the monitoring efforts' main function is to give input to the identification of replacement needs that is associated with preparation for nominee identification.

Component 3: preparation for nominee identification

Because federative voluntary sport is elaborate in its linkage of organizations, many shared activities, such as competitions, educational courses, and meetings for regional chairs take place within these systems. For Swedish NCs, these activities carry institutionally prescribed meaning in the sense of being perceived as opportunities to raise awareness of the key democratic role played by the NC and of the nomination process, and to get input from members about the current and future boards. NCs thus seek to be responsive towards the NSO membership to increase the representational quality of the future board.

Perhaps more important from a recruitment perspective, NCs use shared activities to 'scout the market' for potential candidates, an activity that is not confined to any particular time of the mandate period. I13, for example, said, 'When we've got large gatherings and happenings such as summer camps and other meetings, we try to participate; it's important for us to be visible throughout the country.' Indeed, interviewees frequently highlighted the more general importance of 'always having your eyes and ears open' (I31).

For most NSOs, the bylaws state when the formal nomination period for an upcoming election begins and ends. Typically, the NCs use their NSO's established communication

channels (websites, email-lists to district associations, etc.) to announce to members that they are soliciting nominees for the upcoming board election. Swedish NSO boards operate under a practice of 'successive replacement,' meaning that board members' periods of mandate overlap (Stenling et al., 2020). Thus, most often, calls for nominations also specify how many and which positions are open for election and the deadline for submitting proposals (in itself an opportunity distinct for democratic systems) to the NC. Regardless of the distribution method, the beginning of the formal nomination period marks an intensification of the NC's work of assembling a list of potential nominees.

Component 4: assembly of list of potential nominees

Despite their efforts to connect with the membership during NSO-shared activities, it is reportedly rare for NCs to receive enough nominees to fill board vacancies and even rarer for NCs to have a surplus of membership-initiated nominees at the end of the nomination period. As an illustration, I23 stated that their NC 'hasn't received a single nominee' from the clubs. I16 echoed this point, saying, 'It's not like people are hanging by the lock' to be a nominee or nominate someone else. I19 likewise said, 'I'm not sure how things work in other NSOs, but in our NSO, the democratic process in which nominees are supposed to be suggested by the districts work terribly. We might get one, maximum two nominees.' As I8 elaborated, NCs certainly regret members' lack of interest in nominating candidates to the board and the representative implications that follow:

> Our NSO has a very weak nomination tradition, which is unfortunate because we need the members' help to be able to represent them in the best possible way [by composing a ticket that reflects their wishes]. Because, I mean, we don't have any self-interest in this, we want what's best for the members, and if we don't get to hear their voices, get their opinions, it's really difficult to know what's best for them. We were at an NSO-conference a couple of weeks ago, and I got a slot in the schedule to talk to all districts, and we've done that every period of mandate—talked to people—but people still don't nominate. A good period of mandate, we might get five nominations. (I8)

Consistent with the institutionally prescribed meaning of the NC function and process, interviewees lament the lack of membership proposals because of its representational implications. The lack of bottom-up nominations means that NCs are faced with the task of digging up suitable – or in many cases, at least willing – nominees. One common way of solving this task is to ask the NSO's general secretary to assist the NC in gathering potential nominees. According to the interviewees, the fact that the general secretary is responsible for the NSO's everyday communication with regional bodies and clubs makes him or her well situated to aid the NC: '[We] talk to our general secretary, because he meets clubs and attends competitions during the season. So he's our go-to person when it comes to generating suggestions on nominees' (I14). This use of an employee in the NSO's central bureaucracy is certainly noteworthy because it stands in opposition to the otherwise espoused democratic and representative underpinnings of the NC role and process. More concretely, general secretary involvement in the NC process implies that professional staff play a role in determining the board who will later become their employer.

Beyond taking part in shared activities and seeking assistance from the general secretary, NC members exploit their personal networks to come up with suitable candidates. Some interviewees, such as I18, seemed to find this unproblematic:

> We're a small sport, so we've got complete oversight, we know who's part of Swedish [sport], we represent different clubs, so we get oversight from that too. So, that's how we generate names. If the person we approach declines to be a nominee, we usually ask whether they can suggest someone else.

However, some interviewees regretted having to exploit their personal networks to generate a list of potential nominees, partly because of the work it involves, but mostly because of the democratic implications it has. I8 illustrated this sentiment well:

> Well, when we don't receive nominees from the membership, we have to make do with the names we have. And I mean, there's a lot of really good and committed people in the NSO, but we only notice those that come up in our own discussions, those that are part of the "inner circle" so to speak. […] I wish we had four pages filled with names, but that's not the case, so we're more like, "OK, we have these positions to fill, and we need to fill them now," and then we just pull the strings we feel are good, or at least good enough.

I19 likewise noted that the lack of bottom-up commitment from the members and the resulting network-based recruitment 'places a lot of power with the NC, because our recruitment is based on us calling people [we know or know of],' which creates a 'weakened democratic process.' I24 similarly said that if they would receive more nominees,

> We would have a larger selection and therefore a better chance of finding expert candidates, but the greatest gain would be a deepened commitment in the movement, a more solid ground for us to base our decision on—knowing that "this is what the movement wants." I mean, the members have given us the task of composing a board, but we do so based on *our* values and *our* perspectives.

In sum, whereas corporate NCs might be presumed to want to have a large pool of candidates for efficiency reasons, the NCs under study here value a wealth of (and regrets the lack thereof) membership proposals because it undermines their efforts to present ticket that reflects the wishes of the membership.

Component 5: evaluation of potential nominees

Although this rarely happens, should a proposed ticket be rejected by the GA, the NCs would see it as an indication of the proposal not being properly anchored in the membership. To ensure that such a discount of their democratic practices will not take place and that their democratic legitimacy is upheld, NCs engage in in-group discussions about the (in)appropriateness of the individuals on the assembled list of potential nominees. As a basis for these deliberations, some NCs gather information directly from the potential nominee via CVs and interviews and from talking to people in their network. I12 described this procedure as follows:

> We ask for CVs, and/or we ask around, talk to people to get their opinion of the proposed nominee, how they feel about him or her; we form our own views from that. We also talk to the person in question. I think this is a fairly common procedure for NCs.

However, numerous interviewees' stated that their sport is small enough for NC members to, between them, know, or know of, basically everybody on the list of potential nominees, as one interviewee expressed: 'Word travels faster than lightening in this sport' (I27). Because of this, NCs see no need to use any other decision bases than the NC members' personal judgement, at least when it comes to identifying inappropriate candidates.

The data further revealed several criteria that interviewees consider as having to be met for the NC to be a well-functioning and legitimate democratic organ. These apply throughout the process but especially during the evaluation of potential nominees that precedes the submission of the NC's proposal. Chief among these criteria are, first, that the nomination process is collaborative, with NC members communicating often and well and collectively reaching a decision on whom to nominate. NCs, it appears, 'never submit a ticket that we do not agree on' (I20, I22). As an illustration of the collaborative nature of NC processes, I12 said that it is important:

> … that NC members maintain good contact with each other. I mean, if, for example, a suggestion is submitted to one of us, it's super important that this is forwarded to the others. We can't operate if some members are sitting on proposals that the other members are unaware of. So NCs should stay in close contact.

The second criterion that, according to the interviewees, underwrites the functioning and democratic legitimacy of NCs is the maintenance of the integrity of the NC process and its outcome. All deliberations and the information underpinning them should remain strictly confidential to outside actors. I26, for example, said, 'It is a point of honor really, that what we discuss in the NC stays between us. It's really important that we don't share that with anyone else.' I10 similarly underscored the importance of mutual trust, allowing NC members to 'speak openly' under the premise that 'discussions are being held in a room, and the conversations taking place here *never* leave this room, ever.' For interviewees, it was thus imperative that the NC engaged in open discussions about individuals and their (in)appropriateness, but it was equally important that this openness did not extend to individuals outside the NC.

Component 6: submission of proposed nominees to the GA

At the and of their period of mandate, and usually after significant efforts, the NC submits its proposed ticket for voting at the GA. The scarcity of nominations from clubs and regions aside, the data suggested a reluctance among NCs to put forth a recommendation to the GA that its members would not consider appropriate from a representational perspective. In the case that an NC has failed to come up with what it perceives as good nominees, the members instead prefer to leave it to the GA to produce candidates, thereby circling back the representational responsibility to the membership:

> As the NC chair, I would never propose a candidate that I don't want to see on the board; I'd rather hand over the names we've got—even if they don't fill all vacancies—and say, "We haven't been able to find any more suitable candidates" and let the GA propose a candidate from the floor. (I18)

Citing the integrity and legitimacy of the nomination process – and ultimately the system of representative democracy – NCs thus avoid nominating candidates that they find unsuitable or that they believe will be voted down at the GA.

Discussion: the NC process' potential to shape board composition

In this section, we discuss three aspects (degree of formalization, network reliance, and transparency) of the NC process that we suggest may be particularly powerful in their potential to shape board composition.

Degree of formalization

Although corporate NC research has reported varying levels of NC process formalization (Clune et al., 2014), we found a somewhat surprisingly low degree of formalization in Swedish sport NC processes. Beyond bylaws, which normally contain few guidelines on both process and criteria, it was very rare for any of the NCs' tasks to be structured by written-down protocols. In light of the representative ideals that interviewees ascribed to their NC's function, it is notable that NC members appeared to prefer not having formal rules that diminish their discretion in carrying out this function.

Formalization may have the advantage of bringing stability to processes, making its shaping effects less dependent on the composition of the NC. However, interviewees were probably right in suggesting that increased formalization would make the NCs' work more demanding. Given the reported difficulties of soliciting candidates, it is understandable that this is not something NCs view positively. Certain types of formalization (e.g. gender quotas) also clearly shape the nomination processes by decreasing or increasing individuals' chances of being considered as a candidate (cf. Rehfeld, 2009). However, relying on common sense and NC members' judgement may certainly have an equally big, albeit different, shaping effect. This is because common sense, despite what the term suggests, is tied to individuals' background, training, and social position (cf. Schütz, 1967). The composition of the NC with respect to these aspects therefore ought to partially determine the outcome of processes that build on common sense and judgement. This is supported by research identifying correlations between corporate NC members' characteristics and board composition, particularly with respect to gender and ethnicity (Kaczmarek et al., 2012; Pirzada et al., 2016, 2017).

Network reliance

Corporate NC research shows that the nomination process relies heavily on NC–board communication and at times on relationships between the NC and external consultants (Clune et al., 2014). In relation to this, the NC processes under study here appear to rely on 'network mining' to a much greater extent and during the completion of all NC tasks. NC members deploy their networks as they prepare the identification of nominees (e.g. continuously building their 'in-case lists'), assemble the list of potential nominees, and evaluate nominees. From the interviewees' perspective, exploiting their networks is necessary for NCs to successfully proceed through the nomination process. In the face of a lack of member-nominated candidates, the NC process' reliance on networks

may, therefore, be shaping in the sense that it allows the NC to present a ticket at all. However, due to the principle of homophily (cf. McPherson et al., 2001; see Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007; Kanter, 1977 for gendered homosocial reproduction), the NC process' reliance on networks has the obvious potential of gearing the nomination process toward individuals who are part of NC members' networks and away from those who are not. Because NCs use their personal networks to assemble candidates and to evaluate them, it is not enough for individuals to be known within networks; they must also be approved (or at least not disapproved) by those networks.

The substantive effects of network-related shaping tendencies depend, of course, on the properties of the networks used during the NC process. In relation to this, it is noteworthy that the role of networks in the NC process seems to be introduced when the NC is composed, with connectedness within the sport being an important criterion for selection to the NC. Previous work (Hovden, 2000, 2010; Stenling et al., 2020) has demonstrated that connectedness is a highly valued criterion in sport organization board composition processes and that the evaluation of an individual's connectedness is often gendered. Although not shedding light on the gender aspect, this study adds to this knowledge by suggesting that the reproducing ('narrowing') effect of the perceived and actual importance of networks is introduced with the formation of the gatekeeper. Interestingly, then, though the use of networks is understood as key to being able to assemble a ticket, it may simultaneously limit the range – and certainly type – of individuals who turn up on NC members' radars.

Transparency

Walther et al. (2017) demonstrated that NCs' decision quality is shaped by how effectively NC members share information in informal and formal meetings, avoid opposition in later stages of the process by absorbing disagreement stemming from outsiders, and integrate different perspectives throughout the NC process. These were certainly aspects that the interviewees in our study underscored as well, along with the importance of raising awareness of the NC process among the NSOs' members. However, although Walther et al. (2017) cautioned against insulating the process from outsiders, NCs in this study emphasized the necessity of complete integrity in the NC process. Unfortunately, our data did not reveal why a 'hermetically sealed' process is perceived as paramount. We can only speculate that in addition to personal respect for fellow members' reputations, it relates to a need to maintain good relationships within a system in which individuals' participation extends over a long period of time, sometimes for life (cf. McPherson et al., 2001), and where members therefore are bound to run into – and/or need – each other at one point or another.

Concerning shaping effects, the group cohesion and group-level integrity that interviewees described and advocated might allow 'wild cards' to be introduced into the NC process, and the NC's reluctance to share externally the discussions and rationales that underpinned its decision to nominate (or not) an individual may not affect events at the upcoming GA. However, a lack of transparency on deliberations – and thereby on accountability for decisions – may have long-term consequences in terms of members' willingness to provide input to the nomination process, further limiting the number of suggestions submitted from outside the NC members' networks. This is

because the ways in which NCs perform their role arguably create opportunity structures (real and imagined) for the members they are set to represent (cf. Halpin, 2010). Perhaps the reported undervaluation of the NC's power is precipitated by the lack of transparency surrounding the NC process as it exercises this power, if only because the secrecy surrounding the processing of potential candidates may lead members to view their own input into the process as insignificant.

Concluding remarks

With this paper, we sought to shed light on a largely unexplored yet crucial role in board composition and in sport governance more generally: NCs. Based on the assumption that the ways in which NCs carry out their overall task to a large extent determine the ticket that is put to the vote at the GA, we focused particularly on NC processes, their institutional meaning, and board-shaping potential. Our study makes three main research contributions.

The first is that building on a substantial empirical material, we outline the following key components of the sport NC process and detail their associated conduct: the election of the NC at the GA, monitoring of the incumbent board, preparation for nominee identification, assembly of a list of potential nominees, evaluation of potential nominees, and submission of proposed nominees to the GA. Our study is limited to the Swedish context and to the NSO level, but the outline of these components can be used as a starting point for studies that seek to determine their descriptive value across contexts. Furthermore, although our main reason for exploring the NC process was its potential to shape board composition, the NC process components and their substantive content could be used in studies that take an interest in determinants (e.g. NC composition) or other consequences (e.g. opportunity structures for membership engagement) of the NC process.

Building on institutional thinking (e.g. Greenwood et al., 2008), our second contribution is that we demonstrate that the NC role and process in sport, or at least in federative and membership-based contexts, are distinct from those hitherto covered in business contexts (Clune et al., 2014; Walther et al., 2017; Walther & Morner, 2014). Explicating institutionally specific definitions and meanings, the NCs under study here are not only formally subordinate to the GA (as opposed to the board), but they also understand their overall role and accountability in representational terms and ascribe democratic meanings to their working processes. This shows that 'sport is not industry' (Gammelsæter, 2020, p. 1), at least not in federative, member-based, and democratic systems. While our explication of the institutional shaping of the NC process implies generalizability primarily via context similarity, it simultaneously demonstrates the importance of analyzing governance functions in their institutional and systemic context (Cornforth, 2012).

The third contribution is the identification of three cross-component aspects of the NC process that we suggest may be particularly shaping in the context of board composition. Because we consider a baseline account of the NC process to be a precondition for further studies on its impacts (i.e. we need to understand the process before we can evaluate its effects), our design was limited in the sense that it did not directly explore these aspects' impact on board composition. Future research will therefore have to determine the validity of these elements as shapers of board composition, for example, through

designs in which the identified components and elements are built-in as points of departure. We suggest that these elements are shaping across several components, but future research could also do well in exploring whether their impact varies throughout the NC process. Does, for example, degree of formalization have a bigger shaping effect in monitoring of the sitting board or in the evaluation of potential nominees?

To close, in addition to the implications for research pointed to in the preceding paragraph, our study suggests that sport organizations would do well in considering NCs' shaping potential, regardless of whether adequate board composition is conceived from a professionalization/efficiency or democracy/representation perspective.

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