



Developing a Strategic Plan for the Country's Top Sports Talents' Olympiad

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Abstract

This study aimed to develop a systematic and sustainable strategic plan for Iran's Elite Sports Talents Olympiad to enhance sports governance. Employing an applied, descriptive-field research design, data were collected in 2025. The primary data collection instrument was a researcher-developed questionnaire based on the SWOT analysis model; its content validity was confirmed by an expert panel, and its reliability was verified using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The statistical population consisted of 370 key stakeholders of the Olympiad including heads of sports federations, managers from the Ministry of Sport and Youth, and sports elites all of whom were studied using a census sampling method. The strategic analysis indicated that the Olympiad is currently positioned in the defensive quadrant (WT). Accordingly, the main proposed strategies include increasing public awareness and cultural capacity-building, developing targeted growth programs for underprivileged regions, designing an integrated talent management system, and strengthening provincial sports infrastructures. Finally, it is recommended that the Ministry of Sport and Youth establish a "Research and Strategic Steering Unit" to facilitate the systematic implementation of these strategies and to institutionalize sustainable and effective athletic talent development.

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Introduction

In recent years, organizations globally have faced discontinuity, instability, and uncertainty, making strategic, future-oriented perspectives essential for survival. Organizations are compelled to rely on continuous environmental scanning to identify key strategies and success factors (De Bosscher et al., 2022). Strategic planning serves as a systematic framework for analyzing current situations and anticipating future developments. Research indicates that organizations with coherent strategic planning demonstrate superior performance in institutional coordination and resource management (Al-Khafaji et al., 2024). In elite sports, strategic planning is crucial due to the highly competitive environment, limited resources, and public expectations. It enables organizations to mitigate internal weaknesses and transform environmental threats into opportunities (Nikdamir et al., 2022). SWOT analysis is a widely used tool in this context, translating findings into actionable strategies (SO, WO, ST, WT) tailored to specific organizational conditions (Hill & Jones, 2020). Recent studies suggest that strategic planning is most effective when accompanied by governance reforms and transparency. De Bosscher et al. (2026) emphasize that strategic planning should serve as a practical tool for policy alignment rather than merely formal documentation. Furthermore, participatory planning improves both financial and non-financial performance by reducing institutional conflicts (Al-Khafaji et al., 2024). Sustainable development, encompassing social, economic, and environmental dimensions, has become a core pillar of sports planning (United Nations, 2015). The International Olympic Committee (IOC) emphasizes integrating these principles to promote peace and social solidarity (International Olympic Committee, 2020, 2021). Consequently, strategic planning in sports aims for long-term social outcomes and human capital development (Khosravi, 2016). Within this framework, the Olympiad of Top Sports Talents aims to identify talent and strengthen national teams, thereby enhancing sports equity and social participation (Nikdamir et al., 2022). However, sustainable success requires integrated talent identification systems. Ford et al. (2025) argue that talent programs are effective only when continuity in the athlete development pathway is ensured within a coherent strategic framework. Shahrouki and Esmaili (2020) identified economic and structural factors as key drivers in Iranian sports strategies, while Carvalho (2021) emphasized human resource management and long-term strategies for Olympic success. These align with theoretical perspectives regarding organizational survival (Seifahl et al., 2017; Hitt et al., 2002). Despite Iran's potential, a significant gap remains in research regarding sustainable development strategies for the Olympiad of Top Sports Talents using SWOT analysis.

Methods and Material

The present study is applied in terms of purpose and exploratory mixed-methods (qualitative–quantitative) in nature, falling within the category of descriptive–analytical research. Conducted within the framework of strategic planning and utilizing the SWOT analysis model, the study aimed to identify

and prioritize internal and external factors influencing the sustainable development of the Olympiad of Top Sports Talents.

In the first phase (qualitative stage), initial identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats was achieved through library research and 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with sports and talent identification experts. Participants included managers from the Ministry of Sports and Youth, talent identification specialists, provincial sports managers, heads of sports boards, elite coaches, athletes, and experienced veterans actively involved in talent scouting. Participants were selected purposively, and the interview process continued until theoretical saturation was reached; after the fifteenth interview, no new meaningful data emerged. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and an initial list of internal and external factors was subsequently extracted within the SWOT framework.

In the second phase (quantitative stage), based on the qualitative findings, a researcher-developed questionnaire was designed, encompassing the extracted components across four dimensions: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The statistical population for this phase consisted of 370 key stakeholders of the Olympiad of Top Sports Talents. Given the finite and accessible nature of the population, a census sampling method was employed.

To assess the instrument's validity, face and content validity were utilized. Accordingly, the questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of sports management professors and talent identification experts, and the final version was developed after incorporating their revisions. The reliability of the measurement tool was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, which yielded a value of 0.89, indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

For data analysis, the nonparametric Friedman test was employed to rank and prioritize the extracted internal and external factors within each of the four SWOT dimensions. Additionally, by calculating factor weights and scores, the Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) and External Factor Evaluation (EFE) matrices were constructed, and the strategic position of the Olympiad was determined within the strategic matrix. Finally, based on the SWOT analysis results, SO, ST, WO, and WT strategies were formulated and prioritized according to their scores.

Results and Discussion

Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE)

The evaluation of internal factors revealed that the Olympiad faces significant challenges. The total internal factor score was 2.23, which is below the average threshold of 2.5, indicating the dominance of weaknesses over strengths.

- **Strengths:** Key strengths included improving students' sports skills and physical fitness, creating constructive competition, engaging boards and coaches in organizing competitions, and the medal achievements of identified athletes in Asian competitions.
- **Weaknesses:** Major weaknesses included the lack of post-competition follow-up for identified talents, insufficient attention from provincial

officials, the absence of a coherent talent development plan, weak support systems for elite talents' families, and deficiencies in sports marketing and sponsor attraction.

External Factor Evaluation (EFE)

The total score for the External Factor Evaluation matrix was 2.28, indicating that the Olympiad has not effectively exploited available opportunities and faces difficulties in managing external threats.

- Opportunities: Opportunities included motivating children and adolescents, identifying elite talents within specific target groups, encouraging parents to support talents, and increasing international medal wins.
- Threats: Significant threats included cultural weaknesses regarding participation, macroeconomic pressures, inadequate funding, institutional rent-seeking, parallel/overlapping activities with federations, and a lack of support for women's competitions in certain provinces.

Strategic Position

The results placed the Olympiad of Top Sports Talents in the WT (Defensive) quadrant of the SWOT matrix. This position necessitates a defensive strategy to prevent further regression, as the organization struggles to utilize opportunities or mitigate threats effectively due to overriding internal weaknesses.

Conclusion

Based on field and documentary analyses, this section examines the strategic status of the Olympiad of Top Sports Talents and proposes pathways for its development. Determining an appropriate strategy and conducting an objective analysis of internal and external factors are prerequisites for enhancing the efficiency of sports organizations. The key to organizational success lies in the precise analysis of internal resources (strengths and weaknesses) and the evaluation of the external environment (opportunities and threats) (Konani et al., 2024). The most desirable scenario occurs when an organization can fully leverage its capabilities to capitalize on available opportunities. Furthermore, an organization's ability to transform weaknesses into strengths and utilize existing assets to minimize threats pathways it toward sustainable growth (Khosravi, 2017). In this research, the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Olympiad were examined. The findings indicate that the strategic position of this Olympiad lies in the WT quadrant of the SWOT matrix. In other words, the predominance of weaknesses over strengths and the inability to effectively exploit opportunities or reduce threats necessitate adopting a defensive strategy to prevent further situational regression. These findings align with studies conducted by Konani et al. (2024), Khademi et al. (2019), Ziari et al. (2017), and Keshavarz et al. (2017), as well as recent research in sports governance and strategic management (García-Unanue et al., 2024). Based on these analyses, the Olympiad should employ its limited strengths and transform weaknesses into

development-oriented capabilities to counteract threats and intelligently use its restricted opportunities. Although the Olympiad is located in the weakest zone of the strategic matrix, its proximity to other quadrants indicates that, by adopting appropriate strategies and effectively leveraging existing capacities, it can shift toward a growth and development position—an approach consistent with modern strategic planning models (Bryson et al., 2024).

During the diagnostic stage, identified strengths included the enhancement of students' sports skills and physical readiness, participants' familiarity with competitive environments, the participation of local committees and coaches in organizing competitions, and, most importantly, athletic medal achievements. In contrast, the most significant weaknesses were the disregard for the Olympiad's achievements, the absence of a coherent program for nurturing identified talents, the lack of an organized system for attracting and promoting talents, and an excessive focus on medal wins rather than holistic talent development. These findings are consistent with recent literature on sports talent identification, which highlights complex, multi-stage pathways for athletic development (Till et al., 2023). The key opportunities for the Olympiad include participants' exposure to international competition environments and the Youth Olympic Games, the identification of exceptional talents, and improving the knowledge levels of coaches and executive staff. Conversely, the main threats include economic limitations, weak cultural participation, insufficient support from certain provincial authorities (especially concerning women's sports), and duplication of activities with sports federations—challenges also reflected in recent research on sports governance (De Bosscher et al., 2026).

Proposed Strategic Directions for Improving the Olympiad

- **ST Strategies (Leveraging strengths to reduce threats):** Enhancing awareness and alignment among human resources regarding the objectives of the Olympiad through specialized alignment meetings with provincial sports department heads.
- **WT Strategies (Minimizing weaknesses and neutralizing threats):** Establishing an integrated talent management system to facilitate the long-term growth pathway of identified athletes up to national and international levels, alongside formulating tangible and intangible supportive policies to retain young talents (Till et al., 2023).
- **SO Strategies (Capitalizing on strengths and opportunities):** Designing a comprehensive program to develop provincial sports infrastructures and empower human resources involved in talent scouting and nurturing.
- **WO Strategies (Mitigating weaknesses by leveraging opportunities):** Implementing a performance management system to evaluate provincial executors, expanding financial resources, increasing marketing capacities, and broadening provincial competitions through targeted support for outstanding athletes and coaches.

Overall, the findings indicate that the National Olympiad of Top Sports Talents is positioned in the WT (defensive) quadrant. Therefore, it is

imperative to focus on human resource empowerment, establish a comprehensive talent management system, develop supportive regulations, and revise executive processes a direction strongly endorsed by contemporary literature in sports strategic management and policy (Bryson et al., 2024).

Accordingly, it is recommended that the Ministry of Sport and Youth establish a Research and Strategic Steering Unit to institutionalize evidence-based decision-making in sports talent development, thereby paving the way toward sustainable sports development in the country.

Keywords: Elite Sports Talent Olympiad; Strategic Planning; Sustainable Sport Development; Sport Talent Management; SWOT Analysis.