

INNOVATION IN SPORTS MANAGEMENT: POLICIES, PROCESSES AND CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION

The global sports industry has experienced profound transformation over recent decades, driven largely by rapid technological advancement, globalization, commercialization, and increasing professionalization of sports organizations. Consequently, sports management has evolved beyond the traditional administration of games and competitions to encompass strategic planning, policy formulation, governance, marketing, athlete welfare, facility management, and multi-stakeholder engagement.

Within this dynamic and competitive environment, innovation has emerged as a critical instrument for achieving efficiency, competitiveness, and sustainable development in sports organizations. Innovation in sports management entails the adoption of new ideas, technologies, policies, and administrative practices aimed at improving the organization, delivery, and governance of sports programmes. Effective innovation is underpinned by sound policies that provide direction and regulatory support, as well as structured management processes that guide the development and implementation of creative solutions.

Globally, countries that have deliberately embraced innovation through coherent policies, modern management processes, and strategic investment have recorded remarkable progress in sports performance, governance, and commercialization. However, the application of innovation in sports management is often constrained by significant challenges, particularly in developing countries. These challenges

include inadequate funding, weak institutional capacity, resistance to change, policy inconsistency, and limited access to modern technology.

In Nigeria, despite the nation's rich sporting talent, youthful population, and strong passion for sports, these challenges have continued to limit the full realization of the benefits of innovation in sports management. Against this background, this paper examines innovation in sports management with specific focus on policies, processes, and challenges, drawing from global best practices and the Nigerian experience. The paper aims to highlight how innovative approaches can be effectively applied to enhance sports development, governance, and sustainability.

MEANING OF INNOVATION IN SPORTS MANAGEMENT

Innovation in sports management refers to the purposeful introduction and application of new ideas, technologies, policies, and management practices designed to improve the effectiveness, efficiency, and sustainability of sports organizations and activities (Hoye et al., 2018). It involves creative responses to changing environmental conditions, stakeholder expectations, and competitive pressures within the sports industry.

From a managerial perspective, innovation encompasses the redesign of organizational structures, administrative systems, and operational processes to enhance performance outcomes and competitive advantage (O’Boyle & Hassan, 2014). Innovation may be technological—such as the use of data analytics, digital platforms, and wearable technologies—or non-technological, including policy reforms, governance restructuring, and new administrative approaches that promote transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct in sports administration (Tjønndal, 2017; Ratten, 2016).

TYPES OF INNOVATIONS IN SPORTS MANAGEMENT

Innovation in sports management manifests in several interrelated forms, each contributing to improved organizational performance, efficiency, and sustainability.

1. Technological Innovation

Technological innovation involves the adoption of modern technologies to enhance sports administration, athlete performance, officiating, and fan engagement. Examples include data analytics, GPS tracking systems, wearable devices, performance analysis software, Video Assistant Referee (VAR), smart stadiums, and digital ticketing systems (Hoye et al., 2018; Ratten, 2016). These technologies support evidence-based decision-making and operational efficiency.

2. Organizational and Managerial Innovation

This form of innovation focuses on new ways of organizing, planning, and managing sports organizations. It includes professionalization of sports administration, decentralization of authority, performance-based management systems, strategic planning, and benchmarking (O'Boyle & Hassan, 2014). Such innovations improve accountability, transparency, and governance effectiveness (Tjønndal, 2017).

3. Policy and Governance Innovation

Policy innovation entails the development and implementation of modern rules, regulations, and governance frameworks that promote ethical standards, inclusiveness, safety, and sustainability. Examples include anti-doping regulations, safeguarding and athlete welfare policies, gender equity frameworks, and financial fair-play rules (Hoye et al., 2018; Ratten, 2016).

4. Marketing and Commercial Innovation

Marketing innovation involves new approaches to promoting sports, generating revenue, and engaging fans. This includes digital marketing strategies, sponsorship diversification, branding initiatives, social media engagement, and innovative broadcasting models (Tjønndal, 2017).

5. Service and Event Management Innovation

This relates to improvements in the organization and delivery of sports services and events, such as enhanced spectator experiences, innovative event formats, improved facility management, and community-focused programming (Hoye et al., 2018).

6. Training and Coaching Innovation

Innovations in training and coaching include sports science-based training programmes, virtual reality (VR) tools, personalized training plans using analytics, and the integration of mental skills training and sports psychology.

7. Equipment and Facility Innovation

This includes advancements in sports equipment and infrastructure, such as improved sportswear materials, artificial and hybrid pitches, eco-friendly facilities, and smart gym equipment.

8. Medical and Health Innovation

Medical innovations focus on athlete health, injury prevention, and recovery. Examples include injury prediction systems, advanced rehabilitation techniques, sports nutrition advancements, and mental health support programmes.

9. Fan Engagement and Marketing Innovation

This includes virtual fan experiences, mobile applications, streaming platforms, fan tokens, and digital membership models that strengthen fan loyalty and revenue generation.

10. Educational and Capacity-Building Innovation

Educational innovation involves online sports management courses, coaching certification programmes, and e-learning platforms for referees and sports officials.

HOW INNOVATION HAS ADVANCED SPORTS DEVELOPMENT IN OTHER COUNTRIES

United Kingdom: Research-Driven Innovation

In the United Kingdom, innovation in sports management has been driven by strong collaboration between sports organizations and academic institutions. Professional clubs such as Brentford Football Club have benefited from government-supported research and development in sports science, medicine, and performance analysis. These investments have produced evidence-based insights into training intensity, match analytics, and applied physiology, which directly inform coaching and player preparation. This model demonstrates how research-

led innovation enhances performance systems and promotes evidence-based decision-making.

Spain (LaLiga): Digital and AI-Driven Innovation

Spain's LaLiga represents a global leader in technological innovation. The league established a dedicated artificial intelligence (AI) department to integrate predictive analytics and machine-learning tools into competition management, tactical analysis, media production, and fan engagement. By processing vast volumes of match data, LaLiga has strengthened its global brand, expanded into new markets, and created new revenue streams, illustrating the strategic value of digital transformation in sports management.

INNOVATION IN SPORTS MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA

Innovation in Nigerian sports management is gradually emerging, driven by administrators, private organizations, and technology startups seeking to improve athlete development, event organization, and fan engagement.

Technology-Driven Platforms

Digital platforms such as Leagues Arena have introduced innovative solutions for organizing competitions, managing player data, and scheduling matches. Initiatives like NPFL.TV and sports talent applications further demonstrate how technology can enhance visibility, scouting, and fan engagement.

Public–Private Partnerships and Policy Innovation

The Federal Ministry of Sports Development has entered into innovative partnerships with private firms to improve sports funding and infrastructure. Collaborations with corporate organizations and state sports commissions have supported grassroots development and facility revitalization.

Emerging Sports Formats

Innovations such as drone soccer and the growing popularity of flag football illustrate how alternative sports formats can broaden participation and integrate technology, education, and youth engagement.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE INNOVATION IN SPORTS MANAGEMENT

1. Awareness of Problems and Challenges in Sports

One major factor that helps a layman think innovatively is recognizing existing problems in sports activities or management. Innovation often begins when people ask simple questions such as “Why is this not working well?” or “How can this be done better?”

Example: Poor officiating in football led to the introduction of Video Assistant Referee (VAR) to reduce human error in decision-making (FIFA, 2018). In Nigeria, frequent injuries during school sports competitions can inspire innovation in safer playing surfaces or better protective equipment.

2. Exposure to Technology and Media

Technology and media exposure help laymen understand new possibilities in sports. Television, social media, smartphones, and sports apps make people aware of how sports are organized in other countries, which stimulates innovative thinking (Ratten & Jones, 2021).

Example: Use of fitness tracking apps and smart watches to monitor athletes' heart rate and performance. Online ticket sales and live streaming of local sports events using mobile phones.

3. Increased Participation and Experience in Sports

When people actively participate in sports—as players, fans, coaches, or volunteers—they are more likely to identify areas that need improvement. Practical involvement encourages creative thinking (Hoye et al., 2015).

Example: A community football organizer may introduce online registration instead of paper forms to reduce stress and save time. A gym user may suggest flexible training schedules to suit working-class participants.

4. Education and Knowledge Sharing

Basic education, workshops, seminars, and informal discussions help laymen understand sports better and think creatively. Even simple health education or sports talks can trigger innovative ideas (Oakley & Green, 2001).

Example: Learning about sports injuries may lead to innovation in warm-up routines or injury-prevention programs in schools. Sports management students introducing new competition formats to attract more spectators.

5. Influence of Successful Sports Systems from Other Countries

Observing how sports are managed successfully in other countries motivates innovation. Laymen can adapt foreign ideas to local conditions (Ratten, 2016).

Example: Adopting school–club sports systems used in the USA and Europe. Community-based sports development models applied in grassroots sports in Nigeria.

6. Availability of Resources and Infrastructure

The availability (or lack) of facilities, funds, and equipment influences innovative thinking. Scarcity often forces people to think creatively and find alternative solutions (Tidd & Bessant, 2020).

Example: Using local materials to construct goalposts or multipurpose courts. Sharing sports facilities among schools to reduce costs.

7. Desire for Better Performance and Entertainment

The need to improve athletic performance and spectator enjoyment encourages innovation. Fans and athletes naturally suggest new ideas when performance or excitement is low (Hoye et al., 2015).

Example: Introduction of shorter game formats like T20 cricket to increase excitement. Music, cheerleading, and halftime shows to improve fan experience during local matches.

8. Support from Government and Sports Organizations

Policies, grants, and encouragement from government and sports bodies create an enabling environment for innovation. When people feel supported, they are more willing to try new ideas (Oakley & Green, 2001).

Example: Government support for school sports competitions leading to innovations in talent identification. Sports federations introducing digital athlete registration systems.

HOW THE NIGERIAN SITUATION MOTIVATED THE WRITER

Nigeria's combination of abundant sports talent and persistent management challenges strongly motivated this study. Despite recent innovative efforts, sports management practices remain fragmented and inadequately documented. This gap underscores the need for scholarly inquiry into innovation as a strategic pathway for reform, accountability, and sustainable sports development in Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

Innovation is indispensable to effective and sustainable sports management in the modern era. While Nigeria continues to face challenges such as inadequate funding, weak infrastructure, and limited technological capacity, emerging innovations demonstrate significant potential. Deliberate integration of innovation into sports management policies and processes—through collaboration among government, sports federations, private investors, and academic institutions—can transform Nigerian sports governance, performance, and global competitiveness.

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