

Finding Research Funds for Sports Physiology Projects

The worldwide global economic downturn in the latter months of 2008 and in 2009 is impacting sports physiology and sports performance research. Funding for research from internal or external sources is very likely to be harder to obtain while the economic circumstances remain tight. The historical sources of funding for sports science research, namely, internal academic grant programs, the private sector, government agencies, and professional sports, are all feeling the effects of the global economic downturn in the short to medium term.

The majority of sports science research is conducted and funded through the academic sector. Postgraduate research underpins the sports science activity in most countries, and many academics and students have benefited from grant allocations or semi-competitive internal funding programs. Some of these funding programs are likely to be reduced or cut altogether. Reductions in funding will make for some interesting decisions for program managers, researchers, and students alike. One consequence of this problem is that researchers and their students will be forced to undertake research projects that are cheaper and possibly more limited in a scientific sense. Research in areas that are expensive will become increasingly difficult. Investigators working in physiological areas that require expensive equipment or consumables (eg, in many biochemical areas such as endocrinology, biochemistry, and immunology) or involve lots of subjects and/or travel to training camps and competitions are most at risk of funding shortfalls. Conducting research that one can only afford to do is not always the research a sports scientist would like to or needs to do.

Another challenge for the sports performance researcher is the current public sector focus on health, physical activity, and obesity epidemic in the general community. The balance has certainly tipped in favor of physical activity rather than elite sports performance in terms of funding, scholarships, and academic activity. Funds are increasingly being directed to physical activity research as a priority. This means that teaching positions, graduate scholarships, graduate and undergraduate courses, and research funds will favor physical activity rather than sports performance. One colleague in Australia thinks that the balance in his human movement department is 80/20 in favor of health and physical activity funding over sports performance, a complete reversal of the situation of only five years ago. The focus on health and physical activity is likely to continue for the medium term, so sports performance researchers and students will need careful nurturing to maintain active and vibrant research projects.

The so-called professional sports have been a good source of research support in recent years. Sports researchers have benefited from interaction with professional sports that have the financial capacity to drive research activities in the quest for innovation and competitive advantage. The substantial funding available in some international sports have provided opportunities for savvy researchers to develop

linkages complete with funding support. However, the economic belt-tightening will force these sports and teams to reassess their priorities and expenditure. I suspect it will be more difficult to obtain research funding from professional sports. More than ever, researchers will need to articulate clear practical outcomes of their sports performance research and ensure they deliver them in a timely fashion. Researchers who fail either of these requirements may not be given a second opportunity.

A well-worn cliché in the research community is the need for multidisciplinary research. Can the physiologists link arms with their sports psychology or biomechanics colleagues to form truly multidisciplinary research networks or collaborative teams? A second level of this approach involves increased attention to international collaboration. Even though international collaboration is well established in many scientific fields, my sense is that sports performance researchers have not truly embraced this higher level opportunity. The limited number of these international linkages probably reflects the time-honored priority of protecting a nation's competitive (read sporting) advantage, and the perception that sports science research is less important than other heavy-weight areas such as sports medicine, biotechnology, and biomedical research.

Private sector companies are also reviewing their research and development budgets. However, independent research will remain important as the need for objective evaluation of products, programs, and technology continues to grow. The challenge for the research group leader is to identify opportunities and ensure his or her research team can meet a company's expectations as well as their own.

In this era of globalization and economic adversity, the most successful sports performance researchers will be those who see opportunities within and across funding programs, and are innovative and proactive in articulating the benefits of their proposed research projects. It is difficult to be a lone hand in challenging times, so working closely with like-minded colleagues in your department, program, and university, or across the miles, seems a good way to go. Of course, like minds can lead to grand ideas as well as friendship and funding.

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