Subjection, Surveillance, and the Place(s) of Performance: The Discursive Productions of Space in Canada’s National Sport Centre Policy

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Top international athletes and leading-edge facilities, services, and personnel provide the perfect mix when delivering training and development opportunities to high performance coaches. A Centre in Greater Vancouver will help build a strong relationship with athletes, coaches, and other partners in B.C. and will contribute to the national network dedicated to developing world-class coaches.¹

With the rise of modernity, the progenitors of the liberal state were preoccupied with the political management of the body for reasons that concerned as much the production of the modern state itself as the production of the modern individual. Thus, not only was the body not negated in the emergence of modernity, it was a central, if tacit, feature in the development of the modern state. Bodily agency was not overturned so much as rechanneled into forms that were politically expedient and socially useful in the emergent economic and cultural relations of democratic life.²

Ten years ago, in 1998, Sport Canada, the Canadian Olympic Association (COA), and the Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) released the National Sport Centres Position Paper. These organizations joined in a partnership to create a network of National Sports Centres across Canada to enhance the training environments for high-performance athletes. The mandate for the proposed National Multi-Sport Centres (NSCs) was to focus on the provision of spaces to assist national sporting organizations, coaches, and athletes in realizing optimal athletic performances while contributing to the development and well-being of athletes. This article is a critical analysis of some of the political, economic, historical, spatial, and discursive factors that shaped the formal organization of NSCs in Canada. I conduct a textual and discourse analysis of a selection of media releases pertaining to high-performance sport centres and Sport Canada’s policies on NSCs. I examine Sport Canada’s mission, rationale, vision, and commitment to developing high-performance athletes, coaches, and an efficient high-performance system. Sport-related government policy and media releases about NSCs are analyzed as a case in point. I will argue that the ideological commitment to the development of NSCs was not only embedded in discourses of performance, excellence, discipline,

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and nationhood but also in discourses of space and the surveillance of bodies. To
that end, I pay specific attention to the relationships between state intervention and
Lefebvrian theories of space and Foucauldian theories of surveillance.

First, I briefly talk about the development of Sport Canada’s policies on NSCs
and offer a brief critique of the pursuit of excellence within Canadian sport. Second,
I examine how NSCs spaces were conceived and perceived by Sport Canada, a
branch of Canadian Heritage, as a place for the development of athletic excellence,
which could contribute to Canadian society, identity, and culture, as well as securing
an international profile for Canadian athletes. Paying particular attention to Lefeb-
vre’s theories on the production of space and Foucault’s concepts of surveillance,
discipline, and biopower, I suggest that NSC spaces were conceived as spaces
that would “function increasingly as techniques for making useful individuals.” In
such spaces, useful athletic individuals could be subjected to, and be subjects
of, the organization of space, constant observation, discourses of excellence,
commitment, and nationhood. Although NSC policies demonstrated the federal
government’s investment in high-performance athletes, this is an investment that
might have particular effects on the athletic bodies that would inhabit NSC spaces.
That is, while NSC spaces were committed to providing funding, medical care,
competitive experiences, and state-of-the-art environments to facilitate athletes’
development in their respective sports, NSC policy interventions and subsequent
spaces can also be read as mechanisms of spatialization and subjectivation that,
in effect, enable the government’s subordination of Canadian athletes’ bodies to
the pursuit of excellence.

Policy representations of NSC spaces sought to ensure that conceptions of
athlete, excellence, nationhood, and accountability retained some degree of con-
tinuity and cohesiveness across Canada. Thus, the NSC, as a perceived space or
spatial practice of athletic excellence, was conceived by sports authorities as a
space that could guarantee a level of competence and performance from the athletes
and athletic personnel who trained and worked in those spaces. I argue that the
interactions among the state, conceptions of spaces of expertise and performance,
the disciplining of the athlete’s body, and the particular forms of expression of state
panoptics in producing sports policy should continue to concern sport scholars.
Moreover, I conclude that this requires a sustained alertness to questions of sport,
place, and environment and the ways in which different phases in history might
have particular specific spatial effects.

Government and High-Performance Sport in Canada

Sport binds our diverse nation together through pride, people to people
exchange and portrayal of Canadian values. . . . “Team Canada” is at once
our team, our athletes, our approach, our country. . . . Cradle to the grave, we
value physical activity and sport as a cultural trademark.

The historical antecedents that led the way for public initiatives into sport
and the involvement of the federal government in sport in Canada in the late 20th
century have been well documented. Since An Act to Encourage Fitness and
Amateur Sport in 1961, we have learned that successive Canadian governments