

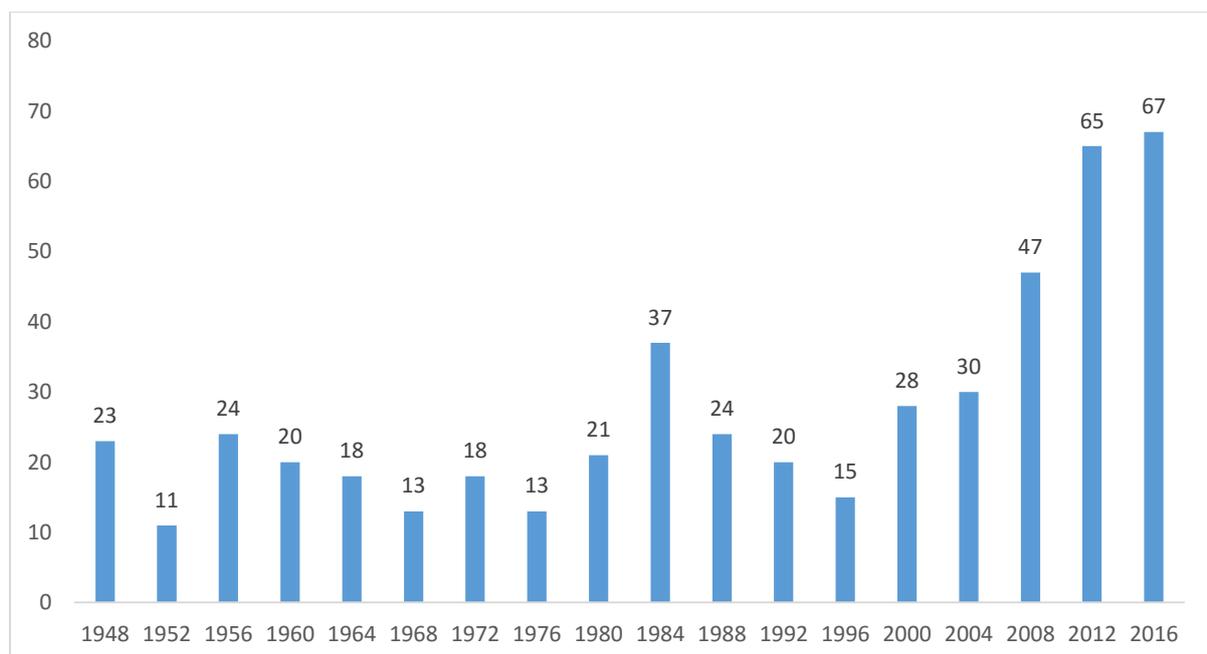
## The Rio Olympics: Explaining the UK's Impressive Results through Project Management

**Marco Sampietro**  
SDA Bocconi School of Management

### Introduction

The UK concluded the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro with 67 medals, achieving an astonishing second place. Only the USA did better, and considering the size of the UK's population the result is really impressive. In addition, the UK hosted the Olympics in 2012 and records reveal that host countries normally perform very well (the so-called home advantage). As a consequence, at the following Olympics the number of medals always decreases. This, however, is not the case here: the UK is the only nation to have won more medals at the next Olympics after having hosted them. Figure 1 reports the number of medals won by the UK in the last 18 Olympic Games.

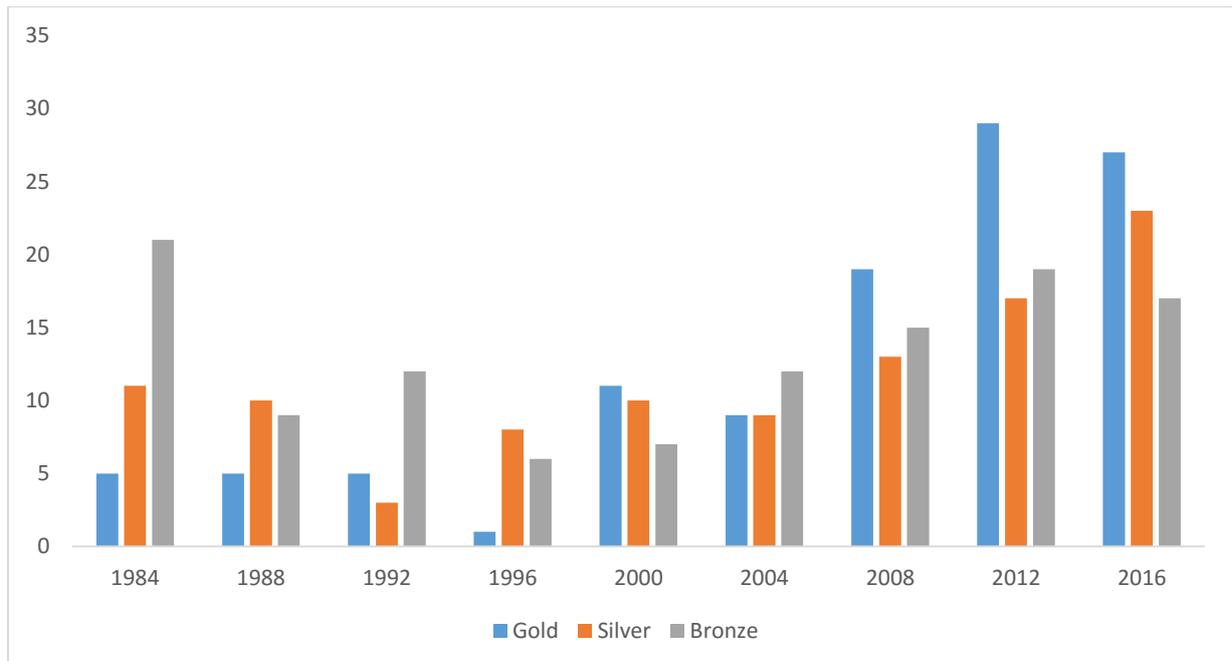
**Figure 1: UK medals at the Olympic Games**



Source: IOC

Focusing on the last 9 Olympics, figure 2 shows the breakdown of medals.

**Figure 2: Type of UK medals won at the Olympic Games**



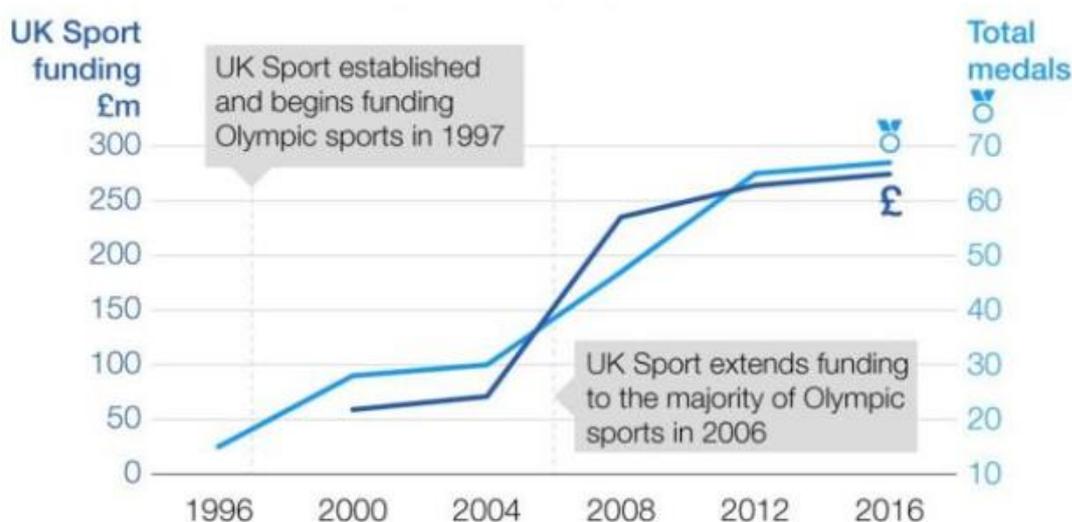
Source: IOC

We can see that two events led to important decisions: the notable increase in the number of medals (even if mainly bronze) at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, and the subsequent decrease in the number of medals at the following three Olympics, culminating in the very poor results of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, where the UK won just one gold medal and ranked 36th, its lowest ranking in the history of the games since the modern Olympics began in Athens in 1896. That was the turning point.

### **Looking at the UK's Results through a Project Management Lens**

Just two years before the Atlanta Games, the National Lottery had been set up in 1994. After Atlanta, it was decided to use part of the National Lottery revenues to fund Olympic sports. In order to support Olympic sports and manage the funds properly, UK Sport was established by Royal Charter on 19 September 1996 and became fully operational on 1 January 1997. UK Sport is a non-departmental public body of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Also in January 1997, it was authorized to distribute lottery funding, which started a virtuous circle concerning the performance of Team GB at the Olympic Games (see figure 3).

**Figure 3: Performance Funding and Olympic Medals Won**



Source: UK Sport

However, it is not just a question of money, and this is where project management comes in.

The first important step is that UK Sport treats the Olympics as if it were a program composed of sets of related projects (sports). Not all countries behave in this way. For many countries, the only coordination mechanism between the different sports is having a common sportswear style and organizing the opening and closing ceremonies. For all other aspects, each sport is independent.

We can learn more by reporting excerpts from UK Sport documents.

As a starting point let us consider the first page of the 2013-2017 Business Plan: “A key role of UK Sport is to make the tough decisions around which sports and athletes have the medal potential to benefit from our strategic investment of Government and National Lottery funding. With a finite resource and high ambitions for further success at elite level we need to rigorously assess our sports and athletes throughout the cycle to ensure that the investment we make into them will deliver more medals. The sports also have to demonstrate that they are fit to govern and be responsible for this public investment to ensure that every penny of National Lottery funding makes a positive difference at the front line.”

It is not hard to identify many elements of Project-Based Organizations: project portfolio management (“decisions around which sports and athletes have the medal potential to benefit from our strategic investment” and “we need to rigorously assess our sports and athletes throughout the cycle”), result orientation (“every penny of National Lottery funding makes a positive difference at the front line”), clear objectives (“ensure that the investment we make into them will deliver more medals”), and clear accountability (“sports have to be responsible for this public investment”).

By reading UK Sport's Annual Reports and Strategic Reviews we can add additional details which highlight the strong project orientation.

UK Sport sets performance targets at both program (Olympics) and project (single sport) level

While in many countries every sport defines (or does not define) targets to achieve, UK Sport defines targets for each Olympics. In addition, UK Sport also sets targets for the so-called Milestone Target events. In other words, UK Sport defines targets for important international events in between two Olympic Games. In this way they have a more realistic representation of the potential of the various sports and if the path towards the Olympics is promising, and if not they can intervene where needed.

Table 1 reports the performance targets (only related to medals) for the year 2015/2016 (April to April).

**Table 1: Performance Targets for 2015/2016**

Objective	2015/2016 Performance Target	2015/2016 Milestone Indicator	Event	2015/2016 Milestone Results	Event
Performance Success – Summer Olympic	Achieve within the medal range	38-67		43	
Performance Success – Summer Paralympic	Achieve within the medal range	94-131		101	
Performance Success – Winter Olympic	Achieve within the medal range	1-7		2	
Performance Success – Winter Paralympic	Achieve within the medal range	2-7		11	

Source: UK Sport, Annual Report, 2016

Before the beginning of each funding cycle, all sports present UK Sport with a detailed, costed strategy and agree a range of medals that they will aim to achieve at the following Olympic or Paralympic Games.

UK Sport scrutinizes all the strategies and allocates funding on a "top-down basis". As a spokesperson stated: "We start with the sports which are targeting the most medals and work downwards i.e. we do not 'salami slice' funding and give some to every sport."

UK Sport measures the achieved performances and, based on the findings, fine tunes the allocation of funds

The level of funding in each sport is assessed annually and benchmarked against results at milestone target events in each year to determine whether they are on track for the next Games. The investment cycle, however, has a duration of 8 years, so sports are not too penalized for extemporary faults.

Funds are normally allocated at the sport level but in some cases funds directly support individual athletes. Medalists at the Olympic Games, senior world championships and Paralympic gold medalists can receive up to £28,000 a year in athlete performance awards funded by the national lottery. Sportsmen and women who finish in the top eight in the Olympics can receive up to £21,500 a year. Future stars, those expected to win medals on the world or Olympic stage within four years, can get up to £15,000 a year.

The performances achieved trigger a review of the allocated funds. Here are some examples:

- The women's indoor volleyball team rose more than 60 places in the rankings to reach the world's top 20 in the four years prior to London 2012, but all funding was withdrawn when they did not win a medal. The UK did not even send a volleyball team to Rio this year.
- Having previously lost all of its elite-level funding, British gymnastics has experienced a steady increase in public investment over the past 20 years, from £5.9m at Sydney 2000 to £14.6m in the current cycle, after it benefited from a 36% funding increase after beating its medal target in London 2012.
- Swimming was one of the elite sports to have its funding slashed from £25.1m to £20.8m after a disappointing London 2012, when its three medals missed the target of between five and seven<sup>1</sup>.

#### Monitoring and control are continuous

While the biggest changes are implemented after the Olympics, teams and athletes are continuously under scrutiny. For example, British Cycling was given a six-point action plan in the spring of 2015 after UK Sport's director of performance Simon Timson headed to Manchester to examine their level of preparedness. British Swimming leadership was lax so Dennis Pursely and Michael Scott were sacked and replaced by Bill Furniss and Chris Spice. The swimmers' tendency not to participate in Team GB's pre-Games preparation camp would have to stop, British Swimming were told. In most other nations, individual federations are not subject to this scrutiny and operate individually<sup>2</sup>.

#### UK Sport centralizes and promotes some important sports development activities

Apart from allocating funds and monitoring and controlling sports teams, UK Sport supports teams by identifying, recruiting, training and coaching the best personnel. As reported in the UK Sport 2013-2017 Business Plan: "What we commonly term the 'Rio' or the 'PyeongChang' cycle refers to the intensive four years of preparation towards the next Summer and Winter Games. Fundamental to this preparation is the continuous development of the high performance system and the recruitment, retention and development of the world class managers, coaches, scientists and support teams that drive it. World class coaching is a key ingredient in medal success and UK Sport is committed to supporting the development of talented

---

<sup>1</sup> Source: The Guardian website (theguardian.com), Monday 15 August 2016

<sup>2</sup> Source: Independent website (independent.co.uk), Sunday 21 August 2016

coaches through central and bespoke programs of support which includes support to retired athletes transferring into these important roles”.

When it comes to athletes: “UK Sport in partnership with our science, medicine and technology arm, the English Institute of Sport (EIS), is also working with sports to develop their performance pathways to ensure there is a constant feed of new and emerging talent with realistic medal potential in Rio, PyeongChang, Tokyo and beyond. Work is on-going to identify talent gaps in programmes that shape the focus of talent identification campaigns that are run throughout the cycle with the aim of parachuting gifted and talented athletes into sports where they can be fast tracked to the podium”.

UK sport also recognizes the role of sports managers: “The leadership and governance of organisations can often have knock on effects to the performance of our sports against their medal targets. UK Sport is committed to inspiring organisations to be world leading in terms of governance not just to prove they are fit to receive public funds but so their governance and leadership can positively impact on athlete success. Leadership and governance programmes are already in progress. In 2014 UK Sport launched the Leading Edge Executive Leadership Programme for sport in partnership with the Home Country Sports Councils. The 18 month programme is being undertaken by 14 CEOs. Beyond the programme, mentoring and coaching schemes are being developed alongside bespoke governance key performance indicators (KPIs) designed to empower the sports to be responsible for owning their governance improvement going forwards”.

It is interesting to note that support for athletes continued during the games with the aim of improving their psychological well-being. For example, all athletes had a form of the Team GB livery worked into their kit, a Union Flag cushion and doormat adorning their Olympic Village flat, and a presentation kit including a commemorative card listing all the Olympic team members. All athletes received a podium jacket, which was presented by chief of mission Mark England, to be worn if they won a medal. The idea behind all this is to instill a love of the team. Finally, Team GB spent more money on the team’s facilities in Rio than at any other Games.

## **Conclusion**

From a scientific perspective correlation does not mean causation. Even if we are not 100% sure that Team GB’s results depend on the allocation of funds and project orientation, we are quite confident that they played a major role. In this article we have tried to explain that consistent positive results come from an explicit strategy translated into specific targets and supported by a coherent organization. From a sports organization perspective, this approach might seem too “business oriented” and, if funds decrease or disappear after poor performances, some sports organization might be disrupted. As Dr Borja Garcia, senior lecturer in sports management and policy at Loughborough University, stated: “It’s a brutal regime, but it’s as crude as it is effective”.

## **Bibliography**

<http://qz.com/763551/how-britain-pop-65-million-won-more-golds-in-rio-than-china-pop-1-3-billion/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Britain\\_at\\_the\\_Olympics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Britain_at_the_Olympics)

<http://www.bbc.com/sport/olympics/37150155>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/olympics/rio-2016-how-did-we-beat-china-at-the-olympics-here-are-eight-reasons-why-a7202901.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/aug/15/brutal-but-effective-why-team-gb-is-winning-so-many-olympic-medals>

<http://www.uk sport.gov.uk/resources/business-plan>

<http://www.uk sport.gov.uk/resources/strategic-review>

<https://www.uk sport.gov.uk/resources/annual-reports>

## About the Author



**DR. MARCO SAMPIETRO**

MILAN, ITALY



**Marco Sampietro** obtained a Ph.D. at the University of Bremen, Germany. Since 2000 he has been a professor at [SDA Bocconi School of Management](http://www.sda-bocconi.it), Milan, Italy. SDA Bocconi School of Management is ranked among the top Business Schools in the world (Financial Times, Forbes, Bloomberg, and The Economist rankings). He is a Core Faculty Member at SDA Bocconi School of Management and teaches Project Management on the MBA – Master of Business Administration, and GEMBA – Global Executive Master of Business Administration programs. He is Faculty Member at [MISB](http://www.misb.edu) – Mumbai International School of Business, the Indian subsidiary of Bocconi University, and Visiting Professor at IHU – International Hellenic University, Greece. He is also a Contract Professor at [Bocconi University](http://www.bocconi.edu) and [Milano Fashion Institute](http://www.milano-fashion-institute.com) for the Project Management courses.

He was a speaker at the NASA Project Management Challenge 2007, 2008, and 2011, in the USA, and a speaker at the PMI Global European Congress, Italy, 2010. He is a Member of the Steering Committee of IPMA-Italy.

He is contributor, co-author and/or editor of 11 books on project management and 7 books on IT management. Among them: [Empowering Project Teams. Using Project Followership to Improve Performance. CRC Press, 2014](http://www.crcpress.com). Finally, he is the author of award-winning case studies and papers.

Dr. Sampietro can be contacted at: [marco.sampietro@sdabocconi.it](mailto:marco.sampietro@sdabocconi.it)