

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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When small countries hit the Olympic big-time



When you account for population size, medal count reveals a crude measure of what's behind national athletic excellence

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My case of Winter Games fever has been heightened by a recent visit to Vancouver, my first trip to an Olympic city. But what has caught my attention most is the incredibly heated national conversation over Canada's supposedly lacklustre medal performance.

Expectations ran higher than usual given the Canadian Olympic Committee's \$110-million "Own the Podium" program. But as of yesterday morning, Canada was in fourth place with 15 medals, well behind the United States with 28, Germany with 24 and Norway with 18. Statistics guru Nate Silver now projects Canada to finish third, with 26 medals.

While topping the standings was an admirable goal, every Canadian knows it was a tall order, especially when the rival United States has 10 times the population to draw from. So with the help of statistically minded colleagues at the University of Toronto's Martin Prosperity Institute, I've been looking at medal count in a different light – by controlling for population. We've dubbed it the Winter Olympic Medals Per Capita Metric (WMPC).

Canada is besting the United States handily on this WMPC metric, taking home roughly five times the rate of medals – 0.5 medals per million Canadians versus just under 0.1 for every million Americans. And if Mr. Silver's projections hold, Canada will finish the

Games outperforming its neighbour by a factor of eight, scoring 0.8 medals per million people.

But before Canadians get all boastful, it should be noted that Canada actually ranks worse in WMPC than it does in the overall medal count. Canada is currently 10th and is projected to finish eighth, behind Norway (projected to win almost five medals per million people), Austria (2), Slovenia (1.4), Switzerland (1.2), Sweden (1.2), Latvia (1), and Finland (0.9). The U.S. would be 21st.

How has Canada performed historically, going back to the 1924 Games? Canada handily tops the United States on the all-time WMPC measure, generating almost four medals per million Canadians, almost five times the American rate. That puts Canada eighth overall. But again, Norway is far and away the dominant force, having taken home a whopping 62 medals per million people. Scandinavia, the Nordic countries and European alpine countries are powerhouses with Finland (29), Austria (23), Switzerland (16) and Sweden (13) raking in the medals. (It's worth noting that we've excluded the Soviet Union and several other Eastern European countries from our analysis – these were initially bigger countries that have subsequently broken up into smaller parts.) The United States ranks 14th with slightly less than one medal (0.8) per million people.

For someone like me who's interested in how economic and social structures affect prosperity, this all raises the question: Are there certain national traits associated with Winter Games performance levels? It's a no-brainer that cold countries with more snowy mountains and icy surfaces do a whole lot better than warm ones – recall the Jamaican bobsledders. But could it be that social and economic factors also play a role? Obviously, a country's level of development matters: Richer countries clearly do better than poorer ones. But countries with more people in professional, knowledge-based and creative industries also fare better, according to our historical analysis. This points to a simple, if crude, theory of performance in the Winter Games.

Winter Games success seems due to more than just the athletic prowess of individuals. From hockey and speed skating to ice dancing, it appears to turn on the same sorts of characteristics that bring prosperity to advanced, creative economies – discipline and diligence, a blend of individual effort and high-performance teamwork, advanced technology and a mixture of raw talent and sustained execution combined with great management, or in this case, coaching. All of which bode well for Canada in future Games.

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MEDALS (THROUGH FEB. 24)

1. United States, 28
2. Germany, 24

3. Norway, 18
4. Canada, 15
5. Russian Federation, 13

MEDALS PER MILLION CAPITA (FEB. 24)

1. Norway, 3.863
2. Austria, 1.208
3. Switzerland, 1.068
4. Slovenia, 0.997
5. Sweden, 0.881
10. Canada, 0.459

MEDALS PER MILLION CAPITA (PROJECTED FINAL)

1. Norway, 4.657
2. Austria, 2.005
3. Slovenia, 1.395
4. Switzerland, 1.215
5. Sweden, 1.156
8. Canada, 0.799