Claims for a link connecting sporting success, the hosting of major events or sporting role models with increased sports participation form part of the rhetoric of sports development policy and practice, although claims in recent documents are more muted.

Previous reviews have demonstrated no robust evidence of the impact of sporting success or sporting role models on sustained participation, and no evidence was unearthed in this review to refute this position.

Other than the more generally applicable social learning theory, no established model of behaviour change was identified that would lead to expectations of sports participation from non- or lesser-participating groups. It might be expected that a general improvement in infrastructure and resources when hosting events would provide a stimulus to existing participants.

The complexity of motivations to participate in sport or to be physically active and the interrelatedness of sports development processes render almost impossible the evaluation of single variable effects such as these. The difficulty in isolating the active effect of sporting success or sporting role models discourages rigorous impact studies.

Methodologies employed in role model research are characterised by case study approaches, observer surveys and process monitoring. The absence of control groups, the lack of consensus on concepts involved and the need for longer-term studies have prevented rigorous systematic research. Sporting role models are important to young people and can be influential in their behaviour and values. The level of interest engendered by programmes such as Sporting Champions is high, and they are generally very well received. Converting interest to activity is not yet substantiated.

Sporting success in specific sports or from hosting a major event may lead to a halo effect in the short term and a burst of interest in participation. Evidence from the Manchester 2002 Commonwealth Games found no evidence of an impact on participation, and evidence more generally suggests that any benefits will only accrue from a more integrated and better planned sports development strategy.
Role models can be categorised on a continuum from observation and minimal interaction to longer-term and more interactive mentoring relationships. Evidence suggests that mentoring-type programmes with ‘at risk’ groups are more likely to have an effect.

Editor's comments - [Do sporting success or sporting role models promote sports participation?]

If such links could be determined, then a host of subsidiary questions would emerge: is the impact sustainable or just temporary; are new participants attracted or do existing sportspeople
Sporting success, role models and participation: A policy related review.

Written by Lyle, J.
Wednesday, 21 January 2009 00:00 - Last Updated Friday, 19 June 2009 17:02

aspire to more; can we target particular groups; and, perhaps most important, how can we capitalise on sporting success or role models to achieve maximum effect on participation?

This review carefully considers a substantial body of research in the area including earlier reviews. Its response to the core question is: “No impacts have been robustly demonstrated.”
