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Design and Development of the Strategic Plan of the Handball Federation of Iran

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ABSTRACT

The present study is classified as qualitative research in terms of research method. Regarding its objective, this research is applied, and considering the nature of the subject, it falls within the field of strategic studies. In terms of data collection method, the present study is a combination of field studies and a descriptive-analytical approach. The statistical population of the quantitative section included 580 coaches, players, referees, and related staff members; the sample size was estimated at 234 individuals based on the Krejcie and Morgan table, and participants were selected through stratified random sampling. The data collection instruments included the review of documents as well as library and internet resources, semi-structured interviews with managers and experts associated with the Handball Federation of Iran, and a researcher-made questionnaire. To prioritize the factors, the Friedman test was applied, followed by the Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) and External Factor Evaluation (EFE) matrices within the framework of SWOT analysis. The findings indicated that the EFE score was 2.44 and the IFE score was 2.48; therefore, the strategic position of the Federation was located in the WT quadrant, indicating the necessity of adopting defensive strategies to reduce weaknesses and mitigate the effects of threats. Accordingly, a set of strategies was formulated in four categories: SO, WO, ST, and WT. The results of this study demonstrated that the Handball Federation of Iran needs to focus on reducing internal weaknesses and addressing environmental threats in order to improve its position. Implementing the proposed strategies in the areas of infrastructure improvement, human resource development, and strengthening international interactions can facilitate the path toward growth and enhanced performance of the Federation.

Keywords: Strategic planning; SWOT analysis; Handball; Iran.

Introduction

In recent decades, strategic planning has become one of the most fundamental managerial approaches for improving organizational effectiveness, enhancing competitiveness, and ensuring long-term sustainability. Organizations operate in dynamic environments characterized by uncertainty, resource constraints, technological developments, and increasing stakeholder expectations; therefore, the ability to systematically analyze internal capacities and external conditions has become a critical factor in organizational success. Strategic planning provides a structured framework through which organizations can define their mission, identify environmental opportunities and threats, evaluate internal strengths and weaknesses, and formulate strategies aligned with their long-term objectives. Unlike traditional managerial approaches that

primarily focus on short-term decision-making, strategic planning emphasizes environmental adaptation, resource optimization, and proactive responses to future challenges. Previous research has demonstrated that environmental uncertainty significantly influences managerial attitudes toward strategic planning and affects the relationship between planning processes and organizational performance. In uncertain environments, organizations with stronger strategic orientations are more capable of adjusting their decisions and maintaining competitive advantages (Cohen, 2001).

The importance of strategic planning is not limited to commercial organizations; rather, it has increasingly become a key requirement for public, nonprofit, and sports organizations. Sports organizations today operate within complex ecosystems involving athletes, coaches, sponsors, media organizations, governmental institutions, international federations, and communities. These organizations must simultaneously address performance objectives, financial sustainability, social responsibilities, and international competitiveness. Strategic management enables sports federations to establish clear priorities, allocate resources efficiently, and develop coordinated programs for talent development, infrastructure improvement, and stakeholder engagement. Strategic planning research has evolved from merely describing formal planning procedures toward understanding how strategic processes create public value, support decision-making, and improve organizational outcomes. Effective strategic planning requires continuous assessment, stakeholder participation, evidence-based decision-making, and adaptation to changing environmental conditions (Bryson et al., 2018).

Sports federations, as central institutions responsible for governing and developing specific sports disciplines, require comprehensive strategic frameworks to achieve sustainable progress. Unlike many other organizations, sports federations must balance multiple objectives, including elite performance, grassroots participation, athlete development, financial management, social inclusion, and international representation. The effectiveness of these organizations depends not only on technical aspects of sport but also on governance quality, managerial competencies, organizational learning, and strategic alignment. Recent studies have emphasized that sustainable sports organizations require managers who possess diverse competencies, including leadership skills, strategic thinking, communication abilities, innovation capacity, and the ability to manage institutional relationships. Competent sports managers are essential for transforming strategic plans into practical actions and ensuring that organizational goals are achieved effectively (Duclos-Bastias et al., 2021).

The management of sports organizations has become increasingly multidimensional due to social, economic, and technological changes. Modern sports federations are expected to operate according to principles of accountability, transparency, sustainability, and continuous improvement. Therefore, the formulation of a strategic plan should not be considered a one-time administrative activity but a continuous managerial process that connects organizational vision with operational decisions. Research on strategic plan management highlights that successful implementation requires clear objectives, systematic evaluation mechanisms, leadership commitment, and coordination between different organizational levels. Many strategic plans fail not because of weaknesses in formulation but because organizations lack implementation capacity, monitoring systems, and alignment between strategies and available resources (Mutambo et al., 2022). Accordingly, sports federations must develop realistic and evidence-based strategic programs that consider both internal organizational characteristics and external environmental forces.

In the field of sports governance, strategic planning has been recognized as an essential factor influencing the performance of national sports federations. National federations that adopt structured strategic planning practices are better positioned to improve organizational performance, attract financial resources, strengthen stakeholder relationships, and achieve

competitive objectives. Strategic planning enables these organizations to identify priorities, establish measurable goals, and respond effectively to emerging challenges. Studies on national sports federations have shown that systematic strategic planning practices contribute to improved administrative efficiency, better coordination among organizational units, and enhanced overall performance (Obonyo, 2021b). Furthermore, strategic planning practices influence the ability of federations to manage limited resources, design development pathways, and create sustainable competitive advantages in national and international environments (Obonyo, 2021a).

Human resources and managerial capabilities are also among the most important elements influencing the success of strategic plans. Organizations require skilled managers, coaches, technical experts, and administrative personnel who can contribute to achieving strategic objectives. Strategic planning combined with effective human resource management promotes organizational competitiveness by improving internal capabilities and facilitating continuous improvement processes. Although strategic planning establishes organizational direction, its effectiveness depends on the ability of human resources to implement strategies and transform objectives into measurable achievements. Previous research has indicated that integrating strategic planning with human resource management creates stronger organizational structures and enhances adaptability in competitive environments (Ossa et al., 2018). Therefore, sports federations need to consider human capital development as a central component of their strategic programs.

In addition to organizational and managerial dimensions, modern sports development increasingly requires attention to sustainability, inclusiveness, and social impact. Sport is no longer evaluated solely through competitive achievements but also through its contribution to broader social goals, including community development, health promotion, equity, and participation. Strategic frameworks in sports should therefore integrate governance principles that support sustainable development and inclusive opportunities. Recent perspectives emphasize the need for policies and governance models that promote diversity, equity, and accessibility in sport systems. Integrating these principles into strategic planning allows sports organizations to create broader social value while maintaining competitive objectives (Kaur, 2025). Similarly, sport has been recognized as a mechanism that can contribute to sustainable development by strengthening social participation, promoting healthy lifestyles, and supporting community-based development initiatives (Gonzalez et al., 2025).

Technological transformation represents another important factor affecting the strategic direction of contemporary sports organizations. Advances in data analytics, artificial intelligence, digital platforms, and performance analysis systems have changed the way sports organizations manage athletes, evaluate performance, and communicate with stakeholders. The use of technology-based systems enables more accurate decision-making, improves training quality, and supports competitive development. For example, recent developments in artificial intelligence and advanced tracking systems have demonstrated the potential of technology to enhance sports analytics, player evaluation, and tactical understanding (Jiang et al., 2025). Therefore, modern strategic planning in sports federations must consider digital transformation as a key opportunity for organizational advancement.

Handball, as a dynamic team sport requiring technical skill, tactical coordination, physical preparation, and systematic development structures, depends heavily on effective organizational management. The development of handball at national and international levels requires long-term planning in areas such as talent identification, coaching education, competition organization, infrastructure development, and international cooperation. Research on elite handball development has demonstrated that community structures, development environments, and support systems play an important role in

producing successful athletes. The interaction between clubs, communities, coaches, and sports organizations contributes significantly to athlete development pathways and long-term sporting success (Rossing et al., 2016). Therefore, national handball federations must adopt comprehensive strategies that address both elite performance and grassroots development.

Performance improvement in handball also requires scientific approaches to training, competition analysis, and technical development. Modern handball has become increasingly dependent on systematic match analysis, which provides valuable information about tactical patterns, player performance, and competitive demands. Evidence from handball research indicates that match analysis contributes to better understanding of game requirements and supports coaches and managers in making informed decisions regarding training and competition strategies (Willian et al., 2019). Consequently, strategic planning in handball organizations should include mechanisms for integrating scientific knowledge, technological tools, and evidence-based practices into federation management.

Previous studies conducted specifically in the context of handball development have highlighted the importance of identifying and prioritizing strategic factors. The development of handball requires the analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to formulate appropriate strategies and allocate resources effectively. Research using strategic evaluation approaches has demonstrated that systematic prioritization of development strategies can help handball organizations recognize critical areas requiring improvement and select appropriate managerial actions (Aghaei & Bahrololoum, 2017). Furthermore, effective management of sport organizations depends on establishing clear organizational pillars, including planning, governance, resource management, and performance evaluation, which together create the foundation for sustainable organizational development (Siffredi & Vilches, 2022).

Considering the increasing complexity of the sports environment, the Handball Federation of Iran requires a comprehensive strategic framework capable of responding to internal challenges and external changes. Issues such as financial sustainability, infrastructure limitations, human resource development, technological advancement, international interactions, and competitive performance require systematic analysis and evidence-based strategic decisions. The application of strategic planning tools, including the identification of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, provides an appropriate foundation for understanding the current position of the Federation and designing strategies for future development. Therefore, developing a strategic plan based on scientific methods can support the Federation in improving organizational effectiveness, enhancing competitive capacity, and achieving sustainable growth.

The aim of this study was to design and develop a strategic plan for the Handball Federation of Iran through the identification and analysis of internal and external factors and the formulation of appropriate strategies for improving the Federation's future performance.

Methodology

The present study is classified as qualitative research in terms of research method. Regarding its objective, this research is applied, and considering the nature of the subject, it falls within the field of strategic studies, as it seeks to identify the current status of the Handball Federation of Iran, outline the desired future state, and develop a comprehensive strategic plan for the Federation by applying scientific methods and a systematic approach. In terms of data collection method, the present study combines field studies with a descriptive–analytical approach. In the first stage, basic information and the research background were collected through library studies, including the review of scientific resources, articles, documents

of sports federations, and official reports. In the second stage, field data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire designed based on common frameworks in strategic planning and indicators related to the management of sports federations.

The statistical population of the qualitative section of this study included managers and experts of the Handball Federation of Iran, members of the executive board and specialized committees of the Federation, presidents and secretaries of provincial handball associations in Iran, experienced coaches and referees, experts from the Ministry of Sport and Youth of Iran, and faculty members of Iranian universities specializing in sports management and strategic planning. The statistical population of the quantitative section included all coaches, players from premier and lower-level handball leagues in Iran, referees, and administrative staff of the Federation and provincial handball associations. According to official statistics published by the Handball Federation of Iran, the number of active members in this population was 580 individuals.

In this study, the sample size of the quantitative section was determined based on the statistical population using the Krejcie and Morgan table. Considering the statistical population size of 580 individuals, the sample size was estimated to be 234 participants at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. In the qualitative section, sampling was conducted using a purposive sampling method with a maximum variation approach, while stratified random sampling was employed in the quantitative section. Furthermore, for the strategic council meetings held to formulate and finalize the strategic plan, members were selectively chosen from among key experts, senior managers, and major stakeholders of the Federation.

The data collection instruments included the review of documents as well as library and internet resources, semi-structured interviews with managers and experts associated with the Handball Federation of Iran, and a researcher-made questionnaire. In the first stage, internal and external environmental factors related to the Handball Federation of Iran were identified through semi-structured interviews with relevant experts and managers familiar with the research topic. Subsequently, the researcher-made questionnaire was developed based on the findings. To determine the face and content validity of the questionnaire, the opinions of 12 experts in the fields of sports management and strategic planning were utilized. After confirming the validity, Cronbach's alpha method was applied to assess the reliability of the questionnaire. For this purpose, the questionnaire was distributed among 30 individuals from the statistical population in a pilot study, and after calculating and confirming its reliability, the final version was distributed in person among the research sample.

In the inferential statistics section, the Friedman test was used to prioritize the internal and external factors associated with the Handball Federation of Iran. Subsequently, by applying the SWOT analysis method, including the Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) matrix and the External Factor Evaluation (EFE) matrix, the strategic position of the Federation was determined, and appropriate strategies were extracted. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 24 and Excel software.

Research Findings

The examination of the respondents' demographic information (descriptive statistics) showed that, out of the 234 participants, 156 individuals (66.7%) were male and 78 individuals (33.3%) were female. Regarding sports or managerial experience, 52 individuals (22.2%) had less than 5 years of experience, 84 individuals (35.9%) had 5 to 10 years, 56 individuals (23.9%) had 11 to 15 years, and 42 individuals (18%) had more than 15 years of experience. Of the total 234 participants, 112

individuals (47.9%) were players, 52 individuals (22.2%) were coaches or members of technical staff, 38 individuals (16.2%) were national or provincial referees, and 32 individuals (13.7%) were administrative staff members.

The mean ranks of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Handball Federation of Iran are presented in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4.

Table 1. Mean ranks in the Friedman test for the strengths of the Handball Federation of Iran

Item	Strengths of the Handball Federation of Iran	Mean Rank	Priority
S1	Use of communication and media platforms, including the official website and social networks, for information dissemination and interaction with the handball community	4.76	9
S2	Holding training courses for coaches, referees, and technical staff in cooperation with international institutions	5.10	7
S3	Holding international events and hosting competitions to enhance the position of Iranian handball at the regional and global levels	3.86	10
S4	Regular organization of official indoor and beach handball leagues for men and women at the national level	6.06	2
S5	Several decades of experience in continental and international events and achieving positions in regional competitions	5.57	4
S6	Formation of men's and women's national teams in all age categories, including adolescents, youth, and adults	5.58	3
S7	Focus on the system of identifying, recruiting, and developing handball talents across the country	5.26	5
S8	Long-standing membership of the Federation in the International Handball Federation and the Asian Handball Federation, and benefiting from international credibility and communication networks	8.76	1
S9	Activity of the committees and provincial associations affiliated with the Federation throughout Iran	4.83	8
S10	Existence of a stable legal and organizational structure approved by domestic and international sports institutions	5.23	6

According to the results presented in Table 1, among the factors identified as strengths of the Handball Federation of Iran, long-standing membership in the International Handball Federation and the Asian Handball Federation received the highest rank, whereas holding international events and hosting competitions to enhance the position of Iranian handball at the regional and global levels received the lowest rank.

Table 2. Mean ranks in the Friedman test for the weaknesses of the Handball Federation of Iran

Item	Weaknesses of the Handball Federation of Iran	Mean Rank	Priority
W1	Weakness in holding regular nationwide base-level and children's league competitions	5.59	7
W2	Weakness in media coverage and live broadcasting of domestic and international competitions	5.52	8
W3	Lack of a codified talent identification system and a clear career development pathway for young players	5.17	10
W4	Lack of marketing programs and attraction of domestic and foreign sponsors	3.43	9
W5	Shortage of coaches and referees holding international and standard certificates	5.72	5
W6	Lack of sustainable financial resources to support development programs and preparation of national teams	6.43	1
W7	Limitation in using modern technologies for education, game analysis, and technical management	5.60	6
W8	Limitation in the number of dedicated handball halls, especially in provinces and remote areas	5.89	3
W9	Lack of sufficient modern and standard sports infrastructure for training and competitions at the national level	5.90	2
W10	Heavy dependence on government funding and lack of diversity in the Federation's revenue sources	5.74	4

According to the results presented in Table 2, among the factors identified as weaknesses of the Handball Federation of Iran, lack of sustainable financial resources to support development programs and preparation of national teams received the highest rank, whereas lack of a codified talent identification system and a clear career development pathway for young players received the lowest rank.

Table 3. Mean ranks in the Friedman test for the opportunities of the Handball Federation of Iran

Item	Opportunities of the Handball Federation of Iran	Mean Rank	Priority
O1	Increasing sports cooperation with neighboring countries and holding joint preparatory camps	4.47	6
O2	Possibility of using the capacity of universities and scientific centers for handball research and development	4.17	9
O3	Possibility of attracting sponsors and domestic and foreign private-sector investment in sport	5.58	3
O4	Development of modern educational and game-analysis technologies and the possibility of using them in training and management	4.54	5
O5	Support of the Ministry of Sport and Youth and the National Olympic Committee of Iran for the Federation's strategic programs	4.28	8
O6	Support of the International Handball Federation and the Asian Handball Federation for the development of handball in member countries	9.21	2
O7	Growth of sports tourism and the possibility of holding international tournaments to attract spectators and generate revenue	4.07	10
O8	Growing popularity of handball among Iranian youth and increasing tendency toward this sport	9.43	1
O9	Opportunity to host regional and international competitions to enhance the position of Iranian handball	4.87	4
O10	Expansion of social networks and digital media for advertising and attracting fans	4.38	7

According to the results presented in Table 3, among the factors identified as opportunities of the Handball Federation of Iran, growing popularity of handball among Iranian youth and increasing tendency toward this sport received the highest rank, whereas the growth of sports tourism and the possibility of holding international tournaments to attract spectators and generate revenue received the lowest rank.

Table 4. Mean ranks in the Friedman test for the threats of the Handball Federation of Iran

Item	Threats of the Handball Federation of Iran	Mean Rank	Priority
T1	Increase in the costs of holding international events and camps due to inflation and exchange-rate fluctuations	2.21	9
T2	Health crises or unexpected incidents leading to the cancellation or postponement of competitions	5.71	6
T3	Political and security instability in some regions of Iran, which may disrupt sports programs	7.49	1
T4	Impact of sanctions and international restrictions on attracting equipment and foreign support	5.73	5
T5	Intense competition with other popular sports such as football, which diverts public attention away from handball	7.22	2
T6	Weakness in national media coverage compared with other sports	4.94	8
T7	Deterioration and shortage of sports facilities due to the lack of sustainable investment	5.61	7
T8	Declining interest of the younger generation in handball as a result of the tendency toward virtual entertainment and activities	2.12	10
T9	Limitation of government financial resources due to the country's economic problems	7.12	3
T10	Migration of talented players and coaches to other countries due to better sports and economic conditions	6.84	4

According to the results presented in Table 4, among the factors identified as threats of the Handball Federation of Iran, political and security instability in some regions of Iran, which may disrupt sports programs, received the highest rank, whereas declining interest of the younger generation in handball as a result of the tendency toward virtual entertainment and activities received the lowest rank.

The Friedman test was used to analyze the mean ranks of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Handball Federation of Iran (Table 5).

Table 5. Significance of the Friedman test for the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Handball Federation of Iran

Statistical Indicator	Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
Number	384	384	384	384
Chi-square	996.888	419.183	2110.419	1890.526
Degrees of freedom	9	9	9	9
Significance level	.001	.001	.001	.001

Table 5 presents the significance of the Friedman test for the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Handball Federation of Iran. As observed, the significance level in all cases was equal to .001, which is less than .01 and close to zero, and is below the standard significance level. Therefore, it can be stated that the components related to each of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the Handball Federation of Iran do not have equal ranks.

The External Factor Evaluation (EFE) matrix of the Handball Federation of Iran is presented in Table 6.

Table 6. External Factor Evaluation matrix of the Handball Federation of Iran

External Factors	Category	Weight	Rating	Score
Increasing sports cooperation with neighboring countries and holding joint preparatory camps	Opportunities	.041	3.3	.138
Possibility of using the capacity of universities and scientific centers for handball research and development	Opportunities	.056	3.5	.196
Possibility of attracting sponsors and domestic and foreign private-sector investment in sport	Opportunities	.034	3.3	.114
Development of modern educational and game-analysis technologies and the possibility of using them in training and management	Opportunities	.043	3.2	.139
Support of the Ministry of Sport and Youth and the National Olympic Committee of Iran for the Federation's strategic programs	Opportunities	.050	3.6	.181
Support of the International Handball Federation and the Asian Handball Federation for the development of handball in member countries	Opportunities	.047	3.6	.170
Growth of sports tourism and the possibility of holding international tournaments to attract spectators and generate revenue	Opportunities	.049	3.6	.177
Growing popularity of handball among Iranian youth and increasing tendency toward this sport	Opportunities	.052	3.7	.196

Opportunity to host regional and international competitions to enhance the position of Iranian handball	Opportunities	.055	3.7	.206
Expansion of social networks and digital media for advertising and attracting fans	Opportunities	.048	3.7	.162
Increase in the costs of holding international events and camps due to inflation and exchange-rate fluctuations	Threats	.051	1.5	.076
Health crises or unexpected incidents leading to the cancellation or postponement of competitions	Threats	.058	1.5	.087
Political and security instability in some regions of Iran, which may disrupt sports programs	Threats	.047	1.3	.064
Impact of sanctions and international restrictions on attracting equipment and foreign support	Threats	.046	1.8	.086
Intense competition with other popular sports such as football	Threats	.047	1.2	.058
Weakness in national media coverage compared with other sports	Threats	.064	1.5	.096
Deterioration and shortage of sports facilities due to the lack of sustainable investment	Threats	.049	1.6	.079
Declining interest of the younger generation in handball as a result of the tendency toward virtual entertainment and activities	Threats	.041	1.2	.051
Limitation of government financial resources due to the country's economic problems	Threats	.062	1.2	.077
Migration of talented players and coaches to other countries due to better sports and economic conditions	Threats	.060	1.3	.082
Total		1.000		2.44

As shown in Table 6, the total score of the external factor matrix was 2.44, which is lower than the average value of 2.50. This result indicates that the Handball Federation of Iran faces challenges in effectively exploiting existing opportunities and reducing the effects of threats. In other words, threats such as limited financial resources, infrastructural problems, competition with other sports, and the country's political and economic conditions have collectively outweighed opportunities such as international support, increasing popularity of handball, and the possibility of attracting sponsors, causing the Federation's external position to be at a relatively weak level.

The Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) matrix of the Handball Federation of Iran is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Internal Factor Evaluation matrix of the Handball Federation of Iran

Internal Factors	Category	Weight	Rating	Score
Use of communication and media platforms, including the official website and social networks, for information dissemination and interaction with the handball community	Strengths	.041	3.8	.158
Holding training courses for coaches, referees, and technical staff in cooperation with international institutions	Strengths	.056	3.8	.217
Holding international events and hosting competitions to enhance the position of Iranian handball at the regional and global levels	Strengths	.034	3.8	.131
Regular organization of official indoor and beach handball leagues for men and women at the national level	Strengths	.043	3.6	.155
Several decades of experience in continental and international events and achieving positions in regional competitions	Strengths	.050	3.8	.193
Formation of men's and women's national teams in all age categories, including adolescents, youth, and adults	Strengths	.047	3.6	.170
Focus on the system of identifying, recruiting, and developing handball talents across the country	Strengths	.049	3.7	.183
Long-standing membership of the Federation in the International Handball Federation and the Asian Handball Federation, and benefiting from international credibility and communication networks	Strengths	.052	3.3	.175
Activity of the committees and provincial associations affiliated with the Federation throughout Iran	Strengths	.055	3.7	.206
Existence of a stable legal and organizational structure approved by domestic and international sports institutions	Strengths	.048	3.1	.150
Weakness in holding regular nationwide base-level and children's league competitions	Weaknesses	.051	1.6	.082
Weakness in media coverage and live broadcasting of domestic and international competitions	Weaknesses	.058	1.7	.101
Lack of a codified talent identification system and a clear career development pathway for young players	Weaknesses	.047	1.1	.052
Lack of marketing programs and attraction of domestic and foreign sponsors	Weaknesses	.046	1.3	.063
Shortage of coaches and referees holding international and standard certificates	Weaknesses	.047	1.0	.047
Lack of sustainable financial resources to support development programs and preparation of national teams	Weaknesses	.064	1.3	.088
Limitation in using modern technologies for education, game analysis, and technical management	Weaknesses	.049	1.5	.073
Limitation in the number of dedicated handball halls, especially in provinces and remote areas	Weaknesses	.041	1.5	.061
Lack of sufficient modern and standard sports infrastructure for training and competitions at the national level	Weaknesses	.062	1.25	.077
Heavy dependence on government funding and lack of diversity in the Federation's revenue sources	Weaknesses	.060	1.5	.090
Total		1.000		2.48

As shown in Table 7, the total score of the internal factor matrix was 2.48, which is lower than the average value of 2.50. This result indicates that the Handball Federation of Iran has faced challenges in using its strengths and reducing the effects of its weaknesses. In other words, weaknesses such as lack of sustainable financial resources, limitations in sports infrastructure, shortage of coaches and referees with international certificates, and heavy dependence on government funding have collectively outweighed strengths such as membership in international federations, regular organization of

leagues, and the activity of committees and provincial associations, causing the Federation's internal position to be at a relatively weak level.

After constructing the internal and external factor evaluation matrices, it was determined that the Handball Federation of Iran is located in Cell V of the Internal–External matrix. This position indicates a moderate status in both internal and external dimensions, which, in the strategy literature, corresponds to hold-and-maintain strategies. Under these conditions, organizations should usually pursue gradual improvement and position-stabilization approaches. For the Handball Federation of Iran, this means focusing on improving internal efficiency, enhancing the use of existing opportunities, reducing weaknesses, and maintaining its current position in national and international competitions. Strategies such as market penetration and product development are recommended in this position so that, while stabilizing the current position, the basis for improvement and movement toward growth cells in the future can be provided.

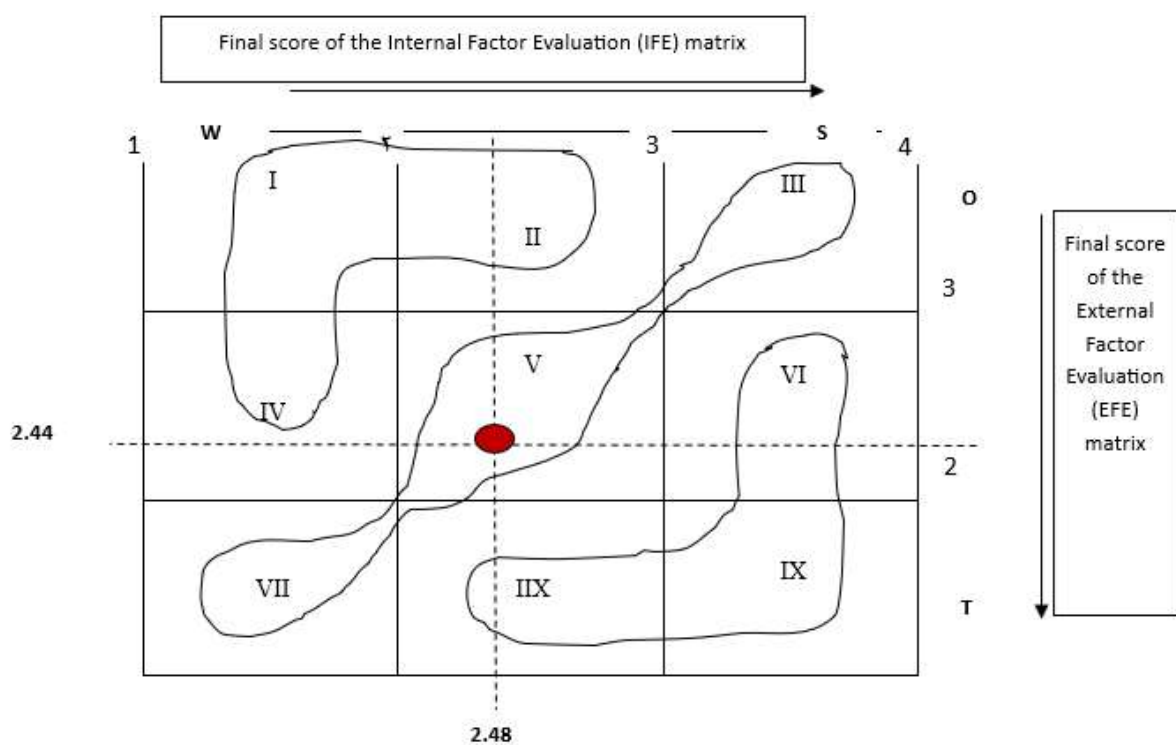


Figure 1. Strategic position of the Handball Federation of Iran based on the Internal–External (IE) matrix

As observed in the Internal–External matrix, the Handball Federation of Iran needs to implement WT strategies in areas such as human resources, facilities and equipment, financial resources, and culture. Organizations located in this position adopt a defensive approach. The main objective of this type of strategy is to reduce internal weaknesses and avoid external environmental threats. An organization that simultaneously faces internal weaknesses and severe external threats is in a risky situation and should place reduction-oriented actions on its agenda. Under such conditions, the Handball Federation of Iran seeks to provide the necessary conditions for survival and relative stability by limiting high-risk activities, focusing on optimizing existing resources, and avoiding entry into threat-prone areas.

Strategies of the Handball Federation of Iran

The SO, WO, ST, and WT strategies are presented in Table 8.

Table 8. SWOT matrix of the Handball Federation of Iran

SWOT Matrix	Strengths: S	Weaknesses: W
Internal Factors	<p>Long-standing membership in the IHF and AHF and benefiting from international credibility and communication networks</p> <p>Regular organization of official indoor and beach handball leagues for men and women</p> <p>Formation of men's and women's national teams in different age categories, including adolescents, youth, and adults</p> <p>Several decades of experience in continental and international events</p> <p>Focus on identifying, recruiting, and developing handball talents across the country</p> <p>A relatively stable legal and organizational structure approved by sports institutions</p> <p>Activity of the committees and provincial associations affiliated with the Federation</p> <p>Holding training courses for coaches, referees, and technical staff in cooperation with international institutions</p> <p>Use of the official website and social networks for information dissemination and interaction with the handball community</p> <p>Capacity to hold and host international events to enhance the position of Iranian handball</p>	<p>Lack of sustainable financial resources for development programs and preparation of national teams</p> <p>Lack of sufficient modern and standard sports infrastructure for training and competitions at the national level</p> <p>Limitation in the number of dedicated handball halls in provinces and remote areas</p> <p>Shortage of coaches and referees holding international certificates</p> <p>Heavy dependence on government funding and lack of diversity in the Federation's revenue sources</p> <p>Limitation in using modern technologies for education, game analysis, and technical management</p> <p>Weakness in regularly holding base-level and children's leagues across the country</p> <p>Inadequate media coverage and weakness in live broadcasting of domestic competitions</p> <p>Lack of marketing programs and attraction of domestic and foreign sponsors</p> <p>Lack of a codified talent identification system and a career development pathway for young players</p>
Opportunities: O	SO Strategies	WO Strategies
<p>Growing popularity of handball among Iranian youth and increasing tendency toward this sport</p> <p>Support of the IHF and AHF for the development of handball in member countries</p> <p>Possibility of attracting sponsors and domestic and foreign private-sector investment in sport</p> <p>Opportunity to host regional and international competitions to enhance the position of Iranian handball</p> <p>Development of modern educational and game-analysis technologies and the possibility of using them in training and management</p> <p>Increasing sports cooperation with neighboring countries and holding joint camps</p> <p>Expansion of social networks and digital media for advertising and attracting fans</p> <p>Support of the Ministry of Sport and the National Olympic Committee of Iran for the Federation's strategic programs</p> <p>Possibility of using the capacity of universities and scientific centers for research and development</p> <p>Growth of sports tourism and the possibility of holding international tournaments for revenue generation</p>	<p>Using the Federation's international credibility to obtain hosting rights for regional events and attract sponsors</p> <p>Developing information technology infrastructure and using analysis tools alongside international training programs</p> <p>Expanding interactions with neighboring countries and holding joint camps by relying on existing networks</p> <p>Launching targeted media campaigns on social networks to attract young fans and strengthen the national handball brand</p> <p>Signing memoranda of understanding with universities for applied research and feeding the talent identification model</p> <p>Developing "national team supporter" packages for companies alongside hosting opportunities to diversify revenue</p>	<p>Attracting sponsors and private investors to renovate halls and training equipment</p> <p>Holding intensive upgrading courses for coaches and referees with the participation of the IHF and AHF to compensate for the shortage of specialized human resources</p> <p>Using low-cost digital platforms and video analysis to improve the quality of training and tactics</p> <p>Creating a national base-level league plan with the support of the private sector and universities to cover age-category gaps</p> <p>Launching joint marketing campaigns with clubs to increase ticket sales and membership fees and reduce dependence on government funding</p> <p>Establishing a talent database with the help of universities and provincial associations and developing a career development pathway</p>
Threats: T	ST Strategies	WT Strategies
<p>Political and security instability in some regions of Iran</p> <p>Intense competition with popular sports such as football</p> <p>Limitation of government financial resources due to economic conditions</p> <p>Migration of talented players and coaches to other countries</p> <p>Sanctions and international restrictions on attracting equipment and support</p> <p>Health crises and unexpected incidents affecting the competition calendar</p> <p>Deterioration and shortage of facilities due to the lack of sustainable investment</p> <p>Weakness in national media coverage compared with other sports</p> <p>Increase in the costs of holding events due to inflation and exchange-rate fluctuations</p> <p>Declining interest of youth due to competition from digital entertainment</p>	<p>Using the international network and IHF/AHF relations to access technical assistance under sanctions</p> <p>Using hosting experience and regular leagues to maintain media attention in competition with football</p> <p>Implementing a talent retention program through phased contracts and educational scholarships to reduce sports migration</p> <p>Improving the quality of digital broadcasting and producing exclusive content to compensate for weakness in national media</p> <p>Developing local supporter packages in safer cities to maintain events under insecure conditions</p> <p>Using youth and women's national teams in low-cost regional tournaments to maintain international presence</p>	<p>Prioritizing costs and suspending high-risk projects, with a focus on maintaining critical equipment and key halls</p> <p>Establishing partnership contracts with universities to train coaches and referees and reduce educational costs</p> <p>Developing low-cost support packages with domestic media to minimize the gap in competition coverage</p> <p>Standardizing the low-cost talent identification process in provinces and preventing resource waste</p> <p>Adjusting the competition calendar by considering exchange-rate fluctuations and public health conditions to reduce event cancellations</p> <p>Limited but targeted diversification of revenues, including membership fees and digital broadcasting rights, to reduce dependence on the government</p>

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to design and develop a strategic plan for the Handball Federation of Iran by identifying and evaluating internal and external strategic factors and formulating appropriate strategies based on the SWOT framework. The results of the analysis of internal factors showed that the most important strengths of the Federation included long-standing membership in the International Handball Federation (IHF) and Asian Handball Federation (AHF), regular organization of official handball leagues, establishment of national teams in different age categories, and the existence of organizational structures and provincial associations. These findings indicate that the Handball Federation of Iran possesses valuable institutional capacities and international connections that can support its future development. The importance of organizational structures and international networks is consistent with previous studies emphasizing that successful sports organizations require strong governance mechanisms, strategic partnerships, and managerial competencies to transform existing resources into sustainable performance outcomes (Duclos-Bastias et al., 2021). Similarly, effective strategic planning enables organizations to identify and strengthen their core capabilities while aligning them with long-term objectives and environmental requirements (Bryson et al., 2018).

Another important finding of the present study was that the Federation's international position and organizational experience were recognized as major strategic strengths. The existence of formal relationships with international sports institutions provides opportunities for knowledge exchange, technical development, educational programs, and participation in global networks. This finding is aligned with the principles of sustainable sports organization management, which emphasize that external cooperation and institutional relationships are essential pillars for organizational improvement and long-term development (Siffredi & Vilches, 2022). In addition, research on sports governance has highlighted that national sports organizations must develop international interactions and strengthen managerial capacities to achieve sustainable progress and competitive advantages (Kaur, 2025). Therefore, maintaining and expanding international cooperation can help the Handball Federation of Iran improve technical standards, coaching systems, and organizational effectiveness.

The findings regarding internal weaknesses revealed that lack of sustainable financial resources, insufficient modern sports infrastructure, shortage of internationally certified coaches and referees, and dependence on government funding were among the most critical challenges facing the Federation. These results suggest that despite having structural and historical advantages, the Federation faces considerable limitations in transforming these strengths into operational outcomes. This finding is consistent with strategic management literature, which emphasizes that the effectiveness of strategic planning depends not only on strategy formulation but also on the availability of sufficient resources and implementation capabilities (Mutambo et al., 2022). Organizations that fail to develop sustainable financial mechanisms and resource management systems often experience difficulties in achieving their strategic objectives. Moreover, integrating strategic planning with human resource development and organizational improvement is considered a necessary condition for enhancing competitiveness and continuous development (Ossa et al., 2018).

The shortage of specialized human resources, particularly internationally qualified coaches and referees, represents another important strategic weakness identified in this study. Human capital is one of the primary drivers of sports development because coaches, technical experts, and managers directly influence athlete development, organizational quality, and competitive performance. Previous research has indicated that the competencies of sports managers and technical personnel significantly contribute to organizational sustainability and effectiveness (Duclos-Bastias et al., 2021).

Furthermore, studies on elite handball and football development have shown that systematic support environments, including skilled coaches and structured development pathways, are essential for producing successful athletes and improving long-term performance outcomes (Rossing et al., 2016). Therefore, investment in education, certification programs, and professional development should be considered a strategic priority for the Handball Federation of Iran.

The analysis of external factors demonstrated that the most significant opportunities for the Federation included the growing popularity of handball among young people, support from international handball organizations, opportunities for attracting sponsors, technological development, and the possibility of hosting regional and international competitions. These findings indicate that despite existing challenges, the external environment provides valuable opportunities that can contribute to the future development of handball. The role of sport in social development and community engagement has been increasingly emphasized in recent studies, which show that sports participation contributes to broader objectives such as social inclusion, sustainable development, and community well-being (Gonzalez et al., 2025). Accordingly, increasing youth interest in handball represents not only a competitive opportunity but also a pathway for expanding participation and strengthening the social position of the sport.

The results also emphasized the importance of technological advancement as an external opportunity for improving the Federation's performance. Modern sports organizations increasingly rely on digital technologies, performance analysis systems, and data-based decision-making tools to improve training, competition management, and organizational processes. The development of advanced analytical frameworks in sports demonstrates how technological solutions can improve player monitoring, skill assessment, and strategic decision-making (Jiang et al., 2025). Similarly, research on handball match analysis highlights that systematic evaluation of performance indicators provides valuable information for coaches and managers and contributes to more effective preparation strategies (Willian et al., 2019). Therefore, investment in technological infrastructure, digital platforms, and analytical systems can help the Handball Federation of Iran overcome some limitations and enhance competitive performance.

The findings related to external threats indicated that political and economic instability, competition with more popular sports, limited financial support, migration of talented players and coaches, and international restrictions were among the most influential environmental challenges. These findings reflect the importance of environmental analysis in strategic planning, as organizations must continuously monitor external conditions and adapt their strategies accordingly. Previous studies have shown that environmental uncertainty affects managerial decisions and increases the need for structured strategic planning approaches that enable organizations to respond effectively to unpredictable conditions (Cohen, 2001). In this regard, sports federations must design flexible strategies that allow them to reduce environmental risks while protecting their essential resources and capabilities.

The results of the External Factor Evaluation (EFE) and Internal Factor Evaluation (IFE) matrices showed that the Federation's scores were slightly below the average level, indicating that the Handball Federation of Iran faces challenges in effectively using opportunities and strengths while reducing weaknesses and threats. The strategic position analysis suggested the need for defensive and improvement-oriented strategies, particularly focusing on resource optimization, infrastructure enhancement, financial diversification, and human resource development. This result is consistent with previous studies on strategic planning practices in sports federations, which demonstrate that successful federations are those that systematically evaluate internal and external environments and formulate strategies based on realistic

organizational conditions (Obonyo, 2021b). Furthermore, strategic planning improves federation performance by establishing clear priorities, enhancing coordination, and supporting evidence-based decision-making processes (Obonyo, 2021a).

The developed strategies in this study, including SO, WO, ST, and WT strategies, indicate that the Handball Federation of Iran should simultaneously strengthen its existing advantages and address structural limitations. Strategies such as using international credibility to attract sponsors, developing partnerships with universities, expanding digital platforms, improving talent identification systems, and diversifying financial resources are aligned with modern approaches to strategic sports management. Previous research on handball development has similarly emphasized that prioritizing strategic actions through systematic methods can help organizations identify critical development pathways and improve resource allocation decisions (Aghaei & Bahrololoum, 2017). Therefore, the implementation of the proposed strategies can provide a foundation for improving organizational stability, competitive performance, and sustainable development of handball in Iran.

The present study had several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research focused specifically on the Handball Federation of Iran; therefore, the results may not be directly generalizable to other sports federations with different organizational structures and environmental conditions. Second, although the study included different groups of stakeholders, strategic evaluations were based on participants' perceptions, which may be influenced by individual experiences and professional backgrounds. Third, environmental factors affecting sports organizations are dynamic, and changes in economic, technological, and international conditions may influence strategic priorities over time.

Future studies are recommended to conduct comparative analyses between different national sports federations to identify common and sport-specific strategic factors affecting organizational success. Researchers can also use longitudinal designs to examine the implementation outcomes of strategic plans and evaluate how strategies influence federation performance over time. Furthermore, future research should consider integrating quantitative performance indicators, financial analyses, and technological readiness assessments to provide a more comprehensive understanding of strategic development in sports organizations.

From a practical perspective, it is suggested that the Handball Federation of Iran establish a continuous strategic monitoring system to evaluate the implementation of proposed strategies and modify actions according to environmental changes. Greater attention should be given to diversifying revenue sources, attracting private-sector investment, developing modern training facilities, improving digital communication platforms, and strengthening professional development programs for coaches and referees. Moreover, expanding collaboration with universities, regional organizations, and international partners can support innovation, talent development, and sustainable improvement of handball at national and international levels.

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Authors' Contributions

Authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

AI use statement

Artificial intelligence tools were used only to support language editing, translation refinement, formatting, and consistency checks. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy of the data, analyses, interpretations, citations, and final content of the manuscript.

Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted using interview and questionnaire data. Participation was voluntary, and the confidentiality of participants' responses was preserved. The research procedure was designed to avoid harm to participants and to respect the principles of informed participation and academic integrity.

Transparency of Data

Reasonable requests for research materials should be directed to the corresponding author, subject to university policies and participant confidentiality.

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