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Player Migration and Talent Development in Elite Sports Teams

A comparative analysis of inbound and outbound career trajectories in Danish and Norwegian women's handball

Sine Agergaard

Department of Public Health, Section for Sport Science, Aarhus University
<sa@ph.au.dk>

Lars Tore Ronglan

Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, Oslo
<l.t.ronglan@nih.no>

Abstract

The conditions for national sport systems and talent development efforts are changing with the globalisation of sports. In the present study we explored the relationship between domestic talent development and the immigration of players from abroad through a comparative multiple-case study of Danish and Norwegian women's handball. Quantitative data demonstrated how there has been a remarkable increase in not only the number, but also the performance level of immigrant players arriving into Danish women's handball, in particular, in the first decade of the 2000s. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 12 experienced coaches and sport directors who have in-depth knowledge of group dynamics in elite handball. Using Lave and Wenger's theory of situated learning in communities of practice the analysis demonstrated the ambiguous consequences of considerable immigration on the position and learning situation of domestic talent. Inbound trajectories of domestic talent may be supported by apprenticeship from many skilled role models (e.g. immigrant players), while an outbound trajectory may also appear, specifically if the young domestic players are continually hampered from participation in matches. It seems that it is not the high number of players from abroad, *per se*, that may block the development of local young talent, but first and foremost the structuring of training and match practices in the clubs and national leagues.

Key words: sport labour migration, globalisation, communities of practice, learning trajectories

In modern elite sport there is a visible increase in the migration of professional players across national and continental boundaries. This exemplifies how globalisation processes can influence national efforts directed towards domestic talent development (De Bosscher et al., 2008). Within Scandinavian sport such global migration processes may lead to particular challenges (Bairner, 2010). In Scandinavia, talent development in sport generally takes place in sport clubs rather than at specific sport schools or high performance centres (Andersen & Ronglan, 2012). This is a reflection of the close relationship between elite and mass sport in Scandinavia, where the sport club is a key actor in a ‘decentralised’ talent development system. Consequently, player immigration into Scandinavian clubs may have a more significant influence on the context of domestic talent development in Scandinavian countries than in other parts of the world where centralised sport governing bodies play a more prominent role in facilitating talent identification and development (Hoare & Warr, 2000; Holt, 2002).

In handball specifically, which is mainly played in European countries, there are no national quotas for the recruitment of players from abroad in line with the Bosman law (Frick, 2009). Up through the first decade of the 2000s, there was a remarkable increase in the immigration of players into Danish women’s handball clubs, while the performance of the Danish women’s handball team in international tournaments declined towards the end of the decade.¹ The media represented the view that the decline in Danish national team performances was attributed to the high percentage of immigrant players in the national league clubs. Under headlines such as “Danish women’s handball suffer from many foreigners”² and “The clubs are responsible for the decline at the European Championship”³, the argument was made that immigration had

- 1 A decline that is reflected in the fact that Denmark was among top three at the World Championship in 1993-1997 (and first again in 2013), and they were only among top three at the European Championships in 1994-2004 (excluding 2000). In comparison, the Norwegian women’s handball team maintained a top three position at the World Championship in the period 1993-2011 (excluding 1995, 2003 and 2005). At the European Championship Norway has been part of top three from 1994-2012 (excluding only 2000). The decline towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s is also indicated in the fact that the Danish women’s handball team won the Olympic Game in 1996, 2000, 2004, while the Norwegian national team won in 2008 and 2012.
- 2 See ”Dansk kvindehåndbold lider under udlændinge.” Fyns Stiftstidende 01.09.2007, Retrieved 10.01.2015 [<http://apps.infomedia.dk:2048/Ms3E/ShowArticle.aspx?outputFormat=Full&Duid=eobb2727>]
- 3 See ”Klubberne får ansvaret for EM-nectur” Ritzaus Bureau, 14.12.2006, Retrieved 10.01.2015 [<http://apps.infomedia.dk:2048/Ms3E/ShowArticle.aspx?outputFormat=Full&Duid=eobb2727>].

reduced playing time in the national league for young domestic talents and thereby the performance of the Danish women's handball team. This made us curious to further examine and discuss the relationship between player migration and local talent development.

The possible correlation between immigration of players and domestic talent development is influenced by various other variables on a macro-sociological level, e.g. economy, politics, and demography impacting the specific sport, while at the micro-sociological level there is the impact of for instance the role of coaches and other centrally placed individuals in the host clubs to which immigrant players arrive (Agergaard & Andersen, 2007, 2008). Consequently, this article cannot deliver a detailed analysis of all relevant macro- and micro-sociological variables, but rather tries out and discusses possible ways in which we may gain access to an understanding of the complex relationship between player migration and talent development, in order to qualify the public debate.

The methodological approach is based in arguments from case study research in which multiple cases are not selected at random and studied to exhaustion, but rather selected through the logic of replication with reference to (and interest in) main similarities and/or differences between the cases (Yin 2014). Here we have opted for a comparative multiple-case study of what can be described as "most similar cases" (Gerring 2007). As such this study is based on a comparison of the development of Danish and Norwegian women's handball through the first decade of the 2000s.⁴ Women's handball has developed in Norway and Denmark under similar conditions through voluntary organisation in clubs (Ibsen and Seippel, 2010). In both countries women's handball is popular in the media and the population (von der Lippe, 1988; Skjerk, 1999). Denmark and Norway are among the 'major nations' in international women's handball with established talent development systems and organisational structures, while the Danish league has been attracting particular attention from players and spectators as the internationally most prominent league through the first decade of the 2000s (Agergaard, 2008; Ronglan, 2012). Thus, this article examines two similar cases that differ particularly with respect to the degree of commercialisation of clubs playing in the national league and the number of immigrant players recruited to their respective clubs.

Our research questions were:

4 For more background information about the differences and similarities between women's handball in the two neighbouring countries, see Hjort, Agergaard & Ronglan 2010.

1. To what extent did migrant players form part of teams in the Danish and Norwegian national leagues of women's handball in the first decade of the 2000s (2000-2011)?
2. How was the social structure and learning conditions for young domestic talent on the teams influenced by this migration?

Thus, our aim was to explore indicators of the complex relationship between player migration and domestic talent development to contribute to an understanding of the degree to which, and ways in which migration into elite sports teams constitute challenges as well as opportunities for local and national talent development.⁵

Young talents as well as experienced players in elite sports teams depend on each other in their joint pursuit of good performance and achievements, and there is an obvious potential for intra-team learning as players interact with competent teammates on a daily basis (Christensen et al, 2011). At the same time, elite team players are each other's 'rivals' in the internal competition to get selected for matches and gain playing time on court. The 'rivalry' is a consequence of the structural built-in 'overmanning' characterising sport teams in general (Hill & Green, 2008), which is reinforced at the elite level due to the focus on performance (Ronglan, 2009). This article focuses on the field of tension between competition and collaboration following increased levels of player immigration. However, these processes may be read as a simple reinforcement of the fundamental dynamics between inbound and outbound career trajectories in elite sports teams.

Linking player migration and talent development

The body of research on sport labour migration is growing and has mainly focused on football and the global flows of athletes from the Global South to the North (cf. Maguire & Falcoux, 2010). Studies within this area have focused on global value chains and global production networks through which talents are given added value when migrating to

5 The conditions for talent development following from player immigration must of course also be related to national players' emigration to other countries and leagues. As described, the commercialisation of Danish women's elite handball developed quickly up through the first decade of the 2000s and it was not followed by any comparable degree of emigration of national players (Storm & Agergaard, 2014). Young talents in particular have not been prepared to leave their country (and clubs) due to their young age, engagement in schooling and social relations etc.

new clubs (Darby, 2010; Klein, 2010; Darby, 2013). When examining the flow of talented players, and the politics of African football migration, to European leagues, scholars have argued that this migration is shaped by neo-colonial exploitation of African talent and under-development of football in the players' countries of origin (Bale, 2004; Darby, 2000, 2007; Darby et al, 2007; Poli, 2005, 2006; Poli & Besson 2010).

There are few precedents for linking player migration and talent development in a European context (Elliott & Weedon, 2011; Maguire & Pearton, 2000). Maguire and Pearton (2000) described the patterns of migration of male football players participating in the 1998 World Cup and discussed how these patterns may have influenced talent development of indigenous players in the four most popular destination countries; England, Germany, Italy and Spain. They pointed to disadvantages in the shape of lack of investment in local talent development in the clubs and fewer playing opportunities for domestic talents, as well as some advantages such as the general improvement in the quality of football and the potential for migrant players to act as role models for domestic talent. Besides, a 'deskilling' of talent is also identified for the home countries and clubs that the migrant players move away from (Maguire & Pearton, 2000:179).

The study of Elliott and Weedon (2011) illustrated that it is problematic when more qualitative components of talent development in cases of immigration are neglected in favour of a focus on the numbers of migrant players and 'deskilling' effects. In their study of the recruitment of young players from abroad into the English Premier Academy League, they showed that migrant players' presence in English youth academies led to an exchange of skills, attitudes and knowledge between domestic and migrant players (Elliott & Weedon, 2011:8). This is also described as an epistemic community, i.e. a transnational network of experts (here athletes), who despite their differences are directed towards exchanging and implementing their knowledge (Haas, 1992).

When considering existing research on talent development, it becomes obvious that the predominantly psychological literature has increasingly recognised and started to explore the significance of the socio-cultural setting to understand the athletes' development and learning trajectories (Christensen et al., 2011; Cushion & Jones, 2006; Henriksen et al., 2010). In developing a so-called holistic ecological perspective on athletic talent development, Henriksen et al. (2010) suggested consideration of the influence of crucial aspects in both the micro- and macro-environment of

the individual talent. Furthermore, Andersen et al. (in press) applied the organisational perspective ‘ecology of games’ to explore the multitude of actors involved in talent development efforts and the challenge of coordinating initiatives to facilitate athlete pathways. This ‘cultural turn’ represents an expansion of the talent development literature beyond the psychological perspective (Ericsson et al., 1993; Côté et al., 2003). Specifically in team sports, skill acquisition has been shown to be a multidimensional process relying upon the opportunities and limitations of the social and cultural contexts (Williams & Hodges, 2005).

Christensen and colleagues (2011) have studied talent development in football from the perspective of it being an activity where situated learning takes place (Lave & Wenger, 1991). They found that the acquisition of specific football skills, as well as developing an identity as a competent professional footballer, were fostered by football communities that allowed players to experience training-inclusion and multi-membership as legitimate team members (Christensen et al., 2011). They concluded that both ‘playing upwards’ (playing at the limit of their zone of development) and ‘mirroring older players’ were crucial for the development of young talents. However, the study was limited to training situations. In comparison, the present study is interested in the ways in which immigration of typically older and experienced players may influence the development of domestic talents, not only related to training but also to match situations.

Handball teams as communities of practice

Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning provides a theoretical framework for understanding talent development as learning taking place in social relationships within communities of practice. Moreover, the role of migrant players as newcomers to a team, the theoretical understanding of inbound and outbound trajectories in the community, and particularly the concepts of legitimate peripheral participation and marginality are applied as key concepts.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), learning is an aspect of participation in practice itself where the learner acquires skills and experience through being part of the working process. The social process of learning is rooted in a community where the members participate and negotiate the meaning of their shared practice. In order to be defined as a

community of practice, three criteria must be met: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. A handball team may be considered a community of practice due to its formation, boundaries and daily practices. Mutual engagement over time develops into a distinct joint enterprise with a shared repertoire including handball-specific skills and terminology, understanding of tactics and collective stories about the game and the club (Christensen et al., 2011; Galipeau and Trudel, 2006).

In the seminal work by Lave and Wenger (1991), legitimate peripheral participation is described as the process of moving through changing positions towards full participation. As such legitimacy is a crucial condition for learning, and individual participants are on different trajectories within the community. In a later book, Wenger (1998) defined four categories of participation: the insiders and the peripherals, both of which are characterised by legitimate peripheral participation, and the marginalised and outsiders, who do not have access to legitimate peripheral participation. In addition to analysing the legitimate positions that experienced migrant players often take in handball teams as communities of practice, the characteristics of participation with or without legitimacy form a crucial distinction for our study. Talented players can be either legitimate peripheral participants who are on inbound trajectories that eventually will lead to full membership, but for now are focused on developing practice, or they can be marginalised participants in the community, who are on a peripheral trajectory that will never lead to full participation.

For a talented player on the periphery of the team to be on an inbound trajectory, she must be gathering experiences and skills to eventually obtain full participation. Peripheral participation is only productive if the new participant is recognised as legitimate and thus accepted as a potential full member of the community (Wenger, 1998). There are various options for members who want to move towards full participation, e.g. through apprenticeship with an individual or group of mentor(s) or through recognition from the coach (Christensen et al., 2011). On the other hand, outbound trajectories and marginalised participation also have consequences when the perspective is on talent development as a social learning process. To become genuinely involved in a handball team as a community of practice, it is important for players to fully participate in the community activities. Thus, for talents to move on an inbound trajectory they must gain experience from elite matches as well as training situations since match situations constitute a basic learning context.

Material and Methods

In brief, this article is based in a comparative multiple-case study of the development in Danish and Norwegian women's handball in the period 2000–2011. In the study we have applied a mixed method approach joining a collection of descriptive quantitative data of the origin of players in the two national leagues and goals scored by immigrant and national players, with qualitative analysis of social learning conditions for talent in national league teams interpreted as communities of practice.

Quantitative data on the nationality of players in the Danish and Norwegian national handball leagues was collected over 11 seasons (2000–2011). Data about players on club squads was available on websites of national league clubs and the national federations, or made available by the Danish and Norwegian Handball Federation. Secondly, quantitative data on players in the starting line and their goal-scoring statistics was extracted from game reports from 182 matches played in each of the two national leagues per season from 2000 to 2009; thus, information from 3,640 match reports was included in the data material (Hjort et al., 2010).⁶ A game report was made for each match in the league by officials attending the matches and sent to the national federations for crosschecking of the information. The report presents the players in the starting line and the goals scored throughout the match linked with information about the scorer. As such it provides detailed and reliable information about the squad and goal scoring in national league matches, while not measuring the minutes that each individual player had been on the court or evaluating their overall performance on the court.

With modern technology, it is possible to collect sophisticated data about players' movements on the court, their role in not only scoring but also assisting in goals, and their total playing time even in sports like handball with running substitution.⁷ However, this information is not registered for the time period we are interested in examining, and it was not possible to conduct a detailed retrospective analysis of migrant players' exact playing time. While a report on the consequences of the Bosman-law for Norwegian male football has used exact information about

6 The Danish data covers the seasons 1999/2000 to 2008/2009, while it was only possible to get Norwegian data from the seasons 2001/2002 to 2008/2009.

7 In elite handball, 14 players are picked for each match out of a squad of 18–20 players, but only seven will be part of the playing unit on court at any one time during the game ('running substitution', as in ice hockey).

foreign and domestic players' playing time (Gammelsæter & Jakobsen 2007), a proxy measurement for 'amount of playing time' in this study is the number of goals scored by domestic and migrant players respectively. Since accurate measures are unavailable, we suggest that goals scored in handball provide a reasonable indication of the pivotal role of a player on a team, particularly when individual data is accumulated into major groups (immigrant players/ domestic players). In principle, each playing position on the team (except the goal keeper) provides the individual with equal possibilities to score goals.

Working with quantitative data, however, did not provide insight into the social learning processes in the teams that are essential for the development of national talent. Instead, these aspects were assessed through qualitative interviews with six Norwegian and six Danish club and national team coaches/representatives; ten men and two women between 40 and 56 years of age. The possible effect of any migratory trend can be viewed from a range of perspectives. Elliott and Weedon (2011) interviewed club leaders and coaches that oversaw the recruitment of, and worked on a daily basis with, both migrant and domestic players. Although it would have been interesting to interview migrant players and young domestic players, we found that coaches and club leaders, who are well acquainted with the development in Danish and Norwegian women's handball through the first decade of the 2000s, were well suited to reflect on the ways in which player immigration may possibly have influenced the conditions for local and national talent development.

Thus, the informants were chosen strategically from a priority list of the available national team and club coaches/leaders with most insight into the conditions for talent development and immigration in Norwegian and Danish women's handball through the first decade of the 2000s. The total number of informants was determined by the project resources available and the degree to which we experienced saturation of our material. In Norway, five of the informants were current or former coaches of national teams (youth and/or senior), with additional experience as elite club coaches. The sixth informant was coach in a leading Norwegian women's handball club. In Denmark, two of the informants were currently coaching national teams and two were head coaches of club teams, while the last two were sport directors in yet other leading clubs with a significant number of immigrant players. We ensured that both perspectives (clubs and national federations), with their different relations to the potential effects of immigration, were represented in the

study.⁸ All interviews with the Norwegian informants were conducted in Norwegian by the second author and a scientific assistant; similarly, Danish informants were interviewed in Danish conducted by the same scientific assistant and the first author. All interviews were conducted in 2009-2010 reflecting in the hindsight of the development through the first decade of the 2000s.

All interviews were semi-structured, based on the assumption that the coaches and club leaders are experts with an in-depth knowledge and their specific perspective on the interview theme, so the interview guide ensured a focused interview. As Zuckerman (1972) has described for so-called elite interviews, we were confronted with powerful people who are used to expressing themselves and are strategic concerning the information they convey. The interviews were structured around initial questions about the background and position of the informants, followed by open questions encouraging the informants' descriptions of the conditions for talent development in Danish and Norwegian women's handball through the first decade of the 2000s.⁹ The following questions concerned the group dynamics in elite women's handball teams (opening for descriptions of the hierarchy at the team and different positioning of younger/older, domestic/immigrant players), and questions about the current talent development (with particular attention to learning conditions and trajectories of talented players in the teams). The interview ended with more direct questions about the ways in which immigration may possibly influence the development of domestic talent.

The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview text was analysed through a combination of meaning condensation and meaning categorisation in accordance with Kvale (1997). In parallel, we worked with developing and focusing the theoretical framework. Before the interviews we only had a preliminary analytical framework consisting of thematic interests in group dynamics and learning conditions at elite sports teams. In collecting, transcribing and analysing the data material, the process of systematic combining developed through moving back and forth between theoretical focusing and condensed descriptions and categories

8 Viewed from a club perspective, players from abroad are positive assets in the club's endeavour to win the domestic league, while the federation is preoccupied with the effects of immigration on the domestic players' development.

9 If the informants compared the conditions in Danish and Norwegian women's handball, they were asked to give more detailed information about the differences and similarities.

originating from our material. We followed the observation that systematic combining as an analytical strategy is centrally concerned with processes of matching the empirical world with relevant theory (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). However, particularly in our last interviews and analysis of the interviews we worked more deductively from the theoretical framework presented in this article.

The number and position of players from abroad

In examining the immigration of players into Danish and Norwegian women's handball, particular attention has been given to the first decade of the 2000s as differences between Danish and Norwegian women's handball became more pronounced in this decade (Storm, 2008). We had no access to material from the 1990s, when there was a larger number of immigrant players in the Norwegian league, though not reaching the level in Denmark.

In contrast to the stable number of immigrants playing in Norway's domestic elite clubs (5–10%), immigration to the Danish league increased from 2000 where foreign players represented 15% of the players; in 2008 this share peaked at 40%. The percentage dropped at the beginning of the financial crises; in 2011 players from abroad constituted just below 25% of the players in the Danish elite clubs (see figure 1).

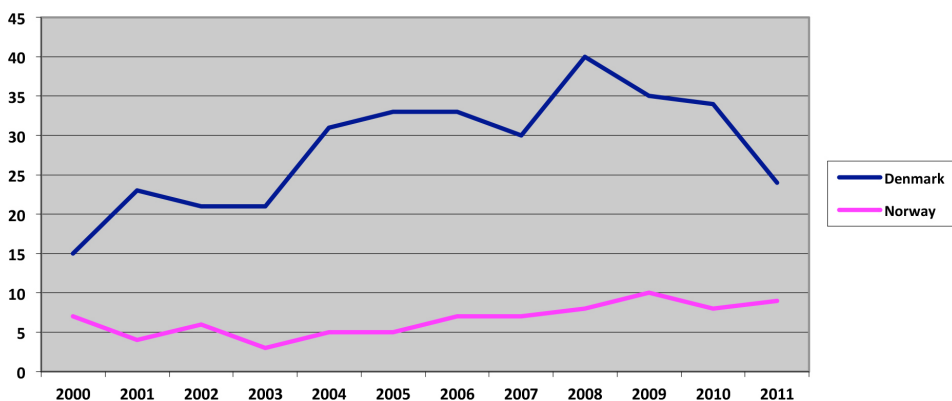


Figure 1 *The percentage of immigrant players in the Danish and Norwegian elite Leagues from 2000 to 2011*

The differences between the two leagues were also examined by looking at the number of goals scored by immigrant players (see figure 2).

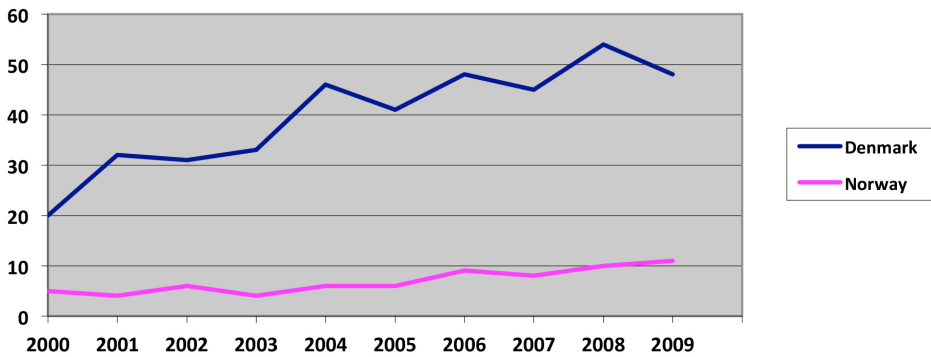


Figure 2 The percentage of goals scored by immigrant players in the Danish and Norwegian elite leagues from 2000 to 2009

As Figure 2 shows, goals scored by immigrant players reflect the number of immigrants represented in the Norwegian league (5-10%). Conversely, in Denmark, the number of goals scored by immigrant players consistently surpassed their share of the total number of players. This indicates that not only did the quantity of immigrant players in the two national leagues differ, but so did the quality (individual performance level). In sum, Denmark received significantly more immigrant players, and those who came scored more goals and thereby seemingly performed at a higher level compared to their immigrant counterparts in Norway.

Further, the quantitative analysis suggests that the increasing immigration of players into Danish women's handball influenced the participation of the youngest handball players in the league in particular. This is estimated from comparing the senior national team players and youth national team players' participation in games in the national leagues. The analysis showed that when the number of immigrant players grew, the members of the youth national team were playing less matches, while the members of the senior national team players were not affected.¹⁰

10 As a part of the quantitative analysis we compared the participation in league matches of members of the Danish senior national team and youth national team, who were specified as so in events taking place at various points in the period where the number of immigrant player grew. The results indicated that the senior national team players were not affected over the period. For instance, in the year of 2000 senior national team players played 19.9 matches per player and in 2004 the equivalent group played 20.8 matches, whereas the youth national team players' participation in matches was

Our quantitative analysis of game reports thus indicates that immigration of players influences the options for young domestic talent in particular, although it is difficult to document this precisely with game reports, given the lack of precise registration of individual playing time. This is the case in a situation where there are also established senior domestic players that influence the learning environment for young domestic talent. Still, based on the research question and the information from our comparative study, we found it interesting to focus particularly on the positioning of experienced migrant players and domestic talent in our qualitative analysis.

Situated learning in Danish and Norwegian club handball

Using the theory of situated learning, this qualitative part of the analysis will first present the communities of practice in Danish and Norwegian women's club handball with particular focus on the position of immigrant players and young domestic talent. Secondly, the analysis will track young players' trajectories in the team and their positions as legitimate peripheral or marginalised participants. Finally options for promoting the inbound trajectory of young domestic talent will be discussed.

Several of both the Danish and Norwegian informants emphasised that Norwegian women's handball had not been professionalised to the same extent as the international leading league in Denmark. In that situation, the best Norwegian players emigrated, for instance to the Danish league, giving young talented handball players in Norway easier access to a position in the senior club squad.

The economy of Norwegian handball has had the consequence that we are unable to keep our best senior players in the national league, which means that our league is not at an international level of competition. There are too many teams with too many young players. But this is also the reason why our young players have performed so well, because they have played in the national league. (Norwegian national coach)

According to the coaches, when entering the senior club squad, Norwegian young players tended to achieve a legitimate position on the team

affected, falling from 15.7 matches in the season 1999/00 to 10.1 matches in the season 2003/04.

relatively quickly since they were capable of contributing to their teams at an earlier stage in their career. Also, there were fewer hierarchical levels within the Norwegian clubs since there were fewer domestic and immigrant elite senior players in the league. This was described as contrary to the conditions for talent development in Danish club handball.

In the Norwegian league you get more responsibility at an earlier age and even if the standard is a bit lower the players are allowed to repeatedly be in the kind of situations where you really grow – on the court, making decisions that can settle the game. (Danish club coach)

The quote from the coach suggests that Norwegian players have the advantage of full membership and legitimate participation in practice, including elite matches, at an early stage. Still, it was also pointed out that the communities of the young Norwegian players did not perform on a level with the Danish club teams because many of the best national players played abroad. To a certain point, this proved to be an advantage for the young Norwegian players as they were given more responsibility and playing time on court. However, when they had adapted to and participated in this context, it might be to their benefit to seek new challenges by moving to leagues with a more competitive environment (like the Danish) and more experienced players. The following analysis will focus mainly on the situation in the Danish league and the position of immigrant players and young domestic talent through the first decade of the 2000s.

Hierarchy within elite sport teams – the position of immigrant players

According to the interviewed coaches, elite handball teams consist of groupings and hierarchies, and the latter are mostly arranged around skills and experience. Thus, young players are often positioned on the periphery of the team – especially if there are a lot of older and more experienced players in the team as in Denmark. Moreover, according to our interviewees, immigrant players tend quickly to take up central positions on the teams.

Several of particularly the Danish coaches described that there is a strong focus on supporting immigrant players when they arrive to their new clubs. By recruiting players from abroad on a professional contract, the clubs are signalling the players' legitimacy to be on the team. According to our informants, established players with good reputations are im-

mediately positioned higher in the hierarchy than young players who are products of the club's own talent development programme. When asked whether immigrant players retain this legitimacy, all the coaches noted that this depended on their performances on court. Their worth had to be proved fast:

When you buy an immigrant player and bring her onto the team, there is an expectation from the club management and the coach that has bought her, as well as the rest of the team, that this player will improve the level of the team and be better than the players you already have (...) So you are very dependent on the players you get from outside the club to deliver and preferably fast. (Norwegian national coach)

In order to see these players perform and earn a place in the hierarchy the interviewed coaches described a tendency to give immigrant players considerable playing time. Seen from the perspective of the national coaches, this playing time is likely to be taken from other players who have yet to prove that they have the necessary skills to contribute to the team.

The bigger the club and the bigger the budget, the more money there is to buy the best (national and international) players. In such clubs the team's accomplishments are often viewed as more important than the growth of the individual player. Due to the logic of competition in modern elite sports, which assumes that the will to win is a driving force (Heikkala, 1993), competitiveness in the short term may tend to be prioritised over development at the highest level in the long term.

To me, the most important thing is to win. This is what I look for during training, and what I look for when I scout for new players. It is something you have to learn, performing under pressure (...) If we want to get to the semi-finals in the Champions League, then we need a team with experience, and not a team where half of the players are still running around as 'talents'. (Danish club coach)

As illustrated above, the coach's ambitions and the economy of leading clubs combined contribute to a selection of experienced (senior and immigrant) players rather than young domestic players. This focus on results may lead to a slowing-down of the learning processes of the young players, the longer they are locked in the phase of peripheral participation.

Position of the young talent – legitimate peripheral practice

The first step to make it onto an elite handball team is often a period of trial practice. A Danish club coach described his attempt to remove some of the pressure from young players by demanding participation and effort, but not expecting high performance:

It is my experience that during a young player's first 2-3 months on the elite team, they are just very humble and happy and grateful to be here. They have been idolising and admiring the other players on the team, looking up to them, and I can understand that, so I try to put them in a safe environment where they don't have a lot of challenges, besides just being a part of the team. (Danish club coach)

However, a Danish national coach noted that young talented players often moved from minor to major clubs (and thereby also changed coaches several times) during their development process. The many changes in their training environment may make it more difficult to build a safe environment for the young players' development.

If the new players on the periphery of the team are to have the opportunity to be on an inbound trajectory towards full membership of the team, they have to possess a certain amount of legitimacy (Wenger, 1998). This legitimacy can come in the shape of the coach's support or acceptance from key players on the team.

When it comes to young players, it is very important that the established players open up and talk to them, and actually see them, that is the first step. For them to blossom and develop they have to gain acceptance from older players, otherwise they will never be able to reach their full potential. (Norwegian national coach)

As this excerpt from an interview illustrates, acceptance and support from established, older players seems to be of crucial importance for young talent coming to a senior team in the national league. Such an acceptance has been shown to promote increasing social mobility in a team by strengthening a diversity of networks (Warner et al., 2012), which can be considered decisive for learning processes in talent development.

Conversely, a lack of acknowledgement from senior players may be seen to exclude young players.

Hierarchy is good, as long as the players at the top of said hierarchy partake in the development of the incoming new talents. Because we also

see environments where the top of the hierarchy is so concerned with keeping and defending its own position, that they eventually block the growth of these young players. (Danish national coach)

As stated above, cooperation and exchange of competence between teammates will strengthen the learning community with positive consequences for the team in the long term. However, on the other hand a focus on educating and including the young players can mean that the established players have to give up some of their hard-earned time on the court, knowing that they are contributing to the progress of players that may one day threaten their own position on the team.

Inbound trajectory through learning from skilled players

Considering the options young talented players have for moving on an inbound trajectory towards full participation, it appears that not only legitimacy but also the chance of learning from experienced players is important. Thus, having immigrant senior players on the team may appear to be beneficial for the inbound trajectory of domestic talent.

According to the Danish club coaches it is important for the young talented players to observe how the best players work and how they can reach that same level.

There is no doubt that for the young talents, role models are incredibly important, fostering a kind of apprenticeship situation where you can see how the best players work, and consider what is it you have to do to become as good as one of the absolute best. They [immigrant players] quickly become an integral part of their [the young players'] everyday life. (Danish club coach)

By observing and integrating experiences from immigrant players into their own practice, young players can facilitate their inbound trajectory. However, the usefulness of this kind of apprenticeship presupposes that experienced players not only demonstrate skills, but also have the attitude needed to improve the skills of others. From a theoretical perspective on situated learning in communities of practice, a legitimate peripheral participating young talent learns from observing the experienced players' performances and their way of working, not only from their acquired competence.

Some coaches noted that a positive attitude towards continuous improvement could be lacking among experienced players: 'If you buy

relatively old stars, they may contribute to team results but may not contribute to an ambitious learning climate’, one of the coaches stated. Another said: ‘I have seen some of those stars being ‘over the top’ where the youngsters noticed that they performed well in matches without working hard in training’. The coaches agreed that ‘attitude’, also related to practice and improvement, was basic for what they defined as good role modelling. In other words, the coaches stressed that young players must learn to apply ‘dedication and hard work’ (Norwegian club coach), which is necessary to *become* an elite player.

At the same time, the coaches noted that to develop as a handball player, the young talent not only needs to play upwards but also mirror players at their own level. This is also pointed out as central in a former study paying attention to the social learning conditions of football talent (Christensen et al., 2011). For the young talent in Danish women’s handball clubs there have been plenty of opportunities to play upwards in the daily training with experienced Danish and migrant players. However, the chances to mirror other players at their level are fewer, since these players tend to be marginalised from national league matches, and the clubs with teams in the national league are not allowed to have a team of players in the division just below.

Marginalisation from match practice

The career progress of elite handball players is nurtured by a combination of training and playing matches. As one of the Norwegian coaches pointed out, training is usually process-oriented, while matches are result-oriented. A Danish club coach described development through training as the primary basis for young talent, but stressed that long periods of only training with little match play are undesirable. The consequences are perhaps most clearly described below:

If you are on the bench and don’t get match training at a decent level, it is my experience that you stall and ‘fall from the precipice’. (Norwegian former club and national coach)

All the coaches emphasised that you cannot develop into a complete handball player without participating in – and growing through – both training and matches. A Danish club coach stated that the pressure you experience on the court in matches cannot be simulated in training. As one of the Norwegian coaches stated: ‘the best preparation for playing a

Champions League match is to have played a Champions League match before'. The players have to be on the court playing a real match to learn to cope with the stress of that situation, which is an important skill for novices to develop. Applying Lave and Wenger's concepts, matches constitute a fundamental aspect of a community's practice, which is necessary for participants to engage in, to acquire the basic competences needed to become a full member of the community.

However, the Danish national coach viewed the pressure of playing matches at the highest level in the national league as an obstacle for the young players.

A young player is picked to play at a senior level when she is 19. As a player in the second best league on a junior team, she is used to making 7-10 goals per match. Then she finds herself in the best league. Now, she has 5 minutes to prove herself, and if she makes a mistake, she is back on the bench straight away. There is so much pressure on the coach and on the players in the best league that there is no room for development. (Danish national coach)

As noted above, it is not enough to put the player on the court for a few minutes – the learning process of playing matches at the highest level requires time and trust between the coach and the young players who need to gain their own experiences and make their own mistakes to learn and make progress.

The national coach for the Norwegian junior team described the development of young players as a process with stages offering different challenges for the player.

I believe that the environment that the players are part of is of extreme importance to their growth, it is the foundation. In some stages in a player's development it isn't important to play matches, because you have enough on your plate just absorbing training at such a high level. But then, in other stages, I believe it is important to play matches, and get that experience. (Norwegian national coach)

All the coaches agreed that if a young player is to continue her development, she has to gain access to the part of the practice that involves playing matches. But they also agreed that this is not always possible when they are part of a club playing at the highest level where the competition from immigrant players (and experienced national players) is high.

Thus, there is a delicate balance and still a crucial difference between legitimate peripheral participation and marginalisation. On the one hand, experienced immigrant players along with experienced national players may support the legitimate participation of young talent in training and strengthen the young players' effort and coping with the internal competition to get picked for matches. On the other hand, many experienced players in the teams may also contribute to sustained peripheral match participation and thereby marginalisation of young talent.

Discussion

Using the concept of communities of practice the issue of talent development has been perceived as a situated learning process that evolves in specific social contexts. This study investigates Norwegian and Danish club handball as communities of practice that differ significantly concerning the extent of player immigration. Further aided by the understanding of the different trajectories that intersect a community of practice, we have gained insight into the complex relationship between legitimate participation in the team and marginalisation from central community practice (matches).

Legitimacy appears to be a deciding factor for being granted full membership of the team community both for young upcoming players and experienced players coming from other teams in the league or abroad. Young players are at the start of a long learning process; they have some skills but also a yet unfulfilled potential (Burgess and Naughton, 2010). In contrast, established and experienced national and migrant players seem quickly to gain legitimacy through their past and present accomplishments. Our analysis also indicates that clubs and national federations could develop training and match practices through which talented players are acknowledged as participants in elite handball teams and through which experienced players come to share their experiences, e.g. by sharing responsibility for improving the team's competence in a playing position with, for instance, all playmakers collaborating and exchanging knowledge.

This is in line with findings by Christensen et al (2011) who suggest that young talents should play upwards as well as downwards at their own level and below. As identified by Henriksen et al. (2010), international research on talent identification and development has tended to

focus on the individual talent. Their model rightly encourages us to consider aspects in both the micro- and macro-environment. Further, our findings suggest that the complex and dynamic nature of athletic talent development environments must be considered since changes in the macro-environment (e.g. in the commercialisation and globalisation of Danish handball to be able to offer attractive employments for domestic as well as foreign players) may change the social learning conditions for talents in the microenvironment.

Our study illustrates the variability of the positions and trajectories of players in Danish and Norwegian handball clubs. However, we gained limited insight into the involvement of young talents in other social settings such as school, family and other sports-related environments. According to Lave and Wenger (1991), we are all part of several communities of practice, and individual trajectories both within and between these communities determine our development. To fully map out talent development paths, we should not limit the focus on talented players' engagement and positions on a single team, but include their involvement in all the communities of practice they are part of. Thus, the involvement of young talent in youth national team training and matches is also relevant to consider along with their daily training and match participation in various handball settings. Talent development is a process where diverse forms of participation and membership in different communities of practice can change, overlap and replace each other over time.

Compared to the existing literature on talent migration, our analysis suggests that we need to develop transnational perspectives on the ways in which talent paths may be located in (and learn from) communities of practices in various societies (Engh & Agergaard 2013). This may also open for a more detailed understanding of talent migration beyond a deskilling of the country of origin and poorer conditions for talent development in the country of destination. As suggested in the limited existing literature on the relationship between sports labour migration and talent development (Elliott & Weedon 2011), epistemic communities may be developing that do not accept national boundaries as borders for exchange of skills and knowledge.

As noted throughout our analysis, young players could benefit from being supported in various ways during their development. It may be beneficial, for example, to create more opportunities for young talent to participate in high-level competence communities of practice for training while having the opportunity to play matches at a lower level. This

contrasts with the situation in many elite clubs, where the young players often just observe matches rather than playing them, one of the processes of learning within the community. Considering the Danish situation, it seems that it is not the high number of migrant players in elite teams, *per se*, that blocks the development of local young talent, but first and foremost the structuring of the practices as well as the ability and willingness of the clubs to tailor a development plan for the individual players.

Concluding perspectives

In conclusion, this comparative case study showed that it is not only the number of immigrant players that made the Danish and Norwegian women's handball leagues differ remarkably through the first decade of the 2000s, but also the extent to which the migrant players in the league took up central roles in match practice. The quantitative study of the number of goals scored by immigrant and domestic players (youth and senior national team players) from 2000 to 2009 also indicates that the heightened presence of established players in Danish women's handball clubs seemed to influence particularly the young domestic talent rather than the established national team players in the league.

Further, the qualitative study showed that immigrant players tended quickly to gain legitimacy as members in elite sport teams compared to young domestic talent who needed to work their way to full participation. Considering the options domestic talent has for moving on an inbound trajectory, experienced immigrant players appear able to contribute to the progress of younger players through their skills and experience. Still this depends on whether young talented players have the chance of learning from the experienced players on a team, and if the migrant players' elite skills and dominance do not block the development of domestic talent, allowing them fewer opportunities to gain experiences from playing matches. It is nevertheless important to emphasise that in the latter case it is not primarily players from abroad that 'constitute the problem', but professional, experienced senior players in general and the structure of the national league. The high pressure for wins and results in the best European leagues can easily lead to a diminishing focus on talent development in the top clubs. Leading handball clubs who participate in international tournaments are in a constant need of experienced layers who can perform and win, so their development is more likely to

be based on the key players on the team rather than on the more inexperienced and younger players.

Towards the end of the first decade of the 2000s, both the Norwegian and the Danish league of women's handball suffered the consequences of the recession. According to Storm (2012), the economic breakdown in Danish handball was also caused by the competition spiral and the high costs of winning. The fact that a lot of international star players have left Danish handball between 2009 and 2014 could be viewed as offering new opportunities for young domestic talents who will receive more playing time and more responsibilities on the team. Yet, following the observations in our qualitative study it could also be argued that fewer experienced players from abroad will lead to a weaker league with less opportunity for domestic talents to learn from experienced players and less teams who are competitive at the top international level – similar to the situation following the economic breakdown of the Norwegian league in the 1990s (Ronglan, 2012).

Within today's globalised professional sports, well established athletes move across borders to a greater degree than ever before to seek better conditions – sporting, economical or otherwise – as may young and upcoming athletes. Such globalising tendencies complicate the notion of talent development as being solely a domestic concern. In short, career trajectories in elite sports must be considered across national boundaries, which means that the complexity of promoting national talent development may be greater and more arbitrary than expected. The globalised conditions call for revision of national sports governing bodies' perception of talent development as a national endeavour and for a discussion of their options for organising and structuring talent development in ways that not only meet the possible disadvantages, but also take advantage of globalisation.

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