

National and Organizational Culture in Norwegian Elite Sport

The Account of National Handball Head Coaches

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Abstract

The present study looks at the organizational culture of Norwegian elite sport which we capture as the meeting point of the national and elite sport cultures. Two successful national teams, the women's and men's handball are the point of departure. The selected elite sport contexts are apparently similar but at the same time distinctive. Informed by theories of culture and high reliability organizations, we analyzed in depth semi-structured interviews with the national team coaches and found that their organizational cultures were characterized by three common elements: a process-oriented approach, an athlete-centered approach, and a value-based approach towards development. Variations between teams were noticed, such as how the athletes partake in the team's value-anchoring processes. Overall, we learned that at the international level results can be achieved even when embracing, and performing, under humanistic and social-democratic values, which deviates significantly from the commonly embraced win-at-all-costs approach. Norwegian elite sport culture appears to exemplify this cultural approach by actively employing a value-system in the development of its athletes, teams and sport. In that respect, the study contributes to the international elite sport organization literature as it relates daily practices with the overall culture theory and the specific theory of high reliability organizations. The study provides a detailed account of how national Norwegian values (and further overarching Scandinavian values) pair up with elite sport demands, in team and backstage practices within two elite sport contexts.

Key words: elite sport, national culture, organizational culture, national team, coach, handball, Norway

Introduction

Elite sport stands out as a social domain where society at large, public authorities and sport organizations share the pursuit of sport performance. Elite athletes perform at the highest level of their sport. They train and compete, live and breathe, within a system characterized by “skill development, talent identification, selection, development and transition to higher levels of competition”, and where success is commonly seen as “the result of everything that takes place at the early stage of selecting and developing talented athletes who aim to reach the zenith of their athletic performance” (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2018, p. 2). While Sotiriadou and De Bosscher (2018) consider “everything that takes place...” from early on as contributing to success, for MacIntosh and Doherty (2007) what takes place inside an organization is culture, and according to Wagstaff and Burton-Wylie (2018) culture influences performance outcomes. As the homogenizing global sporting arms race makes nations strive to position their sports at international rankings (e.g., Green & Oakley, 2001), international elite sport success is prioritized systematically in government sport policy (e.g., Green & Houlihan, 2011) and pursued by national sport stakeholders. Despite globalized standardization, elite sport has its nuances and a complex relationship with overall societal structures and national culture. Today, we know relatively little about how the culture of elite sport deviates from or conforms to a nation’s culture.

Driven by this knowledge gap and recent literature suggesting that societal culture can influence sport organizations and their achievements (Skille & Chroni, 2018), we studied the organizational cultures of two successful Norwegian national teams and how they link with the national and elite sport cultures. We approached, the men’s and women’s teams of the same sport that stand as critical cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) considering how they are organized and operate, aiming to scrutinize similarities and/or variations in elite sport culture of one nation, and one sport. Investigating the organizational culture of successful national teams gave us the opportunity to learn how national and elite sport cultures influence achievement at the international level. In particular, we explored the everyday practices of performing organizational culture in Norway’s men and women’s handball teams. The women’s team has been successful at the international level for more than 30 years (see Hemmestad & Jones, 2019; Ronglan, 2012); with six medals in the last eight Olympics,

nine in the last 14 World Championships, and 11 medals in last 13 European Championships. The men's team achieved success in recent years, following the appointment of the current head coach in 2014; with two medals in the last two World Championships and a medal in the last European Championship.

Theoretical Background

Guided by the recent increased interest in organization culture in sport studies (e.g., Maitland, Hills & Rhind, 2015; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018, 2019; McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019), and the aim to understand how elite sport culture and national culture intersect within high performance organizations (i.e., national teams), we built our conceptualizations on both general and specific theories of culture. "Organisational culture and more broadly just culture is notoriously complex" (McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019, p. 13), and a number of definitions exist (see Maitland, Hills & Rhind, 2015). For reasons of simplicity and increased accuracy, at start we define culture in general, then via general organization knowledge and specific organization culture. We end with culture in high reliability organizations, which is aligned with Wagstaff and Burton-Wylie's (2019) suggestion to pay attention to the "importance [of] sense-making in organisations" (p. 22).

Spillman originally defined culture as a "phenomenon of meaning and value" (1991, p. 41), and more recently as the "processes and products of meaning-making" (2016, p. 419). Hence, culture as a phenomenon is a shared and interactional. To operationalize culture, Spillman (2016) proposed four distinct elements: "practice, schema, distinct aspect of social life, [and] meaning-making process" (p. 422). Within the context of our study, practice refers to a national team's everyday life, while schema refers to the coaches' inner patterns of interpretation and practice. The national team's organizational culture gives reference to the distinct aspects of the team's social life. Lastly, the meaning-making process is about responding to what is meaningful for the members of the national team.

Organizational culture was found to vary across sport organizations (Chroni, Abrahamsen, Skille, & Hemmestad, 2019; Slack & Parent, 2006) based on the characteristics of the sport, the organization's goals, the organization's success, and its members. Concerning organizational culture, Scott (2003) described it as a relatively stable stock of shared

practices, meanings, and values, while Alvesson (2013) defined it as “a set of shared values, norms and perceptions of reality, which develops in an organization when the members interact with each other and with the environment” (p. 23). Leaning on existing literature and following the call by Maitland et al. (2015) to provide a clear definition and operationalization of the culture under scrutiny – organizational culture here refers to norms, perceptions, practices, meanings, and values shared by the members of a national team (athletes, coaches, personnel, officials).

As we embarked here to scrutinize the organizational culture of Norway’s men’s and women’s national handball teams, to understand how organizational culture may shape a team and the intersection of national and elite sport cultures within a team’s organizational culture (for culture intersection see, Skille & Chroni, 2018), we were aware of multiple elite sport regimes and cultures identified in the literature (e.g., Maitland et al., 2015; McDougall et al., 2019; Skille et al., 2017). Our work was informed by the literature on high reliability organizations (HROs, e.g., Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015) due to similarities of these organizations with national teams of Norway, which of course is not be the case for all elite teams. HROs have an organizational culture characterized by emphasis on (a) continuous evaluation of processes and practices (e.g., Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015); (b) attentiveness to details (e.g., Weick & Sutcliffe, 2006); (c) openness to other opinions and ideas that create a more nuanced understanding of the situation (e.g., Shulman, 1993); (d) reluctance to simplify interpretations (e.g., Bigley & Roberts, 2001); (e) willingness and capacity to confront prevailing beliefs and expectations based on newer experience (e.g., Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 1999; 2005); and (f) mindful interactions (Weick & Roberts, 1993) that promote critical reflection at all levels of the organization (Jordan, 2010). In similar ways, Norwegian elite sport organizations place emphasis on development processes rather than performance outcomes, hereunder continuously evaluate old practice and openly discuss new ideas within non-hierarchical structures (Andersen, 2009; 2012; Andersen, Hansen, & Hærem, 2015; Chroni & Skille, 2018; Hansen, 2014; Hansen & Andersen, 2014).

Contextual Background

The development of sport achievements and the organizations in which achievements take place appear to be influenced by societal culture of Norway (Skille & Chroni, 2018). Norway is a social-democratic welfare state with a long history of humanistic values, including equality and universal rights. The Law of Jante (Sandemose, 1933) is still present in daily life, implying *you are not to think you're anyone special or that you're better than us*. This cultural trait carries implications also for sport, where for instance, children's sports regulations prohibit the publication of result lists, tables and rankings of athletes before the age of 11 and promote the rewarding of all children in sport competitions (Skirstad et al., 2012). Without claiming any causal relationship, it is thus interesting that one of the most typical welfare-state cultural traits does not apply (at least directly) to elite sport, namely that the sport system does not offer any safety net for elite athletes who fail to achieve (and position themselves as less than other competitors), as the society-at-large offers for other workers, citizens of Norway.

The national culture values of egalitarianism, universalism, and collectivism appear to be at odds with the elitist values espoused by high achievement performers in sport. Recently, Skille and Chroni (2018) wrote about a broad elite sport culture that is present in Norway and is “based on meaningful processes for development, permeating across sport specific and structural differences of sports federations” (p. 330). According to their findings, this developmental approach can lead to medal performances when the elitist values of high achievement sport performers are supported by people working closely together, employing open and systematic communication, and within an organization that offers growth opportunities for all. These findings bring to light that to some extent the high achievement traits of the elite sport culture meet with the collectivist and egalitarian traits of the societal culture of Norway and produce results at the international level.

Given the recent findings claiming that culture has “a significant influence on performance outcomes” (Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018, p. 32); that elite sport organizations of Norway, alike HROs, succeed while focusing on development processes instead of results (Andersen, Hansen, & Hærem, 2015; Hansen & Andersen, 2014); that sport achievements and organizations in which these occur are influenced by Norway's societal culture (Skille & Chroni, 2018); and while a knowledge gap exists

with regard to how elite sport culture deviates from or conforms to national culture, we sought to answer to two research questions:

- What is the organizational culture in men’s and women’s handball national teams?
- How do national and elite sport cultures intersect, considering the elements and practices of their organizational culture?

Answers to these questions can help us grasp the nuances of the intersection of national and elite sport cultures within the organizational culture of elite sport. The new knowledge can prompt sport management and sport psychology researchers to further look into culture as a critical factor for athlete/team performance, to inform applied practitioners on the importance of considering both elite sport and national culture in their consultations, and to alert sport stakeholders about culture as a critical aspect for sport development and success.

Methodology

Research Philosophy

Delving into the nuances of the national and elite sport culture intersection within the organizational culture of two successful national teams, we followed the qualitative approach informed by a constructivist epistemological positioning. This positioning is based on a relativist and transactional stance that we hold as academics and researchers particularly. Accordingly, we believe there is no one single objective truth but multiple ones as truth arises from interactions, and findings are co-created as the investigation proceeds (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). More recently, Douglas and Carless (2006) pointed out that multiple performance narratives exist, offering different routes to success in sports, which we also accept as true for our research on the two successful national teams.

As a methodological strategy, case studies allowed us “to study holistically the complexity that is involved in naturalistic situations” (Hodge & Sharp 2017, p. 62) with “a greater degree of depth given their *particularity* and *boundedness*” (p. 63). Considering particularity, our focus was on the “distinct, discrete, bounded, and somewhat unique research phenomenon” (Hodge & Sharp, 2017, p. 63) of the intersection of cultures within two national teams. With regard to boundedness, the focus on two teams

limited our breadth, while it also freed us to go as much in depth about everyday team practices and the intersection of cultures as our sources allowed us to go. According to Yin (2009), case study is a suitable strategy for research questions of the how and why of contemporary events in which we as researchers have little or no control, like in our study on how national and elite sport cultures intersect in two national teams. Regarding the knowledge gap of how elite sport culture deviates from or conforms to national culture, the aim here was to start understanding their intersection to fill this gap and not to produce generalizable results, which was possible with the case study strategy (Yin, 2009).

Participants

As participants we invited the head coaches of the two teams and the federation official that was most closely working with each team. The two coaches were considered as solid sources of information based on their extensive coaching experience at the elite level. The interviews with the team officials offered an alternative source of data that helped us develop a comprehensive understanding of the participating coaches (Patton, 1999), considering also that case study strategy calls for multiple sources (Yin, 2009) and were used for data triangulation purposes, which is presented below. At the time of data collection, the men's coach was working with the national team since three years. Previously, he had coached for six years at the professional handball league level. The women's coach had been working with the national team for eight years when interviewed, while before he had served for eight years as one of the team's assistant coaches. Both coaches were men, as most of national team coaches in Norway (see also Chroni, Abrahamsen, & Hemmestad, 2016).

Data collection and procedures

Data was collected via interviews, which is a commonly used method for investigating organization culture in sport (Maitland et al., 2015). We developed the interview guide for this study based on (i) existing knowledge concerning Norwegian elite sport (Andersen, 2009, 2012; Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; Ronglan, 2012; Hansen & Andersen, 2014; Skille, Stenling, & Fahlen, 2017; Skille & Chroni, 2018), and (ii) the theoretical concepts presented above (Alvesson, 2013; Scott, 2003; Spillman, 2016).

The interview contained three parts. In Part A, we explored matters of organization and leadership. In Part B we explored matters of culture, and asked questions related to the mission, philosophy, values, rules, and expectations of the coach, the team and the federation. In Part C, we explored processes and practices that impact the coach's work and the coping required, decision-making matters, and support provided. We used probing questions that guided the interviewees to expand on information shared and to also enrich our understanding on these. With section B explicitly focusing onto culture, sections A and C supplemented data on everyday practices which are the means to perform culture as well as approaches of the coach and team entourage. Taken together, the data collected provided us with information of much depth and some breadth for understanding culture.

The interviews lasted between 58 and 101 minutes (average duration 81.75 min); they were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, resulting in 128 pages of single-spaced text. Two of the authors conducted the interviews together as previously done by Torregrosa, Boixados, Valiente, and Cruz (2004) exploring elite athletes' retirement, as well as Chroni, Pettersen and Dieffenbach (2019) exploring the elite athlete-to-coach transition. Both were trained and experienced in qualitative research and conducting interviews while one of them had sport management and the other one sport psychology background. The different backgrounds were a strategic decision during the planning of the study for enriching the depth and quality of data particularly through probing questions asked and lens employed in data analysis, and for bridging the gaps identified by Fletcher and Wagstaff (2009) in how sport management and sport psychology look into organizational culture. The interviews were conducted in English. One of the interviewers was also bilingual (Norwegian and English) in case the participant needed assistance with the English language. Nonetheless, all interviewees had advanced English language skills.

The study was reviewed and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (48390/3/BGH). Prior to each interview, the participant was presented with a consent form stating the purpose and method of study and the right to withdraw from it at any time. Considering that anonymity could not be retained, as the data had to be analyzed and discussed in light of each team's context for furnishing meaningful findings, both coaches consented in associating the data and findings with their

sport, teams, and identities. The coaches read the present manuscript in full and signed an approval form prior to submitting it for publication.

Data analysis and ensuring rigor

Thematic analysis was employed to serve the study's aims and learn of two national teams' organizational culture and how national and elite sport cultures may underline it. Thematic analysis is a theoretically flexible method for "identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p. 120) and was deemed suitable for answering our research questions, while it has also been used before in the context of sports and elite coaches (e.g., Chroni et al., 2019; Schinke, McGannon, Battochio, & Wells, 2013).

We considered Braun and Clarke's (2006), Clarke and Braun's (2013) and Braun, Clarke and Weate's (2017) writings for the analysis. In step 1, all four authors read the transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. In step 2, the authors worked individually to identify codes relevant to everyday practices enacting organizational culture and any points of intersection between national and elite sport cultures. They examined the texts line by line to identify on a semantic level participant description of culture (i.e., views, approaches, practices) and meanings for culture, and formulated codes using words resembling those used by the participants. To this point, the analysis employed an inductive approach, while in the next steps a deductive approach was employed. In step 3, while applying Spillman's (2016) broad categories of culture and the literature on organizational culture (Alvesson, 2013), the codes were organized into two distinct cultures. In step 4, the authors critically discussed the coding system and made necessary refinements. In step 5, we finalized the organization of the findings in ways that bring out meaning. In step 6, we wrote up the findings. With regard to data saturation we believe that it was achieved considering that the data obtained was rich (quality) and thick (quantity), by Burmeister and Aitken's (2012) criteria, within the realm of boundedness and particularity that characterizes the case study approach.

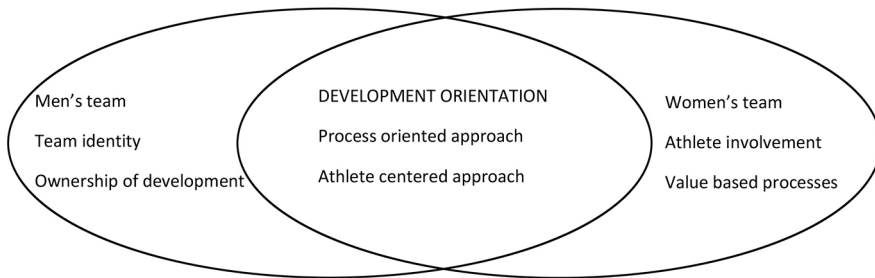
To ensure rigor, Smith and McGannon's (2018) problematizations on member-checking, inter-coder reliability and agreement practices, and use of universal criteria (also discussed by Braun & Clarke, 2013) led us to employing the practices of (i) member reflections, (ii) critical friends, and (iii) making methodological decisions underpinned by the research-

ers' ontological and epistemological perspectives. Under the member reflection practice, beyond the interviews, we gave the interviewees opportunities to reflect on the transcripts, to add or take away data, and to further elaborate on previously mentioned aspects in the interviews. With regard to the critical friends' practice, the first, third, and fourth author acted as critical friends to the second author, who led all discussions in the analysis steps 3, 4, and 5. The discussions were carried out in ways that we complemented each other in the analysis and interpretation. It is important here to note that, as authors, we represent different education backgrounds in sport psychology, sport sociology, and sport management while we all also hold diverse experiences in elite sports, which led to thought-provoking discussions enriching our learning. During this process, we felt that the codes and cultures identified became as clear as possible. The first, second and third author's knowledge and experience of the Norwegian sport system, and the extensive experience of the last author in international sports proved to be a strong diverse combination throughout the study. With regard to making methodological decisions that clearly support our ontological and epistemological positioning, in our work we endorse a constructivist interpretivist stance, where multiple truths are present at the same time, created, re-created, co-created by the engaging interpreters. Accordingly, we chose our participants purposefully, conducted semi-structured interviews so we could follow up on all truths, performed data-driven analysis before the theory-driven, asked for member reflections and critically discussed what sense we were making of the data. These practices enriched our learning and secured rigor by recognizing, accepting and bridging multiple perspectives and interpretations.

Results and Discussion

In this section, we jointly present and discuss the findings because the discussion of certain findings is fundamental for understanding findings that follow. We also felt comfortable in presenting the teams in a parallel way as the constant comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and writing allowed us to pinpoint each team's unique avenues. Overall, the interviewed coaches both focused on development, which we came to view as the overarching element in the organizational culture of both teams. Six codes were organized under the development element, two of

which are shared by the teams while the rest are distinct. Accordingly, the coaches share a process-oriented approach and an athlete-centered approach, yet their practices and perceived meanings vary. In anchoring the culture, the head coach for the women focuses on athlete involvement and value based processes, while the men's coach uses team identity and ownership of development by the athlete. See Figure 1 for an overview of shared and distinct cultural features of the two teams. Consequently, we identified two distinctive patterns (cf. Clarke & Braun, 2013) of organizational cultures that reflect different points of intersection with the national culture of Norway.



Process oriented approach

Applying Spillman's (1999, 2016) definition of culture, the overall meaning-making process in the aspect of social life labelled Norwegian elite sport, is development. This is the case for both teams in this handball study as well as in other sports (Andersen, 2009; Andersen & Ronglan, 2012; Chroni et al., 2019; Skille & Chroni, 2018). To focus on development, they employ a process-oriented rather than result-oriented approach (NIF, 2015; OLT, 2017) and experience the highest level of meaning when development occurs. Furthermore, through the distinct social practices they employ we elaborate here on the national team coaches' values and knowledge for doing the job, considering Spillman's (1991; 2016) culture element of inner schema.

With the strong focus on development processes competition results are viewed almost as a by-product. Endorsing the development process is independent of any competition results and is enacted via reflecting, learning, and working on the things one actually can do something about. Separating results from performances is key to understanding

their culture and is achieved by focusing on playing the game instead of keeping the score.

When you play an attack, you have the ball, [and the] play is coming at a shot with the goal keeper ... If the play and the players created a good opportunity ... then we can say it is a successful play. (Women's coach)

If you make a goal or not, it's not the most important thing ... I think it's much more important how we came to that opportunity, to make that shot ... I can often stand and applaud a good attack with no goal. (Men's coach)

When organizations and individuals evaluate experiences in the light of clearly defined context-specific expectations, it strengthens learning and consequently the capacity for continuous development (Miller, 1994; Sitkin, 1992). The Norwegian handball teams share similarities with the culture of HROs by emphasizing the importance of using everyday experiences as a source for continuous fine-tuning of their practices (Jordan, 2010; Hernes & Irgens, 2013). Such an approach increases the possibility to identify critical elements in performance that can be improved and encourages a culture characterized by acceptance for making and overcoming mistakes (Jordan, 2010; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015). This would mean to continuously work towards the build-up of opportunities to score as opposed to valuing a scored goal; and to keep playing in the here-and-now when mistakes occur in game situations.

Athlete-centered approach

Although handball is a team sport, both coaches emphasized the importance of developing the individual within the team. The women's coach explained this process and why it varies from player to player as follows:

There is not one way of doing it. The most important [thing] is that the player can realize and define what she wants to have help with. ... We challenge the players to find out: What is your task now to develop as a player? Is it physical or psychological, or is it technical? Is it social, or is it a little bit of everything? Then the player together with us coaches, we find out [how to move on].

In both teams, the responsibility to develop is placed on the athlete. This is not to say that the coach passes on his responsibility for athlete de-

velopment. Instead, the coach and support personnel are facilitators in athlete development. One way to interact with the players is by challenging them, and as each player has unique strengths and weaknesses these are thought out on an individual basis. This is consistent with findings that portray the cross-country ski national team coaches and support personnel of Norway as ‘sense-givers’ who influence athlete reflection in order to improve quality of training. Sense-giving is about “how coaches guide and control the way athletes perceive and interpret training advice” (Hansen & Andersen, 2014, p. 18). The women’s handball coach pushes the athletes to identify their developmental tasks and overall aims, triggering individual will-power and motivation.

Each player is responsible for her own journey. You have to sit in the driver’s seat, not let those around you drive, you have to drive your car yourself to your dreams and with this I mean the player is the most important leader in her own journey, career. (Women’s coach)

The men’s coach places strong emphasis on athlete-centered development of the skills each athlete needs for his particular role on the team; he is actively engaged in identifying what each athlete needs to develop and how to proceed towards becoming a team. “We have to start with the basics. ... You want to take one step forward, but if you take a step forward too fast then you’ll take one-and-a-half back because the basics are gone” (Men’s coach). When the development for each athlete is in place, then the interaction between players increases. After individual basics, “what I do is get them together, and start training on our [team] basics, and when I say basics it’s like interaction, how we will work together.” The step that follows is interacting as a whole team, “then it’s just the team, team, team, team all the way” (Men’s coach). In sum, the development process in the men’s team starts with individual basic skills development, moves to a few players interacting on the court, and finally reaches the whole team working together. The role of the coach and support staff is to facilitate this development process to reach a team achievement.

In both teams, the athletes are taught, guided, and empowered to take responsibility for their own performance and careers. The culture within the handball teams promotes self-leadership (Bjørndal, 2017) to foster athlete responsibility for development. To increase individual capacity for continuous development and eventually success, both coaches emphasized the importance of athlete reflection. Individual experiences,

generated through reflection (e.g., Weick, 1979), are deliberately used in the process of developing the team. As the men's coach said:

When we're playing, the players have a much better feel than I do ... they feel the temperature. I can't feel it as they do ... and they see solutions that I don't see. ... I listen to them and start giving them responsibility to come up with solutions. Then it's my job to decide if that's the right solution or not. (Men's coach)

To promote athlete reflection, the coaches give direction by pointing out to the players what to focus on or which player to take advantage of at different plays. This close interaction between coach and athlete is critical for athlete development. The overall aim for both coaches, is for the athletes to develop the skill of critical reflection on how to progress. Of course, developing athlete reflection can be challenging, as the women's coach shared:

This is a hard part [getting athletes to reflect], because to involve players in their own career, you have to have stamina as a coach since you don't get the result today or tomorrow; it takes much longer. [Despite critics] our approach has paid off many times, of course sometimes we missed [the call]. ... It would be a total failure if we hurried the decision [on] whether they are good players or not. (Women's coach)

The women's coach also sees individual and team level reflection as inter-related, where individual deliberations are needed to foster strong team interaction and consistent development for all players:

You have to be patient with the players [who are] not reflecting. Definitely, you don't put them into a group with players who are always talking, because they talk all the time and not the players who are not so much extroverts. A player that doesn't talk much to share what she's thinking or reflecting on will become even more passive. She has to think about this all the time and [then it's] how you ask questions, how you put them together when she is undergoing the [reflection] process with the team mates ... [You] ask [open-ended] questions where the answer is not yes or no. ... Players that master this, in my experience, are the players who live for a long time at the international [level] as athletes. They even become mothers, give birth and return to the team. They have the capacity to take control of their own development. (Women's coach)

This individual reflection approach has been supported in the literature on HROs (e.g., Jordan, 2010; Fraher, Branicki, & Grint, 2016) as well as on sports coaching (e.g., Hansen & Andersen, 2015; Richards, Mascarenhas & Collins, 2009). Putting the athlete at the center of attention is based on the view that each individual has unique needs that ought to be met by the individual first and foremost. Notably, the handball national team coaches enact this key value in a way that promotes continuous development both at the individual and team levels.

*Value- and ownership-based approach:
Anchoring organizational culture*

An interesting point was understanding the balance (or tension) that characterizes the culture element of the athlete-centered approach under which athletes take ownership of their own development. According to the coaches, the balance between individual development goals and team objectives is secured by involving the players in the processes of deciding team goals, key values and rules (norms) that support and clarify the meaning of values. Individual skills and competences are, hence, developed to strengthen the capacity to achieve team objectives.

Within the women's team, the coach facilitates group discussions as the athletes jointly define key values, the content of these values, and rules in accordance to the values. This is a bottom-up process for the women's team that goes as follows:

The players define what the values mean every second spring and summer when we have a little bit more time and games which are not so important. They start on their own at home, clarifying what is important for me, what is important so that I can bring out the best in the team. What is important on the court? What is important outside the court? And then we have the values from the Norwegian Handball Association: respect, fair play, commitment, empowerment. How do I define these values to make our team better? ... Subsequently, we meet to organize the players in pairs and ask them to share their reflections. Then we put two groups together and have four players together. They start defining [values] when on the court. This is important for us, when outside the court ... And in the end, the twenty players are organized into groups that deliver their points to the group of team captains who have a look at them ... Then we try to reach a consensus. It's not so difficult because all the groups have [many] similar things. (Women's coach)

Once the key values are decided, these also apply to the coaches and the wider support system of the women's team. The coach actively follows up the value-based rules decided, and while it is okay for a player to break a rule once, when she breaks it twice the coach takes action.

If you have a good player, who is always challenging the culture, the values, doing the wrong things that are not good for the team as a group, maybe in the end you will make the decision perhaps this player can't play on our team. (Women's coach)

If an athlete crosses the line, then "the culture is threatened" and the organizational culture of the national team is more than a star player. As the worst-case scenario, the coach will tell the *prima donna*, "You are free to go. There will be others who will be pleased to be here, who have dreamed about it all their life. People come and go and there will be another one to fill [her role]" (Women's coach).

The women's coach, when appointed as the national team coach, took over an already successful team where the process of defining the content of team values was established by the previous coach. The men's coach took over a team that was regarded as 'the team that always failed when it mattered the most.' To create a new narrative for the men's team, the coach used time on developing a new identity for it.

We built a new identity; we chose our identity. ... We got together to define our own words: loyalty, precision, effort. These three words should define our culture. We started with the coaches and then did the same exercise with the players. We got three similar words from both sides, a little different but almost the same. Then we got together and discussed how we would like to get the three words combined. ... We talked about them a lot. We have a young team, many players are 20 to 25 years old. They're not so experienced and they often forget our values. So we have to be on [top of] them regularly. (Men's coach)

To safeguard the new identity, the coach deselected some of the players who did not fit the new culture though they had the necessary skills for the game. The decision to select athletes that comply with the desired culture can be seen as an example of institutional leadership (Selznick, 1957) which emphasizes the importance of leaders enacting key values. As the men's coach explained:

I have a lot of players I can choose from. I can just say, "okay you don't fit here, go and I will bring in a new one." When I took the job, I took

some players out. The players I took out were better than the players I brought in, but they did not fit our culture; how we wanted to be. The players I selected were maybe not the best players we had, but together they're the best players. (Men's coach)

In summarizing, we note here a distinctive meeting point we observed between a winning culture and a performance culture; the coaches emphasize the latter to gain the former. Although both coaches aim to succeed, they choose to focus on facilitations and conditions that develop the athletes and the team as the way to reach success. Based on the data, these conditions associate with strengthening relationships and interactions via the practice of commonly defined values and rules. Having the necessary sport skills is not sufficient to be selected for the national team; the players need to accept what is agreed upon and act in accordance with the contract of rules. High degrees of athlete involvement in defining the culture accompany the coaches' purposive approach towards making decisions based on rules and values previously agreed. These findings are also in line with how HROs operate, the sports coaching literature (e.g., Jordan, 2010; Fraher, Branicki, & Grint, 2016; Hansen & Andersen, 2015; Richards, Mascarenhas, & Collins, 2009), as well as how individuals reflect in order to improve (see Weick, 1979).

Organizational culture: The meeting point of national and elite sport cultures

Societal expectations in Norway are formed by the overall national culture in which egalitarianism, universalism, and collectivism are important ideologies with corresponding values. With regard to elite sport in Norway, emphasis is placed on a strong *foundation of humanistic values* in elite athlete development that positions the whole person ahead of the system. This thesis is rather contradictory to viewing athletes as assets for producing Olympic medals (Augestad & Bergsgard, 2007).

Seeing the whole person and working with the human being, not only the elite athlete (the doer), is espoused by the women's coach who believes that in order to become successful a player should get "education and other things" and "it's not good to think about handball 24 hours a day." In his view, for a national team to achieve at the highest levels, it needs players who "take responsibility for their own journey" and a strong team value-system along with individual balances, where *the sport fits seamlessly within the athlete's wider sphere of life*. If she cannot find a fit

for the team within her sphere, then she is asked to leave. Looking at the men's team, it is *the person who's asked to fit the culture* of the team, as the coach employed selection/deselection to form a team with the potential to succeed internationally. While selection/deselection resemble practices followed at international elite sport where winning and dominance are emphasized over a sport that fits with individual balances (Hoberman, 1992), we ought to note that his practices – when for example stating “I have a lot of players to choose from” *aimed to form the new identity and culture for the team*, not to devalue athlete skills. The men's coach approach has to do with *choosing players that fit well together*, who would commit to play under the team's new value-system of “loyalty, precision, and effort” – three concepts that are key elements in Norway's national culture.

The work of the national handball coaches towards cultivating the conditions for athlete and team development and performance reveal some critical points of alignment between the national culture and the international elite sport demands. These coaches appear to embrace the national culture or to have found ways to adapt to societal expectations and national values (since we did not ask such questions directly).

Concluding remarks

Returning to the first research question asking what characterizes the organizational culture of the women's and men's national handball teams, we identified three key elements. One, the organizational culture of these teams is first and foremost characterized by a focus on process rather than product, on performance rather than winning. Two, the process is athlete-centered with some variations between the organizational culture for the men and women. Three, the process is value-based, yet each team anchors values in distinctive ways. Given that the anchoring strategies may depend highly on the coaches' leadership styles, a follow up study is needed to explore the leadership and organizational culture of elite Norwegian teams. Nevertheless, the present findings give us a clear view of what lies beneath the overarching and permeating development focus found in Norwegian elite sport (Hansen & Andersen, 2014; Skille & Chroni, 2018). With regard to the second research question, how national and elite sport cultures intersect, given the elements and practices of their organizational culture, it appears that the value-system of each

team serves as the meeting point for the two cultures. Accordingly, we construed the societal value of “winning is not everything” (cf. Witoszek & Sørensen, 2018) as an impactful one – at least partially and/or indirectly – on the Norwegian elite sport culture with its focus on performance.

The present study contributes to the international elite sport organization literature (e.g. Green & Oakley, 2001; Green & Houlihan, 2011; MacIntosh & Doherty, 2007; Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2018) by combining the overall culture theory with the more specific theory of HROs (e.g. Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015), pairing the macro national levels with the micro team levels of culture. Particularly, if athlete involvement is key, the coaches need to anchor culture by involving the players. This is the story our data told on how organizational culture is the meeting point of elite sport culture and societal values via development processes, athlete-centrism, and value-anchored processes. In contrast with what is often espoused by sport organizations, coaches, athletes and parents, a dehumanizing approach for the athlete that emphasizes winning and dominance over others served by individualism and power hierarchies (Hoberman, 1992; Pronger, 2002), the present study generates the following take-home-message: It is possible to achieve results at the international level by embracing humanistic and social-democratic values. The Norwegian elite sport culture appears to include such values (and accompanying process) for the development of winter and summer sport athletes and sports (Skille & Chroni, 2018; Skille et al., 2017).

In that respect, our main contribution to sport research is the combined sport management and sport psychology approach into organization culture in sport (e.g., Maitland, Hills, & Rhind, 2015; Wagstaff & Burton-Wylie, 2018; 2019; McDougall & Ronkainen, 2019). Given the unique access to two of the most successful national team coaches in international handball the last decade, this study provides concrete examples of how Norwegian elite sport develop and reveals the inside picture of Norwegian achievement culture. In our teams, the existence of different organizational culture anchors under the same umbrella organization(s), the handball federation and the Norwegian Olympic Training Center, accentuate the essentiality of thinking out-of-the-box and not a “one-way-fits-all” approach.

Implications for practitioners are, first, to increase the understanding among officials about how to connect with the coach by learning how some of the successful coaches’ thinking and doing. Second, an implication is to increase the reflection among coaches about how to blend

national culture that the audience can identify with, the elite sport culture and the sport-at-hand culture, in ways that can serve legitimation and achievement. Last but not least, our findings raise the question of whether the chosen practices were adopted as suitable to athlete gender and the ways women and men seek achievement or as ways to overcome weaknesses of men and women in high achievement environments. Yet these were not explored in this study which is a limitation that warrants further research into practices and cultures of elite sport.

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