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**Ideology or Reality? The Awareness of Educational Aims and Activities Amongst  
German and Norwegian Participants of the First Summer and Winter Youth Olympic  
Games**

**Abstract**

This paper explores the awareness of the young German and Norwegian participants in the Youth Olympic Games (YOG) of the additional educational mission of this new event, implemented by the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Among the questions considered are whether the nature of the event contradicts its claimed intention to focus on both competition and education. Data were collected through a set of interviews with young German and Norwegian athletes at the Singapore YOG in the summer of 2010 and the Innsbruck YOG in the winter of 2012. The findings revealed (1) a focus on elite sport by athletes and their coaches, while the educational aims were considered secondary; (2) that it was problematic for the young participants to focus on education in a high-performance event. The overall conclusion was that the YOG have had only limited success in achieving the educational ambitions of the Olympic Movement.

*Keywords: Young elite athletes, International Olympic Committee, Germany, Norway, Youth Olympic Games*

**Introduction**

Educating elite athletes about the values of sport and creating awareness that education in general is important for their life “outside the sporting arena,” has always been a challenging task for sport officials/coaches/educators. Hence, the *dumb jock* stereotype, according to which athletes are accused of neglecting their intellectual development due to the prioritisation of training on competition, has coexisted with sport since its origin (Sailes 1993). Indeed, according to Giulianotti (2004), the increasing demands on elite athletes particularly

the time-intensive training regimes and the increasingly crowded competition calendar, has resulted in participation in regular educational activities becoming almost impossible. Consequently, the educational standard of elite athletes decreased significantly by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Conzelmann and Nagel 2003). However, in recent years, educators, sporting and educational institutions and organisations have attempted to offer more educational opportunities for elite athletes, particularly in the younger age groups. In Germany, top-level football clubs are required to have their own boarding school so young talents can finish their school career whilst preparing for a sporting career. For higher education after high school, the American National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) grants scholarships to college athletes, making a dual career more likely for promising athletes all over the world. Significantly, the most powerful international sporting organization, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) launched a new online platform in March 2014, which delivers free educational content to elite athletes around the world (IOC 2014). Moreover, the dual aim of promoting education and high-performance sport at the same time has become especially evident at the Youth Olympic Games (YOG), the event under investigation in this study.

The relationship between sport and education has always been a polemic within the modern Olympic Movement. Today, the world of sport, and especially the Olympic Games, are a cultural, political and economic phenomenon and can be considered a media event, a tourist attraction and a marketing opportunity (Toohey and Veal 2007). However, the IOC has tried to emphasize the *educational* nature of its Movement more intensively over the past few decades, and it has been argued that the Olympic Games have a unique status among major sporting events because of this emphasis on the educational responsibilities of sport organisations (Payne 2006).

One of the motives of the IOC in establishing the YOG in 2007 was to raise the profile of the athlete education within the Olympic Movement. A distinct feature of the YOG was that it did not consist solely of sporting competitions, but also offered a Culture and Education Programme (CEP) through which the young participants could learn about the educational aspects of sport. After the two first editions, the CEP was renamed to *Learn and Share*<sup>1</sup> (IOC, 2014b), though the content remained the same. Athletes are the main target group of the YOG, and should therefore play an essential role in the evaluation and development of the event and particularly the twofold approach of combining high-performance athleticism and education at a global sporting event thereby reviving Coubertin's original pedagogical vision of the Olympic Movement (Wassong 2014).

By drawing on interviews with German and Norwegian participants at the Singapore 2010 YOG and the Innsbruck 2012 YOG, this research investigates the perception of the educational aims of the YOG. The approach of the study is explorative as it focuses only on a European perspective. However, the inclusion of young peoples' opinions represents a recent shift in research, by which young people are increasingly regarded as valuable social agents, able to reflect on their experiences (Sandford et al. 2010, 66).

### **Youth and the Olympic Movement**

Youth has always occupied a central role within the Olympic Movement (Wassong 2012). Pierre De Coubertin considered athletes of student age to be the main target group for his Olympic event and envisaged a sporting event that would be based on educational values. He thought that it would support a better transnational understanding by educating the youth of the world to think and act in less nationalistic ways (Quantz 1993, 21). For Coubertin, the Olympic athlete had to be a role model, transmitting the educational values of the Olympic

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<sup>1</sup> As the name of the program was CEP during our data collection, we will use this term in the following.

Movement. He believed that the behaviour of Olympic athletes should act as an incentive for other people, especially the young, to participate in, and benefit from, sport (Wassong 2006, 224). The IOC, in its formative years, conceptualised the participating athlete as an active citizen thus promoting the exact opposite of the “dumb jock” stereotype.

Despite these original intentions the IOC had abandoned Coubertin’s educational aims and his emphasis on the youth of the world in dramatic fashion after the Second World War. The IOC increasingly pursued its growing connections with commercial corporations. However, the IOC continued to argue in public that its strategy prioritised youth and international policies specified in the Olympic Charter. Yet rather than promoting the cultural exchange between the youth of the world, the IOC promoted solely *high-performance*. In the process, the educational goals were further demoted. In light of this development, it did not matter if the athletes were young adults as long as they were successful athletically and could be used for political goals (Wassong 2006, 225). Furthermore, the personal development of the athlete for whom the Olympic Games were staged in the first place, was completely neglected.

In the last two decades, however, international sport organisations have increasingly attempted to argue that they have developed a better understanding of the role of education in sport and the importance of addressing young people. One example of this is the staging of the European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF), which was launched by the European Olympic Committees (EOC) under the presidency of Jacques Rogge in 1991 in order to bring young people from Eastern and Western Europe together (Wong 2011, 1833). The IOC also focused much more on the education of the elite athletes, making one of its priorities the promotion of the educational, physical, mental and social protection of the Olympic athletes (Wassong 2009, 18). In 2005, the IOC set up an *Athlete Career Programme*, which supports elite athletes to manage training, competition and everyday life. The Committee also

promotes the concept of the dual career according to which the athletes should be able to combine a successful athletic career whilst also continuing to pursue an education. The new strategy came to light in particular at the XIII Olympic Congress in Copenhagen in 2009 at which – for the very first time – the entire theme of the Congress was to deal with the athletes. One of the recommendations of the Congress was to establish an IOC Commission to deal with the athletes’ entourage in order to enable the best possible educational development of the athlete. Thus, in July 2011 the IOC Entourage Commission was established (IOC 2011, 1). Furthermore, *Recommendation 50* called for a *Youth Strategy* within the IOC and the Olympic Movement, built on three pillars: advocacy (influence to create positive change), activation (implement customised pilot projects) and education (share knowledge and good practices) (IOC 2013, 56).

Without a doubt, the most strategic and most obvious element of the IOC’s new orientation has been the installation of the YOG. In fact, the IOC argues that the YOG are the “flagship of the IOC’s strategy towards young people” (IOC 2008, 6). In terms of the event itself, the IOC stated that it has adopted a different organisational strategy to that of any other international sport event. For example, no new venues should be built with the exception of the Main Media Centre and the Olympic Village. There were no guidelines for infrastructure changes as the transportation system should be based on a shuttle service for all people with accreditation (IOC 2012). This has resulted in considerably lower “official” budgets than at the Olympic Games with, for example, the first Summer YOG in Singapore in 2010 costing US\$75.4 million and the first Winter YOG in Innsbruck in 2012, US\$22.5 million (Schnitzer & Chappelet 2014, 63).

From official IOC communications, it can clearly be seen that the YOG have a twofold objective: first, the YOG are targeted towards young elite athletes and is designed to enable them to display their sporting ability on an international stage; and second, the Games

is intended to introduce them to the educational aim of the Olympic Movement and the Olympic Values (IOC 2012, 1). The second aim is to be realized through the CEP, which is intended to:

introduce young athletes to Olympism and the Olympic values in a fun and festive spirit, and to raise awareness of important issues such as the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, the fight against doping, global challenges and their role as sports ambassadors in their communities (IOC 2012, 2).

At the 2010 Singapore YOG, the CEP contained a number of themes and related projects including: 'Chat with the Champions'; 'Discovery Activity'; 'World Cultural Village'; 'Community Project'; 'Arts and Culture'; 'Island Adventure'; and 'Exploration Journey'. The 2012 Innsbruck YOG was based around six workshops and programmes: 'Media Lab'; 'World Mile'; 'Sustainability Project'; 'Arts Project'; 'Competence Project'; and 'Olympic Youth Festival 2012'. These six events included in the Innsbruck CEP programme gave the athletes some education through four different activities: (a) the athletes were given the opportunity to *learn* more about several topics; (b) they were made aware of how they can *contribute* to the environment and society; (c) they were given the opportunity to *interact* with each other; and (d) they were also given the opportunity to enjoy a *celebration* of diverse cultures informed by the CEP (IOC 2013). In both Singapore and Innsbruck, local students made booths at the World Culture Village representing each of the 205 (Singapore) and 70 (Innsbruck) participating nations. In addition, international organisations, including the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) attended and made presentations to the Olympians on topics such as social responsibility. Some of CEP's learning objectives were reflected in the sports program with new events such as mixed gender or mixed NOC team events that have been introduced in order to reduce the competitiveness of the events.

According to IOC regulations, participation is limited to young athletes within the age range between 15 and 18. However, the IFs eventually decided which specific age group participates in their sports. Moreover, the IOC also claims to reach out to the global youth via the YOG and to raise awareness about the importance of sport and physical activity (IOC 2012, 1). The attempt to achieve this objective through a very intense social media strategy, by which young people are addressed via *Facebook*, *Twitter* and *YouTube* (Pedersen et al., 2014) and by integrating the local youth into the CEP and sending the participating athletes to visit schools in the regions. It is through the prominence given to the CEP within the YOG that the IOC aims to fulfil its two purposes: namely to organise an event for young elite athletes within which education should play an equally important role with performance, and to promote participation and specific Olympic values.

With regard to the implementation of the IOC's youth policy research indicates a general lack of success (Wong 2011). Hanstad, Parent and Kristiansen (2013, 335) argue that while intentionally limiting the scale of the YOG allows more cities to bid for the Games, this strategy also enables the IOC to spread its influence in global sport politics. Furthermore, the implementation of the YOG "cannot be discounted from a business rationale for the IOC and the sponsors," (*Ibid.*), a concern also voiced by Krieger (2013b, 274). Research on the YOG also indicates that the objects of the newly implemented event, the young athletes themselves, were critical of the nature and content of the CEP. The athletes referred to the lack of time for CEP activities due to their busy competition schedule (Kristiansen 2015) and also referred to the somewhat childish activities on offer (Krieger 2013a). This critical assessment of the CEP is supported by Schnitzer and colleagues (Schnitzer et al. 2014) based on data from a survey and focus group interviews conducted among an international sample of YOG participants competing at Innsbruck.



Doubts have also been raised as to whether the YOG reached young people worldwide or even any audience at all, as the YOG could also be considered the “best kept secret in sports” (Judge et al. 2009, 173). The young athletes that participated in the first summer and winter editions of the YOG emphasized that for them the event was primarily about sporting success and not about educational aspects (Hanstad et al. 2013, 336). This is supported by the poor participation and interest found by Schnitzer et al. (2014). Furthermore, parents pushed the “elite sport logic” whereas the IOC’s cognitive association of parents believed them to be fitting its youth education policy (Parent et al. 2013, 18). Hence, when gathering the best youth in the world, it would be “naive and unrealistic to assert that winning is not an important part of youth sports” (Cumming et al. 2007, 322).

As the main goals of the YOG are intended for the participating athletes, this study focuses on their perception of the educational emphasis of the YOG. It is assumed that by encouraging the young athletes to share their experiences and involvement in the YOG, one will be in a better position to acknowledge and address how the new addition to the Olympic Movement can work most effectively. Actively seeking the thoughts of young people is in line with the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989) and mirrors the agenda to get young people more involved in social policy discourse (Prout 2011, 11). Consequently, as stated by Sandford et al. (2011, 67), “there is growing support for providing authentic opportunities to hear young people’s voices within society, and to allow them to share their thoughts and views on matters that directly concern them”.

The data sources used for this project provide insight into the understanding of the YOG by the young athletes from Germany and Norway. Hence, they have been given a voice within this explorative research project. Due to the very specific nature of the YOG and the clearly defined age groups, it appears to be inevitable to question the young elite athletes on their opinion of the event and the perception of mediated aims and objectives. In fact, the

athletes are the only stakeholders of the YOG who can give coherent answers on the success of the twofold focus of education and high-performance with which they were confronted. As such, it was possible to contrast the educational intentions of the event with the athletes' perception. As Sugden remarks "in the context of particular social hierarchies and networks of power, it is the task of the researcher to identify, gain access to, and share as many vantage points as possible" (2005, 206). If a researcher can do this and be able to give as many insights and perspectives as possible, he/she is in a position which enables him/her to construct an interpretation which gives the most valid image of the researched and analysed area. Thus follows for this study that it is important to talk to the athletes as well as considering the stated educational goals of the IOC, as both aspects are significant for the creation of an overall representation of the YOG. Of course, this representation might not be valid from all perspectives. However, by taking into consideration as many angles as possible, an attempt is made to construct the most valid truth at this particular point in time. In addition to that, the applied framework allows the young athletes themselves to reflect on their experiences made in Singapore and Innsbruck and thereby gives other participating athletes the possibility to identify or disagree with the reflections made by the subjects in this study.

## **Methodology**

We used a qualitative approach to understand the youth athletes' experience of the 2012 Winter YOG. Data collection for the samples and analysis techniques are described below.

### ***Participants***

In total, 3517 participants from 205 nations competed in the first Youth Olympic Games in Singapore, held from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 26<sup>th</sup> of August 2010. The German National Olympic Committee sent 70 athletes to the event, who took part in 20 different sports. For this study,

eight German participants were chosen. A purposive sample was created (Strauss and Corbin 1998), attempting to include athletes from different educational backgrounds, different sports (Swimming, High Jump, Pole Vault, Sailing, Fencing, 400m Running) and with different levels of success at the YOG competitions (medal winners and non-medal winners). It is also noteworthy that the participants included the age range from 16 to 18.

Almost 1100 athletes from 70 different countries met in January 2012 at Innsbruck, Austria, and competed and shared cultural experiences for ten days. By the means of a purposeful sampling procedure (Strauss and Corbin 1998), ten Norwegian and four German athletes who competed in luge, alpine skiing, cross-country skiing, biathlon, curling, ski jumping, freestyle skiing, Nordic combined, speed skating, figure skating and ice-hockey were interviewed. The sampling took place according to four criteria: both genders were included; second, it was important to become acquainted with the athletes' experiences in as many different venues as possible; third, to interview athletes who had participated at a different number of events during YOG; and finally, both medal winners and non-winners were interviewed. As the respective IFs were in charge of the competitive program and therefore the age of competing athletes (Hanstad et al., 2013), our sample is also skewed in favour of the oldest athletes.

At this point, it is necessary to highlight that the created samples are by no means to be considered a sample of all athletes that participated at the YOG but rather samples from the German and Norwegian delegations. Accordingly, due to its explorative nature, the study did not attempt to draw conclusions that mirror the attitude of *all* participants.

### ***Interviews***

The athletes from the three samples were interviewed about their Olympic experiences after they had completed their final event. The German athletes were interviewed some months after the event in Singapore, while all the Norwegians were interviewed within a month. The

German interviews were conducted by the first author once the athletes returned home from the competition, while the Norwegian interviews were conducted by the second author at different location on their return to Norway; hence all athletes were given the opportunity to respond in their own language. The interviews were developed and conducted according to ethical guidelines and criteria stated by Patton (2002) and as per institutional ethical guidelines of both research institutions. The semi-structured interviews started with (a) general questions about the athletes' previous experiences in major competition; (b) preparation for this competitive event; (c) expectations and experiences with the combination of competition, CEP, and the innovative competitions; and (d) perceptions of the IOC global policy intentions. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. The interviews ended with the open process-feedback question: 'do you have anything else to add?' Probes and follow-up questions were used to explore further responses.

### ***Procedure and Analysis***

The interviews with the German athletes were conducted in German, and accordingly the interviews with the Norwegian athletes were conducted in Norwegian. So, when quoting the athletes, a careful translation has been made from the transcripts. We used question-focused analyses as the starting point when organizing the raw data from the 30 interviews (Patton 2002). The raw data from the interviews was analyzed, building on ideas drawn from the conceptual framework presented above. During the analysis, deductive coding took place to highlight signs of IOC policy and the athletes' perception thereof. Passages indicating aspects of perceptions of winning and the IOC intentions with the CEP activities also functioned as organizational framework. The data categorized as each of the above deductive themes constitute the basis of the results, which will be presented and discussed. Finally, the specific sport was kept out of the presentation of the data as well as nationality. That is to say, we only

focused on the athletes' opinions and meaning. The answers were aggregated to maintain anonymity, following ethical guidelines.

## **Findings and Discussion**

As outlined, the new educational policy for the young athletes is attempted mainly through the CEP. As such, by using the athletes' perceptions of the CEP as a catalyst, our findings indicate that some aspects of the CEP were not perceived favourably by athletes and coaches. While the athletes totally embraced the interaction with international peers (see Table 1), the perceptions of learning, contribution to society and celebration of the Olympic Movement were restricted to a focus on doing well. This main finding then allows us to exemplify and elaborate upon the contrast between the educational intentions of the IOC (2013) with the athletes' perception in more detail.

[\*\*\*Table 1 near here\*\*\*]

### ***“The Athletes have the Opportunity to learn about Global and Sports Topics”***

Even though the IOC has continuously emphasized the educational aspects of the YOG, this message does not resemble the athletes' perspectives after participation in the different educational activities. When asked about the different activities they took part in and which one they preferred or made the biggest impression during the youth event, “Chat with Champions” (Singapore) and “Meet the Role Models” (Innsbruck) were mentioned by more than half of the young athletes. During these sessions, current and former elite athletes talked about their career in sport but also continuously emphasized the importance of education throughout a high-performance career. Furthermore, they were positive in any form of

education related to their own future elite athletes' career. The young athletes highlighted that learning more about doping, security, how to handle weather etc., was useful and interesting knowledge conveyed through the YOG.

On the other hand, the education of cultural and global topics was downplayed because of time constraints, other priorities or simply lack of interest. When being faced with a tough competitive program, the athletes responded, "this is the only time I can compete in YOG", meaning that was the reason for coming in the first place and they used the time off to recover and prepare themselves for the upcoming athletic events to the best of their ability. This means that their total game experience became limited. Athletes with venues at a longer distance from the Olympic Village also added that their energy level for other activities were reduced as a result. For example, the athletes competing in the Sailing events in Singapore had training or competition sessions every day, which limited them in their availability to participate in the CEP. Other athletes planned to take part in a so-called "Island Adventure." However, they had to cancel it because they needed to do a television interview, in which interestingly they were only asked "about [their] success and how it feels to be an Olympian".

Prioritising the other athletes' competitions or school assignments was also mentioned as a reason for not attending the CEP. Some were able to take tests while others spent time to get on top of homework. The athletes also chose to see sports other than their own because they thought, "when will I ever have time and opportunity to be at a hockey game again?" In Innsbruck at the Congress Centre, the athletes had to walk through an exhibition area in order to eat lunch or dinner. However, if recovery was prioritised, they would leave immediately after eating due to the ten-minute shuttle ride back to the Olympic Village.

Finally, lack of interest in global issues was also a theme in the interviews. One athlete (with only one competition) remarked about the CEP activities offered in Innsbruck: "We did a lot of the activities; but maybe they [i.e., the organizers] should have reduced the activities

offered and included some we could *learn from* instead?” In other words, better planning and interesting approaches might create an interest among the athletes. Naturally, a 15-year old will most likely enjoy different activities than an 18-year old. For example, an 18-year old German athlete who participated in at the YOG in Singapore, considered the encounter with other cultures in the World Cultural Village as “rather superficial.” However, a 15-year old participant at the Winter YOG perceived the same activity as interesting, although he also “preferred to practice for the competition.” In short, many of the young athletes had a similar professional view of success and the tough choices one has to make in order to succeed as more mature athletes.

***“The Athletes have the Opportunity to contribute to the Environment and Society”***

As outlined, one of the main aims of the YOG was to teach young athletes on how to become role models for society and especially their own community – and contribute on their return. This goal is hard to reach when the educational intentions do not reach the athletes. Moreover, when asked directly, none of the participating athletes had any stories to share in this regard, and showed no awareness about spreading the Olympic values they learned within their community. Rather, one athlete said that it was now even more his aim to compete at the real Olympic Games and practice even more: “when you see all the other international athletes and how hard they work in training, it really encourages me to go even further to reach my goals.”

It was also observed that there were a lack of recycling opportunities within the Olympic Village and the extensive use of bottled water. This was considered quite a paradox when considering the IOC intentions of raising the awareness of environmental issues. It is important to learn through education from the CEP, but it was also stated that the “living experience might be even more effective as a teaching tool”. As such, learning by doing could

have contributed to a better understanding among the competing athletes – and also more to contribute with on their return.

***“The Athletes have the Opportunity to interact and build Friendship with other young People from around the World”***

In unison the young Olympians mentioned that meeting all the people from so many nations was “a once in a lifetime experience.” German athletes that participated in Singapore argued that instead of the superficial encounter with other cultures through the World Cultural Village, they preferred to start their own activities within the Youth Olympic Village. They reported about setting up table-tennis sessions with athletes from other nations and stated, “this was when I learned most about other nations and other cultures and also made many international friends that I am still in touch with.” This showed them “how simple international understanding between cultures can be.” To make it easier for them in Innsbruck, the athletes were all given a YOGGER, a USB stick which allowed athletes to exchange contact information and increase the number of ‘friends’ they had in their Facebook-like profile. As such, the dining hall in Innsbruck served as a spontaneous exchange of cultures. Similarly, all interviewed athletes were enthusiastic about the cultural mix, and the fun experience hanging out in the Village after finishing their events, etc. The informal meetings were more popular and memorable than any of the planned activities. This might have led to the more confident and extrovert athletes gained the most from the YOG-experience.

***“The Athletes have the Opportunity to celebrate the Olympic Movement and diverse Cultures of the World”***



It evolves from the described results that there is no doubt about the IOC staging a high-performance event. As a result, the learning processes intended by the IOC are organized according to the institution's performance-orientated philosophy. The implementation of important elements from the Olympic Games such as medals, the medal ceremony with the playing of the winners' national anthem,<sup>2</sup> the Olympic flame and the entering of each participating nations' flag at the Opening Ceremony, are typical signs of the performance-oriented focus (see Hanstad et al. 2013, for a comparison with the Olympic Games). The athletes confirmed this impression in the interviews: "It was so great to get the medal at the podium," and for them the YOG were mainly about competing and being successful. In particular, the older athletes uttered that success was an important part of their YOG experience.

The grandly staged Opening Ceremonies, yet another inherent part of the real Olympic Games, was often perceived as the most outstanding experience of the YOG. One athlete, who participated in the Opening Ceremony of the Singapore Games, which was staged at the "The Float@Marina Bay" floating stage in front of 27,000 spectators, argued that "to march in together with the other German athletes and behind the German flag made me feel as if I had finally made it as an elite athlete, competing for my country." At the 2012 Innsbruck YOG, the fireworks at the Closing Ceremony were something that made a huge impression on the athletes. When asked what could have been better, several simply responded "more fireworks."

Due to the existing elite sport system in which the IOC and the young athletes are situated, the IOC intended learning processes are organised according to this very system based on success and competition. Indeed, Meinberg (1995, 109) and Bette (2007, 119) argue

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<sup>2</sup> In a personal interview with Professor Dag Vidar Hanstad at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences, IOC president Jacques Rogge explained that his original plan was "to have medal ceremonies without national flags. My proposal was to have the Olympic flag, and no national flag on anthem, but I was out vetoed immediately by everyone, I received tons of mail from coaches, trainers, athletes, NOCs." Consequently, he gave up this idea as "the podium is very important for the athletes". (19.06.12).

that athletes think that they are only defined by their sporting success and lose their sense of self-worth if they are not successful. In fact, most athletes must have already accepted that they are defined by their success even before participating at the YOG due to the very competitive qualification requirements as some athletes reported. This led to debates locally in the different federations about how to best create a fair qualification system. Furthermore, there was nothing educational in the qualification processes at all, as these were entirely based on performance aspects for the athletes interviewed from Germany and Norway.

***The Athlete Perception: “It’s all about winning”***

From the above it is obvious that the young European athletes were mainly concerned with optimization of their athletic performance on behalf of the offered learning experience. Issues that may reduce their performance were perceived as stressors (Kristiansen 2015), and the importance of doing well and being successful was repetitively underlined in the interviews. Constant comparisons were made to the “real Olympic Games” and the YOG being an ideal preparation for participating in the Olympic Games (see also Hanstad et al., 2013). In particular, it was important for the young athletes to have a focused approach in the preparation of the event and whilst competing. Consequently, it is not surprising that many of the unique aspects of YOG such as particular different competition rules, new competitions and lack of normal settings for competition were almost perceived as counterproductive among the athletes. Both the traditional and the innovative events could make the athletes a champion, though “we didn’t rate it as the innovative at the same level as the original events” was admitted in the interviews among athletes from both countries.

This was also supported in an informal conversation with a team official during the Innsbruck YOG:

As I have said previously, the athletes are already within the elite sport system for several years and have to be if they ever want to become a professional athlete in their sport. They are already role models to the young people in their community; not for their behaviour outside sport but because they are successful athletes. Of course they have the task to persuade other people to participate in sport, but they are young, 15, 16 maybe 18 years old and have to learn so much about themselves first. To make them role models for society in their young age is surcharged. (Personal conversation, 01.27. 2012)

As an example of the athletes being within the elite sport system, their view of the complicated qualification process that the young European athletes had to go through in order to qualify for the YOG, may serve as an example. One German athlete reported about the qualification scheme in athletics for the 2010 Singapore YOG:

At first, it was necessary to be amongst the best athletes of your age group during the German Indoor Championships. You also had to be better than the athletes from the younger age groups were. This meant qualification for the European selection competition in Moscow. Only if you were amongst the best athletes in this competition as well, you qualified for the YOG in Singapore. However, during the competition we did not know which result would be enough to secure qualification.

Clearly, such a selection process ensured that only the most talented young European athletes that were already much involved in the elite sport system, could participate at the YOG. Also, that all sports should have similar qualification process has also been highlighted (Kristiansen, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

The results from this explorative study display that the awareness of the IOC policy change amongst the interviewed German and Norwegian participants of the YOG is low. This is a result of the high-performance setting of the YOG. The interviewed participants revealed that they do not want to break out from this setting throughout the YOG, which can be attributed to the fact that they are already incorporated into the elite sport system. Curiously, IOC member Richard Pound had voiced such critique already prior to the establishment of the event (Pound 2007). In particular, the two main goals (to learn about global topics and sport topics as well as to contribute to society) seem unrealistic if the CEP (now Learn and Share) is neither visited, nor found important by the athletes. The athletes only partly accepted the offers from it; others had simply no possibility to participate. Consequently, it appears difficult to get the educational messages across to the young athletes. In this regard it is necessary to mention that representatives of the NOCs, the team officials but also sport politicians play an important role in “translating” the purpose of the YOG. Within the framework of the undertaken study, personal communication with team officials revealed an ambiguous picture of their attitude towards the YOG. Whilst most officials downplayed the focus on winning, one official argued:

One of the issues that might be a little provocative to the IOC is that the athletes are preparing and participating in YOG because they want to become elite athletes – and they are quite committed to this goal. At their level they are elite athletes, and then we meet them with statements such as “remember this is not the Olympics” and “this is so much more than a competition.” And you sense that they feel that we do not take their effort and commitment [to become elite athletes] seriously, and they don’t get the attention they deserve for their achievements. [Thus], this is double communication. (Personal communication 02.29.2012).

Such statements were made repeatedly and are not surprising because team officials have a strong interest in the successful performances of their athletes. This gives evidence to the fact that the attempts to facilitate educational objectives in the current high-performance system are mainly lip services.

The YOG's apparent focus on the elite aspects contrasts with the claims of the IOC that its movement is based on idealistic principles with educational intentions and its commendable twofold aim of the YOG. Instead, the constant stronger emphasis on the athletic competition, which has been developed over the past 70 years, is noticeable (Beamish and Ritchie 2006). Because of this, doubts have to be raised whether it is the correct approach to transmit the educational aim via a high-performance sporting event or whether the IOC's educational efforts to overcome the dumb jack stereotype of (Olympic) athletes should be made elsewhere. In fact, the perceived emphasis on the competition may result in increasing competitiveness amongst young athletes, a critique voiced by others before (Fraser-Thomas et al. 2005). Actually, it might seem that the IOC is heading in exactly this direction. For example, the age range for competitors was changed from the initial 14-to-18 to 15-to-18 (IOC 2011, 24). This will improve the level of the competition, as many nations actually struggled to find enough athletes in the right age group (Kristiansen and Parent 2014). Yet, the exclusion of 14-year olds at the YOG is in stark contrast to the IOC's policy of combining education and sport, especially considering the results of this study that the CEP was targeted towards the younger athletes. In addition, it was actually the youngest athletes that enjoyed the educational activities the most because they are not yet as incorporated into the high-performance system.

One might argue that the combination of education and competition has been met with some resistance by the different stakeholders involved in youth competitions (Hanstad et al. 2013), the IOC included. Obviously, the elite sport aspect is also predominant if young elite

athletes participate. It seems as the IOC themselves also struggle with this aim. In publications related to the Olympic Games, the YOG are continuously referred to as *preparation* for the Olympic Games. This becomes most obvious in the celebration of the South African swimmer Chad Le Clos as a “graduate” of the Youth Olympic Games, when he took the Gold medal at the London Olympics ahead of Michael Phelps. The sporting success of the young athletes is most certainly tracked, while on the other hand there seems to be no follow-up on the educational aims and how the young athletes act in their function as “sports ambassadors in their community” (IOC 2012, 2).

When it comes to the opportunity to interact with other young athletes and celebrate the Olympic Movement, the young athletes participated enthusiastically. This opportunity did not challenge their expectations for the event, though it was not the organized meeting places that they preferred, and it was more the informal experiences that the athletes talked about in the interviews (Parent, Kristiansen and MacIntosh 2014; Krieger 2013a). This is an important result as internationalism and the peaceful exchange between cultures was one of Pierre de Coubertin’s main intentions through the staging of the Olympic Games (Loland 2014).

The strength of this investigation on the effect of the educational orientation lies in the listening to the participants of the YOG. Importantly, the German and the Norwegian athletes’ experiences point in the same direction: The competitive nature of the YOG has distracted the educational intention of the IOC and the educational initiatives get a raw deal. However, it is also important to emphasize that Norway and Germany are two highly competitive nations with very solid sport structures. This is a constraint, and we urge more attention to be paid to the direct evaluation of the learning effects of YOG by including the experiences of athletes from other nations and continents in future studies.

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**Table 1**

*Comparison between the IOC Factsheet and the benefits of CEP, athletes' perceptions and the team leaders' opinions.*

<b>IOC politics and intentions</b>	<b>Athletes</b>
Through the CEP, athletes had the opportunity to:  <b>Learn</b> about global and sports topics;	“Not time to take part in the CEP activities because of busy competitive schedule”  “If time, they chose to take part in the activities that will help them become mature elite athletes”
<b>Contribute</b> to the environment and society;	“We are here to win and compete”  “I have to rest and prepare for the next competition whenever I can”
<b>Interact</b> and build friendships with other young people from around the world; and	“What we really enjoyed was when some of our coaches got us out in the snow and we played just for fun”  “Meeting the people from all our the world has been the greatest experience”
<b>Celebrate</b> the Olympic Movement and the diverse cultures of the world.	“It is the Olympics”  “The medal ceremony was memorable”