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Youth athlete learning and the dynamics of social performance in Norwegian elite handball

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Abstract
This study examines how the social interactions of youth handball players are entangled with the ideals, beliefs and norms associated with youth athlete learning in Norwegian handball and communicated through coaching practice. This qualitative study uses Goffman's interactional sociological lens to explore how players strategically manage their interactions with peers and coaches by balancing the risks of overuse and injury with the need to be seen as promising, committed players. Our data collection was based on four focus group interviews and five individual interviews with 24 female youth handball players. The athletes reported that they conformed with the social rules and expectations of acceptable behaviour in handball because they wished to avoid being discredited in the eyes of their peers and coaches. Additionally, they engaged with these expectations through self-censorship and behavioural caution, because doing so allowed them to sustain their identity as promising athletes within the current framework of athlete development. They also feared being perceived as less committed to their development. The findings highlight how the normative expectations of youth athletes affect their sense of agency and control, the behaviours they engage in, and their understandings of what it means to be a good athlete. An understanding of how athletes perform socially in ways that facilitate opportunities for ongoing development will help to facilitate more productive, ethical and meaningful practice and pedagogies.

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Introduction

Youth sport is frequently promoted as an important context for learning that contributes to an athlete's broader development beyond sport-specific skills (Ronkainen et al., 2021). Youth athlete learning is nevertheless typically focused on individual aspects of performance, and success is measured via the acquisition and demonstration of specific skills or characteristics. This instrumental logic suggests that success is achieved when athletes fulfil specific performance goals and results (Barker-Ruchti, 2020; Bjørndal et al., 2022). However, this reasoning can be problematic given that many sports coaching and athlete development practices have been shown either to be somewhat unsuccessful, or even to have negative consequences for athletes' learning experiences, and for their health and sense of well-being (Denison et al., 2017).

Sports research has highlighted how implicit assumptions and informal rules produce certain patterns of behaviour that affect athletes' training and performance, their sense of self, and their general conduct (Larsson and Quennerstedt, 2012). When faced with the physical and mental health demands of their sport, athletes are often forced to make compromises – many are even willing to accept pain and injury as part of their 'normal' professional experience (Manley et al., 2016). To date, there has been little focus on how athlete learning is embedded within and shaped by, specific sporting cultures, and how such settings affect the agency of athletes or their behavioural interactions (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2015). In youth sport, case studies have shown that processes of socialisation, both overt and covert, contribute to the maintenance of particular social orders, and how power is exercised (e.g. Cushion and Jones, 2014). One example is how athletes are socialised from an early age, via informal and formal youth athlete development systems that focus on the imperative of continuous improvement (Kilger, 2019).

In competitive sports, peer comparison is omnipresent, and many athletes compare themselves with their peers to ensure that they retain their status and reputation as talented athletes. Necessarily, this influences how they interact with others, including with coaches who have the authority to determine and evaluate players' rankings (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2021). For some players, the experience of striving to become an elite player is meaningful, even within problematic dominant cultural values and norms (Aggerholm, 2015). For others, the desire to be seen as committed and professional may lead to unintended consequences, such as overuse and injury (Bjørndal and Ronglan, 2017), or even to them opting out of sports altogether (Bjørndal et al., 2017; Persson et al., 2019).

We believe that researchers and practitioners need to develop a deeper understanding of youth athlete learning as a dynamic, socially-embedded practice, one in which everyday social interactions are emerging responses set within socio-cultural structures. Doing so makes it easier to articulate how youth athlete learning is facilitated or constrained by codes of conduct, the classification of athletes, and the roles that are made available to

them. Social classifications, such as being recognised as a 'promising' athlete, have the potential to change the lives of players, through increased opportunities and attention. By submitting themselves to the authority of accepted athlete development and coaching practice, athletes come to embody accepted values and enact these through mutual surveillance (Barker and Bailey, 2016). Through their behaviour, athletes can also contribute to such classifications being sustained, withdrawn, or changed.

An appreciation of the diversity of socially-embedded practice and how this affects athlete development is especially important in the context of Norway because there are clear points of difference between the country's sporting and social systems and the national or academy-based programmes of other countries (Kristiansen and Houlihan, 2017). Public policy for sports within Norway, for example, is non-commercial and focuses on participation, inclusion and diversity. Further, sports participation in the country is high (three out of four children take part in a sports club in secondary school). However, there is no national system for talent identification and development, and the responsibility for athlete development rests instead with each sports association. Grassroots participation and elite sport development are typically not seen as distinct concerns within these associations but are regarded instead as part of the same wider system of sport policy and funding (Ronglan, 2014).

The youth handball context in Norway consists of training and competitions that take place in three autonomous organisational settings: team clubs, sports schools, and sports associations (including age-specific regional and national teams) (Bjørndal et al., 2015). Activities within these settings create social spaces for players to define and construct their personal and athletic learning.

This study is therefore an attempt to contribute to new knowledge surrounding athlete learning by focusing on how agency is shaped and influenced within the athlete development culture of Norwegian youth handball. We examine how the social performance of youth players is influenced by the ideals, beliefs and norms inherent in cultural practice. By reflecting on the codes of conduct that shape the classifications of players and the roles available to them, we believe we are better able to reflect upon the effects (intended and unintended) that socio-cultural structures have on everyday social interactions.

Our study begins with Goffman's theoretical exploration of how individual behaviours are reflexively managed in accordance with social conditions and the self-expectations of individuals. This provides a foundation upon which we address the study's two key aims. First, we explore the codes of conduct associated with elite handball athlete development. These (normalised) imperatives are, as we argue, reflected in the workings of the wider institutionalised social context of youth handball in Norway. We focus specifically on how the ideas, attitudes, and beliefs held by promising female youth handball players are the products of both wider socio-cultural frameworks and constraints and of individual expectations. Further, we explore how athletes use, facilitate and even resist these imperatives through strategic interactions and behaviours as they progress towards becoming elite players (Hacking, 2004).

Our second aim is to discuss how players stage-manage their interactions with others when managing the risks associated with injury or overuse. Like Olesen et al. (2020), we recognise that people can become promising players not simply because of their inherent individual capacities or skills. We argue that athlete development is shaped by the

interactions that occur constantly between people: that it is through constant, dynamic interactions and processes of change that youth players can transform into adult elite players. In the context of this study, we examine how these interactions shape and constrain the behaviours of individuals, how these interactions affect athlete learning, and how they impact their identity as promising players. In particular, we examine how these interactions affect the choices athletes make in terms of managing risk and training loads, even to the point of potentially causing harm to themselves.

Social contexts and social performances

Goffman (1963) argues that social interaction routines feel both ordinary and natural to people within established social identities (e.g. gender, social class, age). However, normative expectations regulate people within particular social categories, and it is these that facilitate a sense both of uniformity and conformity – a 'standardisation', in other words, of individual members. Those who belong to specific social categories – for example, those who in handball are described as 'talented athletes' and therefore engage in behaviours and interactions that are both regulatory and self-regulatory to achieve and sustain a sense of belonging.

Modern elite sport systems (including youth athlete development) and the associated ways of knowing and doing – the codes of conduct found within athlete development – constitute a social framework which shapes and guides the interactions that athletes have with others. However, the many relationships between players, coaches, and others in team-sport settings create a complex web of social dynamics that carry opportunities and risks. One of the risks people face in their social interactions, as Goffman (1963) reasons, is that they can be discredited by others when their conduct is perceived to be inappropriate. Goffman uses an even stronger term – *stigma* – to refer to an attribute that is particularly discrediting; one that makes an individual within the same social group different from others in far less desirable ways (Goffman, 1963). This drive to avoid such stigmatisation, he argues, is strong: people are inclined to engage in conscious impression management to avoid being perceived as non-compliant.

In the setting of youth handball, we suggest that this kind of monitoring and self-monitoring occurs constantly, for example, in the behavioural interactions of athletes during training sessions and matches, in locker-rooms, and in team journeys to match venues. Compliance is not achieved simply by athletes remaining passive or failing to voice their needs. Instead, athletes both consciously and unconsciously engage in impression management, monitoring the information they are willing to share with others (e.g. about their injuries or overuse, or levels of motivation), and minimising the behaviours that they believe others may potentially dislike.

According to Goffman (1963: 57), the challenge facing those who are in danger of becoming discreditable is how to balance the flow of information. The interactional problems, he writes, are 'to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where'. It is a delicate balancing act with potentially severe consequences because disapproval and stigmatisation can impact upon an individual's (vulnerable) perception of self, and people may come to regard themselves 'as unworthy, incomplete and inferior […] concerning [the]

known-about aspects … [that are] seen as undesirable' (Goffman, 1963: 153). In youth handball, this may lead to impaired self-efficacy, withdrawal from development opportunities, or even lead athletes to opt out of the sport entirely.

Goffman is not usually regarded as a theorist of power, but Jenkins (2008) argues that Goffman's interactional sociology offers valuable insights into what power is and how it works operationally. This power is expressed through face-to-face encounters and via mundane, everyday routines. In social situations, people search for what they perceive to be accurate reflections of reality and convey these by employing indicative actions. Doing so establishes what they believe to be a shared context of signification and action (Raab, 2019). When these processes are sustained over time, patterns emerge as power relations become more thoroughly institutionalised and visible, and further impact individuals by both enabling and constraining their efficacy and capacity (Jenkins, 2008).

The behaviours athletes display towards others shape their prospects for success or failure, and in the pressurised world of elite sports, individuals need to be perceived as cooperative and promising players. By examining the attitudes and behaviours of handball athletes, we intend to facilitate an understanding of the constraints that players place upon themselves through normalised expectations. We hope, too, to offer potential insights into how broader institutionalised pressures shape when, how and why athletes engage in strategic impression management.

Methods

This case study of female youth handball players (aged 17 to 19 years) examines players' experiences of the athlete development culture of Norwegian youth handball. Players in this age range were selected because upper secondary school education is a critical formative period for youth, academic and sports development. The study examines their reflections on athlete development, and how they perceive themselves in this development culture. All participants were provided with verbal and written information about the study, and their informed consent was submitted electronically. Participants were informed that their responses would be available only to the research team, would not be given to their coaches or respective sport schools, that their participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw their consent at any time. Ethical approval was granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (reference number 407930) and the Ethics Review Board of the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences.

Participants and procedures

We purposefully sampled a group of 24 female handball players, of whom 19 participated in focus group interviews and five participated in individual interviews. These two methods of interview data gathering complemented each other and ensured that we were able to explore both collective and individual experiences.

All the players we interviewed were recruited from clubs that are recognised for their youth athlete development programmes. We asked the coaches at the schools to help us to recruit participants strategically for the focus groups so that different levels of

performance would be represented. Specifically, we included players who had experience at various performance levels in club-, school-, and association-based activities (from Under-18 teams to the adult elite level). Importantly, the players we selected for our study were skilled and committed youth players, but not elite players *per se*. We also aimed to recruit participants who, in the phraseology of (Haraldsen et al., 2020: 119), varied in terms of whether they were 'thriving, striving, or just surviving'.

The players we recruited all attended specialised sport school programmes: these ranged from broad-based player development to youth international team experience, and from clubs that aimed explicitly to produce elite handball players. In contrast, the five players who took part in the individual interviews were all recruited from the same club because of time and availability constraints. Players who took part in the individual interviews were recruited by the first author, and it was assumed by both authors that these individuals would provide valuable analytical insights.

All the interviews were semi-structured, conducted by the first author, undertaken in Norwegian, audio recorded, and then transcribed into English. The focus group discussions had three main themes: (a) the idealised characteristics of a 'promising' player, (b) the dominant norms and attitudes in handball, and (c) the regulation of training loads in relation to the ideals, norms, and attitudes within handball. We adapted the interview guides further during the data collection process to allow us to deepen our accumulated insights. The focus group interviews lasted 90–120 min and were conducted in classrooms at the participants' schools.

The responses in the focus group interviews prompted both authors to proceed with additional individual interviews because we believed that these could offer further additional insights into how athletes perceived themselves and their roles as handball players. Issues of particular interest in the individual interviews included: how the athletes performed and stage-managed their roles as players, and how their desire to sustain their roles as athletes affected how they managed their training loads. The individual interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were conducted at the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences in Oslo, Norway.

To ensure participant confidentiality, and to distinguish clearly between the participants in the focus groups and those in the individual interviews, different identifying systems were used. All the participants from the individual interviews were given pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. Those in the focus groups are identified by the letters A to D, and each group participant was assigned a group number. All the participants were offered the opportunity to read the transcripts, and to discuss and correct the citations.

Data analysis

The initial data analysis used an open coding approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). In our second cycle coding, we applied a constant comparative analysis strategy to compare concepts. This enabled us to identify similarities and differences between them and to develop initial data and thematic categorisations (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Comprehensive memo writing also formed a key part of the analytical process. Our discussions, as authors, enabled us to refine our main categories and themes, and the theoretical concepts of Goffman provided a means for us to reflect analytically on the study data.

The knowledge and experience which inform this research are rooted in a collective total of more than 25 years of playing and coaching youth and elite handball. Over time, these experiences have sensitised us to the nuances of the study material we have worked on. In the context of this study, our experience has enabled us to understand more deeply, for example, the relevance of the theoretical concepts we have utilised, and their explanatory relevance to the world of elite sport. Nevertheless, we have also been attentive to the importance of sustaining sufficient analytical distance and to examining our implicit assumptions and embedded perspectives, which could otherwise have potentially limited our insights and interpretations.

Results

This section is divided into two parts: the first examines how the cultural *code of conduct* of Norwegian youth handball impacts on players and affects their behaviours and the decisions they make. In this first section, we examine how this code of conduct affects players' decisions related both to their training load management and to their development. In the second section, we focus on how and why players attempt to manage risk and injury. We seek to understand how players learn, rationalise, and display particular attitudes, beliefs and behaviours during the process of becoming talented handball players, even when such utilitarian and seemingly rational choices have potentially negative consequences for them.

Living up to the handball code of conduct: Social identity and development

The processes associated with becoming an elite handball player are defined, normalised, and reproduced by those who participate in the culture of elite sport. These include coaches and the elite players themselves, and those working for the institutions that support them. One of the players we interviewed noted that many young players look up to established elite players and regard the behaviour of senior players as a template of what is required to achieve success.

Goffman's insights draw our attention to how coaches try to sway social interaction routines by verifying, through normative expectations, what kinds of behaviours, actions, and attributes in the sport are either appropriate or undesirable. Coaches in elite handball are experts who have far more experience than players: in their interactions with players, they convey multiple expectations and, in so doing, both support players, and also reflect and perpetuate the desired codes of conduct in handball. Some players, such as Silje, noted the importance of constructive verbal feedback and the reinforcement it provided: '[The coach] is very good at giving feedback on effort and attitude because he genuinely appreciates these values'. At other times, the expectations of the coaches were communicated more forcefully through direct action:

> When I participated in the Norwegian Handball Federation's Talent Programme, the coaches sent a player home, a player who was one of the better [ones], because she dropped the physical training and avoided it throughout the training… They sent her home, even though she was

> much better in terms of her skill level than many others who were there. (Camilla, individual interview)

It became clear in the interviews that many players believed that their coaches occupied positions of significant power in elite handball. While most players respected the expertise of the coaches and largely trusted their decisions, they also recognised that coaches did not necessarily always make ideal decisions. In Group D's discussion, for example, the players reflected on their expectations and uncertainties related to how coaches guided them concerning load regulation:

> Participant 3: I think, as well, there is a lot about the role. That you, in a way, believe that the coach knows. I do think my coach knows absolutely everything.
>
> Participant 4: The coach is somehow God…
>
> Participant 3: When I had a lot of handball sessions a week, I thought that 'The coaches know what they are doing' […], so I sort of just thought, 'let's go!'. It was not until someone confronted me and told me it was too much. So, I kind of feel like they do not always know best.

During the study, it was evident that the code of conduct among ambitious Norwegian youth handball players was focused on self-optimisation through a commitment to continuous development and improvement. One participant from Group C noted that in her team:

> It's about getting better, and you don't come to practice because you want to have fun or because you need something to do in your spare time. You come [to practice] to play handball. (Group C, Participant 5)

Players focused on developing and mastering their skills because they wanted recognition, both from their coaches and from their peers. Their actions, in other words, were more than simply the result of processes of self-improvement: they were also performative acts that relied on the recognition of others. For some players, this striving for recognition became a source of stress:

> When I started my freshman year [in a secondary school elite sports programme], I felt that very much because I hadn't trained that much in my club. And then I thought: 'Shit, everybody's training so much!', and you get a little stressed because of that. […] I maybe felt that… maybe not that I wasn't good enough, but that I didn't train enough. And perhaps others would then experience more development than me. (Group B, Participant 1)

The players largely understood development to be a linear, continuous, and progressive process. Development, for them, was measurable and visible, and something that could be controlled, planned and kept on the 'right' path. This became clear particularly when the participants spoke about the *amount* of training that was required to become an elite player. Some participants, such as Nora, assumed that her development would increase linearly in proportion to the amount of training she undertook: 'How will you

become better than the others if you just do the same?' Nora observed. 'I was very concerned about how I had to train the most to become the best'.

Some players perceived that being able to endure and tolerate high volumes of training was the key to becoming a promising player. For them, this reflected a commitment to athletic development and was about being recognised as a serious player. In addition, as Silje noted, displaying a higher level of tolerance offered benefits: 'Yes, it is status to do a lot of training and that it goes well, in a way'. Conversely, not being able to cope with high training loads carried the risk of stigma:

> I had a friend [in the elite sports school programme] who was home for three months because she had hit the wall. She couldn't take it anymore. It is very easy for those who have not been in that position to label them as weak. […] It's very easy to think: 'Why don't you just pull yourself together? It is difficult to speak up when you are mentally exhausted'. (Nora, individual interview)

Players compared themselves regularly to others to see how much training others were doing. This helped them, they believed, to stay within, or above, the expected norms. The players acknowledged that multifactorial influences, such as participating in multiple competitions and training settings, and the lack of coordination between coaches could create situations in which the training loads were extreme. Despite this, many of those in Group A, for example, admitted that being unable to achieve comparable amounts of training felt to them like a personal failure:

> Participant 1: […] the coaches tell us that we can reduce the activities and/or intensity if we have a tough week and always remark that we control the load yourselves However, I don't feel like I can sit back.
>
> Interviewer: What does that mean then? If one sits down? If you cannot handle the load?
>
> Participant 1: Then you are in poor physical form.
>
> Participant 5: It's like everyone else can do it, so why shouldn't you?

Those in Group B reported similar attitudes towards players who did not comply with the normative expectations:

> Participant 2: The bad attitudes we look down on. It's [seen as] evasion or that one doesn't take handball seriously, I feel.
>
> Participant 1: Yes, or training in general.
>
> Participant 2: It's okay that you don't want to train but you must have a charisma that shows differently.

Living up to the handball code of conduct: Compliance and risk

The physical demands of handball and the stresses caused by participating in multiple club-, school- and association-settings meant that injuries among the athletes we interviewed were relatively common. Despite this, players observed that they felt that they were failing both themselves and their colleagues whenever they were unable to keep pace. Despite this personal sense of failure, the pressures of their training environment also made them prejudiced against those who experienced multiple periods of injury. Players who sustained injuries, for example, were seen as potentially irresponsible or undisciplined. Many believed that it was the individual players who were ultimately responsible for the injuries that they sustained, without acknowledging or recognising that such injuries were sometimes the consequence of systemic expectations or pressures. In our discussions, the players emphasised that they believed that multiple instances of injury were often the consequence of incorrect training (either too little or too much) or because players were undertaking poor quality training. They acknowledged, too, that such assumptions could make the playing environment feel judgemental:

> Yeah, it can be very much like, ‘Oh, you are injured all the time, that probably means that you don’t do your strength training’. I feel like people are quick to trash talk [the injured players] and say things like ‘Yeah, she is injured but can blame herself!’. And that creates an environment where it is not okay to be injured. (Nora, individual interview)

Players shared a common belief that effective development was possible, and injuries were avoidable *if* they applied the correct strategies and structured their training appropriately. As Participant 2 in Group B explained: ‘I would say … that the best players are those who train in a structured way. And those who are good at training what they’re supposed to without overloading oneself’. The athletes believed that the enforcement of clear, structured training regimes could prevent players from experiencing health problems, but then when injuries or health problems occurred, it was up to the individual players to act responsibly and to train ‘correctly’. In other words, it was the players themselves who were ultimately responsible for their rehabilitation, and their success or failure.

Close monitoring by coaches enabled some players to be more reflective about the appropriateness of their training loads and led to them adopting more responsible behaviours. Participant 3 in Group D believed that her coach’s detailed involvement, for example, had had a positive effect on her: ‘The fact that [the coach] programmed my training week, resulted in me learning to think twice before I just went to practice, in a way. That I had to control the load myself as well’. Complying with a training plan, for her, became a strategic behaviour, and a way to ensure that others recognised her as a structured and responsible athlete.

However, close monitoring and support also had unintended, undesired consequences because it placed additional pressure on players. Silje, for instance, reflected on how the development of an individual plan by her coach left her feeling even more constrained:

> I was thinking it was essential to follow the plan and that the week will be like ticking off boxes. But then comes the next day and you kind of feel like your body need to rest, but you push yourself anyway. Because you think you will look weak, that you cannot cope with being tired, that you are a person unable to push yourself. (Silje, individual interview)

Although stigmatisation was not inevitable, the risk of becoming discreditable in the eyes of others, prompted many players to comply or else engage in conscious impression management. Sometimes, players who were seen as important to a team's performance were allowed to adapt their club training schedules and therefore felt less compelled to engage in compromising impression management. However, despite the risks, others felt that saying no to opportunities offered by coaches, such as practising with the senior elite team was stressful because they feared that not doing so would make them seem less committed:

> I feel like many people take that offer because they feel like if they do not … it will not happen again. After all, in a way, you give the impression that you are not so motivated, even if you probably are. (Group C, Participant 5)

Players controlled their behaviours and their decision-making in purposeful and performative ways so that they could satisfy their self-expectations and achieve social approval:

> I must give a good impression then, by training the extra session, so that I get a little better. I asked myself, do I do it for myself or do I do it for others? And then I kind of realised that the extra session maybe is not because I am so strongly motivated, but it is maybe because I present myself more favourably if I do it. (Silje, individual interview)

Success was inextricably intertwined with the players' understanding of themselves and their identities: 'I would play [no matter what]. It's what you want. It's what you work for' [Group D, Participant 3]. Another commented:

> I feel like I am failing myself, and that I am seen as 'she who is always injured'. That is not how I want to be recognised. I want to be identified as 'The handball player', not as the one who always sits in the stands because she cannot train, and cannot play matches. For me, it is more about [what I think about] myself than what others think of me. (Group A, Participant 5)

If players become trapped in a negative cycle of expectations and demands, the consequence could be a personal sense of failure. The effects of this could be cumulative and exhausting: one player had even begun to doubt her desire to pursue a career in elite handball.

For many, exhibiting a high level of training tolerance was a rational and performative solution to the expectations which were placed upon them and potential development opportunities. In the youth international team, athletes had heard stories of coaches who selected players based on how much training tolerance they displayed, and how coaches rewarded positive attitudes and behaviours with opportunities to practice

upwards. As Nora explained: 'The eye of the needle is narrow […] regarding who is allowed to practice with the senior elite team. You do have to show the attitudes that correspond with the coaches' preferences'. Many of those we interviewed had experienced similar selection biases themselves.

> Participant 5: Some players get deselected because they fail to carry through a training camp or if they always get injured, they (would) rather select players who can do it.
>
> Participant 3: Yes! Because they need to be able to push through and endure and … really tolerate the [high] training load. Because if you cannot tolerate the training load then you cannot continue to get selected either.
>
> Participant 2: And if you cannot cope, because they focus very much on championships, and if you don't tolerate the week that we're away [on training camp], then they [the coaches] think that: 'Then you will at least not be able to tolerate/cope with a two-week championship'. This is often what I think goes on in the coach´s head.

Players recognised that committing to an identity as an elite player influenced their decision-making strongly and added to the pressure of managing their responses to conflicting pressures. One of the players described the simultaneous allure of wanting to take part and the fear of feeling unable to say no:

> I had just played four matches and was, like, dead tired. Then I had to go to handball practice the next day. I came home crying and was utterly exhausted. […] It was hard to say no to the Premier League team because it was at the very beginning of the season, and I had not practised with them so often, so I wanted to take part in everything. […] I thought that if I had said no then, I would not be allowed to practice with them anymore. Then I was like "Yes, I will come!". And I should not have come at all. (Group D, Participant 3)

The ethos of putting their team first remained strong despite the associated pressures and risks:

> I want to perform, and I do not want to disappoint the coach. I guess I feel it is mandatory. […] I find it very difficult to say no when I have a central role in the team. I felt that if I do not show up, I disappoint the team. (Group D, Participant 3)

Players needed not only to be *willing* to train intensively but also to be *seen* to be willing to train hard. Doing so would enable them to be recognised, they hoped, by their peers and coaches as promising, positive and reliable players who were serious about their development. It meant, too, that they could demonstrate that they were players who were able to live up to the required code of conduct. Their seriousness and dedication were therefore also conveyed through disciplined approaches to additional non-sport specific training:

> If there's someone who shies away from strength training and just trains the handball sessions that they are obliged to, then I don't look at the person as someone as serious as those who train

> properly. This shows that it's not only what you do on the court that matters most. (Camilla, individual interview)

In some situations, players admitted to considering what information they should *not* share, as a way of avoiding being discredited by their peers and coaches. Ida was one of the few participants in our study who told us that she no longer wished to become an elite player and that she felt unable to express this to others. For her, sharing such information was risky within a culture in which players were expected to do everything in their power to become the best. She believed that an admission of how she felt could potentially discredit her:

> I don't speak up about not having such great ambitions about adult elite handball and things like that. I do not tell everyone, because then it sounds like I do not want to [be here]. I want to, but I just don't… I don't think that's the goal. But I want to give my best efforts in training. (Ida, individual interview)

No one we interviewed wanted to be perceived by others as having a poor work ethic, and the consequence of this was that many waited too long before reporting health issues. This, as Camilla explained, presented a dilemma: 'You do not want to speak up about all the little things all the time, which in the beginning are trivial things. But suddenly, it becomes consequential, and then you should have said something earlier'.

Camilla emphasised that the risks associated with making changes to a training load depended, in part, on a player's social status:

> I think it is much easier to ask for time off when you have proven that I am not someone who avoids hard work. I want to train, but sometimes it is a bit too much. If I had played in a new club, I think I would have had a much higher threshold to ask for time off.

In contrast, players who felt that they already had a lower social status were generally more anxious about reporting injuries or illnesses. In one of the group discussions, an athlete noted: 'Even if I have been sick and sent [the coach] a text message, I feel like [she or he] will think that I just do not want to come to training today'. (Group C, Participant 5)

Players who shared information about personal injuries or illness less frequently were generally shown more acceptance when they did speak up. However, it was common for those who reported injuries more frequently to be met with scepticism. These varying reactions seemed often to sway athletes between two behavioural extremes:

> You're sort of having two types of people, where one jumps and throws herself in and lands on her knee, gets hurt every time, and, in a way, whines and has pain in that knee twice a week in every handball session. Then there's the other one who never complains, and if that person gets hurt, then maybe you take that person a little more seriously. So you don't 'cry wolf', in a way. (Group B, Participant 4)

The players in our study wanted to be seen as positive and engaged, as people who were keen to exercise and constantly willing to improve. This meant, however, that the pressures of their extensive training, risk of injury, and overuse had to be endured. Ultimately, their behaviour became a form of deliberate impression management: strategic and performative acts that were undertaken because they wanted to achieve success.

Discussion

Goffman's interactional sociological lens facilitates an understanding of how responsibility for development in handball is individualised and expressed through personal acts of behavioural management, as athletes adapt to the pressures they face, and strive to be seen as positive and cooperative role models. This suggests that an instrumental focus on training *quantity* reflects a narrow understanding of what youth athlete learning should ultimately be about. It suggests further that the problematic norms of sports are communicated through social pressures, experienced by athletes, and perpetuated through individualised caution, denial, or even self-censorship. Such self-expectations are highly likely to negatively affect the health and well-being of athletes.

Individualised athlete development

Our analysis revealed several ways in which the complex interactions between players and coaches reflected a broader lack of awareness of how systemic factors shape the (sometimes inappropriate) ways in which athletes manage their training loads.

Training quantity and quality *are* important contributing factors that shape players' development and transform them from promising youth players into future elite athletes. However, the interviews revealed a remarkable uniformity in the opinions of the players about the quantity and purpose of their training, the quality of the training, and athlete learning.

The players we interviewed believed, for example, that their development was best managed in an instrumental and rationalistic fashion. Many spoke of their self-reflective efforts to attain improvement, and about how they sought to shape their development and well-being through carefully staged acts of performance management. To them, the behaviours they exhibited needed to be those that they believed 'proper' athletes should demonstrate. Being seen as a serious, committed and disciplined athlete required continuous strategic impression management of their day-to-day interactions.

The choices made by the players were, ultimately, utilitarian and rationalistic performative acts, adapted to satisfy each player's self-expectations and those of her peers and coaches. These behaviours did not, however, necessarily benefit the players, because they were underpinned by erroneous understandings of development as a process that is both controllable and linear. These ideas were perceived to be legitimate within the Norwegian context, and were accepted by the players as fair, objective and even morally benign.

This strongly suggests that the intellectual terrain of athlete development has been captured largely by what is, in our view, an unfortunate dominant mode of thought, in which individualised responsibility for development and performance are central. Coaches are

experts, but when the responsibility for change or risk falls upon individual athletes, this suggests that relations of power that underpin youth athlete development practices need to be further problematized.

Further, this focus on athlete development is problematic because such thinking does not fully reflect the complexity that characterises holistic human development processes in sports. A focus on 'developmentalism' (Morss, 1996) is associated with a stronger focus on mastery and development (rather than performance) but does not necessarily result in more effective and appropriate athlete development. As empirical studies have shown, an excessive focus on development can also impact the motivation of athletes if they are unable to keep pace with the sporting development of their peers (Ojala, 2021; Skrubbeltrang et al., 2016).

Goffman's research focuses on individuals within specific locations and institutional settings who enter into or decline social relations with other people, and who try to manage the way they are perceived by others through behavioural adaptations. However, as Hacking (2004) argues, Goffman's approach does not focus on how institutions and practices come into being, or the nature of their formative structures. Goffman's analysis, as he therefore suggests, could be complemented by a Foucauldian sensitivity regarding 'systems of thought'. This would provide an additional analytical focus that would enable an examination of the preconditions necessary for the creation and shaping of institutions and the factors that affect institutional change. A Foucauldian analysis of athlete development practices in Norway is beyond the scope of this paper, but this complementary perspective sensitises us to how individuals manage their identities as talented athletes, and the behavioural performance management strategies they exhibit. Contextual awareness is important because, as several previous studies have shown, athlete development and self-awareness are shaped within organisational settings such as collegiate sports, professional football academies and state-led sports systems (see, for example Hatteberg, 2018; Lee and Corsby, 2021; Parker and Manley, 2017).

Stigma and social pressure

Understanding the complex dynamics between self-expectations and social pressures is crucial to know how and why athletes manage their behaviours in the ways that they do. This is especially important in the field of athlete development where social navigation is shaped by the asymmetrical nature of coach-athlete relationships, and where the relationships that athletes have with other organisational actors involved with athlete development (such as talent development selection programmes, international competitions, etc.) are shaped by power imbalances (Barker-Ruchti and Tinning, 2010).

The decisions made by the players in this study were especially complex concerning training load management and injury management. However, applying the analytical lens of Goffman's theories of stigma enables us to understand more clearly how the desire to avoid being discredited can drive athletes to stay silent about their health problems, even to the point of avoiding conversations about their own cumulative, painful, but less visible injuries.

Players wanted to be selected to match squads and to be given opportunities to practice upwards to higher levels of competition. To achieve this goal, they were cautious about

adjusting their training loads too often or drawing attention to their injuries or ailments because they feared that doing so could lead to them being seen as less committed, or even unmotivated. They chose, instead, to engage in behavioural impression management and were reluctant to discuss their concerns and attitudes with others.

This is not to suggest that their strategic impression management efforts in handball were simply a matter of making ‘either/or’, bilateral choices – in other words, about definitively deciding whether they should be entirely open or entirely closed about what to share. Instead, as their responses suggested, their strategic impression management consisted of a series of symbolic, performative acts that helped to sustain their desired image of being seen as promising and committed. Decisions to stay silent were governed by conscious social choices, not by neglect or a lack of awareness of the psychological or physical issues that preoccupied them.

Several recent studies on Norwegian youth and elite sports have suggested that the coaching leadership in sport and performance development in Norway is rooted in cultural values associated with the Scandinavian welfare states, which include egalitarianism, democratic involvement, collaboration and athlete-centred approaches (Erikstad et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2021; Hemmestad and Jones, 2019). The less structured and less commercialised context of Norwegian youth sport could be expected to provide more opportunities for athlete-centred practices than the elite sport or academy-based programmes found in other countries. However, our findings suggest that neoliberal discourses of individualism, effectiveness and competition are so strong in high-performance cultures that these can transcend cultural differences and political contexts, such as those specific to Norway.

Stigma: Strategies of deception, concealment, and openness

The interview we conducted with the players in this study, and our knowledge of coaching practices, does not lead us to conclude that the coaches and others within organisational disciplinary bodies engage consciously in controlling behaviour when supervising youth athlete development. However, those normalising practices and behaviours that the players *did* attempt to conform to effectively limited their autonomy and agency. Scott (2010: 221) calls responses like these a form of ‘performative regulation’ – a behaviour change that ‘occurs where groups of people submit themselves to the authority of an institution, internalize its values and enact them through mutual surveillance in an inmate culture’.

In our interviews, we found no examples of players who tried to resist such dominant practices by ‘playing the system’ – in other words, by bending the rules or manipulating others. Of course, our inability to detect such manipulations may be due to the limitations of our research methods, or it may be evidence that the athletes’ performative repertoires were themselves limited by wider institutional rhetoric (Dawson, 2017).

Some scholars who have drawn upon the theories of Goffman and Foucault have noted that while coaching practices often explicitly emphasise the importance of athlete’s empowerment, the reality is that these often do so in ways that subordinate athletes and enforce the disciplinary control of coaches (e.g. Dawson, 2017; Denison et al., 2017; Manley et al., 2016; Williams and Manley, 2016). Concealment, therefore,

within such settings, can be understood as something preferable to social discreditation, or the risk of being subject to the disapproval of peers and coaches.

Importantly, such behaviours stand in contrast with those documented in studies of other performance contexts, even where peer and coach monitoring is constant. In classical ballet, for example, less experienced dancers have been found to voice their concerns instead of remaining silent about their pain. Speaking up, in this other setting, is regarded favourably and seen as part of the process of realising a person's identity as a dancer (Whiteside and Kelly, 2016). This suggests that what is considered to be a virtue in one setting may be a stigma in another. It suggests further, that to develop as a 'promising athlete' in handball, players are required to demonstrate their right to belong and to justify their presence in ways that may not always be of benefit to them.

Coaches act as gatekeepers and distributors of resources and opportunities (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2021): they steer, manage and frame the organisational realities of athletes. The strategic impression management that handball players engage in can therefore also be understood as a survival response in the context of athlete development – a strategic way to ensure that athletes can compete more effectively for attention and opportunities. The players in our study were subject to constant monitoring by their coaches and peers, including their ability to withstand training loads, the attitudes they expressed, and the feelings they conveyed. Few had opportunities to establish a relationship of trust with their coaches, especially in the formal talent development training camps, and this further exacerbated the intensity and strain of their strategic impression management. This suggests as Denison et al. (2017: 777) claim, that 'for coaches to truly coach in holistic ways and not just pay lip service to this idea, they will need to destabilize specific relations of power present in their everyday practices that can make athletes docile' – even within the culturally-specific context of Norway.

Conflicting expectations made it difficult, too, for the players to maintain a coherent understanding of what it is to be a good athlete, and what it meant to be 'good enough'. We contend that if athletes are allowed to be supported in ways that encourage more autonomous engagement, they could potentially follow career paths that are more sustainable and sustaining. The findings in this study raise concerns about the opportunities currently available to athletes who wish to engage in meaningful improvement and participation. They also highlight the necessity of examining both the explicit and implicit limitations placed upon youth athletes in elite sports. If the expectations associated with athlete development are too narrowly and normatively defined, the opportunities within such systems will remain limited.

Concluding thoughts

This study has shone a light on youth athletes' voices and how the taken-for-granted norms of sport impact the participation, performance and especially the development of players. It has demonstrated how an understanding of the social framework of athlete development, and how it is interpreted and enacted by players, can help to expand an understanding of how to improve athlete learning and experiences in ways that extend beyond only skill-learning and adaptation.

It has focused, too, on how youth athletes try to sustain their roles as promising players within the context of Norwegian handball, and how their social performances are shaped

by an intricate web of interactions and decision-making. Our study showed how handball provides many meaningful experiences for athletes. However, the positive developmental benefits of handball were dependent on a material and cultural context that sometimes prevented athletes from developing a more healthy and balanced view of their participation in sport and their development as athletes.

Our results show that even in Norwegian coach education programmes, so-called athlete-centred approaches and autonomy-supportive practices do not provide sufficient agency for athletes and can constrain opportunities for athlete learning. A shift is therefore needed towards more supportive approaches that allow coaches to learn and apply more positive interpretations of successful athlete development, and to offer less pressured development experiences. A focus on existential learning, for example, as Ronkainen et al. (2020) show, can broaden athlete learning by focusing attention on learner-led informal processes. Such forms of learning are not necessarily directly related to athletic skills development but are, nevertheless, valuable ways to build broader critical awareness and an openness to experience.

Goffman's interactional sociological lens, as we have demonstrated, offers valuable conceptual insights into how social interactions facilitate and constrain athlete development within existing institutionalised power relations. In particular, it aided a deeper understanding of the social performances of youth athletes in handball and showed how strategic impression management in handball is both a personal and public reaction that athletes use to sustain their image as promising players. The players we interviewed chose willingly to comply with the social rules and expectations of acceptable behaviour, through censorship, self-denial, and caution, because they feared that doing otherwise would lead to them being seen as less committed to their development, or be discredited in the eyes of both their peers and coaches. Doing so also allowed them to sustain their identity as elite players within the current social framework of athlete development.

We have demonstrated the value of investigating elite athlete development and coaching through a broader understanding of the social forces that shape decision-making and practice. Attention must now continue to focus on the dynamics of the social performances of athletes. Understanding how athletes think, feel, and react to the sports opportunities that shape them will help to facilitate more productive, ethical, and meaningful practice and pedagogies. It will also enable coaches to become more acutely aware of the social relations that influence their coaching praxis and determine which forms of athlete learning are regarded as accepted and acceptable.

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