



# Norwegian Children's Rights in Sport and Coaches' Understanding of Talent

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## Abstract

Little research has focused on and tried to understand the link between children's participation in sports and their human rights. In Norway, children's leisure athletics and sports participation are regulated through rules of sport (CRS), voted in the Executive Board of the Norwegian Olympic and Paraolympic Committee and Confederation of Sports ("Idrettstinget"). The CRS represent formal legislation rooted in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, binding for all Norwegian sport coaches in their work with children until the age of 13. This qualitative study investigates coaches' views of talent and talent development, and examines their views in the children's rights perspective. The study is based on interviews with eight professional coaches in football (soccer), gymnastics, swimming and skiing. In important areas the coaches' views are consistent with children's rights; however, there are also coaches who speak out in violation of the rights.

## Keywords

Convention on the Rights of the Child – children's rights in sports – coaches – policy development for youth athletics – talent

## Introduction

As emphasised by Paulo David (1999, 2005), little research has focused on and tried to understand the human rights dimensions of youth sports. The study investigates this understudied aspect of human rights and sport; namely, coaches' views of talent and talent development in a children's rights perspective. This is an important research avenue, as the opinions of coaches may have a significant effect on young athletes' development and continued sport involvement. Research on talent in sports has often focused on the athlete (De Bosscher *et al.*, 2010) and less the coaches who contribute to the development of sport talents.

The change from amateurism to professionalism in the 1970s with an increasing focus on top performances in sport had dramatic consequences for many children, because often, the pursuit of young sports talents became viewed as an important prerequisite for top athletic performances (David, 2005). Whilst winning at any cost may be an important aim among many coaches, parents and spectators, this adult perspective can be in conflict with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) (the Convention, CRC) which is ratified by all members of the United Nations except the USA (Urinboyev, Wickenberg and Leo, 2016).

As acknowledged in 2014 by the International Institute of Human Rights (Council of Europe, 2014), sport is today a prism through which human rights issues are brought into public and global debate. Very different perspectives on human rights questions are brought into focus through sport, for example attitudes towards disability, gender equality, diversity among players, the gap between rich and poor, doping, and the slavery-like treatment of workers preparing for the Qatar World Cup.

In her recent work, Eliasson (2015) draws on two evident human rights problems that emerge from the sport literature in regard to children's participation: children's rights are violated in sport, and children have a subordinated position relative to adults in the sport context. Violence and abuse of athletic children in the name of their sports is relatively widespread (Eliasson, 2015). This is a broad and complex issue that comprises sexual and emotional abuse from parents and coaches, bullying, and human trafficking of minors in European professional football leagues (Unicef, 2010). The pressure to perform can be too much. Systems to safeguard the well-being of children are generally not yet embedded in the sport context (Unicef, 2010).

Although there are no direct references to sports included in the Convention, the rights are applicable in the context of sports. The Convention can play an important role in preventing and combating unacceptable sport-related

abuses, for example by awareness about violations of children's rights at the ground level. According to CRC, article 3, the best interests of the child must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. Article 3 is defined as a guiding principle (United Nations, 1989); and the best interests of the child or youth should accordingly be a guiding principle for sport coaches. Because of its explicit focus on "the best interest of the child", the Convention is regarded as a revolutionary document (Urinbojev, Wickenberg and Leo, 2016). Also many other articles of the 54 articles of the Convention are of direct relevance to children practising sports. For the purpose of this study we have primarily limited the scope to an additional four articles: Parental guidance and the child's evolving capacities (article 5); Children's right to express their views in all matters concerning the child, which is also defined as a guiding principle (article 12); The aims of education: Developing a child to his or her fullest potential (talent development) (article 29); and Children's right to leisure, play and culture (article 31). The vision of citizenship of children is clearly reflected in article 12 of the Convention. Whilst traditionally, children have been considered to be passive objects of socialisation and training, in order to respect children's citizenship, adults need to acknowledge children's capacity to participate in shaping their everyday lives and include them as active social partners (Bacon and Frankel, 2014).

Bacon and Frankel (2014) state that the authorities have obligations to enact children's rights; however, the Convention allows flexibility for governments to find ways around them. Importantly, therefore, the Convention was included in the Norwegian Human Rights Act in 2003 (Tollånes *et al.*, 2007; Thuen, 2008). The Human Rights Act thus incorporates the Convention into national law and, in the event of a conflict between domestic law and human rights conventions, the latter shall prevail. Moreover, Norway is the only country in the world where children's sports are formally regulated also by the 'Children's Rights in Sport' and 'Provisions on Children's Sport' (CRS) (NIF, 2007). The CRS state the values regarded as fundamental to the establishment of children's athletics and sports in Norway. These regulations on sports were adopted in 2007 and make clear references to the Convention.

In this study, the coaches' understanding of talent and talent development is examined in the light of the Convention and the CRS. The CRS regulations are a premise for activities in the field of sports and are legally binding for all Norwegian sports coaches in their work with children up to the age of 13. A similar human rights commitment has been made by other non-state actors: such as Save the Children and other humanitarian and development organisations – NGOs. It should be noted that the use of the phrases "formally regulated" and

“formal, national regulations” could give the impression that the CRS rules have been passed by the Norwegian Parliament, and that they are binding as such. In the field of sport, however, a distinction has to be made between national legal regulations passed by the authorities and the rules of sport, which are voted by the Executive Board of the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF, in Norwegian: “Idrettstinget”). To what extent any violations of the CRS rules should and could be sanctioned were questions in focus as late as June 2015 when the CRS were revised. The national sports federations/NIF can impose fines on those who are found to have violated these regulations. For a sports club the amount is up to NKR 500.000 (EUR 50.000) and fines can reach up to NKR 50.000 (EUR 5,000) for individuals, for instance a coach (Norwegian Association of Sport [Norges Idrettsforbund] (NIFb, 2015)). In other words, the regulations are backed by the risk of financial sanctions.

The understanding of the child as a subject is central in the Convention (1989) and this understanding is also clearly reflected in the CRS. Both documents elaborate that children, by reason of their physical and mental maturity level, need special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection. Also the CRS regulations (NIF, 2007) stress the best interests of the child, with a great emphasis on values such as safety, friendship, and well-being, expressed, for example, in the following statement: ‘Children are engaged in sports because they enjoy it. Together with their friends they have experiences and learn lessons that will last them a lifetime. This is the foundation that all coaches, managers and parents must safeguard and develop further.’

The explicit objectives of the CRS are to contribute to ensure the following: (a) That sport activities are organised according to the children’s needs and that all children are included in the sports clubs regardless of their ambitions and needs; (b) That activities are offered without any differential treatment and without regard for the child’s and its parents’ gender, ethnic background, faith, sexual orientation, physical development and disabilities; (c) That sports clubs develop a wide and diverse range of activities and schemes; (d) That coaches, managers and parents become even better at cooperating on facilitating activities for children; (e) That good communication exists between the various sports, the parents and the community, based on the values of Norwegian children’s sport. Furthermore, according to the CRS (NIF, 2007), the child has a right freely to choose what type of sport or how many types of leisure activities he or she wishes to participate in and to decide on the amount of training (article 6). The leisure sport activities of children are expected to consist of a variety of activities, and children are to choose freely whether to

participate in competitions (article 7). Participation in the Norwegian national championships and international competitions is permitted from the year the child turns 13 (article 2 g).

The Convention and the CRS-documents (NIF, 2007) have implications for talent development. Coaches' thinking, however, may reflect socio-cultural assumptions which can to varying degrees be more or less in accordance with the children's rights perspective and research-based knowledge. The sports coaches may not have acknowledged the impact of the children's rights perspective in guiding their activities. In the public debate in Norway the CRS seem at times to be viewed as a hindrance to bring about top level achievement in sports, as we understand it, and it seems to be less focused upon the children's rights perspective and the best interests of the child. Our research questions are:

- i. How do Norwegian sport coaches understand talent and performance development?  
and
- ii. To what extent are the Norwegian sport coaches' understandings of talent and performance development in accordance with the Convention on the Right of the Child and the Norwegian Children's Rights in Sport and the Provisions on Children's Sport (CRS)?

These two research questions will be addressed by analysing three main categories: (1) social characteristics (which encompass four dimensions: the motivational climate; talent identification and age; comprehensiveness versus early specialisation; and a formula for the talented and another for the less talented?); (2) personal characteristics/psychological factors; and (3) bodily characteristics.

## 1 Professional Sports and Policies for Youth Athletics in Norway

The Norwegian CRS regulations were the result of ongoing public debates at large regarding what type of leisure activities should be offered to children. In Norway, as in many other nations, sports are considered an essential activity for the holistic development of children and youth. As Hill and Green (2008) have noted, 'The assumed benefits of sport for youth are at the heart of public policy regarding sport, particularly policies supporting sport in the schools' (Hill and Green, 185). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the field

of children's athletics and sports expanded rapidly. These activities, which previously were organised by the public schools in the country (attended by about 98 per cent of Norwegian children) were transferred to the onus of local community organisations. However, neither the equipment nor the regulations of leisure sport activities took into consideration children's age-specific needs, such as their physical qualifications and maturity level. At the same time, various specialised athletics and local sports associations began competing for the attention of children and their parents, and this rivalry were characterised by a conflict between two fractions. One argued for an educative and health-fostering approach to sport, supported by the scientist, explorer and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Fridtjof Nansen, the other fraction argued for a more Olympic and achievement-oriented approach (Olstad, 1987). The two approaches reflect a long history of friction between schools and sports clubs, and in view of this, the collaboration between schools and sport clubs in Norway could be both difficult and challenging (Skirstad, Waddington, and Säfenbom 2012; Stöckel, 2010).

Against this backdrop, the Norwegian athletics communities wanted to develop a common platform for children's leisure sports with a strong focus on the specialised value of athletics and to develop sports that were adaptive to children's mastery levels, needs and wishes (Tollånes *et al.*, 2007). Today, Norway has an umbrella organisation for athletics, which is one of the oldest sports organisations in the world (Skirstad *et al.*, 2012). It encompasses all specialised leisure athletics and local sports associations, i.e. the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF). This organisation, together with the CRS, ensures that the same rights and regulations apply to all athletics activities. The NIF cooperates with other Nordic countries (i.e. Finland, Sweden, Iceland and Denmark) regarding children's leisure athletics and sports. Although the other Nordic countries have similar guidelines, none of them have a regulatory framework with sanctions equivalent to the CRS. However, features of the mentioned conflict can still be seen in today's tension regarding the objectives of publicly funded sport (Skirstad *et al.*, 2012).

## 2 Theorising Athletic Talent

Talent identification is complicated, partly because assumed innate abilities can often be identified only later in life (Ellingsen, 2009, 2015). Globally, the field is characterised by a lack of consensus in relation to how talent should be defined or identified, and there is no uniformly accepted theoretical framework

to guide current practices (Vaeyens *et al.* 2008: 703). Gagné's "Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent" (1995) offers a widely accepted theory for conceptualising the various components of talent and giftedness. Talent narrowly conceptualised is viewed as something that is innate or inherent, and thus something one either does or does not have (Howe, Davison and Sloboda, 1998). In contrast, Gagné's theory proposes a broader conceptualisation of talent as something that can be brought forth or developed over time, such as physical qualities, interests, motivation, efforts of exercise, mental skills and learning strategies (Abbott and Collins, 2004, Gagné, 2000).

We use the following definition of talent, which is based on an amalgamation of definitions found in recent research: *a set of characteristics, competencies, and abilities that are developed on the basis of inborn potential and many years of (athletic) practice in interaction with the surrounding environment* (modified from Tranckle and Cushion, 2006). This definition is based on a multi-dimensional view of talent as the sum of a range of qualities and factors within which the development of the whole individual is central, and as something dynamic that can be developed in interaction with the environment, which can facilitate or inhibit the development of performance and talent.

This view of talent is clearly in accordance with the best interest of the child, and to 'develop the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential' (CRC, article 29a), which implies that a child's potential and talent shall be made on the child's own terms and prerequisites and not based on adult perspective and desires. As emphasised by Brackenridge and colleagues (Unicef, 2010), it is urgent to define young athletes as children first in a way that is appropriate to their needs and as athletes second. However, it has become evident that children with exceptional athletic potential are too often treated as adults, which has serious consequences for the realization of their human rights and their access to protection and defence (Unicef, 2010).

Moreover, a number of studies show that early identification of talent is problematic (Bloom, 1985), and the evaluation of future potential using various talent-related testing regimes has proved to be unreliable for the prediction of athletic achievements later in life (Abbott and Collins 2004). As the work of Gagné (2000) and Tranckle and Cushion (2006) indicate, talent is a much more complex phenomenon than most early identification strategies can accommodate. It involves various conditions and characteristics related to both the person and environment (Storm, Henriksen and Christensen, 2012). Thus, talent identification based solely on benchmarked achievements in relation to age has both serious limitations and a high probability of significant errors.

### 3 The Significance of the Coach in Talent Development

Sport coaches' understanding of talent is likely to influence how children and adolescents who participate in leisure or sport activities are evaluated (Gagné, 2000). The coaches' personal orientation towards coaching, the sport context within they operate and how the coaches perceive their athletes' behaviour and motivation, may be primary factors in creating a safe and enjoyable environment for young athletes (Mageau and Vallerand, 2003). Few previous English language studies have examined the practices and perceptions of sports coaches in Scandinavia. Eliasson (2015) used a theoretical standpoint of childhood to enhance the understanding about how children's rights, as outlined by the Convention, are experienced by child athletes and six adult coaches in the context of sports clubs in Sweden. The data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, and the findings indicated that the participants did not find the Convention meaningful as a policy document, and they did not experience any systematic, deliberate or preventive work with regard to the rights of the child in their sport clubs. Eliasson discusses challenges in the children's sport context, including children's rights, the social ordering of children and adults and the goal of making children's sport a safe activity for children.

According to achievement goal theory (AGT) (Ames, 1992; Dweck, 1986; Nicholls, 1992), the coach may be regarded as a significant other in creating the various psychosocial learning environments in which individuals judge their competence and define successful accomplishment, which seems to be the critical preconditions for motivational processes (Duda, 2001). A mastery goal orientation is likely to motivate individuals to seek skill or knowledge, make an effort, and perform to the best of their ability or experience personal improvement. In contrast, a performance goal orientation motivates individuals to focus on the adequacy of their ability and the demonstration of superior competence (*ibid*). Sarrazin *et al.* (2002) found that a mastery goal orientation emphasising processes of self-determination (SDT) (Deci and Ryan, 2000), may provide adolescents with quality motivation and inhibit dropping out in the field of sports. This research indicates the importance of various environmental factors that may contribute to the development of athletic talent. This also means a clear CRC perspective, not only in connection with the training and development of young talents, but also when it comes to education of coaches.

Larsen *et al.* (2015) interviewed 18 coaches in youth football in Norway and France who had participated in a community-based coach education programme, based on self-determination theory (SDT) and achievement goal theory (AGT). They were asked about their coaching practices. The results indicated that this education programme supported the coaches' efforts to develop



and implement strategies to stimulate intrinsic motivation, enjoyment and long-term participation among the players. However, based on a systematic review of the effectiveness of interpersonal coach education programmes on athlete outcomes, Langan, Blake and Lonsdale (2013) found that it was difficult to draw firm conclusions around the effectiveness of coach education interventions. Another review of coaching research determined that most coaches have focused on participation promotion, and that the coaches receive little guidance with regard to developing talented pre-elites through key transitions toward elite status (Martindale, Collins and Daubney, 2005). Martindale and colleagues (2007) identified factors regarded essential by English elite sport coaches for the development of competitive athletes, such as a development-oriented environment, a sense of autonomy and a strengthening of the athletes' self-regulation skills.

## 4 Methodology – Research Design and Methods

### 4.1 Interviews

This is a qualitative study that relies upon intensive, personal interviews. The approach falls into the constructivist paradigm, as classified by Hatch (2002). Knowledge from this study is regarded socially constructed in the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees through questions and answers, and through transcription, analysis, interpretation and reporting (cf. Eliasson, 2015). Our interview guide was in part based on questions posed by Martindale *et al.* (2007), but was significantly modified to include domain-specific research questions and to suit the Norwegian context. In order to have the most focus on the statements of the informants, the design of the interview guide was theme-based with issues in regular sequence and with open questions only (Jacobsen, 2005). The interview guide focused on the following main topics: the hallmarks of talent; the significance of the coach and environment (as identified in the talent model of Gagné (1995)); talent identification and age; and diversity versus early specialisation. The coaches were not asked any questions about how they understood the Norwegian CRS regulations including the main principles of the CRC directly however, their answers are examined and analysed in the light of the children's rights' perspective.

### 4.2 Pre-interview

Before its implementation, feedback on the interview guide was obtained from five colleagues from the sports department of the first author, all of whom

were specialist professionals in athletics at tertiary level with several years' experience both in research and development (R&D) in the field and in coaching at higher levels. They had no serious objections to the questions, and only minor adjustments were made. This process contributed to a validation of our design, methodology and interview guide.

#### 4.3 *Selection of Participants*

The research participants were sport coaches selected according to the following criteria: (1) experience with talent development among young athletes aged 5–15; and (2) regarded as expert coaches with experience of coaching at least the district level. With assistance from the NIF a total of eight coaches, seven male and one female, were selected: two from football (soccer), two from swimming, two from gymnastics and two from skiing. The reason for limiting the focus to these sports was that discussions of talent and talent development in Norway are frequently related to these particular sports. Informed consent was obtained. In accordance with the rules drawn up by the Norwegian Social Science Data Standards (NSD), as no personal information was collected, an ethics approval form was not provided. To ensure the anonymity of the informants, information regarding the gender and age of each individual is not included. Whilst the participants are all regarded professional coaches, most work part-time as a coach and have other full-time jobs as well. The practical selection of participants was facilitated by NIF through telephone requests.

#### 4.4 *Profile of Participants*

Seven of the informants held a BA, MA or higher level Diploma, and all eight had comprehensive courses in their respective field of coaching. All had comprehensive coaching experiences, between 15 and 40 years and all had practised their respective sports of coaching. We refer to the two coaches of football as C1 and C2; gymnastics as C3 and C4, swimming as C5 and C6 and skiing as C7 and C8.

#### 4.5 *Conducting the Interviews*

The interviews were conducted in NIF offices. Each of the eight interviews lasted for approximately 50–60 minutes, and all were digitally recorded. At the end of each interview, participants were asked whether they had anything more to add, but none provided anything beyond answers to the scheduled interview questions. After the formal interview, the informants were asked about the interview process. All informants were of the opinion that the interviews had been carried out in a professional manner, both because the

topics were perceived as being relevant and appropriate (validity), and because they felt comfortable and secure in the interview setting (reliability). No names or personal information were collected, registered, or saved, and the interviews were transcribed so as to ensure anonymity. Only the authors have access to the recordings, which will be stored according to the proscribed regulations.

#### 4.6 *Interview Transcription*

The first author transcribed the interviews. When the researcher personally carries out this work, he or she becomes more familiar with the data, which inherently strengthens the internal validity of the analysis, and ultimately, the interpretations (Krumsvik, 2014). Each interview was transcribed in full in order to ensure that the interview discourse as a text was readily accessible to analysis, thereby allowing further examining and refining the textual interpretations (Kvale, 1996; Jacobsen, 2005). When interviewees paused, or expressed feelings through, for example, laughter, this was registered, and the inclusion of these discursive features also contributed to strengthening the reliability (Krumsvik, 2014).

#### 4.7 *Data Analysis*

The analysis and interpretation of the interview data followed similar guidelines to those described in Martindale *et al.* (2007) and required both an inductive and deductive approach. The inductive approach was employed in the analysis of the coaches' statements, categorisation and interpretations of the coaches' self-reported practices, in order to develop a theoretical understanding of the data. The deductive approach was employed in the application of the interview guide, which was developed from previous research and theory related to talent in general, and athletic talent development in particular, and finally in analysis of the data in the children's rights perspective. The first and second authors independently examined both the recorded and the transcribed versions of the interviews. To ensure the reliability of the findings, the researchers also categorised each interview before they met.

The goal of this study is not to draw general conclusions from a small sample of coaches to a larger population. Our research has an intensive design which means that we have conducted in-depth interviews in an effort to extract as many details and nuances as possible regarding an actual phenomenon, rather than focusing on how many people experience the phenomenon or the general differences in the ways in which the phenomenon is experienced. Our in-depth approach is an attempt to provide as comprehensive an understanding of the research questions as possible (Jacobsen, 2005: 89–90).

5 Result Presentation and Discussion

5.1 What are the Hallmarks of Talent?

Regarding the first research question, the findings indicate that both the concept of talent and the various understandings of its manifestations are by nature rather complex. Based on the analysis, the coaches’ statements in this regard were divided into the three main categories: (1) social characteristics; (2) personal characteristics/psychological factors; and (3) bodily characteristics (see figure 1). The children’s rights perspective of the second research question is addressed by analyses within these categories.

5.2 Social Characteristics

Table 1 provides an overview of the extent to which each football (soccer), gymnastics, swimming, and skiing coach consider various social characteristics as important in relation to talent development.

The table indicates that the coaches seem to consider factors related to social characteristics to be the most important to talent development. For the purposes of this article, social characteristics are employed synonymously with “sociocultural characteristics” and “environmental factors”. More precisely, they include the significance of others (parents, siblings, friends, coaches), a stimulating and safe environment, varied training with an emphasis on social

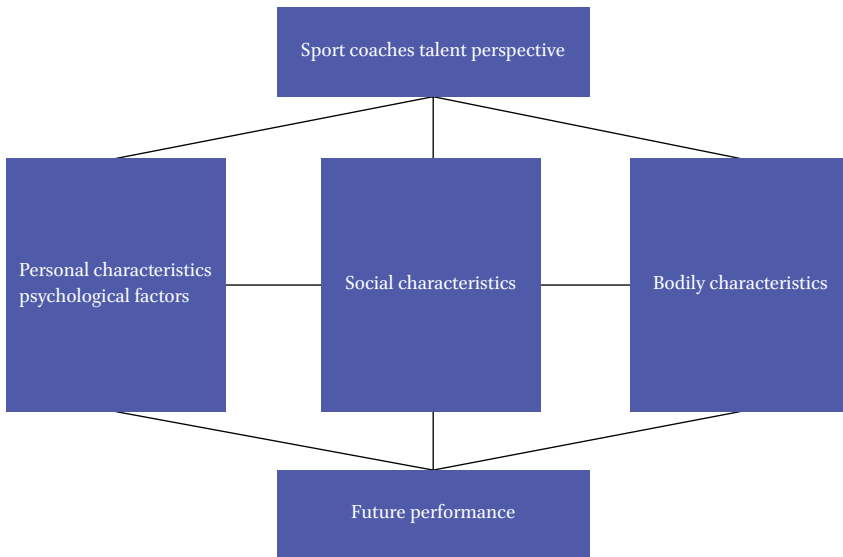


FIGURE 1 Sport coaches’ talent perspective

TABLE 1 *Perceived importance of social, personal and bodily characteristics in talent development*

Participant	Sport	Importance of social characteristics	Importance of personal characteristics	Importance of bodily characteristics
Coach 1	Soccer	Very important	Very important	Not important
Coach 2	Soccer	Very important	Important	Not important
Coach 3	Gymnastics	Important	Important	Very important
Coach 4	Gymnastics	Very important	Important	Very important
Coach 5	Swimming	Very important	Important	Important
Coach 6	Swimming	Very important	Very important	Important
Coach 7	Skiing	Very important	Very important	Not important
Coach 8	Skiing	Very important	Very important	Not important

activities, and a good support network, which were all regarded particularly important to the coaches. This interpretation is based on statements by the participants, such as:

The main point of our work is to create a good environment and a good training culture. A good social environment helps to lift everyone, not just for those regarded as the best (C1).

The social aspect is very important. Creating an achievement culture and an environment where they [the children] support each other and are having fun, is perhaps one of the most important aspects (C6).

As we understand it, the coaches' (C1; C6) statements can be theorised to reflect behaviours that nurture children's inner motivational resources, which are likely to be in accordance with CRC article 3, the best interest of the child. Several coaches emphasised the importance of children having fun in the sports context, and this is highly relevant to the children's right perspective. CRC, article 31, stresses children's right to engage in play. Furthermore, the Norwegian CRS regulations point out that the reason for children to engage in sport is that they enjoy it.

In the talent model of Gagné (1995), various environmental factors which impact on talent development in young athletes are identified, the foremost of which being the roles of others, such as parents, friends and coaches, because

in their capacity as caregivers and role models they can provide the child protection and care and contribute to a positive development to the best interests of the child. The importance of others is clearly recognised in children's rights, such as CRC, articles 3 and 5. The importance of environmental factors is supported by the work of Henriksen and Mortensen (2014) who based their findings on interviews with elite athletes. Our findings confirm that coaches consider others such as parents, siblings, friends, and coaches to be significant factors. For example, one participant stated that, 'Without the support from parents and other important adults, it is difficult for a young person to develop his or her talent' (C3). In particular, the coaches emphasise that parents are important, both as role models and through their presence and interest in their children's activities. These findings correspond with other studies conducted in Norway and USA (Breivik and Gilberg, 1998; Rønbeck, 2006). Good communication between parents and coaches is also considered important, especially when the children are young, according to the coaches.

As we understand the informants, they regard it as important that a coach is fully trusted by his/her athletes and is a qualified trainer, with good subject-specific skills and experience. They highlighted the senior position of the coach as bearing the ultimate responsibility for supporting the athletes. Since the senior position entails a great responsibility of a higher ranking coach, these expressions may be interpreted as representations of an awareness of the imbalance of power between athletes and coaches, and between children and adults more generally, due to the dominant order between generations. In much the same way as recent educational research has identified teacher influence as the most critical environmental factor in student achievement variances (Hattie, 2012), coaches are likely to play a crucial role in the development of young athletes. This view appears to be supported by the Norwegian coaches in the present study. The coaches placed particular emphasis on their role as a motivator, care person, conversation partner and general mentor, recognition which is in accordance with their holistic perception of athletes: 'The human characteristics that a coach has as a person are to me 100 times more important than their skills as a football-coach' (C1). Because this statement places the person first and the sport second, it can be understood to be in accordance with the CRC, Brackenridge and colleagues (Unicef, 2010) as mentioned in the introduction section, and for example article 1, 'Safety and security' of The Norwegian Children's Rights in Sport (CRS): 'Children have the right to participate in a safe and secure training environment without any inappropriate pressure or exploitation'. In accordance with the findings of Martindale *et al.* (2007), the coaches stressed the importance of providing a balance in the everyday life of the athletes by having pursuits outside of sports.

### 5.2.1 Motivational Climate

A rather pointed question regarding how best to groom effectively young athletes for elite achievement was one posed to the participating coaches. Given the complexity of the topic, they had difficulties in answering the question. One coach stated that the “recipe” would differ from person to person. Nevertheless, the coaches identified a range of factors as being important. In addition, which also speaks to the above mentioned significance of others, the coaches indicated that it is important for a young athlete early on to experience achievement in a mastery-oriented and safe environment. Similarly, CRC, articles 5 and 29, underscore the importance of an environment where children can grow and reach their potential consistent with the evolving capacities of the child. Mastery and safety are further emphasised in articles 4 and 1 of the Norwegian Children’s Rights in Sport (CRS) respectively. The importance of mastery is supported by prominent theories of motivation, such as achievement goal theory (AGT), as presented in the introduction (Duda, 2001). In addition, the coaches stressed the distribution of training with social activities, especially when children are young. Further, coach C1 and coach C2 emphasised that children should remain in their own age-appropriate clubs for long as possible and not be transferred to other more performance-oriented clubs at a stage that is too early in their development. This is in accordance with the children’s rights perspective and The Norwegian CRS regulations presented in the introduction of this article, for example CRS, article 3, based on the children’s needs.

The development and maintenance of a secure environment that facilitates positive development, whilst offering appropriate challenges and even room for modest failures, was mentioned by the coaches as being very important. In their view, the athletes must experience a sense of belonging to their environment, and the environment must be supportive and characterised by open and honest communication. This is important to friendship and well-being as stated in article 2 of The Norwegian Children’s Rights in Sport (CRS). Factors such as social interaction, psychological state and athlete-coach relations have, according to Fishbein (1992), an impact on the athlete’s motivation, in both the short and long term. A mutual interest in making each other good performers, were also emphasised as key environmental objectives by the coaches. Moreover, coaches such as C1 and C6 highlighted the significance of working with attitudes towards issues on violations of the rules of conduct, especially the negative ramifications of swearing. Phrased differently, the coaches held that the better quality of the motivational climate, the greater the demands the athletes will make of each other. In addition, many informants stated that parents are also a part of the whole motivational climate (C1, C2, C3, C4, C7).

According to the coaches, a favourable learning and training climate also involves a high degree of self-determination and individual autonomy. Not only was this regarded as an essential premise for optimal learning and growth by coaches, it is also in accordance with research-based knowledge and motivation theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Conversely, the psychosocial climate can be perceived as so challenging that it may have a significantly negative influence on the efforts of the athlete (Ryan and Deci).

The coaches' emphasis on self-determination and autonomy might also be related to CRC, article 12, which points out that children have a right to be heard about things that concern them. The importance of children's influence is further stressed in article 5 of The Norwegian Children's Rights in Sport. However, this rights-based perspective was absent in the interviews. We do not have data on the extent to which the coaches involve children in decisions and how children's views are handled in the sport context. The lack of explicit reflection on this might indicate that the coaches do not work deliberately or systematically with children's rights. The absence of reflection on children's citizenship is not surprising given the very little explicit consideration accorded to children's voices in society and even by political theorists (Bacon and Frankel, 2014). Quennerstedt (2016: 657) state that 'children's perspectives have rarely been used to question or develop human rights thinking'.

### 5.2.2 Talent Identification and Age

The coaches stressed the significance of maturation and growth, and not age in itself as a condition for success in sports. Whilst the coaches from the fields of gymnastics and swimming stated that the identification of talent may take place from the ages of seven or eight or even earlier (six-seven years) (C3, C4, C5, C6), the football and skiing coaches believe that talent identification should wait until at least the age of 12–14 (C1, C2, C7, C8). In a children's right perspective, caution is warranted with respect to early identification of talent, to ensure the best interest of the child, and to avoid abusive practices as reported in the introduction.

Several studies have shown that young athletes born early in the year perform better than those born later the same year (Helsen *et al.*, 1998). This is not a random finding but rather attributed to the fact that their development is more advanced than their peers physically, mentally and socially. This, in turn, leads to increased attention and more stimulating support from coaches (Mush and Grondin, 2001). In contrast, those who do not excel receive less attention and less support, both in relation to training and to competitions (Wilson *et al.*, 2006). Consequently, this leads to a loss of motivation, as well as impeded self-efficacy (Thompson *et al.*, 2004). These findings are in accordance with the



definition of talent presented in the introduction; namely, something that is developed in interaction with the surrounding environment.

### 5.2.3 Comprehensiveness versus Early Specialisation

The coaches stated that an often-discussed dilemma amongst their peers is comprehensiveness versus early specialisation. Indeed, our analysis shows that the coaches agree that comprehensiveness at an early age can be correlated to top achievement later on. They stress that the activities must be comprehensive, enjoyable, varied, yet still challenging. This is consistent with children's right to play and relax contained in CRC, article 31. Children have also a right to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities (CRC, article 31), also beyond sport, which will contribute to the development of the whole person. Further, the coaches state that successful talents often have broader sports background than less flourishing athletes. This may seem counterintuitive since two coaches (C4, C6) emphatically insisted on the importance of early specialisation, which could be questioned in light of CRC, article 31 and the CRS regulations. Coaches from the fields of gymnastics and swimming state children should not play too many sports for too long. C4 and C6 emphasised that some skills may be difficult to develop without the correct motoric stimulation at a young age. Specialisation, in their view, should take place from about 10–11 years of age, and comprehensiveness should be limited to activities that are closely related to the talented individual's chosen sport. Interestingly, previous research has offered tentative evidence to suggest that an earlier onset and a higher volume of discipline-specific training and competition, and an extended involvement in institutional talent promotion programmes during adolescence, are not *per se* associated with greater success in senior elite sports (Vaeyens *et al.*, 2009: 1376). Rather, it is common for youth athletes to benefit from experience in multiple sports, engendering a phenomenon known in the research literature as the 'talent crossover athlete' (Vaeyens *et al.*, 2009: 1374).

The views of the gymnastics and swimming coaches seem to be contrary to research findings indicating that more specific and one-sided training within one special field of sport should not take place until the age of about 15 (Baker *et al.*, 2003) or later (Carlson, 1988, 1991; Breivik and Gilberg, 1998). However, what counts as junior in one sport might count as senior in another, because competitive sporting careers may peek at different ages in different sports (Unicef, 2010). According to Baker *et al.*, (2003), the focus should be first and foremost on whether the training is adjusted to the premises of children and youth, and their needs and interests. This children's right perspective (CRC,

article 3) is also clearly reflected in the Norwegian CRS regulations on children's leisure athletics/sports. Additionally, in their study of English coaches in top-level sports, Martindale *et al.* (2007) found that the participants considered comprehensiveness to be preferable. Their findings also indicated that training must be adjusted to the premises of the individual athlete (Martindale). This is also in accordance with the views of the Norwegian coaches.

In the view of most of the participants in our study, comprehensive training for youths involves less in-depth training in a particular sport chosen for specialisation. One coach stated that, 'If they [the children] had begun with more comprehensive training when they were six years old, but with a lot of different sports activities, then I think they would have needed less training in their teens' (C1). Another coach emphasised that '... It is important to see the whole person' (C4). This point of view is supported by the studies of Williams and Ford (2008) on English junior football players. Côté and colleagues (Côté *et al.*, 2003; 2007) also compellingly theorised a critical division between "Deliberate Play", characterised by playful, joyful and varied physical activity that is performed because it has a value in itself, and its opposite, "Deliberate Practice". The latter is an activity of instrumental value, performance-oriented and inherently less joyful, and in many cases directly controlled by adults. The activities of "Deliberate Play" correspond best with children's right to play (CRC, article 31) and the best interest of the child (CRS, article 3).

5.2.4 One Formula for the Talented and Another for the Less Talented? None of the coaches in our study organise and segregate training on the basis of talent. The coaches emphasised that ensuring the players' safety and providing the opportunity for positive mastery experiences are important objectives when working with all young athletes, in addition to other important factors such as enjoyable physical training and maintenance of an effective social support network. Nevertheless, the coaches observed some notable differences, in that in their view, the less talented seem to be satisfied when they are having fun and experiencing limited mastery. Talented children seem to require more demanding, precise and unambiguous goals. In addition, there seem to be differences in the athletes' abilities to participate in rigorous training. The talented athletes are considered to learn new things more easily than other athletes; they set higher goals for themselves, and they expect better returns for their efforts. This topic appears to call for further research, with a particular attention to environmental factors in schools and community settings, and personality types and motivational profiles of youth athletes and coaches.

## 6 Personal Characteristics

To a lesser extent, the coaches also agreed on the importance of personal characteristics, as indicated in figure 1 and table 1. Most of the coaches shared the view that a talented youth is a person who “picks things up fast” and is eager to learn. The talented youths also seem to distinguish themselves from others both intellectually and in the way they communicate. Moreover, they show abilities to structure and plan their own training, are eager to train, and are more highly motivated than others according to the coaches.

Our analysis generally indicates a common view shared by the coaches regarding the qualities that best characterise talented youths. In particular, they agree that the talented children are in most cases more highly motivated than others and are mastery oriented (cf. Duda, 2001). This is also expressed in their school achievement, according to the coaches; ‘I believe that their interest, the pleasure of their activities, and experience of mastery, – [are] the most important things ... I see a connection. I can see it in their eyes, the sparkling of the ones who wish to be really good’ (C1).

The coaches also explained that talented youth are typically responsible and rarely selfish, as well as having empathy and caring about others. This chimes well with research that indicates that there is a relationship between empathy, social behaviour and self-esteem (Laible *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, it is most often the talented youths who offer to help when the coach or fellow athletes require assistance, for example when the equipment must be cleaned after a training session.

## 7 Bodily Characteristics

With regard to the question of the importance of bodily characteristics as premises for achievement in a given field of sports, there were clear differences in the views represented by the eight participating Norwegian coaches (see table 1). Whilst this was not an important issue in football (soccer) and skiing, the coaches in gymnastics and swimming took the opposite view. In particular, the gymnastics coaches highlighted the importance of having the “right” body.

As a basis for athlete selection in gymnastics and an indicator of the future success of the child, the gymnastics coaches (C3, C4) agreed further that parental body types and shapes can be important indicators. When they emphasise such use of bodily criteria in the selection of athletes, the two coaches speak out in conflict with the explicit objectives of the Norwegian CRS regulations

regarding the inclusion of children in athletics and sports (NIF, 2007). It is stated that the sports shall be offered without regard for the child's and its parents' gender, ethnic background, faith, sexual orientation, physical development and disabilities. Moreover, all children shall be included in the sports clubs regardless of their ambitions. This is explicitly stated in the objectives of the CRS cited in the introduction section.

## 8 General Findings

It has been our objective with this research to develop a more robust and deeper understanding of how talent development is viewed by coaches in one European nation in a children's rights perspective. The practices of Norwegian coaches of young athletes are regulated by the Norwegian CRS regulations (NIFa, 2015). In turn, the CRS takes as its partial basis the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The coaches were not asked directly and systematically about specific articles of the Convention and the CRS, and knowledge from this study represents only a limited range of possible children's rights perspectives. Our analysis indicates that the views of the respondents in important areas seem to be in accordance with these policies; however, some of them speak out in violation of the rights.

In particular, the gymnastics coaches highlighted the importance of having the "right" body to be included in the sport, and in addition, they referred to parental body types and shapes as a basis for athlete selection in gymnastics, which indicates violations of children's rights and of the objectives of the CRS regulations. The swimming coaches occupied a middle ground in this respect. The findings suggest that there is cause for concern in this area of children's rights. The CRS regulations require children to be included in leisure-time sport activities. The issue of bodily characteristics as premises for achievements in a given field of sport reveals clear differences in the views represented by the informants, because it was not a central issue in football and skiing. It is important to learn more about how low- and medium-ability children (or those who do not have "ideal" body types) are eventually guided away from participation in these activities. Further research is needed to explore more thoroughly issues such as selection and retention, as well as the criteria for inclusion and exclusion in Norwegian leisure sports activities for children.

The football and skiing coaches seemed to identify most closely with the national regulations (NIF, 2007), which may be related to the fact that these sports are the largest and most professionally developed sports in Norway. The football coaches also stated that specialisation may start quite late; when

the children are 14 or 15, or even later according to the skiing coaches. With regard to early specialisation, the gymnastics coaches would prefer young athletes to start specialisation earlier than all the other coaches, which also indicates a preference that conflicts with the CRS and which could be questioned in the light of CRC, article 31. Other important aspects, such as the guiding principle of CRC, article 12, the right to express their views in all matters concerning the child, was not directly reflected upon in the interviews, and interestingly, the social practice of competitions was never mentioned by the coaches throughout the interviews. Future research is encouraged to explore these issues further. For example, how can children be included and participate in making decisions in the sport context?

The participating coaches can be regarded as highly skilled. However, in Norwegian leisure sports activities for children, it is predominantly parents that take charge of the coaching. To what extent parental coaches (and other grassroots and volunteer coaches) are aware of and identify with CRS and the children's rights perspective, and how skilled they are compared with the coaches in our study, we are not able to answer on the basis of our data. The coaches' views on the CRC and the CRS regulations and – in particular – if their way of coaching has changed as a consequence of adding new provisions to the rules of sport, would have been of great interest to explore further.

### Conclusion

We have sought to gain an understanding of eight selected Norwegian coaches' views of talent and talent development, and to consider their perspectives and beliefs in the light of children's rights. This article highlights the shortcomings of the view that sport is a private activity and that talent is primarily related to an individual's subjective characteristics. Talent and talent development is a process to which a number of sociocultural and environmental factors contribute. The participating coaches differ in their views regarding age of specialisation and the importance of bodily characteristics, and in these regards, some of them speak out in violation of children's rights which is cause for concern. Nevertheless, our analysis suggests that the coaches' views are consistent with children's rights in other important areas, because they emphasise the growth and well-being of all children engaged in sports and athletics. Thus, with some notable exceptions, the coaches' understanding of talent and performance development do not seem to be in conflict with the Norwegian CRS regulations, which anchor nationally the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

However, none of the coaches referred explicitly to the children's rights during interviews, which may suggest that there may be a need for more deliberate and systematic integration of the children's right perspective in youth sport. Future research is encouraged to examine this issue further, for example, how can children be included as members in the everyday interactions of sports with their voices and perspectives? Given that this is a limited study, future research is required to determine whether the findings made here can be generalised to the diverse population of coaches, including, for instance, parents as a sub-population of coaches. Future studies could also present a comprehensive analysis of mentors' understanding of talent development and children's rights in other jurisdictions.

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