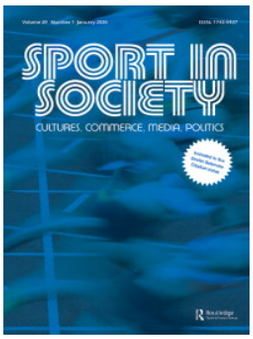

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Sport successes, 'against all odds'

Bo Carlsson[a], Niklas Hafen[b] and Jørgen Bagger Kjær[b]

[a]Department of Sport Sciences, Malmö University, Malmö, Sweden; [b]Department of Sport Sciences, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Initially, as a scholastic horizon, the article reflects on general thesis/studies linked to sport participation and selection processes as well as in relation to talent identification and talent development. Yet, the basic departure – and the main subject – in the work is those elite athletes who, for some reason, ought to have been sorted out – due to various obstructions – but who have not been disregarded or ruled out in the general selection process, and in fact have had successes in elite sport, 'against all odds', notwithstanding cultural, physical, geographical and/or social difficulties and barriers. Thus, the article will revolve around issues related to differentness, whether what is considered different is of a social, cultural, physiological, or medical nature. Accordingly, discussions about normality and cultural hegemony stand as important elements in the approach, as well as in the analysis. This reasoning is, substantially, supported by interviews with four Swedish elite athletes, who have made a success on an elite level, 'against all odds'. By introducing the concept of 'the uncaptured' – as a balancing act at the edge of exclusion and inclusion – the analysis of these interviews results in a support of a wider and humanistic direction in talent identification and talent development, to encourage and support outsiders.

KEYWORDS

Talent identification and development; 'sport for all'; selection processes; physical hinderance; cultural barriers; social difficulties; motivation; self-image

Introduction

In general, people are always fascinated by individuals who, against all odds, succeed. For example, in the 2012 Swedish television program, 'Mot alla odds' [Against all Odds], viewers were captivated by ten struggling people with disabilities who made their way, in 24 days, through 1000 miles of difficult terrain, wild animals and harsh weather from Victoria Falls in Zimbabwe to Namibia's Skeleton Coast. In the 2021 renewal of the program, the production team replaced the wild environment in Africa with the Scandinavian mountains, where ten individuals with disabilities or a previous serious illness had to overcome hardship in an extremely difficult and snowy winter environment – conditions that would be a hard challenge, even for trained athletes.

CONTACT Jørgen Bagger Kjær jorgen.kjaer@lnu.se

It is remarkably impressive to watch individuals with limited physical or medical conditions overcome various tangible obstacles in these scenarios in contrast to situations and challenges where the construct is predicated on physical conditions and limitations, as in the Paralympics, for example. These TV productions have inspired us to develop a sport study focusing on 'against all odds' in various sport settings, beyond the 'adapted arenas like the Paralympics, and therefore shed light on those factors facilitating success in regular elite sports beyond the general consensus of attributes and talent identification that unleash uncommon achievement and portend success. Although we focus on 'against all odds' events, we do not include 'The Miracle on Ice', when a team of American university students beat the USSR's Red Machine in the Olympic ice hockey final in Lake Placid. Similarly, we will not include in the 'against all odds' empirical testimonies and theoretical reasonings a focus on Steve Bradbury's remarkable triumphs in short track in the 2002' Olympics, in large measure due to the many and frequent mistakes of his competitors, Obviously, athletes in the Paralympics succeed by surmounting various physical obstacles, against all odds. Yet, all these athletes compete with the signs – and the preconditions – of these challenging impediments and they are familiar with the prerequisites and standards, and thereby compete under these adapted conditions in which they offset the impact of these very obstacles and conditions.

Hence, our study will be limited individuals who have, for various reasons, conquered social, medical/physical, geographical, cultural and social obstacles that per se ought to have excluded them from participation in regular sport settings, and thus, unanticipated successes. In this regard, we take as our starting point those elite athletes who, for some reason, ought to have been sorted out – due to various obstructions – but who have not been disregarded or ruled out in the general selection process, and in fact have had successes in elite sport, notwithstanding this cultural, physical, geographical and/or social difficulties and barriers. In terms of knowledge, our departure commences from previous research on selections and talent development in sport, but by taking an alternative path, via a focus on the possibility of more unorthodox success factors, and thus, the treatment – and overcoming – of various selection processes. Scholastically, the departure will necessarily be multifaceted. But it is not possible to avoid that the theoretical part of the project will revolve around issues related to differentness, whether what is considered different is of a social, cultural, physiological, or medical nature. Hence, discussions about (a) normality and b) cultural hegemony stand as important elements in the approach, as well as in the analysis. To stress, the studies context is Scandinavian sport, with its substantial sport policies related to e.g. participation, inclusion, and integration.

Previous research and theoretical frame

This section will briefly capture a mixture of sports science research which has dealt with various selection processes as well as issues related to talent identification and talent development. In this matter, there exist numerous of publications, which makes it hard to give a solid and fair description, with the risk of being relatively selective. Still, our condensed description of research will, expectantly, be a decent attempt to put the study in a reasonable academic context. In addition, as a critical encounter, this section will sketchily discuss 'normality' and the subject of a hegemonic culture (in sport) as 'the playground' for outsiders and underdogs, and thus, as an elastic mode to erect on the concept(ions) of outsiders.

In general: success factors in sport

In sports research, there are a variety of studies on different success factors in sport, especially in elite sports. At the macro- and meso-level, research, including i.e. the SPLISS-project (De Bosscher et al. 2006), has pointed out several economic, organizational and political factors that seem to be enriching and promote a nation in its drive to achieve sporting triumphs. At the micro level, researchers have studied why different individuals are included or excluded in sport. These studies usually provide structural explanations that are largely based on social, cultural and physiological factors. In this context, RAE ('Relative Age Effect') has been launched as an explanation for the selection process (e.g. Wattie, Schorer, and Baker 2015; cf. Delorme, Boiché, and Raspaud 2010; Dixon et al. 2020; Ek et al. 2020). The concept of RAE is based essentially on the thesis that success factors consist of a combination of both physiological and organizational factors. From the physiological perspective, children born early in the year are considered to have an advantage over those born later in the same year. Regularly accepted, this advantage is supported by the youth sport's organization model due to their fixed age groups.

Furthermore, from an organizational perspective, familiarity with i.e. the Scandinavian sports model, is often cited as a prominent factor, which logically means that children and young people who lack this organizational familiarity, experiences and ability have a disadvantageous position (Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society 2005). In this respect, 'parental cultural capital' is held to be supportive (Vollmer, Lohmann, and Giess-Stüber 2019).

In addition to these selection variables, factors that can be linked to mental capacity can be mentioned. Mental capacity, in addition to motivational capacity, is of course launched in sports psychology as crucial for success at the elite level (e.g. Rudd 2005; Seippel, Ibsen, and Norberg 2010). A good development environment and a well-thought-out talent development have been empirically mapped as well and are also considered to be a solid foundation for sporting success (e.g. Henriksen et al. 2010a, b). Thus, there are sports where the physiological advantages dominate (e.g. Gleaves and Lehrbach 2016; Kaleth and Mikesky 2010). But there are also sports where cultural hegemony brings significant benefits to 'insiders' (Vollmer, Lohmann, and Giess-Stüber 2019). In sport, it also requires a sporting habitus and a high seriousness, which is expressed in the desire to compete and exercise/train seriously and rational (Lindfelt 1989). Laziness, therefore, is blamed and criticized in various narratives, and just having talent might not be enough, or 'not even fair'.

This type of research focuses on studying who has the social, cultural and/or physiological conditions to be included in the sports movement, and at the best, also achieve success at the elite level, and those who, on the other hand, due to possible deficiencies in these (sporting) conditions, are left out of sport. These functionalistic and structural studies are often complemented by moral reflections, which, as a rule, call into question the processes of selection in sports, and its basis in various cultural conditions about what sport's sporting success is and how it is generated.

Research on inclusion and exclusion in sport

There is international enthusiasm for the idea that sport can contribute to 'social inclusion' strategies (Kelly 2011). Consequently, there is a well-established commitment within national and international sports policy to promote participation in sport (European

Commission 2007; International Olympic Committee 2000). In Sweden, 'Idrotten vill' [What Sport Wants] stands as the central policy document and is meant to steer the aspiration of 'Sport for All' (Riksidrottsförbundet 2019). Thus, the most prominent statement in the policy is the fundamental value of everyone's equal right to participate in sport (cf. Stenling and Fahlén 2009).

The term 'Sport for All' was coined already in 1966 by the Council of Europe (Marchand 1990) and institutionalized in the European Sport for All Charter (Council of Europe 1975). In this respect, there is a strong European emphasis on enabling every individual to participate in sport (Council of Europe 2001). At the same time, however, Collins (2004) argues, that if access to sport becomes an unimpeded expectation, then the inability to participate is a form of social exclusion. This corresponds to the thesis that individuals and groups in society can experience social exclusion in multiple domains, such as education, employment, health, social participation, and community integration (Levitas et al. 2007). Tackling social exclusion – often through promoting social inclusion – is thus a global challenge for policy makers, practitioners, and societies in general. In this setting, sport is often promoted as an inclusive environment, in which people of all backgrounds and abilities can participate and access a range of benefits (i.e. personal, health and social). The policy ideal of 'Sport for All' is, nevertheless, not easily realized in practice (Schaillée, Haudenhuyse, and Bradt 2019). Sport continues to be permeated by various forms of discrimination and social exclusion (Collins and Kay 2014; Spaaij, Magee, and Jeans 2014).

Social inclusion is often defined in relation to social exclusion (and as such often remains undefined). Social exclusion has, nevertheless, been described as a vague and elastic concept which lacks an agreed definition (Haudenhuyse 2017). Accordingly, social exclusion implies a complex process involving a lack of and/or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to most people in society, whether in economic, social, cultural, or political settings (Haudenhuyse 2017; Levitas et al. 2007). In this regard, a heavily debated aspect of social exclusion in sport is poverty. Poor people lack money and material resources. Furthermore, many live in high-crime, low-cohesion environments with high unemployment. Access to transport and facilities for sport is thus limited. In this respect, poverty is compounded by age, gender, ethnicity and/or disability. Accordingly, inequality, poverty and social exclusion are closely linked with each other (Collins 2012; Collins and Haudenhuyse 2015; Hovden 2012).

A brief review of talent development and talent identification literature

In the normative perspective of inclusion and the practices of exclusions, the rationality – as well as the ethics – of talent identification becomes paradoxically, due to the dual vision of, as in our case, the Swedish Sports Confederation, and its clashing focuses on 'all-inclusive sports' as well as on elite and talent development.

Thus, to start, talent development and talent identification became institutionalized during the late 1970s as countries were eager to produce sporting success during an era that has been described as the global sporting arms race (De Bosscher 2008). Countries were looking for 'the best way' to create the athlete of tomorrow even though it is unclear what makes an elite performer (Swann, Moran, and Piggott 2015). For example, the SPLISS model was developed to figure out how to get the most value for the money that countries invested in elite sport. One area of the SPLISS-model focuses on talent development.

Researchers began to explore the components of how to develop an elite athlete. The development Model of Sport Participation (Côté, Baker, and Abernethy 2007) outlines two main pathways to elite performance. The first pathway is referred to as the *elite performance through early specialization,* which was inspired by the work of Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993). For many years the 10,000-h rule of Karl Ericsson et al. was dogma (Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer 1993), suggesting a causative relationship between the number of hours of *deliberate practice* and performance. According to Ericsson et al. deliberate practice was the most effective way to learn and improve skills. They defined deliberate practice as 'a highly structured activity, the explicit goal of which is to improve performance; requires effort and is not inherently enjoyable' (Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer 1993, 368).

As deliberate practice is not 'inherently enjoyable', scholars began to criticize it as a way of training young athletes (Abernethy, Farrow, and Berry 2003). Some scholars argued that for training for young athletes to be sustainable in the long run, it had to be enjoyable (Baker and Young 2014; Durand-Bush and Salmela 2002; Starkes et al. 1996; Ward et al. 2007). Moreover, evidence suggests that intensive training for young athletes can result in injuries and burnout (DiFiori et al. 2014; Law, Côté, and Ericsson 2007). Côté (1999) suggested that sporting activities should be intrinsically motivating and that learning experiences should be less structured. The term used to describe this approach is *deliberate play*. Deliberate play is a key element in the second developmental pathway known as *elite performance through sampling*, as promoted by Côté, Baker, and Abernethy (2007). This pathway emphasizes a gradual transition from sampling a variety of sports during early childhood to specializing in a single sport around the ages of 13 to 15. As athletes begin to focus on one sport, their participation tends to shift from primarily deliberate play activities to more structured deliberate practice.

Following that line of thought, more recent research suggests that deliberate practice and deliberate play can complement one another in fostering the development of expertise (Côté, Erickson, and Abernethy 2013). Athletes benefit from engaging in both less structured and more intensive activities throughout their development (Ribeiro et al. 2021). For instance, Storm, Kristoffer, and Krogh (2012) propose important nuances to the Developmental Model of Sport Participation. They argue that it is possible to enter a sport at a relatively late age and still reach an elite level, challenging the idea that developmental phases must be tied to specific ages. Additionally, Storm, Kristoffer, and Krogh (2012) introduce the concept of *playful training*—a form of practice that blends elements of deliberate play and deliberate practice—offering a middle ground that expands the traditional dichotomy.

Another focus in talent development is the importance of the environment in which sporting activities take place. Henriksen et al. suggest that a holistic, ecological approach to the athlete will be instrumental in bringing that athlete to the elite level (Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler 2010a, 2010b). Significant others in the microenvironment, such as parents and coaches, will need to collaborate in supporting the athlete (Kjær et al. 2023). Likewise, systems should be in place that allow athletes to focus on both school and sport simultaneously, so they are not forced to choose between the two. This is especially important because some talented athletes thrive by maintaining multiple identities (e.g. as both athlete and student). However, similar to the debate between deliberate practice and deliberate play, there is disagreement in the research field regarding dual careers. The concept does not work

for all athletes, as the combined schedule can be very full and stressful, often forcing athletes to prioritize one area over the other (Andersson and Barker-Ruchti 2019).

Lastly, the whole talent development discussion raises another controversial question: Which criteria should be used to identify who is talented? Talent identification research has shown that individual practitioners use subjective judgements when assessing young athletes' potential (e.g. Christensen 2009; Cushion and Jones 2006; Larkin and O'Connor 2017; Lund and Söderström 2017; Roberts et al. 2019; Williams and Reilly 2000; Woods, Joyce, and Robertson 2016). This appears to be a wild card given that expertise is multifactorial (Burgess and Naughton 2010; Phillips et al. 2010) and that sport studies have used inconsistent criteria to define who is an expert athlete (Baker, Côté, and Abernethy 2003; Berry, Abernethy, and Côté 2008; Farrow 2010; Hayman et al. 2011; Johnson et al. 2008; Swann, Moran, and Piggott 2015). Lastly, there is a bias to select athletes based on their physical strength, speed and height at one moment in time (Phillips et al. 2010). This phenomenon has been termed the relative age effect (Wattie, Schorer, and Baker 2015; Hancock, Adler, and Côté 2013; cf. Delorme, Boiché, and Raspaud 2010; Dixon et al. 2020).

In sum, some scholars conceptualize talent development as a linear process that can be tracked and quantified. As a result, several models of sport participation and career transitions have been developed to identify distinct stages in the cultivation of elite athletes (cf. Côté, Baker, and Abernethy 2007; Stambulova 1994). However, talent development is not always linear (Ribeiro et al. 2021), and it is not always possible to predict precisely when an athlete will reach their peak (Storm, Kristoffer, and Krogh 2012). There are many different pathways to becoming an elite athlete.

Intermediate reflection: the focus in previous research, and thus, an unexploited or ignored subject

According to our initial review and general understanding, there has been a tendency in this research field to find general factors and ideal types, who works beneficially or disadvantageous in sport participation and, particularly, regarding the development of elite athletes. Although being a pragmatic and instrumental part in these detection processes, basically sport scholars have generally been skeptical towards selection processes as well as more general concepts of talent identification and talent development, particularly related to young athletes. Despite this critical attitude, a rather neglected subject in previous research, corresponding to this review, is successful athletes who have succeeded in their sports, by implicitly or explicitly challenging the general criteria and systems in sport participation/the elite sport development and its culturally defined selection processes, and thus, common identification and development of talents. But by focusing on elite athletes that are considered to have had sport success against all odds we will find it possible – and strategically – to make such an initial investigation, particularly if the inquiries focus on various social, physical, medical, geographical and cultural obstacles or difficulties among these elite athletes, as in this respect, 'outsiders'.

Normality, cultural hegemony vs. outsiders and the 'uncaptured'

Although the study takes a starting point in previous research and various exclusion facts, the study's theoretical frame will not per se focus on structural, medical/physical, social,

geographical or cultural aspects *as* limitations and normal exclusion but, instead, focuses more on how different individuals have challenged and exceeded these physiological, social and cultural limitations or obstacles. Thus, the analysis needs additional theoretical components, which ought to gain by an elastic amalgamation of, e.g. on 'normality' (cf. and 'cultural hegemony' (Gramsci 2012; cf. Rowe 2004; Andreasson and Carlsson 2022), in addition to inspiring studies of outsiders and underdogs (e.g. Becker 2018; Elias and Scotson 1994), and the experimental idea of 'the uncaptured' (Mathiesen 1982).

Principally, the concept of 'hegemonic culture', Antoni Gramsci's contribution to social and political sciences (2012), works as a critical horizon for capturing and analyzing: (a) cultural beliefs and norms that govern, control and guide actions and practices in the everyday environment of sport, and b) on the other hand, the conditions for opposition, alternatives and insubordination. Gramsci's starting point is fruitful because it rejects determinism and assumes that cultural domination, in a broad perspective, must be constantly normatively reproduced and ensured through either negotiation or encapsulation, where the 'ruling groups' have great advantages in governing cultural values and controlling its institutions (cf. Andreasson and Carlsson 2022). In this way Gramsci emphasizes cultural leadership and hegemony – as ideological superstructure – as prerequisites for dominance and control systems. Thus, sport is an interesting arena where social values, moral dilemmas, alternative choices are tested and renegotiated and defined in its soil of cultural hegemony (Rowe 2004). As an example of the analysis of hegemonic culture, e.g. it has been demonstrated how markedly behavioral science has formed and ruled talent identification (Kerr 2019). In a similar manner, researchers have presented the imperative role of rational training, with natural training as an opponent, with limited practice, still acclaimed and honored (Svensson 2017; Svensson and Sörlin 2019). According to our understanding, these studies are enlightening examples and present blinders in the process of talent identification/development, due to cultural dominance, and thus, identified and stated 'roads of success' in sports, according to normality and rationality.

'Against all odds' is, from our input, a starting point for capturing alternative norms, values and experiences among elite athletes, who had succeeded, despite cultural, social, physiological and geographical obstacles, that could have worked as a ruling out and a marginalization. This kind of illumination might address and challenge the cultural hegemony in contemporary talent identification and the development of selection processes.

In principle, outsiders, and particularly, bohemians – despite being idealized nostalgically – are positioned outside of today's more professional and regimented sports world as heroes from a bygone era. Thus, although outsiders and underdogs in professional and homogenized sport are glorified, they do seem to have a harder time in 'surviving' in a more (rationalized?) and controlled environment, which generate standardized concepts, supporting the 'established'. Thus, Norbert Elias' and John Scotson's work (1994) on the relationship between outsiders and 'conventional' athletes serves as an illuminating entrance to this issue. The book consists of a microcosm of local relationships that highlights a wide variety of 'social configurations' such as class, race, ethnicity and gender. The ambition in the work is to spotlight social and cultural mechanisms in, among other things, stigmatization, prohibition, and in the attitude of 'we against them'. In addition, the reading of Howard S. Becker's famous work (2018) on outsiders and deviance inspires the study to detect and emphasize useful qualities in this group of elite athletes, beyond recognized and accepted talent identification characteristics. For our purpose, a limitation in Backer's work, as well

as in Elias and Scotson's study, is their focus on groups as outsiders, and not on individual outsiders. Moreover, the groups they were focused on were deviants, whereas our studies' outsiders strove of to be included – regardless of the dissimilarities – in regular and normatively accepted groups, but by other prerequisites, opportunities and means than the normal.

In this respect, Thomas Mathiesen, a Norwegian socio-legal scholar, might be supportive (Mathiesen 1982). Departing from Foucault's thesis on disciplinary power and surveillance, Mathiesen presented a contrasting horizon – a counterpart to disciplinary power – with the concept of 'the uncaptured', 'the unsettled' or 'the incomplete' [in Swedish/Norwegian; 'det ofullgågna'], that represented a political strategy of neither having political issues – in his case environmental protection – excluded from the political discourse or, alternatively, encapsulated by the political and bureaucratic establishment and their interests and logics (Mathiesen 1982), and thus, 'thinned out' and insipid. Thus, in Mathiesen's use, the 'uncaptured' occurs on the political scene, and as a conscious political strategy to avoid in-/undefinitions, as well as encapsulation. In our theoretical framework, the 'uncaptured' can in a similar – yet adapted – way represent a mental – and unspoken – humanistic or existential state of mind, a world view and an approach to life in, for instance, the field of talent identification and selection processes, in which individuals avoid and/or circumvent the general selection processes, and thus, develop gradually and analogously to the common identification and developmental systems. Accordingly, these individuals – who succeed, against all odds – might be empowered with implicit and favorable characteristics, not yet detected and identified – and 'encapsulated' – by the general talent system.

Materials and methodological departure

To our benefit, these departures inspire and complement the methodological design. Yet, our subject must be tested and envisioned by empirical standards, by several cases/narratives focusing on several elite athletes who have overcome e.g. various structural, cultural, and physical obstacles to succeed in sport, against all odds. These narratives hopefully will contribute to the comprehension – and imminent reflections – on additional qualities and characteristics among elite athletes beyond the general identification logics, and will thereby support the attributes of outsiders, as well as challenge the cultural hegemony in talent development and the selection processes in sports.

The empirical core in previous research on talent identification/development and selection processes has been primarily on successive athletes or, on the other hand, talented athletes who have been dismissed. In this study the empirical foundation relies on athletes who have succeeded, despite various selection processes.

Empirically, the project will be based on three narratives/case studies – both current and retrospective – that include athletes who seemingly should not have achieved the high level of success that they did, given their individual difficulties or limitations. The three in-depth-interviews have been conducted face-to-face in an environment familiar to the respondents– at the respondent's workplace, at a café, or at a sports arena. One of the face-to-face interviews was conducted with two brothers at their former sports arena.

The actual selections of athletes in the study are basically derived through media coverage and by acquaintances/contacts. There are deliberate boundaries drawn in the selection of relevant athletes in our focus and in the aim of the study. As mentioned, Paralympics or

disability sport are not included. Neither demographic difference – i.e. 'too young, or too old for sports' – has been included in the selections. Of course, there are most likely athletes, comparable to our selections of outsiders, who have failed despite having the identified and beneficial characteristics of an 'outsider'. Thus, we have only detected and reported success stories, due to our essay's point of departure and settings.

All interviewed athletes in this study are male, which is a limitation, particularly in light of women's increasing participation in 'against all odds', in sports that have been shaped by a masculine hegemony (see below). In that respect, there is relevant literature related to this subject (cf. Pfister and Sisjord 2013). Gender as a factor in the exclusion process, is, evidently, interesting, also from the perspective of 'success, against all odds'. However, dealing with women in elite sport, who also encounter ethnicity, social resistance, as well as physical, medical or geographical encumbrance would be even more productive, due to a critical inquiry considering talent identification and selection processes. Yet, our current accessibility to women elite athletes will not include that perspective and experience of 'sport success, against all odds'.

Another shortcoming is that the four elite athletes are all related to team sports (ice hockey, football and basketball), and thus, the study lacks respondents from an individual sport.

Undeniably, the phrase 'against all odds' has normative as well as subjective connotations. This, the credibility, and thus, the legitimacy of the study is basically found in the narratives, and accordingly, the interpretations of the interviews.

Cases and narratives of sport success, against the odds, related to obstacles

The empirical section starts with a short introduction to several obstacles that have been – and will be – presented in the press – as well as among sports scholars – as obstacles to success in sports, and which sports journalists praise when these obstacles are overpowered – 'against all odds'.

Introduction

Certainly, gender has been a general obstacle in the hegemonic history of a male dominated sports, which has been profoundly reported by sport scholars (cf. Pfister and Sisjord 2013). However, women have gradually entered male-dominated sports field such as football, ice hockey, tennis and golf, and thus, generated a firm market. Thus, there are women, that against all odds in their early carriers through their ambitions, actions and personal characters have confronted this hegemonic culture, and thus, have paved the way for a generation of women, by confronting molded prejudices, chauvinism and intolerance. For instance, sympathetic media coverage of ice hockey tells stories how lonely and driven girls had to play with the boys' teams, facing and confronting the hockey culture as well as masculinity (cf. Nyström 2023).

In general, 'imperfect physical status' is generally considered as a possible obstacle in several sports, particularly in team and combat sports. Sport journalists are, obviously, fascinated by athletes who have made a career in elite sport, despite various physical 'handicap' (cf. Sandahl 2019; see below, 'the case of Håkan Söderstjerna'). Besides, physical

injuries could work as serious setbacks, temporarily or for a longer period. Due to a narrative of extreme and fascinating commitment, a successful comeback from a longer period of physical problems works efficiently in the sport media, and is labelled as a success, 'against all odds', particularly if the medical doctors have deemed it impossible (cf. SvT Sport 2021).

In addition, medical problems must normally be regarded as a similar hindrance and an impediment to optimal performance in sport, and those athletes who conquer these obstacles in their sport are doing this despite all odds, particularly if they are performing well due to relentless determination, and thus contrary to medical advice and experiences. Of course, this impediment works also as a captivating narrative in sport media (cf., Kvarnström 2024; Skeppstedt 2021), focusing on commitment and will, despite 'all odds' is actually against a success.

Sport generated psychological problems has become a substantial subject in recent research. In addition, sporting success in the light of psychological distress, e.g. palpable loneliness, can be portrayed in the media as a struggle against all odds. Thus, dealing with mental problems and a successful comeback to elite sport, particularly if the athletes, through counselling, find a new and different motivation in sport-in-itself, are presented positively in these narratives (cf. Tengblad 2021).

> Furthermore, a disadvantaged and underprivileged social background might function as an obstacle, and the struggle for success in sport could be viewed as a success, against all odds. Thus, in these media narratives the athletes stand as admirable examples of an unfortunate – almost doomed – individual who has achieved success, while at the same time overcoming difficult social conditions. Regularly, in these coverages sport seems to generate a stronger belief in themselves, and the athletes develop trust in a special significant other in order to direct and motivate them (cf. SvT Sport 2024; see below, 'the case of Elijah Clarence').

Correspondingly, cultural hinderance works as an exclusion in many sports and is a regular theme of 'success against all odds' as portrayed in television shows. (cf. SF Anytime 2015). In fact, successes in most winter sports in Sweden are, obviously, hard to reach for immigrants and individuals with a foreign background, due to the lack of experience as well as the cultural hegemony in these sports. A few, with a different cultural background, who have succeeded, do capture the media's attention (Näsman 2020; see below, 'the case of Alen och Almen Bibiç')

In relation to geographic barriers, e.g. athletes situated in southernmost Sweden, with rare snow conditions, who chose to pursue a career in skiing, or another winter and outdoor sport, are regularly portrayed as doing this 'against all odds', and they are admired as well as exalted, due to their commitment and efforts to realize their ambition and their'geographically weird', interest (Enström 2022).

To conclude this outline, the narratives in sport media seem to present and praise 'late bloomers', a return to a sport carrier, struggling with demanding diseases, the dealing with lengthy geographical distances, which illustrate a solid commitment to the elected sport, and the accomplishments have, in this perspective, been done 'against all odds'. Being illustratively, this kind of media narratives work as appetizers. In that respect, we must go 'behind the scenes' of sport journalism, in order to initially grasp and understand the characters of these elite athletes, who have made 'sport success, against all odds'. Thus, by three deep-interviews, we will focus on dealing with cultural, social and physical obstacles.

Dealing with physical limitations, an individual case

Håkan Söderstjerna (born 1975), who played football for Landskrona Bois in the Swedish Premier League [Allsvenskan], suffered from dysmelia, but made nevertheless a solid career as a goal scorer, despite, as a shortcoming, having only one arm. (Sandahl 2019). He was, according to the narratives in *fotbolldirekt*: 'A player who stood out. With his irrational style of play, balance and with his heart for Landskrona BoIS' [playing three years in BoIS], in addition to playing in the highest leagues in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands and Singapore, our remark]. And yet, 'for the way he looked, Håkan Söderstjerna became a football star in Allsvenskan [the Swedish Premier League] despite missing an arm' (Sandahl 2019).

Growing up in a small village in southern Sweden, Söderstjerna lived within 50 meters from the sports hall and the football field. He says, in our interview:

> The ball was always in focus. My father also played football in Allsvenskan for Landskrona BoIS, and was also a football coach, so football has always been a part of the family, so it was natural. And I'm also a bit of an 'omnivore', regarding sports.

He was also involved in wrestling at a young age. He consequently claims:

> If it hadn't been for wrestling, I wouldn't have become a successful football player because I built up a basic physique. Balance, torso, strength and agility […]. Of course, I had an advantage. He [my opponent in wrestling, our remark] looked at me and wondered 'how am I going to wrestle down him', and I already knew how to solve it. I always felt strong in my body, so to speak, and it was thanks to wrestling.

Regardless his physical handicap, Söderstjerna does not believe that he has had to validate and assert himself in front of his friends, and claims:

> I've never regarded myself as a person with only one arm. I have seen myself as a completely ordinary person. I've never thought along those lines, not in my career in general. Not as a child either. And it has to do with the fact that I have never been bullied, and I think that has to do with the fact that I always had an easy time asserting myself in all sports from the beginning. […] I was fast, I could jump far, I could jump high, I was good at table tennis and everything you played with your friends. And that made you get some respect; 'the little one-armed guy he's good' […]. I've always been able to participate in everything and in all the games. All sports, whether it was table tennis, tennis or billiards. All with balls. I quickly learned to play billiards. I've never felt like I can't be a part of this. It has never been in my mind.

His father might seem harsh and cruel in his upbringing of his son, but he didn't want to make things easier for him, as preparation for everyday life, as 'self-propelled'. Söderstjerna says:

> I thought it was terribly boring to sit in the hallway and try to learn how to tie my shoes with one arm. But I wasn't allowed to go outside the door if I hadn't tied my shoes, by myself, regardless of the time. But look at me to this day, I can tie my shoes.

His career took off at the age of sixteen when Landskrona BoIS called. The coach was someone his father had played with in Allsvenskan in the 70s. But 'it wasn't because of that that BoIS called', says Söderstjerna. A year earlier, he attended the summer football school at Helsingborgs IF (HIF), the local competitor, which however did not show any interest at the time. But one of Söderstjerna's stronger points is his grit and determination. He says:

> I perceived myself as being able to handle 'kicks' and setbacks, but I could always get up. I was quite stubborn, almost too stubborn. And maybe it has to do with the fact that I was born lacking an arm, I don't know. I wanted to be the best at everything. […] I've always wanted to be the best. My surroundings have experienced that. […] But that's probably my greatest talent. I never gave up. That has been my greatest quality.

To get to Landskrona, he had to get up at six o'clock in the morning, cycle to the bus stop and then take the bus. No one drove him. But at the same time, according to him, he learned to be terribly structured and disciplined.

When asked if he has been provoked by his opponents because of his handicap, Söderstjerna answers:

> Yes, it happened, but very rarely. Surprisingly little, actually. I would like to say that those who provoked had other challenges, mentally. They stood out negatively in other ways and I was able to provoke back, so to speak, in the desire to win.

Besides, he could also see a certain humor in some provocations, such as when HIF's supporters turned a well-known children's song about frogs ('little frogs are funny to see, no ear, no tails, have they…') into a joking jingle. He states:

> It was quite funny when the HIF-fans sang 'little Boisarna, little Boisarna are funny to see. Not arms, not arms have they'. It was funny, I never took offense, it was the opposite, it was pure humor, and they were afraid of me, otherwise they wouldn't have cared […]. I think it's about perspective and being confident in yourself. Yes, I only have one arm, but I didn't think like that. I didn't see myself as a guy with one arm.

Söderstjerna left BoIS in 1997 when the club had poor finances, and he himself had a feeling of wanting to reach higher in his football career. But no bids came, until one from Singapore, who had started a league, and he quickly became a crowd favorite:

> They said there are a lot of people who are here to see you. The rumor spread quite quickly. Many are here to cheer at you, so you know. Here we have a player who doesn't look like everyone else.

He returned rather quickly to Scandinavia and to clubs in Norway, Denmark, in addition to BoIS. In a summary of his career, Söderstjerna reflects on the attention he has received over the years in the following way:

> Every place I've been to has been the same journey: Wow! What an interesting guy! But there has been too little focus on the actual football playing. It's been radio, TV, focusing on the fact that I only have one arm. Enough is enough, I've felt. […] A lot of focus on my disability […] The media liked to do articles and features around me because of my lack of an arm. So, I felt that I got a lot more media time than others who contributed as much, and I thought that was annoying. Many teammates sometimes joked about it.

In the interview he considers, and then concludes, whether his handicap had been a limitation that constrained him to stay at a lower level than his talent and capacity could have led to, since he, considered as the star of the team, was often marked on the pitch. He reasons like this:

> [I]'ve always felt that I was a little too good not to have progressed further (in the football hierarchy, our remark). And I've reflected on it. Would it have been the same today if a guy had come up, who had only had one arm. Had they marked and labeled him in the same way

> then. Does it look different now? Were they afraid of me, as a club, to buy me? It would have been easier to buy me with two arms. With one arm, perhaps, it was more difficult to connect to sponsors and other things.

To sum up, Söderstjerna was raised from early age not to regard his handicap as a limitation, and to handle everyday life as everyone else, in spite of his handicap. His wrestling experience with one arm provided a dividend that proved beneficial for his career as a goal scorer. He perhaps received more media attention because of his 'disability' rather than his top goal scoring, and he has been clever in developing an implicit plan for his career while not focusing on the impediments and obstacles.

Still, paradoxically, Söderstjerna expresses gratitude for the possibility – due to his own commitment and hard efforts – to have had a career in football, 'against all odds', but he still speculates if he could not have progressed further in his career if he had been treated like others and not limited and classified as the 'player with one arm'.

Dealing with cultural and ethnic barriers, an individual case

Alen Bibiç (born 1991) and Almen Bibiç (born 1993) were raised in a small Swedish country village, Rättvik/Leksand (see below), as children to immigrants from Serbia. The town, culturally homogenous and with a solid sense of 'Swedishness' (Stark 2010), was predominately ruled by ice hockey as a national sport (Stark and Andersson 2025) but with hardly any second-generation immigrants in the rinks. Nonetheless, their determination took them to SHL (the Swedish Hockey League), and to clubs as Leksands IF and Rögle BK.

Ice hockey, however, was not the brothers' 'breast milk'. Still, both brothers started to play ice hockey, but rather late in their youths. In addition, the family's connection with sport in Serbia was water polo, handball and football but the brothers chose to engage in ice hockey as a career, and in the following section we will, by an interview, focus on the brothers' reflections on careers, talent, motivation, or hindrances and obstructions. Alen Bibiç states:

> Yes, we started late […] We had no history of hockey in the family and started to play football. […] However, I had friends in the school who hanged out at the hockey stands… [Thus], I also wanted to go to hockey practice.

His brother, Almen Bibiç, adds:

> Allen started playing before me and as a little brother you do everything similar. […] I wanted to be a professional football player… and a goal scorer. It was a little sad when I had to make the decision, in the end, to bet on ice hockey and to succeed as a muddier play (the brothers' recognized signum, our remark).

Concerning the question on being a talent, Alen Bibiç reflects:

> I wasn't a talent at all, in the sense that I had ice hockey in me. That's not that I skated well and wouldn't say that I'm good at handling stick and puck. No, definitely not. However, I had another talent and that was to be able to train… a lot. I had that ability already when I was young. […] Then I don't think I reflect very much on it, but I had an ability to set out a plan, and I want to get there. The goal is kind of over there, somewhere, and then I know how I'm going to get there. I had that ability from an early age.

Alen Bibiç remembers that he didn't even get into the hockey high school 'which is the first selection for the elite', but that he received a try-out contract where the principle was that if he trained all summer 'we'll see how it develops'. Alen Bibiç states:

> For me, it's pretty much enough that I just get a little finger and then I take the whole hand and make a plan: now I'm kind of going to reach that goal, now damn I'm going to take a place and there's nothing else, I couldn't see obstacles in my head. Why shouldn't I take a place, and I never allowed myself to fall because I didn't work hard enough, but I thought that I should work really hard and then it falls on other things.

Of course, there were coaches who have meant a lot and who have been able to put a stop to the careers by declaring that you are not good enough, and as Alen Bibiç puts it: 'then I think that my motivation might have fallen and then I would probably have invested in something else because […] then I would probably have felt that that cannot offer 100% on ice hockey'.

Both seem to have been driven by a good feeling for ice hockey and a passion to get better every day. They grew up, close to Leksand, in 'our cozy apartment' in central Rättvik, where the brothers shared a room covered with Leksand's flags hanging above the computer desk, where they dreamed of Leksands IF, and where they sang their hymns together before bedtime. The family ran a pizzeria, where they had to help, which the brothers have mixed feelings about. Today, as adults, they are quite proud of their family's efforts and the environment in which they grew up. As children, they found it embarrassing and sought some kind of (redress?), and did not like being called 'pizza bakers' at a young age.

They lived very close to a hockey rink and started to play more and more, and came to an environment that they perceived as very positive. Almen Bibiçs remembers:

> We came to an environment where people were kind and there were so many parents who were so kind and had such warmth when you got there. […] They thought it was a bit funny with someone who was from a different culture, that was my feeling, people thought it was a bit exciting, and we have never felt left out. […] The big barrier is probably that people with an immigrant background are never introduced to ice hockey, but if they do get into ice hockey, it's pretty decent.

In addition, their father was gradually included in the culture, and through hockey (and the pizzeria), he started to interact with the locals, which according to the brothers is probably easier in a small community, compared to growing up in Stockholm.

As mentioned, the brothers' talent was their ability to train a lot, and even though it was boring they got out and ran, 'we still did it because our focus was on the goal that was further ahead and that was where we differed from other children'; setbacks were tackled by training even harder. As an example, on difficulties:

> We have had many who doubted us, and we have had our problems at school. […] as well as other people who were very racist. […] I (Alen Bibic, our remark) think that it has also been a kind of driving force for us to succeed. […] If we have (success, our remark) in the Swedish sport, then we will be accepted, and then we will even be able to take a step higher.

Furthermore, Alen Bibiç lifts their character as players and the fans' appreciation, as a success factor:

> We couldn't handle a puck and missed passes, but we always gave 100%, and I think people appreciated that, because they supported these 'diggers', with 100% commitment. We could step down and cover shots as well with our faces. We sacrificed ourselves for the team and for the club brand. […] There was some kind of connection there between us and the fans, I think, because they could see that we were loyal and that we were dedicated to the club (Leksands IF, and later Rögle BK, our remark) for a few years.

In addition, the brothers claim that they have put in an extreme amount of time and have never tried to find shortcuts, while at the same time they have always been open to getting feedback and knowledge from coaches, and have 'always big eyes, big ears and really listened and been present'.

At the end of the interview, the brothers come back to the family, the pizzeria and their origin and relationship with Serbia, as well as the opportunities offered in Swedish society. They got to see their parents working hard in the pizzeria, 'peeling onions' themselves, and at the same time watching other parents who had a better social and economic life, but that was also an incentive for the brothers. Yet, at the same time, they were impressed by their father – who was, as they say, 'brave' – due to his purchase of the pizzeria, since, with no knowledge or experience from is life in Serbia, he had to learn everything from scratch, and thus, there are parallels to the brothers' journey in the Swedish hockey culture.

They also look back and think about what their life in Serbia might have been like, where, in the wake of the war, some relatives are still living in scarceness and want, something they were reminded of during their annual holiday month in Serbia, where they met cousins, who were shepherds. To quote:

> We have, after the war, many relatives scattered throughout Europe, but also those who still live in the former Yugoslavia. […] They [our relatives in Serbia, our remark] believe that hockey is a side job. […] They remain living in poverty. We were constantly reminded, every summer, that our life could have been like this, if our parents hadn't moved to Sweden. We saw youths, our age, who after school had to manage the cows. Is this their everyday life? Shit, we're having a good time!

Another reflection worth highlighting (Alen Bibiç):

> Again, we have parents who fled war and who constantly talked about what opportunities we now as young people have (in Sweden), so we can't 'dirty that chance', now that the opportunity finally appeared […] and then I'll give 100% there as well… So that if we have got the little finger, we will take the whole hand.

They have, of course, greatly benefited from each other during their childhood, and their development into skilled hockey players, which has especially been an advantage in social settings with friends and parties. They have never been interested in alcohol; instead, they have often gone home, done an evening training session, and then 'eaten candy at home and played some FIFA while everyone else was out partying'. Their teammates have been very kind and have invited them to parties, but the brothers have usually declined. In this way, diet, sleep, and nutrition have never been an issue for them—it has been a natural part of their goal-oriented mindset.

Seemingly, beyond the rationality in the talent industry/identification, there is a 'rationality' in the Bibiç brothers' way to a career in ice hockey, developed through and by their own background, life situations, and experiences, which has progressed and amalgamated to an implicit aspiration… to a goal.

Dealing with social conditions, an individual case

This section will highlight reflections on motivation and social background, in relation to sport, made by Elijah Clarence (born in 1998), who has made an elite career playing basketball in the top leagues in Europe. As a start, he grew up with a single and alcoholic mother in one of the more socially disadvantaged areas of Malmö, and with a father (from Trinidad/Tobago) who was 'very distant', according to Clarence. In our interview, Clarence describes his upbringing:

> My mother wasn't there either. It was hard, and she was drunk all the time. I had to be the man of the household. [….] I mean, she gave me freedom, but not quite the freedom you want. The freedom meant that I could do what I wanted, come home whenever I wanted and be out with the boys. We had no one to discipline us and it was scary because I felt that what I do here and now will have consequences.

His education was at a school that was ranked as the worst in the whole country:

> It was like a jungle at my school. […] I missed mathematics, I missed English, Swedish. But instead, I was out playing basketball. […] I still managed to stay straight and then Nick came into my life (see below, our note).

Most of Clarence's friends from this time are in prison or not alive. But basketball came into play early in his life. He had an older brother, from his father's previous relationship, who was a professional basketball player. Through pictures and YouTube clips, Clarence was inspired: 'You looked and thought it was cool. […] So, there we have the entrance to the sport in some way'. Still:

> It was difficult to choose basketball because of the friends and the intersection between what they did and what I felt I was good at and had talent for. That balancing act was tough. However, I would have been lying if I said it was tough all the time. Because, I have always had an inner voice telling me to do what is necessary to take myself to another level. I had to go out and play basketball by myself instead of hanging out with the boys.

At the Malmö Festival, Clarence first met Nick and 'The Entire Malmö [Hela Malmö]', an NGO that organized a mixture of basketball, music and dance, at this festival. Fluently and enthusiastically, Clarence tells:

> It was basketball competitions, and he (Nick) is not only there, but 'on the court', as they say. […] He contributed with some kind of energy that caught me: that he saw me, it was strange. He cared about me as soon as I was there. Maybe because I was there until three o'clock in the morning. I mean I was a twelve-year-old who had gone there on a twisted bike. But somehow, he saw me, and we built a relationship. […] And the next day I came back, and he asked, 'shall we eat something?', so we went and ate and just talked and I got a genuine feeling. […] And then I knew that he was the coach of Malbas (Basketball Association, our note) and then he started coaching me individually. And that's how it started. […] I was seen for who I was. We had personal conversations about what it was like at home. And he was the first person I broke down for. […] He could tell from my attitude that I had a lot inside me. […] That's how our relationship became really strong. And then he took the step to come home to my mother and talk to her. […] And then it resulted in me living with him for two years and not being home once.

The important thing, according to Clarence, is to find something that no one else is doing and 'to tell yourself to take it all the way'. But many, Clarence believes, will say that

it will not happen, but that it is still important to tell yourself that it will happen. 'I believe very much in one's mindset. […] I think a lot of people are too realistic, and if you are, then you're going to be dragged down' (as a self-fulfilling prophecy, our remark). They should be more 'optimistic' and 'visionary', if we interpret Clarence correctly. He expresses the problem in the following way:

> In some way, I feel that it is important that you can get out of this box (i.e. negative mindset, our remark), that you give kids opportunities that they really believe in. […] There are possibilities. […] But suppress their dream, suppress their passion, which happens so often in our society. That people can make us change our beliefs about ourselves. To extinguish our dreams. […] Of course, I'm blessed that I had Nick who kind of pushed me and made me take care of school, to improve my language, to improve my attitude.

When Clarence started playing with the national team, he also got a scholarship to go to high school in the USA, but then there were four schools that said no because of his poor grades. However, it was a school in Maryland that gave him a chance due to a 'down-to-earth conversation with the principal', according to Clarence. Also, of note:

> And I was staying with a host family, and they were former marines, you know 'tough guys, the toughest of them all'. […] Anyway, nice people. Love them to death! They taught me discipline. Every day, if you have done your homework, there is something you need help with. Set up a schedule, eat right. It was a completely different lifestyle than what I came from.

When asked what he perceived as the most serious obstacles in his development and career, Clarence gives a comprehensive picture of social and mental problems that he has had to work with. He states:

> The biggest thing I've had to work on was to change my image of myself; that I must dare to believe in myself, even when it's been hard and difficult. When I was 13–14 years old, the dream of coming to the United States was there. And I believed in it. I believed in it genuinely. That I constantly fed my thoughts with it, and thus, I had to find a way to move on, and from Malmö. I didn't saw anyone do it. […] And on top of that, you knew that there were rumours that my mother was a drunkard, that I had attitude problems, that my schooling was at 'Munkhättan School' (among the worst schools in Sweden, our remark). So, there were a lot of setbacks that I had to overcome mentally, and I didn't know if it would work. But I constantly felt that 'I got to do it'.

Clarence felt like an outsider even in primary school: 'I'm a little different from everyone else, I'm a little louder than everyone else, I'm a little more charismatic than everyone else'. Thus, Clarence states:

> That's how I've always felt, in all the contexts I've been in; in all the teams I've been in. I have a genuine belief in myself and that's what I think makes me different – to be honest. And again: back to a person like Nick. I'm very grateful for that. For sure, I was an outsider, but he wasn't 'normal' either. In the end, he pushed me honestly to be the person I am.

In addition to the contact with Nick, it was, according to himself, the will and drive that set him apart from others. He didn't just regard basketball as an activity, 'but saw it genuinely as a way out of my social circumstances; my environment that I was in, and that desire was stronger than anyone else's'. He concludes the interview by emphasizing that as a coach you must understand that 'not everyone is the same, and that you cannot exclude those who

deviate, because they too may have talent'; something 'inner' that you should make something positive out of: It's about getting them to choose the right path, that's my advice.

Apparently, the experiences and actions of Elijah Clarence is a story of the importance of care and the trust in and from 'significant others' (cf. Kjær et al. 2023) as an illustration of the potency and the force in a latent or an embryonic 'mindset', that needs individually adapted guidance and directions to blossom.

Discussions and conclusion

'All roads lead to Rome' is Geoffrey Chaucer's famous statement from the fourteenth century. That is, however, not the case in elite sport, where we find marked and signed roads, dead ends, as well as one-ways and road barriers. Notwithstanding these signposts – e.g. 'Vägen till landslaget [The Road to the National Team]' – and barriers, we might also detect unmarked sideroads to 'Rome', to the goal. Thus, we imagine that the approach in this article may have significance not only to better understand why some, who should not have been successful in their sport, nevertheless did become successful. Through such studies, we believe, it will be possible to better understand what alternative paths to elite sport might look like. Hence, this approach broadens and deepens research on talent and development environments, and suggests that the system is 'unsettled' and perhaps even 'incomplete', and will continue to evolve (Mathiesen 1982).

The 'scientification of sport' recently has supplemented social science to natural science (Augestad and Hjelseth 2024). From our perspective, a humanistic approach will add further qualities. In addition, one can understand and analyze the 'discipline of thought and knowledge' *via* its expression in traditional notions of talent development and common success concepts in both the everyday life of sport and in accepted research results and profiles (cf. Kerr 2019), thereby challenging the thoughts with alternative experiences, choices and motives.

To stress, the elite athletes in our study have made sport success – 'against all odds' – by challenging various hinderances and obstructions that generally rule out individuals from a sport career. In that respect, they stand as underdogs and outsiders, opposing normality and conformity in sport. Still, they are not to be regarded as outsiders in the model of Elias and Becker. They are not to be regarded as 'deviants', in the sense of classic sociological theory (Becker 2018; Elias and Scotson 1994). On the contrary, these athletes have made serious and vigorous efforts to become included and committed to the 'hegemonic culture' in sports, however based on and related to their specific circumstances. Thus, general theories on resistance do not work as explanations. Still, regardless of theoretical departure, the rationality in the institutionalized talent identification is challenged, empirically, by their efforts and potency, 'against all odds', beyond general thesis on talent development. In that respect, our special subject relates to the dialectics of the 'industry in the identification' of sport talent and possible candidates as elite athletes, and the ideas of sport participations. Accordingly, the launched concept of 'the uncaptured' (Mathiesen 1982) seems to cover our athletes in this study, and their experiences, choices, directions and motives due to being 'outsiders' as well as 'insiders', operating and using qualities from both horizons, for instance, taken advice seriously, as Bibiç brothers, but incorporate these into their own goals.

All in all, in this article we have set out to take the critical sport literature on talent identification and selection processes to an elevated and more complex level by focusing

on a group of individuals who, in practice and 'against all odds'. challenged and overpowered general theses on talents and selections held or criticized by Sport itself or by the Sport Academia. As such, talent development and selection processes can be viewed as 'unsettled' (Mathiesen 1982). For example, all four athletes represent both sides of the aisle on the key debate between early specialization (Clarence) vs multi-sport participation (Bibic brothers and Söderstjerna).

The focus in the study – and the reflections – can ultimately add clearer individual and humanistic aspects in a context of 'social engineering' and structural/functionalist approaches, which to some extent characterizes both the usual search for talent and talent identification as well as the development environment in elite sports. In sum, the following characteristics can be listed:

- Spirit, determination, stamina, and hard training capacity as 'the main talent'.
- Significant others.
- Early pressure to 'fix-things-yourself', regardless of time and inadequate ability.
- The temperament of being an implicit ambassador for an oppressed and marginalized social group.
- Role model, and even a 'negative picture' as a possible distress
- A sense of community and belonging, despite being 'different'.

Despite our ambition, we have not detected common characteristics among our athletes, despite a tremendous will, stubbornness, endurance, an intensive training capacity, the ability to turn disadvantage into a favour, the trust in supporting persons, still being self-propelled, and to regard commitment and hard work as a generator of benefits, even outside of the sport.

Of course, the factors of pathos and the determination demonstrated by 'our athletes are generally settled among sports scholars discussing talent development as well as detected among most athletes at the elite level'. However, the 'spirit' – or character – among 'our athletes' seems to go beyond this general and internal motivation and seems to increasingly draw energy from other forces outside of sport. In general, in our study, the media narratives as well as the interviews present athletes that are, in some senses, hard to grasp and conceptualize according to general thesis on talent development and sporting success, and thus, 'uncaptured' (cf. Mathiesen 1982). However, resolute, pragmatic, and able to identify and exaggerate other individual gifts (Alen and Almen Bibiç and their mutual extensive training capacity, beyond their fellow hockey youths), as well as counter-images (i.e. 'shepherds in Serbia', a criminal, or incapacitated), and thus, a healthily respect for opportunities given by the Swedish Welfare State in companion with the Swedish Sport Movement. After all, there is a chance if you take care of your 'cards' and perhaps include new cards to the play (e.g. motivation by negative pictures, with an inferior and gloomier future). In addition, sport seems to work as a 'lever' or as a 'valve'. Furthermore, Söderstjerna, from early childhood, had to learn to be 'self-propelled', and not to regard his disability as a career obstacle, and this then generated an almost uncompromising mindset. Clarence had a similar mindset, still detected, directed and supported by a trustful sport and life coach, and other 'disciplinarian channels'. For him, sport also presented an 'escape' from difficult social conditions, and as an arena to become a positive representation for the community, which seems to have worked beneficially in their battle 'against all odds.'

It is noteworthy, the interviewed athletes seem to 'overcompensate' their lack of cultural familiarity, physical prerequisites or safe social upbringing:

- Alen and Almen Bibiç, by being highly dedicated to the Swedish society/sport model, that gave them 'an opportunity to fulfill their ambition', as well as their willingness to train hard, and to take advice seriously and implement their plans.
- Håkan Söderstjerna, by not accepting his physical limitation, by being increasingly 'self-propelled', regarding both his everyday life and football. In addition, he profited from overcompensating for his disability and subsequent training and wrestling.
- Elijah Clarence, by connecting with companionship and 'a significant other' beyond a typical coach relationship. Additionally, this deep bond has developed his self-esteem, which has made it easier to separate and distance himself from his previous home environment.

Clearly, they are all strong individuals and they all evidently developed solid social competence and communicative skills, which certainly stand as an advantage in their careers and in their interactions with sports media. Håkan Söderstjerna, för instance, maintains that he received media attention due to his physical handicap. In a similar manner, Alen and Almen Bibiç, as well as Elijah Clarence, attracts the interest of the media because of their cultural or social background. Thus, the 'obstacle' became – by media narratives – leverage for them to exploit and integrate into their ambitions and plans; in other words, they turned reframed deficits into assets.

At the end of the day, sports media – and sport history – requests and needs narratives of the 'outsiders' who have succeeded 'against all odds' beyond the regular talent industry. Thus, the practice of sport espouses some idealistic – and perhaps naïve – sense of 'uncertainty' and 'improbability', contrary to the general rationalization processes, and predictability, in contemporary sport.

As a concluding reflection, there are most likely athletes, comparable to our selections of outsiders, who might have successfully dealt with tough obstacles, 'against all odds'. As a second reflection, there are most likely athletes, comparable to our selections of outsiders, who have failed despite having the identified valuable characteristics and advantages of an 'outsider'.

As a final emphasis, our study has had an explorative as well as an elaborative approach to making an academic and 'pragmatic turn regarding focus', initiating and supporting additional systematic studies. The article's merits will be its explorative and tentative character, in order to illuminate an interesting and challenging subject that needs more systematic research. Evidently, the focus/subject in this article is challenging, as well as rather original, and could easily be expanded to a full-scale and a long-term research program.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Jørgen Bagger Kjær http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7010-3791

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