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Group Dynamics of Vuokatti Sports Academy Cross-Country Skiing Team in 2013 – Perspectives of Athletes and Coaches
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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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The key questions were: what kind of experiences d	o the team members have from being a part of the
what kind of insight do the academy and the coache the academy.	es have into coaching and how it should be done in
·	ncluded essay writing, interviews and analysis of the
The research group was Vuokatti Sports Academy of investigate the overall situation in the cross-country research as well.	

In literature group dynamics is defined as the group members' influence on each other, the performance and reaching a mutual goal. Previous research has shown that conformity to group norms has yielded a positive relationship. Schacter et al. (1951) examined the norm of productivity in a high-and low-cohesive group. Conformity to group norms is greater in teams high in cohesion. Similar findings have been found with sports teams (e.g. Gammage et al. 2001; Kim, 1995).

Language of Thesis	English
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#### 1 INTRODUCTION

According to Evans, Eys and Bruner most individual sport settings involve groups, as athletes often train in a team environment even though they compete individually and often in opposition to their teammates (Evans et al. 2012, 301). Group dynamics in individual sports has not been investigated as much as in team sports, but more information is needed since individual sport environments are diverse and this causes confusion within the team. The group structure as well as the perceptions held by the athletes is not as clear as they could be.

The purpose of this study was to describe the situation that lies in Vuokatti Sports Academy cross-country skiing team at the moment in terms of group dynamics, find explanations behind the research results and provide development proposals for the future. The results of this study are one of a kind because the focus group will change after six months of conducting the study. The aims of this thesis were to develop the group dynamics of the cross-country skiing team and strengthen the bond between Kajaani University of Applied Sciences and Vuokatti Sports Academy. For me this was a chance to learn about the different aspects of sport psychology and especially group dynamics that must be taken into consideration when coaching individual sport athletes. This I view as very important considering my professional development because I hope to work in the field of coaching at some point in my life.

The goal was to gather information with a qualitative research method. Therefore, this research should have provided information that would have helped coaches to understand athletes' point of views better.

I have always been interested in people as a human being is a complex entirety. A person has biological, physiological, psychological, social, spiritual aspects and especially psychological features interests me. Passion for psychology as a subject motivated me to write this thesis on the topic: I intend to pursue a career related to psychology whether it is bound to sports or to other branches of science. Through this work I am hoping to gain valuable

information on sport psychology. I also wish to support a sport that I have felt passionate about all my life.

#### 1 CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

Cross-country skiing has remained as a popular form of physical activity especially amongst adults. After all, it is an outdoor sport that strains the whole body and suits for everybody regardless of age and state of fitness (Heikinaro-Johansson and Huovinen, 2007, 403-407). Sport specific analysis on cross-country skiing includes the required physiological qualities, athlete's physical development through growth and exercise and the forces influencing on the athlete during exercises and competitions. These factors have an effect on athlete's racing speed. Some of these factors are dependent on the athlete but the athlete cannot affect in everything during a competition and those factors are the weather and the features of the track. Because this thesis focuses on sport psychological aspects of cross-country skiing and specifically on group dynamics of a cross-country skiing team, factors such as weather and track profile are considered unnecessary to be explained in this context. However, some important factors need to be explained. Physiology and biomechanics of cross-country skiing are described as well as psychological and social point of views of the sport.

#### 1.1 Physiology

Cross-country skiing is physiologically a demanding sport. As endurance sport cross-country skiing requires a high aerobic capacity but in addition to maximal oxygen uptake, which is traditionally thought the most important, it has been stated that a good skiing technique and the functionality of the neuromuscular system has significance in cross-country skiing. (Rusko 2003, 1; Shepard 2000a, 301).

The significance of the cardiorespiratory system in cross-country skiing cannot be denied. Generally the functionality of a respiratory system is shown as a maximal oxygen uptake, which measures the body's capacity to transport incoming oxygen to the muscles. The unit of measurement is usually ml/kg/min. (Shepard 2000a, 301). Through an efficient respiratory system the athlete gets oxygen to his lungs from the inhaled air, from where it transfers to the circulatory system through the pulmonary alveoli. The circulatory system transports the oxygen-rich blood to the muscular system where it is utilized by the muscles.

The most significant aspect in cross-country skiing is to uphold the highest possible ventilation and tolerate fatigue, because the oxygen uptake of the respiratory muscles during a maximal performance can be up to 5-10% VO<sub>2MAX</sub>. Furthermore, respiratory muscles can produce lactic acid, which can lead to fatigue in respiratory muscles in maximal performance (Rusko 2003, 3) and continues: the effect of the respiratory system in maximal oxygen uptake is significant. The amount of blood pumped through a chamber in the heart in a minute is directly comparable to the maximal oxygen uptake. When determining the performance of the athletes, the mass of red blood cells, haemoglobin and blood volume are the most significant factors.

Cross-country skiing demands endurance from the muscular system. Athletes' muscular system consists of slow twitch muscle cells that have better endurance qualities compared to fast twitch muscle cells, but the difference between athletes and the division of their muscle cells according to their qualities can be significant (Bergh and Forsberg 1992, 576). Especially fast twitch muscle cells are in a relevant role amongst sprinters.

The most important thing in cross-country skiing when thinking of the muscular system is the functionality of the neuromuscular system. Since the power production times are short in cross-country skiing, the nervous system has to function. An athlete is required to produce speed strength. In addition to producing speed strength, anaerobic power production is in an important role with any distance in question. Anaerobic power production is required especially in the sprint but also in greater distances in uphills where the need of the maximal oxygen uptake can raise over 100 ml/kg/min. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the neuromuscular system prevents fatigue and abolishes lactic acid from the muscles (Rusko 2003, 19, 28-30).

As a whole the significance of the cardiorespiratory, circulatory and muscular systems to racing speed is crucial. Athletes who possess the greatest maximal oxygen uptake are usually more successful but the qualities in question do not necessarily determine the performances conclusively.

#### 1.2 Biomechanics

Biomechanics can be considered as a scientific discipline that studies the macro- and microobjects, organ systems and physics of tissues that are under the influence of living forces (Kauranen & Nurkka 2010, 9-10). Cross-country skiing is a sport that is affected by many external factors that determine an athlete's speed. According to G. A. Smith:

Unlike an endurance sport such as running, where physiological capacities are major determinants of performance, and where environmental conditions, equipment and technique have relatively little effect, skiing performance is often influenced by mechanics (2008, 248).

In classical skiing the skis are constrained to run in parallel tracks; the various classical techniques being relatively planar they can be reasonably analysed using two-dimensional methods (Ekstrom 1981, Komi 1985; 1987 as cited in Smith 2008). The forces that direct the athlete are the push generated with the sticks (forward), gravity that direct the athlete down in down hills and in push the force that is generated with the one leg (backwards). The force that the kicks generate depends on the friction between the ski and the snow but also on the athlete's technique to kick at the right moment. Retardant forces are gravity in up hills, friction between the ski and the snow and wind resistance (Smith, 2000, 248-262).

In contrast, the more recently developed skating technique involves three-dimensional motion, which complicates the process of force component determination (Smith 1989; Street & Frederick 1995 in Smith). One of the force components in skating technique is resultant force that occurs when the ski is placed to the ski surface where the force resolves into vertical, propulsive and mediolateral forces that take the athlete upward and forward. When analysing the performance, an athlete does not produce any forces directed to the back, but when directing movements to the sides, it enables the strong leg muscles to work.

#### 1.3 Skier's Psyche

Different sports have different psychological demands and therefore sport psychology and psychological coaching cannot have general instructions for every sport. Since cross-country skiing is a high-intensity sport (high-impact intensity and continuous power output

throughout the performance phase), psychological skills training should differ from similar training directed to other forms of sport. Birrer and Morgan state, "This is remarkable, bearing in mind that the performance-relevant tasks of say a soccer player and a 200 m breaststroke swimmer are very different" (2009, 79), and continue: "However, to systematically support the performance outcome in a specific sport, it is important to know what demands an athlete has to meet in order to choose the most promising and best-adapted intervention." Cross-country skiers are individual athletes and psychological factors they need are self-confidence, sustainability, perseverance and courage. It is also important to be able to tolerate disappointments and set goals, control stressful situations, think constructively and creatively, to be able to relax, calm down and focus (Liukkonen & Jaakkola 2003, 23).

#### 2 GROUP DYNAMICS

Group dynamics is defined as the group members' influence on each other, the performance and reaching a mutual goal. Group dynamic factors influence significantly the athletes' experience on others and how the group's know-how is utilized (Heino 2000, 203). Teamlike behaviour is a part of individual sport settings as well, and therefore athletes' cognitions, emotions and behaviours influence and are influenced by other athletes of the team. Understanding of group dynamics should improve individual and team athletic performance so that the group functions and teams become better.

### 2.1 The Self in Groups

An individual is a biological, psychological, physiological and social entity. Psychological coaching in sports refers to observing, ensuring or improving individual's development, performance, life management and well-being (Heino 2000, 14). Liukkonen and Jaakkola state that athletic performances are results from three co-operative functional systems; cognitions, emotions and physiology affecting in each other (2003, 6). Emotions are a part of interpersonal situations where they serve as a critical source of information to others who respond to these messages either emotionally or behaviourally. Therefore emotions have to be taken into account in sports and exercise settings. According to Latimer, Rench and Brackett "Emotions are short-term feeling states that have certain components including and elicitor (i.e. an internal/external trigger), a subjective experience, a physiological response and behavioural expression" (Parrott, 2001 as cited in Beauchamp & Eys 2007, 3). Athletic performances are full of internal and external triggers that make an athlete behave one way or another. We react differently and therefore personality traits go hand in hand with emotions. Heino suggests that in sports and exercises settings the most significant encounters of personalities are between an athlete and his coach and therefore knowing the athlete's personality traits is extremely important (2000, 33). Traits such as conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neurotisicism and openness to experience have an influence on group dynamics of the team.

Managing emotions can be challenging as the expressed feelings need to be socially appropriate, behaviour socially acceptable and handling difficult situations desirable. "Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to an individual's capacity to process emotion-laden information in order to enhance cognitive processes and facilitate social functioning (Mayer and Salovey, 1997; Salovey and Mayer, 1990, as cited in Beauchamp et al. 2007, 4). It is crucial in competitive sports to learn how to process emotions so that focus remains on the performance. Also, knowing one's personality gives a basis for interpersonal situations.

In cross-country skiing athletes perform mainly individually, and their emotional and/or behavioural expressions may be influenced by others or have influences on others. Therefore, being able to recognize emotions and modify social functioning is important for an athlete. Furthermore, in relay four members of the team work together in order to reach a mutual goal. A team may withhold a competitive edge against opponent teams if the team members are able to perceive emotion in the opponents (Beauchamp et al. 2007, 10).

## 2.2 Leadership in Groups – Coach-Athlete Relationship

Fundamentals of coaching are defined differently by every coach, but some of the them could be expertise in coaching, aims as a coach, goals agreed with the athlete, life experiences, coaching philosophy, coach's personal career as an athlete and his relationship to sports, values and so on. Coaches may also have different ways of managing their work, which is defined by his own personality and by the experiences he has from the field. Coaching can be either authoritarian (commanding and intense instructing) or democratic (negotiating and making mutual decisions) (Heino 2000, 101). As Jowett states "A productive working environment is usually the result of a social environment in which coaches relate, interact and communicate effectively with everyone in the team (Beauchamp et al. 2007, 63). Person's previous experiences, values, education and ability to communicate and interact with athletes define what kind of coach he is.

Coach-athlete relationship develops stage by stage. After meeting one another they have to find mutual working environment, set some rules and then aim for achievements. Coach-athlete relationship is based on the communication between the two (Heino 2000, 110). In line with Heino (2000) Kelley et al. stated: "a relationship is defined as the situation in which

two person's feelings, cognitions and behaviours are mutually and causally interconnected" (1983, as cited in Beauchamp et al. 2007, 64). Emotions and behaviour are bounded to coach-athlete relationship but as long as the relationship is nourished, it can result in positive environment for the team to work in. Jowett explains:

Ultimately, the coach-athlete relationship can act as a vehicle through which each member in the team understands their personal and team goals and objectives, performance roles and start to consciously (or unconsciously) form a sense of groupness and an interdependent team (Beauchamp et al. 2007, 64).

### 2.3 Group Environment

Even if cross-country skiing is an individual sport, cross-country skiers are a part of a team in many contexts. Understanding group environment in that sense is important. Group environment is a combination of role perceptions in sport groups, group cohesion and gendered social dynamics.

Role perceptions can be powerful since there are different types of roles in sport groups. As Bales and Slater (1955) suggested, roles within a group could be differentiated on the basis of the functions they serve (Eys et al. as cited in Beauchamp et al. 2007, 99). Mabry and Barnes (1980) on the other hand suggested that the conceptualization should focus on the level of formality that may exist within the roles (Eys et al. as cited in Beauchamp et al. 2007, 100). The role perceptions within the team can influence on how an athlete feels his place in the team and therefore is an important factor to have a look at.

"Cohesion is considered a distinguishing attribute of successful groups, whether it be in the domain of work, military, sport or exercise (Carron, Shapcott & Burke as cited in Beauchamp et al. 2007, 118). Group cohesion creates communality within the team. For a team to function well, group cohesion should be emphasized.

Interplay between gender and social dynamics should be taken in consideration when investigating a team that consists of both male and female athletes. One aspect could be gender differences; male and female characteristics people are born with and cannot be changed. Krane suggests, "For example, a stereotype that females are more emotional than

males connects the personality characteristic of being emotional to the biology of being female" (Beauchamp et al. 2007, 159). Therefore, some coaches believe that social dynamics among male teams is different than among female teams. That leads to recommendations being made of how males and females should be coached differently. Then how a coach works with a team with both genders so that it accommodates the team functionality?

#### 2.4 Motivation

The greatest sport performances would not occur without motivation. Treasure, Lemyre, Kuczka and Standage explain "Without motivation, even the most gifted performer is unlikely to reach his or her athletic potential" (as cited in Hagger & Chatzisarantis 2007, 153). Then again, people are motivated out of different reasons; for some athletes being an elite-athlete stands for money or social status and for some it may be pure interest to the sport or enjoyment of simply doing it. These internal and external motivators may also be integrated in a way that it is difficult to point out which one actually is the origin of the motivator.

As Ryan and Deci (2000) contend, actions characterized by integrated motivation share many qualities with intrinsic motivation, although they are still considered extrinsic because they are done to attain separable outcomes rather than for their inherent enjoyment (Treasure et al. as cited in Hagger et al. 2007, 156).

Internal motivation consists of three factors that are experienced internally: demonstrated competency, individual's control over something and social cohesion (Liukkonen et al. 2003, 59). When an athlete is internally motivated, he comes to practices primarly on his own account. The motives then are joy and positive experiences caused by the action. When an athlete is externally motivated, he strives for excellence because of rewards and/or sanctions.

For an athlete to thrive within the sport, to reach the feelings of capability and togetherness are important in order to develop internal motivation. A coach creates a psychological environment with his actions and interaction with the athletes, which can endorse or hinder the athlete's development of personality and qualities needed in top performances

(Liukkonen et al. 2003, 56). A coach can influence on the athlete's motivation by emphasizing experiences of competence, autonomy and control over the sport and social cohesion in his actions (Liukkonen et al. 2003, 61).

Motivation state that an athlete can affect on group dynamics positively or negatively. A motivated athlete is someone to look up to to the other members of the team. It creates a positive environment to train and compete. If an athlete is not motivated for any reason, negative talk and appearance can make others underachieve too. Having a good motivation state or lack of it can be a realistic situation in a team having won everything for example in world championships or being disappointed in the team performance.

#### 3 ADOLESCENCE

High school students are 16-20 year-olds, which means that their maturation, physical and psychological growth is unfinished. Compared to adults an adolescent body works physiologically differently, body is composed differently and proportions of the body are still changing. Boys become men and girls turn into women because of hormonal changes. Adolescence is a challenging phase in anyone's life but being a competitive athlete at that age forms some restrictions that need to be considered in coaching.

## 3.1 Physical Growth and Maturation

The growth of children and adolescents is generally divided in three factors that are partially dependant on each other yet independent: 1) physical growth, 2) biological maturation and 3) physiological development (Hakkarainen, Jaakkola, Kalaja, Lämsä, Nikander & Riski, 2009, 74). It is also common that during puberty physical growth and maturation occurs in phases that differ in time: 1) slow growth in early puberty, 2) growth spurt lasting approximately two years and 3) growth slowdown and ending (Mero, Nummela, Keskinen & Häkkinen, 2007, 11). Physical growth can be simply described as the changes in body size, biological maturation refers to sexual maturity and physiological development is explained as differentiation and functional development of the body's organisms. There are individual changes in times how fast an individual matures and grows. The growth factors that have significance in cross-country skiing are neuromuscular and cardio-respiratory systems.

Inherited genes navigate the development of neuromuscular system but external stimulus caused by the growing environment affects on the development as well. The amount of muscle cells is also an inherited quality and cannot be changed or increased largely (Hakkarainen et al. 2009, 91).

Structural length and depth of the lungs change when an adolescent grows in size. Respiratory system and its growth is rarely a preventing factor for an adolescent to perform maximal oxygen uptake exercises (Hakkarainen et al. 2009, 97). The size and capacity of the heart grows accordingly to the growth of other internal organs and reaches the size of 600-600 cm<sup>2</sup> by the age of 18. Heart's left ventricle is responsible for pumping the blood and

therefore its growth is dependent on the stress exercise causes to it. (Hakkarainen et al. 2009, 98).

## 3.2 Psychological Growth

Inherent temperament is the basis for personality development. Personality forms under the influence of temperament and environment (Hakkarainen et al. 2009, 103). Young crosscountry skier is influenced by his parents, siblings, relatives, friends at school, coaches and other skiers. Temperament types in children and youth are divided in categories of easy, challenging and slowly warming. Recognizing the differences in temperament types makes it easier to support one's growth for parents and coaches. (Hakkarainen et al. 2009, 103). All temperament types have pros and cons and there are no rules for handling certain types of adolescents. Interaction between people consists of several personalities and it is impossible to predict how for example a coach with calm personality handles a challenging adolescent – outcomes can be various.

Puberty is mentally a challenging phase for any adolescent. Gaining sexual maturity is not the only major change in adolescent's life. Adolescents become independent and start to think more realistically. However, becoming independent sometimes results in rebellion against any authority by breaking the rules and experimenting matters that belong to adult life, e.g. sex and drugs. Adolescent's self-esteem can vacillate (Hakkarainen et al. 2009, 120). In the first developmental phase of adolescence (years 11-14) the adolescent familiarizes himself to the changing body. The second phase (years 15-17) includes the increased interest towards the opposite or the same sex. At this point it is important that the adolescent accepts both mental and physical changes. The third phase (years 18-22) includes full independency from the parents (Hakkarainen et al. 2009, 121-122).

For any athlete to raise to the top it is crucial that all needs based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs are fulfilled. Physiological needs such as nutrition and living conditions are usually taken care of considering Finnish adolescents, but realisation of needs such as safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization needs can vary between adolescents. In sport and exercise settings for example social needs appear as friendships between athletes and coaches. Learning to socialize in forms of exercises, camps and competitions is crucial for the adolescent's mental development (Heino, 2000, 21).

Vuokatti Sports Academy cross-country skiing team consists of adolescents that possess different personalities, adolescents whose physical and physiological growth is independently unfinished and who are in different phases of psychological growth. Several members of the team have moved from their childhood homes to come to Vuokatti, which means parents no longer belong to their everyday life. Girlfriends and boyfriends do. This all has an influence on group dynamics of the team.

#### 4 RESEARCH TASKS

The purpose of this thesis was to describe the situation that lies in Vuokatti Sports Academy cross-country skiing team at the moment in terms of group dynamics, find explanations behind the research results and provide developmental proposals for the future. The aim of the study was to provide information on group dynamics primarily for the team coaches so that they get tools in improving communality, group leadership, environment and motivation within the group of athletes.

#### The research tasks are:

- What kind of experiences the team members have from being a part of the team?
- Is individual coaching/club coaching more important compared to team coaching in the Sports Academy?
- How does a coach improve communality, group leadership, environment and motivation within the team?

#### 5 RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this thesis was to describe the situation that lies in Vuokatti Sports Academy's cross-country skiing team at the moment in terms of group dynamics, find explanations behind the research results and provide developmental proposals for the future. The aim of it was to provide information on group dynamics primarily for the coaches so that they get tools in improving communality, group leadership, environment and motivation within the group of athletes.

## 5.1 Vuokatti Sports Academy as the Commissioner of the Thesis

Vuokatti Sports Academy is a part of the Finnish Sports Academy Network which is regulated by the Finnish Olympic Committee. The first sports academy in Finland was created in Lahti in 2005 as a project coordinated by Lahti University of Applied Sciences. "The mission of Finnish Sports Academies is to assist young elite athletes to pursue their education, while also training and competing at an elite level" (Väänänen & Kuorikoski, 2010, 1). Sports academies support the student-athletes by organizing professional coaching, testing, providing training facilities, massage and physical therapy in addition to medical, nutritional and psychological services. Lectures are also held on anti-doping and sport ethics. Student-athletes are also equipped with media and life management skills. Sports academies support both team and individual sports, and when individual athletes invest mainly in their personal performances, they still have to work as a team within the academy. When operating as a team is self-evident for team sports, it can be challenging for an individual athlete to become a team member. Vuokatti Sports Academy has been interested in investigating the subject because the coaches have realized that there are questions that should be answered.

## 5.2 Qualitative Research Process

The method used in this study was qualitative. According to Barbour, "qualitative methods cannot answer questions such as 'How many?', 'What are the causes?', 'What is the strength

of the relationship between variables?' It can, however, provide an understanding of how official figures are created through social processes" (2008, 11). A starting point for a qualitative research is to describe real life situations as truthfully as possible. However, reality is diverse. Incidents are shaped by one another simultaneously, and it is possible to find various connections between the incidents during the research process. In qualitative research the subject should be studied as comprehensively as possible (Hirsjärvi, Remes & Sajavaara 2010, 11). As this research is established on experiences and emotions of Vuokatti Sports Academy's cross-country skiing team members, this research method is suitable for the purpose.

The focus group of this research was Vuokatti Sports Academy cross-country skiing team. Qualitative research is known from discretionary sampling. This signifies that the research is often based on a small amount of research material (Eskola & Suoranta 1998; 2000, 61). As the team had approximately 30 student-athletes, it was mutually accepted with the commissioner that they would all participate in the research. However, only 15 participated.

The data for this research was acquired by having the focus group write an essay on the topic, supporting the focus group's given information by interviewing two of the athletes and deepening the information on the topic by interviewing one of the team coaches. The essay included four essay questions on group dynamics within the team, in which all team members answered. The interview was conducted to two randomly chosen athletes of the team, who were informed about the interview in advance. An interview is interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. It is typical for an interview that it is 1) planned in advance; 2) initiated and directed by the interviewer; 3) the interviewer is forced to motivate the interviewee and uphold the interview; 4) the interviewer knows his role and the interviewee learns it; and 5) the interviewee has to trust that the given information will be handled confidentially (Eskola et al. 1998; 2000, as cited in Hirsjärvi & Hurme 1980, 41). The interview used in this research was theme-based interview. In this type of interview the themes of the interview are chosen beforehand, but the interviewer does not have any structured questions nor does he ask the questions in a certain order. The interviewer ensures that every theme is discussed during the interview (Eskola et al. 1998; 2000, 86). "A qualitative interview schedule may simply involve a series of headings or may have a few carefully worded questions which are usually open-ended to allow respondents to elaborate"

(Barbour 2008, 115). The coach's interview was conducted in the same manner, the questions differing from athletes' interview questions.

### 5.3 Implementation of the Research

The results of the research were obtained by means of essay questions and interviews based on predetermined essay and interview structures (appendices 4, 5 and 6). The essays and interviews were gathered in Finnish language and the results were translated into English for this thesis. Fifteen (n=15) student-athletes participated in answering to the essay questions. Altogether three persons were chosen for the interviews: two student-athletes and a coach. One of the two coaches that appeared to the occasion of implementing the research was interviewed. They were told that they could decide which one would participate to the interview. The coaches based their decision on experience – one had more experience on coaching in the academy than the other. The research material gathered from the essay answer sheets was compatible with the material drawn from the interviews, and was concluded to the results. The data gathering was conducted on February 27<sup>th</sup> 2013.

#### 5.4 Qualitative Data Analysis

The data was analysed by coding the essay answer sheets and transcribing and coding the interviews. If the data is collected using a theme interview, the interview framework is a useful tool when coding the material (Eskola et al. 1998; 2000, 152). After the coding was finished, the material needed to be refined to be an actual research.

The essays and student-athlete interviews were used to answer for the first two research tasks and the coach's interview was used to retrieve information for the last research task. However, the line between used research methods according to the focus group and opinions of the coach was not completely strict. Eskola et al. holds the view that: "The first round of answers does not explicitly distinguish the analysis and the interpretation. According to this the hermeneutic deduction process of a qualitative research, so called hermeneutic circle, defines the congruence of analysis and interpretation" (1998; 2000, 149). During the research and analysing process the dialogue between the focus group and the

coach formed and reformed, deepened and engrossed together so that I as a researcher found a deeper understanding on the matter in question.

There are several types of methods that can be used in analysing the material, but according to Eskola et al. one of the fortunes of analysing qualitative data is the profusion of methods (1998; 2000, 161). If one does not function, another one can be applied. The data can be quantified, themed or classified, or content analysis, discursive analysis or discussion analysis can be used. These methods are used on upon the other, which makes the analysis more reliable than when using only one of them. I decided to use content analysis and quantification as my methods of analysing.

#### 6 RESEARCH RESULTS

The first research task, what kind of experiences the team members have from being a part of the team, was answered in the essays and student-athlete interviws. The second research task, is individual coaching/club coaching more important compared to team coaching in the Sports Academy, was also answered with these methods. The essay answer sheet included four open ended questions on coaching and group dynamics. 1) Who belong into your coaching team? 2) Which one is more important: individual/club coaching or academy coaching? 3) What kind of an atmosphere your group has? 4) What the coaches could do so that the team would function even better? In the following I have quantified a few interesting points that caught my attention during the analysing process. In the end of this chapter content analysis of this research material is included.

All 15 student-athletes are coached under the Academy but 66,6% of the group had also an individual coach and 13,3% of them took part in club coaching. 20% of the focus group were only coached by the Academy coaches. Student-athletes also mentioned parents, massagers and friends as a part of their coaching team but they were left out from the investigation due to their irrelevance to this research.

The second question went after the importance of the coaching method. The student-athletes were made to choose which one is more important to them: individual/club coaching or academy coaching. As it is shown on the chart (figure 1), seven student-athletes preferred individual coaching over academy coaching, three of them preferred academy coaching over individual coaching and finally five of them considered both of them important and felt that they benefit from having both coaching methods in their use. It was interesting to find out that 10 student-athletes had an individual coach but only four of them stated it as the most important to them. Out of the remaining six student-athletes possessing an individual coach two preferred academy coaching as the most important and four stated the combination of individual and academy coaching as the most important to them.

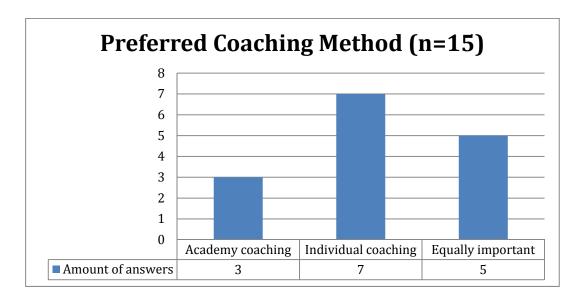


Figure 1. Preferred coaching method.

Third question approached the student-athletes about group dynamics and asked about the team spirit and the atmosphere of the team. A total of 93% of the focus group described the team spirit as good, very good or excellent. Figure 2 describes the division of answers.

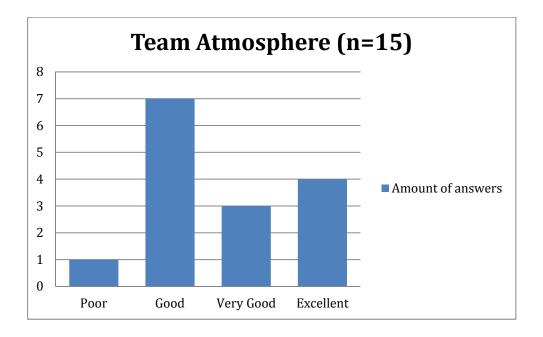


Figure 2. Team atmosphere.

Lastly the student-athletes were asked to suggest what the coaches could do differently in the future in order to improve group dynamics. Four out of 15 did not have an opinion. All four explained not having an opinion by having the feeling that there was nothing to improve in their group dynamics. 11 out of 15 had some kind of proposals for the future.

However, as Eskola et al. describes: "Closing the research after the quantification may leave out a significant amount of relevant information" (1998; 2000, 164). Therefore the content analysis was used to enrich the quantified research results. At first the research material was read through a couple of times. Compiling the themes that rose from the material started after being familiarized with the research material. Subthemes that described the main theme more precisely were compiled under the main themes. On the fourth round of going through the material some themes were eliminated or combined and finally compounded the themes with research tasks. As a result of compiling a content analysis from the research material three themes were classified: individuality, supporting each other and individual coaching.

Individuality' describes the reasons why the members of the focus group preferred either individual/club coaching or academy coaching. Academy coaching was seen as an important addition to student-athletes' coaching team and some student-athletes preferred it the most, but mainly the focus group wanted to invest in individual coaching. Content analysis is seen in appendix 8.

"I personally feel that individual coaching has become more important, but academy/club coaching should not be forgotten."

"Academy coaching provides information in a wider perspective whereas individual coaching focuses on you only."

'It is important that academy coaches understand individual demands of each athlete when implementing exercises."

"I am absolutely satisfied with academy coaching but individual advices are still needed."

'Supporting each other' describes what the focus group thought of group dynamics within their group. The overall feeling arising from the group was supportive. Content analysis is seen in appendix 9.

"Team atmosphere is very good. Everyone supports each other and competing against each others improves us all."

"We can always go to the coaches and talk about our issues – any kind of issues."

"It is great that the coaches have similar policies in coaching. This would not work without them being on the same page."

"A coach is always an authority. They know what they are doing. If they give critique, it may hurt but they are probably always right after all. That is why I do not judge their decisions easily."

"Everyone in the group encourages and helps others and when someone succeeds, we give credit to that instead of being jealous."

"Individual coaching" describes the importance of personal approach to the sport even if the group exercises together. The coaches should put emphasis on individual grasp of coaching (appendix 10).

"There could be more personal interviews or meetings because it is easier to speak up in them than in group exercises."

"The coaches should monitor single athletes more closely. There should be more time for individual coaching. Development should be monitored with different kinds of tests."

"The coaches could take in consideration individual needs of each athlete in training."

The coach's interview showed the coach's point of views concerning group dynamics of the focus group and proposals of how to improve the group functions. The main message of the interview was that the coaches wish to co-operate more closely with the student-athlete's individual coaches.

"Connection between athletes and coaches vary a lot... Some athletes are easy and flexible, others are shy and challenging... And I guess you could say it gets easier when they are third graders... They come for advices more easily."

'Probably it is the trust... it should be raised to the same level... Maybe through that we could cooperate better with the individual coaches. We organize meetings but they don't ever come. Of course it's a question of money — no-one pays them for coming... Their travel expenses. But as soon as we could get that kind of contact that we could talk face-to-face... It would probably help with that."

#### 7 DISCUSSIONS

In this final chapter, the research and succeeding in completing it is assessed. Ethicality and reliability of this thesis are also discussed. My professional development during this writing process is evaluated as well.

#### 7.1 Research Evaluation

I was very motivated from the beginning to conduct this research and especially writing the thesis plan was pleasant. I understood the importance of a solid theory base for a research and wanted to invest in it. The challenging part of this process came after the data collection. I was very excited doing the hands-on work when gathering the data, but initiating the analysis was extremely difficult. There were two reliability issues that rose from the research analysis process.

First of all, this investigation was supposed to focus on group dynamics within a group of cross-country skiers. The academy included their biathletes to the investigation as well, and I noticed this later on during an interview with a student-athlete. Cross-country skiers and biathletes exercise partly together, but this caused uncertainty to myself in knowing into which group a student-athlete referred in his/her essay or interview answer. I could not distinguish were they referring to cross-country skiers, biathletes or both. Therefore this research does not reliably answer to the original question on group dynamics within cross-country skiers.

Secondly, some of the essay and interview questions were not comparable to the research tasks. This I view as a result of my inexperience to conducting a research. The time limits I had set did not give a chance to analyze the essay and interview questions more closely. However, each essay and interview question gave valid information to the academy coaches but concerning the research only, the questions were not accurate and specific enough compared to the research tasks.

Despite of the reliability issues research results showed that the overall feeling belonging into a group is positive and that the coach-athlete –relationships are seen open and sincere.

Both athletes and the coach agreed that co-operation with the individual coaches would improve communality and leadership within the group. I perceive the lack of communication and co-operation with the individual coaches as the biggest issue concerning communality, leadership, environment and motivation. The individual coaches are not present but they act as a background influence, and that causes uncertainty of how everything should be handled with each student-athlete. The majority of student-athletes are wishing for individual touch on coaching and this would be improved by developing the communication and co-operation between individual coaches and academy coaches. In order to increase the feeling of communality within the group, it would be good to include the individual coaches to the group as well.

"Group dynamics in sports is still a comparably young field for researchers and practitioners" (Kleinert et al., 2012, 425). Research around group dynamics and even more taking the expertise to practice is still unsatisfying even though the progresses and concepts of group dynamics have reached a high importance rate amongst researchers. Therefore this subject was challenging to myself as well – there was not as much theoretical information on the subject as I thought there would be. Previous studies on the same subject have shown that field studies and experimental research has to be conducted with two main aims: showing whether theory-driven interventions are effective and examining whether these interventions are acceptable and applicable in practice (Kleinert et al., 2012, 429-430).

### 7.2 Ethicality and Reliability

Ethical values are important when doing any kind of research. Instructions on research ethics were kept in mind during the writing process. Honesty, integrity, carefulness, openness and respect are the principles that have been considered in this research.

Confidentiality and anonymity of the focus group was fully taken in consideration. Respecting human dignity is a starting point for forming the focus group (Hirsjärvi et al. 2010, 25). It also includes anticipating the effect of sampling strategies and identifying of individuals (Barbour 2008, 87). Also, analyzing the essay answers and recordings required precision in order to make findings that are truthful and reliable. Peräkylä states:

In research practice, enhancing objectivity is a very concrete activity. It involves efforts to assure the accuracy and inclusiveness of recordings that the research is based on as well as efforts to test the truthfulness of the analytic claims that are being made about those recordings. (2004, 283.)

Furthermore, it is quite common to request the focus group to sign an informed consent form. This is a way of preventing any kind of manipulation during the research process (Homan 1991, 71 as cited in Hirsjärvi et al. 2010, 25).

Confidentiality and anonymity were taken into account by letting the athletes decide whether they want to participate in the research or not and designing the essay answer sheets and consent forms so that the athletes could not be identified from them. After analyzing the research material it was disposed.

As I was the only person handling the research material, I kept in mind the ethical principles of making a research. Researchers have to be honest in every phase of the scientific research.

A written consent form taken from each participant of the study was a safety issue that I wanted to take into account. Also, a safe working environment throughout the research and especially while interviewing was an important matter.

#### 7.3 Personal Development

Writing a thesis requires a significant amount of hours of sitting, reading and writing. It can be challenging to find a topic that interests enough to make research on - especially when conducting a research for the first time as an undergraduate. At first the process seemed difficult and the goal impossible to reach but as I got started, the investigation swept me along. I have experienced this process as such; very interesting and educating.

Kajaani University of Applied Sciences as my home university and Camosun College, Victoria, Canada, as my exchange university have given me a deep understanding of the field of sports. Especially the knowledge I acquired in sport psychology during my exchange year has supported the thesis process. During the studies completed abroad I already have experience on recorded interviews, transcribing and analyzing, which gave me confidence to conduct this research.

Because cross-country skiing has a strong national status in Finland, I thought that investigating this topic would serve at least a small part of our future elite skiers. I want to find out how individual sport athletes work in a group and how the team's situation can be improved if the findings show negativity that influence on the team remarkably.

As a future sport instructor I wish to work with cross-country skiers and invest especially in psychological aspects of this sport. I am very fortunate that I was able to write my thesis on a topic that interests me. This learning process is a good foundation for that.

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# LIST OF APPENDICES

- Consent form 1
- Consent form 2
- Consent form 3
- Essay questions for the athletes
- Interview questions for the athletes
- Interview questions for the coach

# HYVÄ TUTKIMUKSEEN OSALLISTUJA,

Olen liikunnanohjaajaopiskelija Kajaanin ammattikorkeakoulusta ja teen opinnäytetyötä ryhmädynamiikasta maastohiihdossa.

# Mitä ja miten tutkitaan?

Vuokatin urheiluakatemian Opinnäytetyöni tarkoituksena ymmärtää on maastohiihtojoukkueen toimintaa ryhmänä. Vuokatin urheiluakatemian tavoitteena on kehittää urheilupsykologiaan liittyvää osaamista valmennuksen saralla. Jotta valmennustyötä voidaan jatkossa kehittää, tarvitsen tutkimuksen toteutusta varten tietoa ryhmän toiminnasta. Tutkimustieto kerätään esseevastauksin, joihin ryhmänne vastaa. Hävitän tutkimusmateriaalin opinnäytetyön valmistuttua.

#### Tietosuoja

Kaikki tutkimukseen liittyvä tapahtuu luottamuksellisesti, tutkimukseen osallistujia ei mainita nimillä tutkimuksessa ja tutkimusaineistoa säilytetään huolella. Opinnäytetyöntekijänä minua sitoo vaitiolovelvollisuus, ja antamanne vastaukset jäävät ainoastaan minun käyttööni. Käsittelemme keräämämme tiedot laadullisin menetelmin. Tulokset raportoidaan siten, etteivät yksittäisen henkilön tiedot ole niistä tunnistettavissa. Tutkimukseen osallistuminen on vapaaehtoista kirjallisen suostumuksen perusteella. Pyydän suostumustanne oheisella lomakkeella. Teillä on oikeus kysyä lisätietoja ja vastaan mielelläni kysymyksiinne.

Ystävällisin terveisin, Mira Bergqvist Kajaanin ammattikorkeakoulu Liikunnanohjaajaopiskelija spo9smirab@kajak.fi 040 548 5729

#### SUOSTUMUSLOMAKE TUTKIMUKSEEN OSALLISTUMISEKSI

Olen saanut riittävästi tietoa opinnäytetyöstä Group Dynamics of Vuokatti Sports Academy Cross-Country Skiing Team – Perspectives of Athletes and Coaches, ja sitä varten tarvittavasta aineistosta. Olen tietoinen siitä, että osallistumiseni/lapseni osallistuminen on vapaaehtoista, ja että voin/hän voi keskeyttää osallistumisen milloin tahansa ilman, että se vaikuttaa mitenkään kohteluuni/hänen kohteluunsa nyt tai vastaisuudessa.

Ymmärrän, että antamiani vastauksia/lapseni antamia vastauksia käsitellään ehdottomasti luottamuksellisesti. Tulokset raportoidaan siten, etteivät henkilötietoni/lapseni henkilötiedot ole niistä tunnistettavissa. Osallistun/lapseni osallistuu vapaaehtoisesti tutkimukseen ymmärtäen, etteivät tutkimuksen tekijät luovuta henkilökohtaisia vastauksiani/lapseni vastauksia kenellekään ulkopuoliselle.

Nimeni/lapseni nimi
Osallistun tutkimukseen Lapseni osallistuu tutkimukseen
Paikka ja aika
Allekirjoitus
Nimenselvennös

#### SUOSTUMUSLOMAKE HAASTATTELUUN OSALLISTUMISEKSI

Olen saanut riittävästi tietoa opinnäytetyöstä Group Dynamics of Vuokatti Sports Academy Cross-Country Skiing Team – Perspectives of Athletes and Coaches, ja sitä varten tarvittavasta aineistosta. Olen tietoinen siitä, että osallistumiseni on vapaaehtoista, ja että voin keskeyttää osallistumiseni milloin tahansa ilman, että se vaikuttaa mitenkään kohteluuni nyt tai vastaisuudessa.

Olen tietoinen siitä, että antamani haastattelu nauhoitetaan. Ymmärrän, että antamiani vastauksia käsitellään ehdottomasti luottamuksellisesti. Tulokset raportoidaan siten, ettei henkilötietoni ole niistä tunnistettavissa. Osallistun vapaaehtoisesti tutkimukseen ymmärtäen, etteivät tutkimuksen tekijät luovuta henkilökohtaisia vastauksiani kenellekään ulkopuoliselle. Luotan siihen, että haastattelija hävittää nauhoitetun haastattelun opinnäytetyön valmistuttua.

Osallistun haastatteluun
Paikka ja aika
Allekirjoitus
Tion and all and war

# ESSEEKYSYMYKSET URHEILIJOILLE

- Keitä kaikkia valmennustiimiisi kuuluu?
- Millainen ryhmähenki akatemiajoukkueessanne on ?
- Kumpi sinulle on tärkeämpää, yksilö/seuravalmennus vai akatemiavalmennus? Perustele.
- Mitä valmentajat voisivat tehdä, että joukkue toimisi vielä paremmin?

#### HAASTATTELUKYSYMYKSET NUORILLE

- Asutko yksin/perheen/kämppäkaverin kanssa?
  - Miten kotiolot vaikuttavat harjoitteluusi ja koulunkäyntiisi?
- Onko sinulla omaa valmentajaa?
- Pidätkö omaa/seuravalmennusta tärkeämpänä kuin akatemiavalmennusta?
  - Miksi?
- Millainen ryhmähenki joukkueellanne on?
- Onko joukkueellanne "johtajatyyppiä"? Mitä muita rooleja joukkueestanne löytyy? (Esim. valittaja, kritisoija, rakentava kommentoija, päättäjä, myötäilijä, kuuntelija).
- Miten sinä vaikutat/yrität vaikuttaa ryhmähenkeen?
- Kysyvätkö valmentajat koskaan sinun/teidän mielipiteitä? Meneekö yhteinen keskustelu vain tiedottamiseksi?
- Ovatko joukkueen jäsenten antamat mielipiteet ajatuksia ja ehdotuksia vai puhutaanko koko ryhmän kuullen myös tunteista?
- Uskaltavatko joukkueenne jäsenet puhua suoraan joukkueen kehityskohteista?
- Eroavatko valmentajat toisistaan? Suhtautuvatko urheilijat eri tavalla eri valmentajiin?
- Ottavatko akatemiavalmentajat sinut huomioon?
- Mitä ajattelet valmentajan sinua kohtaan esittämästä kritiikistä?
- Onko sinun helppo sulkea kritiikki pois mielestäsi kilpailun aikana ja keskittyä suorittamiseen?
- Miten käsittelet kilpailun ja sen aiheuttamat kritiikin jälkeenpäin?
- Vaikuttaako hiihdosta aiheutunut stressi muuhun elämääsi?

# HAASTATTELUKYSYMYKSET VALMENTAJALLE

- Millaista urheiluakatemiajoukkueen toiminta käytännössä on?
- Vaikuttaako lukion luokkajako harjoitteluryhmiin?
- Mikä on käsityksesi valmentaja-valmennettava suhteesta?
- Miten valmennusyhteys valmennettavien kanssa tällä hetkellä toimii?
- Miten toivoisit valmennusyhteyden ja yhteistyön toimivan?
- Mikä merkitys tunteilla on joukkueen toimintaan?
- Puhuvatko urheilijat tunteistaan?
- Miten valmentajat käsittelevät urheilijoiden tunteita?
- Mitä työkaluja valmentajilla on tunteiden käsittelyä varten?
- Millaisia tunteita on helppo/vaikea kohdata?
- Miten syksyisin saapuvat uudet opiskelijat vaikuttavat ryhmän toimintaan?
- Onko urheilijoiden välillä kahnauksia? Onko sanailua, kritiikkiä ja kuohuntaa?
- Uskaltavatko urheilijat puhua joukkueen kehittämiskohteista suoraan?
- Miten yhteistyö muiden valmentajien kanssa toimii?
- Millaista tukea valmentajat saavat lajiliitolta tai urheiluakatemian johdolta?
- Toimivatko urheilijat itsenäisesti, vai onko valmentaja kaikkivoipa pelastaja jota joukkue vain ja ainoastaan kuuntelee?
- Onko joukkueessa rooleja?
- Miten tärkeänä roolien tiedostamista joukkueen toimintaan nähden valmentajien keskuudessa pidetään?
- Mitä keinoja valmentajilla on roolien tutkimiseen?

- Mitä konkreettisia parannuksia haluaisit itse tehdä, jotta joukkue toimisi yhtenäisemmin?

# SISÄLLÖN ANALYYSI TAULUKKO 1. Nuorten hiihtäjien vastauksista poimitut ilmaukset sisällön analyysin avulla luokan "yksilöllisyys" muodostamisesta

Aineiston pelkistäminen, ryhmittely sekä abstrahointi		
Alkuperäisilmaisu	Pelkistetty ilmaisu	Luokka
"Henkilökohtaisesti yksilövalmennus on tullut tärkeämmäksi, mutta ei saisi unohtaa akatemia/seuravalmennusta"	"yksilövalmennus on tullut tärkeämmäksi"	
"Akatemiavalmennuksessa saa tietää asioita laajemmin ja yksilövalmennuksessa taas on hyvää se että silloin keskitytään vain sinuun"	"keskitytään vain sinuun"	
"On tärkeää, että akatemiavalmentajat ymmärtää henkilökohtaisia vaatimuksia toteuttaessaan harjoituksia"	"henkilökohtaisia vaatimuksi	a"
"Koen yksilövalmennuksen tärkeämmäksi, koska silloin valmennus on kaikkein henkilökohtaisinta ja tarkinta. Akatemia- valmennus on mainio lisä."	"yksilövalmennuksen tärkeär	mmäksi"
"Minulle yksilövalmennus on kaikkein tärkeintä. Totta kai akatemiavalmennus "y on myös ja se, että saa treenata porukalla"	yksilövalmennus tärkeintä"	yksilöllisyys
"Koen akatemia- ja yksilövalmennuksen yhtä tärkeiksi. Yksilövalmennuksessa perehdytään täysin minuun itseeni."	"yhtä tärkeiksi"	
"Yksilö! Koska hiihto on hyvin pitkälti yksilölaji, täytyy henkilökohtaista valmennusta olla tässä iässä entistä enemmän."	"yksilö"	
"Yksilö ja akatemiavalmennus kulkevat käsi kädessä. Molemmat tukevat toisiaan."	"tukevat toisiaan"	
"Koen yksilövalmennuksen itselleni tärkeämmäksi. Oma valmentajani on myös se henkilö, joka on itseni ohella vastuussa onnistumisistani ja epäonnistu- misistani"	"yksilövalmennus tärkeämm	äksi"

# SISÄLLÖN ANALYYSI TAULUKKO 2. Nuorten hiihtäjien vastauksista poimitut ilmaukset sisällön analyysin avulla luokan "kannustaminen" muodostamisesta

Aineiston pelkistäminen, ryhmittely sekä abstrahointi		
Alkuperäisilmaisu	Pelkistetty ilmaisu	Luokka
"Ryhmässä myös kannustetaan ja autetaa muita ja silloin kun joku onnistuu hyvin sitä myös kehutaan, eikä olla kateellisia"	n "kehutaan, eikä olla kateellisia"	
"Kaikki tukee ja kehuu hyvistä suorituksi	sta" "tukee ja kehuu"	
"Treeneissä tunnelma on kannustaa ja huonoja ja hyviä hetkiä voi purkaa toisten hiihtäjien kanssa"	"treeneissä tunnelma on kannustaa"	kannustaminen
"Akatemiajoukkueessamme on mielestäni hyvä ryhmähenki. Se on kannustavaa. Ryhmässämme tuetaan heikoilla hetkillä ja kannustetaan eteenpäin"	"hyvä ryhmähenki on kannustavaa"	
"Ryhmähenki on kannustava ja tukeva"	"kannustava ja tukeva"	

# SISÄLLÖN ANALYYSI TAULUKKO 3. Nuorten hiihtäjien vastauksista poimitut ilmaukset sisällön analyysin avulla luokan "henkilökohtaisuus" muodostamisesta

Aineiston pelkistäminen, ryhmittely sekä abstrahointi		
Alkuperäisilmaisu	Pelkistetty ilmaisu	Luokka
"Kuunnella joissakin tilanteissa urheilijoita"	"kuunnella"	
"Valmentajat voisivat panostaa vieläkin enemmän yksilölliseen valmennukseen"	"yksilölliseen valmennu	kseen"
"Ehkä henkilökohtaisia haastatteluja/ palavereja voisi olla enemmän, niissä kuitenkin asiat voi sanoa suoremmin ja paremmin kuin yhteistreeneissä"	"henkilökohtaisia haastat palavereja"	teluja/
"Valmentajat voisivat olla vielä kiinnostuneempia urheilijan toiminnasta"	"kiinnostuneempia urheilija toiminnasta"	an
"Tarkkailla enemmän yksittäisiä hiihtäjiä. Enemmän aikaa henkilö- kohtaiseen valmennukseen. Tarkkailla kehitystä erilaisilla testeillä ja niiden analysointia lisätä"	"yksittäisiä hiihtäjiä/enemm aikaa henkilökohtaiseen valmennukseen"	iän henkilökohtaisuus
"Valmentajat voisivat ottaa valmennuksessa hieman paremmin huomioon jokaisen urheilijan henkilökohtaiset tarpeet harjoittelussa"	"henkilökohtaiset tarpeet harjoittelussa"	
"Valmentajat voisivat pitää haastatteluja useammin jotta ajatuksia ja kysymyksiä olisi helpompi esittää kuin treenin lomassa"	"haastatteluja useammin"	