



PLEASE NOTE! THIS IS PARALLEL PUBLISHED VERSION /
SELF-ARCHIVED VERSION OF THE OF THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.
This version *may* differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Author(s): Ojala, Anna-Liisa

Title: Nurturing and sidelining capitalism in discourses of player potentiality in Finnish ice hockey

Year: 2021

Version: Accepted manuscript

Please cite the original version:

Ojala, A-L. (2021). Nurturing and sidelining capitalism in discourses of player potentiality in Finnish ice hockey. *Sport in Society* 24, 9, 1574-1589. DOI: 10.1080/17430437.2020.1763309

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2020.1763309>

Nurturing and sidelining capitalism in discourses of player potentiality in Finnish ice hockey

Anna-Liisa Ojala

School of Professional Teacher Education, Jyväskylä University of Applied Sciences,
Finland

Piippukatu 11, FI-40100 Jyväskylä, +358447426246, ojala.annaliisa@gmail.com

Grants and acknowledgements: This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant 296564. The author would like to thank the research group of the Cold Rush Project for their valuable insights with regard to the research topic and data.

Abstract

Ice hockey is an established site for talent identification and development in Finland. In this ethnographic study, I examine the discourses that top gatekeepers of Finnish elite junior hockey construct and favour with respect to the human capital potentiality of ice hockey players. Building upon Foucauldian discourse analysis, the study identified two competing discourses within the Finnish ice hockey domain. The dominant one considers a player to be a capital investment, and the aim is symbolic and economic success; the lesser discourse looks at a player as an individual with potential that can be nurtured with the right attitudes and conditions. Together, these discourses create a social space in which up-and-coming hockey players' talents are identified and decisions are made about their possible future athletic careers. These conflicting discourses create tensions for coaches—that is, whether they must obey commercial logic despite their own motivation for working with junior athletes.

Keywords: ice hockey; sports career; professional sports; potentiality; human capital; talent identification

Introduction

Professional team sports form markets in which a team's vitality depends on the competitive balance of the whole league. Spectators desire success for their own team, but if that success is guaranteed, the sport loses its attractiveness (Gratton and Taylor 2000, 193–197).

Therefore, every professional team aims at victory in fair, tense matches, and many leagues restrict the over-dominance of big-revenue teams with internal regulatory mechanisms, such as player market restrictions (Gratton and Taylor 2000, 197). These restrictions of the player labour market also increase the importance of and speculation around up-and-coming talent. Seasonal and long-run outcomes cannot be ensured by buying reliable but expensive players; teams must also think about future talent and its development. Predictions on the potential of young players belong to the field of *talent identification*, which is at the centre of high-performance sports coaching, research and administration (Baker et al. 2017). These speculations and predictions are also the focus of the present study.

Ice hockey scouts, coaches and sports managers are key persons in identifying and developing talent in the transition phase of junior and professional sports. In addition to 'recognizing participants with the potential to excel in [a] particular sport' and 'providing the most appropriate learning environment to realize this potential' (Vaeyens et al. 2008, 703), hockey professionals working at the nexus of sports, media and markets must also pay attention to the qualities needed to perform and to sell well, both individually and as a team outside the ice (Kelly and Hickey 2009). However, when these gatekeepers work with junior athletes, they are also attached to expectations related to positive youth development

(Coakley 2011; Holt and Sehn 2008). In addition to improved motor skills, sports is considered to enhance the psychosocial development and physical health of the participants (Côté, Strachan and Fraser-Thomas 2008), which, again, are not necessarily the first priorities of professional sport as a business. Talent identification and player management are risk management for professional teams, and every player has to demonstrate his value and be willing to undertake the demands of the professional logic (Kelly and Hickey 2009).

Although talent identification and development are much studied (cf. e.g. Simonton 1999; MacNamara and Collins 2014), previous studies are centred upon physical factors, and they often neglect the processes of talent identification (Baker et al. 2017). The present study contributes to research on the talent identification process by investigating the intersection between youth sports and business. The interplay of these two different priorities—talent development for commercial elite sports and positive youth development—from which professionals may construct their discourses (Foucault 1972, 51) provides a rationale for studying the discourses around talent identification and development in elite (male) junior hockey, asking the following question:

What kinds of discourses do gatekeepers of professional ice hockey construct and favour with respect to the talent identification of young ice hockey players?

A high-performance junior hockey team operates at the nexus of developing talent for elite commercial sports markets and positive youth development, offering an apt framework for this study's examination. After introducing the theoretical background, context and methods of the study, I will discuss the findings, which indicate that the discourses around player potentiality form a social reality in which capitalism is both nurtured and sidelined in the day-to-day practices of Finnish ice hockey player development.

State of the art

The ice hockey system context

Previous studies on talent identification and selection have made it clear that predicting talent is not easy (Lund and Söderström 2017; Cushion and Jones 2006). Some important qualities for top athlete performance in adulthood may appear in late adolescence or young adulthood, and talent conceptualization may neglect potentially talented athletes (Simonton 1999; Abbott and Collins 2002; MacNamara and Collins 2014). By its nature, talent development is non-linear (Gulbin et al. 2013). Furthermore, athletes must face and cope with a range of demands, stressors and transitions during their careers; this means that they need skills and capacities beyond physical sporting skills in order to be successful (Fletcher and Sarkar 2012; Stambulova et al. 2015). For example, on the brink of their professional careers, young hockey players must cope with high training loads, along with other stressors and demands, such as schoolwork and peer and romantic relationships (Ojala 2018).

All these complicate the decision-making processes of player recruitments, which led me to treat talent in sports as human capital (Schuller and Field 1998; Feher 2009). On the one hand, this allows for the consideration of professional sports athletes as members of the entertainment industry's labour force; in such a labour market, excelling at sports is an essential quality-defining talent, but it is not the only one. On the other hand, this characterization allows for the acknowledgment of day-to-day athletic career management skills at the transition phase of junior and professional sports (Ojala 2018), which may be crucial in achieving professional careers.

In Finland, ice hockey is the most popular spectator team sport (e.g. Purhonen et al. 2014) and one of the most popular sports hobbies amongst Finnish boys (Blomqvist et al. 2019). The popularity of the sport is also reflected in the professional markets. The national hockey league, *Liiga*, is the only fully professional sports league in Finland (Laine 2017). In a country of just 5.5 million inhabitants, hockey is therefore the most likely sport in which to make a profitable, sports-related career and the most lucrative sports market for talent

identification and development. However, this popularity also sets ethical responsibilities, requiring that hockey representatives consider junior careers from the perspective of positive youth development. All potential junior players do not reach the professional level, and yet a whole team of motivated and disciplined minds and bodies is needed to produce a few lucky professionals (Ojala 2018). Thus, nurturing the aspirations and the ideology of positive development is as crucial for the high performance of sports clubs as it is for the efficient talent development and identification of clubs operating at the interface of profit and non-profit sports.

Unlike junior teams, professional teams do not have positive youth development on their agendas. Recruitment is always a financial risk for sports clubs (Kelly and Hickey 2009). The teams in the professional hockey leagues in Finland and abroad have significant financial investments at stake in every player, match and season. The payroll for team salaries in National Hockey League (NHL) teams in North America in the 2018–2019 season ranged from around US\$66.5 million to US\$82 million, including performance bonus cushions (The Nation Network 2018). In the same season, the budgets of Finnish league teams varied from US\$3.9 million to US\$8.7 million, of which about one third was earmarked for player salaries (Jääkiekkolehti 7/2017, 8).

Young players are rarely ready to take on a big role in the professional rinks. However, the fact that they are cheap and will take over in the future means that efficient junior sports curricula, especially at the under-20 (U20) team level, are in the interest of professional teams.

U20 teams operate at the intersection of junior and professional sports. Some of the players in Finland play with professional or semi-professional contracts, whereas other players pay a small amount of money in order to play on the teams.

Theory

I consider discourses to be strategic fields that allow certain power relations to take place and become apparent and that allow certain resources, which are either available or out of reach, to be utilized (Foucault 1977). The discourses on talent identification in ice hockey are materialized, for example, in the categorizations at junior hockey player tryouts or in game lineups, as well as in the everyday observations, conversations and interventions of sports coaches, scouts and sports managers about which prospective candidates have enough potential talent to warrant investment (Foucault 2006). Controlling a discourse of talent is a form of domination, as it construes knowledge and contributes to the production of a particular world order (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002). The notions of talent and potentiality are and become ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972, 49). They create what Michel Foucault would call *truth* (Lorenzini 2015)—a way of rationalizing the world in which future hockey careers and players’ self-perceptions are built.

Control, in the case of coaches, sports managers and scouts—or authorities of delimitation (Foucault 1972)—becomes possible because these actors are the gatekeepers of valuable player resources. These gatekeepers are important actors in the power network, which is ‘responsible both for creating our social world and for the particular ways in which the world is formed and can be talked about, ruling out alternative ways of being and talking’ (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 14). They conduct the organized everyday talent development, as well as control access to it and to the desired hockey careers. Their roles as coaches, sports managers and scouts give them different vantage points from which to experience and speak about hockey and related resources (Foucault 1972).

To discuss the findings on the discourses that professional ice hockey gatekeepers construct and favour, I utilized Gerd Gigerenzer’s (2014) and Barry Schwartz’s (2005) theories on decision making. As I explicate in the findings section, these theories allow specific player qualities to be treated as decision-making strategies, especially with respect to

commercially oriented discourse. In other words, these theories and previous studies (e.g. Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer 1993; Abbott and Collins 2002; Baker et al. 2017) helped me understand the discursive context in which these qualities come to be defined and the domains in which the discursive practices become present (Foucault 1972). Similarly, I utilized studies on junior sports in Finland (e.g. Itkonen 2003; Aarresola 2016) to contextualize the findings on the discourse related to positive youth development.

Materials and methods

Understanding discourses requires a situated exploration of the everyday conditions and contexts in which talent identification takes place, which is why ethnography was an appropriate method for the present study (Heller, Pietikäinen, and Pujolar 2018). I observed the work of coaches, a sports manager and NHL scouts as representatives of the gatekeeper group, which has access to and control over the discourses related to the skill and potentiality of ice hockey players in Finnish high-performance junior hockey. The sampling followed the typical snowball method (Patton 2002, 237). The sports manager provided crucial access to the field (Amis 2005) by recommending coaches and scouts for the study, who, in turn, recommended other coaches and scouts who might have knowledge about hockey careers and the potentiality of 18- to 20-year-old players in Finnish high-performance hockey. Each gatekeeper had a connection to one or two U20 teams, which I studied ethnographically between January 2017 and December 2017. They were either current or former coaches of the teams or had coached many of the players at some point of their player careers, or scouts who followed the teams in tournaments in 2017.

I conducted semi-structured interviews altogether with six of the current or former coaches, two NHL scouts and one sports manager. Three of these were coaches for U20 teams, two for elite-level men's teams and one for both. Of the six coaches, I observed the work of three at practices, games and game trips, including their communication with one

another and the players at the arena; I also talked to them before and after practices and games and participated in their communication on the bus on two away-game trips. The sports manager I interviewed and observed had worked with many of these coaches and with both teams. Finally, I observed five scouts during tournaments and games as they scouted two U20 junior teams in the autumn of 2017 and interviewed two of them.

The semi-structured interviews dealt with two themes: (1) the roles of the coaches, sports managers and scouts in player development and in the hockey markets and (2) talent identification and development. The latter was examined particularly with questions on the qualities that the scouts and coaches are looking for in players, the qualities which they consider to predict success, and the terms the organizations set for player recruitments. The observations generated follow-up questions on the two themes and brought up insights into how coaches find their roles related to the talent identification of hockey business and the talent development of junior sport. The fieldwork also generated trust on which to build the interviews.

The 564 minutes of recorded interviews were mostly transcribed, although some irrelevant parts were ignored. I transcribed 279 pages of fieldnotes, completing each observation day's transcription within 24 hours of the event. The data were collected in Finnish, and I translated excerpts into English for this paper. The data collection approach, themes, theories, and ethical guidelines and concerns were discussed in monthly meetings with ethnography colleagues who were working on similar topics and methods. These meetings guided and deepened my focus and prepared me to investigate the field with focused questions in mind (Silk 2005).

Discourses often become apparent in situations in which a person feels pressure or an obligation to submit or to modify his/her actions, approaches or speech (Foucault 1981). These pressures and obligations often became apparent in the person's first-hand reactions to

the actions taking place in the field. Thus, informal talks with the study participants and observations of their actions and reactions outside the recorded interviews were as important for this study as the recorded interviews were. In particular, I conducted informal talks with the participants during game trips, which encouraged them to reflect on their views and actions concerning talent identification and development and related investments. The recorded interviews also revealed experiences and expressions of obligation and pressure, of which perceptions of being taken for granted were extreme examples.

I coded the data exploratively by going through the interview transcriptions and fieldnotes to determine how the informants spoke about a player's potentiality from the point of view of their own work. I looked for the different classifications they composed on a player's qualities and how they rationalized these classifications. To verify and strengthen my interpretation of the two emerging discourses, I looked at how the informants position their roles as talent developers and identifiers in relation to these classifications.

I primarily utilized Foucauldian theories on discourses (e.g. Foucault 1972, 1981; Jørgensen and Phillips 2002) when identifying the main discourses circulating around player potentiality. One of the techniques I used at this stage to classify the coded data under different discourses involved post-it notes, which I used to record the most important findings, test different divisions of constraining systems of thinking and acting and consider how they were linked to the exercise of power (Foucault 1981). After this, I utilized theories on decision making and previous studies on talent development and identification (e.g. Gigerenzer 2014; Schwartz 2005; Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer 1993) to understand the findings and deepen my interpretations.

Results: Nurturing and sidelining capitalism with discourses on athletic potentiality

In discourse studies, what is considered truth is truth only in a particular discourse or a set of discourses (Jørgensen and Phillips 2002, 13–14). I noticed a significant difference in how the potentiality of a player was considered in two discourses. In one discourse, a player is a form of capital that should primarily benefit the team, whereas in the other discourse, the same player is an individual with potential that, given the right attitudes and conditions, could be nurtured and further developed for his own sake. These discourses are discussed in the following sections.

The discourse of meeting the expectations of capitalism

The cultural and material context is important for understanding circulating discourses (Grodal and Kahl 2017). Sports is like other branches of capitalism where money is made and risks are avoided by predicting and speculating on value increases and decreases (Fulcher 2004), and player recruitment is a critical part of budget management. A career in professional ice hockey demands the constant demonstration of usefulness and absolute commitment from the player. This became evident in my interviews with NHL scouts and Finnish coaches.

A Finnish Liiga coach explained the expectation that players will demonstrate their usefulness to the team and their prowess in this most prestigious league largely because of the commercial logic of it:

In a U20 team, if you fail in a game, then you fail. If you fail in another game, you can still fix it. But if you fail in the Liiga, where the game is already being played for money, in a way, the ruthlessness of the results shows up rather fast, so if you screw up, you don't necessarily get onto the ice during the game or [get to] play in the next game at all. (Interview September 2017)

The NHL scouts referred to similar requirements in the NHL, except that players are also expected to sacrifice their health for the hockey business, as one scout pointed out: ‘Once you get into the NHL, if your foot is not totally broken, you’ll play because it’s the NHL’ (Interview October 2017). As these informants explained, in the context of the professional leagues in North America and Finland, the competitiveness between teams and players and their successes are closely linked to resources, such as money, position and prestige. Therefore, in this discourse, the aims for player development included performance and success, which is why I called it the *discourse of meeting the expectations of capitalism*. A coach or scout does not feel much responsibility towards the players in terms of their skill development, but in order to be accepted, players must have the necessary potential and skills to benefit the team in its success-seeking and money-making.

According to Barry Schwartz (2005), most good decisions follow six steps: identifying the goals, evaluating their importance, considering the options, evaluating how each option would probably meet the goals, picking the winning option and using the consequences of the choice to modify the goals. For an NHL team, the goals are always to win games and have lucrative seasons, and evaluating the options to meet these goals with up-and-coming players means evaluating players’ potential to help the team win in the future. The goal-oriented approach translates into investments in players, and scouts are they key persons in the investment decisions. However, as one scout observed, his work is to ‘evaluate people, which one cannot evaluate, because the intangibles will always beat the tangibles in this work’ (Interview October 2017). Thus, as in Christensen’s (2009) study on soccer coaches’ talent identification, scouts, sports managers and coaches use their common sense to identify potential players. Gigerenzer (2014), who studies risks and decision making, also addresses intuition in business, suggesting that good hunches, which are called categories in this study, reduce uncertainty in decisions that cannot be solved with probability theories. In

my analysis, I found that hockey scouts rely on the categories of *size*, *exceptionality*, *youth* and *recognition given by others* when evaluating players for the commercial hockey markets. These categories make sense, especially when considered under the commercial discourse, because they are structures that materialize the commercial logic. The coaches and scouts reflect their decisions related to the categories, which show their aspect of moral order (Bergmann 1998). These categories are so widely recognized by sport managers, coaches and scouts that they obligate gatekeepers in talent identification and development.

Size

Hockey is a very physical sport in which body checking is allowed, and there is a significant risk of injuries (Tuominen 2017). Therefore, in this discourse, *size* is an advantage for a player; NHL scouts look for players who can play tough and get back at someone if needed, which often became apparent during observations. As one scout said, ‘a player less than 180 centimetres tall is tiny; 185 is common, but if a player is around 190 centimetres or more, scouts might turn a blind eye to his poorer qualities’ (Interview October 2017). In particular, goaltenders, who are expected to cover the maximum amount of the goal front, need to be big. This was recognized and followed by one of the coaches of junior teams when considering which goaltenders to pick for the team:

A significant predicting factor for a goalie’s elite sports career is size, so we once had two 173-centimetre goalies born in the same year [. . .] and then we had 190 and 185 coming from down [smaller juniors]. And the NHL goalie’s average height may be between 185 and 190. And the joint stock company thinks about business, that can we get some money out of these fellows at some point by selling them somewhere, so it’s more likely you’ll get the 190-centimetre goalie sold to the big leagues than the 173. (Interview April 2017)

In other words, when 17- to 18-year-old goalies were chosen for the U20 team one year, their size and future exchange value were considered a part of their human capital potential. This example shows how the Finnish professional hockey league adopted the category of size

from the NHL, which espouses the extremes of the commercial and goal-oriented logic of hockey. This logic trickled down to the lives of the junior players because of the moral order experienced and obeyed by the coaches.

However, as is common in critical discourse studies, acknowledging that knowledge taken for granted is only one version of social reality is important. On 15 January 2018, I reviewed the goalie rankings (based on save percentage = shots on goal minus goals divided by shots on goal) of the highest hockey leagues of Finland, Sweden and Russia and of the Finnish U20 league. Amongst the top 10 goalies in these four leagues, only two of the first three were more than 185 centimetres tall (altogether, there were 12 goalies with heights from 176 to 200 cm), and the average height of the other seven was 187.5 centimetres (altogether, there were 28 goalies with a height between 178 and 200 cm, with 15 being over 185 cm). Thus, being tall can be an advantage for a goalie because of the discourse, but it is not necessarily crucial for performing well in the sport. The experience of a goalie coach of a U20 team perhaps best expresses this phenomenon:

I think this is a skill sport and not a size sport. I think size is overrated in a way [. . .] But what I've understood over the years is that, although size is not an absolute factor [in] why one becomes a professional and another doesn't, it's so valued among a certain group of people that this group, in a way, makes it into a factor that decides if someone will be something.
(Interview December 2017)

Not all alternatives, probabilities and consequences are known when player potentialities are considered and investment decisions are made. Coaches, therefore, seem to contribute to what Da Silva and Pietikäinen (2018) call *business for the game* by considering what would sell in the professional markets, and these professional markets value players who at least have a clear enough quality upon which to build. If a big goalie has a poor day and does not catch well, at least he covers a great deal of territory. Thus, in terms of this category, the aim is to choose 'the alternative that avoids the worst outcome' (Gigerenzer 2014, 129)—losing

games because of a bad goalie. When big goalies get contracts and are brought on well, they are certainly more likely to end up having successful careers compared with smaller goalies.

Exceptionality

Exceptionality is something that can be required from a player in a league that skims through all the players in the world and selects the ones who seem to have the greatest potential for ensuring the success of the team. This requirement was often expressed during the observations with the scouts. A description of this category was put into words in an interview:

Researcher: Are there any qualities which you could say you are looking for in a player?

Nikolas: Well, to me it's the instinct [. . .] that particularly the boy does things that one can't teach [. . .] In the moment, he makes a solution and just goes in a way that wows. It's the biggest thing [. . .] And another thing that catches my eye is that it looks natural. The pass comes naturally, and he skates, [demonstrating] that the understanding with the puck when he skates is natural and not pushed. Cos sometimes you just see that someone has trained so much that he's better than the rest, but he's 18, and I would need him to be the best when he's 20 or 22. (Interview October 2017)

The player is expected to perform exceptionally well for his age group; the performance should come naturally and show that the player has an innate potentiality for hockey.

Although NHL hockey scouts do not discount the necessity of years of deliberate practice, shown to be essential in sports expertise by several scholars (e.g. Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer 1993), they value the kind of environmental and genetic interaction that refines players' skills to look natural instead of well trained. According to current sports studies, genetically influenced abilities and traits affect learning and provide an advantage in particular surroundings (Simonton 2017). NHL scouts aim to find those players whose bodies look likely to give the maximum effort possible in a career in hockey. This is a part of the

trend of identifying talented young athletes in order to place them in optimal environments (Baker et al. 2017) where they will benefit commercial teams with their rising yield curve.

Youth

In this discourse, potentiality is always considered through the lens of utility, focusing on two questions: (1) What can be done with the player as human capital over the next few years? (2) How profitable will it be to direct resources to this player? Each player consumes the team's money after signing his contract, which is also why being *young* is a category that helps scouts, sports managers and coaches make decisions. Each summer, a new age group—comprising those who will turn 19 before the coming September 15th—is eligible for NHL drafting; this group is of particular interest to scouts, as one scout explained in an interview:

Those boys who go to the draft or are newly eligible [. . .] that's the biggest target group. But, in principle, all eligible players are [. . .] well, you have to follow them because they are the target group [. . .] but every time when it's later than newly eligible, for the bosses, there is always the question of why wasn't he good at that age, and then again, of course, it takes up a lot of his development. He has again one year less for developing. (Interview October 2017)

As this example shows, age is also a factor in this discourse, absorbing or detracting from other qualities if the players are not developed to a high level early enough. NHL team managers expect scouts to find young talents. Younger players are considered all the time; if their physical prowess exceeds the level expected of their age—and they can show this to national team representatives or scouts—then these young players become more highly valued than older players are. Previous studies (e.g. Abbott and Collins 2002) show that trying to identify talented athletes at a young age and guarantee 'effective financial investment by focusing available resources on the development of a smaller number of athletes' (Vaeyens et al. 2008, 704) is a common but incalculable trend in talent identification and development. It also appears that by concentrating on younger players, scouts can reduce the constantly increasing options; considering all these options and all the relevant

information is impossible for someone looking for the best possible decisions and investments (Schwartz 2005).

Despite the value placed on being young, it is not assumed that a player's skills will always be on display during the junior period; some players can mature and show their potential suddenly, as one scout explained:

They can advance significantly in a year at this point if they are just willing to make progress and work hard, and some have grown fast and look a bit lanky but start to get muscles, and then they start to look totally different. (Interview October 2017)

This uncertainty with growing bodies and the threat of injuries call for good intuition on which to base investments and consideration. For this reason, scouts use a maximizing strategy (Schwartz 2005) and gather all possible information for their decisions first-hand. They meet the player's parents, ask about the player's grandparents and review medical documents on the player's health before deciding whether to invite the player to the testing camps and the NHL's test event, which was called 'the cattle market' by one scout (Interview October 2017) because of how the selectors evaluate the lightly dressed players, who try to do their best in physical, medical and social tests.

Recognition given by others

The fourth category in this discourse, *recognition given by others*, helps scouts and coaches reduce the number of potential players by trusting the choices of other respected coaches. This trust means that if a player has been accepted to represent a national team of his age group or the men's league or first division teams at an early age, he is considered to have potential. This category was widely recognized by the representatives of U20, Liiga and NHL. The next example, from a scout interview, reflects this practice:

It's true that whenever a boy gets to that [national team], he's always looked at differently. 'He was in the national team. He used to be in the national team'. That's unfair but natural [. . .] I know some examples in which without someone who liked them being there, and [helped

them so that] they got into the national team, they wouldn't be playing in the Liiga now.

Would they get that far without someone liking them just when they were say 17? I doubt it.

But that's just how it is. (Interview October 2017)

Trust in a player from a national or league team coach produces hype around the player that smooths the way ahead for him. National teams gather many potential players for international games to test their potential in a demanding context, which again puts pressure on the local team to recognize talent in the local context. This mechanism does not claim that there are no other potential players outside the national teams. It just gives opportunities and coverage to some players within this discourse and makes the number of options more manageable for the scouts (cf. Schwartz 2005). National team membership, then, becomes one part of the truth on which to build in the uncertain market of player development and investment. Moreover, the recognition given by others creates pressure for scouts to concentrate on specific players, as well as for hockey organizations to sign contracts with these promising players so that they stay in the organization despite the hype around them.

The discourse of sidelining capitalism

The second discourse becomes clear when examining the specific conditions under which it is constructed and maintained. The hockey context studied here is the one in Finland, where junior sports and sports clubs have always been closely related to civic education (Aarresola 2016, 13–14). Competitive and goal-oriented aims reached the Finnish sports movement in the early 20th century; over the decades, the different sports gradually diverged. In the late 20th century, most sports clubs focused on developing just one sport, such as ice hockey, and its practitioners in their career paths (Itkonen 2003). Despite this development, sports clubs have remained non-profit organizations, ensuring that sports are available to all children and young people. The Finnish sports system has been strongly attached to the idea of positive youth development. This is also the ethos of the Finnish education system, which

traditionally emphasizes equal opportunities for every child and social mobility through education (Ahonen 2003).

The coaches in the present study were all employees of a high-performance club. Unlike other junior teams in Finland, the U20 elite-level hockey teams belong to the joint stock companies of the men's hockey league organizations. Three of the coaches had master's degrees in sports pedagogy, one had a master's degree in sports sciences and two had degrees in coaching from universities specializing in applied sciences. In other words, they were highly educated, with strong pedagogical mindsets. All the coaches had internalized the goal-oriented high-performance sports discourse. This was apparent during the data collection phase; for example, the coaches required players to push themselves to their limits in most of the practices, and they used stress and recovery analysis in player development.

The junior team coaches, however, mostly contributed to a discourse which I call the *discourse of sidelining capitalism*. It constructed a discursive reality in which every junior was emboldened to try his own limits as a player without being afraid of causing defeat for his team or being labelled a poor player; he should live in the moment, without considering his future playing career. The coaches emphasized that the key aspect of potentiality was the stamina to push oneself to the limit over and over again and use the opportunities given for learning, which gives greater hope and motivation for training than an emphasis on innate talent. All other categories besides motivation were avoided because rankings were unnecessary during the season, especially if the team succeeded. A goalie coach of the U20 team, who had had a master's degree in sports pedagogy, talked to me about his views on potential goalies and their coaching:

I like to talk a lot about how a goalie plays well, instead of someone being a good goalie. It sort of, it's another conversation you could talk about for hours, but if you talk about identity,

that somebody is something permanently, instead of that someone's playing well or poorly [. . .] I try to react to the weaker games like [I do] to anything else, that they aren't less normal than others or scarier. That you kind of make it acceptable that we're human and everybody fails sometimes [. . .] If you fear that the goalie will fail with his stick, for example, it suppresses a lot of learning. (Interview December 2017)

Unlike in the discourse of meeting the expectations of capitalism, in this discourse, the player is considered an individual and has permission to try and to err. This gives the individual players—both those who may never be professionals and those who are on the brink of a breakthrough—a pressure-free space for talent development. It also produces a space in which the player does not have to think about how his performance will affect his future career or the economic or symbolic success of the team; instead, he can try to determine his own limits and do his best. Therefore, this *discourse of sidelining capitalism* constructs a space in which 'will' and 'skill' are valued and nurtured, whereas the economic and symbolic 'profit' familiar in professional hockey (da Silva and Pietikäinen 2018) is muted.

During the course of this study, I had several discussions with different junior team coaches, such as on buses during game trips, in which the coaches said that their roles and attitudes were different from those of scouts and sports managers. They considered players to be individuals who could reach their peaks with the right kind of support and nurturing. This discourse resists emphasizing a view in which potentiality is intertwined with the kind of talent that only a few possess or that a player must make a profit for someone.

However, the junior coaches also recognized when a player was exceptionally talented. For example, I spoke with one coach in a hockey arena after he introduced a boy who was walking by us. After this discussion, I wrote the following observation in my fieldnotes:

Peter explained how some other players play [along] the lines he had outlined earlier on a tactics board, but this guy gets the idea that they are, after all, playing against another team, and each player needs to make his own decisions. (Fieldnotes February 2017)

In this conversation, as in many others with the coaches, we discussed some of the qualities that make a player exceptional. However, fostering a discourse of sidelining capitalism was so strong amongst these coaches that ideas of exceptionality were not stressed as much as motivation for training or a bold playing style were. One Liiga team coach recognized the power of this discourse in an interview in which he described his first experience as an observer at a Liiga team's practice when he was still a U20 team coach:

I still remember what a shock it was after the practice when I stayed talking with the coaches, and the response was that it's useless to try to develop anything here, that you just have to get the guys fit, and then play and win with what you have, that you don't develop anything anymore. Let's say that I still haven't solved that question in the end, but if I gave up and thought I couldn't develop a 20-year-old player in the Liiga, I wouldn't want to work there, it would take the point out of my work. But the requirements and pressure, where and how, and with what cost—that's hard. (Interview September 2017)

As this example shows, a discourse is always constructed in a social world with a material aspect (Grodal and Kahl 2017), and resources, such as money and time, which are allocated to certain activities, strengthen some discourses in the struggle to define the truth. Despite the discursive space constructed in the actions and speech of the junior team coaches, there was limited space for this discourse. Every spring, each U20 team is reorganized; the players with the most potential are allowed to continue in the highest team or are moved up to the men's first division or Liiga teams, whereas the rest are relocated to the local farm teams. In other words, despite the presence of this discourse, the available resources do not allow everyone to make a career in professional sports. Therefore, the coaches of high-performance teams

must concentrate on talent identification even though talent development would be more interesting to them.

Discussion

Professional ice hockey teams invest considerable resources in talent identification and show great interest in talent development at the junior level because good decision making based on a player's human capital is crucial for sporting and financial success. However, they do not know which qualities will bring the best outcome for the team, so sports managers, coaches and, in particular, scouts use certain criteria—which I call categories in the present study—to gather first-hand information on which to base their investments, reduce the amount of information they need to digest, narrow down the available options (cf. Schwartz 2005) and focus their resources on the development of certain athletes to guarantee effective financial investments (Vaeyens et al. 2008). They therefore seem to unconsciously follow certain rules of thumb, what Gigerenzer (2014) proposes as a rational method for decision making in a world of uncertainties.

However, following the findings of Christensen (2009) on soccer coaches as arbiters of taste and the previously mentioned observations about goalie size, categories that aim at good decisions in player recruitment may construct truths that are very much discursively constructed. Furthermore, Lund and Sörenström (2017, 252) state that through their practical sense, 'coaches have developed a specific taste for which social, mental and physical characteristics can determine whether young players are talented'. The tendency of professional teams to prefer alternatives that avoid the worst outcomes (Gigerenzer 2014, 129) trickles down to junior teams, which must also respect *the discourse of meeting the expectations of capitalism* and are therefore also focused on what will sell later. Hence, the process of identifying talented future hockey players and their relevant qualities—which is

often a controversial task (e.g. Vaeyens et al. 2008)—turns into a process of evaluating the exchange value of a young athlete.

The second discourse, *the discourse of sidelining capitalism*, was especially valued amongst junior coaches. It is strongly influenced by the traditional ethos of the Finnish education and sports systems, which emphasize equal opportunities and everyone's right to participate. Furthermore, this discourse acknowledges that talent development, by its nature, is not necessarily linear (Gulbin et al. 2013) and that some players may be late bloomers. It also allows everyone involved to try their best in terms of development and success seeking without putting special emphasis on the most promising players. This space may decrease the pressure caused by a heavy training load and a precarious career. In this discourse, each season, a player's potential is considered in the context of his own development, so there is no need for the categories used in the other discourse. However, talent development resources are not infinite, and every season ends with trials in which coaches decide who can continue in the team. Thus, although both discourses exist side by side, the discourse of sidelining capitalism is, in the end, very much the subordinate one. However, as Jørgensen and Phillips (2002, 142) note, some people have better access to certain discourses than others are, and overall, coaches have great influence on young players' careers (Cushion and Jones 2006), as well as on the discourses cherished by the teams. Hence, junior coaches have at least some power to tame capitalism and keep alive a discourse that values individual talent development in the threshold phase to professional sports.

The present study showcases that talent identification and development, which many previous studies (e.g. Simonton 1999; Abbott and Collins 2002; MacNamara and Collins 2014; Gulbin et al. 2013; Lund and Sörenström 2017) have examined, are strongly related to discursive practices. The discourses behind talent development and identification explain the organization of junior sports. Talent selection processes may be and have been presented and

legitimized differently in a different time and space (Kilger 2019). Studies on the discourses related to talent identification and development can deepen our understanding of the environmental constraints that influence young athletes' experiences and enjoyment of their sporting careers.

As this study on discourses shows, the coaches of team sports often need to obey commercial logic in day-to-day talent development despite their own motivations for coaching. Commercial and goal-oriented team sports organizations manage the resources and discourses of high-performance junior sports, which may cause moral dilemmas for the coaches. Therefore, important tasks for future studies include examining whether this mismatch results in the dropouts of officials in junior sports.

References

- Aarresola, Outi. 2016. "Nuorten urheilupolut. Tutkimus kilpaurheiluun sosiaalistumisen normeista, pääomista ja toimijuudesta." *Studies in Sport, Physical Education and Health* 246.
- Abbott, Angela and Dave Collins. 2002. "A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of a 'State of the Art' Talent Identification Model." *High Ability Studies* 13(2): 157–178.
- Ahonen, Sirkka. 2003. *Yhteinen koulu—Tasa-arvoa vai tasapäisyyttä?* Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Amis, John. 2005. Interviewing for Case Study Research. In *Qualitative Methods in Sports Studies*, edited by David L. Andrews, Daniel S. Mason, and Michael L. Silk, 104–138. Oxford: Berg.
- Baker, Joseph, Stephen Cobler, Jörg Schorer, and Nick Wattie. 2017. "Talent Identification and Development in Sport. An Introduction." In *Routledge Handbook of Talent Identification in Sport*, edited by Joseph Baker, Stephen Cobler, Jörg Schorer, and Nick Wattie, 1–7. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Bergmann, Jörg R. 1998. "Introduction: Morality in Discourse." *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 31 (3–4): 279–294. doi:10.1080/08351813.1998.9683594.
- Blomqvist, Minna, Kaisu Mononen, Pasi Koski, and Sami Kokko. 2019. "Urheilu ja seuraharrastaminen." In *Lasten ja nuorten liikuntakäyttäytyminen Suomessa. Liitututkimuksen tuloksia 2018*, edited by Sami Kokko and Leena Martin, 49–55. Helsinki: National Sports Council Finland.
- Christensen, Mette Krogh. 2009. "'An Eye for Talent': Talent Identification and the 'Practical Sense' of Top-Level Soccer Coaches." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 26 (3): 365–382. doi:10.1123/ssj.26.3.365.
- Coakley, Jay. 2011. "Youth Sports: What Counts as 'Positive Development'?" *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 35 (3): 306–324. doi:10.1177/0193723511417311.
- Côté, Jean, Leicha Strachan, and Jessica Fraser-Thomas. 2008. Participation, Personal Development, and Performance through Youth Sport. In *Positive Youth Development Through Sport*, edited by Nicholas L. Holt, 34–45. London: Routledge.
- Cushion, Christopher, and Robyn L. Jones. 2006. "Power, Discourse, and Symbolic Violence in Professional Youth Soccer: The Case of Albion Football Club." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 23 (2): 142–161. doi:10.1123/ssj.23.2.142.
- Da Silva, Emanuel, and Sari Pietikäinen. 2018. "Foreign Captains in Elite Hockey Markets: Mediatized Discourses of Professionalization between Routes and Roots." *Sport in Society* 21 (11): 1795–1816. doi:10.1080/17430437.2017.1417987.
- Ericsson, K. Anders, Ralf Krampe, and Clemens Tesch-Römer. 1993. "The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance." *Psychological Review* 100 (3): 363–406. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.100.3.363.
- Feher, Michel. 2009. "Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspiration of Human Capital." *Public Culture* 21 (1): 21–41. doi:10.1215/08992363-2008-019.

- Fletcher, David, and Mustafa Sarkar. 2012. "A Grounded Theory of Psychological Resilience in Olympic Champions." *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 13(5) 669–678.
- Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Foucault, Michel. 1981. "The Order of Discourse." In *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, edited by Robert Young, 51–77. Boston and London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Foucault, Michel. 2006. *Psychiatric Power. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1973–1974*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fulcher, James. 2004. *Capitalism. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gigerenzer, Gerd. 2014. *Risk Savvy. How to Make Good Decisions*. New York: Viking.
- Gratton, Chris, and Peter Taylor. 2000. *The Economics of Sport and Recreation: An Economic Analysis*. London: Spon Press.
- Grodal, Stine, and Stiven J. Kahl. 2017. "The Discursive Perspective on Market Categorization: Interaction, Power, and Context." In *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*, edited by Rodolphe Durand, Nina Granqvist, and Anna Tyllström, 151–184. Bingley: Emerald Publishing.
- Gulbin, Jason, Juanita Weissensteiner, Karen Oldenziel, and François Gagné. 2013. "Patterns of Performance Development in Elite Athletes." *European Journal of Sport Science* 13 (6): 605–614. doi:10.1080/17461391.2012.756542.
- Heller, Monica, Sari Pietikäinen, and Joan Pujolar. 2018. *Critical Sociolinguistic Research Methods. Studying Language Issues That Matter*. Abingdon: Routledge.

- Holt, Nicholas L., and Zoe L. Sehn. 2008. Processes Associated with Positive Youth Development and Participation in Competitive Youth Sports. In *Positive Youth Development Through Sport*, edited by Nicholas L. Holt, 24–33. London: Routledge.
- Itkonen, Hannu. 2003. “Nuorisourheilun muuttuvat käytännöt, tavoitteet ja merkitykset.” In *Nuoruuden vuosisata. Suomalaisen nuorison historia*, edited by Sinikka Aapola and Mervi Kaarninen, 326–343. Helsinki: Nuorisotutkimusseura.
- Jørgensen, Marianne, and Louise J. Phillips. 2002. *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*. London: Sage.
- Kelly, Peter, and Christopher Hickey. 2009. “Professional Identity in the Global Sports Entertainment Industry. Regulating the Body, Mind and Soul of Australian Football League Footballers.” *Journal of Sociology* 46 (1): 27–44.
- Kilger, Magnus. 2019. From Hard Work to Grit. On the Discursive Formation of Talent. *Scandinavian Sport Studies Forum* 10 (2): 29–50.
- Laine, Antti. 2017. “Finland: The Importance of the Private Sports Sector has Increased in the 2000s.” In *The Private Sport Sector in Europe: A Cross-National Comparative Perspective*, edited by Antti Laine and Hanna Vehmas, 107–124. Cham: Springer.
- Lorenzini, Daniele. 2015. “What is ‘Regime of Truth’?” *Le Foucaldien* 1 (1): 1–5.
doi:10.16995/lefou.2.
- Lund, Stefan, and Tor Söderström. 2017. “To See or Not to See: Talent Identification in the Swedish Football Association.” *Sociology of Sport Journal* 34 (3): 248–258. doi: 10.1123/ssj.2016-0144.
- MacNamara, Aine, and Dave Collins. 2014. “More of the Same? Comment on ‘An Integrated Framework for the Optimisation of Sport and Athlete Development: A Practitioner Approach.’” *Journal of Sports Sciences* 32 (8): 793–795. doi:10.1080/02640414.2013.855805.
- The Nation Network. 2018. “Team Salaries.” <http://nhlnumbers.com/team-salaries>.

- Ojala, Anna-Liisa. 2018. "Being an Athlete and Being a Young Person: Technologies of the Self in Managing an Athletic Career in Youth Ice Hockey in Finland." *International Review for Sociology of Sports*, online publication. doi:10.1177/1012690218801303.
- Patton, Michael Quinn 2002. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*. 3. Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Purhonen, Semi, Jukka Gronow, Riie Heikkilä, Nina Kahma, Keijo Rahkonen, and Arho Toikka. 2014. *Suomalainen maku. Kulttuuripääoma, kulutus ja elämäntyylien sosiaalinen eriytyminen*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Schuller, Tom, and John Field. 1998. "Social Capital, Human Capital and the Learning Society." *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 17 (4): 226–235. doi:10.1080/0260137980170402.
- Schwartz, Barry. 2005. *The Paradox of Choice. Why More is Less*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Silk, Michael L. "Sporting ethnography: Philosophy, Methodology and Reflection." In *Qualitative Methods in Sports Studies*, edited by David L. Anderson, Daniel S. Mason, and Michael L. Silk, 65–103. Oxford: Berg.
- Simonton, Dean Keith. 1999. "Talent and Its Development: An Emergent and Epigenetic Model." *Psychological Review* 103(3) (Issue): 435–457.
- Simonton, Dean Keith. 2017. "Does Talent Exist? Yes!." In *Routledge Handbook of Talent Identification in Sport*, edited by Joseph Baker, Stephen Cobler, Jörg Schorer, and Nick Wattie, 11–18. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Stambulova, Natalia, Cecilia Engström, Alina Franck, Lukas Linnér, and Kent Lindahl. 2015. "Searching for an Optimal Balance: Dual Career Experiences of Swedish Adolescent Athletes." *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 21: 4–14. doi:10.1016/j.psychsport.2014.08.009

Tuominen, Markku. 2017. "Injuries in the International Ice Hockey Federation World Championships and Olympic Winter Games." PhD diss., University of Tampere.

Vaeyens, Roel, Matthieu Lenoir, Mark A. Williams, and Renaat M. Philippaerts. 2008. "Talent Identification and Development Programmes in Sport. Current Models and Future Directions." *Sports Medicine* 38 (9): 703–714.