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'You create your own luck, in a way' About Norwegian footballers' understanding of success, in a world where most fail

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ABSTRACT

The article is based on interviews with twelve young footballers who turned pro with the Norwegian top-flight club Odd BK. After asking why they succeeded in making the transition from promising talent to established top-level footballer, we investigate how the players' own explanations tally with the two predominant theories in research on talent development, namely deliberate practice and successful talent development environments. We shall see that the basic elements of these theories resemble the players' own recipes for success and more or less specify how the players and the club can achieve progress. However, neither of these theories relates to the structural situation that the players find themselves in, namely the fact that most hard-working players are never offered a professional contract. The looming uncertainty provides fertile ground for the development of notions of luck and the intricate workings of chance.

Introduction

Approximately 0.3 per cent of male Norwegian footballers play professionally for a domestic or foreign club.¹ For most, the dream of making a living from football will fade before they turn twenty, and they will either stop playing entirely or else only have football as a hobby. Coaches, parents, and players alike know that rising through the ranks to sign a professional contract is nigh impossible. This realization notwithstanding, a growing number of educational programmes are emerging in Norway that allow promising footballers to combine their training with an upper secondary education.² Several of these schools are privately run and require the payment of tuition for the lucky few who are admitted there. And the greater the number of young, hopeful footballers who attend such schools, the tougher the competition becomes to be offered a professional contract at a Norwegian club.

Thus, even though few end up turning pro, ever more young people are choosing an education with an eye towards this very goal. How do these individuals maintain their belief in their own talent in a situation where only a minority succeed? And how do they cope with all the uncertainty during their journey of development? These are the overarching questions of this article. In order to obtain an answer to these questions, we interviewed twelve professional players in Norway who began their careers by combining dedicated football training with upper secondary education. How do they themselves explain their success? Why didn't their peers make the grade? And how do their explanations chime with their coaches' understanding and with the insights from talent development research?

Quite a few articles have attempted to uncover and analyse the prerequisites for reaching the elite level in sports in general and in football in particular.³ These articles cite two theories above all, namely Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer's theory of deliberate practice and Henriksen and Stambulova's theory of successful talent development environments.⁴ These two theories have also

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been the starting point for a number of studies where the influence of ‘training’ and ‘environment’ has been examined and analysed in depth. Such studies, however, rarely address how the players tackle the uncertainty of their chosen path. We therefore ask, How do young talents manage to sustain their belief that they themselves will succeed in a system where most are doomed to fail? And can Merton’s theory of social structure and anomie help us understand how the players deal with the disparity between their own dedicated efforts and the low odds of turning pro?⁵

Materials and methods

The starting point for this article is a research project on the so-called Telemark model, which is an informal cooperation to develop football players in the region of Telemark in Southeastern Norway.⁶ The participants in this model include grassroots clubs, the Norwegian Football Federation’s regional association in Telemark (NFF Telemark),⁷ the private sports school Telemark Toppidrett Gymnas (TTG),⁸ and the Norwegian top-flight club Odd BK. At a time when ever more top-level clubs have keenly sought to attract the most promising talents as early as when they are twelve, Odd has gone the opposite way. As the region’s only elite club, Odd has preferred that promising young talents remain in their grassroots club until the year they turn sixteen, at which point they may transfer to Odd and begin at the private upper secondary sports school TTG. This arrangement allows the young players to combine schooling with two daily training sessions at the club’s home ground Skagerak Arena, of which TTG is an integral part.

For years now, Odd has committed itself to developing players through the Telemark model, and every senior match in both 2018 and 2019 featured five to seven home-grown players in the starting line-up.⁹ ‘home-grown’ refers here to players who transferred to Odd the year they turned sixteen and rose through the ranks from the regional youth team to the club’s junior team and finally to the A-team. For this article, twelve of the players who signed professional contracts with Odd were interviewed about their experiences from joining the club at sixteen to establishing themselves as top-flight players. Using a semi-structured approach, we asked them about their background, the influence of the school and their teammates, the role of their parents and coaches, their training sessions, the factors that helped and hindered their development, and why they ended up succeeding rather than those who didn’t.

This is a so-called purposive or judgemental sample, which entails that we chose respondents who had climbed the ladder from promising young player at a recreational football club to training with Odd as a junior and then signing a professional contract with the club.¹⁰ The respondents have certain experiences in common, even as their backgrounds and personalities differ.¹¹ The findings of this article will therefore not be representative of players who have followed other paths of development – players who have experienced other set-ups, outcomes, and institutions will probably have other stories to relate.

The twelve respondents, aged 19–26, were divided into four focus groups of three players each. Such a design was chosen to make the respondents feel more at ease and to encourage discussions and reflections on issues related to the specific work on talent development at Odd and TTG. In addition to these conversations, we interviewed five coaches with longstanding experience of the Telemark model, whether they worked for NFF Telemark, TTG, and/or Odd. In this article it is above all the coaches’ viewpoints on the factors the players themselves cited that will be discussed and analysed.

All the participants were guaranteed confidentiality and that their identities could not be recognized in the study. Participation was voluntary, and the participants were informed that they could withdraw their consent at any point. The project was registered and approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data.¹² All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and all the players and coaches have been assigned a pseudonym to ensure their anonymity.

Data analysis and the use of sensitizing concepts¹³

Qualitative research does not begin with hypotheses and fixed notions but seeks rather to get hold of the meaning the actors themselves ascribe to their actions and choices.¹⁴ This does not mean that data are collected without any idea of what to look for.¹⁵ Social researchers today tend to regard sensitizing concepts as interpretive tools for a qualitative study,¹⁶ and most case studies feature a dialogue between the chosen case and certain so-called orienting concepts.¹⁷ Many empirical studies have already been conducted on the topic of ‘who succeeds in football’, and some of the findings and concepts that have dominated this research have directed our attention towards certain aspects of talent development. Two such sensitizing concepts that have served as a starting point in this study are deliberate practice and talent development environment. These concepts have informed the questions we have asked, what we have looked for, and how we have organized the data.

Taking their cue from Ericsson et al.’s concept of deliberate practice, researchers have sought to investigate how athletic performance is affected by variations in training amount and content.¹⁸ The basic idea is that the number of hours of targeted, dedicated, and football-specific training is key, with the theory predicting ‘a monotonic relation between the current level of performance and the accumulated amount of deliberate practice for individuals attaining expert performance’.¹⁹ It is of interest here to investigate whether the players’ own explanation of their development tallies with this theory. Have the players – and also the coaches – fully accepted and adapted to the principles that underlie the theory of deliberate practice?

The theory of deliberate practice has also been criticized from various quarters, with some detractors claiming that it ignores the impact of the sociocultural context.²⁰ In particular Henriksen and Stambulova’s theory of how individuals are socialized at the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-levels has received widespread attention.²¹ It is precisely by understanding the various contexts and how these interact that we can understand how talent development works. Characteristics of successful talent development environments include a training environment full of support and friendship, the existence of proximal role models, meaningful communication between families, teachers, and coaches, and a long-term focus.²² This model has inspired several empirical studies of different athletic environments in the Nordic region²³ and has also informed the focus of the present study, where we asked the players about how factors such as the school, the training environment, and various role models have affected their motivation and development.

The risk of such concepts and models is that they can divert the researchers’ attention away from crucial aspects of the phenomenon being studied. In other words, it is not given that these concepts encapsulate all the key elements of talent development, and we shall see that our twelve informants present stories and perspectives that sensitize our attention towards other aspects of such development. Our aim is to use the players’ own interpretations of why they have succeeded to discuss, qualify, and challenge established concepts, and also to use their interpretations to uncover mechanisms and circumstances that the established concepts fail to capture.²⁴ Subsequently, the players’ stories can be used to develop new concepts and theories, concepts that both supplement and shift conventional understandings of talent development.

Results

Physical training

All the players underlined the importance of hard and correct training in order to become a top-level footballer. Two football-focused sessions a day was the norm during their time at the upper secondary school:

So, the set-up was that the first training session is from 8 to 10, then school starts at 10:30 and ends at 3 p.m. After we finish the first training session, it’s time to go and eat before we go to class. After school the session starts at 3:30. So you’re here from 8 in the morning to 5 in the afternoon. (Jonathan)

Odd and TTG are both located at the stadium and the club's training facility, so the distance is short from the training ground to the classroom and back to the ground. Such an integrated facility minimizes the players' travel time and makes it possible to complete two training sessions before 17:00. The coaching staff is in charge of the daily training sessions and the player conversations. During these conversations, each player became involved in setting goals. And it was important to make time during the training sessions for exercises whose purpose was to work on the various secondary goals each of the players had set with the coaches:

We often had player conversations with the coaches where we talked about the various goals for the season as well as the lesser, secondary goals. The coaches thought more in terms of development than results, so they were very focused on seeing each individual. (Eric)

The players emphasized the importance of continuity and training amount, as well as how helpful it was that they received different suggestions and insights from different coaches. Many of the players noted that their coaches had themselves been top-level footballers. These were coaches who knew what was required, who knew top-flight football, and who had themselves been where the aspiring players were now. One of the coaches the players mentioned had previously played professionally for several years in a European league. Because he had succeeded as a player himself, he attained a sort of authority. The erstwhile 'master' acted as a proximal role model and source of identification on the basis of his career, his competence, and his experience²⁵:

Coach X helped me a good deal with the philosophy of the game. With reading the game. That's what really helped me a lot, because I had the technical skills, but it was a question of understanding the game. And he also focuses a lot on football tactics. I mean, he was a really smart footballer himself. (Ronny)

The coaches we interviewed were also interested in establishing a good training culture. They emphasized the importance of focusing on 'gradual progress and not on results', that the players 'must own their development', and that each player 'must develop their individual skills' in a way that improves them as team players. In other words, there is a kind of consensus among the players and coaches in regard to the importance of engaging in hours and hours of football-specific training over time. This is also in line with the findings of previous research, for example Reeves et al., who note that 'the notion of "hours in practice" (HiP) is repeatedly highlighted as a crucial determinant in the development expertise in football players'²⁶

Will and determination

The players emphasized personality traits – or what may be called specific mental qualities – as being decisive for making the cut as footballers. It is those who have enough will and desire who will make progress and end up realizing their dream of turning pro:

I feel that it's about the will to excel and that you dare to make sacrifices to excel. You know that this is what you're good at and that this is what you want to do. So I think a lot of this is down to your inner drive, that you're not going out on the pitch because you have to train for an hour, but that you're going out there to improve and develop. If I improve in some area, that might be what turns me into someone who can play in the top flight. (Mats)

Here, will and determination are manifested through what the individual is willing to sacrifice in order to succeed. Excelling at football requires thousands of hours of practice, and the additional schoolwork makes for a jam-packed weekly schedule. And this in turn means that little time remains for other activities:

Of course, football is what comes first, no matter what. Even though Odd and the school have a good set-up, it has affected my education that I've chosen to prioritize football ahead of school, so that I can be as good as possible. This not only affects my schoolwork, it also means that you have less time for friends and stuff like that. (Mats)

The players are in two minds when the topic of ‘sacrificing something’ is raised. On the one hand, they claim that it is difficult to have to say no to ‘nights out, parties, and holidays’. On the other hand, they are keen to point out that it is worth it, that they have gained more than they have sacrificed, and that they are privileged to be in a position where they can spend their time on their favourite thing in the world. By emphasizing what football has given them, the players simultaneously tone down what they have had to forsake:

The coaches we interviewed spoke of ‘players who have a burning passion’. Differences in will and determination are a common explanation for how a player and a team are doing. Gaging the will of a football talent is by no means straightforward, of course. At best, it may be claimed that this manifests itself in the players’ efforts and priorities and in their focus and zeal. In their study of young football talents, Nicola et al. claim that ‘effort and will were constructed as semi-static qualities that players either possessed or lacked’.²⁷ These psychological qualities are seen as being crucial to the players’ likelihood of being professional,²⁸ and they can for example be gaged on the basis of the players’ exertions at the training ground.²⁹

Understanding what is required

According to the players, making it as a professional requires not only training for hours upon hours but also ‘understanding what is required’ and ‘making the right choices’:

You can say that you need some luck and all that, but I think you create your own luck, in a way. Both hard work and doing the right work are important, but you have to have a clear head and understand what is right. For you can work your arse off without achieving the same effect you get when you realize what it takes for you to be top-level. You can train a whole lot, but it’s maybe not right for someone else. It’s like you have to find your own way. (Anders)

The players speak in terms of ‘cracking the code’, ‘making smart decisions’, and ‘having the right priorities’. According to the respondents, the school and the club focused strongly on developing independent athletes who took responsibility for their own development. The aim of both institutions is to develop 24-hour athletes who have a plan for the entire day using what they know about the various factors affecting their bodies and their performance levels:

When you go to school and practise a sport at the same place, the school gets a good look at the whole person, and then they soon see who’s meeting up with soda and sweet buns in class and who isn’t. All the choices you make are crucial for what happens in the future. (Noah)

A high performance level requires more than training correctly for hours. Restitution is part of the training and depends on the proper nutrition, enough rest, and other factors. The players learn to see their own body and their own priorities through the lens of elite athletics and develop an understanding of all the factors that are germane to success.

The players’ own recipe for improving and succeeding thus consists of three variables or forms of work: training, will, and understanding. These variables are mutually interdependent and form what may be called a triangle of performance development. A lack of understanding of what is required leads players to choose the wrong types and amounts of training, even as it saps their will to commit themselves to all the training. If the will and desire are not there, training sessions become perfunctory and lacklustre, characterized by an absence of experimentation and limit-pushing. And without hard work and training, players will not challenge and develop their body, technique, and will.

The importance of understanding what is required was underlined and expanded upon by several of the coaches we interviewed. They talk about being ‘reflected’, ‘deliberate’, and ‘focused on development goals’. One of the coaches puts it as follows:

Over the years, you would have to say it was the guys who popped in most often to discuss things who were the ones who ended up being the best. [...] You got them to reflect on what they were doing. We discussed football and they were given assignments. [...] And then we would reflect afterwards. Talk about systems, what kind of formations they play, how they’re set up offensively and defensively, low press, high press, medium press,

where on the pitch they're trying to dupe their opponents. That discussion is important – make them think about football. Many players don't think about football enough, they only play it. (Konrad)

The coach's role is thereby defined as something more than setting up football drills to develop the players' repertoire of physical skills. The work then becomes just as much a knowledge and awareness-raising project. According to the coaches, the players must work on their development systematically and look at their own practice, and at what they should and shouldn't do, with a coach's eye. In other words, the work that must be done is just as mental as it is physical.

The emphasis on these three forms of work – in regard to training, will, and understanding – affords the players a good deal of room for action, and the coaches as well. Those who work hard, and in the right way, will themselves be able to affect their future career. And those who can give the players the tools to do the right things – and to understand what is required – are the coaches. In such a perspective, coaches do not speak of talent as an innate quality, signalling instead that everyone who works hard and deliberately can realize their dream of turning pro. Thus, what is being taught is a variant of the old Norwegian proverb 'everyone is the smith of his own fortune'.

Working together

The players are together at training, at school, at matches, and in their spare time. They get to know each other well and develop a form of camaraderie. At the same time, however, they are competing for the coach's attention, playing time, and ultimately a professional contract:

Obviously, everyone wants to be a football player. That's why we've all started here. It wasn't like it created a bad vibe if Peder and I played the same position. We trained and tried to win games together, and then had a cool time and hung out together in our spare time. Everyone realized that we were doing everything we could in order to become professional footballers, but it was a nice way of doing it. A nice environment. (Jonathan)

The players mention that they were a tight-knit gang who wanted to develop and improve and who were happy for each other's success. Odd has three senior teams in the Norwegian league system: Odd A at the highest level (Eliteserien), Odd B at the third level, and Odd C, which consists of elite U-19 players, at the fifth level. Junior players who have been included in Odd's talent squad may be called up to train with or play for any of these teams. For a player who excels in the C-team for an extended period, the next step is making the B-team, which means training with the junior team and then playing with the B-team at the third level along with A-team players who do not feature in Odd's starting line-up in the Eliteserien. Those who perform well for Odd B may be invited to train regularly with the A-team and even be offered a professional contract. Since the coaches always focused on development, the players were promoted to the next level so that they always faced fresh challenges:

If a coach has seen you do something well, you get sent up the chain towards the A-team, so that you always have new challenges in case you need them. [...] It's not a sure thing that it'll turn out well the first time, but then the player will at least have been up there and gotten a taste, so he can set a new goal he can work towards. (Jonathan)

According to the research by Henriksen et al. on successful talent development environments, sharing their experiences with one another is a vital element in the development process for young talents.³⁰ The younger players acquire role models, knowledge, and values from the older players.³¹ This learning takes place partly through direct feedback and partly through the younger players observing how the older players do various things out on the pitch. The younger players can in turn relate these experiences to their peers.

Through conversations and common activities, the other players and the coaches strengthen the individual's own sports identity. The players spend many hours every day with others who are interested in the exact same things as they are, who talk about the same issues, who have the same goals, and who hold up their peers as a mirror. This interaction gives meaning to the individual's efforts to become a professional footballer. Participating in the training sessions and in the endless

discussions on training methods and their future prospects confirms the individual's project to become a professional footballer. In their spare time as well, the players are drawn towards venues and social connections that buttress their identity as promising footballers. And the longer and more intensely the athlete commits himself to realizing his dream of turning pro, the more he becomes attached to this project.

The working of fortune and chance

Over a ten-year period, Odd has signed professional contracts with no less than thirty-five local players who came up through the ranks from their junior team. This is an exceptionally high number of home-grown players, in both a national and international perspective. According to the players, it was its poor finances that forced the club to commit itself to developing home-grown talent:

At a club with more money, you would probably have been cut much quicker than at Odd. Players here probably get a bit more patience, with an eye towards developing into a good player. (Noah)

Because of its tight budget, Odd cannot afford to buy as many new players, so the club relies on promoting players from its own junior squad. An extra effort must therefore be made to ensure that the talents do not fall by the wayside. Specifically, this entails that the club and the school facilitate a flexible education, take action when players lose their drive, and provide mental support to those who are suffering from a lack of self-confidence and motivation. The club is thus impelled to be more patient: everything must be tried before a player is shown the door.

This perception is confirmed by our interviews with the coaches, who speak of 'patience', and 'believing in people'. The club's lack of financial clout proved to be a boon to the young talents who ended up being offered a professional contract: this fortuitous state of affairs made the path to a professional contract a bit shorter for the players on Odd's junior team. Nevertheless, only a minority of these players do in fact end up turning pro. As mentioned above, our twelve respondents underscored the significance of training hard and being strong-willed, but when confronted by the fact that most of their teammates end up being cut by the club, they highlight the vagaries of chance as an explanation:

It's like I said, for every player who makes the grade, there are three who don't – of the good players, that is. If you take four equally good players and there is one who makes his way through the ranks, the other three don't make it, and they might possibly have been better than the one who did. (Lars)

Most of Odd's young, hopeful talents are never offered a professional contract. And it might be difficult to relinquish a dream a player has tried to realize through thousands of hours of training and scores of player conversations, and that has been the focal point of a strong social community for several years:

Many of the players in my age group were really good, but in the end it was only me and Brian who were given a contract with Odd. So when you don't get a contract, you lose your motivation, and then it's often the case that you're no longer willing to sacrifice the things you did sacrifice earlier on. And in that case, other players turn up who work harder than them and who surpass them. (Eric)

The players realize that circumstance and chance affect who becomes a professional, and that it is not just up to them whether they succeed. Having Lady Luck on your side is crucial. In our interviews with them, the coaches make little or no mention of chance, but some of the coaches admit that different coaches do see a different potential in the same players:

What I've seen, you know, is that different types of coaches disagree about what they consider to be a good football talent. Coach X thinks that entirely different types were interesting than coach Y does. Y has entirely other preferences for what a good player is. In our system, we also have preferences for what a good player is. (William)

Even though the various coaches assess talent differently, they agree that it is the individual player's football skills and personal qualities that are crucial. According to Christensen, the coaches set themselves up as 'arbiters of taste who judge and label observable skills and perhaps less observable personal qualities' by using 'socially constructed "images" of the perfect player'.³² Such a classificatory scheme does not rule out disagreements, but it does exclude players who fall outside the coaches' predominant framework of understanding. Where Christensen speaks of the effect of the coaches' classificatory scheme, the players we interviewed speak of randomness and luck.

Discussion

When trying to explain performative development and success, the players and the coaches we interviewed highlight the trifold interaction between training, will, and understanding what is required. Such an explanatory model resembles what Ericsson et al. call deliberate practice. According to Halldorsen, such practice 'focuses on the systematic improvement of performance, emphasizes repetition, provides clear feedback and mental challenges, and is generally not enjoyable'.³³ Deliberate practice presupposes that the athlete is motivated to train diligently and at length.³⁴ Both the players' and the coaches' interpretation of talent development and the theory of deliberate practice identify targeted training, strong resolve, and mental work as keys to success.

This might indicate that knowledge has been transferred from academia to the coaches and further to the players in regard to what is important in training. The research findings and concepts affect the choices and interpretations of the clubs, coaches, and players, and as such it is the entire field that is being studied. But even as the concepts are formative, there are certain aspects of the young players' situation these concepts do not encapsulate. These are empirical realities that challenge both the concepts and the very work on talent development.

An element that is under-communicated in the theory of deliberate practice is the importance of the athletes' performance for maintaining the intensity of their training. When positive results fail to materialize, this saps the athletes' belief in their talent and in the fundamental notion that committed effort leads to progress. The athletes begin to doubt their potential to become professionals, and their motivation to continue their efforts is undermined. Poor performance levels might also change the relationship between coach and athlete. This relationship is akin to two sloping walls, where both depend on being able to lean against the other in order to stay erect: an athlete who does not trust his coach will lose his energy, even as the coach must believe in the player in order to draw on all of his own creativity and competence. Poor results weaken the athletes' belief in their coach's competence, and his words of comfort become empty phrases. The athlete's belief rests on the underlying logic of sport, that is to say on results and performance.

When discussing what separates the best from the next best, several of the coaches highlight the importance of the players' understanding of what success requires. But separating such understanding from the other elements in the athletes' development is in itself problematic. According to Nick Crossley, all fields of practice, whether philosophy or football, are about knowhow or competence.³⁵ And just like a philosopher, a footballer's performance is contingent upon an embodied competence to do certain things in accordance with certain standards. Of course, football represents another type of knowhow than philosophy does, but understanding the game, strategic competence, and a targeted approach are decisive for performance in football. Operating with understanding as virtually a separate practice risks constructing an absolute divide between intellectual and manual activities. Further, it will perhaps be a new way of mystifying what is required to succeed, with the coaches constructing a selection criterion that is more socially acceptable than for example a lack of speed.

Deliberate practice and the development of performance also have a few sociocultural preconditions. We must ask what it is that makes the young talents put up with all the training, experience the toil and hard work as meaningful, and gain an understanding of what is required for making progress. What is it that creates determination, understanding, and training zeal? In their accounts,

the players highlight the environment as an important factor in order to explain their development and their continued belief in turning pro. The players underscore certain characteristics of this environment we recognize from Henriksen and Stambulova's model of successful talent development environments: proximal role models, supportive training groups, a cooperation between the school and the club, and training that allows individual differentiation and a focus on long-term development. These are characteristics of the performance environment that also the coaches claim must be in place in order for the players to succeed.

What is lacking in this model is an understanding of how these mechanisms and the processes in the environment affect the individual. This is a matter of analysing how the environmental factors and the social communities shape and corroborate the individual's identity as a promising footballer. The players' identity is created through cooperation, dialogue, and practice. The athlete's identity as a talented footballer is shaped by daily activities, and these are in turn a response to the social situation that talent development constitutes.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann asserted that maintaining our identity depends on what they called probability structure, that is our self-conception is contingent upon a social basis and social processes.³⁶ Someone's identity as a promising footballer can only be upheld in an environment that confirms this identity. In order for us to keep on trusting that we are who we think we are, the explicit and emotionally charged confirmations that are provided by significant others such as peers, parents, and coaches play a key role. TTG and Odd can be viewed as necessary probability structures for the athletes maintaining their identity. In these institutions the young athletes have daily interaction with students and coaches who have the same focus and aims as them. The club and the school establish a community where each athlete's belief in his or her own commitment is strengthened.

Ralph Turner has studied the conditions for role identification.³⁷ He claims that some roles become part of our self-conception. The roles an individual identifies the most strongly with are those that are highly visible to his or her surroundings, those that the individual must sacrifice a good deal to master, those that provide clear rewards, and those that are part of a tightly integrated group. The young football talents are continually exposed to the gaze and judgements of their surroundings, they have sacrificed a good deal to develop as footballers, and they have clear rewards in sight in the guise of approbation and a professional contract. In addition, their role as a talented footballer gives them access to a tightly integrated group of other football talents.

In the interviews it emerged that the players were convinced that the force of their efforts would overcome all external obstacles, and that their slog and toil would finally pay off with a signed professional contract. Sports in general, and football in particular, continue the elements of what is referred to as the American Dream, or what is encapsulated by the aforementioned proverb 'everyone is the smith of his own fortune'. According to this maxim, those who are determined, work hard, and make the right choices will succeed in the end. And society loves stories about women and men who became sports stars and multi-millionaires against all the odds. The notions of institutionalized talent development and the coach as a role model is formed on the basis of an understanding that it is effort, will, and smartness that determines who will ultimately succeed. This is a socially acceptable explanation of success, even as it provides room for action for the coaches and a rationale for talent development.

The reality, by contrast, is that most of the hard-working talents never realize their dream of turning pro. Regardless of whether they all train diligently, are focused in their work, and embody a strong identity as a promising footballer, this cannot eradicate the structural uncertainty that the players find themselves in. In his famous book chapter 'Social Structure and Anomie', Robert K. Merton describes the social and psychological effects of a strong emphasis on success in a system where most of the actors are more or less doomed to fail.³⁸ In such a situation, many of those involved – both those who succeed and those who fail – will look to what Merton called 'mysticism' for an explanation, that is 'the workings of Fortune, Chance, Luck'. People who succeed in such a social situation may claim that they were 'lucky rather than altogether deserving' of their success,

while for those who fail, despite all their commitment and effort, ‘the doctrine of luck serves the psychological function of enabling them to preserve their self-esteem in the face of failure’.³⁹ The young football talents have long had their dream of turning pro as their goal – and family, coaches, and friends have cheered them on. It is as though the red carpet has been rolled out in front of their eyes, but just as the player is about to walk through the doorway and enter the life of a professional footballer, the carpet is whisked away and the door is slammed shut. And what caused the door to be shut was not a lack of talent but a wind of unfortunate circumstances.

Conclusions

According to the players we interviewed, a belief in hard work, smart choices, and one’s own talent were what ultimately led them to being offered professional contracts. They also note the role that peers, parents, and coaches played in helping them believe they could make it as professional footballers. At the same time, the players knew that most aspiring talents fail to turn pro, that even hard-working athletes come up short, and that boys who were as talented as them ended up being cut. They recognize that a number of external circumstances help determine whether an individual is selected or cut, or is noticed or ignored. In this uncertain situation, players may seek to explain the outcome as the fickleness of fortune and the random intervention of Lady Luck.

We have uncovered two seemingly contradictory sources of faith or what we can call two theories of success: in part, the informants advance the notion that people are responsible for their own success, and in part they develop the notion that it is fate or happenstance that determines who ends up doing well. It would perhaps be expected that the belief in the intervention of chance would undermine the force of the individual’s efforts and lead to fewer talents daring to dedicate themselves to turning pro. But instead it seems as though the two theories of success complement each other, and in tandem they help increase the talents’ dedicated efforts and their fascination with football.

The concepts ‘deliberate practice’ and ‘successful talent development environments’ refer to circumstances that everyone can in theory factor in and seek to develop. The concepts provide directions for how the clubs can organize their talent development programmes, for how the coaches should work, and for which factors the players must consider in order to realize their dream of turning pro. But such concepts do nothing about the competitive situation itself, namely the fact that although many feel the calling, only a few end up being selected. In other words, recipes for success – instruments that specify how everyone can manufacture their own success – have been created, but these recipes do not relate to the structural situation the players find themselves in. In order to tackle the uncertainty, the players seek recourse to notions of luck. And Lady Luck may provide hope in an unsure situation, and solace to all those who fail.

Notes

1. Haugaasen and Jordet, ‘Developing football expertise: a football-specific research review’.
2. Today there are 27 upper secondary school in Norway, combining schooling with top-notch football. See: <https://utdanning.no/utdanning/vgs/>
3. Halldorsson, ‘No man is his own creation’.
4. Ericsson et al., ‘The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance’; Henriksen and Stambulova, ‘From general to adapted frameworks in investigating successful athletic talent development environments’.
5. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*.
6. Telemark is a geographical region in the southern part of Norway. The county consists of approximately 170,000 inhabitants, with the vast majority living near the coast in the most closely-knit municipalities Skien (54,000), Porsgrunn (36,000) and Bamble (14,000).
See: <https://www.ssb.no/offentlig-sektor/kommunetall/kommunetabeller#Befolkning>
7. NFF = the Football Association of Norway (NFF), which is a special sports federation for football in Norway. NFF organizes a total of 364 940 practitioners. The NFF is divided into 18 regions, all of which are responsible for player development in their geographical area. See <https://www.fotball.no>

8. TTG is a private foundation, but the main source of funding is state transfers. Pupils must pay about NOK 40,000 a year in tuition fees.<https://ttgymnas.no>
9. According to CIES, Odd has 55.4% playing time on club-developed players since 1.7.19:<https://football-observatory.com/IMG/sites/atlasdemo/>
10. Maxwell, 'Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach'.
11. Thagaard, 'Systematikk og innlevelse'.
12. <https://nsd.no/nsd/english/index.html>
13. Bowen, 'Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts'.
14. Blumer, 'What is wrong with social theory?'
15. Yin, *Case study research and application*.
16. Bowen, 'Grounded Theory and Sensitizing Concepts'; Padgett, 'The qualitative research experience'.
17. Ragin, *Fuzzy-set social science*.
18. Ericsson et al., 'The role of deliberate practice in the acquisition of expert performance'.
19. *Ibid.*, 387.
20. Tucker & Collins, 'What makes champions?'
21. Henriksen and Stambulova, 'From general to adapted frameworks in investigating successful athletic talent development environments'.
22. Henriksen et al., 'Successful Talent Development in Soccer'; Balish and Côté, 'The influence of community on athletic development'.
23. Haukli, 'En casestudie av utviklingsmiljøet i Stabæk fotball'; Larsen et al, 'Successful talent development in soccer'; Bru, 'En casestudie av Telemarksmodellen i fotball'; Aalberg and Sæther, 'The talent Development in a Norwegian top-level football club'.
24. Blumer, 'What is wrong with social theory?'
25. Nilsen and Kvale, *Mesterlære*.
26. Reeves et al (2018) 'A scoping review of the potential sociological predictors of talent in junior-elite football'.
27. Nicola et al., 'Players' understanding of talent identification in early specialization youth football', 1159.
28. Miller et al., 'Identifying Factors Perceived to Influence the Development of Elite Youth Football Academy Players'.
29. Reeves et al., 'A scoping review of the potential sociological predictors of talent in junior-elite, 116
30. Henriksen et al., 'Successful Talent Development in Soccer'; Henriksen and Stambulova, Natalia 'Creating optimal environments for talent development'.
31. Bandura, *Social Foundation of Thought and Action*.
32. Christensen, 'Elitesport og talentudvikling', 309.
33. Halldorsson, 'No man is his own creation', 9.
34. Abott and Collins, 'A theoretical and empirical analysis of a 'State of the art' talent identification model'.
35. Crossley, *The Social Body*.
36. Berger and Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality*.
37. Turner, 'The Role and the Person'.
38. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, 185–248.
39. *Ibid.*, 203.

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