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Chasing an Olympic dream: a holistic approach to how youth athletes narrate injuries, performance, and the value of being seen

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how athletes experience injuries and performance pressures when striving for an “Olympic dream”, and focuses on how ten young women, aged 19–22, understand present and past experiences with injuries. Through a narrative analysis, we found that female players striving to become elite athletes often talk about injuries as something that made them feel invisible in a culture where visibility is key. “Being seen” emerged as a parallel narrative to that of injuries and the elite athlete as the players often looked back with regrets about how young and naïve they had been. This holistic take on injuries as a cultural construct is important for any coach to consider when working with young aspiring athletes. We conclude that this process is contingent on social processes and is a matter of when, how, and on what or whose terms young athletes are seen.

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KEYWORDS

Transitions; sport schools; injuries; coach relationship; holistic development; handball

This article contributes to the literature by taking a holistic approach (Agnew & Pill, 2023; Douglas & Carless, 2017; Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2017, 2020; Kuhlin, Barker-Ruchti, & Stewart, 2020; Thompson, Rongen, Cowburn, & Till, 2022) to talent development (i.e. multi-disciplinary by also looking into physical, emotional and social well-being of the athletes) and the importance of being seen by coaches (Broch, 2020; Corsby & Jones, 2020; Douglas & Carless, 2009, 2014, 2017; Jones, 2009) as we followed ten female handball players for a decade. Many aspiring young athletes join specialised secondary sport school (SSSS) to learn more efficiently and to focus more intensively on their skill development; to get a head start to an Olympic dream (Cushion & Jones, 2006). Yet, research shows that

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this is not without difficulties. In the Scandinavian context, the context of this study, talented athletes in sport schools habitually interact with several coaches in teams, clubs, and school, and these coaches tend to not communicate sufficiently (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2018; Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2017, 2020).

On the positive side, sport schools provide opportunities and environments for young athletes to develop as elite athletes and pursue higher education (De Bosscher, Brockett, & Westerbeek, 2016; Kårhus, 2016, 2019; Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2017). The sport schools also promote holistic perspectives by combining sport and school (Thompson, Rongen, Cowburn, & Till, 2022), and as such nurture the talent of youth who aspire to become elite athletes while studying (De Bosscher, Brockett, & Westerbeek, 2016; Kårhus, 2016, 2019; Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2017). Many of these schools “sell” their product in ways that have been criticised as a hallmark of neo-liberal sports: chasing the Olympic dreams and building competitive character (Karlsson, Kilger, Bäckström, & Redelius, 2022; Larson, 2006). While no sport schools can guarantee success (Baron-Thiene & Alfermann, 2015; De Knop, Wylleman, Van Houcke, & Bollaert, 1999), they are, for many, considered a *necessity* for success.

Intense training and work ethics are required to reach the Olympic dream (Kuhlin, Barker-Ruchti, & Stewart, 2020), and few fulfil it. Consequently, there is a need for other stories about “doing sport”; stories about loss or weakness are often silenced or devalued (Douglas & Carless, 2017). Care from coaches has been highlighted for quite some time (Agnew & Pill, 2023; Kristiansen, Tomten, Hanstad, & Roberts, 2012), and coaches and managements should be inclusive of success stories *and* alternative stories (Carless & Douglas, 2012).

This longitudinal research adds to a literature that often presents a “performance narrative” (Barker-Ruchti, Rynne, Lee, & Barker, 2014; Carless & Douglas, 2012) by focusing on a cohort of athletes that is followed annually to discuss their ups and downs – which we believe will give a more accurate picture of their emotions than post-career interviews. The ten handballers had played in the same handball club since the age of 13, when six of them started at a secondary sport school. Their paths took different directions, and we followed them as they changed schools, clubs, and coaches. We explore how they look back on being a student-athlete and how they balanced schoolwork, training, athletic development, and injuries in the three years after high school. The handballers had the same dream and hope for status as elite athletes. Both a part of and a challenge to this identity, we found, was *injuries*. Without the right support and well-functioning communication with the coach, the dream would be crushed. We therefore ask: How do young athletes narrate their injuries in relation to becoming elite athletes? We start with the context of handball.

The Norwegian women's handball

Handball is a team sport that is characterised by combined low speed positioning as well as explosive movements such as sprints, cutting movements, jumps, throws, and physical confrontations (Luteberget, Trollerud, & Spencer, 2018). Technical and tactical skills, psychosocial behaviour, and physical characteristics such as height and lean mass are important to a player's success (Michalsik, Aagaard, & Madsen, 2013; Mohamed et al., 2009). The game's complexity causes multiple strains throughout adolescence. Research shows that during one season, about 50–90% of handballers experience substantial health problems or injuries (Moseid et al., 2018; von Rosen, Frohm, Kottorp, Fridén, & Heijne, 2017). Sport medicine research shows that early specialisation and training regimes of female adolescents are associated with anterior knee pain and knee injuries (Hall, Barber Foss, Hewett, & Myer, 2015; Visnes & Bahr, 2013) and that injuries are vital to understand mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion from Olympic dreams (Bergeron et al., 2015; Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011; Hall, Barber Foss, Hewett, & Myer, 2015; LaPrade et al., 2016). Injuries are a considerable mental challenge. Sport psychology research shows that drop-out often results from injuries and early sport specialisation (Capranica & Millard-Stafford, 2011; Le Bars, Gernigon, & Ninot, 2009), and that athletes tend to hide injuries to remain relevant and avoid negative feedback from coaches; they feel isolated when injured (Caron, Bloom, Johnston, & Sabiston, 2013).

The high demands and risk of injury do not seem to intimidate aspiring athletes. The number of Norwegian female handballers has been as consistent as the national team has been successful internationally and immensely popular in Norwegian media (Broch, 2020). Culturally, handball is a sport and an arena where Norwegian girls and young women tend to be seen as tough, not only in sports, but in social life as well (Broch, 2014, 2015). Together, this raises the bar for coaches in a sport that has a very high status and that is often coded masculine (LaVoi & Dutove, 2012).

Literature review

Studying the experiences of young student athletes who look back on their time in school combines a longitudinal study with retrospective narratives. An athletic career can, according to the lifespan model formulated by Wylleman and Lavallee (2004), have several transitions with different domains of careers. This model consists of four stages: the *initiation* stage (starts average age of 6–9 years), the *development* stage at age 15, and the *mastery* stage at 18.5 years of age. Furthermore, within each stage there are four domains of development: athletic, psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, and a talented young athlete needs to develop within

a holistic framework and as a whole person (Wylleman & Reints, 2010; see also Agnew & Pill, 2023). The transitions may be different between countries depending on the sport system and the sport (see Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). According to the life-span model and the Norwegian system, the present study focuses mainly on the mastery stage and for those who retired the *discontinuation* stage. The linearity of this model and the career paths has been pointed out on several occasions, for example Ollis, Macpherson, and Collins (2006) who argue for a wave-like process instead of the more descriptive and linear one. We agree with this view but use the main stages as an organising approach.

In 2004, the first private specialised secondary sport school opened in Norway for students ages 13–16. After comprehensive curriculum reform, the Knowledge Promotion Reform (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007), making sport a major program alongside traditional programs, also opened opportunities for private schools to target young kids. There are both private and public actors in the sport school system in Norway, and there is no state regulation of the designation of a school as a sport school with the result that there is considerable variation in the quality of schools (Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2017). NTG and Wang stand out as professional and holistic programs, and due to uneven support nationally from different national federations, private sport schools have “emerged by default . . . [and] the government, through its inaction, has allowed sport schools the policy space to expand” (Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2017, p. 447). As such, they are considered a steppingstone for Olympic success in both summer and winter sports. The sport school system has also been important in educating youth coaches. According to the lifespan model (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), the development stage is covered by attendance of specialised secondary sport school and the into Sport Academy High School (SAHS) years (from ages 16–19). By attending sport schools from the age of 13, it might appear that athletes are pushed earlier into the development stage than the ones who chose not to specialise at such an early age (Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2017).

After 19, athletes in Norway must make a choice about pursuing sport or education. Dual careers after 19 take a lot of the athlete and s(he) must be in a system that supports this. In this process, the role of the coach and the system s(he) may provide, increases. How should coaches get their athletes to the top? The art of coaching consists of many implicit feelings and knowledge from a several disciplines as all sport activities are interdisciplinary (Armour & Chambers, 2014). According to Ronglan and Havang (2011), it is about doing the right thing when needed based on observations. This is vital in the mastery phase for a successful transition (Wylleman, Reints, & De Knop, 2013). However, care tends to decrease when athletes transition out of the sport (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). In a recent study, the

focus was on the care provided by football managers and coaching staff towards deselected footballers as they are particularly vulnerable to difficult transitions (Agnew & Pill, 2023). The need for care was highlighted together with the need for a wider identity than that as an athlete.

The coach

For athletes to succeed and reach their Olympic dream, coach care and support is crucial (Agnew & Pill, 2023; Corsby & Jones, 2020; Cronin, Walsh, Quayle, Whittaker, & Whitehead, 2019). In an ideal world, the coach needs to understand physiology to avoid injuries and get the most out of practice, act as a sport psychologist and motivate athletes, and prepare for competitions. This holistic understanding of the context around athletes requires a multifaceted view on the nature of coaching (Selimi, Lascu, Serpiello, Woods, & Senel, 2023). Additionally, ongoing knowledge development is required together with communication with stakeholders. It is demanding to be a *great* coach (Becker, 2009), and to support and care for athletes (Cronin, Walsh, Quayle, Whittaker, & Whitehead, 2019; Jowett & Carpenter, 2015; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; McKay, Niven, Lavallee, & White, 2008). Care is an essential component of coaching (Cronin & Armour, 2017); elite athletes do not develop in a vacuum. Social contexts are vital as well as the management of the organisation the athletes belong to. In a study where coaches discussed their role in high-performance settings, the complexity and competence requirements across multiple domains were highlighted (Selimi, Lascu, Serpiello, Woods, & Senel, 2023). When investigating young Olympians and their development after participation in the Youth Olympic Games, Kristiansen, MacIntosh, Parent, and Houlihan (2017) found that poor coach relations was the main reason for dropout. In addition, there was a (small) difference in the perceived level of support from schools, parents, and coaches between those who dropped out and those who did not.

Athletes have a constant need of *being seen*. Corsby and Jones (2020) offer a thorough discussion of what they mean by “seeing”, it is a social act that is “qualified and created through particular, negotiated and comprised exchanges (e.g. post-game analysis, coaching intervention, feedback)” (Corsby & Jones, 2020, p. 352). In the present longitudinal investigation, being seen emerged as significant *longitudinal* theme from the analyses in all phases (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), a theme at the nexus of the coach-athlete relationship (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003). We analyse it as a social process and a matter of when and how the student athlete is seen. Corsby and Jones (2020, p. 349) highlight that coaches seeing athletes is “socially organised and managed thus being inherently linked to context”. Broch (2020, 2022) and Lund and Söderström (2017), show that being seen is

contingent on cultural codes and narratives that direct both our actions and observations. In other words, athletes and coaches are complex people (Gilbourne, 2012) positioned in complex social, cultural and interactional situations (Broch, 2023).

Conceptual framework: Narrative analysis

In this article, questions and experiences of being injured and its impacts on being seen (or not) were dealt with through the lens of narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2009, 2014). Being seen is a big part of being an athlete and a huge part of what coaches do (Broch, 2020; Jones, 2009). Complementing sport medicine and sport psychology research that is based on physiological and cognitive lenses, the narrative approaches of the human sciences allow us to consider how being seen is contingent on culture (Douglas & Carless, 2017; Lund & Söderström, 2017; Riessman, 2008). While some use narrative analyses to study formal structures or reconstruct biographical narratives (Kuhlin, Barker-Ruchti, & Stewart, 2020), we used a thematic narrative approach to emphasise young athletes' experiences as forming and being formed by various cultural contexts (Riessman, 2008).

In general, narrative is about stories and story structure; not necessarily orderly accounts (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995; Smith, 2003). Narratives are a consequential and meaningful sequencing of what is otherwise fragmented and arbitrary (Riessman, 2008). We conceived narratives as meaning fragments, contextually ordered, with a temporal constituency of realities and identities. The medical and psychological reality of injuries are interpreted by athletes who reorder accounts of their lives as athletes. This knowledge construction, through narrative practices, also concerns cultural legitimacy and normativeness (Bruner, 1987, 1991; Hardin & Whiteside, 2009). Consequently, we explore the narrative construction of a sport school reality where normative comprehensions of sports, athletes, and schoolwork are produced, reproduced, and transformed. Through narratives, various actors construct, negotiate, and order shared comprehensions of what it means to be a sport school student – and what it takes to be successful. Vitaly, we explore what young athletes' stories tell us about their identities, sport schools, and coaches. The identity we are foremost concerned with is the “aspiring elite athlete”.

Narratives are moral (Smith, 2003) and context-specific. People, consciously or unconsciously, frame identities, events, and texts in larger discursive structures: An inextricable intertwining of the personal and the cultural (Bruner, 1990; Douglas & Carless, 2017; Dowling, Garrett, Lisahunter, & Wrench, 2015; Kuhlin, Barker-Ruchti, & Stewart, 2020; Polkinghorne, 1995; Smith, 2003). To gain insight into how sport school student-athletes interpret their school lives, we link

their narratives about injuries with social processes within the school, with broadly available myths about sports, and with the dynamics of the coach–athlete relationship. We demonstrate how narrative analysis can be used to show how broad meanings about schools and sports shape, constrain, and allow the very being of an athlete and how she experiences being seen or unseen.

Methodology of the overall project

We used a multidisciplinary approach to girls' experiences of being a handballer. At the start of the project, it was reviewed by the Regional Committee for Medical Research Ethics, South-Eastern Norway Regional Health Authority, and also approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (SIKT). Players and at least one parent signed a written informed consent form before inclusion at the age of ~13 years old when they volunteered to take part in this longitudinal investigation. Later, we have updated and informed SIKT about the changes. From the age of 16, all players have signed an informed consent before each interview. Schools, coaches, parents and handballers have received constant updates and read the published articles from this longitudinal investigation, and they continue to be positive about the project.

We depart from a stance between the humanities and the social sciences. Our social constructionist approach is complemented by data from the larger project that joins sport medicine and psychology to mitigate the limitations of this article's text and talk-based representations. This will be elaborated below, but it should be mentioned that observations and talks during injury prevention training were used to consider how injuries are experienced.

Context, participants, and recruitment

In this 10 years prospective longitudinal investigation (e.g. 2013–2023), we followed young female handballers in their aim to become elite athletes by checking in on them frequently and in particular at important transitions such as a change in school and becoming elite athletes (Elliott, 2005). We did *not* use retrospective methods. Our first informal meeting with a group of handballers at age 12–13 was at a tournament where we informed them about the project. They also met an elite Norwegian handball star, and we observed her discussions with the young players about what it takes to succeed in sport. The players gave us valuable information for the first meeting a few months after they had started at the specialised secondary sport school (SSSS) for age group 13–16.

From the initial group of handballers, we selected 10 *female student-athletes*, whom we followed between the ages of 13 to 23. We closely

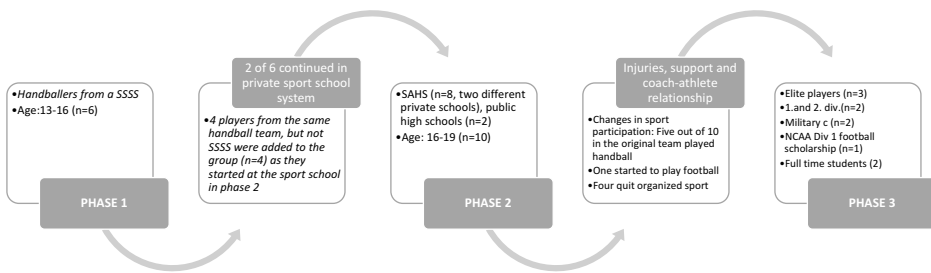


Figure 1. Overview of the three phases and interviewed athletes in sport specialised secondary sport school, (SSSS) and sport academy high school (SAHS).

monitored their physical and mental development as well as their understandings of ups and downs. We conducted three overall assessments in accordance with major transitions following choice of school and club (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004; see Figure 1). The first phase covered the transition from primary school to a specialised secondary sport school. The main findings were that biological more than chronological age must be considered to avoid overuse injuries, and that individualised training load and deliberate recovery are important (Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2017).

The second phase was the transition to a sport academy high school. At this level, sport is often given a prominent role. Findings revealed that coordination and communication between stakeholders are essential for monitoring young athletes' overall workload to avoid injuries and foster motivation (Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2020). Finally, at the mastery level and after they finished the sport school-system, five girls continued their handball career – at different levels while five others had discontinued (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014). As injuries were a major factor for quitting, the focus for the third phase was how handballers talk about their injuries in relation to the aim of becoming elite athletes.

Data collection

The primary data for the present study are the final, individual open-ended interviews conducted with the ten selected female handball players in which we focused on the third phase. The opening questions was “what is it like to be you now”? In the following discussion, we covered topic such as injuries, coach-athlete relationship, motivation and well-being, dual workload, support persons, and school-club relationships and transitions. We had questions about all three phases, but we dwelled on recent situations and how they had coped with challenges over the years. Previous data (see Figure 1) functioned as a secondary source in the interviews. Wrapping up, we discussed how it had been to be part of this project. Some reflected that it

Table 1. Overview of the longitudinal data collection.

	Interviews	Observations
10 Athletes (annually)	Individual interviews ($n = 32$) $n = 6$ focus groups interviews	The first three year we conducted weekly observations. The following years it was more on a distant
Parents	Individual interviews ($n = 6$) after 4 years into the investigation	Informal talks and observations of the parents during about 12 matches per year and in addition observation at two parental club meetings organised by the club coaches each year
Coaches	Individual interviews with coaches at two different school ($n = 3$) on several occasions under the investigation	Informal talks and observations of the club coaches during 1–2 training sessions per month
Sport school representatives	Individual interviews ($n = 2$)	

had been interesting and helpful to review their career (at least in retrospect).

Over the years we also conducted formal interviews with stakeholders such as parents, coaches, and sport school representatives (see [Table 1](#)) to better grasp the female handballers understandings and experiences. In addition, we had hours of informal conversations and observations, which we used as background information and support. We used both individual and focus group interviews; the latter due to allowing us to see “the complex ways in which people position themselves in relation to each other as they process question, issues and topics in focused ways” (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 904). All aspects of the total workload (school, training, and private life) were discussed (see also Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2017, 2020).

Observation was also an important aspect of this investigation, and [Table 1](#) offers an overview of its extent. Throughout the years the participation changed from participant observation to onlooker and friend to talk to/support person (Patton, 2014). These shifting roles provided first-hand observation of the coach–athlete relationship and how the athletes coped with injuries. The coach became more important as the handballers developed, and his or her role also slightly changed from merely support to providing handball-specific knowledge in addition to a developing a wider understanding of their life situations.

Data analysis and confidentiality

This is a thematic narrative study where coding was performed manually by writing notes on the transcripts and using highlighters to avoid fragmentation and decontextualization of the “narrative data” (Riessman, 2008). Emerging findings were compared with the data to verify understanding, and this was discussed with colleagues. Then, a refining of the specifics of

each theme led us to define and name themes, or stories, about specific issues that linked several issues across the dataset. These were highlighted as patterns of shared meanings and themes that were important (Riessman, 2008). The process of evaluating codes and clustering took several rounds of reviewing and emergent findings were compared and discussed (investigator triangulation, Patton, 2014). Importantly, we carried out a reflexive practice where an additional researcher was brought in to create some distance from the field in which the other two authors of this paper had long been immersed. Rigor was demonstrated by use of *member reflection* in order to generate additional data and facilitate enriched understanding by interviewees reading the first drafts of the article (Smith & McGannon, 2018). This reflexive practise and member reflection on our preliminary findings kept the project going and contributed to the main emergent narrative theme in the final phase of analysis: *to be seen*.

We took several measures to respect the anonymity of participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); details were left out and only general concepts about school and teams were used. Similarly, websites from involved schools are not included with full references, even though these sites are public domains. Together, these measures protect the confidentiality of the individuals, even though this means a slightly constrained data presentation (Kristiansen et al., 2012).

Findings and discussion

With the aim to develop a holistic understanding (Agnew & Pill, 2023; Douglas & Carless, 2017; Kuhlin, Barker-Ruchti, & Stewart, 2020) of the experiences of being a handballer, we started by looking into their cultural context, namely school sports and Olympic dreams in the first two phases (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). Next, we outlined how this context potentially harms the young women's bodies and then how they talk about their dreams and hopes. It requires constant work to reach the goals of an aspiring Olympic athlete when entering the mastery phase. Injuries made students feel isolated from the sport and not seen by the sports coach; the sport made them at times feel unworthy; and, in the end, the coach-athlete relationship suffered. Throughout, being seen emerged as a significant narrative that guides the handballer's understanding of sport and herself.

The cultural context: the dream of becoming an Olympic medallist

“Your dream, our passion” it reads on the school walls. Here, the Olympic dream can be bought with the modern talent system cultivated through *sport schools*. At the age of 13 years, athletes and parents are told that students will learn how to “think like a world champion” and that by

attending this school ‘you will learn how to become a top athlete’. Pictures of successful athletes are all over, they visit frequently too, and rooms are named after them. The message is clear: learn, persevere, and you will win with us [i.e. this school].

Initially, when we interviewed the girls about why they wanted to be in a sport specialised school, the dream of playing at the national team was often shared with a shy laugh – “I do not say it out loud, but of course it is a dream” one responded when asked directly. Of course, “being accepted at the school is cool too and means that you are among the best handball players in your age group” the girls told us. They were already aware of the demand of not only taking up the legacy of the accomplished Norwegian women’s national team, but to do this in a certain way: “they want us to high five each other when we do well on defence and cheer when you score”. Being tough, playing through injuries with a smile, is part and parcel of Norwegian women’s handball identity (Broch, 2014, 2015) and the young players underlined how this works in the practice of an elite youth handball player. When confronted with what they said ten years earlier before entering the “elite sport race” and attending the sport school, one of the girls said in the last interview:

National team play has always been a dream, but I do not like to say it aloud or share my dream. I keep it to myself and see how far I can go. At my age [i.e., 22] I realize how hard this goal is.

A constant theme was that school was underlined as important *if* they “did not reach their dream” of playing on the national team in a world championship or in Olympic Games. A sport school becomes a compromise that allows you an alternative option in case you do not make it. This was repeated by both the players and their parents; they are aware that the dream may be futile. In retrospect, some did question whether the first transition to the development phase (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004) was made too soon as the seriousness can be overwhelming at the age of 13.

A minor drawback was the lack of a supportive school climate due to “many egos as everyone wants to be best in the world in their sport”, one student explained. It was somehow accepted that it is hard and lonely work to become an elite athlete. The harsh climate of individual achievement also intertwined with narratives of injuries:

I am happy that I went through the sport school system, it has given me mental strength as I have coped with so many injuries . . . I do not regret going there, but I regret not standing up for myself more when I was seen and classified as a shooter; both the coaches at my team and at school thought it was a very good idea that I threw a lot with high-weight-handballs . . . at every workout, often twice a day. Naturally, I got a shoulder injury.

Being seen as an aspiring athlete, just like being seen as a shooter by your coach; is also a moral imperative (Smith, 2003); it makes you an aspiring athlete and a shooter instead of a “dreamer” and playmaker or defender, respectively. Wanting to be seen and recognised for this skill – to stand out as a player who is both identified and identifies as a top shooter – it is tempting to hide pain and not speak up. Some of the players mentioned that by the age of 22, they were more honest about their bodies to coaches instead of trying to please them. At a young age, during their time at the sport school, this courage was often lacking.

The dream of becoming an Olympic medallist, a player on the national team, reaching for the dream and “ideal” competitive character (Karlsson, Kilger, Bäckström, & Redelius, 2022; Larson, 2006) meant for these student athletes that they, through sport schools, entered into a world where the many coaches in school (and the very school ideology itself) and outside school shared ideas about what an Olympic medallist looks like. This creates a problem of communication in which both athletes and coaches are positioned within and make use of the same narratives and codes concerning the elite athlete, yet from very different points of view. The problem was enlarged in that each coach saw the girls from their own perspective; situated in their own previous experiences and understandings about elite sports (Lund & Söderström, 2017) and they did not take an holistic approach (Agnew & Pill, 2023; Douglas & Carless, 2017; Kuhlin, Barker-Ruchti, & Stewart, 2020; Thompson, Rongen, Cowburn, & Till, 2022). In fact, the girls often found that the coaches disregarded the fact that they trained on both school and club teams. Furthermore, the young women were often unable to share the problems this dual participation caused. As one said, “My coach only cared about what I did in his practices and games” without acknowledging that she played and trained with another team too. The girls told a story in which they only felt seen by a particular coach when they were present with this coach. In other words, the lack of a holistic approach from the coaches made it almost unbearable for the young handball-women to communicate and perform “the aspiring elite athlete” in each and every context, each and every day throughout the year. This became even more apparent in the last interview – when they realised the consequences of their invisibility.

The young women: taking stock of physical injuries

Being injured is by many lay (Gould, Tuffey, Udry, & Loehr, 1997) and professional coaches considered a natural part of becoming an elite athlete (Cover, Roiger, & Zwart, 2018). In many sport cultures, it is a signifier of the dedicated athlete (Broch, 2020). Injuries, we argue, should therefore be considered a cultural aspect of sports. Injury and injury prevention exercises, in other words, help athletes form bodies and minds that adhere to the

narrative of the dedicated elite athlete. Therefore, injury prevention training became a key in the project of being present and being seen to avoid being alone for the handballers in this investigation.

For many female athletes, injuries are a part of their life so school coaches and club coaches, as well as the schools and clubs, were committed, in principle, to attend to this matter (NTG, n.d.). The private schools in this investigation implemented regular injury prevention training and reduced handball training for their handball players. The same cannot be said about the clubs, where injury prevention program is something, they expect the girls “to take care of themselves”, as the handballers expressed to us.

Due to an increasing awareness of the detrimental effect of injuries in talent development (Thompson, Rongen, Cowburn, & Till, 2022), one of the researchers in this project was given the chance to carry out participant observations as a physical trainer responsible for alternative training outside the handball practices at school in the development phase (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). The aim of this training was to give the girls a more versatile experience than what they receive on the handball court. From the age of 10–11 years, this was never called injury prevention training, but as fun, outdoor activities with a variety of different exercises that would make them better handball players. In the informal talks and formal interviews, the girls emphasised the importance of these training sessions, not only to prevent injuries, but most because this was a “free zone” without a need, or pressure, to perform. They learned some fundamentals that helped them also when pursuing other careers after sport such as in the military and when changing sport for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)-system. Furthermore, those who only participated sporadically due to participating at several teams sustained serious long-term injuries. In [Table 2](#), we outline the major injuries the athletes experienced and their current occupation at the last interview.

Comparing No 1 and No 2, these two elite division players have both recovered from serious injuries at different times in their career and they were among the players who participated from the age of 13 years in this project. Players No 1 and 8 were injured four years after they left the program. Player No. 3 prioritised injury prevention training and was never injured. Of course, athletes may be injured even if dedicated to this type of training, but the program also taught them that it requires work to get back from injuries.

In some of the first interviews, the girls would simply state that “we have less injuries in our team than the other [girls] in the club, we have been good at doing injury prevention exercises”. In the later interviews this sentiment would be framed more positively to “one of the better take home messages from doing sport” was that the injury prevention program had learned them more about their bodies and what they could, or could not, manage. This,

Table 2. Overview of the 10 handball players and their part in the project. Players marked with * participated the longest in the project.

	SSSS/ SAHS	Major injury and year	Being "seen" by the club coach and national/regional team	Level handball or occupation in 2022
No 1 *	yes/yes	Patellar tendon fracture 2020	yes/no	Elite level/part-time student
No 2 *	yes/yes	Stress fracture 2016	yes/yes	Elite level/part-time student
No 3 *	yes/yes	Never	yes/no	Division 1/Full time student
No 4	yes/yes	Lower back injury 2017	Yes and no/no	Full time student
No 5	yes/no	Compartment syndrome 2017	no/no	Military
No 6	yes/no	ankle rupture of ligamentum medialis 2020	no/no	NCAA scholarship, football/student
No 7	no/yes	2020 ACL	yes/yes	Elite level/Full time student
No 8 *	no/yes	Elbow, shoulder, broken wrist, acute syndesmosis rupture	yes/no	Division I/Full time student
No 9	no/yes	Shoulder 2019	no/no	Military
No 10	no/yes	ACL 2020	no/no	Full time student

many argued, was helped by the adult who saw them and helped them feel seen as they recovered from injuries. As such, the injury prevention program allowed players to be seen as important individuals and not only as competitors.

The girl's perspective: narrating injured bodies

The themes of skill development and injuries are omnipresent in the tales of our interviewees. Skill development – in the form of technical, physical, and mental skills – foregrounds the ideal narrative. However, when we use the longitudinal data, both as present time and retrospective testimonies, a prominent narrative about injuries emerges as the women athletes interpret their sporting careers. In this quote below from Phase 1 to Phase 2, a young athlete tells the story of being seen for her skills to become invisible later on due to injuries:

I participated early on in the national team for my age group, and people notice you because of that. Though, when I got injured later, still relatively young, I found the recovery challenging because it also meant lack of visibility . . . It is vital to feel special and talented. I changed sport school because another sport school coach saw me, and I was so tired of my former coach never responding to my messages.

Being seen is not only important to the athlete. The nurturing and seeing of young players is important for building the confidence and stamina that are needed for not giving up (Broch, 2020; Douglas & Carless, 2009, 2014; Jones, 2009) when facing challenges such as injuries and fighting to

be on the start-up team. Importantly, this fight is part of a competitive sport culture that values fighters and devalues athletes who do not want to be tough, also through injuries, as expressed in the interviews in Phase 3.

I like that we must fight for the position on the team, it helps to improve your own play because you have to go all in, 100% at every training session . . . it's a fight in all positions in our club as most of us are at the same level and this gives the coaches no clear first choice, that is what makes us better.

Fully knowing and representing the code of competition, this athlete retells the story of competition as positive. For those who do not view the constant “fight” as a way to improve, it may become too much. As one player said in retrospect: “When I started school I wanted to be as good as I could be, but then it became too much, and the joy disappeared underneath a never-ending competition”. The constant competition mixed with a feeling of invisibility if you do not perform in the eyes of the coach, of not being seen as equal or the best in the team’s internal competition, is demanding, and several examples were given on the topic over the years. One girl remarked that not even “the schoolteachers notice if we fall asleep in class” when we are exhausted from all the physical practices and mental pressures. Not even the teacher, who is supposed to care about the whole person, cares enough to act on obvious signs of exhaustion, according to the athlete. When no feedback is given by either teachers’ or coaches’, several remarked that they were “unsure how to make it to the elite level, as no one seems to take any interest”. Adding salt to injury, depression was often related to these issues:

Earlier I was depressed all the time because of the injury, now I am much better, probably because everyone around me has been good at supporting me . . . but it took time before I realized why I was depressed - because I thought of everything that I could not participate in. The uncertainty of coming back from injuries has affected me a lot, especially as many people thought I should be on the national team, which is a long-term dream. But it is tiring to think about it all the time.

The performance narrative is relentless (Barker-Ruchti, Rynne, Lee, & Barker, 2014; Carless & Douglas, 2012). When being unable to train with the others, not being seen and forgotten instead also becomes a source of stress for athletes. In a culture where visibility is key to both individual and team achievements, invisibility due to the lack of ability to be seen is detrimental. They want to be noticed, also when injured:

I guess I am afraid to tell the coach how much it hurts, and sometimes I take part in exercises that I should not do. But my teammates are good at reminding me when I push through [at this point the 14-year-old player almost starts crying]. But I am afraid the others will think, there is always someone claiming to have injuries to avoid training.

Injuries as a signifier of the dedicated athlete create a multitude of paradoxes. Coaches and players continuously assess whether athletes have injuries that make it impossible to participate, impossible to participate in some activities, uncomfortable but fully possible to participate, fully possible to participate yet simply wanting a break, and so on (Broch, 2020). Young athletes can also use injuries to gain attention and injuries may become an excuse to skip (part of) the practice. Both coaches and players know this. It appeared problematic for the young athletes to deal with teammates' injuries, and they also admitted never "asking anyone if they are injured". Apparently, if you are in real pain, you need "to tell everyone yourself" and do your best to convince everyone.

How your teammate sees you has been a constant theme in the interviews over the years, and how you cope with injuries. This creates a difficult space to manoeuvre when we consider that being seen as tough in handball also signifies the necessary cultural, physical, and mental skills of the handball girl (Broch, 2014, 2015). It is part of the narrative identity that players must communicate verbally and physically. However, being seen, not only as tough or injured, but also as persons was a significant part of the athletes' narratives about becoming (or trying to become) elite athletes (Corsby & Jones, 2020; Douglas & Carless, 2009, 2014; Jones, 2009). It was a part they storied as missing or as being shaped mostly by the codes and narratives that the coaches used. In many sports, being seen is contingent on sport performances and being unable to perform due to injuries can therefore rob you of your identity as a player. When we consider the myths of the sport school fostering Olympic dreams and the iconic smile of the Norwegian handball girl, it seems plausible that injuries are both important for the girls to appear dedicated, but risky in the way that can make them invisible.

Conclusion

There are several bumps in the road that may crush a young aspiring athletes' Olympic dream. This article contributes to the literature on holistic approaches (Agnew & Pill, 2023; Douglas & Carless, 2017; Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2017, 2020; Kuhlin, Barker-Ruchti, & Stewart, 2020; Thompson, Rongen, Cowburn, & Till, 2022) to talent development and the importance of being seen (Broch, 2020; Corsby & Jones, 2020; Douglas & Carless, 2009, 2014, 2017; Jones, 2009) in different phases of their career (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). While two of the athletes in this study continue to have an Olympic dream after a decade, the study also offers examples of transitions out of elite sport through competition at lower levels of their sport or other careers – which is less researched (Agnew & Pill, 2023).

We were interested in the differences between the players who made it and the ones who did not. The starting point for the elite career in the

development phase (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) was the enrolment into the sport schools, how this shapes the very being of an athlete and how players experience being seen – or not. Our handballers entered the elite sport system surrounded by portraits of Norwegian Olympians at sport schools, conveying an impression that the school has made it possible for student-athletes to reach their dream (Berntsen & Kristiansen, 2018; Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2017; Radtke & Coalter, 2007). This was discussed in the final interview, and some of them even admitted in retrospect that the different transitions (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), in particular the first one into the sport specialised secondary school, was a tough one. Maybe they would have succeeded better without it? The tears shed over the ten years offers these narratives an extra dimension. Furthermore, and as the girls matured, they also become more aware of the fact that the coach treated them differently and the impact this had on their sport experiences and fighting through periods of declined performances. Those who received more individual feedback together with private text messages and encouragement were, more often than not, in the start line-up. Also, it was easier for them to continue doing sport – while those who were overlooked, quit. In retrospect, they could narrate the impact of different coach treatments and what it meant to become invisible due to injuries. Could more care and being seen by the coach (Cronin, 2023) have affected how they perceived themselves and developed? Many handballers admitted that quitting sport was closely related to miscommunication or lack of communication among their many coaches and not feeling seen when they struggled (Kristiansen et al., 2012). By linking the 10 female handballers' narratives with social processes that are coloured by myths, codes, and narratives (Broch, 2020, 2022, 2023; Corsby & Jones, 2020; Gilbourne, 2012; Lund & Söderström, 2017) about sports and the Olympic dream (Larson, 2006), being seen emerged as a parallel narrative to that of injuries.

While the natural sciences and medicine might emphasise the gravity of injury, we have shown that this is only one part of the story. This studies narratives offer alternative success stories (Carless & Douglas, 2012). Through the athletes narratives, *what* coaches actually do is in focus (Douglas & Carless, 2017). While only three of the athletes currently play handball in an elite division, and two in the lower division, the other five have had quite remarkable careers both in sport, sport and medicine studies, art studies, and the military. However, in current successes, which are almost for everyone related to sport, there is also a fragility or sadness when talking about lost chances (Caron, Bloom, Johnston, & Sabiston, 2013).

Injuries are a part of elite sport and handball, where players are expected, by themselves and by others, to be tough and push through pain. Teaching athletes in contact sports to talk about pain and injuries is a way of protecting

them. Helping coaches understand that young athletes have limited communicative skills and that they tend to undermine their own voice in the lopsided coach-athlete power-relation, is key. Furthermore, this is also a call for a more humanistic and holistic coaching approach where listening and conversation is central (Thompson, Rongen, Cowburn, & Till, 2022). This is vital to stop dropout in young and talented female handball players.

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