Current Issues in Sport Science
ISSN: 2414-6641
claudio.nigg@unibe.ch
Universität Bern
Suiza

The athlete talent development environment in the best ranked football academy in Norwegian football: The case of the U16 team in Stabæk football club

Stian Haukli, Jon; Hvid Larsen, Carsten; Feddersen, Niels; Arve Sæther, Stig

The athlete talent development environment in the best ranked football academy in Norwegian football: The case of the U16 team in Stabæk football club
Current Issues in Sport Science, vol. 6, 2021
Universität Bern, Suiza
Disponible en: https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=677871911006
DOI: https://doi.org/10.36950/2021ciss008

Psychology & Philosophy

The athlete talent development environment in the best ranked football academy in Norwegian football: The case of the U16 team in Stabæk football club

Jon Stian Haukli
Carsten Hvid Larsen
Niels Feddersen
Stig Arve Sæther stigarve@ntnu.no

Current Issues in Sport Science, vol. 6, 2021

Universität Bern, Suiza

Recepción: 11 Julio 2020
Aprobación: 26 Marzo 2021
Publicación: 03 Junio 2021

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36950/2021ciss008

Redalyc: https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=677871911006

Abstract: We used the holistic ecological approach to examine the talent development of Stabæk football club. Specifically, the male under-16 team. The environment was categorised as successful based on their history of developing senior elite players and being the highest ranked football academy in Norway. The study design was an explorative, integrative, and qualitative study considering an extreme case. Data collection included interviews, observations, and document analysis. The results showed that the environment shared features with other successful environments and deviated on other features. Our findings were consistent with research highlighting the importance of long-term development focus, supportive training groups, and support from the wider environment. However, we also found that the contrary to former research, success was not underpinned by a coherent organisational culture. Instead, there were several examples of ambiguity (e.g., between espoused values and actual behaviours). There was also a lack of integration of efforts, no support for developing psychosocial skills, lack of diversification, and a lack of proximal role models. Instead, the club practiced early recruitment and specialisation, employed failure-focused coaching, and kept youth players away from role models. Our findings show that the club environment could be described as a successful, and yet, success does not necessarily equal all previously suggested successful features.

Introduction

Much of the earlier talent development literature has focussed mainly on the individual and how external factors influence athlete performance and less on the importance of the players' environment and how this teaches athletes to handle difficult situations (Henriksen et al., 2010a). Despite the increased focus on talent development in the past two decades, Johnston et al. (2018) highlighted in their review, comparing highly skilled and less-skilled athletes, the inconsistent and unreliable talent predictors in the research on elite-level sport. Till and Baker (2020) went further in their literature review on talent identification and development, pointing that the lack of robust research evidence would indicate that we should stop thinking about talent per se (especially at younger ages), and instead apply appropriate and research informed practices to everyone (or as many as possible) for as long as possible.

Football is a sport in which the talent development focus has been strong for decades. Most professional football clubs want to provide high-quality talent development environments and strategies arranged in academies to provide players for the club's professional team. Given the changing requirements encountered along the path to becoming a professional footballer, it is important to understand the process that young footballers go through at different stages of development (Nesti & Sulley, 2015). Being part of a professional football team and culture can be quite challenging for even the most talented footballers, as indicated by the high dropout rate in academy football (Güllich, 2014). Based on the complexity of athlete development, adopting a holistic approach to athlete development environments might be essential (Henriksen et al., 2010a). A holistic talent development approach emphasises the player's importance in an environment of clubs, coaches, parents, teachers, and friends, who all might facilitate the players' development (Nesti & Sulley, 2015).

The holistic ecological approach (HEA) introduced by Henriksen et al. (2010a), focuses on the environment in which prospective elite athletes develop, which they defined as the athletic talent development environment (ATDE). This approach pays considerable attention to the organisational context of the environment and especially the role and function of the organisational culture. Earlier, talent development environment research has linked the environment's success to a strong and coherent organisational culture of the club or team, with the focus on internal integration to create unity among the group members with respect to the value of the organisation and external adaption specified as the culture's necessary adaption to its surroundings (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b; Larsen et al., 2013; 2020). Yet, recent organisational culture research (Feddersen et al, 2020b; McDougall et al., 2020) suggests that linking successful outcomes (e.g., developing elite athletes) to a good culture might neglect ambiguity and conflict in seemingly coherent cultures. It is entirely possible that a negative or even destructive culture can produce functional, successful outcomes (Feddersen et al., 2020b). It might therefore be worthwhile questioning whether a good, coherent culture always leads to successful outcomes and whether successful outcomes always come from a good, coherent culture.

Since the first study which using the ATDE model in football in the Danish club AGF in 2013 (Larsen et al., 2013), there have been studies conducted in Norway and the Netherlands. The findings from these four studies suggest that the staff and especially the coaches in these clubs have a clear focus on equipping the players with the transferable skills needed, both on the pitch and in life in general (dual careers). An example of such a transferable skill was player responsibility for their own development, also transferable to them taking responsibility for their school homework or coming to training on time. Many of the clubs have struggled in their collaboration with the club's elite team despite the otherwise close relationships with the younger teams in the club, making the transition from the youth team to senior elite difficult (Flatgård et al.,

2020). For one, the Norwegian team Rosenborg struggled to implement a smooth transition to the elite team despite the wish to recruit players from their own academy (Aalberg & Sæther, 2015). Similar tendencies have been found in other football academies (Relvas et al., 2010) and clubs (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009).

One of the most important actors in the talent development environment is the coach (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2018). Literature on football and psychology (Johnson et al., 2011; Nesti, 2010; Relvas et al., 2010), claims that for practitioners and coaches to be effective in football organisations, they need to understand the culture within which they are operating and how their behaviour impacts on the players' development, both positively and negatively. Mills et al. (2012) studied the experiences of elite football coaches and factors perceived to either positively or negatively influence athlete development. The study found that awareness, resilience, goal-directed attributes, intelligence, sport-specific attributes, and environmental factors as the most essential. Research has, furthermore, shown the importance of the coach related to issues such as the perception of need-support (Berntsen & Kristiansen, 2020), social support when facing stressors (Morris et al., 2017), and burnout (Lu et al., 2016). Further, much research (see Harwood et al., 2015; Holt et al., 2017) provides evidence for the importance of coaches providing appropriate challenges for young adults as they progress towards an elite sports career. In football, Nesti and Sulley (2015) along with Champ et al. (2020), and Nesti et al. (2012) provide compelling evidence of the coach's essential role in supporting players develop through critical moments. Challenging athletes on their developmental journey also comes with dilemmas. One dilemma involves the ethical and moral implications of to which degree and how the coaches should challenge the players who already are in a challenging situation. Considering the many reviews into the destructive behaviours of coaches in elite sports (see Kammeradvokaten, 2020; King, 2012; Phelps et al., 2017), and research into destructive features of talent development programmes (Feddersen et al., 2020b) it may seem that providing challenges can in some cases end with bullying and social domination behaviours. Research has found potential unfortunate consequences of coaches employing challenges, such as abusing trust in the coach-athlete relationship (Feddersen et al., 2020a), making players play while injured (Crust, 2008), harsh and authoritarian coaching behaviour (Champ et al., 2020; Cushion & Jones, 2006), and emotional abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2008). Such behaviours could lead to significant conflict in the coach-athlete relationship (Wachsmuth et al., 2018) and ultimately need third party support to resolve conflicts (Wachsmuth et al., 2020).

Current study

The case chosen for this study was a club with significant success in developing players who make the transition to senior professional football. Yet, Stabæk FC is an atypical (or even extreme case;

Flyvbjerg, 2006), in the Norwegian context, because they focus on early recruitment/selection in the football academy (U7), and a more challenging coach-athlete relationship in the academy. The aims of this study were to: (i) present a holistic ecological description of Stabæk football club's U16 team, (ii) to describe the organisational culture of the club's U16 team, and (iii) because of the description of the chosen case as an extreme case, examine how the partly unorthodox coaching practice impacts the players development.

Methods

This study was organised as an explorative, integrative, and qualitative case study in a successful Norwegian football environment (Maaløe, 2004). The study adopts the HEA established by Henriksen et al. (2010a) for a case study of the development environment of the youth department at Stabæk Football and the under-16 team in particular.

Case Selection and Participants

We selected the case, the U16 team in Stabæk Football Club, because (1) it is a team in a professional club which were successful in developing players that make the transition from their academy to the senior team (i.e., number of players) and (2) ranked number one in the national academy classification (quality) despite a lack of economic resources. As a track record for the club, they currently have six players in their senior team (age 19-25) who were also youth players at Stabæk FC. Also, in the academy classification in 2017, the club had the highest number of age-specific national team players, with 15 players and 10 club-produced players under the age of 25 in their 2016 season squad (Norsk toppfotball, [Norwegian top-level football association, NTF], 2017). Furthermore, it is the only club that has won both U16 and U19 national series for both boys and girls in the same year. The club had a U15, U16 and U19 team, and no teams between U16 and U19. The club is, also, unorthodox in a Norwegian context since they focus on early recruitment and selection (U7).

The features above make the club an interesting case compared to many clubs that are more in line with the standard academies in the Scandinavian context. The male U16 team consisted of 20 players (aged 15-16) and its staff (two head coaches, one part-time physical coach and two physiotherapists working on a voluntary basis).

Research methods and instruments

Data were collected from three main sources – participant observation, qualitative interviews (individual and focus group), and document analysis, and from multiple perspectives (related teams, coaches, and

players in the club). These research activities were conducted by the first author.

Interviews

First, semi-structured interview guides (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) were created on the basis of the categories from the ATDE and Environmental success factors (ESF) models (Henriksen, 2010b) which allowed the interviewees freedom to discuss issues that were personally important to them. Within the semi-structured format, open-ended questions (e.g., how do you consider the clubs ability to collaborate with surrounding clubs, and, how would you consider the clubs resource access) were used to yield in-depth responses about the interviewees' expectations, perceptions, and knowledge of the environment. We conducted four in-depth interviews of two head coaches with 10 years' experience coaching the researched age group, one goalkeeper coach, and one physiotherapist, on average lasting 49 minutes. In addition, there was one focus group interview with three players, which lasted 35 minutes. The players selected for the interviews were regarded as role models in the environment and furthermore represented a variety of experience in the environment both related to time spent and challenges, they had to overcome. All respondents were men.

Participant observation

Second, participant observations were used as a method (Tanggaard, 2006). The observations took place at the clubhouse, the training grounds (12 training sessions), and at matches (three matches were observed). Altogether, the observations covered about 60 hours (three separate weeks of observations) across three months and included informal conversations with administrators, elite players, parents, coaches, and volunteers. The first author took notes both during and after their immersion in the environment and used the notes to reflect on their observations and experiences on a daily basis. The notes were discussed in the research team after the collection of the data was finished.

Document analysis

Third, archives and documents were used as a substantial category of data in the case study (Ramian, 2007). The documents included the club's homepage; official papers describing the vision, rules, and structure of the club; and statements about its vision, rules, goals, strategies, and values. A new report regarding the academy classification conducted by the federation of top-level Norwegian football was also included. The use of document analysis was chosen to try to get an overall perception of how the clubs wanted to appear based on different sources (websites, strategy documents etc.), both seen from an insider and outsider perspective.

Data treatment and analysis

A thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse, and report patterns within the data. With the use of a notebook, initial descriptions and interpretations were written down during the fieldwork, and fully written out in full text afterwards. All interviews were audio recorded. Interviews and observation notes were transcribed verbatim and raw material was coded. The first phase consisted of familiarising trough transcribing, reading, and re-reading the data. In the second phase, the first author generated initial codes from the data, where the coding was based on a node tree built from the ATDE and the ESF models and primarily involved high-order themes, using the six steps suggested by Braun et al. (2016) for inductive-deductive qualitative analysis in psychology, while trying to give a triangulation of data sources (Creswell, 2012). In the third phase, we worked with the deductive codes and identified low-order themes. The fourth phase involved outlining the environment's preconditions, processes, organisational culture, and outcomes, with the data from all three sources. In the fifth phase, we reviewed and refined the subthemes and final categories, and developed the empirical models of the case. The sixth step was report writing and presentation of data. The triangulation of data sources and data-collection techniques helped to establish the trustworthiness of the analysis and findings (Patton, 2002).

In this paper, rigour is related to the meaningful coherence between the purpose of the study, the procedure, and the findings (Tracy, 2010). We build on the former research using the HEA and add a new methods' procedure by using thematic analysis as opposed to the usual inductive-deductive meaning condensation (Henriksen, 2010). Doing so could lend additional credibility to the framework (Tracy, 2010). Building on Tracy (2010), we have sought to ensure transparency by making a detailed description of the research process. In attempting to do so, we exemplified the procedure and data analysis, and tried to make explicit our pre-conceptions, sensitivity to the environment, and role by creating distance and reflecting on our interpretations. Moreover, we have continually sought to verify and validate the analysis and provide critical interpretations of the data. During the data collection the research team discussed various theoretical perspectives and interpretations with the co-authors (and supervisors), thereby ensuring peer validity (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This is additionally ensured through collaboration between the co-authors to establish the accuracy of the interpretations. Triangulation of data sources and data collection techniques helped to establish the trustworthiness of the analysis and findings (Patton, 2002). Additionally, on-going member reflections took place during the individual studies (Tracy, 2010). Here, the task therefore was to make sure that the descriptions and explanations were rich, bountifully supplied, generous, and unstinting (Weick, 2007). In this case, richness is generated through a requisite variety of theoretical constructs, data sources, contexts, and samples. Applying the concept of requisite variety to qualitative rigor suggests that "a researcher with a head full of theories,

and a case full of abundant data, is best prepared to see nuance and complexity" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841).

Results

Organisational Structure of the Stabæk football club U16 Team

Microenvironment (sport-domain)

The study focussed on the U16 team and its staff in the professional football club Stabæk FC (see Figure 1), consisting of two coaches, one physiotherapist, and a goalkeeper coach. Together with the players, the coaches are the core of the development environment. The player squad consisted of 20 players born in 2002, and the team was playing in a league with an age cohort one year above their own (i.e., age 15 and 16). We found that the microenvironment also included support functions such as the physical coach and physiotherapist. The coaches explained that the club gave them ownership to adjust their coaching approach as they saw fit, despite the club's desire to have a common club-driven approach. The players felt that being part of an academy well known for their development of talented players supported their chances of becoming a senior professional with Stabæk FC. Many of the players considered their teammates to be their friends, and the players on the U16 team seemed socially closely knit.

The relationship between the U16 and both the U15 and the U19 teams was an essential part of the environment in the academy. According to the coaches, these relationships were based on how the coaches of the different teams collaborated in training sessions and had similar goals and views on player and team development. The coaches talked a lot about taking a step up in development, and naturally, the next step for the U16 players would be the U19 team, making the relationships between these two teams essential. Because of limited facilities, the U16 players saw the senior players on a regular basis, especially because the senior team trained at the same location immediately after the U16 team – even though, during the period of observation, the U16 players as a team and the senior team players seldom met physically. Even so, it meant that some of the U16 players had a better relationship with some of the senior players compared to the U19 team players, as explained by a player: "I would almost say that the players in the senior team are nicer. It depends on which player on the U19 team you talk about. It's like if I am passing a person from the U19 team, and I don't know him, we don't say hi" (Player 3).

Microenvironment (non-sport domain)

There were three relationships seen as important: family, friends, and school. Family members were described by most players as essential for

both social support (watching matches), logistics (driving, preparing meals), and facilitating participation (flexibility on holidays). Some fathers of players were especially close to team since they liked to get an insight into their sons' daily lives. The coaches, however, described two different types of parents: the ones with experience of elite level football or other elite sports who keep a distance and those without this experience who get involved in discussions with the coaches related to playing time, team selections, training principles. Some of the players highlight the importance of their parents in their process of trying to become a professional player, by adjusting their families' everyday lives around them. One player explained: "I believe they sacrifice a lot. If the family is planning vacations etc. then they have to check that there are no clashing matches. You are very grateful that they do a close follow-up" (Player 3). Overall, it seemed like the coach-parent relationships could be described as somewhat superficial partly because this was a strategy of the club and coaches, since they wanted a minimum of interaction with the parents in favour of more interactions with the players.

According to the player focus group interview and player conversations during the observation period, many of them felt they had a good balance between football, school, and friends. The coaches also considered the players' social situation to be important in their development, emphasising the importance of friends and vacation. The players were occasionally given freedom from training sessions, so they could have the opportunity to attend other activities (e.g., movie, cafe). The players were occasionally asked to attend a party or a social event and explained that they often had to decline most of these invitations, to be able to perform the next day or that they perceived that this was expected of them from the coaches. Yet, most players did not consider that a problem.

The club has collaborated with the Norwegian Elite sport upper secondary school (Norges Toppidrettsgymnas, NTG), Stabæk department, and the Norwegian Elite sport lower secondary school (NTG-U) for a long time. One main difference between the schools is their focus on basic skills and diversity of sports in the lower secondary school, while in the upper secondary school the players specialise in football. The club and school have a tight social bond because the head coach was also a teacher at NTG, thus optimizing the relationship between the school and club sessions in a manner in which PE at school supplemented the club's practice. Because the club has no rule stating that the players have to attend NTG-U, approximately half of the players attended other schools, which has sometimes caused difficulties for both the players and coaches. According to the coaches and some of the players, this often meant that the players not attending NTG-U had less adjustment of their physical education and club sessions, and often ended up with more than one high intensity sessions on the same day. Attending another type of school could from a player perspective mean less focus on an elite life with the sole focus on them as football players.

Macroenvironment

At the macro-level, the surrounding clubs and the Norwegian football association influenced the players through their coaches' relationships with these actors. At the macro-level, the local clubs, the football association, and national sport culture were important. These actors mainly influenced the players through their coaches. Over the long term, the club has collaborated with local clubs in the same municipality, which have nominated players for the Stabæk academy. This collaboration has had both a positive effect and been somewhat of a challenge, since the elite clubs received the greatest benefit from the collaboration. They often recruited the players they wanted, sometimes leaving the grassroots clubs with fewer players or a team with lower skills. There have been talks within the Stabæk academy about doing more outreach work and trying to spread the club's knowledge to the municipal clubs. Lately, however, the club has witnessed other local clubs introducing their own academies, partly for economic reasons, but also to challenge the big brother (i.e., Stabæk) in the football environment. In the Norwegian sporting context, the grassroots level has a strong standing. It has unique children's rights and the regulation of athletes under 13 years of age by restricting their opportunity to compete based on travel distance, preventing the use of tables of results ranking the teams, and arranging no national competitions before the age of 12. These rights and the core focus on grassroots (equal terms and opportunities) have caused a continuous debate (especially within football), simplistically divided into early professional versus late professional specialisation groupings. Stabæk wanted to challenge these rights and to start to recruit and specialise earlier – which could be considered a conflict with the national culture and law. At the core of the debate was the age of selection. As the results showed the coaches challenged this model and claimed that this was a model that did not produce future professional players.

The collaboration with the federation was of vital importance to develop the talented players, giving them new opportunities and challenges on the youth national team outside of the everyday environment. Even so, the coaches felt there was a lack of communication related to the players' performance on the national team. The coaches were much more critical of the regional level of the association, simply stating that the academy could provide a better environment for the players than the regional level of the football association.

The development process as a successful talent Development environment in Stabæk football club U16 team

The empirical ESF model (Figure 2) is a general representation of the talent development process, showing the main features which occur over years. Figure 2 shows that the pre-conditions (i.e., financial and physical context) in Stabæk FC included financial difficulties, few facilities, and how coaches and players attempted to counter these

with increased toughness. The common process of talent development included significant focus on the players' own responsibility, a large physical training load, and a small support system compared to other clubs in Norway. Further, the cultural paradigm (i.e., artefacts, values, and assumptions) included an espoused value of *playing up* (i.e., playing against older age groups) and assumptions related to early recruitment. We also found that there were some intra-cultural conflicts between the culture in the club and the national culture. The historic outcomes of individual development and achievement as well as team development showed that the ATDE had a history of relatively high effectiveness suggesting that becoming an elite senior player was within reach to the current players in the academy.

Preconditions

The academy and the department of development are located in an old barrack strategically placed in the middle of the club's training pitches, where all of the club's coaches can gather and have discussions. The club has a history of financial problems, and it has moved from the new Telenor arena back to their old stadium of Nadderud. A challenge for the club is the lack of pitches (only three pitches available) for the academy and professional team. During this transition, the club decided because of the lack of funding to invest more in the academy's human resources, hoping to bring forward more players to their professional senior team.

Process

Usually the players had four to five training sessions each week at the club (with the opportunity to play up and down compared to own age group); and they also played in the NTF national series, which consists mostly of professional clubs. The national series was described as a good development arena for the players. Although it could be difficult at times, especially physiologically due to the large training loads the players had in the academy. A feature easing the physical toll was how a physiotherapist supported the players' rehabilitation. The small support system for the players (i.e., coaches and supporting staff) meant that players had significant responsibility for their own development although the club had teams in all age groups, they still recruited some additional players to the club's U16 and U19 team. Of the 20 regular players in the U16 team, five had been in the club since they were six years old. Among the professional senior team players, 12 were born within 10 km of the stadium. Even so, one of the coaches wanted more resources in terms of talent scouting, because of the individually coach-focussed and less club managed approach the clubs had today: "We have not built a good enough system. There are people out there looking at regional development teams and matches in the local area. So, it's been very much up to the coach who has the age cohort. At U16 we do very little of that" (Coach 4).

Video analysis was an important part of the club's talent development. All of the games were analysed, both in groups and individually. According to one coach, Stabæk had been leading on this strategy in the past few years. The coaches systematically used video analysis and made a collection of videos in which players faced the same opponent. Players had the opportunity to watch old videos or use them as a reference point for playing style. Coaches could also use the collections to show new players the earlier performance of players who ended up getting a professional contract. Many of the players appreciated the video feedback, stating that it could be an advantage compared to other clubs. Yet, most players claimed they learned more during the one-on-one feedback from the coach: "The group presentations are like ... I feel I learn more one on one. I learn more by watching clips relevant to my position, and not how the striker should move to become easier to pass to" (Player 2).

Individual development

Individual development was vital in the club's philosophy and they understood the social sacrifices the players had to make. Like most professional clubs, they knew the difficulty of becoming a professional player so the club sought to develop non-sport domain skills the players could use in other parts of their lives (e.g., life skills). The coaches focus on the need for courage, was also related to trying your best related to football, school or work. Stabæk stated however that they were mainly concerned about developing sport domain skills and had examples to show it. Two U16 players with a professional contract who regularly trained with the senior team, did not train or play matches for the U16 team in an agreement between the U16 coaches and the senior coach, although this could be tempting for coaches focussed on results.

The club also used a ranking system to evaluate the players according to the acronym FATTA (i.e., *fotballforståelse, arbeidskapasitet, tempo, teknikk & attitude* [football tactics, workload capacity, tempo, technic & attitude]), ranking the players from one to seven, on these factors: football tactical skills, physical capacity, tempo, technique, and attitude. The players were not allowed to be given the score of four, so the coaches had to rank them as over or under the mid-point, and this was done every quarter to track the players' development. Each player also had individual development goals, in agreement with the coaches and these were hung on the player's locker.

Team development

The club tried to facilitate positive transitions between the teams in the club, by keeping the same coaches with a specific group across U13, U14, U15 and U16. As an example, the transition from the U16 to the U19 team could be a challenge for the players, especially because this occurred during a period with different types of transitions related to both school

and sport. An important priority for the coaches was to continue the development of the group of players, irrespective of whether the players were selected for the U19 team in the club or not. Both players and coaches seemed to think that both the selected and unselected players for the U19 team got the same attention, even though the unselected players were considered less motivated in relation to their development. According to the coaches, there was a focus on winning the first five matches after the selection to keep the unselected players motivated for the rest of the season.Communicating with the parents as well as the players during this process was also regarded as important, so there they were less surprised when the selection process occurred.

Organisational culture

We found that the organisational culture had several elements of ambiguity and conflict between espoused values and actual behaviours (e.g., wanting a supportive environment and long-term development whilst practicing failure-focused coach feedback). We also found discrepancy between the espoused values, basic assumptions, and the national culture in Norway.

Artefacts

The artefacts of the Stabæk U16 team are: (1) the facilities and (2) the history of successful talent development within an open environment.

Artefact 1: The facilities. The stadium, including the locker rooms, could be regarded as the heart of the club where the three pitches are close to each other. Alongside the coaches, the administration was also located in the same building, indicating a high opportunity for communication. Because the U16 team was the youngest team to have regular locker rooms and use the stadium facilities, many of the players felt it was a step up in the club hierarchy, making this a symbolic issue among the players. Although this was not an intended club strategy, it was appreciated by the players: "It's better now. Earlier we had lockers further away, which we also shared with other teams. Now we are the only ones there, except the U19 team" (Player 2).

Artefact 2: Stabæk had a history of successful talent development in an open environment (i.e., currently six players from the academy in the senior elite team). The club also has a short history of being represented on age-specific national teams, with 15 players according to the latest academy classification, making it the club with the highest number of age-specific national team players. The club is also characterised by a positive approach to invitations from clubs, players, and others, which the coaches described as a yes mentality. "We have a wide acceptance and space for everyone. We say 'yes' as often as we can, and 'no' almost never" (from the home webpage; Stabak.no, 2016). Although this *yes* mentality or what could be described as openness was not defined as a specific club value for

the environment, it seemed nonetheless a feature. An example is the club and barracks; which was an open arena to which all seemed to be invited and included from the U13 to the professional level, indicating that they have few secrets in terms of how they develop talented young players.

Espoused values

The club's values were (1) "we believe in playing up", (2) "we believe in the need for courage", and (3) "we believe in the need for cohesion".

Value 1: We believe in playing up. The club also had a clear philosophy of giving the players the opportunity and challenge to play with both younger and older players. During the study period, there was a lot of interaction with the U15 team, as players from both teams played for the other team. Because all the players in the academy play in a league for players one year older, this meant that the players who did not play in the U16 match could play with the U15 team. A lot of advantages were mentioned resulting from this collaboration, as the oldest players got quality games and the younger players got to see a level of performance one year ahead. Even so, there is a potentially negative effect for the players who do not get the opportunity to play up. Not playing up might indicate that they are less skilled than their teammates, which could influence motivation negatively. The club seemed however not to have a strategy towards this group of players, which could be seen in relationship with the club's basic assumption number two, that was just something the players had to handle.

Value 2: We believe in the need for courage. The value of courage was essential for the coaches and was related to setting large goals and the desire to achieve a higher standard for the players in their academy while challenging the norms within Norwegian sports: "We have to be tougher; we have to make higher demands. We have to work differently. It must be allowed, in a way, to make demands early. You have to learn that competing early is a must to be able to go all the way" (Coach 1).

Value 3: We believe in the need for cohesion. There seemed to be strong cohesion in the team, potentially explained by the fact that most of the players had been in the club for a long time, had regular seats in the locker room, and even injured players attended training sessions and matches. The coaches highlighted the importance of group cohesion, even though some of the players lived a distance from the training ground, making it even more important that the players thrive in each other's company.

Basic assumptions

The basic assumptions of the club were: (1) "early recruitment (before our competitors) is necessary", (2) "the players must be challenged" and (3) "'players must show potential and ambition at an early age".

Assumption 1: Early recruitment (before our competitors) is necessary. The club is well known for its practice of early recruitment, which could

be considered in conflict with the national culture in Norway. At the centre of this debate are unique but fiercely debated children's rights, which the coaches wanted to challenge to start recruiting and specialising earlier. Another vital reason was the club's local competition for player recruitment with three elite level clubs within a 30-km radius, which is unusual, compared to most competing clubs. The main argument used by the club was that if it does not pick up these players, the other professional clubs will.

Assumption 2: The players must be challenged. The coaches wanted to challenge the players and even here, used an unorthodox strategy, introducing the metaphor of the aircraft mechanic in their video feedback (also related to value 1 – we believe in playing up and assumption 3 – players must show potential and ambitions at an early age). The aircraft mechanic approach is a failure-focused approach to coach feedback, exemplified by coaches only showing video clips of players making mistakes or handling the situation badly. Coaches searched for errors like an aircraft mechanic would do and then trying to fix it. The coaches understood that this was an unfamiliar approach in terms of talent development, but they believed that it was the right way to develop the best players possible.

It is perhaps a slightly different thought than the one we are used to in Norway, where we are constantly looking for the positive. I believe that for us as coaches it is important to do that flight mechanic job. I think it is a process that the players have to do themselves and then they have to try to figure out which areas they make mistakes in. (Coach 4)

For outsiders, this approach could seem harsh and negative. The coaches argued, however, that they prepared the players and have a close relationship with them, thus making a negative focus more acceptable to the players:

I can be tough with the guys, and this you probably have seen. But you couldn't be there if you didn't sit with the guys weekly face-to-face and talk to them. If you haven't done that job and made your toolbox wider, then you can actually miss (not provide enough support and safety for the players). (Coach 3)

Despite the harsh approach, it seemed that the players were used to it, even if it could be risky when the focus became negative and the players got frustrated. Most of the players felt they got appropriate feedback and instructions, but there were some players who said that it was sometimes a bit much: "It may sometimes be a bit too much. You know when you made a mistake. It doesn't help to hear the coach standing on the side and swearing" (Player 2). The two coaches were nonetheless described by the players as having a good balance in their communication and their handling of the players.

Assumption 3: Players must show potential and ambitions at an early age. The coaches expected the players on their team to have ambitions, and one of the coaches claimed that the players should already have ambitions to play on the U19 team as a U16 player. Although the coaches wanted the teams to be mixed with each other during play, the coaches

and players had different opinions on how closely knit these teams were. During the observation period, only a few players played up on the U19 team, which was explained by the coaches as being due to the hectic nature of the period. During the winter, there was greater collaboration and communication between the two groups according to the coaches. Many of the players naturally have the ambition of playing for the club's professional team, not least because two players from the U16 team recently managed to get professional contracts, and the head senior coach had been a coach at the academy; thus the players' ambitions seemed more realistic to them.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to present a holistic ecological description of Stabæk football club's U16 team, and to describe the organisational culture of this team and examine how the coaching practice affects the talent environment in the club. The second aim of this study was to examine how the coaching practice affects the talent environment in the club. Although each successful ATDE is unique, the present study shows that this environment shares several factors compared with previous studies (Henriksen, 2010; Larsen et al., 2013; 2020).

Previous research in a professional football context suggests that focusing on the athletes' long-term education and development rather than their early success or winning the next match can be difficult due to the short-termism of professional football (i.e. a need to win and avoid relegation), which might influence the operating culture of the organisation (Nesti et al., 2012). The U16 team of Stabæk seemed to manage a long-term focus where the players seemed supported for their sporting goals by the actors in the wider environment. The environment had a partly integration of efforts related to the players attending NTG supported Christensen and Sørensen (2009) in suggesting that close club and coaches' collaboration with school can support the players' daily life in terms of a coach managing training content, total physical load, and predictable expectations. Previous research has suggested that not having integrated efforts between sport, school, and family can have negative effects on talent development (Aalberg & Sæther, 2015). Yet, we also found that other players had to manage the training load themselves, which meant that they had the opportunity to take greater responsibility for their own development. Furthermore, the club environment was characterised by supportive relationships where the players supported each other and created a sense of psychological safety highlighted as important. Early studies suggest that team members experiencing psychological safety believe that the team is safe for risk taking with regards to development (Edmondson, 1999). In our study, close personal player-player and coach-player relationships created a sense of security and capability of developing. Such mutual respect and trust could act as an implicit conflict prevention strategy (Wachsmuth et al., 2018) and buffer dysfunctional outcomes of some of the examples

of authoritarian and negative coach behaviours (e.g., focusing on their mistakes). Without psychological safety, it is reasonable to hypothesize that negative coach behaviours could lead to coach-athlete conflict and issues around well-being (e.g., heightened stress, rumination, and conflict anxiety; Wachsmuth et al., 2018). The player development, longevity of managing close coach-athlete relationships, and athlete mental health might be at risk in environments that focus on a negative feedback and pressure them to perform (Nesti et al., 2012).

Compared to studies on individual sports earlier studies have found a lack of interaction between the football academy and the professional team (Aalberg & Sæther, 2015; Flatgård et al., 2020; Larsen et al., 2013), as is also found in the present study. Despite the symbolic value of being close to the stadium and the professional team, the U16 players, as a group, lack interaction or practise with the professional players indicating a lost opportunity for role models (Henriksen et al., 2010a; 2010b). Even so, for some of the players the road to the senior team seemed within reach since U16 players had received professional contracts and several players successfully managed transitioning from the academy to the professional team. Another feature that deviated from individual sport studies (Henriksen, 2010) was that players lack opportunities for training diversification. The early recruitment and selection meant that the club also deviated from the Norwegian sporting model and national culture. These discrepancies are in part linked to our findings regarding organisational culture as more ambiguous than previously suggested. Building on ambiguity in culture, we consider a critique on sports policy from Agergaard and Sørensen (2010). They suggest that Nordic countries often downplay differences, which is similar to critics of Schein's (1990) culture framework who suggests that it marginalises not-shared features and merely gives an impression of coherence (McDoughall et al., 2020). Downplaying differences might result in an imagined sameness (Agergaard & Sørensen, 2010). However, our findings show that Stabæk is an example that disputes the suggestions of actual sameness.

The club's success rate related to producing players to the professional senior team could potentially explain their organisational culture, player approach and negative approach to both the local football federations' talent camp gatherings and the Norwegian model of sport development. Here, a part of the club philosophy was also a selection strategy of recruiting young players in the area (many competing clubs within a 30-km radius), focussing on early potential and thereby snatching these players before competing clubs, in a tough race to find the most talented players (Relvas et al., 2010). The coaches sink or swim approach, through the airplane mechanic approach, intended to mentally toughen the players especially using the negative-centred focus on the players' mistakes in the video feedback, but also with the use of playing up, and early recruitment. From an organisational standpoint in talent development, the management and coaches have a particular responsibility for helping athletes with their transition (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), and a lack

of support for the development of psychosocial skills as found in this study, could be a challenge when introducing players for a sink or swim approach. A trusting coach-athlete relationship in which motives and communication patterns are mutually understood forms the basis for this seemingly negative approach and thus buffers potentially dysfunctional consequences. See Wachsmuth et al. (2018) – conflict management/ prevention. The coaches' argument of "making sure that the players understand the approach and the reason behind it" could be a risky one, because of the possibility of introducing stressors (Morris et al., 2017). Not doing so could lead to negative consequences from potentially harsh and authoritarian coaching behaviour (Champ et al., 2020). Yet, Nesti et al. (2012) have highlighted critical moments, stating that the players must expect challenges in their pursuit of a potential career in professional football. This could be a difficult approach because of the risk of being too tough with the athletes, through potentially emotional abuse (Stirling & Kerr, 2008), or making the players play games while injured (Crust, 2008), because the athletes believe that is required. On the other hand, would the openness in Stabæk seem like a confirmation of the maximisation of a high-expectations situation, indicating a two-fold environment since the club also claims to have a holistic focus on the players' development.

The environments organisational culture based on a mix of challenge and support can be a difficult one for the players. Both Feddersen et al., (2020b) and Gibson and Groom (2018) suggest that different sub-groups might have different interpretations of the values, assumptions, and behaviours in the culture they exist within. An example from the research is the different interpretations of players playing up, interpreted as for the wrong reasons (e.g., winning games) and more general differences in the coaches approaches on player development. Altogether, our findings suggest that an ATDE can be successful without having a coherent and shared culture, and that conflicts and ambiguity might be inherent in sports (Feddersen et al., 2020b; McDougall et al., 2020).

Limitations

The main intention of the case study is to give empirical insights (providing opportunities for practitioners and researchers to learn) through an in-depth examination of a complex functioning unit (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Hodge & Sharp, 2016). Transferability is the advantage of using case studies, when the readers perceive an overlap with their own situation, and then transfer the findings to their own contextual actions (Tracy, 2010). Part of the intention with the present study is to provide vicarious experiences of professional practice. Compared to earlier studies with the same approach, the number of player interviews and partly period of observation was limited and could have affected the results in terms of depth and rigour. The inclusion of more player interviews might have introduced other perceptions of the talent development environment in the club, but that was not possible in the current study.

Even so, the contribution of the present study gives an insight into the talent development environment of a club ranked as the best in an academy classification.

Conclusion

This study provided findings that both supported, supported and challenged, and deviated from suggested features of successful ATDEs. The substantial contribution of the current study is, therefore, that it provides researchers and practitioners with examples of how ambiguity might be inherent, even in successful ATDEs. We found that Stabæk FC shared common features such as long-term education and development rather than overvaluing early success (despite of early recruitment – U7), a supporting training group, support for sporting goals by wider environment. Further, findings indicating ambiguity in organisational culture and integration of efforts as well as deviating findings in lack of support for developing psychosocial skills, lack of opportunities for training diversification, and a lack of role models add to our understanding of whether success is always coupled to good, and coherent practice. The present study illustrates how coaches often balance their approach to player development on a knife edge, by both pushing and supporting the players to develop further as talented players in a football academy environment, resulting in a potentially negative effect on the player's mental health. Moreover, the basic assumptions of players' early potential and ambitions, their early recruitment on top of the need to challenge the players, and the focus on courage could be considered contradictory to earlier research on successful talent development environments in football (Aalberg & Sæther, 2015; Flatgård et al., 2020; Larsen et al., 2013).

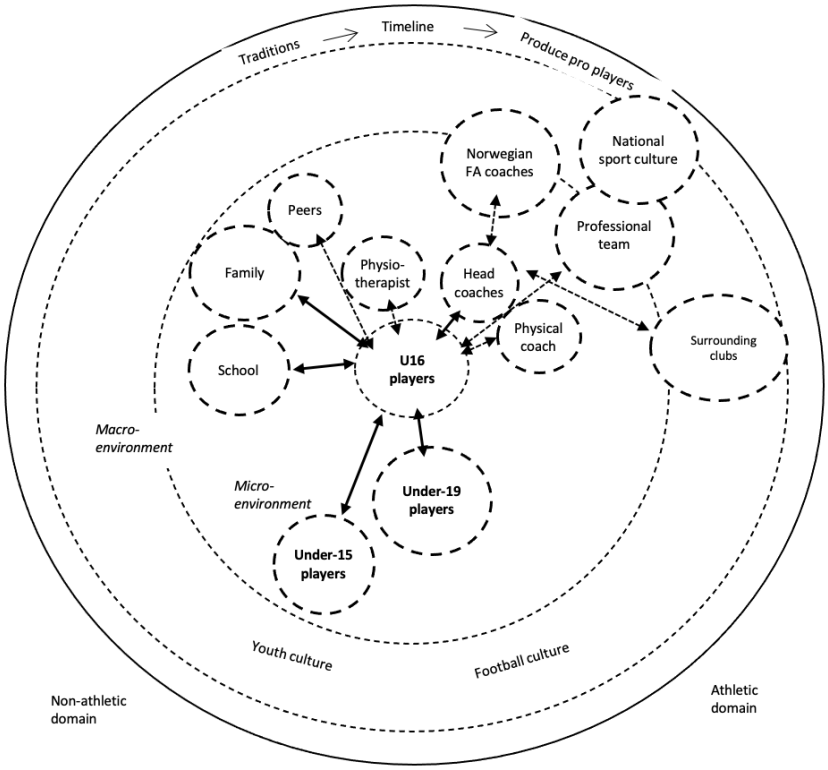

Figure 1
ATDE empirical model of the Stabæk football club.

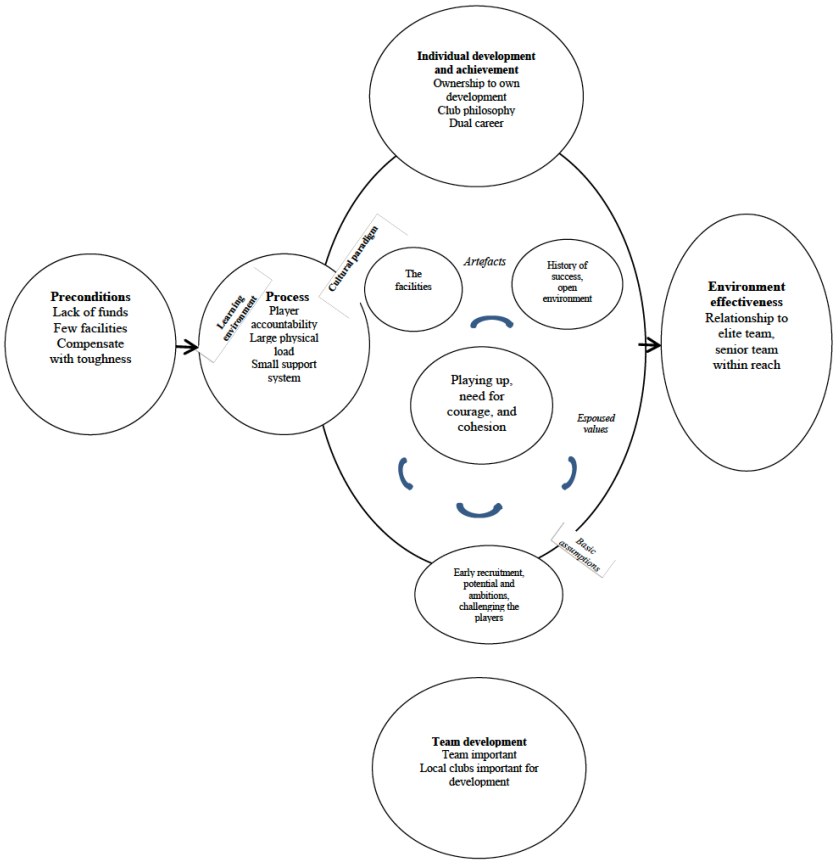

Figure 2
Empirical model of the Stabæk football club.

Acknowledgments

Funding: The authors have no funding or support to report.

Competing interests: The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Data availability statement: All relevant data are within the paper.

REFERENCES

Aalberg, R. R., & Sæther, S. A. (2015). The talent development environment in a Norwegian top-level football club. *Sport Science Review, 3-4*, 159-182.

Agergaard, S., & Sørensen, J. K. (2010). Policy, sport and integration: the case of talented ethnic minority players in Danish football clubs. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics, 2*, 205-221. https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2010.488067

Berntsen, H., & Kristiansen, E. (2020). Perceptions of need-support when "having fun" meets "working hard" mentalities in the elite sport school context. *Sports Coaching Review, 9*, 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2018.1525862

Bjørndal, C. T. & Ronglan, L. T. (2018). Orchestrating talent development: Youth players' developmental experiences in Scandinavian team sports.

Sports Coaching Review, 7, 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2017.1317172

Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Wheate, P. (2016). Using thematic analysis in sport and exercise research. In B. Smith, & A. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 191-205). London:Routledge.

Champ, F. M., Nesti, M. S., Ronkainen, N. J., Tod, D. A., & Littlewood, M. A. (2020). An exploration of the experiences of elite youth footballers: The impact of organizational culture. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 32*, 146-167. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2018.1514429

Christensen, M. K., & Sørensen, J. K. (2009). Sport or school? Dreams and dilemmas for talented young Danish football players. *European Physical Education Review, 15*, 115-133. https://doi.org/10.1177/1356336X09105214

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. London: Sage Publications.

Crust, L. (2008). A review and conceptual re-examination of mental toughness: Implications for future researchers. *Personality and Individual Differences, 45*, 576-583.

Cushion, C., & Jones, R. (2006). Power, discourse, and symbolic violence in professional youth soccer: The case of Albion Football Club. *Sociology of Sport Journal, 23*, 142-161.

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 44*, 350-383. https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999

Feddersen, N. B., Keis, M. A. B., & Elbe, A.-M. (2020a). Coaches' perceived pitfalls in delivering psychological skills training to high-level youth athletes in fencing and football. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching, 16*, 249-261. https://doi.org/10.1177/1747954120959524

Feddersen, N. B., Morris, R., Littlewood, M. A. & Richardson, D. J. (2020b). The emergence and perpetuation of a destructive culture in an elite sport in the United Kingdom. *Sport in Society, 23*, 1004-1022. https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2019.1680639

Flatgård, G., Larsen, C. H., & Sæther, S. A. (2020). Talent development environment in a professional football club in Norway. *Scandinavian Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 2*, 8-15.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 12*, 219-245. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363

Gibson, L., & Groom, R. (2018). Ambiguity, manageability and the orchestration of organisational change: A case study of an English Premier League Academy Manager. *Sports Coaching Review, 7*, 23-44. https://doi.org/10.1080/21640629.2017.1317173

Güllich, A. (2014). Selection, de-selection and progression in German football talent promotion. *European Journal of Sport Science, 14*, 530-537. https://doi.org/10.1080/17461391.2013.858371

Harwood, C. G., Barker, J. B., & Anderson, R. (2015). Psychosocial development in youth soccer players: Assessing the effectiveness of the 5Cs intervention program. *The Sport Psychologist, 29*, 319-334. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2014-0161

Henriksen, K. (2010). *The ecology of talent development in sport: A multiple case study of successful athletic talent development environments in Scandinavia* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Southern Denmark.

Henriksen, K., Stambulova, N., & Roessler, K. K. (2010a). Holistic approach to athletic talent development environments: A successful sailing milieu. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 11*, 212-222. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2009.10.005

Henriksen, K., Stambulova., N., & Roessler, K. K. (2010b). Successful talent development in track and field: Considering the role of environment. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sport, 20*(s2), 122-132. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1600-0838.2010.01187.x

Hodge, K., & Sharp, L. A. (2016). Case studies. In B. Smith, & A. Sparkes (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of qualitative research in sport and exercise* (pp. 62-75). London: Routledge.

Holt, N. L., Neely, K. C., Slater, L. G., Camiré, M., Côté, J., Fraser-Thomas, J., ... & Tamminen, K. A. (2017). A grounded theory of positive youth development through sport based on results from a qualitative meta-study. *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 10*, 1-49. https://doi.org/10.1080/1750984X.2016.1180704

Johnson, U., Andersson, K., & Fallby, J. (2011). Sport psychology consulting among Swedish premier soccer coaches. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 9*, 308-322. https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2011.623455

Johnston, K., Wattie, N., Schorer, J., & Baker, J. (2018). Talent identification in sport: A systematic review. *Sports Medicine, 48*, 97-109. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40279-017-0803-2

Kammeradvokaten. (2020). *Undersøgelse af forholdene for elitesvømmere i Dansk Svømmeunion* [Study of the conditions for elite swimmers in the Danish Swimming Union]. Copenhagen: Kammeradvokaten.

King, P. (2012). *GBCT Review* (Issue November). https://www.britishcycling.org.uk/

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *Interviews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing*. (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Larsen, C. H., Alfermann, D., Henriksen, K., & Christensen, M. K. (2013). Successful talent development in soccer: The characteristics of the environment. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology, 2*, 190-206. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031958

Larsen, C. H., Storm, L., Sæther, S. A., Pyrdol, N., & Henriksen, K. (2020). A world class academy in professional football: The case of Ajax Amsterdam. *Scandinavian Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 2*, 33-43.

Lu, F. J. H., Lee, W. P., Chang, Y.-K., Chou, C.-C., Hsu, Y.-W., Lin, J.-H., & Gill, D. L. (2016). Interaction of athletes' resilience and coaches' social support on the stress-burnout relationship: A conjunctive moderation perspective. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise, 22*, 202-209. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.08.005

Maaløe, E. (2004). *In case of case research*. Department of Organization and Management, Aarhus University.

McDougall, M., Ronkainen, N., Richardson, D., Littlewood, M., & Nesti, M. (2020). Organizational culture beyond consensus and clarity: Narratives

from elite sport. *The Sport Psychologist, 34*, 288-299. https://doi.org/10.1123/tsp.2019-0163

Mills, A., Butt, J., Maynard, I., & Harwood, C. (2012). Identifying factors perceived to influence the development of elite youth football academy players. *Journal of Sports Sciences, 30*, 1593-1604. https://doi.org/10.1080/02640414.2012.710753

Morris, R., Tod, D., & Eubank, M. (2017). From youth team to first team: An investigation into the transition experience of young professional athletes in football. *International Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology, 15*, 523-539. https://doi.org/10.1080/1612197X.2016.1152992

Nesti, M. (2010). *Psychology in football*. London: Routledge.

Nesti, M., Littlewood, M., O'Halloran, L., Eubank, M., & Richardson, D. (2012). Critical moments in elite premiership football: Who do you think you are? *Physical Culture and Sport. Studies and Research, 56*, 23-32. https://doi.org/10.2478/v10141-012-0027-y

Nesti, M. & Sulley, C. (2015). *Youth development in football. Lessons from the world's best academies.* London: Routledge.

Norsk Toppfotball. (2017). *Akademiklassifisernigs rapporten 2017* [Academy classification report]. Norwegian Top Football Association.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. London: Sage Publications.

Phelps, A., Kelly, J., Lancaster, S., Mehrzad, J., & Panter, A. (2017). Report of the Independent Review Panel Into the Climate and Culture of the World Class Programme in British Cycling. http://www.sportsthinktank.com/uploads/cycling-independent-review.pdf

Ramian, K. (2007). *Casestudiet i praksis* [The case study in practice]. Copenhagen: Academica.

Relvas, H., Littlewood, M., Nesti, M., Gilbourne, D., & Richardson, D. (2010). Organizational structures and working practices in elite European professional football clubs: Understanding the relationships between youth and professional domains. *European Sport Management Quarterly, 10*, 165-187. https://doi.org/10.1080/16184740903559891

Schein, E. H. (1990). Organizational culture. *American Psychologist, 45*, 109-119.

Stirling, A., & Kerr, G. (2008). Defining and categorizing emotional abuse in sport. *European Journal of Sport Science, 8*, 173-181.

Tanggaard, L. (2006). A psychological field study of learning: Analysis of methodological aspects. *Nordic Psychology, 58*,196-214. https://doi.org/10.1027/1901-2276.58.3.196

Till, K., & Baker, J. (2020). Challenges and [possible] solutions to optimizing talent identification and development in sport. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 664, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.00664

Tracy, S. J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight 'big-tent' criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 16*, 837-851, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121

Wachsmuth, S., Jowett, S., & Harwood, C. G. (2018). Managing conflict in coach-athlete relationships. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology, 7*, 371-391. https://doi.org/10.1037/spy0000129

Wachsmuth, S., Jowett, S., & Harwood, C. G. (2020). Third party interventions in coach-athlete conflict: Can sport psychology practitioners offer the necessary support? *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200.2020.1723737

Weick, K. E. (2007). The generative properties of richness. *Academy of Management Journal, 50*, 14-19.

Wylleman, P., & Lavallee, D. (2004). A developmental perspective on transitions faced by athletes. In M. Weiss (Ed.), *Developmental sport and exercise psychology: A life span perspective* (pp. 507-527). Morgantown, WV: Fitness Information Technology.

Información adicional

Cite as: Haukli, J. S., Hvid Larsen, C., Feddersen, N., & Sæther, S. A. (2021). The athlete talent development environment in the best ranked football academy in Norwegian football: The case of the U16 team in the Stabæk football club. *Current Issues in Sport Science (CISS)*, 6: 008. https://doi.org/10.36950/2021ciss008