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# From Hard Work to Grit

## On the discursive formation of talent

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the long historical interest for the selection of young talented children in sports. This seemingly everlasting search for talents and the quest for the especially gifted is followed by the practice of trying to find and select the right individuals. This paper elucidates historical representations of talent and talent selection in a series of professional sports literature in Sweden during the 1930s, 1980s, 1990s and 2010s.

Drawing on a discourse analytic approach, it illustrates the historical understanding of selection and how such practices produce formations of legitimacy. The study shows how certain historical elements reoccur in contemporary selection discourse and how specific actions are transformed into personal characteristics. These selection processes construct a rationale for a legitimate selection and illustrate how talent selection is based on historically specific assumptions, normative and moral statements and activities connected to a specific discursive formation. This insight underlines that talent selection cannot be understood as essential skills identified through observation, tests or interviews. It is rather to be understood as a discursive repertoire responding to a specific historical legitimacy.

*Keywords:* talent, discursive formations, interpretative repertoires, Foucault, “Tidskriften Svensk idrott”

## Introduction

The search for talented children has a long history in many different areas. In sports, finding, selecting and developing talent has become an increasingly important field of research (e.g. Henriksen, 2010; Kerr, 2018; Kilger, 2017; Lund & Söderström, 2017; Russell et al., 2013). Talent selection has become a prominent aspect of everyday sports practice. While sports researchers, coaches and athletes have for decades agreed on the importance of a fair selection, numerous research articles have tried to carve out the essence of talent and find adequate ways to identify and select the right individuals (Anshel & Lidor, 2012; Russell et al., 2013). Nevertheless, there is still little consensus concerning what to look for and how to identify and select the individuals with the best potential for future sporting success (Adamsen, 2016). It has been argued that talent development today lacks a unified approach for singling out the characteristics required for future elite sport and determining whether such qualities can be detected through the observation of children during practice (Adamsen, 2016). There is also ongoing debate surrounding the morals of child selection, which draws attention to its low accuracy (Kerr, 2018; Miller, Cronin & Baker, 2015; Ronglan, 2015). Nevertheless, talent identification remains a strong incentive in both social practice and sports policy. A sophisticated scientific discourse – bringing together biometrics, sports psychology, different forms of testing and development programs – has produced a *technicization of selection*. This provides an image of talent selection as scientific, nonpolitical and free from subjective assessment (Clark, 2012; Kerr, 2018; on the concept of technicization, see Rose & Miller, 2008).

However, procedures for selecting the right individuals are not produced within a political and social void; they are produced within a framework of time and space. Many studies have been interested in the issue of talent selection in contemporary sports: its legitimacy, correctness and moral implications for social practice (Kerr, 2018; Kilger & Börjesson, 2015; Miller, Cronin & Baker, 2015). However, significantly less attention has been devoted to selection as a historically recurrent practice. This article is concerned with how talent selection is connected to time and space, and therefore seeks to explore selection within its specific historical framework. Its goal is to elucidate the discursive formations of talent selection in sports by focusing on historical representations of selection in professional sports literature in Sweden from 1930 to 2013. This will

accomplished by analyzing the magazine *Svensk idrott* [Swedish Sports]. Drawing on a discourse analytic approach, the aim is to examine how talent selection is represented and legitimized in different historical periods. First, the paper will illustrate child selection practices in different areas of contemporary society and review previous research about talent management in sports, as well as shed light on the theoretical starting point of the research. The second and main focus contains an analysis of recurrent historical repertoires in the empirical material and interprets these repertoires within their discursive formation.

### *The production of legitimate selection*

There is a strong tradition of seeking talent traits as individual and universal characteristics (Bloom, 1985; Heller, 2004; MacNamara & Collins, 2012). However, recent studies by Adamsen (2016) and Kerr (2018) suggest that selections would benefit from being studied in their social and cultural context, rather than being studied as universal individual characteristics. Moreover, the concept of grit has been used to convey the need for perseverance and long-term motivation to reach success in a number of areas, rather than a simple reliance on individual physical or social prerequisites (Duckworth et al, 2007). Accordingly, researchers within many fields of selection have drawn attention to a wider context in which practices are developed. In education, it is illustrated how a discourse of neoliberal rationality produces an emphasis on the individual's own responsibility (Dahlstedt & Fejes, 2017) or the importance of grit to succeed. (Stokas Gonzalez, 2015).

In all selection practices there must be a social mechanism through which specific individuals are recognized and acknowledged as talents. In sports research, studies have often focused on the coaches as identifiers of talent (Christensen, 2009; Russell et al., 2013). Avner, Markula and Denison (2017) illustrate the production of legitimate knowledge about effective coaching in coach education texts and demonstrate how this shapes a specific discursive formation. That is, the ways of becoming accepted as an effective coach are part of a discursive process of legitimization. Talent selection involves personal abilities used as sorting mechanisms but also the construction of discursively legitimate principles for selection. This disciplinary apparatus of selection is filled with normative ideals, statements and practices compliant to these principles. For example, the statement that success must be achieved through hard work,

or the need for self-confident individuals, are both marketable ideals in a meritocratic discourse of contemporary society (Andrews & Jackson, 2001, Kilger &, 2017). Accordingly, Hellström (2014) illustrates how ideals of modesty and hard work are particularly central to obtaining legitimacy and status within a Scandinavian sporting context. However, children's right to participate, sports as a fostering arena, and the safeguarding of the child are also key principles of the sporting rationale, which further underscores the complexity of organized talent selection (Garratt, Piper & Taylor, 2013). In Time Magazine, ten-year-old Joey states his view: "I love working hard", says Joey, who lives in southern New Jersey but has suited up for teams based in California and Texas. His Instagram account @joeybaseball12 has more than 24,000 followers" (Gregory, 2017, pp. 35).

In this study, instead of tracing the origin of talent selection, attempting to define the concept of talent, or investigating the effectiveness of different selection systems, the purpose is to explore how talent selection is represented and legitimized at different historical moments. This is essential to understand how talent selection operates and is legitimized in everyday sports practice today.

### *Legitimizing talent selection*

Organized sport in Scandinavia constitutes a specific context within a particular cultural and historical framework. Swedish sports is often described as a grassroots movement based on voluntary and idealistic premises (Carlsson, Norberg & Persson, 2011). However, over the last decades, these organizational principles have been challenged due to an increased commercialization of sports in Sweden and worldwide (Ronglan, 2015). This has added a new discussion to the already contentious area of talent selection in child and youth sports, which often focuses on the effectiveness of selection programs and value for government money. This, as part of a wider discussion of new public management in the public sector, has meant an increased focus on organizational effectiveness, and has forced organizations to produce *auditive practices* to display value for money (Power, 1997). Accordingly, in recent years the Swedish government has required the Swedish Sports Confederation to show increased efficacy of governmental grants (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016).

The magazine analyzed in this article was published by the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC) and is a standalone publication. However, the magazine is part of a sport policy discourse where the SSC needs to politically legitimize its operation. In organized sports in Sweden, one such principle is the requirement to enable every child to participate in sporting activities regardless of competence. At the same time, another principle highlights the development of a few young promising talents (SOU, 2008:59). This all-embracing approach, including both principles, is clearly expressed in organizational policy documents as a unique organizational strength (SSC, 2009). As an important part of the Swedish welfare state at large, this model is considered a central part of civil society. Moreover, these two principles are prerequisites for success in elite sports, rather than a potentially problematic space. Bacchi (2009) underlines this by claiming that organizations need to produce a rationality for their activities, and not in a common-sense understanding of rationality as being particularly logical or wise, but rather with respect to the thinking that lies behind this specific rationale of governing. Accordingly, policy documents, internal publications and curriculums must balance this discursive logic in order to legitimize the activities of the organization. Therefore, discourse analysis should pay attention to recurrent rhetorical building blocks and moral statements used to legitimize organizational practice in a particular time and place.

## Theoretical considerations

This study seeks to analyze how selection is addressed, explained and legitimized in different historical moments, as well as to expose discursive transformations and the interpretative domains in which they were deployed (Foucault, 1972). The point is to draw attention to how practices and statements are intimately tied to their historical context. This analytical approach is therefore not a traditional linear historiography of gradual progression. The task is rather to investigate how historical elements are reused and renewed in a network of power and knowledge relationships creating a discursive formation. In a discursive formation, specific repertoires of actions and sets of terms concerning an object or

phenomenon are used as building blocks in the construction of social and cultural acceptance. These interpretative repertoires can be identified as recurrent patterns in a certain material and, as an analytical tool, can illustrate the ways in which a discourse and its practices are organized. In order to investigate talent selection in different historical periods, this study takes the concepts of discursive formations (Foucault, 1972) and interpretative repertoires (Wetherell & Potter, 1988) as its analytical foundation.

In discourse analysis, the shift in attention from studying language to studying discourse as a system of representations is often in focus (Hall, 2001). Foucault maintained that institutional power is intertwined with (perceived) knowledge, and he showed how institutionalized practices control human conduct and, thereby, produce patterns of conduct (1977b). Whenever discursive practices address the same event or object, or support a recurrent pattern of strategy, they are all part of the same discursive formation (Hall, 2001). Meaning and legitimate practices are thereby constructed within a particular discourse, and sets of norms, regulations and practices are thus perceived as legitimate, fair and rational within this discursive formation. Following Avner, Markula and Denison's (2017) recent work on the discursive formations of effective coaching in contemporary coach education literature in Canada, this paper is interested in the discursive formations of selection in Sweden from a genealogical perspective. In their classic work, Berger and Luckmann (1964) demonstrate how institutionalized activities are products of a long and shared discursive history. Accordingly, Foucault argues that the analytic goal is to expose discursive transformations and the interpretative domains in which they are deployed (Foucault, 1972). In such an analytical approach, contemporary discursive practices are not the effect of a rational historical development, but rather artefacts of long and complex political processes (Foucault, 1982b).

Interpretative repertoires in sports link details in, for instance, the organizational policy of sporting organizations or sports media texts, to the broader historical and societal context in which they are situated. The analytical procedure is concerned with collecting repeated issues and topics in the empirical material and examining them for recurrent interpretative patterns (Edley, 2001). Accordingly, interpretative repertoires can be understood as local

discourses produced in a specific sport context. These repertoires produce specific ways of representing and making sense of – in this case – talent and selection, and are made visible as recurring patterns in the material. For example, Grahn (2015) shows how certain repertoires shape perceptions of sport competitiveness as gendered, or how coaches understand effective coaching (Avner, et al, 2017). In what follows, familiar rhetorical repertoires of talent selection are repeated in the different historical periods studied, however featured for different purposes. The concept can be termed differently (e.g. supertalented or natural talent), include specific elements depending on time, and comprise various knowledge claims. However, a common denominator is accepting talent as a foundation for different forms of selection practices.

## Empirical material and analytical approach

In seeking to investigate the historical formations of talent selection, and how this has been described, used and explained, this paper analyzes written material during a time of expansion in organized child and youth sports in Sweden. The material consists of the periodical *Svensk Idrott* [Swedish Sports] published between 1929 and 2013. The material is a profession specific journal targeting sports officials and coaches, and it deals with both sport policy issues, organizational issues, and practical advice on training and competition. The analysis of niche media, in contrast to mainstream mass media, is well suited in order to provide an opportunity to study internal debates and central internal areas of discussion (Thorpe, 2008). The magazine investigated here is produced by the umbrella organization of Swedish sports, the Swedish Sports Confederation, with eight issues per year. Accordingly, the data set in total consists of over 600 issues.

In the first step of the analytical process all the texts were reviewed schematically. In the second step, four different time periods were selected: the 1930s, 1970s, 1980s and 2010-2013<sup>1</sup>. This selection was based on (1) the expansion of organized sports during 1930s, (2) the 1970s and 1980s as a period of time when the issue of child and youth sports was particularly debated and regulated and (3) the early 2010s as the present time, when the contentious issue of selection frequently recurred.

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1 The magazine was closed down in 2013.



These periods of time were also identified as central to the discourse of talent management today, due to a changed regulation for amateur and professional sports (in Sweden, the amateur rule was abolished in 1967), as well as implementations of government directives for elite sports development (SOU, 2008:59). Out of the 260 issues from selected periods, ten issues per decade were chosen, along with five from 2010-2013, based on whether the content was linked to selection or talent in sports. This means that the empirical material comprises a total of 35 issues. All articles concerning promising young children, talents or selection in sport were grouped together in charts and organized into larger themes. Based on the themes, the material was analyzed by using interpretative repertoires (Edley, 2001) and discursive formations (Foucault, 1972). In the analytical procedure repeated topics and issues were compiled from the empirical material and examined for interpretative patterns (Bacchi, 2009; Edley, 2001). The analysis has linked the interpretative patterns in the data to the discursive formation, i.e., the historical circumstances and context in which they are situated (Bacchi, 2009).

The material is available to the public in full and was received from the archive of the Swedish National Sports Centre of Bosön; the material is not, however, digitized and electronically searchable. All categorization had to be done manually, since the material is entirely in paper format, and the translations of Swedish original texts were made by the author in collaboration with a translator. This study follows the guidelines for research practice within social sciences formed by the Swedish research council (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

## Repertoires of talent selection

In this results section, recurring repertoires will be illustrated using typical examples from the empirical material. The analyses are based on the theoretical concepts of interpretative repertoires and discursive formations, and this yielded the identification of three recurrent repertoires: (1) the repertoire of talent as “nature” or “nurture”, (2) the repertoire of selection as character-building and the risk of arrogance, and (3) the repertoire of the psychologized talent. In the analyses, these repertoires reflect of specific historical and discursive formations.

*The repertoire of talent as “nature” or “nurture”*

One recurrent topic and discussion deals with identifying the origin or essence of talent. The material shows two repertoires of explanations: a Darwinist perspective of heritage, and a social constructionist perspective of hard work. In the Darwinist understanding, there are a few people within a population that have talent while others do not (Adamsen, 2016). In a social constructionist perspective, several abilities and qualities are assessed and valued as talent traits within a discursive framework. Accordingly, definitions of talent or a talented person originates in a specific time and place. In the material, these two explanations re-occur as overlapping and intertwined, which makes it particularly interesting. A re-occurring feature is about how hard work pays off. This is exemplified in a chronicle illustrating how one or two in a group are considered “super-talents”, a few “promising” and the majority simply “hard workers” (SSC, 2013, pp. 45). At the same time, it is declared that “talent is important, but without heart, discipline and motivation it will not happen” (SSC, 2013, pp. 45). There are many similar examples in the material, often summed up by a moral coda (Riessman, 2007), concluding that the “hard workers” overcome “the natural talents” in the end (SSC, 2013, pp. 45). Along similar lines, Andrews and Jackson (2001) show that the representation of success through hard work is a viable feature that fits into a meritocratic discourse of today. However, both explanatory models are designed to find individuals with future potential. This is an example of what Foucault (1982a) calls “the objectivizing of the subject in what I shall call ‘dividing practices’. The subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others” (pp. 777-778). These dividing practices create a rationality for categorizing individuals as mad or criminals (Foucault, 1977c), and indeed, as in this case, selectable individuals.

From the 1980s and 1990s and onwards an at times acrimonious debate on talent management has been present worldwide, and Scandinavia is no exception (Anshel & Lidor, 2012; Henriksen, 2010; Lund & Söderström, 2017; Musch & Hay, 1999; Woodman, 1985). The legitimacy of the selection practices is questioned throughout the material, but from different rationales. During the 1930s, it is the risk of “inadequate socialization” that is underlined (SSC, 1938/9, p. 139). During the 1980s it is the agenda concerning

“the ethics of child exclusion” (SSC, 1987/10, p. 37), and in the contemporary discourse, it is “the low accuracy” and “the lack of a child perspective in sports according to the UN convention of the rights of the child” (SSC, 2013/1, p. 25-27). For instance, a series of reports from a child and youth conference in 1981 (the Bosö-conference) suggested that early specialization should be stopped. This also occurs frequently in the 2010s, as in the report from the football club Värmdö IF, which states that “the point is not to create a new Zlatan<sup>2</sup>. It is about joy and positive experiences” (SSC, 2011, pp. 25). The material shows how, during the 1990s, the ‘power of hard work’ representation won ground by promoting social conditions and environmental prerequisites rather than innate personal characteristics. In a series of reports from 1995 one coach declares that:

These guys went to ice-hockey school before they started primary school and already train four times a week. A couple of extra training session [...] they do not say no to that (SSC, 1995, p.23).

This seems to underline the need to integrate sports in schools and enable young ambitious children to increase the amount of training. The power of hard work repertoire as a prerequisite for success, is even more discernible in the material from the 2000s. In a report concerning what to learn from the Chinese table tennis coach operative in Sweden, it is underlined that to reach the international elite children must specialize from an early age. The coach concludes that “if you want to move forward, there are no shortcuts” (SSC, 2012, p. 27).

At the same time, this is balanced by a continuous debate proposing the moral societal values of sport as a way to counteract the focus on exclusionary practices (SSC, 1984/3; SSC, 1931). Other countries’ exclusionary models of child and youth sports are used as warning examples, and the Swedish model of sports is put forward as a role model (SSC, 2011/1). Several warning signs related to this model are mentioned, such as stories of ice-hockey clubs letting their own players compete with external players in the selection for first teams, or general managers urging Sweden to eliminate the heavy load of the tall poppy syndrome [in the Scandinavian

2 Zlatan Ibrahimović is a Swedish football player. In the Swedish media he is often used as an example of a new, super-confident sporting ideal (see e.g. Kilger, 2017 and Kilger & Jonsson, 2017).

countries known as “Jantelagen”] (SSC, 2012, p. 26). Throughout the material, the Swedish model of sports is promoted as the key to ensure an ethical child selection practices (SSC, 2011/1; SSC, 1984/3; SSC, 1931). An extended experience of the societal fostering of children as well as democratic governance are repertoires that are underlined, and thereby the organization works as a legitimate administrator of selection. Accordingly, this way of producing rationality is used to legitimize the organizational dilemmas and problems (Bacchi, 2009). This rationality is also given prominence as a role model internationally, as in the report about how the “Swedish style is celebrated in Switzerland”, which underlines how “the democratic style of Swedish coaches has been popular” (SSC, 2011, p. 16). Moreover, the increasing prominence of an environment for development is preferred over finding individual skills in order to produce talents (Henriksen, 2010; Russell et al, 2013). In many ways, this marks a shift in the material from the 1980s – from a focusing on the talented individual to talent environments.

Talent is to be considered as a combination of personal traits and how these develop in interaction with the environment. Thus, talent is not a static property but is subject to constant change throughout the development process (SSC, 1987/12, p. 35).

Accordingly, the environment for the development or ecology of talent (see e.g. Henriksen, 2010) becomes a central rhetorical element. This means that the talent concept is replaced by an interest in developmental environments where the individual may blossom. This also means an increased focus on talent development, rather than defining the concept or identifying the right individuals. All the material in this study shows an absence of discussion about the essence of talent. As illustrated by the example above, the material from the 1980s onwards demonstrate a recurring focus on the environments for development. This is followed by debates on how sports policy decisions can support and contribute to the creation of such environments. However, within this talent environment specific actions are required. They constitute self-evident institutionalized patterns of conduct and organizationally appropriate rules of conduct (Berger & Luckmann, 1964). As will be shown in the next part, the young talents are internalized in this discursive formation, which produces specific subject positions and specific conduct of the selectable.

*The repertoire of selection as character-building  
and the risk of arrogance*

Representations of the gifted individual often accentuate their high self-esteem and the confidence they radiate (Andrews & Jackson, 2001; Kilger & Jonsson, 2017). This “confident ego” is a recurring representation in the material of this study, but with different starting points. This position and these qualities can both be an asset considered important to support and reconcile, or as attributes that can be provocative. The all too self-confident individual may become self-sufficient, an unwanted position. Simultaneously, the confident ego is typical for, or even a prerequisite for, the elite athlete. However, this position is an act of rhetorical balance – being confident while at the same time being modest.

In the material from the 1930s, children and young people are markedly absent, or as claimed in a retrospective report: “In the childhood of sports, the children were not allowed to participate. Except in school sports” (SSC, 1985, pp. 6-7). However, in this period, selecting the especially gifted is considered a risk due to the possibility of giving them an overly strong self-image and arrogant attitude. A 1935 inquiry about youth championships suggests that such competitions should be avoided due to the risk that the participants “should feel too remarkable” (SSC, 1935, pp. 27). Thus, it is better to postpone the selection. Even in the material from 1980s the risk of arrogance is invoked, but here “the greed of professionalized sports” is treated as the primary risk (SSC, 1985/6, p. 7). If sport becomes a profession, with motivational change caused by new-found wealth, the young athletes run the risk of not understanding their own privileged positions. In the material from the 1930s, talent or future potential is not touched upon in terms of results or increased physical abilities, but rather with respect to development into a good citizen. Development in sports underscores *the virtuous youth* and sports as means for developing a strong character. This becomes visible in an article from 1933 describing a couple of young boys forming a sports club in a small village in Central Sweden.

In the old days, they would have gathered around the schnapps bottle [brännvinsbuteljen] and a pack of cards. Now they are gathered for physical training and competition in the free nature of God. (SSC, 1933, pp. 46)

The virtuous youth repertoire is repeated in the material from this period, where youth sports create responsible and healthy individuals, and not least give them the means to resist the enticements of liquor. This connection between sport and individual traits or character is historically recurring. However, there are several key differences. During the 1930s and 1970s, organized sport is represented as an educator and builder of specific character traits. The potential development in this example is primarily about development of character *through sports*. These characteristics, as we will see, return in the 1990s and 2010s but not as an effect of sporting participation, but as *requirements for* sporting success in sport and as individual psychological traits. The great athlete is described as a healthy, hardworking and modest man of the people. These characteristics of reaching success through hard work, being modest and being toned down is a well-known position in the media discourse of sports (Hargreaves, 2000). Hellström (2014) discusses how such ideals are particularly central to obtaining legitimacy and status within a Scandinavian welfare context. Issues associated with sport as physical education, as a means to develop good citizens, or as a means of responding to social problems, are recurrent throughout the material. Furthermore, the importance of physical literacy from an early age is considered vital to the formation of good, healthy citizens. Accordingly, numerous reports target coach education and course content. Modern competitive sport in England is referred to as an example of how working class culture can be integrated into organized sports organizations (Lindroth, 2011). However, in the 1930s, studies of youth championships were conducted, and the debate that followed focused on the effects of competing at a young age. The investigation concluded that “these championships should be avoided” in order minimize the risk of the youngsters becoming overbearing, haughty and imperious (SSC, 1935, pp. 26). This view of the role of sport in society has in the West been at the forefront for most of the 20th century. Walvin (1975) suggests that the primary role of sport is to foster and control young men through cooperation and not to build their confidence on hierarchization. Similar arguments can be found in the contemporary policy documents from the Swedish Sports Confederation (SSC, 2009).

The risk of early success leading to self-importance and producing arrogant young athletes returns in the material from the 1980s. The ideals of the sporting star was until then often represented as a hardworking and moderate man not engaged in luxury or self-promotion (Hellström,

2014). However, the new threat of arrogance during this period is often connected to commercialized sports. The debate at this time was not only seen as a moral degeneration of the original ideal of sports, it also heralded a new sporting subject – the greedy athlete. In a chronicle, the problem is defined as follows:

[...] and very young [in Swedish: *purunga*] girls and boys with a tennis racket in their hands have something of a dollar sign in their eyes as soon as they start getting the ball over the net. If the person concerned is assessed as talented and thereby profitable in the long run, there are companies prepared to invest big bucks (SSC, 1986, pp. 5).

This quote shows a recurring objection to the fact that early specialization focuses on the sport as a professional career and as a possible source of income. This representation is in stark contrast to the idea of sport as a fosterer of good citizens of society. It is also interconnected to a wider societal debate in Sweden about viewing citizens in terms of profitability. Sports are welcome to provide income and serve as a livelihood, but these should not be presented as entry values for children to begin playing. Wetherell and Potter (1988) illuminate that interpretative repertoires produce specific positions as accepted and desirable within a particular context, where others are not. In the discursive formation of Swedish sports in the 1980s, the athlete playing for money seems to be an utterly undesirable position.

In the material, a partially contrasting representation discusses exclusion in child and youth sports as a myth, while also suggesting inclusion as a problem. In this perspective, the problem of children in sports is presented as a matter of parental coercion or pressure from coaches. Here science is used and referred to as a key element to prove this fact.

And his [Ass. Professor Göran Patriksson] recent study gives without a doubt the Swedish sports movement a very strong argument in the debate about “exclusion” in youth sports. It is not as bad as the backbiters of sport have claimed [...] ‘- The case of “inclusion” is a much worse problem, that is, when young people continue to play sports under pressure from coaches. (SSC, 1986, pp. 45)

This excerpt shows how organizational legitimacy is produced by referring to expert knowledge and scientific expertise. Rose (1999) elucidates different ways in which governments usurp power by making use of science to justify and legitimize governmental actions. An organization can

thereby manage the distrust that may otherwise exist against their way of governing. The organization can present a repertoire of actions perceived as rational, thereby producing a legitimate rationality for its operations. Scientific claims become a way of depoliticizing areas of political judgment and make the act of political decisions and judgments appear as if it were an objective or technical mechanism. The area of selection in sports is, as demonstrated by previous research, a delicate issue that needs to be legitimized, not only to the participants but also within the welfare state at large (Fahlén & Stenling, 2016).

### *The repertoire of the psychologized talent*

In the material from the 1930s, a child perspective and the children's own voices are totally absent. The development of personal characteristics through sports or specific personal traits as prerequisites for success are not addressed at all. If it is stated, it is from an adult perspective with an adult voice claiming that sports are good for children. However, this changes in the material from the 1980s onwards. A recurring theme is when children can be seen to be "mentally mature to handle selection" (SSC, 1985/6, p. 6-7). The focus is shifting from a perspective on children as "objects of protection" (SSC, 1995/3, p. 22) to the perspective of "the right of the child to be heard" (SSC, 2011/8, pp. 20). Garratt et al. (2013) establish how this perspective has emerged within a wider political formation of child welfare policies during the 2010s. Accordingly, this material reveals a subtle shift from safeguarding children to the rights for children to influence practice.

Furthermore, the material shows a shift in explanatory models for doing a fair and unbiased selection, and children are seen as psychological beings (SSC, 2010/5, p. 16). In contemporary society, as Rose (1998) points out, psychology plays a significant role in understanding human behavior. The analyses here illustrate a transformation of the understanding of hard work, from something a person does to a personal trait. In the material from 2010 and onwards, hard work has been transformed and incorporated into individual characteristics, similar to the contemporary concept of grit (Duckworth et al, 2007; Stokas Gonzalez, 2015). This psychologization of hard work shows how historical representations are reused and renewed in a discursive formation of power



and knowledge and given new strategic meanings. The concept includes similar elements based on different knowledge-claims, which has consequences for practice. Moreover, a recurring element in the studies of potential talent is psychological skills, where the concept of talent is linked to psychological factors beyond skills on the pitch or in the rink. This is also attributed to smaller margins, arguing that mental skills are gaining an increasingly vital role: “In the fight for hundredths and centimeters, off the post in or out, the mental strength is ascribed an increased importance” (SSC, 2013/6, p. 26). These mental factors, often vaguely described and difficult to measure in practice, are frequently assigned to the coach’s assessment. Accordingly, it is often the coach’s task to identify individuals with the right psychological characteristics, for example through observations from training, everyday conversations or performance appraisal interviews (Kilger & Jonsson, 2017). According to Berger and Luckmann (1964), this exercise of power to assess cognitive validity produces institutionalized patterns of conduct and a common stock of knowledge. By ascribing the talent specific personal psychological characteristics observable in practice, it constructs both normative conduct and aspirational patterns of conduct. Consequently, the importance of mental skills, attitudes and adequate psychological traits has been increasingly emphasized in talent management during the 2010s (SSC, 2012/2; SSC, 2013/1). Grit and outstanding motivation are regarded as deciding factors for success (SSC, 2012/2, p. 27). Moreover, the ability to work hard, or grit, has been incorporated as an individual psychological trait. These traits, often vaguely explained, are expected to be manifested as specific actions. This study shows how individual traits put forward as important for elite sports also produce a specific set of actions and practices. Previous research by Adamsen (2016) and Kilger and Jonsson (2017) have illustrated how young athletes are aware of the personal traits required, and how these traits can be displayed and audited in actions on the field during matches and training. For instance, as illustrated in this study, showing hard work during practice is a vital part of the psychologizing of talent in order to display a grit personality.

The importance of “psychological coaching” is underlined during the 2010s (SSC, 2013/6, pp. 28-29). It is not only the young talent who need psychological traits to succeed; the coaches also

need psychological knowledge. In elite sport, this has often meant an extended coaching staff and a new authoritative position: the mental coach. This position is considered as a natural part of elite sports today, and it is defended as no hocus-pocus but an area “where there’s definitely an undeveloped potential [...]” (SSC, 2013/6, pp. 25-26). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that this area of new expert knowledge will expand.

Just look at the national teams and the elite clubs. Most of them have mental trainers or coaches. There will definitely be more and more people working in this area (SSC, 2013/6, pp. 26).

This is a recurrent example in the material from 2010s that illustrates how physical and mental skills interact. By claiming the new authoritative expert knowledge, this also produces a psychologization of selection. In line with Rose’s (1998) illustration of how the psychologized society is playing a key role in the evaluation of personal conduct, this paper shows how moral judgments of selection appear as if they are based on more comprehensive aspects and objective facts. Accordingly, this repertoire of practices produces a legitimacy for psychological assessment practice, and thereby such practices become discursively rational. However, the questionable effect of using, for example, psychological testing has resulted in claims that such testing gives little guidance in the evaluation of future elite success (Anshel & Lidor, 2012; MacNamara & Collins, 2012).

## Discussion and conclusions

This study shows how the issue of talent selection is a recurrent and contentious issue in the history of sports. This divisive practice has implications for practices, for the participants in the form of the young talented children, and for the coaches who often conduct the selection. Problems associated with the adequate selection, as well as the difficulties in predicting which children are best placed to become adult elite athletes, are repeated in the material. All systems whether it is a penal system, a mental institution or a selection camp, create specific rationalities for categorizing individuals; as criminals, mad or, indeed, as exceptional talents (Bacchi, 2009; Foucault, 1977b). Individuals with talent or outstanding

skills do not emerge by themselves. There must be a social mechanism through which a set of individuals are collectively recognized to be experts in this field (Adamsen, 2016). Talent is not only a matter of sporting skills, it is also a matter of discursively produced practices and positions. These selection processes construct a rationale for a legitimate selection. The selection is based on historically specific interpretative repertoires of assumptions, normative moral statements and activities interconnected to the specific discursive formation.

This study illustrates how certain repertoires of components and arguments in talent selection practices also appear in the contemporary selection discourse. Even though the exact same practices do not exist today, important components are still alive, however in a different context and with different meanings. One such repertoire is balancing between high self-esteem and being conceited. Selection was described in the 1930s as carrying a risk for the development of this personality trait, while reports from 1990 and 2000 have highlighted similar personality traits as a prerequisite. Another one illustrates the transformation of hard work as an activity to hard work as grit. As Rose (1998) points out, it is by means of psychological concepts that we categorize other people and their personal characteristics. Moreover, there are historically recurring elements of critique, albeit targeting different areas. While the results from the 1930s show how the critique underlines the risk of producing arrogance and hubris, the material from the 1990s questions the low accuracy of the selection made, and during the 2010s it questions the moral starting points of child selection. Accordingly, this study illustrates how this ever-present critique is intimately tied to its societal context of time and place, rather than being a universal dimension of selection.

In line with Foucault (1977a), the intention is not to uncover the personality traits best suited for success, but to account for the ways in which these human beings have historically become the subject and object of social discourses and practices. Where Foucault (1982b) shows how psychiatry has sorted out the mad from the sane in different ways in history, this article illustrates how selection of the talented has been argued for in different ways within the discourse of Swedish sports. This approach shows that talent and selection are historically recurring phenomena, although differently understood and legitimized at different historical times. It may not be so surprising or new that the role of sport as a fosterer of virtuous citizens holds a historically strong position. What is interesting is to consider how these ideals turn up in different periods of

time and within different explanatory models. This study illustrates how personal characteristics have moved from being taught through sport to being a prerequisite for (successful) sporting careers. Therefore, I argue that talent cannot be understood as essential skills merely identified through observation, tests or interviews. It is rather to be understood as a discursive repertoire that responds to a specific historical legitimacy.

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