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Article

Being a good sport: players’ uptake to coaches’ joking in interviews for the youth national team

Magnus Kilger and Karin Aronsson

The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences (GIH), Stockholm, Sweden; Department of Child and Youth Studies, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden

Abstract

This paper draws on detailed analyses of authentic coach-athlete interviews during the final selection camp for the Swedish national youth team in hockey. The audio-recorded interviews between the coaches and the individual players (20 players and two national team coaches) covered various issues, involving both the individual players’ goal-setting and sports character, as displayed in his self-presentation during the interview. If the presumptive elite level player presented a vague or low goal or an overly humble self-presentation, this was contested by the coach through jokes, laughter or ironic teasing. Such conversational joking exchanges formed part of each coach’s toolkit for giving critical feedback to interview questions. In their uptake to the coaches playful corrections, the players were expected to engage in po-faced receipt or to laugh along. The selection involved character contests both on the ice rink and in the talk-in-interaction that formed part of the performance appraisal procedure.

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Humor; assessment sequences; performance appraisal interviews; coach-athlete interaction; character contests

Introduction

In the following, we will analyze how humor and joking can be seen to be aspects of successful performance in social interaction during interviews in the final selection procedure for the male Swedish national youth team in hockey. The data illuminate how the coaches’ joking and use of humor in interaction constitutes a way to destabilize hierarchy and downgrade the seriousness of this high stakes elite selection context (performance appraisal interviews, PAIs). Through interview data, Ronglan and Aggerholm (2014) have illuminated how coaches deliberately deploy humor to destabilize group hierarchies. This study offers an analysis of humor and jokes in talk during the final selection camp for the Swedish youth national hockey team in hockey.
Prior research has shown that elite sport is a relatively closed world with low transparency especially in social science, when it concerns ongoing selection practices (Kilger, 2017; Meckbach, 2016). Our access to data from ongoing selection procedures – including coach-athlete interviews with young players aspiring to the elite level – makes this study a unique and relevant set of data for analyzing the role of teasing and joking in high-stakes sports interviews.

Sports coaching today is increasingly acknowledged as a social practice where social interaction is at the very core of the process. Communicative skills are emphasized as a prerequisite for the coach-athlete relationship to function (Burton & Raedeke, 2008; Nelson, Groom, & Potrac, 2016). However, detailed analyses of the actual conversations between coaches and athlete has been sparingly investigated in sports coaching research. However, previous research has underlined that such approach can provide a better understanding of the nuanced, temporal and reactive process of talk-in-interaction within the coaching context (Groom, Cushion, & Nelson, 2012; Groom, Nelson, Potrac, & Cushion, 2014). Moreover, it has been empirically illustrated how a detailed approach is well placed to investigate coach-athlete-interaction in practice (Zucchermaglio & Alby, 2012).

For the coach in everyday practice, this means acquiring interactional skills in order to develop the group and each player, and to create a positive environment for development, offering advice or building the athletes’ confidence. In brief, this is what is often is referred to as the ‘social skills’ of coaches. Included in the idea of social skills is the ability to use humor or being humorous. This ability is often emphasized as important in many different areas, not the least within the sociology of sports coaching, where all elite sport coaches in a recent interview study testified about the importance of humor (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014), for instance in breaking up the hard work and monotony of training. This paper extends prior research in documenting authentic coach-athlete interaction, exploring humor as a conversational resource in coach-athlete interaction (on coach-athlete interaction: Groom et al., 2012; Kilger & Jonsson, 2017; Zucchermaglio & Alby, 2012, on humor in coach-athlete interaction: Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014).

Humor indeed fulfills a number of functions and is used for a range of different purposes and the area of sports is no exception. Humor is an equivocal conversational resource. It can be used to include people, producing a sense of belonging, but it can also be used to exclude individuals by, for instance, generating ridicule. In a classical paper about situational humor and conversational joking, Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) discussed ways in which teasing and joking in conversations may feature both teasing and biting, on the one hand, and bonding, on the other, creating or enhancing a sense of in-group belonging. As discussed by Boxer and Cortés-Conde:
Teasing runs along a continuum of bonding to nipping to biting. Because this is a continuum, these constructs are not mutually exclusive and the boundaries are not always clear. As with all talk, much depends on the identification of context, and indeed the exact message cannot be interpreted without encoding/decoding the metamessage. (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997, p. 279)

This of course also means that different participants might hold different views on what is humorous or laughable in a specific social context. The role of humor in social situations has attracted an increased interest in research on social interaction as a way to understand identity work and social alignments. Yet, the interest in humor in the world of sport has been relatively limited. However, there are some exceptions. Drawing on insights from existential philosophy, Ronglan and Aggerholm (2012; 2014) highlight how humor holds important possibilities and argue that it forms a central part of coach-athlete interaction. Conversational joking in sports is seen as something that can be seen as part of an existential attitude of playfulness that is important for balancing stressful aspects of competitive game action and that enhances creative game performance (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014). Some other work in sports (Edwards & Jones, 2018) and other fields (Terrion & Ashworth, 2002) has similarly highlighted the bonding potential of humour, especially for group identity and the cohesion of groups. One aspect of this is that laughing together can be an important conversational device for glossing over trouble or equivocality. Conversational joking can also be used to mitigate socially improper utterances or smoothen conversations in stressful situations or to mitigate a so called dispreferred response (Glenn, 1989; Stokoe & Edwards, 2006).

Conversely, some scholars have foregrounded the disciplinary role of humor (Franzén & Aronsson, 2013; on its role in sports coaching, see Edwards & Jones, 2018). In line with work of Billig (2005) and his critical discussion of ridicule in humour, several scholars have problematized putdown humour (Edwards & Jones, 2018; Terrion & Ashworth, 2002). As yet, though much research on humor has primarily concerned coaches’ joking, as reflected in interview data or ethnographic observations. In this paper, the focus is instead on how young athletes and coaches interact, that is, the focus is on talk-in-interaction. This means focusing on talk as a vehicle for social action (Hutchby & Woffitt, 2008; for talk in a sports context, see Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012). What conversation analysis – and a detailed analysis of talk – may offer is a systematic approach to the detailed and sequential study of talk-in interaction (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). This paper will offer detailed analyses of conversation in order to elucidate how interactional structures are produced and to show how power relations shape humor in this particular context. The aim is to contribute to the understanding of teasing and humor as conversational tools in coach-athlete interaction.
The focus is on how conversational joking emerges in social interaction, as a product of co-construction. It is to quite some extent a matter of footing, serious or non-serious (Goffman, 1979). Laughter, giggling, smiling, second jokes constitute some ways of acknowledging conversational joking (Sacks, 1974; Schegloff, 2001). Within conversation analysis, what is biting or bonding is basically a matter of co-participants’ uptake, for example, their smiling, laughter or non-serious uptake (Glenn, 1989; Sacks, 1974; Schegloff, 2001).

In line with conversation analysis, the focus of this paper is on how coaches express themselves in talk with young athletes, that is, on talk-in-interaction. This means focusing on talk as a vehicle for social action (Hutchby & Woffitt, 2008; for talk in a sports context, see Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012). What conversation analysis can offer is a systematic approach to the detailed and sequential study of talk-in-interaction (Heritage & Clayman, 2010). This paper will offer sequential analyses of conversation in order to elucidate how interactional structures are produced and to show how power relations shape humor in this particular context. The aim is to contribute to the understanding of conversational joking as a communicative tool in coach-athlete interaction.

Additionally, this paper is focused on a specific interactional context; coaches’ interviews with individual players during the final selection camp for the Swedish youth national team in hockey. Such interviews – performance appraisal interviews – have become increasingly common in many areas. They have attracted increased interest as a management procedure ever since the 1950s and few interactional topics have received as much attention in management research during the last decades (Grote, 2002; Nathan, Mohrman, & Millman, 1991; Pälli & Lehtinen, 2014). Scholars have at large focused on the effectiveness of different practices to increase corporate productivity and working morale, as ways of enhancing employee satisfaction. These studies have primarily been based on data from retrospective interviews or questionnaires, and they have often had a prescriptive or normative approach, establishing guidelines for how to conduct successful interviews (Grote, 2002; Losyk, 2002). Appraisal interviews constitute a specific form of interaction where social and institutional norms are reconstructed (Sandlund, Olin-Scheller, Nyroos, Jakobsen, & Nahnfeldt, 2011). Clifton (2012) shows how facework plays a significant role in appraisal interviews and Pälli and Lehtinen (2014) highlight how goal setting and the co-construction of joint goals is a central part of such interaction. Moreover, researchers within the field have called for an increased focus on appraisal interviews as a social and discursive practice to understand distinct types of institutionalized assessment-talk. Similarly, our investigation of talk-in-interaction seeks to contribute to an understanding of how people perform and achieve divergent
aims in this genre of interaction. In brief, this concerns how social relations and institutional norms are negotiated and interactionally accomplished by the participants in real-time interviews.

Moreover, appraisal interviews have become increasingly important also within the field of sports (Kilger & Jonsson, 2017; MacLean, 2001). However, this genre of interaction has as yet been sparsely studied as situated action or in any detail (Asmuß, 2008). Yet, this form of interview has become an increasingly important part of the selection process for several reasons. Previous research on talent selection has emphasized that selection of young talents cannot solely be based on physical capacity. The selection must also consider personality, ambition and capacity for development (Kilger, 2017; Martindale, Collins, & Daubney, 2013). In sport selection processes, these interviews are seen as a tool to uncover personal characteristics and producing a fair selection.

Needless to say, there is much at stake for the young participant during each interview. This genre of interview is a form of assessment practice, a part of selection processes. However, scholars within different fields have shown that this genre of institutionalized interaction is often framed as a type of everyday conversation (Losyk, 2002; Van de Mieroop & Schnurr, 2014). The use of humor is one important way of downplaying the seriousness of the situation (Glenn, 1989; on role distance, Goffman, 1961; Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014).

Character contests and dramaturgical aspects of appraisal interviews

Erving Goffman’s work on the micropolitics of social life has been highly influential in sociology, including theorizing within conversation analysis. Goffman (1959) deployed the metaphor of theatrical or dramaturgical performance as a framework for analyzing self-presentations in everyday life. Drawing on analyses of social interaction in various social contexts, including both private and public areas, Goffman (1959) has explored, how social techniques of self-presentation appear in many areas of daily life. Much of his writing on impression management has involved sport metaphors, such as play, players, teams, team performance and comebacks (e.g. Goffman, 1959; on dramaturgical metaphors, counter-attacks and other group performances, see also; Aggerholm, 2013). Goffman (1967) has similarly discussed ways in which everyday life involves character contests. As a part of his analyses, Goffman (1967) introduced the concept of make-work where he theorized how people in many areas of everyday life are expected to give an impression of hard work. Appearing as a hard-working person is a central part of the presentation of self. This, as we will illustrate in this study, is also a central part of coach-athlete interaction. In terms of Goffman’s theorizing, a selection interview could be seen as an important
performative act of self-presentation. He points out that “when an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed [...] the others will know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response from him” (Goffman, 1959, p. 1). Therefore, he argues, everyday life involves a number of character contests. For Goffman (1967), one of the most interesting part of social interaction arrives when character is at stake and when personal characteristics are contested. More specifically, how social events are supposed to reveal or test personal character. As we want to show character and to be known as, for example, brave, promising or hard-working, we try to behave so as to enact such ideals (Goffman, 1967).

Moreover, selection interviews are interesting social events because such interviews constitute a place where individual actions reveal the social codes by which people assess themselves and are assessed by others. Such character contests often occur in sports and involves much more than just winning or losing. Goffman emphasizes that: “an overmatched player can gamely give anything he has to his hopeless situation and then go down bravely, or proudly, or insolently, or gracefully, or with an ironic smile on his lips [...] in which case a duel is lost but character is won” (Goffman, 1967, pp. 43–44). In this study, we will show how joking and teasing are ways for the coaches to contest character and that this forms a key part in interviews as parts of selection procedures.

In sports, there are numerous examples of dramaturgical performance as a way to showcase preferred characteristics. For example, the New Zealand rugby team may perform the Hakka-dance before kick-off or a sprinter might tense his muscles and shout before the start of the race. These examples both constitute ways to convey impressions and influence and define social situations. As Aggerholm (2013) points out, such dramaturgy in the field of sports, may, for instance, involve complaints and other conversational resources as ways of displaying innocence. For instance, a soccer player may beg the referee for a penalty judgment, for being the subject of an unfair decision. It is necessary to balance self-presentations in relation to the situation. This paper is about successful performance in appraisal interviews, where the players’ future in sports is about to be decided. In this high-stake situation, humor becomes an important tool for de-dramatizing or destabilizing the seriousness of the situation – for doing expressive distance – but also for arriving at discursively preferred responses. As shown by Kilger and Jonsson (2017), there are discursively bound activities and expectations in this context that requires of the participants that they showcase specific sporting goals and personal characteristics in order to appear as successful players.
In a classical paper, Drew (1987) discussed so called po-faced receipts to teases. When someone makes fun of another party, it is important for the target of teasing to be able to play along and to laugh along with the teaser, to produce a witty come-back or to show in other ways that s/he has taken no offense (for work on po-faced receipt in informal educational contexts, see also Tholander & Aronsson, 2002). In this paper, we will illuminate ways in which successful uptake to humorous teasing may also be part of the makeup of an elite player to be and how coaches deploy conversational joking as a way to talk about the individual athlete’s goals and character, illustrating how this is handled through detailed analyses of the interaction.

**Methodology**

**Methodological reflections**

In conversation analysis, the first part of the analytical process is to identify an interesting phenomenon and then to collect a number of examples (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 2008), creating a collection. The point of departure for the analysis is that actions are situated in a sequential context. Social action is accomplished on a turn-by-turn basis, where one utterance makes another one relevant (Sacks, 1992). Benwell and Stokoe (2006) emphasize that the structure and effects of institutional interaction should not be presupposed. Instead, the analysis should find evidence in the talk that the unfolding conversation involves relevant participants’ concerns. Therefore, conversation analysts and scholars within discursive psychology often highlight the importance of naturally occurring data, that is, data that are not elicited by the researcher, as is the case in for example, a research interview or an experiment (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Potter, 1996). In the analysis of all forms of conversations, there are different ways to rhetorically gain legitimacy, for example by managing personal stakes, using reported speech, impersonal constructions and ways of invoking consensus.

When listening to interviews in a high stake selection context, this study started off with our realization of the coaches’ recurrent use of joking and humor in their interaction with the young athletes. Our preliminary analyses revealed that, in this asymmetric social context, joking was initialized by the coaches and mobilized in specific ways. A closer examination of the data revealed the coaches’ design of joking and the young athletes’ uptake when particular topics (sporting goals, character) were raised in the interviews.

**Data and analytical procedure**

**Setting and participants**

The empirical material used in this paper includes authentic individual interviews with twenty young athletes, in all 20 interviews (so called
performance appraisal interviews, PAIs) between two national team coaches and each player participating in the final four days Elite camp (in Swedish; Elitlägret) for the youth national team in hockey in Sweden. These interviews formed a routine practice and a mandatory part of the selection camps. This final Elite camp is a regular part of the Swedish Hockey Federations’ yearly process in the screening for the male youth national team and it is part of the termination of a two years process of selection for the participating players. The recordings used in this paper form parts of a larger data corpus from selection camps, including research interviews, participant observations and field notes, by the first author.

In conversation analysis, there is a preference for natural data, where the researcher is neither part of the conversation, nor the person who set it up. None of the two authors were present during any of the interviews. For all practical purposes, the performance appraisal interviews in this study can be seen as a type of naturally occurring institutional talk (cf. Potter, 1996). The coaches were provided with recording equipment from the researcher for audio-recording the interviews. Each interview lasted from about 15 minutes to 32 minutes, comprising in total about six hours of audio-recorded material. The interview guide used by the coaches in the interviews at the camp formed a regular part of the standard procedures, highlighted by the coaches as a central part of the selection process.

After repeated listening to the recordings, the authors identified joking sequences of at least two turns: a first turn where a coach made an ironic or joking comment, and a second turn where the player could be seen to orient to the laughable quality of this comment in that he (i) laughed, (ii) responded with a joke of his own or (iii) talked in a smiley voice. These sequences were then transcribed in some detail in Swedish by both authors, drawing on the transcription conventions of conversation analysis (Jefferson, 2004; Sacks, 1974, 1992). It should be noted that the chosen extracts (featuring six athletes and two coaches) are based on an analysis of the entire corpus of data, and that they illustrate recurrent phenomena in the entire set of data. In line with the validation procedure of conversation analysis, our provisional understanding of the examples has been discussed at data sessions with colleagues at the Discourse Group at Stockholm University. From other theoretical perspectives, Billig (2005) has problematized whether participants who laugh actually enjoy a joke, particularly if it involves potential ridicule. However, the most important validation, from the point of view of conversation analysis is whether the participants themselves actually provide a joking uptake (smiling, laughing, making novel jokes or displaying other signs of amusement).
Joking and teasing in performance appraisal interviews: handling a joke

In assessment contexts, humor can be seen as a discursive resource for mitigating criticism and for reducing distance (on distance and alignments, see also Goffman, 1961). As highlighted by Kilger and Jonsson (2017) interviews in the context of a highly competitive selection procedure may produce a great deal of nail biting. Therefore, joking in the beginning of an interview can be seen as a way to mitigate the stress or seriousness of the selection procedure, making the young athlete less nervous.

Conversational joking can also be deployed in the downplaying of hierarchies and how preferred responses are recurrently co-construed through social interaction. By using humor, “poor” answers or answers deviating from the standard, might be handled and tailored (corrected) to fit into local norms (Holmes, 2007). Moreover, it can be a way to express things between the lines, as an explicit way to make a point or express opinions. This can, for instance, be accomplished by deliberately suggesting a poor answer, by rolling your eyes, smiling, laughing or showing a surprised face (Ronglan & Aggerholm, 2014).

Our study of institutionalized interview interaction shows how high sporting goals is a normative prerequisite. If a goal is too low or too vaguely described by a player, it is contested by the coach through a joke or a teasing comment. For a presumptive elite player, not to express the goal of being an international top player, is a norm-breaking response to the coaches’ question about sporting goals. The analyses show that specific answers are discursively expected and that very few answers deviate from this pattern. Moreover, the analyses illustrate how the young players are familiar with this genre of interaction and the responses that are expected from them if they are to present themselves as future elite players. Even though these interviews might give the impression of being informal, everyday conversations, this study illustrates that they follow a distinct interactional pattern. Friendly teasing was a pervasive feature of the present interviews. The coaches played close attention to the athletes’ interview responses and made jokes to challenge their responses. As we will illustrate here, the interviews form a context of joking and teasing where, on an underlying level, important assessments also concern whether the young player, the interviewee is able to “take a joke”.

In this paper, we will illustrate how joking both involves the individual player’s goal-setting and his impression management (Goffman, 1959) or more precisely, his self-presentation and revelations about his individual character or sport persona. Below, we will first present cases where the coach challenges the player’s goal-setting (Ex.1–3) and then cases where the coach primarily challenges the player’s self-presentation (Ex.4–7).
“Best in the world”: youth players’ talking about their elite sport goals

In the initial section of each interview, the coach generally asks about the player’s aspiration and goals. Directly and indirectly (e.g. through joking exchanges), the interview sequences then invoke local norms for what are the appropriate goals of an elite athlete on the national team. As mentioned, high sporting goals are not just expected for elite players, it is a normative prerequisite for elite sports players to be. If a player does not express the goal of being an international elite player, this appears to be a norm-breaking account. If his goal is too vaguely described by the player – or if it is set too low – it is recurrently immediately contested through a joke or a teasing comment, where the coach, ironically, suggests a low goal or at least a non-elite goal. Moreover, the analyses illustrate how the young participants are familiar with this genre of interaction and the responses that are expected from them in order to qualify for the national team. The interview format resembles that of an informal everyday conversation, but the analyses show how the players’ uptake follows specific discursive patterns and few (or none) of the answers differ from these patterns. Even though these interviews might give the impression of being mundane, everyday conversations, this study thus illustrates that the interviews are highly scripted and follow a distinct interactional structure: (i) vague or low goals by the players are (ii) contested by the coach who in his turn (ironically) suggests a goal that seems to be absurdly low in this competitive elite context – whereupon the young player (iii) responds with the normatively preferred answer (striving to become best in the world and/or aiming to play in the NHL or in the Swedish national team).

As we will see in the next two extracts, the coach in both cases orients with irony to the young players’ presentation of goals when they are seen to be too vague (Ex.1) or too low (Ex.2).

Extract 1. “Best in X-county, I note, he-he ((laughing)) or?”.

1 C1 What are your goals (.) with your hockey?
2 P Be-be-be as good as possible.
3 C1 M:hm (.) how good is that then?
4 P The best (.) sort of [mhm]. At least you can try.
5 C1 → Best in X-county I write, “he-he”((laughing)) (.) or? (X-county is a small Swedish province))
6 P $ Best in the world $
7 C1 Yes, what will it take to become that then?
8 P Training (2) [two- two times] and eating and resting and all of that.
9 Good habits.
10 C1 Good habits.

On line 2, the player modestly sets his goal as “as good as possible”. This is evidently seen by the coach as too vague a response (as a legitimate sporting goal for a future elite player). In any case, the coach responds
ironically, laughingly suggesting an absurdly low level as the player’s “best” level (“Best in X-county”). The player then quickly revises his response, as it is obvious from the coach’s ironic uptake that his initial goal was set too low. In a smiley voice, the player then (line 6) presents a candidate response – “best in the world” (produced in a smiley voice) – a response that is more in accordance with what is to the expected for an elite player to be. Through this somewhat playful uptake, he can be seen to align with the coach in adopting a playful footing (Goffman, 1979).

In his discussion of self-presentations, Goffman (1959) has differentiated between expressions given and expressions given off (see also Aggerholm, 2013). In this case, the player apparently tries to give a good impression when he talks about becoming “as good as possible”. Yet, the coach comments quite ironically and laughingly on the player’s initial goal. In line with the proof procedure of conversation analysis (Heritage & Clayman, 2010), he can thus be seen to correct the young athlete’s response, and the athlete follows suite and actually upgrades his response (to an aspiration of becoming “best in the world”). In both instances (lines 5 and 6) – the irony of the coach and the self-correction of the athlete – the speaker’s own perspective is thus shown through his talk-in-interaction.

The next case, with another player, involves an initial response that is apparently also seen by the coach as too vague and too low.

Extract 2. “Yes, or X-town’s A-division?”; “Hard work, good habits, ha-ha”.

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At first, this player presents a somewhat vague goal “as good as possible”, and he is immediately challenged by the coach who asks what that means. The player then responds that he should “maybe play NHL, maybe” (line 4). The coach apparently orients to the highly tentative and guarded quality of this response (including two “maybe”) and jokingly and ironically suggests “yes or X-town’s first team”, an absurdly low goal in this elite context. The player then right away protests loudly, and somewhat laughingly “NO::hhhh That’s not my goal”, emitting a playful outcry (NO::hhhh) in a laughing voice, a type of response cry (Goffman, 1978) that testifies to
his own awareness of his mistake, much like “oops” or “woops”. The discussion then moves on to what is required of someone with more ambitious goals (NHL). On line 11, the player then makes a joke of his own when he responds “Hard work, good habits he-he”, alluding laughingly the celebration of “good habits” which has been something of the coaches’ mantra, throughout the selection camp. Accordingly, this is a preferred answer, however it is so obviously in accordance with the coaches’ demands that the coach himself laughingly (and ironically) acknowledges the answer as “well said” (“Really! he-he, well said. Good habits”; line 12).

In the third extract the coach is joking about the young player’s goal to become a “NHL pro, in the US, in America”.

**Extract 3. “You don’t like Canada?”.**

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<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>What are your goals for your career?</td>
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<td>P</td>
<td>Yeah (.) to (.) get as far as possible, become- (1) NHL professional, in the US, America and to be, yeah, or, I’m (.) KHL ((The Russian professional league)) also, that’s- but my highest goal is NHL.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>“Not Canada” I’m noting here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Yes, exactly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>You don’t like Canada?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Ye:ahh [he-he] Canada as well [he-he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>not Canada [he-he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>[he-he</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Of course, Canada (.) but, yeah (.) ((speaking in an unperturbed voice))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Mh:m</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this case, the player’s articulated goal as such is not too low, if seen in relation to that of the other elite team candidates. But in this case, the player makes a slip of the tongue or reveals that he is not quite in the know when he does not include Canada when referring to NHL. In this specific example, the coach is jokingly teasing the young player, orienting to his gaffe when equating the National Hockey League with just the US. In any case, the coach makes an ironic remark “not Canada, I’m noting here” (line 5). The player does not respond right away and the coach then repeats his ironic joke and explicitly highlights the player’s gaffe, asking whether he does not “like Canada” (line 7). In the player’s subsequent turn, this is followed by what can be seen as repair work (Pomerantz, 1984) in that he laughingly acknowledges that Canada would also be fine, speaking in a laughing voice (line 8). The two coaches then join in, laughing as well. In social interaction, there is evidence that speakers prefer co-participants to repair interactional lapses or error, rather than to continue unfazed (Billig, 2001). In this example, the coach’s joke follows as an uptake to the player’s gaffe of not including Canada in the NHL and, his failure to handle the first ironic joke by the coach (line 5).
Performance appraisal interviews as character contests

A key element in the interviews is apparently also to assess the individual player’s ability to handle a joke, that is, the young athlete’s character, including his skills in producing relevant comebacks, laugher or other po-faced receipts to teasing.

In the present data, discussions about goals often leads to discussion about elite players and about how the individual athlete thinks about himself as a player or sport character. Some researchers have shown how personal traits and individual characteristics are recurrently highlighted by coaches in the selection of young talents in addition to pure sporting skills (Christensen, 2009; Kilger, 2017). Selection process is also filled with normative ideals, statements and practices compliable to principles of examination and sorting. In the next two examples, we will see how specific character traits are required on the ice and if these are not invoked by the player himself, this is contested and becomes part of joking in the performance appraisal interview. For instance, recurring jokes invoke the players’ self-descriptions. When social categories such as “kind”, “calm” or “shy” appear in their self-presentations, this is often challenged through the coaches’ joking, contesting such character traits as viable ideals on the ice.

Extract 4. “So just like on the ice (very calm and nice)?”

As shown in the coaches’ comments and laughing uptake (lines 5, 7–8, 10–11), the idea of being “very calm and nice” is not the expected answer on the ice, that is, in this competitive elite context. The interactional data show that personality traits off the court are assumed to be relevant also on the court and if discursively non-preferred traits are displayed, the coaches tend to orient to this, directly or indirectly (e.g. through joking) pointing out to the player what is not to be expected or desired in this elite sports context. Thus,
personal traits off-the-ice rink are linked to behaviour on the ice. Here, the player orients to their indirect critique and repairs his previous (too vague and too low) goals, ensuring the coaches that he just tries to be a good sport, a person who values fair-play and is hard-worker (lines 12–14).

In another case, the player similarly presents himself in a way that does not resonate with the tough competitive context of elite hockey. Again, the coach immediately challenges this self-presentation.

Extract 5. “So just like on the ice he-he (. o:r?)”.

Ronglan and Aggerholm (2014) have discussed how joking is a way for coaches to amplify their messages. When the players make self-presentations invoking a nice (in Swedish: snäll) and humble character, this is recurrently contested. In this case, the player’s self-presentation as someone who is “nice perhaps, humble (.) yes” (line 2) is not the expected or preferred response in this highly competitive elite sport context, and it is immediately challenged by the coach.

In the last two examples (Extracts 5 and 6, as in the following two cases), it becomes apparent – through the coaches’ challenges – which character traits that are not discursively desirable in order to appear as successful in this competitive interaction. In the next case, an (overly) humble approach is again challenged by the coach.

Extract 6. “No goal scorer?”; “Yesterday it did happen”.

Ronglan and Aggerholm (2014)
In this episode, the player presents himself as skillful, but in a somewhat modest way. The coach can be seen to challenge such modesty when he somewhat jokingly asks “Mh:m (.) no goal scorer?” The player again responds somewhat modestly (line 6), but he is again challenged by the coach who in a laughing voice points out that he was recently actually quite successful on the ice in making an important goal. At this point, the player actually responds in a laughing voice and admits that it was “really great fun”, displaying amusement.

For reasons of space, we have first presented the players’ goal-setting (Ex. 1–3) and then their individual self-presentations as players (characters). It should be pointed out, though, that these two topics are often intertwined in the interviews. Last, we will therefore present an extract that, within one episode, illustrates both a player’s talk on sporting goals and his self-presentation (Ex.7).

### Extract 7. “One can do that in Allsvenskan ((Swedish 2nd division)) today”; “$ But you’re smart, aren’t you? $”.

1. P Ah, yeah, to try to get as good as possible and make a living out of hockey
2. C1 → Well (.) one can do that in Allsvenskan today
3. P hhh ((affirmative inhalation)), no, but like I try to be as good as possible. You ((Sw: man)) want to reach the NHL, but-
4. C1 (2) Do you have any player that you, sort of (.) that you think that (.) I look up extra to that guy?
5. P No, not any particular player. It’s different players for different things. But I am a Washington-
6. C1 Neither have I (2.0). So it’s Bäckström then that you have as- (.) that you’re looking at a bit extra?
7. P Yeah, I do like him. He has a good hockey sense, his wrists kinda ((technical skills)), ah, what’s it called, I’d like- I’m a bit more, perhaps, more energetic. Ah- he is more, he’s just lying around and like smart and- sort of
8. C2 → $ But your smart, aren’t you? $ (xx)
9. P $ Yeah, but he’s perhaps-$
10. C2 Yeah, yeah, he-he
11. P $ I can perhaps dump the puck and check $ (.) that’s not perhaps what he’s doing that much, but-

In this episode, the player (P) is initially seen to present too vague an account for his goals in hockey. In any case, the coach challenges his response “Well (.) one can do that in Allsvenskan today” (line 2), orienting to the player’s low goal-setting. The preferred answer is apparently for the player to present a precise goal, and this goal should be high, and it should be on the international elite level, such as the highest level in hockey, the National hockey league (NHL) or the Swedish national team. As can be seen here, and in the previous extracts (Ex.1–3), the goal should thus fulfill two requisites: (i) it should be precise, not too vague, and (ii) it should be high. In this case, in his repair of his prior response, the player invokes NHL (line 4), a goal that is apparently both precise and sufficiently high.
Moreover, an appropriate answer must come from the young player himself and not from the coach, who should not explicitly spell out the preferred answers or put the answers in the interviewee’s mouth. The answer must come from the player himself as a spontaneous expression of his own high goals and his own competitive or tough character.

When the coach laughingly praises him ($ But your smart, aren’t you? $, line 17), the player responds with subdued laughter in his subsequent turn. On another note, the young player and the coach thus express joint amusement. As in several other cases above – and in the data at large – the coach and player share joint laughter or amusement, and there are no overt indications in the interactions that the player is feigning his amusement. The players generally do not produce comebacks, but they laugh or display amusement in other ways, speaking with subdued laughter or making second jokes (e.g. extracts 1 and 2). They thus play along through humorous comments or joint laughter. If anything, the joking seems to be bonding, rather than biting (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997).

**Discussion**

While different types of development dialogues in sports have attracted an increased interest over the last decades, the study of coaches’ assessments in interview interaction is still quite limited (Asmuß, 2008; Van de Mieroop & Schnurr, 2014), especially in sports where competition and assessments is a very important aspect of the domain as such. The examples illuminate how joking and teasing are recurrently deployed as conversational resources by the coaches to challenge and test elite players to be. Drawing on interview data, Ronglan and Aggerholm (2014) have shown how coaches deploy jokes and teasing in coach-athlete interaction to make stressful situations more relaxed. Goffman (1967) has similarly highlighted how laughter might be part of impression management in potentially embarrassing social situations. In this paper, we have documented empirically how joking and playful comments are used to relieve tension and to reduce the level of contestedness.

Moreover, our findings suggest that joking and teasing often feature repair work where coaches can be seen to correct non-appropriate answers. Prior research has shown that discursively dispreferred answers are often handled through challenges, and the speakers are then expected to engage in self-repair (Billig, 2001; Pomerantz, 1984). More specifically, our analysis of individual coach-athlete interviews shows that overly vague or low individual goals are recurrently contested and negotiated through coaches’ joking, laughs and teasing. These interviews are not only part of the process of selection for the youth national team, they also form part of socialization into local sport ideals (Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012). As discussed by Ronglan and Aggerholm (2014) humor is often a central part
in coach-athlete interaction. Our paper illustrates how power relations are made visible in conversational joking in a situated sports context and underlines how teasing is an important conversational tool in coach-athlete interaction. Moreover, our analyses of the examples illuminate how humor, joking and laughter serve several functions in the disciplining of the young participants. Joking can be both a teasing move that has the potential of biting, and a move that has the potential of bonding. The analyses illustrate how jointly agreed types of goals and self-presentations are explicitly verbalized, negotiated and agreed upon in social interaction on a joking and somewhat playful footing (Goffman, 1979). What we have shown is that it serves as a tool for both contesting character and for legitimizing and propagating organizational norms.

Moreover, one of our findings is that the appraisal interviews involve acts of conversational performance. The players should ideally be able to engage in po-faced receipt of the coaches’ teasing (Drew, 1987). The analyses highlight how the young players actually handle coaches’ challenges and teasing through relevant repair work and joint laughter, successfully playing along. In some cases, the players even respond through jokes of their own, as when they talk about “good habits”. The data also illuminate humor as an aspect of power-at-work in an asymmetrical social situation and illustrates the privileged role of the coach in assessing the success of the individual players’ self-presentations.

As can be seen, the sport character that appears during an individual interview is interpreted by the coaches both in terms of conversational performance and behaviour on the ice. The individual player’s character is also assessed in a normative framework of expectations and requirements in a wider discourse of talent management (Christensen, 2009; Kilger, 2017).

Humor is an ambiguous enterprise with both bonding and biting features (Boxer & Cortés-Conde, 1997). This means that we cannot draw any absolute conclusions about whether the players laugh in a genuine way or whether they feel obliged to do so. Similarly, we do not know whether the coaches at times laugh at and not with the player.

The coaches recurrently challenge answers that are not consistent with elite player norms. Thereby, the individual players’ self-presentations are actually often contested. The character of the individual player is not to deviate from elite sport ideals. In brief, the discursive practices are guided and framed by a discourse of sport selection and cannot merely be understood as tools to uncover personal characteristics. Our analysis of talk-in-interaction in hockey serves as an example of how to investigate the dialectics of ‘talk-and-context’ in sports and it illustrates the interconnection between situated interactional practices and wider organizational frames.

In this study, the young athletes generally performed as good sports, both on the ice and in the interview room. They handled jokes and mild teasing with laughter, talk in a smiley voice or, occasionally, with a joke of their own. In line
with the participant perspective of conversation analysis and the emic perspective in ethnography of speaking approaches, our research focus has been on how the participants themselves oriented to the mild teasing and potentially bonding or biting qualities in the coaches’ joking or teasing in the interviews. As far as we could see, they did not orient to coaches teasing as putdowns or ridicule.

Our work has explored joking and teasing in a two-party context, individual interview conversations between the interviewee, one young athlete at a time, in interaction with a coach, and interviewer (head coach, assistant coach) in a high-stake context, where only every other player would be selected for the youth national team. The present findings are thus relevant for work on coach-athlete interaction in dyadic or small group contexts. In future research, it would be interesting to document conversational joking in multiparty contexts, with several athletes, for instance, locker room talk or post-game talk between several athletes and one or more coaches. Such situations would be more conducive to joking on the part of the young athletes. It would also involve more complex group processes with potential joking alliances. Finally, it is our hope that this paper will inspire other scholars to conduct detailed investigations of talk-in-interaction.

**Note**

All names have been anonymized. All coaches, players and parents were informed about the project in advance and had accepted that the interviews were to be recorded.

**Disclosure statement**

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**ORCID**

Magnus Kilger [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8684-3724](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8684-3724)

Karin Aronsson [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7383-540X](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7383-540X)

**References**


Appendix 1. Transcription notations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>notation</th>
<th>description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>:</td>
<td>prolonged syllable</td>
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<tr>
<td>[]</td>
<td>overlapping utterances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(.)</td>
<td>micropause, shorter than (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>pauses in seconds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(x) (xxx)</td>
<td>inaudible word(s)</td>
</tr>
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<td>(no)</td>
<td>unsure transcription</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>°°</td>
<td>speech in low volume</td>
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<tr>
<td>NO</td>
<td>higher amplitude</td>
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<td>()</td>
<td>transcriber’s comments</td>
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<tr>
<td>no no</td>
<td>underlining for emphatic stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- -</td>
<td>cut-off sign; self-editing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he-he</td>
<td>laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE:HE</td>
<td>loud laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$ $</td>
<td>enclose talk in smiley voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; &lt;</td>
<td>delivered in lower volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>delivered more quickly</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2. Swedish originals

Extract 1

1 C1 Vad har du för mål (.) med din hockey?
2 P Bli-bli-bli så bra som möjligt.
3 C1 M:m (.) hur bra är det då?
4 P Bäst (.) typ [mm]. Man kan ju försöka i alla fall.
5 C1 → Bäst i Östergötland skriver jag, “he-he”((laughing)) (.) eller?
6 P $ Bäst i världen$
7 C1 Ja. Vad kommer krävas för att bli det då?
8 P Träning (2) [två, två gånger] Och äta och vila och det.
9 P Goda vanor.
10 C1 Goda vanor.

Extract 2

1 C1 Jaha, vad vill du uppnå då, med hockeyn. Har du tänkt någonting på det?
2 P Ja (.) bli så bra som möjligt.
3 C1 Hur bra är det egentligen, för det har jag funderat mycket på.
4 P Alltså (2), ja, det är väl (1). Kanske spela NHL, kanske.
5 C1 → Ja, eller Hedemoras A-lag? ((div 2))
6 P Ja, typ, NÅ:hhh! Det är inte mitt mål.
7 C1 Nå-hå, men dom är väl bra. Är dom inte det?
8 P Nej (.) inte i år.
9 C1 NHL kanske, säger du [ja, eller NHL]. Jaha, ha-ha. Men vad krävs för att du ska komma till NHL då?
10 P → Hårt job[b, goda vanor, he-he.
Extract 3

1 C1 Vad har du för mål med din karriär?
2 P Ja () att () komma så långt som möjligt. Bli (1) NHL proffs, i USA, Amerika och att bli, ja. Eller,
3 jag KHL också, det är. Men högsta målet är NHL.
4 C1 Ej Kanada skriver jag här
5 C2 Ja, precis
6 C1 → Du gillar inte Kanada?
7 P Jo:he-he Kanada också he-he
8 C2 Ej Kanada he-he
9 C1 He-he
10 P Såklart Kanada () men, ja ()
11 C1 M:m

Extract 4

1 C1 Vad kommer krävas för att komma till NHL då?
2 P Det är väl sitt egna driv och. Att vi-, vilja bli bättre hela tiden =
3 C1 = Jac:ə (4). Jaha (2). Hur skulle du vilja beskriva dig som person?
4 P Ja:a (1) Väldigt lugn och () snäll skulle jag väl säga.
5 C1 → M:m () Precis som () på isen alltså?
6 P Ja.
7 C2 VA? =
8 C1 = VA?
9 P Nej, men asså jag är inte så hära
10 C1 [He-HEHE
11 C2 [He-HEHE (chorus laughter))
12 P Nej, men asså inte så att jag gör efterslängar och sånt. Men alltså, Ja, jag är ju lite fram och
13 tillbaka, det är jag ju. Jag jobbar ju rätt så hårt, tycker jag själv alltså
14 C1 M:m. Det gör du verkligen.

Extract 5

1 C1 Beskriv dig som person nu Patric
2 P (2) snäll kanske, ödmjuk () ja.
3 C1 → Mm (3) precis som på isen alltså he-he () e:ller?
4 P Lite för snäll på isen är jag väl kanske () kanske.
5 C1 Kan du tuffa till dig?
6 P Ja, jag kan försöka.
7 C1 Redan till ikväll? Eller?
8 P Ja () kanske.
9 C1 Kanske?
10 P Ja
11 C1 Vad är det som hindrar dig?
10 P Ingenting egentligen.
11 C1 Nähå
Som spelare, hur vill du beskriva dig då?

Ja ( lite- ( kanske lite snabb ( ( hyfsad teknik kanske ))

Rätt så bra spelsinne, >tor jag< ( ja, så ser jag på mig.

Mm ( ingen målskytt?

Nja, händer väl.

Igår hände det (( P scored in a Swedish youth international))

Ja:ahh hehe, igår hände det. Det var riktigt kul

Center eller ytterforward?

Ah, ja, försöka bli så bra som möjligt och kunna livnära mig på hockeyn

Jaha ( kan man ju i Allsvenskan idag ((Swedish 2nd division))

.hhh ((affirmative inhalation)), nej, men alltså försöka bli så bra som möjligt. Man vill ju nå till NHL, men-

Har du någon spelare sådär som du tycker att, den här ser jag upp extra mycket till?


Har du varit där någon gång, i Washington?

Nej, det har jag inte.

Inte jag heller ( 2). Är det Bäckström då som du har som- ( som du kikar extra på?

Ja, jag gillar ju honom. Han har bra spelsinne, såhär handleder men, äh, vad heter det, jag vill-

jag är väl lite mer, kanske, rivigare. Åh-han är lite mer bara ligger och smart såhär och- sådär

Men du är väl smart? ( xx)

Ja, men han är kanske-

Ja, ja, he-he

Jag kanske kan dumpa och forechecka ( det kanske inte han gör så mycket, men-