

Becoming an athlete, remaining other:

**A Foucauldian reading of athlete commitment in a lower
secondary sports school in Norway**

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Summary

Teaching young athletes sound training routines and healthy lifestyle choices is widely recognised as a means of supporting their holistic development. This objective is institutionalised in lower secondary sports schools, which seek to apply scientific knowledge to the practical aims of combining long-term athlete development with formal education. In this thesis, I explore how athlete commitment is discursively produced through the intersections of educational practice, athlete development and health knowledge, institutional arrangements, and student-athletes' self-governing practices.

The outcome of the research is presented in three papers, each based on empirical data collected during fieldwork at a lower secondary sports school in Norway. Various qualitative methods were applied, including document analysis, observations, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. The theoretical foundation for all three empirical studies is poststructuralism and Foucault's concepts of discourse and power/knowledge. In the analysis, Foucauldian perspectives were integrated with methodological tools from reflexive thematic analysis and poststructural interview analysis.

Paper 1 explores how lower secondary sports school coaches discursively construct the 'ideal' student-athlete in their talk and teaching practices. The analyses indicate that an overarching aim of the sports school programme is to teach young people how to take responsibility for their own development, while simultaneously learning to orient themselves towards their own goals and interests. Furthermore, the paper highlights the disciplinary potential of these teaching practices, which both enable and constrain young people's understanding of sound training routines and healthy lifestyle choices.

Paper 2 delves into how student-athletes understand and organise their free time. Drawing on Foucault's notion of power/knowledge relations and focus-group interviews with 25 student-athletes, the analysis highlights three ways in which student-athletes balance expectations of succeeding simultaneously in sport and education: by using their time as effectively as possible, by reducing energy-demanding activities, or by invoking health as a justification for resistance and for taking breaks from an otherwise tightly packed schedule.

Paper 3 examines how the discursive conditions under which student-athletes can position themselves as committed athletes change over time and across educational and athletic transitions. Further, the paper sheds light on the 'identity work' young student-athletes do to sustain legitimacy as committed athletes within the shifting power relations of their dual career environments. The analysis indicates that being part of a talent network

reinforces student-athletes' commitment identities but also extends the discursive terrain within which they can fashion subjectivities marked by patience, self-regulation, and a growth-orientation towards performance development.

Overall, the empirical papers move beyond understanding commitment as the internal asset of an individual. Instead, this thesis provides insight into how athlete commitment is produced and sustained *relationally* between coaches, athletes, and through the tools, spaces, and discourses in which they are engaged. This insight forms the basis for a theoretically grounded rationale for rethinking holistic talent development as an integration of specific technologies of knowledge, power, and the self.

Sammendrag

Å lære engasjerte idrettsungdom gode treningsrutiner og sunne helsevalg regnes som et viktig verktøy for å støtte deres helhetlige utvikling som idrettsutøvere. Idrettsungdomsskoler har blitt sentrale aktører i dette arbeidet og anvender kunnskapsbaserte anbefalinger i arbeidet med å tilrettelegge for langsiktig talentutvikling i kombinasjon med skolegang. I denne avhandlingen undersøker jeg hvordan satsingsatferd diskursivt produseres og forhandles i skjæringsfeltene mellom pedagogiske praksiser, vitenskapelige anbefalinger om langsiktig talentutvikling og ivaretagelse av helse, institusjonelle ordninger og idrettselevenenes egne praksiser for selvstyring.

Avhandlingen bygger på empiriske data fra feltarbeid gjennomført ved én idrettsungdomsskole i Norge. Jeg benyttet ulike kvalitative metoder, inkludert dokumentanalyse, observasjoner, uformelle samtaler og semistrukturerte intervjuer. Det teoretiske grunnlaget for de alle tre empiriske arbeidene er poststrukturalisme og Foucaults begreper om diskurs og makt/kunnskap. I analyseprosessen ble prinsipper og perspektiver fra Foucault sitt arbeid innpasset med metodiske verktøy fra refleksiv tematisk analyse og poststrukturalistisk intervjuanalyse.

Artikkel 1 undersøker hvordan skoletrenere ved idrettsungdomsskolen diskursivt konstruerer den “ideelle” idrettseleven gjennom sin undervisningspraksis. Analysene viser at et overordnet mål med idrettsprogrammet er å lære ungdommene hvordan de kan ta ansvar for egen utvikling, samtidig som de skal lære å orientere seg etter egne mål og interesser. Videre løfter artikkelen fram det disiplinerende potensialet i undervisningspraksisene som både muliggjør og begrenser ungdommenes forståelse av gode treningsrutiner og sunne helsevalg.

Artikkel 2 går i dybden på hvordan idrettselever ved samme idrettsungdomsskole forstår og organiserer hverdagen sin. Med utgangspunkt i Foucaults begrep om makt/kunnskap og fokusgruppeintervjuer med 25 idrettselever, viser analysen tre måter ungdommene balanserer forventninger om å prestere i både skole og idrett: gjennom mest mulig effektiv tidsbruk, ved å redusere energikrevende aktiviteter, eller ved å bruke helse som begrunnelse for motstand og pauser fra en ellers tettpakket timeplan.

Artikkel 3 undersøker hvordan de diskursive betingelsene for at idrettselever kan posisjonere seg som satsende utøvere endres over tid og på tvers av overganger i idretten og fra ungdomsskolen til videregående skole. Artikkelen belyser også det arbeidet ungdommene gjør for å opprettholde legitimitet som “en satser” innenfor de skiftende maktrelasjonene som

preger deres utviklingsmiljøer. Analysen indikerer at det å inngå i et talentnettverk reproducerer ungdommers satsingsidentitet og utvider handlingsrommet hvor de kan forme subjektiviteter preget av tålmodighet, selvregulering og en læringsorientert holdning til egen utvikling.

Samlet sett utfordrer artiklene en forståelse av satsingsatferd som en personlig egenskap eller indre drivkraft. I stedet belyser denne avhandlingen hvordan satsingsatferd produseres og opprettholdes relasjonelt mellom trenere, utøvere og gjennom de verktøyene, materialitetene og diskursive praksisene de inngår i. Denne innsikten danner grunnlag for et teoretisk forankret rasjonale for å tenke på helhetlig talentutvikling som en integrering av bestemte teknologier for kunnskap, makt og selvet.

Abbreviations

OLT	Olympiatoppen
HEA	Holistic Ecological Approach
NIH	Norges Idrettshøgskole/ Norwegian School of Sports Sciences
NIF	The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports
PIA	Poststructuralist interview analysis

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Paper 2

Øydna, M. L., Nielsen, J. C., Saarinen, M., & Thue Bjørndal, C. (2026). “I would have studied while I showered”: A Foucauldian reading of how young student-athletes regulate their free time. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 0(0), 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902261426777>

Paper 3

Øydna, M. L., Saarinen, M., Nielsen, J. C., & Bjørndal, C. T. (2025). “You can definitely tell she’s truly committed”: Student-athletes’ discursive construction of athletic commitment during transitions in secondary school. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 7, 1-14.

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1 Introduction

If there is one ideal that seems unassailable in our current professionalisation of high-performance youth sport, it is the need for holistic talent development. This is hardly strange: which athlete doesn't wish to pursue a healthy, successful, and long-lasting career in sport or want to live life fully? Yet the starting point of my thesis is informed by doubts about this ideal. I do not doubt what the ideal *represents*. The cultural norms and values which have informed the last 20 years of talent development research are commendable. They have helped youth sports coaches broaden their perspectives beyond performance and steered high-performance youth sport in more ethically sound directions.

This thesis is informed by a concern for the emergence of problem-solving strategies that hold so-called holistic development as their target, yet fail to adequately account for the contextual and relational dimensions of talent development (Denison et al., 2017). I therefore wish to critically explore such strategies from a premise that all problem-solving strategies inherently create distinct connections between power, knowledge, and bodies. My focus in this work is on the relations created between different knowledges and truth claims through which young people come to recognise themselves as committed athletes, the strategies of regulation and the tactics of action which are made allowable by such knowledge, and the unintended consequences that this knowledge has on what young athletes can say, think, and feel.

The approach I have adopted is inspired by the writings of Michel Foucault. It is an attempt to explore athlete commitment (*satsingsatferd* in Norwegian) as discursively practiced, being both historically and contextually specific. My investigations are highly focused on this current period in which a broad range of youth sport stakeholders are loudly proclaiming their dedication to empowering young athletes and to helping them better manage their own health and development (Heiestad et al., 2025; OLT, 2021). Talent development programmes are subtly transforming into pedagogical spaces in which young athletes are to be equipped with scientifically grounded and contextually relevant knowledge. Their goal, in other words, is to enable young athletes to make 'good choices' for themselves.

All coaching knowledges and practices, as Avner et al. (2017) note, have their uses but also their dangers and problematic effects. When writing the three papers that form part of this thesis, I wanted to contribute to a nuanced understanding of ethical practice in holistic talent development. My aim, in other words, is to critically reflect on the knowledges and assumptions that inform these empowerment initiatives, and what specific competencies are

made (more or less) visible and intelligible as young athletes seek to administer themselves as committed athletes.

The growing emphasis on equipping young athletes with individualised coping strategies and self-management skills ought not to be taken lightly, particularly in a context where talent development and identification systems increasingly depend on advanced technology and monitoring tools that, in practice, often expand rather than reduce coaches' control over athletes (Monsees, 2025b; Taylor et al., 2017; Williams & Manley, 2016). Athlete-focused interventions that fail to address these underlying dynamics risk reinforcing the prevailing notion that performance or health-related issues stem from a personal shortcoming or character flaw in the athlete (Consterdine & Taylor, 2025; Denison & Winslade, 2006; Mills et al., 2020).

When behaviours are understood solely as expressions of individual intentionality, the broader discursive fields in which they are located can be obscured or even dismissed as irrelevant. For instance, if young athletes fail to follow advice or struggle to incorporate procedures into their routines, there is a tendency for coaches to see these deviations as the consequence of athletes' personal troubles, not as the result of social issues (Gould et al., 2020). This is problematic as the power imbalances and issues with informal talent categorisation and coach-athlete interactions in talent development programmes will remain unchallenged (Manley et al., 2016).

To explore how athlete commitment is made malleable in the name of holistic talent development, I have scrutinised the pedagogical practices directed at student-athletes in a lower secondary sports school in Norway, and the lives they lead as athletes. They are a group of young people who sustain a weekly training load that exceeds that of the 'normal' population. Researchers have categorised this group as vulnerable to high levels of physical and psychological strain because of the challenges they face when trying to balance the escalating demands of sports and education (Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2017; Saarinen et al., 2024). In many ways, they are the 'perfect target' for pedagogical preventative investments, especially as schools provide the necessary infrastructure for these interventions.

The term *dual career* is an umbrella term which is used in sports psychology research and is defined as "a career with two major foci on sport and studies or work" (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2014, p. 612). This concept, however, cannot be applied directly or comfortably within the context of Norwegian lower secondary schools. School pupils, by definition, are too young to be following careers. In this age range, few are involved even in high-performance sport. I use the term *dual career*, therefore, to describe the balance between

athlete development activities in relation to other activities, such as schoolwork or care of their health.

Research aims

This PhD thesis consists of empirical findings from the fieldwork which I conducted at a lower secondary sports school in Norway. The research project was guided by the following key research questions: *How is athlete commitment discursively practiced in a lower secondary sports school, and with what implications for student-athlete's self-governance?*

My research focuses on everyday engagements with training, schoolwork, nutrition, and recovery as practices through which young people come to know themselves and others as committed athletes. When these routine practices are read alongside truth claims about healthy, motivated, and performing athletic bodies, they can be understood as specific ways of *knowing* and *doing* athlete commitment. By asking how athlete commitment is discursively *practised*, it is possible to move beyond understanding commitment as the internal asset of an individual, or as an ideal which is forced upon young people by coaches and experts. Instead, this perspective enables me to examine athlete commitment as something which emerges *relationally* between coaches, athletes, and through the tools, spaces, and discourses in which they are engaged.

The overarching research questions posed above were broken down into more specific research questions related to each empirical paper:

- Paper 1** Through which discourses do school coaches construct the 'ideal' student-athlete? What is the disciplinary potential of the individual-oriented practices used by school coaches to regulate and enforce student-athlete adherence to these requisite norms?
- Paper 2** Through which forms of knowledge about balancing athlete development and education do student-athletes regulate their free time practices?
- Paper 3** How do student-athletes' discursive constructions of athletic commitment change over time and across educational transitions? What do these shifts reveal about the discursive possibilities for athletes to practise commitment in high-performance junior sport contexts?

The first study shed light on the calculated orchestration of school teaching activities. It explores school coaches' use of 'best practice' principles to teach young student-athletes the 'right' and 'effective' ways to sustain their long-term development and well-being. The second and third studies focus on the ways (and consequences) of how student-athletes come to know athlete commitment and themselves as committed athletes through these norms and truth claims.

Following the call of Denison et al. (2017) to interrogate the athlete empowerment movement in light of sports' disciplinary legacy, this thesis examines how truth claims about long-term development, about youth athletes' health, and about student-athletes' dual career gets talked about, understood, practiced and reinforced (and what doesn't) in a sports school programme. It keeps particular attention to their emotional and ethical consequences for young people. This thesis thereby opens up alternative understandings of why seemingly quite straightforward objectives (such as enabling student-athletes to make thoughtful, balanced choices which will enable them to prioritise their health and achievement of long-term goals), sometimes result instead in confusion, resistance, indignation, or even in defiance.

Talent development- and dual career scholarship increasingly acknowledges that attempts to successfully combine and coordinate sport with other aspects of life involves messy and complex processes (Stambulova et al., 2024). Sociological analyses of these processes in dual career literature, however, remain underdeveloped. This empirical research provides a novel contribution to the field by foregrounding, with greater critical sensitivity, the discursive field underpinning dual career development environments. It is these conditions that will have an inevitable impact on the ways young student-athletes combine sport and education while maintaining their position as a committed athlete. By acknowledging that athlete commitment is relationally produced through the intersection of knowledge, power, and practice, we (researchers and practitioners) are ethically bound to pay attention to how we shape not only athletes' lifestyle choices but also identities, dispositions, and moral orientations.

2 State of the art

In this chapter, I present research addressing key issues in talent development, with a particular focus on studies exploring the life of young athletes within formal talent development programmes. I also describe current trends in dual career research that strive to propose more sustainable and ethical approaches to talent development. Finally, I present socio-cultural research focused on the complexities of day-to-day life within Scandinavian dual career programmes.

Key challenges represented in talent development literature

Scholars from the social and medical sciences have argued that high-performance youth sports are increasingly mirroring the demands of senior elite sports (Bergeron et al., 2015; Matthews et al., 2024; Schubring et al., 2025). The heightened professionalisation and commercialisation of youth sport is leading to intensified focus on individualised player development, increases in the volume and frequency of competitions, strict requirements regarding training regimes, and often leaves insufficient time for rest and recovery (Gammelsæter et al., 2023; Hagum et al., 2022; Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2020; Nilsen, Fusche Moe, et al., 2024). The personal risks faced by youth athletes have been highlighted in multiple disciplines. These include injuries and energy-deficiency, and mental health risks, such as performance anxiety, eating disorders, and burnout (Bjørndal et al., 2021; McLellan et al., 2022; Moseid et al., 2018; Moseid et al., 2023; Mountjoy et al., 2023; Saarinen et al., 2025; Walton et al., 2024; Wilhelmsen, 2023). Moreover, high levels of athlete drop-out have been observed (Espedalen & Seippel, 2022). This raises broader concerns about the sustainability of contemporary talent development structures and procedures (Schubring et al., 2025).

Research shows that international talent development systems have inherent challenges. While selection processes create opportunities for some, they also place young athletes in vastly different developmental positions, each with its own vulnerabilities (Clarke et al., 2018; Wrang et al., 2023). Critical scholars have convincingly argued that young athletes who are selected into highly regulated developmental systems negotiate a setting marked by competition for attention and resources (Bjørndal, 2026; Brown, 2016, 2017; Hatteberg, 2018). Within football academies, players describe a daily life characterised by structured time schedules, continuous evaluation, and expectations to appear resilient and self-regulated (Gennings et al., 2025; Manley et al., 2016). They also describe challenges related to

unpredictable social support or emotional neglect, inauthentic friendships, and at times invasive forms of surveillance (Adams & Carr, 2019; Sothorn & O’Gorman, 2021).

Jones (2019) provides compelling examples to illustrate the ways in which surveillance in a football academy setting is ensured. These include, for example, the routine use of GPS surveillance and individualised training plans as part of athlete performance and health monitoring. Over time, as athletes grow accustomed to such forms of surveillance, they may comply with potentially unhealthy physical and psychological demands, or struggle with feelings of guilt and apathy when they fall short of the goals that are expected of them (Friedman et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2016).

Goffman-inspired research has further advanced this line of inquiry to by examining how athletes navigate complex social interactions within talent development settings. For example, Skilbred et al. (2024) argue that youth athletes perform their athletic identity in accordance with norms for training, recovery, and nutrition. Moreover, their analysis highlight that the athletes link performance to the need to showcase individuality, maintain alignment with the 24-hour athlete ideal, and ensure that the enjoyment of sports continues into the elite sports career. Similarly, Øydna and Bjørndal (2023) demonstrate how young female handball players conceal pain, appear to be highly motivated, display a growth mindset, and strive to excel their training volume to display themselves as promising prospects for elite coaches. Kilger and Jonsson (2017) analysis of performance appraisal interviews in talent selection camps further underline young athletes’ understanding of the importance of paying lip service to coach’s preferences in critical situations.

This literature underlines that standardised and structured pathways, couched in ideas of efficiency, competition, and practices like testing and selection, shape not only athletic skills but also identities and moral requirements. It shows that young athletes who are perceived as loyal, self-regulated, disciplined, and talented tend to be the ones who are valued and prioritised within these systems. Some empirical studies, however, demonstrate that young people also resist these norms by adopting alternative discourses to construct their athletic identities (McMahon & Penney, 2013; Ojala, 2020; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2020). Thus, while dominant pathways promote conformity to specific moral and performance standards, there is potential for agency, albeit restricted, among youth athletes who challenge and redefine these norms through alternative identity constructions (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Ronkainen et al., 2016).

In contrast, those who are not selected or who drop out early, face challenges that might be less visible but are often equally profound and structurally unjust. Formal and informal selection processes establish clear boundaries between those ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, with those placed on the outside frequently losing access to skilled coaches, quality facilities, structural support, and social recognition (Wrang, 2024). Wrang et al. (2023) show how boys as young as 10 years old are aware of social hierarchies, such as first and second teams. Their analysis demonstrates that the boys actively negotiated their alignment with social status attached to these team categories, shedding light on intended and unintended consequences of skill-based grouping at a young age. Common problems associated with exclusion and deselection include (but are not limited to) a loss of motivation, diminished self-confidence, and identity disruption (Brown & Potrac, 2009; Gorman & Blackwood, 2025).

In response to concerns about the healthiness and social sustainability of traditional talent identification and development systems, scholars have advanced more holistic, ethically oriented models of athlete development. Dual career research represents a key area in the literature where the integration of *both* talent development and personal development is well-established.

Athletes’ dual careers

In Norway, as in many European countries, young people around the age of 12 years must navigate significant changes as they move from primary school to lower secondary school. In addition to adjusting to new social environments, young people also face increasing academic demands. For those involved in sport, this is a time of significant transition as they also transition from children’s sport and become involved in more competitive activities. It is marked by a shift away from play and inclusivity, and towards heightened training intensity, competition and responsibility, and the introduction of talent development practices (Jørgensen et al., 2024; Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2020). Together, these transitions create a particularly demanding period for young people, who must balance the competing pressures of education and sport (Kuokkanen et al., 2024; Saarinen et al., 2025).

Within the broader sports scholarship, dual careers have been predominantly examined through the lens of sport psychology. Researchers in this area have generally adopted two complementary axes of inquiry, namely career development and career transitions (Stambulova et al., 2021). The holistic lifespan perspective (Wylleman et al., 2013) is a central theoretical framework in this field of inquiry. It illustrates that across the athletic life span, student-athletes are influenced by and required to balance a range of different life

domains, spanning psychological, psychosocial, academic/vocational, and financial dimensions.

In their review, Stambulova and Wylleman (2019) contend that student-athletes have to not only deal with demands in sport, studies, social, and private life, but also with systemic barriers and external factors that interfere with successful adjustments. Therefore, the support network around student-athletes is typically advocated to initiate problem-solving strategies based on a *whole person* philosophy (Storm et al., 2021). This includes to recognise athletes first and foremost as people and supporting them in developing the skills and competencies necessary to achieve excellence, not only in sport but in all aspects of their life (Henriksen et al., 2024).

Applied sport psychology and medicine take on different intervention approaches to help student-athletes develop as healthy, capable, and resilient individuals. One such approach is age-adjusted life skills training programmes which, according to Carrière et al. (2024), can help student-athletes to learn to cope with adversity and challenges. Researchers have emphasised that for young athletes to succeed in both sport and school, and to achieve a ‘balanced’ dual career path (Stambulova et al., 2015), they must develop the ‘right’ skills (Jonker et al., 2010) and employ the ‘right’ strategies (Aquilina, 2013; Perez-Rivases et al., 2020).

The skills taught in these training programmes typically include goal setting, concentration, healthy eating and training habits, physical and mental recovery, time management, and problem-solving (e.g., Iversen et al., 2022). This form of workshop-based support is based on the understanding that life skills must be explicitly taught. However, empirical findings from a recent study by Poole et al. (2025) suggest that student-athletes may benefit just as much from informal learning experiences as from structured teaching materials. This implies that it is important to design environments that offer a diverse range of learning opportunities.

Leading scholars on holistic talent development in sport has stressed the importance of bridging individual developmental approaches with ecological approaches to talent development (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2023; Stambulova & Henriksen, 2025). The Holistic Ecological Approach (HEA; Henriksen et al., 2010) for example, has been used to shift the attention from the individual student-athlete to the environment in which student-athletes are embedded. When applying this framework, researchers examine the structures, features, and processes within dual career development environments, like sports schools, to understand

how they either support or hinder student-athletes' performance development, their mental health, and their well-being (Henriksen et al., 2020).

The holistic ecological approach is currently being used to build an empirical evidence base that identifies the key functional and dysfunctional environmental features which shape different stages of talent- and dual career development (Hauser et al., 2024; Morris et al., 2021; Storm et al., 2021). These include *outcomes* (e.g., injury prevention, life skills, athletic or academic performance) and dual career *antecedents* (e.g., optimal environments, a whole person approach, competent and flexible support providers, and effective educational programmes). Practical advice informed by such knowledge focuses on integrating efforts across the *whole* environment in which student-athletes are located, building strong and coherent organisational cultures, and providing support for athlete autonomy (Hauser et al., 2024).

This next step in the literature review is here presented in the form of a critical discussion; a discussion that does not aim to place holistic ecological approaches in a binary opposition to poststructural theorising in ways that allows no movement or interaction between them. Rather, it aims to deepen contextual sensitivity by highlighting studies that interrogate how 'truths' about holistic athlete development in dual career programmes travel across settings and power relations.

The cultural and relational practices of dual career development

A strand of dual career scholars has critiqued current literature for insufficiently addressing the dynamic discourses and evolving trends within the sporting world. For the most part, this critique highlights that culture tends to be narrowly reduced to static categories such as values, norms, and artefacts, thereby neglecting the complex, fluid, and relational nature of cultural contexts that shape student-athletes' experiences (Darpatova-Hruzewicz & Ryba, 2025; Feddersen et al., 2021). This is problematic because discontinuities in the environment and complexities of day-to-day cultural life, as experienced by coaches, managers, and athletes with marginalised identities or lower status and authority still tend to be overlooked (an exception is Book, 2022).

Several previous studies highlight that gendered discourses shape sporting and educational policies and practices, and athletes often face gendered relations of power within sporting cultures (Avner, Jones, & Brown, 2025; Dowling, 2010; Ekengren et al., 2020; Grahn, 2018; Kavoura et al., 2018; Persson, 2022). Feminist scholars who have explored dual career pathways have thus drawn close attention to the power imbalances existing within dual career

programmes. In their study of the identity tensions experienced by young female student-athletes, for example, Kavoura and Ryba (2020) argue that dual career policies are intertwined with neoliberal values that promote individual responsibility. They contend that this individualised focus fails to recognise or address wider, gendered cultural barriers, even though these complicate the experiences and opportunities available to female athletes. Importantly, as Ronkainen et al. (2021) contend, female student-athletes must continuously and actively negotiate the definition of success across various aspects of life. In doing so, they assume a personal responsibility for creating a sense of balance and harmony in their lives. These values, as Burlot et al. (2018) and Mateu et al. (2024) contend, can shape student-athletes' experience of their time as squeezed, constrained, and as always lacking.

Ryba et al. (2021) have explored how gendered discourses influence the construction of dual career pathways and the unequal opportunities facing male and female student-athletes who are attempting to pursue dual career development. They observed that Finnish male athletes were more inclined than female athletes to invest solely in professional athletic careers. They observed, too, that female athletes were more likely to feed into a 'superwoman' ideal, and to strive for dual career excellence in sporting *and* academic fields, as a way of gaining recognition and appreciation. Moreover, female student-athletes must also navigate the stereotypical views and assumptions held by coaches. Saarinen et al. (2023) note, for instance, that Finnish cross-country ski coaches often reinforce gender hierarchies when applying strategies that draw on stereotypes related to female athletes' 'natural' physical inferiority, positioning male biology as the desired norm.

Previous studies also suggest that current sport school and academy systems reproduce dual career pathways that are skewed in favour of sport talent development. For example, Nikander et al. (2022) highlight the challenges faced by sports academies in fully integrating dual career practices, and note the underlying assumption in such contexts that sport *should* be the central priority in athletes' lives. Similarly, Belling (2025) concludes that although established sports school programmes might profess to support holistic talent development, players structure their dual career trajectories in accordance with the needs, for example, of a football club rather than themselves. The author also made the compelling argument that such formalised solutions may even be an obstacle for talented athletes who wish to pursue a different educational direction. For this reason, it could even be argued that the promotion of holistic athlete development by sport organisations is primarily a branding strategy to attract talented athletes (Nilsen, Glenn, et al., 2024; Olesen & Gregersen, 2025; Saarinen et al., 2020; Thomsen & Nørgaard, 2020).

In a recent published book chapter, Darpatova-Hruzewicz and Ryba (2025) argue that extant approaches to investigating dual careers are inherently reductionist on three accounts. First, the authors argue that essentialist approaches fail to fully account for how spatial, temporal, and material elements of the student-athlete's environment (e.g., training schedules, access to facilities) influence dual career practices and, conversely, how cultural practices contribute to the transformation and construction of context and reality. Second, they contend that current approaches disregard how environments operate as complex adaptive systems with emergent qualities, which means that current models tend to overlook unpredictable outcomes of person-environment interactions. Third, the authors critique the models for failing to account for dynamic relationships across broader contexts, such as between knowledge systems or over time.

Against this backdrop, emerging Danish research applying relational and performative social theories to talent- and dual career development hold great value. Olesen et al. (2020) provide a compelling example of talent as something which emerges relationally between coaches, athletes, medical knowledge, the national team system, and cultural values such as hard work and discipline. Talent, then, is not a fixed category one possesses, but a practice that must be continuously performed to maintain the status of being a potential elite athlete. In this perspective, the coach is positioned as a gatekeeper rather than a neutral expert (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2021). It is they who can distribute opportunities to athletes and will decide which athletes will be permitted access to resources, given patience to improve skills, recognition for efforts, and who are allowed to fail without negative consequences. In doing so, coaches are able to reinforce specific notions of what constitutes talent and what behaviours are more or less acceptable (see also Monsees, 2025a).

In their study of dual career environments in Denmark, Olesen and Gregersen (2022) compared two talent development programmes for young footballers. They incorporated two sports classes at the lower secondary level and two football academies at the upper secondary level in their ethnographic study. The analysis they undertook showed that both programmes left their student-athletes with limited agency, yet requiring different competencies and problem-solving solutions from them. In the sports classes, education took precedence and the student-athletes had to assume responsibility to develop their potential across both sporting *and* education domains. The opposite was true for those in football academies, where the school, not the football club, was expected to be flexible so that the student-athletes could follow both tracks for development. These student-athletes were subtly encouraged to postpone the prioritisation of their education until after their professional

football careers had ended. The authors conclude that neither programme is inherently better as both, in different ways, place young student-athletes in vulnerable positions.

Skrubbeltrang et al. (2016) provide an explanatory account of how socialisation and the hidden curriculum within dual career practices contribute towards the formation of student-athlete identities. Drawing on an ethnography within Danish lower secondary sports classes, the authors found that student-athletes, despite type of sport or gender, are expected to follow an ambitious developmental track and to focus on excelling in sports *and* academic work. They argue that the broader goal of developing the ‘whole person’ is, in practice, often constrained by the expectation that student-athletes must focus exclusively on the domains of education and sport. Nielsen et al. (2022) and Skrubbeltrang et al. (2020) further highlight the influential aspect of the broader education system and students’ social background in shaping cooperations between school and high-performance youth sport, as well as influencing the regulation of student-athletes’ behaviours within these sports classes.

Taken together, this literature suggests an important gap. While dual career and talent development research has increasingly sought more ethical, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches, much of it still treats commitment, balance, and responsibility as properties that individuals possess or should develop. At the same time, sports research engaged with poststructural theorisation, particularly that of Foucault, has shown how coaching practices may discipline bodies and shape subjectivities have paid less attention to how athlete commitment is discursively practiced within lower secondary sports schools as a dual career environment. This thesis addresses that gap by examining how commitment is produced through the intersections of educational practice, health knowledge, institutional arrangements, and student-athletes’ self-governing practices. The next chapter outline the institutional arrangements, actors, dilemmas, and knowledge infrastructures that shape lower secondary sports schools in Norway.

3 The talent development landscape in Norway

Norway is a global leader in sports participation: 92% of children aged from 0 to 12 years participate in organised sports, and participation rates among youths are high compared to other countries (Bakken & Strandbu, 2023). In international sporting competitions, the number of medals awarded, when measured per capita, is among the highest in the world. The country's achievements are rooted in a model in which talent development is integrated into a membership-based, volunteer-driven structure (Ibsen & Seippel, 2010).

In this section, I describe the institutional arrangements which Norwegian sports schools are currently part of. This is done as a way of understanding how these alignments (re)produce and maintain status quo, and how they influence various actors in their efforts to support the holistic development of young athletes. I outline the networked relations between different organisational actors and highlight different dilemmas that typically arise within this arrangement. I also describe the role of key knowledge brokers which are relevant to understanding how lower secondary sports schools can design their sports programme.

Institutional arrangements in Norwegian talent development

In Norway, talent identification and development are not embedded within a centralised, hierarchical elite sport system. The system can be characterised as a heterarchical and decentralised network of autonomous actors; each actor wields influence, but no single actor holds instructional authority over others (Andersen et al., 2015). Figure 1 shows the various actors involved in shaping a young student-athlete's dual career development environment in Norway.

Successful athlete development within this structure depends not only on the significance of each individual actor but on how well each participant complements the other actors involved. When the system is coordinated effectively it can provide athletes with valuable flexibility and opportunities. Athletes, for example, can take part in several development initiatives across different actors, and this enables them to draw inspiration from different coaches, peers, and practices within various settings. However, as Bjørndal et al. (2017) have observed, this is a structure which also carries certain risks for athletes, because coordination, communication, and the distribution of responsibilities can easily become fragmented.

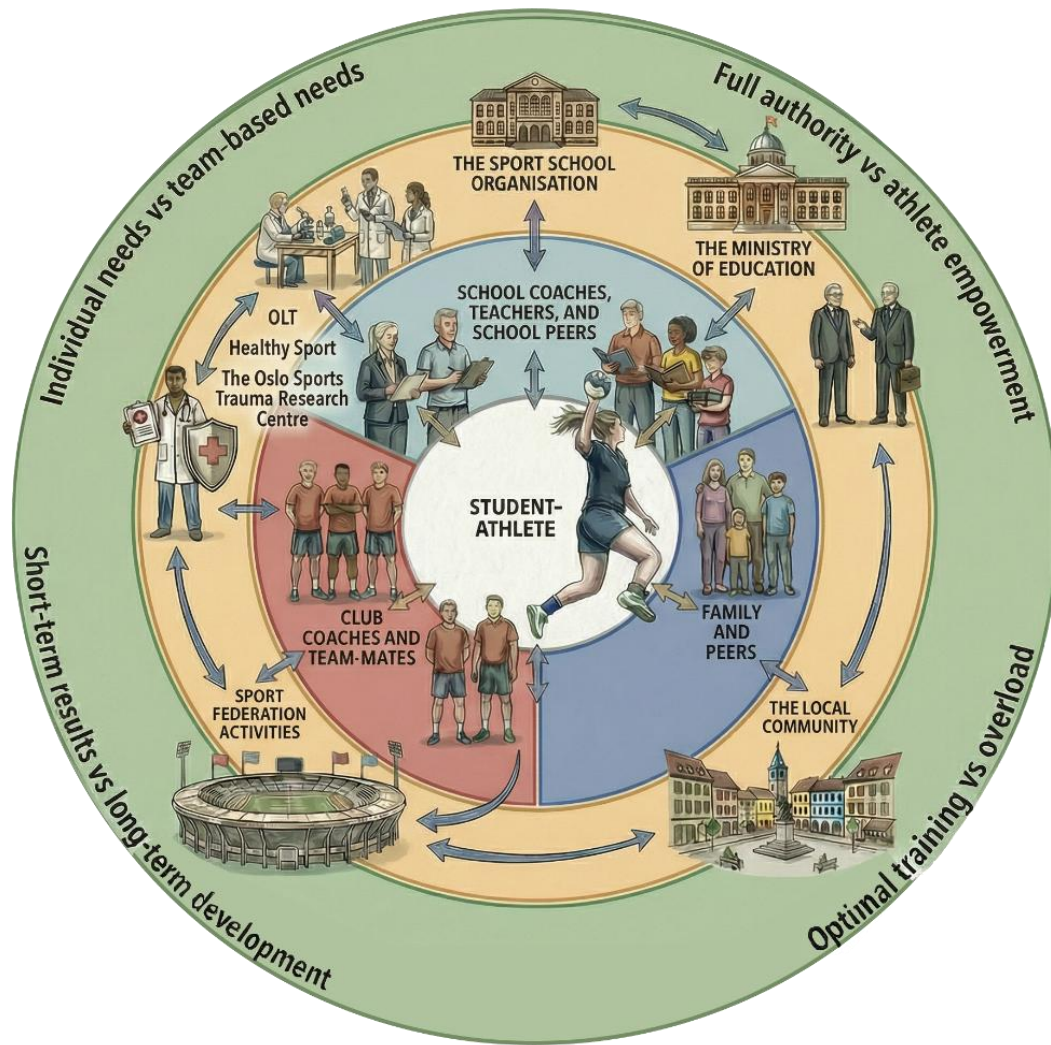


Figure 1: An illustration of a descriptive Norwegian Youth Dual Career Development Environment. Note. The figure is adapted from Henriksen and colleagues' (2020) The Dual Career Development Environment (DCDE) working model.

Organisational actors

As Figure 1 illustrates, dual career development environments are typically divided into three domains, namely private life, sport, and school, each operating at micro (direct) and macro (indirect) levels to reflect the varying influence of different actors on student-athletes' daily experiences (Henriksen et al., 2020). Given that my fieldwork is conducted in a lower secondary sports school, the majority of the focus here is on the school domain.

Family and friends play a crucial, supportive role in athlete development. For younger student-athletes, families provide important practical and emotional support, such as transportation, preparing nutritious meals, and fulfilling other essential needs (Eriksen et al., 2024; Stefansen & Strandbu, 2024). Additionally, families are instrumental in facilitating student-athletes' dual career engagement because they help them to balance athletic and

academic pursuits (Saarinen et al., 2025). Even factors such as the location of a family home (in an urban or rural area, for example) may impact on the experience of athletes by determining whether they will have access to particular sporting resources, such as indoor-training facilities during the winter season (Eriksen & Stefansen, 2022). The school participating in this project is located in a resource-rich area. It is therefore likely that many of the student-athletes come from relatively high socioeconomic backgrounds.

Sports clubs and sports federations also operate as key organisational actors which influence athlete development processes. The ways in which these actors affect participating athletes will depend on the particular organisational structures and relations within sporting domains. In team sports, a within-club team may serve as the basic development unit for an athlete's development. However, each athlete is likely to be located within multiple team contexts (Bjørndal et al., 2015), and athletes will be further affected by the participants within micro-environments, such as club coaches and sport peers.

Most mass sporting activities in Norway are organised within volunteer-based sports clubs, and are supported further by government funding and efforts to ensure public access to facilities (Andersen et al., 2015). Accordingly, youth coaches at the club level are mostly staffed by volunteers and/or parent-coaches who receive limited compensation (Chroni et al., 2018). However, increasing demands are being placed on sport organisations and coaches to meet specific competency requirements.

The adoption of certification systems, for instance, and the growing emphasis on fostering level-adjusted, individual-centred opportunities are changes that are leading to a gradual professionalisation within such settings. More clubs are now hiring paid coaches to meet these evolving demands (Skille et al., 2024). Such changes are likely to affect athlete talent development in important ways. This is because, as researchers have argued, expectations (re)shape the ways young people create meaning about their sport, how coaches and athletes interact, the ways talented athletes are selected and monitored, and how parents are expected to be involved (Belling et al., 2023; Stefansen & Strandbu, 2024; Svensson & Sörilin, 2019).

At the macro-level in Norway, all sports federations are organised under the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF). The policy of this umbrella organisation is shaped by a dominant discourse of 'sport for all' and is underpinned by central governing values of inclusion and equal participation opportunities for all (Dowling, 2024). Each specialised sport federation oversees the organisation of age-specific

regional and national team activities, and selected athletes interact with regional or national talent development coaches.

In the school domain, sports school programmes provide additional resources to facilitate individualised athlete development processes, and aim to help young people to balance their athletic and academic pursuits (Bjørndal & Gjesdal, 2020; Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2017). Norway has a long-standing tradition of offering sports school programmes, including elite sport and sports-friendly tracks¹ at the upper secondary level (Morris et al., 2021).

Similar opportunities have also been recently extended into lower secondary schools and are provided by private school organisations. These extensions must be understood within the context of the political shift brought about by the election of a right-wing government in 2013, which prioritised the creation of an education system designed to ensure students and their parents their liberal right to freely choose their school. Currently, there are over 20 lower secondary sports schools across the country, enrolling a total of more than 4,000 students aged 12-16 (grades 8-10).

To enrol in a sports programme at a lower secondary school level, youths must first pass an entrance exam which is designed to identify those who have the greatest sporting potential. These entrance exams focus on young people's athletic abilities, their developmental potential, and their social and teamwork skills. It should be noted that these exams are often seen as being in conflict with the foundational principles of Norwegian youth sport because they run counter to efforts to delay talent identification. In my experience (as a researcher doing fieldwork in a lower secondary sports school), I have observed that school representatives acknowledge the inherent challenges and implications of this form of selection strategy. The Ministry of Education in Norway, however, has yet to permit such schools to adopt alternative selection methods, such as conducting interviews with prospective students and their guardians.

In Norway, there is a consensus that exposing student-athletes at a lower secondary level to a *variety* of sport and training activities, rather than allowing them to *only* specialise in a single sport at school, is an approach which provides a strong developmental foundation for a future elite sport career. At most schools, student-athletes take part in up to five weekly morning training sessions. These are either sport-specific activities (such as football and golf) or activities which are designed to developing general physical capacities (such as strength

¹ These sports-friendly programmes consist of a three-year general and flexible academic education. This includes five hours of sport training per week during school hours. In contrast, the elite programmes are characterised by clear, formal arrangements with clubs and sporting federations. They are strategically located in cities, close to key sports clubs, and include daily school training sessions.

training and conditioning). The training sessions are governed by separate curricula and complement the training and the competitions which are offered across other settings in which the student-athletes participate, such as clubs, regional talent development initiatives, and national team activities. During training sessions and related academic assignments, school coaches assess whether the competencies of the student-athletes meet the outlined learning objectives.

Within the school domain, the micro-environments of student-athletes are shaped by the presence and practices of their teachers, school coaches, and schoolmates. In more formalised partnerships between schools and clubs, student-athletes will often work with the same coaches in both settings. Coaches at sports schools are professionals, although at several elite sports programmes in Norway, teaching qualifications are not required, and the educational training of the coaches varies. Sports schools will therefore typically market their programmes by promoting the expertise of their coaches. This includes highlighting their relevant specialist knowledge in coaching this age group, and the coaches' ability to find flexible solutions to the individual development challenges faced by talented athletes.

These schools offer more interest-driven and diversified educational experiences which have been shown to motivate student-athletes to enrol in them (Gjesdal et al., 2025). However, as Karlsson et al. (2023) notes, the promotion of individualism and professional expertise at such schools reinforces the implicit assumption that voluntary sport clubs are unable to provide the same level of quality that commercial businesses provide in sports training and athletic development.

At the macro level in the school domain, the Ministry of Education plays a central role in subsidising private sports schools, and these schools rely on tuition fees and sponsorship revenues for additional financial support². Importantly, the schools are organised as non-commercial, non-profit organisations. This means that all the financial resources they receive benefit students directly and must be used to facilitate the academic and sport education of each student (Sandbakk et al., 2023).

In Norway, the Ministry of Education regulates teaching practices through educational policy and reforms that are increasingly influenced by new managerialist ideas (Hovdenak & Heldal, 2022; Møller & Skedsmo, 2013). This mirrors similar neoliberal developments in other Western countries (Jones & Ball, 2023; Rasmussen et al., 2014). Thanks to governmental support for the promotion of instrumental competencies suited to the future

² Private sports schools at the lower secondary and upper secondary level in Norway receive 85% of their funding from the Ministry of Education. The remaining 15% comes from tuition fees

knowledge economy, teachers are expected to prioritise the use of testing, standardisation, and individual qualifications (Ball & Olmedo, 2023; Skarpenes, 2021). Students are also encouraged to take control of themselves, their learning, and their future, and strive towards becoming autonomous, self-responsible, enterprising, and flexible (e.g., Brunila & Siivonen, 2016; Hilt et al., 2019).

Dilemmas challenging athlete development processes

The coexistence of various interests and influences in the institutional arrangements and interrelationships connected to athlete development can create dilemmas, both for individuals and organisational actors. This is because the diversity of objectives can lead to conflict. The tension between prioritising short-term athlete performance versus long-term athlete development, for example, is one notable source of potential struggle (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2017). While sports schools are positioned as educational spaces in which athletes are taught to prioritise their long-term development, the reality is that an athlete's talent, in the short-term, is often read and evaluated, through their performance in competitions. This occurs despite concerns about the risks associated with focusing on issues of performance too early in an athlete's career (Matthews et al., 2024). At the same time, sports clubs rely on short-term results for securing access to the highest levels of competition and maintaining their reputation as high-quality environments for athlete development. Without such access, it can be argued, those athletes who are most talented may gravitate towards other clubs that offer better opportunities for advancement to the elite level.

The influence of multiple agencies and organisations also creates tensions related to the independence of sport schools. Kårhus (2019) notes, for example, that such schools are responsible for educating young athletes for a lifelong engagement with sport, but that stressors exist related to whether sports schools should function as an extension of local clubs or operate independently. Many schools prioritise (and benefit from) collaboration with local clubs in specific sports (Sæther et al., 2022), and these relationships are thus complex. The degree of organisational integration thus ultimately depends on the strategic decisions made by each individual school and club (Nielsen et al., 2022).

Student-athletes face additional dilemmas. These include high workloads and injury risk versus recovery; the progressive intensification of training and competition versus growth, maturation, and limited physical tolerance; and time pressures associated with balancing schoolwork and leisure (Kristiansen & Stensrud, 2017, 2020; Stambulova et al., 2015). Such problems cannot be solved or resolved definitively: there will always be elements of

uncertainty related to *what* everyone involved is trying to do, *why* they are trying to do it, and *whether* they can achieve it (Jones & Wallace, 2005; Ronglan, 2016). These dilemmas must therefore be continuously balanced by the different organisational actors involved (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2017).

Knowledge brokers

Knowledge brokers are individuals or organisations which facilitate connections between sources of knowledge (usually science and research) and the users of such knowledge (Macdonald, 2015). Their role as intermediaries involves building networks and offering access to knowledge resources to organisations within a network. This ‘scientification’ of knowledge is an ‘obligatory passage point’ for athletes and coaches in the context of talent development (Hjelseth & Telseth, 2023; Svensson & Sörlin, 2019). To this end, centres of competence such as *Olympiatoppen* (OLT), *Healthy Sport*³, and *the Oslo Sports Trauma Research Centre*⁴ in Norway operate as knowledge brokers in the heterogeneous networks of lower secondary sports schools.

OLT has been assigned the operational responsibility of ensuring the quality of sports programmes that are offered at private lower and upper secondary schools on behalf of the Norwegian Ministry of Education. This is undertaken via meetings, observations of practice, and the sharing of documentation about the practices of schools (Sandbakk et al., 2023). In recent years, a key area of development for sports schools, in collaboration with OLT and specialised sport federations, has been the creation of long-term development pathways tailored to each sport.

Rooted in the principles of the *Long-Term Athlete Development Framework* (Balyi et al., 2013), which is a prescriptive model informed primarily by physiological knowledge on adaptation to training, OLT has articulated a philosophy of talent development. The model recognises sensitive developmental periods or ‘windows of opportunity’ during which specific physical capacities can be optimally developed, advocating for individualised progression approaches. Despite its popularity among coach education initiatives (Avner et al., 2017), this model has been sharply criticised as being one-dimensional, lacking an empirical foundation, and one which is difficult for coaches to adapt to the individual needs of athletes (Dowling et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2011; Lang & Light, 2010).

³ *Sunn Idrett* in Norwegian

⁴ *Oslo Senter For Idrettsskadeforskning* in Norwegian

The philosophy document prepared by OLT (2021) refers to a developmental ladder of age, which is divided into seven stages, ranging from birth to 23 years. The age range of Stages Four and Five are of particular relevance to thesis. Stage Four, covering the ages of 12-14 years, focuses on building the skills needed for systematic training which has long-term developmental goals. Stage Five, covering the ages 15-17 years, focuses on learning how to prepare for, execute, and evaluate competitions. OLT encourages specialised sport federations to list pedagogical recommendations for key training priorities at each phase of the seven-stage development cycle.

Although this stage-based model presents the pathway to high-performance success in a linear fashion, the philosophy document stresses that early specialisation should be avoided. Diversified support and the holistic development of athletes are seen as essential priorities. Additionally, dual career options, health, and well-being are key focus points of the OLT document. The OLT philosophy document also draws on psychological knowledge about motivation, and situates coaches as key resources in the construction of training environments to facilitate values of individual improvement, mastery, and effort.

Finally, the philosophy document touches upon an end goal: athletes must develop a strong sense of ownership over their own development. To this end, OLT encourages coaches to involve young athletes in training processes by delegating responsibility for aspects of their training to athletes. This principle is one of ten criteria identified by OLT for governing and evaluating athlete development processes in sports school programmes (Sandbakk et al., 2023).

Other key knowledge brokers in the field of athlete development in Norway include Healthy Sport and the Oslo Sports Trauma Research Centre. Both collaborate with sports schools to enhance the competence of teachers, coaches, and parents. The engagement of Healthy Sport, for example, is a priority within NIF for disseminating knowledge about sports nutrition and promoting sports environments that foster positive attitudes and values related to food, the athletic body, health, and performance. Most of Healthy Sport's efforts are preventative in nature, and the competence centre operates in collaboration both with national sports federations in Norway and through direct engagement with sports clubs, parents, and sports schools (Sunn Idrett, n.d.).

Other forms of support include the educational tool *Prep to be Pro* which has been designed by the Oslo Sports Trauma Research Centre in collaboration with schools, OLT, and Healthy Sport. This educational programme is grounded in the latest curricula, incorporates relevant competence and learning objectives, and is designed to be applicable

across all sports. It is a tool which is also designed to empower young people to make good choices for themselves. This is done by supporting them to adopt a long-term approach to their athletic pursuits while simultaneously managing their everyday, present lives (Heiestad et al., 2025). *Prep to be Pro* is an aid which helps coaches and teachers to deliver lessons on key and relevant topics which are thought as necessary to facilitate holistic development, promote good health, and to enhance the resilience of student-athletes. This tool is currently being implemented in a number of lower secondary and upper secondary sports schools across Norway. At the lower secondary level, student-athletes are offered specific knowledge about growth and maturation, nutrition, performance- and injury preventative training, and training planning.

From a Foucauldian research perspective, these collaborations provide a context in which scientific knowledge is transformed from academic forums into educational practices. As such, they do more than simply enable the transmission of content. This integrative networking, I would argue, connects diverse scientific disciplines and transforms how practitioners interpret information about young athletes, how they decide on adopting and implementing new approaches, and how they seek to solve the contextual problems they are confronted with.

Crucially, as such knowledge brokers interact and build upon each other's work across disciplines, certain forms of knowledge in the world of athlete development (the natural sciences, for example) are ascribed greater authority in the government of student-athletes (Campbell et al., 2023). In turn, this makes particular practices (more or less) possible and grants only particular people and institutions the authority to speak on matters of athlete development. The next chapter provides a detailed description of how I have utilised Foucault's analytical framework in this research.

4 Theoretical framework

In this chapter, I introduce some of the key theoretical themes found in Foucault's work and my way of understanding and using his work on technologies of power, knowledge, and the self. I also present the concept of *discourse*, which is central to Foucault's broader methodological approaches. Although I will be elaborating on discourse separately, it is critical to my theorising of self-formation, and a brief clarification is therefore warranted. In this thesis, discourse refers to a historically contingent practice that governs what can be said, done, or thought within a given domain. Before delving into Foucault, I outline some broader principles that unite poststructuralist theory.

Key tenets of poststructural theorising

Poststructuralism denotes a philosophical movement encompassing a diverse array of theoretical positions (e.g., Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida; see Williams, 2005). What unite these thinkers is their shared opposition to universal metanarratives and foundational assumptions about science. More specifically, poststructuralist theory rejects society's meta-narratives of a world unified through universally generalisable, value-neutral theories that claim to represent a true reality (Williams, 2005). Any concepts used by researchers are never neutral tools but are inherently active in narrating and constructing the world in specific ways, whether researchers consciously recognise this or not (Avner, Jones, & Denison, 2025).

Poststructuralist thinkers, and Foucault more than others, were also profoundly critical of the phenomenology theory of the subject and Kant's inquiry into human reason (Foucault, 1983/2020, 2020b). He challenged, among other things, the belief in the rational, autonomous subject by piecing back together the historical conditions that made it possible for individuals to speak a truth about themselves – as a mad person or a prisoner. On this view, there is no inner core, or unchanging 'true self' waiting to be uncovered. Instead, subjects are constituted through discourse but only in a certain, quite particular regime of truth (Foucault, 1998/2020).

Identities are thus, as Weedon (1997) suggests, theorised as fluid and multidimensional, and as something that people continuously practice through pervasive and mundane acts, rather than have. This implies that individuals may find themselves performing shifting or even conflicting identities, each serving a different purpose, according to the discursive resources that are available to them and the cultural context in which they are displaying their

selves (Markula, 2014; Weedon, 1997). In this research project, I use the term *identities* interchangeably with *identity constructions* and *identity positions*. I use *identity management* more specifically to highlight the deliberate display of culturally valued behaviours or attitudes by student-athletes.

Closely linked to the discursive understanding of identity are the concepts of *subject position* and *subjectivity*. Subject positions, as Weedon (1997) explains, can be understood as locations in discourse, consisted of specific rights and limitations. When an individual assumes a specific subject position, they begin to know themselves and the world around them through that position. As certain discourses, which inhere in social institutions and practices, gain dominance over others, specific subject positions and subjectivities become more privileged while others remain in the margins (Markula, 2014; Weedon, 1997).

St. Pierre (2000) explains poststructuralism 's double move in the construction of subjectivity as follows: “a subject that exhibits agency as it constructs itself by taking up available discourses and cultural practices and a subject that, at the same time, is subjected, forced into subjectivity by those same discourses and practices” (p.502). Subjectivity, then, is theorised as precarious, contradictory and in process, reconstituted each time we use discursive practices. Individuals actively take up or resist certain subject positions that are already available in discourse, but subject positions can also be ascribed to individual, constraining their possibilities to certain expectations as to how to feel, think and act (Foucault, 2020a; Rabinow, 1984/2020).

Clustered tightly around the problem of the subject is the notion of power as fluid, relational, and closely connected to the production of knowledge. In brief (since I return to Foucault's notion of power later), whereas critical theory seeks to disrupt oppressive societal structures through a dualistic understanding of power, poststructuralist theorising instead examines the criteria by which claims to knowledge are legitimised, and point out the limits to this knowledge (Avner, Jones, & Denison, 2025; Weedon, 1997). The analytical task in poststructural research is thus to tease out the relationship between knowledge, power, and self-formation.

It is important to note at the outset that Foucault's approach is not developed as one, fully thought-out theory. It offers instead an invitation to critically engage with concepts and ideas. Utilising theory as a tool, rather than viewing it as a self-contained conceptual system, has proven to be a productive approach in poststructuralist research. As Reckwitz (2023) argues, a more active engagement provides an heuristic richness when analysing concrete situations. It is a more active, “*doing theory*” approach, as he suggests, which has “the character of an

experiment in which concepts and theoretical connections are tested and redefined in dialogue with the objects in question” (p. 24). I contend that this approach is especially appropriate to the writings of Foucault who continually expanded his repertoire of conceptualisations, and created a rather loosely connected and increasingly intricate analytical framework.

Technologies of power, knowledge, and the self

Foucault was consistently preoccupied with how human beings are made subjects and deeply concerned with how human lives are administered and organised (Foucault, 1982a).

Foucault’s oeuvre is typically divided into three phases, each with distinct areas of interest, namely: discursive formations, disciplinary mechanisms and technologies of domination, and governmentality (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983). In short, inquiries into discursive formations involve connecting groups of statements and theories to knowledge or sciences to understand what set of choices is provided and normalised by discourse (see, for example, Mills & Bjørndal, 2025).

A great strand of Foucauldian-inspired research in sports coaching literature includes inquiries into technologies of domination, and explorations of how athletes’ bodies are made docile through disciplinary techniques and instruments. Disciplinary techniques include the spatial and temporal control of movement, the organisation of genesis (e.g., structured training plans), and the composition of forces (e.g., building effective team cohesion). The success of these techniques also derives from the use of three disciplinary instruments – hierarchical observation, normalising judgment, and the examination (Foucault, 1999). Through the deconstruction of dominant knowledge and disciplinary power, researchers have attempted to uncover the negative impacts of coaching practices on athletes’ performance and well-being (e.g., Barker-Ruchti & Tinning, 2010; Friedman et al., 2022; Johns & Johns, 2000; Jones et al., 2016; Mills & Denison, 2018).

In his later writings, Foucault continued to expand on the research theme power/knowledge under the name governmentality. Power/knowledge, as Avner, Jones and Brown (2025) rightly argue, is a concept that Foucauldian scholars use to draw attention to power and knowledge’s relational ontology and inseparability. As Foucault (1980) observed: “we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth” (p. 93). Importantly, Foucault understood power not as a negative force but as a productive and relational one. He argues that he was less concerned with defining what power *is* and more focused on “the set of mechanisms and

procedures that have the role or function and theme, even when they are unsuccessful, of securing power” (Foucault, 2007, p. 2).

Let me provide an example: when a young footballer is observed by her coaches, measured in terms of scientific truths about the healthy, performing body, and organised through a selection system based on conformity to whatever norms are established, she becomes knowable as with/without talent, and consequently, is confronted with ways to act on her body to develop further. When the football player is subjected to this knowledge, she gets tied to specific ways of thinking about herself and others. In this process of subjectification, the footballer submits to the prescribed development practices, and by doing so, she can become a qualified actor who pursues interests with her own ‘subjective perspective’ in these power/knowledge relations. Moreover, in demonstrating talent through interactions with coaches, teammates, winning competitions, practice sessions, exercise equipment, training plans, and other related activities, the footballer can experience a range of emotions, including pleasure or pride, as well as fatigue or anxiety – that is, her subjectivity.

Governmentality, coined by Foucault (1991), conjoins the technologies of power, knowledge, and self-governance. It crystallises that a set of rationalities and techniques for governing in modern society operate at the intersection of population regulation and the disciplining of the body. The health of a state, as an example, rests, in part, on the discipline of individuals to maintain active lifestyles and avoid an obese body. Foucault’s thesis was that, in Western societies at least, political authorities also managed the population towards desired objectives under the support of biopolitical power – the mechanisms and strategies which target the vital processes of human existence and the well-being of the population as a whole (Markula & Pringle, 2006; Senellart, 2007). In the politics of our present, governance occurs at a distance but in ways in which people perceive their own interests as being served in the best way possible (Han, 2017). Hence, to understand power in its materiality, its day-to-day operation, we must go to the level of the micro-practices, the technologies of knowledge, in which our practices are formed (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983).

The sciences and their knowledge production, as Rose (2001) provides a compelling example to, are central systems for authorities to regulate, control, promote, nurture and protect life of the population. These activities are also governed by certain ‘regimes of truth’ which operate within the surrounding networks of power relations, as Rabinow and Rose (2003) explain:

Knowledges – even those of the positive sciences which take the human being in its living, acting, desiring, transgressing, sickening and dying reality as their object – are governed by certain rules which establish what can be said truthfully at any one time, the criteria of evidence, the forms of proof and even the very object of which they can speak. (p. 7)

A regime of truth can be understood as a set of rules which sustains ‘truths’ or ‘facts’ through complex networks of social relations, mechanisms, and prohibitions. As such, scientific knowledge is not merely a neutral representation or reflection of truth or an objective reality but actively shapes the world into a fragmented but malleable reality. For example, as Larsson (2013) demonstrates, the construction of sex/gender in physiological research produces specific formulations of truth about women’s participation in competitive sports. Viewed through this lens, the problem-solving approach of equipping young athletes with scientifically proven knowledge raises important questions about what new configurations of authority, truth and ethics they will encounter.

Foucault argues, therefore, that knowledge production and regulatory norms play an *active* role in the workings of power, as they position individuals in dependence with their own conscience and relation to self (Foucault, 1982a). Yet in his essay, *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault (1982/2020) makes explicit his shift of interests, looking beyond externally imposed forms of domination to understanding how domination can also be self-imposed. He writes:

Perhaps I’ve invested too much in the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others, and in the technologies of individual domination, in the mode of action that an individual exercises upon himself by means of technologies of the self. (p. 225)

Through technologies of the self, Foucault contends, individuals develop and refine specific techniques through which they navigate their relationship with themselves as selves. These techniques require engagement with oneself in various ways: knowing oneself, mastering oneself, or taking care of oneself (Foucault, 1982/2020). Yet, it is a matter of placing the imperative to ‘know oneself’, as Foucault (2020b) notes, as characteristic of our civilisation, “back in the much broader interrogation that serves as its explicit or implicit context: What should one do with oneself?” (p. 87). He argues that, with his work on ethics and self-formations, his aim was “to show people that they are much freer than they feel”

(Foucault, 1982b, p. 10). Importantly, Foucault's move towards self-formation does not entail any recovery of the constitutive, essentialist human subject. Foucault's work on self-formation can rather be understood as attempts to open the subject up to the possibility of continual reconstruction and reconfiguration.

Several sports coaching scholars have identified potential points of resistance to disciplinary aspects of high-performance sport, via the use of technologies of the self (e.g., Jones et al., 2022; Konoval et al., 2021; Thorpe, 2008; Tsang, 2000). Training journals, for example, can be designed to guide athletes to reflexively exercise their own freedom in deciding the intensity of their training sessions (Augestad, 2024). Yet, within the context of high-performance sport, such tools also work as techniques for athletes to "mould their bodies and souls into productive and willing entities" (Heikkala, 1993).

Foucault (1984/2020) make clear that power is always present, and that where there is power, there are possibilities to act. He argues, too, that resistance is immanent to power, unfolding within, rather than outside of, existing relations. Agency can therefore be understood not as a grand opposition to power, but as the everyday tactics which are employed by people as they attempt to reconstruct their own subjectivities (Villadsen, 2023). As such, individuals can be understood to be active, albeit unequal, participants in ongoing (re)productions of discourses and power relations because, even to some extent, they are able to determine which practices they allow to constitute them.

My agenda using poststructural theory, particularly Foucault, was to open up analytical space for understanding how scientific truth claims about training and recovery have become the 'medium' within which the self-government of young student-athletes can be linked to the imperatives of good governance, such as holistic approaches to talent development. More specifically, it allowed me to theorise holistic talent development as a problem-solving strategy in which specific technologies of knowledge, power, and the self are integrated and institutionalised. I turn now to a consideration of Foucault's broader methodological approaches.

Discourse and discursive practice

The term *discourse* is used frequently and it therefore important to elaborate on what it means in this thesis. Foucault himself offers multiple explanations of the term throughout his work, yet Markula and Pringle (2006) stress his persistent emphasis on the workings of discourse in constituting social reality and constructing ways of being, doing, and feeling in a given sociocultural context. In other words, it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. Foucault's (1998/2020) reflections in his later writings are of especial relevance to this thesis. A discourse, he writes, can be understood as:

the ensemble of more or less regulated, more or less deliberate, more or less finalized ways of doing things, through which can be seen both what was constituted as real for those who sought to think it and manage it and the way in which the latter constituted themselves as subjects capable of knowing, analyzing, and ultimately altering reality. These are the “practices”, understood as a way of acting and thinking at once, that provide the intelligibility key for the correlative constitution of the subject and the object. (p. 463)

In this definition, discourse is a *way of doing* things which constitute what is real in a socio-historical context. As Bacchi and Bonham (2014) contend, this means that focus is on how multiple realities are produced through plural and contingent *practices* across different sites. It is important to note that discursive practices are not a synonym for language use or linguistic practices. Mol and Law (2004) provide more concrete examples with diabetes to illustrate this point. “It only becomes possible to talk about ‘a blood sugar level below 3.5 mmol/l’,” they write, “if someone’s skin is pricked, a blood sample is taken, and ... [a] ... sugar level is measured” (p. 46). The practice of measuring blood sugar levels, however, gain intelligibility only when measurements are compared according to medically-agreed object-definitions. All of these routine ways of engaging with measuring blood sugar levels, in other words, represent a medicalised way of *knowing* and *doing* diabetes.

Discourse is therefore always entangled with specific materialities. The actualisation of a practice, understood as a way of acting and thinking at once, occur through an individual’s interaction with material spaces and tools. A gymnastic venue, for example, invites particular bodily movements which will differ from those encouraged at a CrossFit centre. Viewed in this way, discourse, seen as a set of unwritten rules that establish what are accepted as norms and reality, define the practices that people engage in everyday life. Discursive practice, on

the other hand, provides the conditions for the function or meaning of discourse (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

A recognition of the intertwining of the cultural and the material informs my analytical approach in this thesis, though I acknowledge that I have focused more closely on the cultural dimensions than the material. With my understanding of discourse evolving throughout the course of this research, I have strived to pay close attention to how discourse not simply shape participants' perceptions but how discursive practices make athlete commitment manageable. I elaborate on these efforts in the methodology chapter.

Finally, to clarify, I use the term *performance discourse* to denote ways of doing athlete development that connect student-athletes to practices such as designing rigid training programmes for performance investment and prioritising sleep for optimal recovery. I use the term *dual career discourse* to indicate ways of bridging athlete development and education that put student-athletes in relation to practices for effective pathways in both arenas. In addition, I refer to *health discourses* in sport to shed light on the more or less regulated ways knowledge about physical and mental health is incorporated into lifestyle choices by the student-athletes.

In summary, the writings of Foucault provide an important theoretical foundation to the analysis in this thesis. I recognise that power and knowledge are inseparable, and they work together to define what is considered true, valuable, or appropriate within a given context. To recognise this truth is to recognise that ideas about desirable athletic conduct are not neutral facts. Instead, they are products of particular power/knowledge relations. Through self-formation and processes of subjectification, individuals govern themselves in accordance with particular truths. Resistance is immanent to power and unfolds within, rather than outside of, existing relations. The next chapter outlines how poststructural thinking is woven into my methodological choices.

5 Methodological considerations

This chapter addresses the methodological considerations which underpin this PhD research project. I begin by outlining the philosophical foundations and quality criteria which guided all stages of the research processes. Following this, I present and discuss the methodological choices, considerations, and reflections I made related to planning and conducting the fieldwork, undertaking the analyses, and addressing the ethical dimensions of the study.

Philosophical underpinnings

A poststructuralist ontology assumes that reality and truth are multiple, subjective, and context-dependent, and intricately linked to the dynamics of power (Markula & Silk, 2011). The key word being *multiple* because, as Campbell et al. (2023) aptly note, poststructuralists do not argue that truths are inherently false or right; rather, their applicability shift as contexts change, reflecting the fluid and negotiated nature of knowledge production. Consequently, poststructuralist thought encourages a critical examination of how knowledge claims are produced, maintained, and contested across varying contexts without collapsing into relativism or denying the possibility of meaningful critique (Denison, 2023). This ontological stance thus foregrounds the multiplicity and contingency of truths as central to understanding knowledge as a dynamic process rather than a static fact.

The writings of Foucault and Annemarie Mol, in particular, have taught me to attend more closely to the ways in which scientific disciplines, such as sports psychology and medicine, determine how objects are constructed and made malleable through various and varied practices. This philosophical change has affected my own methodological approaches: I have realised how important it is to invite in rather than eschew the unpredictability and activity involved in everyday practice (Foucault, 1998/2020; Mol & Law, 2004).

When practices (ways of both acting and thinking at once) are foregrounded, the type of knowledge produced is highly specific and local. To fully articulate this knowledge, it is necessary to compare, in detail, the different possible ways of doing which co-exist within a single moment in time and space (Mol & Law, 2004). This means, as Foucault argues, it is necessary to explore the ways in which power relations are productive and mobile. Examining discursive practices is therefore a way of foregrounding *processes* rather than outcomes. If dual career development environments are spaces in which we are to recognise (and address) the specificities of young athletes' daily struggles, we need to recognise the "micro-physics of power" to which every coach and athlete is both subject by, and a

productive subject for (Mills et al., 2020, p. 247). Prioritising such situated knowledge, I believe, allows for more nuanced, alternative ways of seeing aspects of athlete development that are difficult to capture using more normative approaches (Markula & Silk, 2011).

Poststructuralists do not subscribe to the idea that objective knowledge exists independently of thought (Markula, 2023). It is important that poststructuralist researchers recognise that they are involved in the production of knowledge itself. They must therefore locate themselves as integral components of the relational dynamics in which they're engaging when designing, structuring, conducting, and presenting their research (Markula & Silk, 2011). These epistemological reflections have determined the methodologies I have selected. I decided, for example, that a qualitative research design would be best suited to scrutinising the likely contradictory discourses that shape the beliefs about athlete commitment of the participants.

Finally, poststructural research seeks to deconstruct consensus (Brinkmann, 2018). It is, by ambition, a political and ethical practice, and my aim therefore with this thesis is to trouble the consensus around athlete empowerment initiatives rather than to cultivate it. I recognise, too, as Markula (2023, p. 172) aptly notes, that poststructuralists can “diagnose how to improve situations, but without claims for ultimate solutions: new problems continually emerge as events proceed”. The aim of my research, the questions I have engaged with, and my choice of research methods, have all been shaped by these philosophical assumptions and concerns.

Quality in poststructural research

Reflexivity is a highly valued aspect in poststructural research, and serves as a way of legitimising and challenging research practices (McGannon, 2016). I recognise how my own personal experiences have affected the research processes throughout; it is important therefore for me to explain the positions from which I speak, both as a researcher and as someone who was part of the current elite sport culture for a long time.

My interest in holistic approaches to athlete development began a few years ago, when I was still pursuing a career in handball. It was during the first year of my master's studies in coaching and sports psychology that I was first exposed to poststructural perspectives on athlete development. Jim Denison (a professor of sports coaching and a committed social theorist who worked at the University of Alberta), was invited as a guest lecturer to one of our coaching courses. He encouraged us to reflect on our personal experiences through the lens of power relations and Foucauldian theorising. As a result, I began to analyse my own

understanding of what it meant to be a good athlete, and how truth claims and disciplinary power permeated my everyday life as a student-athlete. Slowly, the way I related to high-performance sport, and my own sense-making of what it means to balance athletic and personal development began to shift. My initial motivation for undertaking this study, therefore, did not arise from published data or academic reports, but from my own lived experiences of trying to succeed simultaneously in sport and school.

My involvement in elite handball has unfolded in different phases over the years. There were times when sporting performance was my main priority. I was careful with my recovery and I trained hard. In other words, I did all the ‘right’ things. There can be little doubt that at that time the bioscientific articulation of the athletic body had a strong influence on me. Even so, I was also a frequently injured and ‘unreliable’ athlete. Right knowledge, wrong effect, as Mills et al. (2020) would phrase it. I continued to play handball until the spring of 2024, when I could no longer justify the toll that balancing two demanding careers was taking on me.

Engaging with poststructural theorising while conducting this research project was a fulfilling experience, but also a frustrating one. Most people involved in Norwegian talent development are immersed in a humanist and post-positivist coaching logics. Many of these fit uncomfortably alongside poststructural approaches and research ambitions. While I enjoyed conducting the fieldwork, I was worried often about how my research and poststructural positioning would influence my relationships in the field, and vice versa. In hindsight, I could have approached my initial conversations with the school which took part in this research project in a slightly different way. I could, for example, have been clearer about the fact that the research was not about whether particular ways of working were ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ but to explore the tensions in the way athlete development is conducted and commitment made malleable. Such clarity might have helped bridge the gap between my theoretical framework and the expectations of those embedded in more conventional sports coaching and athlete development traditions.

The potential impact that empirical inquiries can have is a second relevant quality criterion to poststructuralist research. Richardson (2000) argues that the value of a poststructural research project is not limited to the formal *findings section* proclaimed in academic papers but lies equally in how the research is *told*. Writing well-crafted ‘stories’ that invite readers to think, feel, and imagine otherwise can be equally valuable. From this perspective, impact is aesthetic, ethical, and political, as much as it is epistemic.

Good poststructural research is therefore built upon rich empirical material and offers thick descriptions and thorough contextualisation. It makes visible the contingencies, exclusions, and power relations through which particular realities are produced. When written down, this material can create a recognisable yet estranging account of cultural, social, individual, and communal experience that both resonates with reader's lived worlds and opens these worlds up to critical re-reading (Markula & Silk, 2011). In this way, empirical poststructural inquiries are judged by their capacity to unsettle sedimented assumptions, generate alternative understanding and problem-settings, and expand what can be said and done in a given field of practice (Markula, 2023).

My goal has been to explore the material I collected from multiple perspectives, while also maintaining an openness to the possibility that such practices are shaped by tensions, contradictions, and forces which are pulling in different directions. Where possible, I have included longer extracts from the interviews as a way of making my involvement in the production of knowledge about these processes more transparent.

Adopting a reflexive approach as a researcher requires one to be as articulate and transparent as possible about the choices made for producing knowledge. In the following section, I detail the research processes and procedures through which the knowledge claims in this thesis have been produced.

The research process and methods

My intention has been to articulate holistic talent development as a problem-solving strategy in which specific technologies of knowledge, power, and the self are integrated. To make this relationship analytically concrete, I have examined a case: a variation of teaching practices and everyday life among student-athletes at a lower secondary sports school. This investigation has been made possible through a larger research project⁵ the aim of which is to generate insights into the role of lower secondary sports schools on youth athlete learning and development within the context of Norwegian youth sport. When planning this PhD research, my supervisors and I were interested mainly in the sociocultural and political forces governing teaching practices within sports-related subjects. This is because lower secondary sports schools are situated within wider societal debates about talent development, especially

⁵ The main objective of this research project was to explore how the hybridisation of academic and sport learning influences the socialisation processes of young people during the major transitions of early adolescence. The project examines key interdisciplinary themes, including student-athlete cultural learning, psychosocial development, mental and physical health, and well-being.

ongoing discussions about how to ensure that talent development is conducted in a socially responsible way (Skrubbeltrang & Rasmussen, 2014).

As part of my fieldwork, I attended the training sessions and corresponding theory sessions at a lower secondary sports school located in an urban area in Norway. Further, I analysed texts and policy documents about athlete development and the web-based teaching materials used by the school. I also interviewed school coaches and student-athletes. Following advice from Lareau (2021), I built an empirical understanding over time. This allowed me to develop contextual sensitivity, create a critical distance, structure my interpretations with theory, receive feedback offered by participants, and explore things that I had previously not considered to be significant.

I decided that all my fieldwork would be undertaken at one school. This is because I did not want to evaluate or qualitatively compare different sports school programmes; concentrating the fieldwork in one specific setting, I reasoned, would allow me to attend more carefully to the specificities of the environment. The specificity of the PhD project does not mean the relevance of the research is limited. Rather, in line with Mol's (2002) argument about the value of detailed case stories, I contend that the detailed points of reference and enhanced sensitivity presented here give this thesis potential relevance to participants in other settings and situations, and especially to other sports schools organised under the same dual career policy.

Table 1 provides an overview of the studies I conducted, including information about the participants, the choice of methods and the timing of each data collection, the units of observation, and my analysis strategies. I am not all that comfortable with the concept of 'collecting data', because it suggests, as Markula (2023) reasons, that researchers passively discover knowledge, whereas from a poststructuralist perspective, knowledge claims are always actively constructed through interpretive processes. What is foregrounded as data in the observations in this study are my interpretations of what the participants did as coaches and student-athletes. Similarly, in the interviews, a representation of the participants' knowledge was co-actively produced both by me and the participants.

TABLE 1		Overview of the original studies	
Study	Study 1	Study 2	Study 3
Participants	Seventy-six student-athletes (14-15 years old), from three 9th grade classes, took part in the observation phase. Ten school coaches took part in the observation phase. Out of these, five female coaches and two male coaches participated in two group interviews.	Twenty-five student-athletes (15-16 years old) from three 10 th grade classes took part in this study.	Three student-athletes – June, Elise, and Theodor (pseudonyms) – from the same 10 th grade class participated in individual follow-up interviews as they transitioned to different upper secondary schools.
Data collection and time point	October-December 2022: Observation of basic training sessions and the corresponding theory sessions (9th grade). January 2023: Focus group interviews with coaches. February 2023: Observation of sport-specific training sessions (handball). May-June 2023: Document analysis.	January-April 2024: Focus group interviews with student-athletes.	December 2023: First round of individual interviews with all participants. May 2024: Second individual interviews with Theodor and Elise. December 2025: Third individual interviews with Theodor and Elise. Second individual interview with June.
Units of observation	The athlete development policy documents of the sports school, the coaches' attitudes towards, and experiences of, athlete development in a school setting, and the pedagogical practices and strategies that were used during the school training sessions.	Student-athletes' attitudes towards, and experiences of, scientific knowledge and the norms related to athlete development in lower secondary school. Their experiences of balancing social, athletic, and academic endeavours.	Student-athletes' attitudes towards, and experiences of, self-surveillance, and their experiences of transitioning into upper secondary school.
Analysis strategy	Reflexive thematic analysis. Foucault-informed poststructural policy analysis.	Foucault-informed poststructural interview analysis.	Foucault-informed poststructural interview analysis.

Undertaking a poststructuralist research project requires more than a focus on its technical dimensions and technicalities, such as the planning and preparation of observations and interview guides, of recruiting participants, or of developing method-specific skills. It necessitates attending closely and persistently to the activities and dynamics which take place within interview and observation settings. I have therefore spent considerable time and effort reflecting on these situated practices, since they are central to the knowledge claims I present in this thesis.

Observation

Using qualitative forms of observation is a valuable way of unpacking everyday practices, noting gaps between formal rules and actual behaviours, and seeing the difficulties people face as they go through their days (Lareau, 2021). Markula and Silk (2011) identify three types of observation, namely descriptive, focused, and selective observations. My observations progressed through three similar stages during the study. At the outset, I tried to write down *everything* which caught my attention in the training sessions. Over time, I narrowed my focus to specific teaching activities and coach-athlete interactions. As the study progressed further, I concentrated on more specific aspects of the ways in which student-athletes' adhered to, or resisted, the social norms of the training settings.

One of the central elements of fieldwork research is access to a relevant research site (Markula & Silk, 2011). The school which took part in this study was already taking part in the larger research project, so an agreement to gain physical access to the site was relatively simple to obtain. However, earning the trust of school officials and coaches proved to be more difficult. Inspired by Lareau (2021), I took deliberate steps to build rapport with them, arriving early for the observation sessions and spending time with the coaches before the trainings began. These moments of informal interaction allowed me to share my study intentions with them and, as the fieldwork progressed, I also shared my ideas and interpretations with them in casual conversations and in a non-confrontational way. Ultimately, I believe, doing this contributed to the fostering of more trusting and collaborative relationships. These moments where I could 'hang out' with them provided me with valuable insights into the individual follow-up work they were engaged in with the student-athletes. It also helped me to understand the controversies and challenges the coaches were trying to navigate collectively with other coaches.

I carried a notebook with me during the first training sessions and attempted to take quick notes in situ. However, I soon abandoned this approach, as it felt disruptive to me and risked increasing the distance between myself and those I was observing. I began instead to rely on what might be termed ‘mental notetaking’ of the things I was observing. At home, immediately after each training session, I would write up detailed field notes. While writing my field notes, I also systematically documented my initial reflections, including theoretical interpretations and my own presumptions. Following Bacchi and Goodwin’s (2016) insistence on making one’s thinking available for critique, this procedure helped me to subject my own interpretations to critical scrutiny. Relevant findings from the observations have been published in Paper 1.

The observation phase of my research lasted approximately four months. Most of my observations took place during a period of self-directed training for the student-athletes, during which they were tasked with planning, executing, and evaluating their own training. The loosely structured nature of these sessions allowed me to interact with the student-athletes without disrupting the teaching or their training processes. Initially, I communicated with them informally when they were within their friendship groups instead of approaching them individually. However, as trust was established over time, these interactions and conversations occurred more organically.

I always wore training clothes while conducting my research and these often reflected my handball background. This served as a subtle way to signal my involvement and familiarity with sport. Although the participants were aware of my role as a researcher, there were occasional moments when some of the student-athletes approached me as if I were a teacher. They could, for example, ask me if they had interpreted a task correctly. In such cases, I clarified that my role was solely to learn about their lives as student-athletes and that I held no formal authority within their environment.

Document analysis

In conducting a document analysis of the school’s athlete development philosophy, my aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the rationale for their sports programme and their educational priorities. The document contains four overarching guidelines which outline the principles, norms, goals, and standards of the lower secondary sports school’s programme. These guidelines are similar for all lower secondary schools governed by the same private school organisation. For reasons of confidentiality, none of the guidelines specific to the

school participating in this project are included in my analysis. However, to address this limitation, I did include documents which were foundational to the development of the school's athlete development programme, its philosophy, and its teaching practices. These include OLT's guidelines for youth athlete talent development, and the youth athlete healthcare principles found on web pages published by the school's collaborative knowledge brokers, namely Healthy Sport and the Oslo Sports Trauma Research Centre.

Relevant findings from the document analysis have been published as supplementary material in Paper 1. The amount of data constructed via these documents was more limited and served primarily as a contextual backdrop for my subsequent investigations. Despite this limitation, these texts aided my understanding of how 'problems' are constituted in policy (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). It was during this process that I noted, for example, that holistic approaches to training and recovery were represented as good governance within this sports school setting. Moreover, these investigations guided my curiosity about the relationship between best practice and individual decision-making.

Interviews

The empirical material produced through my observations and document analyses shaped the development of the guides which I used for the focus group interviews I conducted with the coaches and the student-athletes. I also used it to develop the guides for the follow-up individual interviews. All the interviews were semi-structured (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). This provided a sufficiently consistent structure through which to explore the key issues. It also ensured that both the participants and I had the flexibility to explore additional topics and interpretations.

I do not regard interviews as moments of neutral reflection about pre-existing experiences. Rather, I understand them to be discursive spaces in which participants will actively negotiate and articulate their understandings from the subject positions made available to them (Bonham & Bacchi, 2017). The substantive meaning of a phenomenon such as 'athlete commitment', for example, is inherently open and flexible. It is only when activated through conversations in this setting, that specific meanings, justifications, rules, and legitimacies are constituted. The focus group and individual interview methods each provided me with distinct opportunities for these kinds of negotiations to unfold.

The focus group interviews

Focus-group interviews are valuable ways to elicit participants' diverse perspectives, beliefs, and attitudes as they operate in a social network and how these relate to discursive practices (Halkier, 2010). They also offer more opportunities, compared to other similar qualitative techniques, to explore the social dynamics of knowledge production (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999). I therefore conducted focus-group interviews with the school coaches, reasoning that, relative to individual interviews, the group dynamic would better illuminate how consensus about athlete development in a sports school programme is formed, negotiated, and contested. Likewise, I conducted focus-group interviews with student-athletes because the group dynamic was, I believe, better suited to revealing how particular lifestyle choices and balancing strategies are treated as more legitimate than others.

Two focus group interviews were conducted with seven school coaches. The first group interview included three female coaches, while the second included two female and two male coaches. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. To gain deeper insight into the intentions behind the school's teaching practices, I asked the coaches in advance to reflect on the role and function of the lower secondary sports school in the lives of the young student-athletes. This preparatory task was designed to establish a foundation for the discussions which took place.

I also presented fictional case scenarios of student-athletes, which were based on earlier observations and reflected some of the challenges I assumed they might encounter in their work. The intention of doing so was to encourage the coaches to share their thoughts on how they would approach such situations. In instances in which the coaches thought the scenarios were too far removed from their lived experiences, we collaboratively adjusted them to align better with their realities. The findings from the interviews have been published in Paper 1.

Six focus group interviews were conducted with a total of twenty-five student-athletes (aged 15–16 years) from three 10th grade classes. A school coach assisted in the purposeful selection of participants. This was based on the criteria that the participants would be: (a) the same gender, (b) have similar levels of sporting and/or academic commitment, (c) represent different sports, and (d) have an established rapport with other group members in the group. After conducting a pilot interview, I tested and refined the interview guide and developed two scenarios which were designed to prompt further discussions about responsibility and prioritisation in their everyday lives as student-athletes. My hope was that the scenarios presented during the interviews would generate descriptions that were rich in detail. Each

interview lasted between 50-70 minutes, was audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The findings from the interviews have been published in Paper 2.

The individual interviews

The individual interviews were a more appropriate format for engaging student-athletes in in-depth discussions about their relationship with themselves as committed athletes. Follow-up interviews are particularly suitable for tracing people's experiences during formative periods of life and can provide valuable insights into key life transitions and pivotal turning points (Barker-Ruchti, 2019). I wanted therefore to undertake a longitudinal follow-up of a selected group of student-athletes to gain a deeper understanding of whether their self-surveillance as committed athletes became more rigid or more flexible over the course of their development.

The three student-athletes who participated in the individual interviews have been given pseudonyms (Theodor, Elise, and June) to protect their identity. I purposefully invited them to join the study, as they had become familiar to me and appeared relatively comfortable in my presence. In addition, each of them represented distinct cases: Theodor was diligent in his training, Elise was grappling with injuries, and June was recognised as talented and displayed a playful approach to training. To ensure the level of detail necessary for linking self-surveillance practices with transition processes, I wanted to select student-athletes from team sports with which I was well acquainted. At the time of the interviews, Elise and Theodor were playing handball, while June was specialising in football. I conducted three sets of interviews with Theodor and Elise, while June participated in two sets of interviews due to her busy schedule.

The first set of interviews took place in the autumn of the participants' 10th grade year, when they were 15 years old. I asked them to describe a typical day, what they enjoyed about their sport, why they chose to attend a sports school programme, and what their goals and aspirations were. For the second set of interviews that took place in the following spring, I met only with Theodor and Elise. During the interviews, I asked Theodor and Elise more directly about self-surveillance and how they had adopted or resisted the knowledge and norms promoted by the school regarding athlete development.

The third set of interviews took place in late autumn the following autumn, after the participants had transitioned to upper secondary school and had turned 16. These interviews were held at a location chosen by the participants. I asked the participants to compare their new educational programme with their previous one, and to reflect on how their daily lives presented new opportunities and challenges, both as committed athletes and as individuals.

June participated in the third interview. I therefore asked her to describe how she was navigating the expectations associated with athlete commitment; I also posed other questions that were similar to the ones I had used in the second set of interviews with Theodor and Elise. The findings from the interviews have been published in Paper 3.

Analytical strategies

Although poststructuralist research often resists rigid analytic techniques due to its emphasis on fluidity and context, analytical structure remains essential to guide inquiry and interpretation. As Markula and Silk (2011) reasons, “a well-conducted analysis process strengthens the interpretation and provides a convincing final analysis” (p. 108). To enhance the credibility of my analyses, I tried to use clear analytical strategies and structures while, at the same time, remaining reflective and flexible when using these formats.

Study 1: Reflexive thematic analysis

During this research project, I strived for methodological consistency and analytical clarity. My ability to achieve these objectives evolved over the course of my work. In reflecting on the first empirical study (Paper 1), I recognise now that the descriptions of the analysis process were somewhat underdeveloped. To enhance the quality of the study and provide greater transparency regarding my application of Foucault’s concept of discourse, for example, I have expanded these sections to detail more explicitly how I analysed the empirical material through a Foucauldian lens.

A key feature of the first empirical study was the use of both interview and observational research methods to answer the following research questions: Through which discourses do school coaches construct the ‘ideal’ student-athlete? What is the disciplinary potential of the individual-oriented practices used by the school coaches to regulate and enforce student-athletes’ adherence to the requisite norms? The analysis based on the first question required an iterative process across the various materials I collected. It focused on coding patterns of ideas to understand how the ensemble of “more or less regulated, deliberate and finalised ways of doing” (Foucault, 1998/2020, p. 463) constituted, in this context, a particular ‘ideal’ of a student-athlete. The second question, in contrast, was addressed in the form of a theoretical discussion. The intention of this was to highlight additional considerations about the potential, unintended consequences that such approaches may have on the student-athletes.

Braun and Clarke (2022) outline a reflexive approach to thematic analysis. This approach offers a systematic yet flexible approach well-suited for analysing large and diverse types of data, emphasising the active role of the researcher in theme development. It is also theoretically flexible, allowing researchers to anchor their analysis in explicit theoretical frameworks and epistemological assumptions, which enhances both credibility and coherence (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Initially, my co-authors and I were guided by this version of thematic analysis which is structured in six stages, namely: familiarisation, coding, theme development, refinement, naming, and writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I began by coding *what* the coaches said about training and recovery, before reflecting on what made these statements legitimate or ‘truthful’. When doing so, I began to pose a number of questions to myself. What worldview, for example, needed to be in place for these best practice principles to be possible to speak of? Which scientific disciplines had produced these principles and in what ways do they constitute objectifying approaches to athletes that are disadvantageous for them? In what ways were the student-athletes engaged in the discursive practices of training and health during their training sessions?

As the analysis progressed, I began to group the analytical codes I constructed and to examine what truth claims were being *articulated* (e.g., post-positivist viewpoints versus humanist assumptions about what responsibility entail) and what knowledge was *embedded* in practice (e.g., how the act of goal setting becomes instrumental under the regime of performance development). During this phase of theme refinement, the authors working on the study paper met to discuss the fluid and competing *ways of doing* athlete development within the educational context of the school. We noted tensions between the post-positivist claims which were being made by the coaches (those focused, for instance, on the do’s and don’ts of physical training for the adolescent body), and humanist claims related to the importance of preserving the autonomy of the student-athletes (the clear objective of providing personal choice, for example). We connected these tensions to the school’s educational objective of making responsible individuals and athletes. As a result, a central analytical theme was developed around ‘responsibility for empowerment and optimising development’.

We then constructed two subthemes related to the development of responsible student-athletes for empowerment purposes [humanism’s logic]: ‘Know what’s right for yourself’ and ‘Governing alternative enactments of responsibility.’ Additionally, two subthemes were constructed in relation to the development of responsible student-athletes for optimal

development purposes [positivism's logic]: 'Acting according to the scientific book' and 'Governance through self-governance.' These four subthemes were then reviewed and subsequently collated into two themes to reflect the fact that two constructions of responsibility were made possible through two competing ways of facilitating for athlete development, and to show how discursive practices made responsibility matter in school-based training sessions. For us, these empirical themes reflected the technologies of knowledge and power that were operating in the teaching practices of athlete development at the school.

When writing the analysis, we referred occasionally to discourses as something which coaches can draw upon. This phrasing is unfortunate as it implies that knowledge should be treated as a collection of ideas rather than as a practice, and this risks framing discourse as merely a lens through which reality is perceived and, therefore, easily adjustable (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014). Recognising this issue prompted me to adopt a more critical and reflective approach to how I incorporated the concept of discourse into my writings, and to make sure it aligns more closely with its Foucauldian underpinnings.

Study 2 and 3: Poststructural interview analysis

The second and third studies focused on the ways in which student-athletes discursively construct athlete commitment, and how these constructions condition their self-surveillance practices. Using the empirical material produced during the interviews, I applied Bacchi and Bonham's (2016; 2017) poststructural interview analysis (PIA) strategy to guide my analyses. This strategy, based on Foucault's theory of discourse as *practice* rather than language (Bacchi & Bonham, 2014), is concerned with the knowledge and knowledge-making practices which must be in place in order for a particular thing to be articulated.

The second empirical study (Paper 2) was guided by the following research question: Through which forms of knowledge about balancing athlete development and education do student-athletes regulate their free time practices? Forms of knowledge refer here to types of explanatory frameworks, be that biological, psychological or medical, which inflect and condition what can be said and thought, and with what authority, about balancing dual careers. I have recently become aware of its broader connotations in the literature where it is sometimes used to denote relatively stable discursive formations⁶. With this in mind, I do not aim to map the full architecture of scientific or discursive fields.

⁶ See Ball (2013), for a more detailed explanation.

After carefully reviewing the interviews, I began to examine critically who had free time and who did not, how they used those free time spaces, and how it is valued were informed by discursive practices of health, performance, and dual career. Table 2 below includes an example of how I analysed the self-positioning of the student-athletes applying steps from PIA. Although this example was not included in any of the publications, it makes visible a highly relevant (and otherwise easily overlooked) aspect of the social dynamics that organise everyday life in the sport school setting.

Table 2 Excerpt from the analysis process.	
Theme	Prioritising talents
Quote	Erle: I often feel that those who are the best then, here at the [sports school], you can see that there is a difference in what they put into it, and what we put into it, and what the clubs facilitates for. [...]. Another common feature is that they, I think, are much less social. They are less social with others, than those [of us] who are, like, in the lower half [of the performance hierarchy].
What is said?	Performing in sport is important. Commitment resembles sacrifice. Talents are prioritised. Less talented athletes are more social.
How is it possible to say it?	Systemic talent development and selection practices. Talent development is an exclusive practice, available only to the most skilled athletes. The '24-hour athlete' concept.
Why is it said?	Marginalised position: the 'less talented' athlete holds less value in the sports school programme.

Together with my co-authors, I discussed how to develop my analytical interpretations. It was decided, collectively, that the participants' experiences of performance expectations would be a focal point of my analysis. Accordingly, the analysis was structured around three discursive premises underpinning how the balance within dual careers is constructed, namely: (a) evoking efficiency to meet expectations, (b) reducing the to-do list to protect recovery, and (c) deliberately resisting or reinterpreting expert advice. A thorough review of the analytical steps is presented in Paper 2.

Given that the groups I interviewed were gender-divided (girls/boys), it would have been logical for me to examine the gendered nature of dual career discourses. This would have facilitated an understanding of the gender power relations in the context of the school and of gender hierarchies present in dual career programmes. However, I chose not to pursue this line of inquiry because there is already extensive, detailed and nuanced scholarship about gendered perspectives among younger student-athletes in dual careers (e.g., Kavoura & Ryba, 2020; Ryba et al., 2021; Saarinen et al., 2023; Skrubbeltrang, 2019).

The initial aim of the third empirical study (Paper 3) was to gain a clearer understanding of how student-athletes related to themselves as committed athletes. When the participants transitioned into different upper secondary school programmes, my focus shifted towards theorising how the power relations involved in athlete commitment are relationally enacted. My analytical processes were guided by the following research questions: How do student-athletes' discursive constructions of athletic commitment change over time and across educational transitions? What do these shifts reveal about the discursive possibilities for practising commitment in high-performance junior sport contexts?

The first step of the analysis focused on tracing how their construction of athlete commitment was entangled within discursive practices related to training, performance, youth, education, and gender. In the interviews, participants moved fluidly between multiple, sometimes competing, identity positions (e.g., athlete, student, friend, daughter, sister, boy, girl). Rather than treating these shifts as inconsistencies to be smoothed over, they are analytically significant because different identities carry distinct, and often conflicting, expectations, obligations, and forms of recognition across contexts such as sport, school, peer groups, and family. To make the intersecting identities more visible, I constructed a series of vignettes to present the empirical material. As a representational strategy, vignettes allowed me to 'story' the complexity of the participants' experiences, both within and beyond sport, and to emphasise athlete commitment as something actively 'done' in relation to the broader institutional arrangements they are part of.

Conducting a relational examination of the institutional contexts and interplays between various elements, including the associated power struggles, systemic talent development and selection practices, and gendered expectations in education, was a complex task. My co-authors played a crucial role in this process, by contributing their extensive expertise in Norwegian talent development, gender studies, and education research. Additionally, I discussed and refined the vignettes with colleagues from the Child and Youth Sport Research Centre at the Norwegian School of Sports Sciences (NIH), to further enhance the analysis.

It was only when I compared the ways in which the participants discursively constructed athlete commitment over time that I realised that supporting athletes to broaden their perspectives beyond sport is not as straightforward as it might seem. This insight prompted me to question whether certain aspects of our knowledge about holistic development might be advantageous to those student-athletes who are positioned as talented, thereby contributing to the reproduction of unequal access to talent development resources. We incorporated this

idea into Paper 3 as part of a speculative discussion which I expand upon further in the discussion chapter of this thesis.

Ethics

This research forms part of a larger research project which has received ethical approval from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (reference number 618455) and the Ethics Review Board of the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences. After contacting the school, the school officials granted me permission to present verbal and written information about the research project to three 9th-grade classes. Seventy-six student-athletes, aged 14 to 15 years, participated in the initial observation phase. Most of these student-athletes also consented to participate in individual interviews, group interviews, or both. Additionally, the ten coaches who oversaw the training sessions for the 9th-grade classes consented in writing to participating in observations and interviews.

I reassured all the participants that I would not include their names or any identifying information in the research. All the participants were told that they would be given pseudonyms, and that all references to particular coaches, teachers, or peers would be anonymised. Formally, this meant safeguarding the participants' confidentiality (National Research Ethics Committees, 2015). They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequences.

My ability to reflect critically on how the empirical material in this thesis should be presented, and about how I could ensure that the findings were shared in respectful and appropriate ways evolved over the course of my work. I learned, for example, to better consider the risk of what ethical and political effects different forms of representation might have for the participants and for potential readers. Moreover, I have tried always to articulate my own research positions clearly when commenting on such viewpoints, so that my representations do not foreclose alternative readings of the material. Foucault's theoretical vocabulary, however, is complex and dense. The lower secondary sports school sent feedback about my use of inaccessible language, too. I have therefore made a concerted effort in this thesis to write in the most accessible way possible.

Finally, it should be noted that although I am a researcher, I am also an 'insider' in the culture of elite sport. I have had similar experiences to the people I was interviewing, and was familiar with their schedules; I have also had first-hand experiences of the social practices described by the participants. My own subjectivity has also been constructed through my own

personal navigation between the oppressions and pleasures of a dual career trajectory. Such familiarity demands its own kind of ethical reflection.

Despite our differences, such as age (I was 26 to 27 years old at the time the research was being conducted; the participants were 15 to 16 years old), our education, and our experiences in high-performance sport, I believe that we were able to establish a common and relaxed bond in the interviews. It could be argued that my familiarity and my closeness to the world of the student-athletes may have complicated the attempts of those I interviewed to convey opinions or ideas which strayed beyond the current norms of acceptable best practice. During the interviews, I tried to open for alternative perceptions by challenging some of my own taken-for-granted assumptions about athlete commitment. I also made efforts to step away from the position of a coach or other experts, whose job it is to sharpen the student-athlete's awareness about 'best practice'.

Nevertheless, there will always be unequal access to power positions in a research interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2018). For the purposes of the second and third studies, I argue that asymmetric power relation can, in fact, be productive in better understanding the performative aspects of athlete commitment. Specifically, the power dynamic between a young athlete and an adult 'expert' prompts reflection on the identity work involved in coming across as a committed athlete.

In summary, this chapter has outlined the methodological considerations which underpin this doctoral thesis. In the next chapter, I present the main findings from each empirical study.

6 Main findings

This chapter presents a summary of the main findings of the three papers included in this doctoral thesis.

Paper 1: Øydna, M. L., Nielsen, J. C., & Bjørndal, C. T. (2024). Power, discourse, and practice: exploring athlete development as an educational discursive practice in a Norwegian lower secondary sports school. *Sport, Education and Society*, 1-15.

The purpose of the first study was to explore how lower secondary sports school coaches discursively construct the ‘ideal’ student-athlete in their talk and teaching practices. Further, we examine the disciplinary potential of the teaching practices used in shaping young people’s understanding of sound training routines and healthy lifestyle choices. The questions posed were: Through which discourses do school coaches construct the ‘ideal’ student-athlete? And what is the disciplinary potential of the individual-oriented practices used by school coaches to regulate and enforce student-athletes’ adherence to the requisite norms? Our analysis shows that the goal of the school as an educational institution is to aspire to developing *responsible* student-athletes. The coaches predominantly constructed responsibility as a personal competence; this involved adhering to bioscientific rules of ‘best practice’ for physical training and the recovery of the adolescent body. The school coaches also discursively constructed responsibility as a tool for athlete empowerment. They reasoned that by following more self-determined choices, student-athletes could help to reduce some of the performance pressures they experienced.

The paper invites for a wider discussion on the seemingly tacit acceptance of the role of sports schools in reproducing ‘best practice’ development structures. By engaging with both bioscientific and psychological knowledge of what constitutes responsible behaviour, it is possible to make the teaching practices position the responsible student-athlete in different ways.

Paper 2: Øydna, M. L., Nielsen, J. C., Saarinen, M., & Thue Bjørndal, C. (2026). “I would have studied while I showered”: A Foucauldian reading of how young student-athletes regulate their free time. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 0(0), 1–19.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10126902261426777>

Drawing on Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge and focus group interviews with 25 student-athletes (aged 15-16 years), this paper addresses the following research question: Through which forms of knowledge about balancing athlete development and education do student-athletes regulate their free time practices? Our analysis shows that student-athletes predominantly reproduce dual career discourses that normalises coping strategies, foregrounds compatibility between sport and education, and positions efficiency as the solution to balancing athlete development and education. For those whose actions were grounded in a bioscientific knowledge of recovery, balance was constructed around sporting performance. It was something that could be achieved through the reduction of tasks rather than through increased efficiency. This involved either lowering academic expectations or eliminating activities that were deemed to waste energy.

Together these ways of knowing balance through performance optimisation were reinforced by the structures of training schedules and the coordination of home, school, and club demands. At the same time, psychological truth claims about health introduced alternative power/knowledge relations that could legitimise small acts of disruption and, in turn, could lead to greater resistance to performance optimisation. In light of these findings, school coaches could benefit from reflecting on the ways that certain practices, values, and beliefs might be linked to instrumentalised forms of care for some young people.

Paper 3: Øydna, M. L., Saarinen, M., Nielsen, J. C., & Bjørndal, C. T. (2025). “You can definitely tell she’s truly committed”: Student-athletes’ discursive construction of athletic commitment during transitions in secondary school. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 7, 1-14.

In this paper we examine how the discursive possibilities for student-athletes to speak a truth about themselves as committed athletes change over time and across educational and athletic transitions. Further, we shed light on the ‘identity work’ young student-athletes do to sustain legitimacy as committed athletes within the shifting power relations of their dual career environments. More specifically, the paper answers the following research questions: How do student-athletes’ discursive constructions of athletic commitment change over time and across educational transitions? Moreover, what do these shifts reveal about the discursive possibilities for practising commitment in high-performance junior sport contexts?

Our analysis shows that over time and across institutional structures, the student-athletes – Theodor (male), Elise (female), and June (female) – increasingly constructed the committed athlete as someone who invest their performance development, displaying a will to improve through discipline, delayed gratification, and the ability to endure high training loads. Elise and Theodor, however, lacked access to the institutional resources available to June, who held the status of a talented student-athlete. Our analysis suggests that they were given less flexibility to negotiate less instrumentalised constructions of the committed athlete. As a result, they were drawn into more individualised solutions that required them to monitor their compliance and demonstrate their willingness to ‘control themselves’ and meet their coaches’ expectations.

In comparison, June’s access to a high-performing dual career environment seemed to reinforce her identity as a committed athlete. She focused less on proving herself and constructed her commitment on values of patience and a focus on learning rather than on demonstrating work ethic. By comparing these approaches and experiences, we posit in this paper an alternative reading of power struggles in dual career pathways. We also question if there are aspects of current taken-for-granted assumptions underpinning holistic athlete development approaches where those positioned as talented might have more advantages compared to others who are positioned as less talented.

7 Main contributions and reflections

In this research project, I have sought to approach holistic talent development from a perspective which contrasts to most research on this topic. I started with the premise that all problem-solving activities, as Denison and Avner (2011) argue, create specific relations between power, knowledge, and bodies. The overall purpose of the research project was to address the following research questions: *How is athlete commitment discursively practiced in a lower secondary sports school, and with what implications for student-athlete's self-governance?*

In this chapter, I synthesise the findings from all three papers to address these overarching questions. The three points I outline are the discursive field that produces athlete commitment, the uneven distribution of agency within this field, and the unintended consequences of romanticising individual choice in efforts to empower young student-athletes. Finally, I provide suggestions for applied implications, address some of the limitations of this thesis, and propose directions for future research.

Athlete commitment and self-governance strategies

In concrete terms, this thesis shows that athlete commitment is discursively practiced in at least four interrelated ways in the lower secondary sports school. First, it is organised through institutionalised routines around training, recovery, health, and education. Second, it is shaped through competing truth claims about what constitute healthy, motivated, and performing athletic bodies. Third, it is enacted by student-athletes through self-surveillance, adherence to the responsible athlete ideal, and selective forms of resistance or non-compliance. Fourth, it is unevenly distributed across performance hierarchies, as some student-athletes are granted wider margins for agency, flexibility, and recognition than others. Figure 2 illustrates the discursive field institutionalised within a youth dual career development environment.

In everyday teaching activities, student-athletes' training habits are modified through the long-term athlete development model, which is rooted in physiological knowledge on adaptation to training. Under this physiological 'gaze', controlled and systematic training is normalised as the proper expression of committed behaviour.

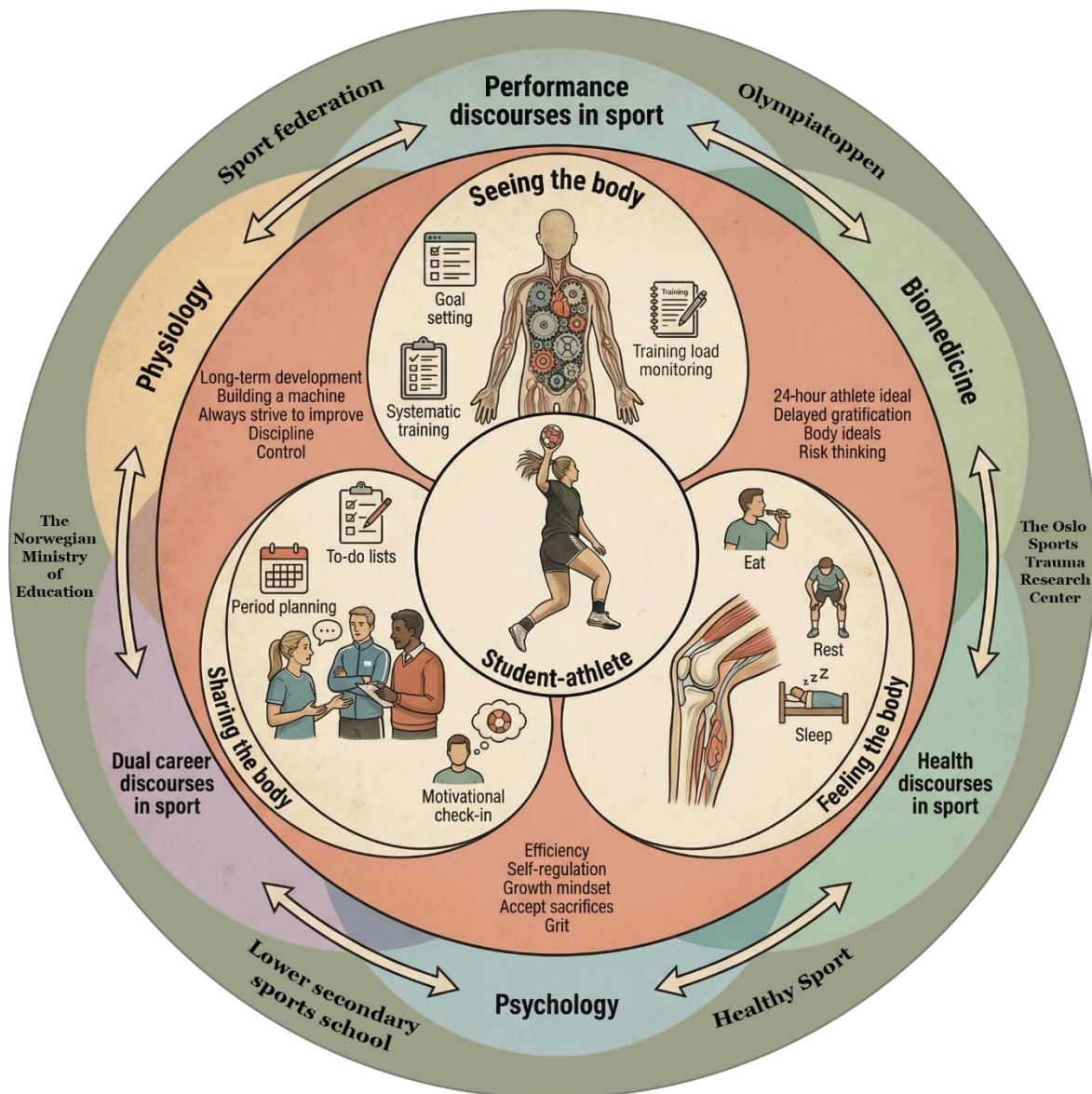


Figure 2: An empirical model of the discursive field institutionalised in a Norwegian Youth Dual Career Development Environment.

Structured training plans, training journals, and clearly defined development goals are disciplinary technologies that are introduced to make student-athletes pay attention to connections between their training regimen, physical test results, and performance levels. Many athletes, including those in this project, express great interest in gaining knowledge about their physiological bodies in order to maximise their development and performance (Augestad, 2024). Through these practices, student-athletes are ‘building a machine’, as Mills and Bjørndal (2025) describe it, because they become actively engaged ‘seeing’ their bodies through quantified metrics.

Similarly, medical truth claims about the adolescent body actively organise student-athletes' everyday lifestyle decisions. They delineate which training, nutritional advice, and recovery practices count as 'legitimate' healthy behaviour, and which are constructed as risky and negligent. In practice, this means engaging in actions such as eating sufficient food, sleeping 9-10 hours per night, and be diligent with injury-prevention exercises. In everyday practices around food and sleep, however, student-athletes do not speak of 'seeing' their bodies but of 'feeling' them. Sensations and signals from their biological bodies appear to guide concrete choices about energy management, such as opting to rest instead of meeting friends.

This awareness is entwined with a cultural imperative to invest in athletic performance, where sacrificing social activities and accepting delayed gratification are equated with being a 24-hour athlete; someone who is constantly aware that every action may affect the chance of becoming elite. For some student-athletes, concerns about performance demands and experiences of physical fatigue prompt intensive self-monitoring and a strong emotional sense of obligation. As Thorpe and Clark (2020) highlight, it becomes nearly impossible to disentangle the relative influence of biological and cultural forces in areas such embodied health experiences. Accordingly, I suggest that energy management among young student-athletes is better conceived as a messy activity, in which both the biological and the cultural are agentic (Mol, 2008).

Aligning with previous studies (Kavoura & Ryba, 2020; Ojala, 2020; Skilbred et al., 2024), this thesis shows that tensions arise as the student-athletes are simultaneously known as a rational, rights-bearing decision-maker who should own their choices. Through institutionalised routines that emphasise the importance of education alongside sports, using everyday time-management skills, such as making to-do lists, planning ahead, and staying organised, is prompted as a responsible way of coping with dual career challenges. These practices, in turn, invite student-athletes to reorganise their conduct in line with the neoliberal ideals of active citizenship that valorise 'efficiency' in all walks of life (Ronkainen et al., 2021; Thing et al., 2015). In doing so, student-athletes' rigid schedules appear as the outcome of free, individual choice among supposedly open alternatives.

For these practices to be effective, student-athletes are organised around the premise that they can turn inward to locate the motivation for self-regulated behaviour. Rather than 'seeing' or 'feeling' their bodies through biomedical or physiological metrics, psychological knowledge about motivation and autonomy provides them the means to actively engage in

‘sharing’ the body through speaking a particular truth of their feelings and desires with others (Rose, 1996; Rossing & Rasmussen, 2023).

Interestingly, this thesis highlights the student-athletes’ awareness of their psychological tendencies in informing their concerns about over-conformity, and their general resistance to close physiological monitoring. For some, this manifest in distancing themselves from food restraint and resisting taken for granted notions about needing to alter body composition to improve performance. Others used the strategy of creating ‘private’ spaces, outside the formal scope of the authority of adults, where they can step outside the confines of their athletic identity. These findings, however, ought to be read alongside studies showing how athletes’ perceptions of what constitutes a valued body are interlinked with broader discourses on gender to better comprehend variations in self-governing strategies (Cosh et al., 2019; Dowling, 2010; Kavoura et al., 2018; Pringle & Hickey, 2010; Walseth & Tidslevold, 2020).

Bear in mind that the committed athlete is predominantly constructed as someone who *invests* in their performance development by displaying a will to improve through discipline, delays gratification, and performatively shows the capacity to endure high training loads. This tendency should not be overlooked as other scholars have argued that the same norms can lead athletes to engage in a range of dangerous practices and health-compromising behaviours while they are active in elite sport (e.g., McGee et al., 2025; Roderick et al., 2000; Sigvartsen & Tjønndal, 2025). My interpretation, however, is that being part of a talent networks grants student-athletes wider margins to oppose parts of this *sports ethic* (Hughes & Coakley, 1991).

Of course, this observation is far from straight-forward because a myriad of everyday practices and relations shape where, when, in what ways, with whom, and with what authority, student-athletes can occupy or shift between more or less instrumental constructions of commitment. Yet this observation speaks to Foucault’s theoretical insights by illustrating how discourse and power relations don’t eliminate agency but pattern and stratify it. It is my interpretation that student-athletes holding a talent status in their dual career environment are granted wider margins within which they can fashion subjectivities marked by patience, self-regulation, and a growth-orientation towards performance development. Yet they still remain firmly inscribed in regimes of high-performance and the formation of coaching truths (Denison et al., 2017; Mills & Denison, 2018).

One possible explanation for this could be that dual career research and policy tend to represent ‘the problem’ in ways that prioritise supporting already-selected athletes within talent systems. June’s story, for example, illustrates how she is actively supported through

integrated efforts spanning sport, education, and private life, combined with individually tailored flexible solutions, which resonates with recommendations provided by leading dual career researchers (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). June would not be able to both meet performance demands in her sport and still complete her education without this support.

Indeed, from my research position, which purports the coexistence of multiple social realities, I perceive such a solution to be an ‘valid’ one. At the same time, however, the passage point for such support remains, in practice, tied to impossible training – or competition schedules. Student-athletes who are not yet embedded in high-performance sport, or whose trajectories do not require coordination across multiple development settings, simply do not meet the eligibility criteria for such support resources. From this perspective, the absence of support can be understood as practical issues rather than as a neutral background condition. Not being invited in, not being granted flexibility, or not receiving extra support are not ‘nothing’; they are part of how unequal development positions are reproduced.

This resonates with the stories shared by some student-athletes who identified themselves as being in the ‘lower performance hierarchy’. In the interviews, they would share frustrations about how their schedules were not taken into consideration, or how flexibility and privileges granted the most talented sometimes undermined the learning environment for others. In such cases, and here I turn to the work of Annemarie Mol (2008), an overemphasis on individual choice as a problem-solving strategy can itself constitute a form of neglect, insofar as it obscures the ongoing relational work required to respond to people’s actual needs.

Building on this line of reasoning from a critical Foucauldian perspective, problem-solving strategies structured primarily around personal choice may act as an even stronger mechanism of social control (Bjørndal, 2026). It invite student-athletes to monitor and correct themselves in accordance with institutional norms, while leaving the underlying relations of power and domination shaping coach-athlete relationships untouched (Denison, 2007; Gearity et al., 2023; Griffiths et al., 2025). Knowing with any degree of assurance what is ‘right’ or ‘best’ remains the norm. As Mills, Campbell, et al. (2024) argue, even if athletes are placed at the centre of the coaching process and put on the throne, it is still a throne constructed by the coach and the dominant systems of knowledge. Knowing what is always expected and preferred, attentive young athletes ultimately do what their ‘expert’ coach would want them to do (Kilger & Jonsson, 2017; Øydna & Bjørndal, 2023).

This is not to say that taking responsibility within this power/knowledge nexus simply reduces to obedience. Rather, student-athletes' capacity to negotiate and move between these sometimes-conflicting ways of engaging with healthy, motivated, and performing bodies can be conceptualised as a contextually adaptive 'know-how' that is continually reworked in relation to shifting demands (Camiré, 2022). Student-athletes actively act upon power relations when they, for example, mobilise the rhetoric of long-term development to legitimise a decision; "I choose to rest today to become better tomorrow." Such actions, however, presuppose a finely tuned, situated awareness, because the discursive position from which student-athletes speak (as talent, injured, less committed, etc.), shapes how credible their justifications are perceived to be by others. Framing responsibility in this way, I purport, foregrounds the contextual and relational aspects of decision-making and invites a broader understanding of why making 'good choices' as a committed athlete is neither straightforward nor reducible to individual willpower or stable dispositions.

Overall, the empirical papers move beyond understanding commitment as the internal asset of an individual. Instead, this thesis provides insight into how athlete commitment is produced and sustained *relationally* between coaches, athletes, and through the tools, spaces, and discourses in which they are engaged. Building on this, a modest contribution of this thesis involves rethinking holistic talent development as an institutionalised constellation of specific technologies of knowledge, power, and the self. The value of such theorising, I believe, lies in how it brings athlete commitment and agency into dynamic tension. It reminds us that, although student-athletes may enjoy some agency in their dual career environments, the discursive conditions under which this agency becomes actionable are unequally distributed and rarely of their own choosing.

Suggestions for applied implications

The findings of this thesis have important potential practical implications. First, practitioners and school officials working within lower secondary sports schools could develop greater awareness of the tacit assumptions and environmental features that shape the day-to-day experience of student-athletes. This is an important first step to consider how power relations are reproduced through everyday routine practices (Avner et al., 2019).

To facilitate cultural change and expand what counts as legitimate commitment, coaches within sports schools and sports clubs could benefit from interventions that broaden their relational and discursive understanding of athlete commitment. To illustrate more concretely how lower secondary sports schools might engage more critically and ethically with these issues, I now introduce a series of guiding questions addressing selected areas of interest from this thesis. Drawing on Esmonde and Posbergh's (2025) example of how to 'think with' bioethics, I have adapted some of their questions to issues pertinent to dual career programmes in Table 3.

Table 3 Ethical reflection questions for dual career programmes.

What is the goal of the programme?	To foster the development of the whole person? To improve young people's knowledge of the holistic development of athletes? To improve young people's chances of accessing a type of elite sport environments?
What are the known and potential burdens?	What are the burdens for student-athletes who are submitting to a highly scheduled lifestyle? Social withdrawal due to emotional exhaustion? Loss of meaning or creativity? Fear of personal risks, such as injuries and energy-deficiency?
Can the burdens be minimised? Are there alternative approaches?	Can the burdens of a rigid schedule be minimised? Can student-athletes opt out of training? Can sport schools and sports clubs provide support that involve more flexibility? How do student-athletes think about these burdens, and do they see them as burdens?
Are the problem-solving solutions implemented fairly?	Are individualised solutions and dual career resources implemented fairly, or do those with talent status primarily benefit? Are the burdens fairly distributed? Who is included in determining what the policy is? Who is excluded? How is power in coach-athlete relationships considered?
How can the benefits and the burdens be fairly balanced?	How can the benefits of personal life skills, such as period planning, be balanced with structural or environment changes? What can be de-prioritised to prioritise school-club cooperations? How can scientific research be fairly considered alongside sociocultural conditions?

For these interventions to be effective, it is essential that coaches can reflect on how their coaching practices are formed, which athletes they privilege and marginalise through these practices, and where their preferences for certain types of athletes come from. It is therefore

important that coach education programmes explicitly cultivate critical reflexivity, encouraging coaches to interrogate how their own assumptions and everyday practices are shaped by historically, social, and scientific truth claims about talent, athlete commitment, and holistic development (Bjørndal, 2025; Mills, Kuklick, et al., 2024).

A second implication is that care should not be taken to be an individual responsibility. If student-athletes are repeatedly encouraged to prioritise rest and recovery, these priorities should likewise be reflected in the organisation of schedules, workloads, and shared expectations across clubs and schools concerning acceptable training loads and training quality. Acknowledging these possibilities is important for school officials, I purport, because it can create opportunities to reimagine and implement alternative forms of cooperation between sports schools and clubs. Such collaborations could intentionally provide greater flexibility, allowing student-athletes to spend more time with friends and gain access to new experiences outside of sport.

Third, drawing on the findings of this research project, as well as previous studies (e.g., Nikander et al., 2022; Poole et al., 2025; Skrubbyeltrang, 2019), I argue that efforts could be directed towards recruiting a more diverse group of student-athletes. This could help to enhance social awareness among student-athletes and potentially help prevent performance from becoming the dominant organising principle of peer interactions and hierarchies. Sport governing bodies and national decision-makers, such as Olympiatoppen and the Norwegian Ministry of Education could commit to providing greater flexibility to lower secondary sports schools in how they design entrance exams. More flexibility could allow schools to potentially reduce the marginalisation of ‘late bloomers’ in sport who are often overlooked in favour of early-developing athletes (Sweeney et al., 2024).

Finally, this thesis highlights the potential for facilitating alternative ways of thinking about empowering young athletes. The mobilisation of a non-reductionistic discourse where, as Thorpe and Clark (2020) suggest, both social-cultural and biological ways of knowing athletes’ sporting bodies are understood as inextricable entangled, could be critical for practicing more ethical forms of holistic development. Without such engagement, there is a risk of uncritically layering isolated best practice prescriptions (for training load, nutrition, sleep, mental skills, etc.) onto athletes’ daily routines, producing ever-expanding to-do lists.

Building on the thoughts of Avner, Jones and Brown (2025), a place to start would be to promote transdisciplinary frameworks that do not present ‘evidence-based’ coaching information in siloed manners as discrete entities (e.g. physiological vs. psychological considerations for coaching youth athletes). Designing frameworks that that embrace, rather

than eschews, the messiness of the biological as inextricable from the cultural, could help coaches in working more collaboratively with athletes.

These ideas could, for example, be implemented into the educational materials produced by sports schools and by knowledge brokers, such as Healthy Sport and the Oslo Sports Trauma Research Centre. Teaching practices could be designed to encourage athletes to engage with biomedical data thoughtfully rather than unquestionably, always with the aim of destabilising dominant ways of knowing medicalised, psychologised, and gendered sporting bodies (Kerr et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2025; Thorpe & Clark, 2020). Consideration should also be given to deciding at which educational level such critical work would be most appropriate.

The broader goal of opening multiple pathways to being a committed athlete nevertheless remains relevant across the school system. Consequently, these educational programmes could be designed to place greater emphasis on how, where, and when small acts of resistance against performance investment discourses in sport can be initiated and supported. Using the experiences of older athletes who have experimented with alternative athlete identities can be beneficial for such purposes (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2023; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2020).

Limitations and future research

I began my fieldwork by experimenting with observations, but within a relatively narrow scope. In retrospect, extending these observations across a wider range of everyday settings where student-athletes interact, could have provided me with additional insights into how athlete commitment is discursively practiced. I could, for example, have observed more classroom activities and the social interactions among student-athletes. Following individual student-athletes over the course of a day to experience their transitions between different settings (e.g., schools, clubs, and homes) may also have added valuable insights into how they engage in lifestyle choices in practice.

It should also be noted that the interviews in this research project were conducted in Norwegian. Certain linguistic nuances may therefore have been lost when translating the material to English. For example, the term *satser* is commonly used in everyday Norwegian to describe individuals who are actively pursuing a career in sport. It is a term that denotes an identity construction that extends beyond simply prioritising sport. Some youth athletes who are dedicated to their sport may not identify themselves as a *satser*. The closest translation in

English, in my opinion, is a *seriously committed athlete*, but even this does not fully convey the cultural and historical nuances and complexities which are associated with this term.

Building on calls for transdisciplinary collaborations and projects that considers how environments operate as complex adaptive systems with emergent qualities (Darpatova-Hruzewicz & Ryba, 2025; Stambulova et al., 2024), I see the potential in future research that further examine the claim that those in talent networks are granted wider margins within which they can play with a growth-oriented subjectivity. I also think future research projects involving lower secondary sports school could benefit from prioritising closer researcher-school collaborations. There is room for projects that examine both the short-term and long-term impacts of ethical practices designed to challenge the dominance of performance investment and open for other meanings in high-performance youth sport.

Taking inspiration from research that adopts new materialist approaches (Mol, 2008; Nelson et al., 2025; Thorpe & Clark, 2020), I am excited for research that explores new ways to account for the biocultural moving body – especially in regard to young female athletes taking part in the rapidly professionalising sports.

8 Coda

Fieldnotes, 4th of November 2022:

Mie and Erle are both busy writing in their training journals on their phones. I take a moment, uncertain whether to interrupt, but eventually, I go ahead. “Got any exciting plans for the weekend?” I ask, trying to keep my tone casual.

It takes a couple of seconds before Mie looks up and says, “We’ve got a match on Saturday.” Erle doesn’t look up but nods in agreement. They’re on the same team, and the match is against Caroline, one of their close classmates.

I recall what Erle mentioned last Friday. How there’s much focus on performance and comparison in their class. I decided to steer the conversation back to the weekend.

“What do you do when you’re not training or playing matches? What do you do when you have the whole day off?” I ask, hoping they’ll tell me something about life outside of sports.

“We usually end up doing some individual training,” Erle says, glancing briefly at Mie before finding eye contact with me.

I recognise this all too well myself, so I ask what might be considered a very leading question, “You don’t feel like you can skip training, do you?”

“Not really,” they reply while looking down on their phone again.

Mie speaks up shortly after. “That’s probably something we could work on”.

My Foucauldian reading of athlete commitment may well strike some as overly critical or one-sided, and that is a fair charge to level at me. I am, admittedly, somewhat critical. To be clear, my concern is not with the lower secondary sports schools per se; my impression is that these institutions manage to foster a sense of community that genuinely enriches many young people’s lives.

My concern rather lies with the fact that fourteen-year-olds can feel too guilty to skip training, and, more troubling still, that they have come to view it as their personal responsibility to ‘work’ on themselves to fix it. There should be other solutions available to them. I hope this thesis can make a modest contribution in that direction.

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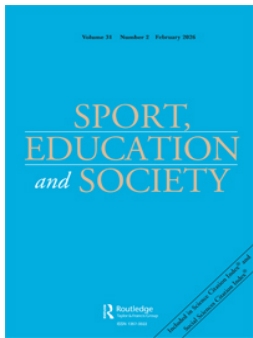
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Appendix 1
Papers 1, 2, and 3

Paper 1



Power, discourse, and practice: exploring athlete development as an educational discursive practice in a Norwegian lower secondary sports school

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Power, discourse, and practice: exploring athlete development as an educational discursive practice in a Norwegian lower secondary sports school

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ABSTRACT

Norwegian lower secondary sports schools offer athlete development programmes that have a dual focus, both on the sports development and the education of student-athletes. Critical analysis of these programmes is vital given that such offerings are shaped by multiple power relations that have both positive and problematic consequences. This qualitative study set within the context of a Norwegian lower secondary sports school seeks to offer novel insights related to how policy and coaching practices for athlete development are informed by broader discourses within a school setting. The study has two main objectives: (a) to explore the discourses that school coaches draw on in their construction of the 'ideal' student-athlete, and (b) to investigate the disciplinary potential of the individual-oriented practices utilised to regulate and enforce student-athletes' adherence to the requisite norms. We have adopted a Foucauldian-inspired theoretical framework to examine the sociocultural construction of particular 'types' of student-athletes. The sports programme, we argue, seeks to educate *responsible* student-athletes who are capable of making rational decisions about their individual training and healthcare. However, this individualised responsibility can be a problematic ideal because it constitutes a form of institutional governance achieved through self-governance. As such, in a school setting, it operates as a way both to encourage and condition the ways in which student-athletes can develop and adapt in creative, meaningful, and appropriate ways.

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Introduction

In the past decade, Norway has witnessed a significant expansion of private lower secondary sports schools which are funded by state subsidies and annual parental contributions. This trend has seen adolescents aged from 12 to 16 years offered opportunities to blend sport-specific and general sports training into their compulsory education. Studies of the dual career pathways of student-athletes indicate that the impact of sports schools on athlete development are multiple and diverse. In their review of sports schools' impact on holistic athlete development, Thompson et al. (2022)

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concluded that these institutions can foster positive dual career experiences among student-athletes. This positive outlook is attributed to the increased physical development, flexibility and support provided within a school environment. At the same time, dual track development can also be problematic for student-athletes as it places additional pressure on them to excel in both areas (Linnér et al., 2021).

In Norway, sports schools are state approved venues where young, talented athletes can learn and understand the lifestyle expectations and behavioural requirements of being an elite athlete. This official legitimisation indicates that these institutions are shaped not only by national educational policies but also by the values and ideals associated with elite sports (Kårhus, 2019). Given the prevailing emphasis of educational policies on the development of effective and responsible individuals, sports schools can be viewed as efficient 'systems' for institutionalising neoliberal rationalities and governance concerning athlete development (Nielsen et al., 2022).

A handful of studies have highlighted how athlete development programmes endorse rationalities and pedagogies that shape training regimes to prepare student-athletes for a commitment to sports (Brown, 2015a, 2017; Costa et al., 2024). This approach illustrates the disciplinary potential of these institutions amidst contextual variations (e.g. Hatteberg, 2018; Olesen & Treumer Gregersen, 2022). To the extent that these institutions establish, convey and perpetuate norms and 'truths' about athlete development via specific favoured discourses and pedagogical practices, these institutions may serve to stabilise power relations in which certain behaviours and identities are favoured and others are marginalised (Brown & Macdonald, 2008).

Scholars have demonstrated, for example, how coaching practices are shaped by biased gender discourses (see, for example, Saarinen et al., 2023) that shape how female student-athletes build a discursive construction of their future selves, reproducing gender inequalities in male-dominated sports (Kavoura & Ryba, 2020; Schmitt et al., 2024). Moreover, research shows that student-athletes in lower secondary sports school programmes encounter a 'hidden curriculum' of favoured conduct such as being goal-oriented and time-efficient, and that this contributes significantly to the formation of specific subjectivities and self-conduct (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2016). Cumulatively, these processes and expectations of athlete development within sports schools give rise to distinct power dynamics that define what constitutes acceptable and preferred behaviours for young student-athletes (Brown, 2016).

In this paper, we therefore direct attention towards the educational discourses that inform individual athlete development practices at a lower secondary sports school. Our focus is to better understand how a sports school contributes to constructing ideals and enforcing norms for behaviour, and how these might create and constrain student-athletes' possibilities to develop in creatively and meaningful ways. This study thus has two main objectives: (a) to explore the discourses that school coaches draw upon in their construction of the 'ideal' student-athlete, and (b) to investigate the disciplinary potential of the individual-oriented practices utilised to regulate and enforce student-athletes' adherence to the requisite norms.

By adopting a Foucauldian-inspired theoretical framework that recognises the sociocultural influences involved in the formation of particular 'types' of student-athletes, this study seeks to offer a deeper understanding of how statements and practices related to athlete development in a lower secondary sports school are discursive and entangled with power. Importantly, the purpose of this study is to provide empirical insights that can help lower secondary sports schools to improve their policies and practices related to athlete development.

Power, knowledge, and practices

Our study is rooted in a Foucauldian-inspired post-structuralist framework that seeks to examine how power is expressed, sustained, and reinforced through specific discursive practices. We seek also to emphasise how different discourses contribute to the construction of what are regarded as reasonable or unreasonable actions, desires, and identities for student-athletes (Markula & Pringle, 2006). According to Foucauldian theory, power is transmutable, dynamic and relational:

In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future (Foucault, 1982, p. 789).

As such, Foucault conceptualised power as a pervasive, capillary-like network that permeates through institutions without being explicitly localised to particular people, elements or actions (Foucault, 1999). However, Foucault's primary concern lies not in defining the essence or origin of power but in elucidating how power operates, through which practices and statements, and its intended and unintended consequences (Foucault, 2007). Likewise, we are intrigued by the educational objective of sports schools in shaping young individuals into future elite athletes because it exemplifies the significant impact that targeting the minds and routines of individuals can wield.

In this paper, the concept of a *discourse* refers to sets of statements, knowledge, and practices that determine what is considered to be true or false, normal or abnormal, and who is listened to or silenced within specific socio-historical contexts. As such, we view discourses as exercising the power to deviate, distort, and privilege certain identities over others, and affect how individuals regulate *themselves* through their own thoughts, feelings, and actions (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

Scholars have already examined how discourses in several sporting contexts have led to the establishment of normative 'ideals' (e.g. Manley et al., 2016; McMahon & Barker-Ruchti, 2017; Shogan, 1999), including, for example, the notion that talented athletes are people who should show modesty and grit in addition to their sport-specific potential (Kilger, 2019). For female student-athletes, in particular, the pressure to conform has been further exacerbated by the emergence of a 'superwomen ideal' in dual-career discourses in which women are expected to succeed in a combined trajectory of high-performance sport *and* education (Ronkainen et al., 2021).

Consequently, discourses impact on how subjectivities are sustained and mirrored, especially when particular interpretations of what constitutes an 'ideal' student-athlete are promoted by coaches and teachers via their practices of governance.¹ Importantly, such structural influences do not diminish the role or impact of an individual's own efforts to shape and develop herself or himself within such systems (Weedon, 1997). Power relations, Foucault argued, are also potentially productive and not simply sources of restriction or restraint (Foucault, 1982). This is important to recognise within the context of athlete development – and dual career research – because it enables a more subtle tracing of the power dynamics through which coaches and student-athletes are subjected to, and affected by, particular discourses and subjectivities, and the opportunities that these provide for negotiation and self-expression.

Methods

Research design

We used a case study design to explore athlete development within the context of one Norwegian lower secondary sports school. This allowed us to examine the complexity of athlete development from multiple perspectives and to develop a more nuanced understanding of the social processes that shape student-athletes' everyday realities (Thomas, 2021). Our units of analysis were the foundational assumptions, the intended learning outcomes, and the practices that are integral to athlete development within this school's sports programme. Our units of observation were the athlete development policy documents of the programme, the coaches' attitudes towards – and experiences with – athlete development in a school setting, and the pedagogical practices and strategies that were used during the school training sessions. The Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (reference number 618455) and the Ethics Review Board of the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences provided the ethical approval for this study.

Case study selection and participants

The school was chosen strategically based on specific criteria, namely that it: (a) attracted a substantial number of applicants, (b) was integrated into a comprehensive sports school organisation, (c) was geographically accessible and conducive to extended research fieldwork, and (d) was a sports school organisation that demonstrated a willingness to partake actively in the study. The sports school held a positional advantage over other schools due to its strategic admission process, profiled coaches, and the sports school organisation's successful track record in producing elite athletes. For an overview of the political landscape of sport school structures specific to Norway, see Kristiansen and Houlihan (2017).

To initiate the study, contact was made with school officials and consent was obtained to present information about the research project to three 9th-grade classes through a combination of verbal and written communication. Subsequently, 76 student-athletes, aged 14 to 15 years, participated in the observation phase after informed consent was obtained electronically from both the student-athletes and at least one of their parents. Additionally, ten coaches, who were involved with the training sessions of the 9th-grade classes, provided written consent for themselves to participate in observations and interviews.

Five female coaches (A, B, E, G, H) and two male coaches (C, D) were selected to participate in group interviews due to their pivotal roles in the training sessions. All participants held an academic degree at the bachelor's or master's level in pedagogy or sports sciences, and all brought a wealth of experience from both team and individual sports, either as former elite athletes or club coaches. Furthermore, they were engaged nearly full-time at the school, with responsibilities extending beyond training sessions (i.e. teaching other subjects, coordinating with parents, planning training, student-athlete follow-up, and school marketing). A subset of them also served as club coaches in the afternoons.

Context

All lower secondary sports schools fall under the jurisdiction of the Norwegian Directorate of Education. The private ownership of these sports schools is a distinctive feature compared to other public schools in Norway. Their unique status grants them the autonomy to customise their sports programmes according to their own specific visions and goals, and to select strategically which students to admit to the programme. Nevertheless, students receive a general academic education similar to that offered in regular lower secondary schools.

Furthermore, these institutions are required by the Norwegian Directorate of Education to distinguish themselves from other educational offerings by incorporating academic outcome goals related to athlete development in three interrelated physical education curricula: (a) physical activity and health, (b) physical education, and (c) the development of youth athletes. This structure offers an alternative to an elite athlete model by providing coaches with an educational purpose beyond a reductionistic approach focused solely on training athletes (for further discussion, see Brown, 2015b). However, central educational aspects of physical education, such as health, are closely tied to the objective of athlete development (i.e. injury prevention and promoting healthy behaviours within the realm of sports).

Training sessions at this school are typically conducted four mornings per week, starting between 8 and 10 AM, and lasting for 75 min. The sessions are either sport-specific (e.g. football, golf), or focused on developing general physical capacities (e.g. strength and conditioning). The first two curricula are implemented during strength and conditioning sessions, while the last curriculum is utilised exclusively during sport-specific sessions. The coaches assign grades to the student-athletes by assessing their performance in meeting the learning objectives during both training sessions and related theoretical assignments. School trainings complement the trainings and competitions offered across other organisational contexts in which the student-athletes participate, including

clubs, regional initiatives, and national-level talent development pathways (Bjørndal et al., 2017). The remainder of the school day is dedicated to classroom activities. In the afternoon, the student-athletes return home to relax, prepare for their upcoming training session, and occasionally set aside time to study for forthcoming school tests.

Data collection

The initial data collection of our study took place over a three-month observation phase which was undertaken during a period of self-directed training for student-athletes.² The first author observed two theoretical lectures about training planning given to the student-athletes by the coaches, 15 strength and conditioning sessions, and four sport-specific training sessions. The observations focused on: (a) the organisation and selection of the practices by the coaches and student-athletes; (b) the communication of knowledge terminology, expectations, values, and ideals; (c) the social interactions between the student-athlete peers and their coaches; and (d) the identification of pedagogical rituals. Fieldnotes were written by the first author after each session.

The first author conducted two group interviews. Group A included Coaches E, G, and H, while Group B comprised Coaches A, B, C, and D. The composition of these groups was based on the availability and schedules of the coaches. The group interviews were organised around two themes: (a) the role of the school's sports programme in the development of the youth athletes, and (b) the programme's pedagogical practices and strategies.

At the same time, the first author conducted a preliminary examination of the programme's policy regarding athlete talent development. This analysis was intended to explore the discursive influences that shaped the coaches' practices. This process extended to a review of documents that were foundational to the programme's policy, written by external organisations. These included the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee's guidelines for youth athlete talent development³, and the youth athlete healthcare principles found on web pages published by the school's collaborative authoritative bodies, namely Healthy Sports [Sunn Idrett]⁴, and the Oslo Sports Trauma Research Centre [Skadefri]^{5,6}. The intention of our document analysis was to explore how the school's policy proposals are articulated and the ways in which the underlying assumptions which underpin them are represented. This content served as the contextual backdrop for our subsequent analysis (See Supplementary Material 1).

Analysis

Using a post-structural methodology, we applied the principles and phases of reflexive, thematic analysis in our study to facilitate an iterative analytical process (Braun et al., 2016). The fieldnotes and interview transcripts were first analysed inductively by the first author to explore the discursive construction of what constituted 'ideal' student-athletes by the coaches. Semantic codes were initially employed to structure the coaches' statements regarding athlete development. Subsequently, the first author generated codes representing shared meanings underlying these statements, particularly related to how athlete development was conceptualised within the framework of the sports school's educational objective to cultivate future elite athletes.

We then discussed and linked these codes to broader discourses related to sport and education (i.e. healthcare for development purposes in sport). Secondly, the first author analysed the coded material deductively by utilising a Foucauldian analytical perspective, which was focused on the disciplinary potential of discursive practices and the coaches' governing strategies. During the next phases of the study, we developed themes that represented broader patterns within the coaches' discursive meanings. We agreed on two central analytical themes, each related to the research questions, underpinned by relevant subthemes. Throughout the analytical process, we critically examined our own preconceptions related to athlete development and the dual career pathway,

particularly the first author, who is a female student-athlete herself, and receives an education which combines academia with elite sports training.

Findings

We constructed two main themes from the data material, which we aim to problematise: (a) the ideal of the responsible student-athlete, and (b) self-directed training as a practice of empowerment. The first theme we discuss below under two subthemes related to the different discursive constructions of responsibility. The second theme we explore below as two subthemes that focus on the technologies and pedagogical strategies employed to govern student-athletes' responsible behaviours.

The ideal of the responsible student-athlete

As the first author's fieldwork progressed and she became more immersed in the educational objectives of the school's sports programme, she recognised that the student-athletes were situated, as learners, in a way that, from our experience, departed from the singular orientation of 'improve-performance-training' that is common to talent development programmes. Several learning objectives were embedded in the curricula. These addressed the student-athletes' physical capacity, their social skills, and the knowledge required for individual development and healthcare. The aspirational goal of the school as an educational institution was to develop *responsible* student-athletes who would be equipped with the necessary competencies to individualise and optimise their athletic development and their dual career lifestyle. The coaches we interviewed articulated these coexisting rationalities regarding the importance for student-athletes learning how to take responsibility for their own actions.

Acting according to the (scientific) book

Responsibility was recognised by the coaches as being an essential personal skill that was crucial for student-athletes to master in order to achieve success in sport. Coach B noted, for example:

We must develop students that learn to train and that take responsibility for their own development, and students who can be critical of the training programmes they will encounter in the future. Because being critical of something is what leads to development. (Coach B, Interview with Group B)

For this coach, the ability to think critically and to take responsibility, was rooted in postpositivist assumptions about a clear distinction between what is 'right' and 'wrong', and of *knowing* what training quality is. In this discourse of talent development, responsibility meant that student-athletes needed to learn to 'train by the (scientific) book' to ensure effective performance development. In the policy documents we reviewed, frequent references were made to bioscientific disciplines (encompassing physiology, biomechanics, nutrition, psychology, and medicine, for example), the communication of normative guidelines related to recommended actions (the 'do's') and actions that were to be discouraged (the 'don'ts') of physical training and the recovery of the adolescent body. The first author observed in her fieldnotes that after the first session of self-directed training, these bioscientific guidelines were communicated as explicit rules to the student-athletes:

Coach E has gathered the class to reflect about training exercises and training load. [...] A student-athlete proposes a drop-jump exercise. Coach E pauses for a second. She writes it on the board, only to swiftly erase it. She explains to the class that this is the most intensive approach to training explosiveness and thus something they should avoid. 'Do you remember the amount of jumps you're allowed to have throughout a session?' She writes 100-200 on the board behind her. 'This is maximum amount of jumps we are to do in our training sessions'. (Fieldnotes, first author)

Responsibility, as these notes indicate, was viewed as something that was closely aligned with *personal accountability* – in other words, the ability of individual student-athletes to be answerable for

the outcomes of their conduct. Informed by health discourses related to athlete development, the coaches we interviewed understood individualised knowledge development among student-athletes as being the most important and effective way to prevent injuries and energy deficiency. Although the school's sports programme focused on the regulation of training intensity, the student-athletes were, ultimately, seen by the coaches as being primarily responsible, both for the management of their own overall workload and for recognising the importance and need for proper recovery. Throughout her fieldwork, the first author noted that the coaches arranged formal and informal lectures about nutrition, sleep and recovery, and physical growth and maturation. The purpose of these sessions was to ensure that student-athletes, both presently and in the future, were able to demonstrate accountability in their decision-making regarding their own training load and healthcare:

I [the first author] had heard 'June', a talented student-athlete in her sport, state her tiredness two-three times [in] this training session. Close to the end of the session, I overheard Coach E talk to her about training load management. She seemed worried that 'June' had trained as much as she had this week, especially since she had been sick. Coach E spent some time educating her on how the body is less robust when sick. (Fieldnotes, first author)

As these bodies of knowledge align with normative guidelines established by authoritative scientific entities like the Norwegian Olympic Committee, Healthy Sports, and the Oslo Sports Trauma Research Centre, coaches may perceive them as objective truths and integrate them into their coaching methodologies. Consequently, coaches situationally reproduced postpositivist assumptions of viewing the body-as-machine, thereby reinforcing power dynamics wherein student-athletes depend on knowledge sanctioned by authorities.

Know what's right for yourself

Coach H, in comparison, placed a strong emphasis on the importance of developing autonomous, self-determined athletes:

[The objective is for athletes] to become their own coach. That they know what's best for themselves. Not [just to listen to] what a random coach says, but to somehow manage to make informed decisions. At least when they reach the elite sport level. That they are better prepared for all the choices they are exposed to. (Coach H, Interview with Group A)

The acquisition of knowledge by young people was recognised as being crucial for student-athletes because it enabled better decision making outside the school's network of power relations, in their encounters with future coaches. The coaches' reasonings, informed by neoliberal educational values, suggested that individual growth occurred at different paces and was dependent on how student-athletes regulated themselves to effectively interact with the demands made on them. Fieldnotes, written by the first author during the student-athletes' self-directed training period, included the observation that self-regulation was used by the coaches as a pedagogical construct to develop student-athletes' competencies in decision-making:

I asked Coach D whether it's normal for the coaches to correct student-athletes' training plans if their exercises don't meet quality standards. Coach D pauses briefly, then emphasises that the student-athletes aren't evaluated based on the quality of exercise selection. He highlights their young age, stating, 'They are only 9th graders. It is still quite young'. He further adds that students are given the opportunity to practice self-regulation to a greater extent, focusing on reflection and the capacity to adjust as the central aspects of assessment.

We contend that the coach's statement that the student-athletes were 'only 9th graders' and that their age 'is still quite young,' indicated the use of a subtle exercise of disciplinary power and observation – an expression of the observation, measurement and correction, in other words, of the changes that the student-athletes were undergoing to become 'desired' athletes in the future. As such, the statement hints at an underlying assumption made by the coaches that maturity is a factor that can limit a student-athlete's capacity to behave with 'total' responsibility. Furthermore,

we assert that the coaches' choice to assess student-athletes' self-regulatory practices produce moral codes that shape the student-athletes' social performances, promoting them to be reflective, structured, and effective.

Self-directed training as a practice of empowerment?

At the school, the self-directed training period was designed as a formal learning activity. The purpose of the period was to empower student-athletes to take responsibility for the processes associated with training at school. Its primary purpose was to instruct them in how to formulate individually oriented training plans that would conform to the established training and healthcare principles of achieving athlete 'best practice'. During her fieldwork, the first author noticed several interconnected technologies that were being employed by coaches that enabled them to influence, both directly and indirectly, the choices that the student-athletes were making. These are discussed below.

Governance through self-governance

The self-directed training period began with an initial theory session in which the coaches introduced the training programming to the student-athletes. In this session, the coaches provided details about the *systematic* application of goalsetting. We perceive this as an endeavour to reconcile student-athletes' personal aspirations with the programme's overarching objective of developing them into future elite athletes. Fieldnotes taken by the first author during this theory session included the following observations:

We are in the middle of the theory lecture about training planning when one of the school coaches requests the student-athletes to turn their attention inward. They are to judge their sport-specific capacities, development desires and training preferences to find their motivational sources for the training period. Then, the student-athletes are directed to materialise these inner thoughts into two SMART goals (specific, measurable, attractive, realistic, and time-bound). However, their attention soon turns outward as the coaches again remind them of the rules; 'No heavy lifting! Remember, no less than eight repetitions due to your maturation. And you can only do explosive work when you are fully rested'. (Fieldnotes, first author)

All the available training planning technologies were outlined, including: goalsetting and analyses of sport-specific work capacity relevant to the selection of exercises, sets and repetitions; the timeframe and space available for school training; the criteria by which student-athletes would be assessed and graded (i.e. effort); the use of a training diary (i.e. an evaluation of their Rate of Perceived Exertion); the need for recovery; and a consideration of the overall training schedule. Collectively, these technologies formed a 'machine' of interlocking components. The intention of teaching the student-athletes these appeared to be to encourage them to approach training with a *cause-and-effect* rationale in mind. In her fieldnotes, the first author reasoned that the purpose of this collective machinery was linked to the creation of an overall 'best practice' that needed to be recognised and understood by student-athletes. Further, the aim was to help the student-athletes to connect related norms to the decisions they made, so that these were informed by their own conscience. The process, as such, acted as an attempt to implement a distinct form of discipline through self-governance. The first author noted:

Coach E and Coach B provide final instructions before the commencement of self-directed training, emphasising the significance of maintaining a training diary. Coach E explains to the student-athletes that they should document all their training sessions, extending beyond school training. 'If you aspire to become an elite athlete, or in general, it's crucial to utilise the training diary as a tool for monitoring your training load,' Coach E emphasises. There's a momentary pause as she introduces the term 'elite athlete', acknowledging that not all students may aspire to or achieve this status. (Fieldnotes, first author)

We contend that this coach's emphasis on the aspiration of becoming an 'elite athlete' demonstrated the dominance of an elite performance narrative at the school over the alternative narrative of becoming a 'general' recreational athlete. Although the coaches articulated an acceptance of

alternative developmental pathways, they also stressed in the interviews we conducted that the key objective of the school's sport programme was to produce future elite athletes. Thus, both explicitly and implicitly, the expectation placed upon the ambitious student-athletes was that they would be encouraged to perform in accordance with a particular code of conduct that would lead them, ultimately, to becoming elite athletes.

The first author noted further during her fieldwork that the coaches often used carefully chosen questions and statements when helping student-athletes become more attentive and to teach them about self-surveillance. These included, for example, questions such as: 'How does your pain feel?' or 'How fatigued are you after yesterday's match?'. On the surface, the intention of such questions was to encourage student-athletes to become more aware of the need to care for themselves and of the importance of regulating their training. However, such prompts served also to subtly affect the decisions the student-athletes made about recovery routines, nudging them towards an understanding and acceptance of best practice. As such, they served also as ways to govern, and monitor, student-athletes via a form of self-governance.

Governing alternative enactments of responsibility

For some student-athletes, demonstrating responsibility on their developmental journey involved not just finding a balance between their commitments but pushing back against the excessive and serious demands inherent in pursuing a dual career. The coaches recognised that the pressures the student-athletes faced in the club environments outside of school were serious and demanding. The coaches were amenable to the creation of more generalised training plans for these student-athletes, *if* doing so could be aligned with the school's own educational aim of attaining systematic training skills. One commented:

We have [a] footballer now whose goal is to do a backflip because that's what [he] wanted to do. I also saw that the same person did pull-ups in the strength training, while it's actually technical training on basic lifts that he should [prioritise] to develop, erm, speed at a later age. But if [a] backflip and pull-ups are what motivates that student ... and the purpose behind the self-directed training period is also to [...] understand what [systematic] training planning is all about, then I'm at least very positive toward the fact that they choose something that they want to do. (Coach B, Group B interview)

The coaches also expressed an awareness to the first author of the risks that excessive conformity posed to the well-being of the student-athletes. They noted that they were willing to intervene if a student-athlete became overly fixated, for example, on strictly adhering to training 'correctly' or, more generally, if student-athletes seemed to lack motivation. Most notably, the coaches acknowledged the importance of their role as authority figures and were open to teaching student-athletes how to *allow themselves* to have more fun:

Coach H: The really good students who, for example, during a self-directed training period, are very like ... erm ... do, for example, explosive training here in the gymnastics venue. Why not have a fun goal that's gymnastic-like and just play around for an hour. [...] I often say to the best [students] that 'you just have to play more' in the gymnastics venue.

Interviewer: What is the response then?

Coach H: They're like: 'Oh, I can do that?' or something like you say, that they're a little surprised because they're maybe a little too used to being at their best and 'on' all the time. So that is one of the most important things I say to those who have only straight A's. That they must play more. I think it's important that an adult or a coach tells them this, because then it's okay in a way (chuckles). They had never figured it out themselves. (Coach H, Group A interview)

Consequently, the coaches draw upon the idea of 'fun' as a solution, either when responding to motivational problems, or as a way to address perceived perfectionistic tendencies. However, the coaches seemed not to be conscious of how the self-directed training period were also characterised by an inherent imbalance of disciplinary power that reproduced and normalised the notion that effective training was key to holistic athlete development.

Thus far, we have highlighted the hybridised focus of the school on educating *and* developing student-athletes. We have also explored the inherent contradiction of advocating for the importance of responsible, self-governing student-athletes within a development framework that is shaped by discursive constructions and norms. Postpositivist and humanist foundational assumptions about what constitutes 'responsibility', as we have suggested, are expressed through a strategy of governing self-governance. We turn now to a closer discussion of the potential consequences and implications of these findings.

Discussion

In this study, our first aim was to explore the discourses that school coaches draw upon in their construction of the 'ideal' student-athlete. We found that the coaches at the school drew upon inter-linked discourses when explaining what they understood student-athlete responsibility to be. Foremost, the coaches at the school appeared to be strongly influenced by the dominant neoliberal values of Norwegian education policy, which stress the centrality and importance of individualised, self-regulated learning (Riese et al., 2020). Responsibility, for the coaches, was associated with enabling the individual, personal choices and freedoms of the individual student-athletes. As they saw it, their key objective was to *ensure* that student-athletes could secure their own safety and 'best practice' in matters of development, health, and motivation – even within the confines of the normative expectations of the school's sport programme.

Secondly, the sports school's objective of developing future elite athletes meant, inevitably, that the actions of the coaches were informed by postpositivist rationales of athlete development and coaching. The school's athlete talent development policy document, and other external policy documents that are foundational to the school's programme, were strongly informed by postpositivist perspectives in which the body is framed as a biological and psychological entity that must be shaped in ways that ensure maximum effectiveness and productivity (Mills et al., 2020). Further, the coaches' regulation of 'correct best practice' knowledge in the training regimes reflected an understanding of sport participation that was outcome-oriented. By reproducing norms of effectivity and control for long-term development (Barker-Ruchti et al., 2014), the student-athletes are being taught to expect that their bodies would perform at a certain time and with a certain intensity. Encouraging student-athletes to be responsible and accountable for the development goals they set for themselves might be a well-intended objective. However, the strong undercurrents of post-positivist discourses within athlete development serve to undercut this objective by assuming that learning and development can be predicted, controlled, and monitored.

It is important to question who truly benefits from constructing responsibility as an educational, yet individually focused, goal. The notion of responsibility advocated by the school is embedded within a humanist notion of the independent self – student-athletes, in other words, who are able to act autonomously and are informed by a clearly articulated sense of self and self-interest. However, in lower secondary sports schools and other settings that seek to professionalise youth sports, it is important to critically examine the appropriateness and reasonableness of burdening young individuals with this role. Nielsen et al. (2022) argue that neoliberal educational policies situate student-athletes within a dual track of achieving success and create an expectation that student-athletes need to be dedicated to, and focused on, development in both their education and sports training. The effect of such dual pressures creates the potential for unintended consequences, especially burnout (Kuokkanen et al., 2022), and individualised solutions, such as producing 'more responsible student-athletes', we contend, could possibly exacerbate these demands. Instead, alternative strategies that are geared towards more structural changes could be explored. We suggest that these include, for example, adapting student-athletes' training environments to accommodate changing needs and wants (Kerr et al., 2021), improved coordination and communication between school and club settings (Hagum et al., 2023), and educating coaches to plan, coach and evaluate student-athletes in more flexible and ethical ways (Bjørndal & Ronglan, 2019).

The ambiguity of responsibility

The coaches we interviewed seemed convinced that governing through individually-based responsibility was a way of delegating empowerment to student-athletes and allowing them an opportunity to experience self-determination. However, from a Foucauldian perspective, governing student-athletes' abilities in this way can become problematic for (at least) two reasons.

Firstly, an institution, such as a sports school, risks encouraging student-athletes to judge themselves according to a set of corrective rules as they strive to become 'better' athletes and/or students (Brown, 2016; Rose & Lentzos, 2017). This is potentially problematic because such student-athletes are thus effectively required to work, learn and play inside a system that is governed by an overall imperative to know, measure, conquer, or facilitate choices that are deemed 'effective'. As Ronkainen et al. (2020) suggest, this leaves few opportunities for them to explore or negotiate personal experiences or subjectivities. In many ways, relying on a sense of self-responsibility in student-athletes and making them accountable for their own productivity and health reflects an instrumentalised and oversimplified conceptualisation of the intricate relationship between learning, development, and performance. While this performance narrative may be motivational and appropriate for some student-athletes, it can also prevent others from voicing their desires or concerns (Carless & Douglas, 2013).

Secondly, the stated imperative of sport schools to develop holistic, self-determined student-athletes is unlikely to be achieved without the presence of practices that can actively help them to challenge more traditional power relations and the effects they exert on their bodies (Denison et al., 2017). Sports schools seek to foster constructive and independent thinking and to help students to navigate their way through dual career environments in holistic and appropriate ways. However, from a Foucauldian point of view, fostering narrow possibilities for enacting responsibility within such school environments serves, in effect, to simply shift visible and direct control away from the coaches, and transforms it instead into a more subtle form of governance through self-management.

Because of the networked power relations of the Norwegian youth sport system, we encourage a wider reflection on the seemingly tacit acceptance of the sports schools' role in reproducing 'best practice' development structures. An intriguing possibility is restructuring these institutions into sites focused on, for example, educating young people to question and problematise the assumptions and interests about what it is to be an 'elite athlete' and the centrality of the objective of needing to become one (Brown, 2015b; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2020). By heightening the awareness of school coaches and other involved actors about the power dynamics embedded in performance discourses and dual career environments, we advocate that lower secondary sports schools could become an important contributor in challenging outcome-oriented and instrumentalised athlete development practices.

Exploring the potential of self-directed training

The second aim of this study was to explore the disciplinary potential of the individual-oriented practices utilised to regulate and enforce student-athletes' adherence to the requisite norms. Because of their lack of emphasis on competitive performance, Norwegian sports schools have been recognised as valuable potential settings for prioritising individual needs in ways that are more flexible, compared to other talent development initiatives (Bjørndal & Gjesdal, 2020).

At the school, several disciplinary instruments, such as coach surveillance and monitoring (i.e. grading), were applied. However, the self-directed training period in this less competitive environment, it could be argued, could also be seen as having greater potential for transformation, because there are more spaces and opportunities for coaches and student-athletes to establish more subtle, coexistent understandings of how responsibility can be enacted.

During the observed period, the student-athletes were exposed to discursive practices of athlete development, health, and motivation, which yield different ways to rationalise their choices while still living up to the expected norms for behaviour. These choices covered a multitude of entangled, complex considerations which ranged from risk calculations (about, for example, sustaining an injury or being hampered by a lack of motivation) to the potential of the material elements available (the amount of open space, for example, for spontaneous movement at the gymnastic venue). The shifting of responsibility in these settings, it could therefore be argued, could allow for multiple (and even conflicting) ways to demonstrate responsibility as part of their training and performance development.

We argue, therefore, that self-directed training could be designed to be more of an explorative educational encounter, in which less emphasis is placed on reproducing techno-rational knowledge systems. Coaches then need to shift their focus from managing the performance and productivity of athletic bodies, towards disciplinary mechanisms and power dynamics that promote more explorative modes of behaviour, which could, potentially, be valuable to some student-athletes' wellbeing, learning, and engagement (Mills et al., 2020; Ronkainen et al., 2020).

However, how student-athletes respond to such opportunities in these less pressurised environments, and whether they are able to react in developmentally appropriate ways in such spaces is uncertain. Student-athletes may find it difficult, for instance, to maintain a suitable social performance or demonstrate to others, through their choices, that they are 'good' athletes or students (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). Even within such settings, the student-athletes must still negotiate a balance between the risks of overuse and injury with the need to be seen as promising and committed (Øydna & Bjørndal, 2023).

Limitations and directions for future research

Our study has explored the power dynamics which help to enforce specific ways of understanding and practising athlete development. We have not presented a broader analysis of the dual career discourse (i.e. combination of academic education and sports). However, it is important to note that the hybridisation of education and sports in the Norwegian sport school system is discursively integrated, unlike in other sport school contexts (Kristiansen & Houlihan, 2017). Our ambition was not to reinforce an assumption that these other institutions prioritise sports over academics, but we recognise that this study could have benefited from a broader examination of the dual career environment and an exploration of the interrelation between education and sport, between sport school and club activities. We recognise, too, the potential value of examining how a sense of athlete responsibility is constructed and performed by student-athletes in other settings. Nevertheless, we argue that an in-depth exploration of what athlete development implies in a lower secondary sports school context is equally important to understanding the impact of such schools on how student-athletes shape their lives in the present and orientations for the future.

We suggest future studies should also critically explore the experiences of young student-athletes so that their voices can also be heard. In particular, it would be valuable to deepen our understanding of how student-athletes take part in processes of subjectification; how they understand the ideal of responsibility, how they come to recognise their moral obligations as student-athletes, and how they work upon themselves in order to become ethical subjects (e.g. Costa et al., 2024; McMahon & DinanThompson, 2011; Nielsen & Thing, 2019; Ojala, 2020). Contextual investigations of such topics will help to determine the future potential impacts that such sports programmes have on student-athlete and on the holistic potential of athlete development.

Final thoughts

Our study has shed light on a complex interplay between education and athlete development within a Norwegian lower secondary sports school. This hybridised approach, we found, promotes the ideal

of the individualised, responsible student-athlete, a construct that is reinforced through various discourses such as educational, health, and athlete development. The sports programme's affiliation with authoritative bodies presents a distinct social and political dimension, subjecting student-athletes to norms that are rooted in postpositivist and humanist assumptions of responsibility as an educational ideal.

We have examined these pedagogical practices through a Foucauldian lens and contend that the emphasis which is placed on the *individual* responsibility of student-athletes can be viewed as a disciplinary strategy designed to shape (and perpetuate) a specific 'type' of student-athlete through a strategy of self-governance. This research has provided valuable contextual insights and has also highlighted the need for further explorations of the power dynamics that are inherent in educational athlete development processes. Our findings serve as a starting point for this continued exploration, offering new perspectives on the intricate process of athlete development within a lower secondary sport school.

Notes

1. The practice of governing others involves using a range of technologies and strategies to guide and regulate behaviour, essentially controlling 'the conduct of conduct' (Rose, 1996, p. 29). In the context of a sports school, examples of practices that regulate the behaviour of student-athletes include training – and development-plans, school assignments, and time schedules.
2. The self-directed training period is an integral component of their formal curricula and evaluation process. These sessions are scheduled during school hours, with coaches present, alongside fellow student-athletes. Links to external documents foundational to the programme's policy:
3. <https://olympiatoppen.no/fagomrader/talentutvikling/utviklingsfilosofi/innledning/>
4. <https://sunnidrett.no/hva-vil-det-si-a-spise-smart/>
5. <https://www.skadefri.no/felles/belastningsstyring/>
6. <https://www.skadefri.no/felles/restitusjon/>

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Paper 2

'I would have studied while I showered': A Foucauldian reading of how young student-athletes regulate their free time

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Abstract

Achieving athletic and educational goals, maintaining well-being, and leading a 'balanced' private life are key ambitions promoted in dual career policy. Yet, for young student-athletes, these holistic intentions are blurred by demands to train more, recover efficiently, and remain academically competitive. Drawing on Foucault's concept of power/knowledge and focus-group interviews with 25 student-athletes (aged 15–16), we examine the forms of knowledge through which young student-athletes regulate their free time. Our analysis shows that student-athletes predominantly reproduce dual career discourses that position time efficiency as an ethical solution to balancing sport and school. For those acting upon bio-scientific expertise about recovery, balance was achieved through reduction rather than redistribution, either by lowering educational expectations or by eliminating activities deemed wasteful. At the same time, health introduced alternative power/knowledge relations that could legitimise small acts of disruption. We argue that

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opportunities for such disruption easily become unequally distributed, shaped by institutional legitimisation, talent status, and access to credible rationales. These findings raise questions about what version of the young athlete dual career policy helps to produce – and at what cost.

Keywords

Dual career, Foucault, athlete development, health, education

Dual career, broadly defined as the combination of sport and education or work, has become a dominant policy discourse and knowledge regime in contemporary talent development (Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019). Promoted through policy documents such as the *EU guidelines on Dual Career of Athletes* (European-Commission, 2013), this agenda calls for holistic approaches that enable young athletes to combine sport and education successfully (Stambulova et al., 2024). Yet, beneath its inclusive and developmental rhetoric, the dual career agenda also introduces specific rationalities of government; techniques and norms that render student-athletes responsible for optimising their own lives across multiple performance domains (Burlot et al., 2018; Mateu et al., 2024; Ronkainen et al., 2021).

In Norway, these rationalities have recently extended into lower secondary education, where 13–16-year-old students can now attend subsidised private sport schools designed to integrate athletic and academic development. This marks a shift in how early talent development pathways are structured, raising questions about how young people are encouraged to build agency through assuming responsibility for their long-term development as self-supporting (Belling et al., 2023). While several studies in sport psychology and medicine have focused on providing preventative solutions for *how* student-athletes can cope with stress, recovery, injuries, and performance (e.g. Heiestad et al., 2025; Storm et al., 2021), fewer have examined *why* certain norms of persistence and self-discipline become accepted as truths, and *how* these shape student-athletes' everyday practice and sense of self (Belling, 2025; Brown, 2016).

Despite increasing recognition of the messy nature of dual career development and its vulnerability to many and varied related pressures (Olesen and Gregersen, 2022), a sociological analysis of this messiness remains under-developed. Much of the existing scholarship relies on retrospective and psychological accounts to identify functional and dysfunctional personal and environmental features (e.g. Aquilina, 2013; Brown et al., 2015; Hauser et al., 2025; Sæther et al., 2022; Storm et al., 2021). Consequently, a host of knowledges and practices are repeated in cycles, with little epistemological attention given to the unequal access athletes have to construct their dual career pathways in alignment with social norms. For instance, deeply embedded yet often overlooked gender discourses within dual career policies and practices shape student-athletes' motivations, career aspirations, decision-making, and overall well-being (Kavoura and Ryba, 2020; Ronkainen et al., 2021; Ryba et al., 2021). Moreover, recent socio-cultural research has begun to problematise the *ideal student-athlete* as a self-regulating, efficient, and autonomous subject who strives to control his/her fate (Kavoura and Ryba, 2020; Ryba et al., 2021). These studies

reveal how dual career discourses privilege those who perform a willingness to maintain ambitious development goals, and take responsibility in matters of development and motivation (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2016). Yet, we know little about how different discourses operate among *younger* student-athletes who are still in the formative stages of developing their sense of self, and who experience dual career expectations through school institutions rather than elite academies.

In this study, we take a Foucauldian approach to explore how power/knowledge relations shape young student-athletes' negotiation of their *free time* – a crucial but often overlooked dimension of the dual career lifestyle. Drawing on Foucault's conceptualisation of discourse as a historically contingent practice that define what can be said, known, and done (Foucault, 1998/2020), we understand power/knowledge as co-constitutive forces that produce taken-for-granted assumptions about how the balance between sport and education can be enacted in practice. Rather than treating free time as a neutral space, we investigate how it provides student-athletes opportunities to govern themselves and adopt or resist knowledge in their engagement with the dual career lifestyle. In doing so, we ask: Through which forms of knowledge about balancing athlete development and education do student-athletes regulate their free time practices?

Since new athlete development practices and talent pathways increasingly rely on advanced procedures designed to control and to minimise risk, and to normalise the athletic performing body (Denison et al., 2019), it is important to trace and challenge the discourses that shape how student-athletes construct 'truths' about what their bodies can achieve and how athlete commitment 'should' be interwoven with other aspects of life. This study provides a novel contribution to dual career research by suggesting an alternative reading of why something that appear relatively straightforward, such as the need for student-athletes to follow expert advice, can instead result in confusion, resistance, frustration, or deviance. It challenges instrumental views of 'balance' and opens possibilities for rethinking what ethical and sustainable dual career support might entail.

Power/knowledge relations and discursive practices

A Foucauldian reading of sports coaching and athlete development positions power, knowledge, and truth as inextricably intertwined, operating and circulating through discourses (Avner et al., 2025). Foucault defined discourse as:

the ensemble of more or less regulated, more or less deliberate, more or less finalized ways of doing things, through which can be seen both what was constituted as real for those who sought to think it and manage it and the way in which the latter constituted themselves as subjects capable of knowing, analyzing, and ultimately altering reality (Foucault, 1998/2020: 463).

In this study, we use discourse to mean a historically contingent practice that organises what can be said, known, and done. We treat power/knowledge as co-constitutive forces that produce 'truths' about what counts as desirable or legitimate conduct. Subjectification refers to how individuals come to govern themselves in accordance

with these truths; while resistance is understood as immanent to power, unfolding within, rather than outside of, existing relations.

Viewed this way, discourse is both constituted by and constitutive of the relations between action and thought, knowledge and practice, power and truth (Foucault, 1982; Foucault, 1982/2020). Consequently, we do not approach the sport-education balance as a universal or stable phenomenon. Instead, we are interested in the conditions of possibility, or more specifically, the interplay of knowledge regimes that enable student-athletes to recognise themselves, and to be recognised by others, as capable or incapable of arranging their free time in acceptable ways. For example, contemporary expertise about the intersections of female biology, holistic development, and education demonstrates how discursive coaching practices produce both constraints and opportunities for young women in sport (Saarinen et al., 2023).

Discursive practices are thus woven into power/knowledge relations that determine who can speak with authority about balance and recovery, and determine how time and energy should be managed across different social and personal settings. For Foucault (1982), power is not primarily repressive but productive: subjecting oneself to power/knowledge relations is the very condition through which agency becomes possible. As Mol (2002: 38–41) reminds us, people's identities do not precede their enactments, but are constituted in and through them; identity is something *done*, continuously practiced through pervasive and mundane acts [that] make people what they are.

All individuals participate, albeit unequally, in the (re)production and transformation of discourse. The ways they are constituted as subjects through discursive practices shape not only their thoughts and feelings but also determine which subjects become privileged or marginalised, and influence who gains access to authority and resources (Foucault, 1998/2020). Deconstructing these power relations is therefore essential for exposing the often-unintended effects that arise when bodies and behaviours are invested with particular patterns of belief and habit (e.g. Mills et al., 2020).

Foucault succinctly argued in one of his later interviews that resistance does not exist outside power but operates within its very relations:

[...] in power relations there is necessarily the possibility for resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all (Foucault, 1984/2020: 292).

Understanding resistance in this way compels a critical reconsideration of how power is exercised and reconfigured within existing relations (Markula, 2004). In our analysis, this orientation allows us to attend not only to how student-athletes are subjected to discursive practice of athletic and educational commitments, but also to how they subtly contest or reorient these everyday practices through norms of self-care that takes its place 'between' institutions. Drawing on this understanding of the inter-relation between power, knowledge, and subjectivity, we examine the forms of knowledge about balancing athletic development and education that circulate within student-athletes' socio-cultural contexts. Given the tendency for holistic development policies to privilege individualised solutions over structural ones, we argue that uncovering the current rules and conditions through which student-athletes make sense of and negotiate their dual

career pathways can open alternative and potential more nuanced ways of conceptualising ‘optimal balance’.

Methodology

In this paper, aligned with our post-structuralist theorising, we approach knowledge and meaning as constructed through the interaction between participants and researchers, recognising that knowledge production is contingent upon social, historical, and political contexts, and the impossibility of an objective or ‘true’ way reality can be brought into existence (Markula and Silk, 2011). Stemming from this onto-epistemological position, we do not treat interviews as neutral reflections of pre-existing experiences, but as discursive spaces in which participants actively negotiate and articulate their understandings from the positions made available to them. Researcher reflexivity, thick descriptions of student-athletes’ talk, and personal engagement with high-performance sport and education are therefore viewed as crucial means of deepening our understanding of the power relations that shape the social worlds of student-athletes (Smith and McGannon, 2018).

The research setting: Norwegian lower secondary sports schools

The Norwegian approach to talent development differs markedly from the elite sport systems and academy-based models common in many non-Scandinavian countries (Andersen et al., 2015). At its core are sports school programmes designed to support young peoples’ dual ambitions by combining athletic and academic development. These programmes operate independently yet maintain close cooperation with clubs, sport federations, and regional or national teams (Bjørndal and Gjesdal, 2020).

There are over 20 lower secondary sports schools in Norway, enrolling more than 4000 students aged 12 to 16 years (grades 8–10). These schools are privately run but publicly subsidised, receiving 85% of their funding from the government, and must follow the national lower secondary curriculum. What distinguishes them from other schools is the integration of academic aims with athletic development across three interconnected curricula: (a) physical activity and health, (b) physical education, and (c) youth athlete development. Students typically train four mornings per week, between 8 and 10 AM, in 75-min sessions in addition to their club activities. While these sessions serve an educational purpose beyond a purely athletic one, they are tied to the broader goals of fostering general athletic capacity, sport-specific skills, and the routines and mindsets deemed essential for long-term success (Øydna et al., 2024).

The research process

This study forms part of a longitudinal research project and the first author’s doctoral work. She conducted fieldwork at one lower secondary sports school between autumn 2022 and spring 2024. She generated the empirical material through multiple methods, including document analysis, participant observations, fieldnotes, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. For this paper, we draw on focus-group interviews

with 25 student-athletes (aged 15–16) from three 10th grade classes from one lower secondary sport school. Focus group provides a dynamic space for interaction (Smith and Sparkes, 2016), where participants can explore, negotiate, and sometimes contest differing perspectives on how to balance sport, education, and personal life. Moreover, by inviting only student-athletes from this school, we could situate their accounts within the wider body of empirical material generated through the first author's fieldwork. The stories presented are therefore deeply specific and local. Yet, it is precisely this contextual specificity that we believe enables their broader resonance, offering the insights generated to speak beyond this particular setting.

We obtained informed consent from all participants and, where applicable, from parents or guardians of those under 15. Participants were informed that they could exclude any information from the transcripts. We used pseudonyms and anonymised all references to coaches, teachers, or peers. The research adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki's ethical guidelines for human participants.

We purposefully organised the participants into six groups of four to five student-athletes (see Supplemental materials). A school coach assisted with purposeful selection based on the following criteria: (a) same gender, (b) similar levels of sporting and/or academic commitment, (c) representation of different sports, and (d) an established rapport among group members. These criteria helped both comfort and variation across discussions.

A pilot interview with two female student-athletes from another sports school informed the phrasing of the questions and the development of two case scenarios (available upon request). The first author conducted all focus groups, each lasting 50–70 min. The interviews began by inviting reflections on what participants had learned about athlete development during their 3 years at the school, followed by two scenarios designed to prompt about responsibility and prioritisation. The first scenario addressed difficulties in adhering to recovery routines, while the second explored tensions between schoolwork and sleep. Subsequent probing questions encouraged participants to elaborate on how they negotiated competing demands.

The interviews were conducted during a pivotal time in participants' lives as they prepared to apply to upper secondary schools.¹ This process can have heightened their focus on academic performance and time management. All sessions were held at the school, without teachers or coaches present. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author.

Analysis

Guided by Bacchi and Bonham's (2016) approach to Foucault-informed post-structural interview analysis, we conducted a theory-driven analysis to explore how student-athletes engaged with discursive practices and positioned themselves within them. The first author noted various statements related to how participants understood and enacted the norms and responsibilities of navigating dual career pathways, particularly regarding their free time. These statements were grouped according to dominant norms of meaning related to athlete development (e.g. eat enough food), education (e.g. get good grades), and social life (e.g. 'we don't party') and linked to the

situations in which these norms were practiced (e.g. at home, in the car, or before training). This process illustrated how student-athletes' daily schedules regulated and disciplined their free time.

Next, we examined how these articulations enabled student-athletes to position themselves in relation to competing demands: that is prioritising both sport and education, privileging sport over education, or privileging education over sport. These positions were fluid and situational, shifting as participants navigated different dilemmas. Through iterative movement between empirical material, Foucauldian theory, and existing literature (McGannon, 2016), we synthesised three discursive premises underpinning how balance was constructed: (a) evoking efficiency to meet expectations, (b) reducing the to-do list to protect recovery, and (c) deliberately resisting or reinterpreting expert advice. These constructions were then related to the institutional conditions and power relations that shaped student-athletes' capacity to adopt or resist knowledge in their engagement with the dual career lifestyle.

The research team used each other as 'critical friends', challenging and refining one another's interpretations (Smith and McGannon, 2018). Reflexivity was central throughout the process. The first author's long-term experience of balancing high-performance sport and higher education made her acutely aware of her own assumptions regarding time- and energy management. These reflections informed the interpretation of how participants made sense of competing demands. Where appropriate, interview extracts in the findings and interpretations section illustrate the co-construction of meaning between researchers and participants. The second author's expertise in theorising talent as a relational phenomenon added depth and integrity to the analysis. The third author, an experienced dual career researcher, contributed to the methodology and was central to interpreting the findings and shaping the study's implications. The fourth author, with extensive academic and practical experience in the Norwegian sport system, enriched our contextual understanding and interpretations. All authors contributed to reviewing and editing the manuscript.

Findings and discussion

The aim of this research was to examine the forms of knowledge through which student-athletes make sense of and regulate their free time. More specifically, we sought to explore how power/knowledge relations shape the possibilities for enacting (and resisting) different balancing strategies, and how young student-athletes act upon these relations in their free time. On this basis, we discuss the effects of dominant knowledge regimes on how free time and responsibility is enacted in everyday life.

The discussion that follows is organised around three main inter-related sections: (a) performance matters: balancing through efficiency, (b) recovery matters: balancing through reduction, and (c) health matters: balancing through covert resistance. We chose this structure to illustrate the conditions that shape student-athletes understanding of dual career expectations, and how these power/knowledge relations configure what it means to 'take responsibility' in matters of athletic development, educational achievement, private life, and health.

Performance matters: balancing through efficiency

Noah: If you can't perform in sport or school or whatever, then there is, like, nothing to do. You have to perform [...] if you don't, you just end up sitting at home, sleeping, and slacking off.

[...]

Harry: I feel like some of the coaches at [the school] are really like, you've got to give it everything at every single training session. That's the only way you're going to become the best. And if you don't, then... you'll never become anything, you'll never get anywhere (Discussion, Group 6).

Mie: When I'm at training, it's the expectations from the coach, and then when I'm at home, Mum and Dad expect me to work on school stuff. So, there are expectations from everyone, but just different ones. It's not like anyone expects me to manage everything, but it's, like, when everyone expects you to...

Sofie: ...manage everything within that category.

Mie: Yeah, manage everything within that category. Then it kind of adds up, and I end up feeling like I must do it all (Discussion, Group 1).

For most student-athletes, performance demands constituted an unquestioned and enduring 'truth' within sport and education. The discursive practices through which they sought to 'manage everything within that category' positioned particular understandings of athletic commitment and academic diligence as morally and socially legitimate forms of striving (Eriksen, 2022; Øydna et al., 2025). Within the prevailing institutional logic, success was imagined as the outcome of disciplined self-management: to secure a team position or gain admission to the desired school, one had to devote adequate time and effort to each pursuit. Consequently, the student-athletes continued to act upon themselves to complete their to-do list, even during supposed moments of rest. The following discussion between Anna, Mie, Sofie, and the interviewer illustrates how these norms were articulated and embodied in everyday life:

Anna: Yes, there's a lot you need to get done. Then you also have to go to training, and you also have to make sure to eat and drink enough, and sleep.

Sofie: You kind of have to make sure you get everything done, in a short amount of time.

Interviewer: But what do you do if it piles up? What strategies do you use, for example?

Mie: I just make a list. You have time in your everyday life if you just use it right, and then you manage to fit things in here and there. So, if you know what to do, and are a bit efficient, then it's possible to make it work.
(Discussion, Group 1).

The student-athletes approached the organisation of their free time as both malleable and instrumental, assigning status to efficiency and effort as solutions for managing

competing demands. They acted upon time as a scarce and measurable resource, and thus questions of how to structure the day and prioritise the ‘right’ activities at the ‘right’ time became central to their ongoing self-governance. This orientation is illustrated by the reflections of Edward, from group 2, who explained:

I think I can get better at planning how to get home quickly after a late training session. I’ve talked a little bit about this with [Coach B – a school coach]. I can start to, for example, make myself a small snack that I can have after training and then eat in the car. And then go straight home and just go to bed. Because I have a lot of time before training, when I can pack my bag for tomorrow and all that stuff. So, I don’t have to do it after I get back from training.

Time management practices, such as creating to-do lists and scheduling tasks, are widely promoted by sport psychology experts as core competencies for student-athletes navigating the dual career lifestyle (e.g. Linnér et al., 2021; Stambulova et al., 2015). Edward’s account, and his reference to coach B’s guidance, illustrates how these practices are institutionalised within the sports school, functioning as normalised standards for what it means to be a ‘good’ and responsible student-athlete. This mirrors earlier research showing how dual career environments encourage student-athletes to build agency through individual autonomy and self-responsibility over collective or structural solutions (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2016).

Read through Foucault’s later writings on technologies of the self (Foucault, 1982/2020), the student-athletes’ effort to optimise and plan their daily lives can be seen as ethical practices or attempts to fashion themselves into competent and morally worthy subjects. Yet, as Thing et al. (2015) remind us, this ‘busyness strategy’ offers little room for idleness or critique, thereby narrowing what it means to live a ‘good’ and balanced personal life.

Recovery matters: balancing through reduction

Sofie: Everything counts, everything you do.

Interviewer: Can you elaborate on that?

Sofie: The 24-h athlete. That is, no matter what, if you want to become an elite athlete, everything you do, whether directly related or not, plays a role. If you skip a training session to do something else, it affects you and your opportunity to become as good as you can be, for example (Discussion, Group 1).

Vetle: We’ve learned about being a 24-h

athlete, and that’s what we are. We train and are athletes 24-h a day. But you can’t be thinking about that all the time.

Interviewer: What is a 24-h athlete?

Chris: You are always an athlete. Every hour of the day. Everything you do is conscious, like, what you eat and when you go to sleep (Discussion, Group 2).

The statements in the extracts above are part of the network of discursive practices that position specific understandings of long-term development and health *within the true*. National actors such as Olympiatoppen² have institutionalised the concept of the ‘24-h

athlete' to normalise the idea that, while athletes need not think about sport every waking moment, they should nonetheless organise their daily lives in accordance with a broader plan for maximising sporting performance (Hjelseth and Telseth, 2023). Norwegian lower secondary sports schools have adapted this rationale to guide young athletes in governing themselves through the logic of long-term athletic development (Øydna et al., 2024).

This norm reinforces a bio-scientific and functionalist understanding of energy management, grounded in the principle that energy intake should correspond to output (Lang, 2015). For student-athletes who subjected themselves to this norm, decisions about energy management and recovery become moralised acts of self-regulation. As Bella (group 5) said: 'It depends on what you're doing the next day, you know... considering what you've done the days before, whether you have energy or not'. Such reflections exemplify how the imperative to manage energy consciously becomes a moral requirement, shaping how athletes interpret responsibility and success.

This moral demand was particularly evident among those aspiring to, or already positioned within, high-performance youth environments. Here, the capacity to act upon such expert knowledge signified maturity and legitimacy within the broader performance discourses (Augestad, 2024). For example, Mie, a talented footballer from group 1 who earlier emphasised efficiency as a strategy for managing demands, redefined her role as a responsible student-athlete by acting upon expert knowledge of energy management:

Interviewer: Do you have any downtime at all?

Mie: You often have, like, if you have training right after school or in the evening, then there are usually a few hours in between when you can relax a bit. But if you also use that time for schoolwork every day, it can get a bit much. So, you have to be careful. Or at least I think it becomes way too much [several other participants voiced their agreement]. So, that's not possible. I'd rather relax a bit.
(Discussion, Group 1).

The statement 'you have to be careful' articulates a link between energy management and risk thinking. As Rose (2001) notes, risk thinking functions by projecting potential future consequences onto present actions, thereby demanding constant vigilance for potential risks and solutions. Within this form of knowledge, the balanced subject is expected to minimise health risk while securing performance outcomes through rational planning and bodily awareness.

By incorporating athletic performance preparation into their everyday routines, student-athletes attached themselves to norms for optimised recovery. The act of governing the athletic self was mainly enabled through the practice of monitoring dietary intake and sleep. This governance should not be taken as a matter of external coercion but rather as ethical attempts to keep one's developmental progress in check (Augestad, 2024). Yet, as the following extract illustrates, this moral economy of risk and responsibility also produces tension. Harry, a footballer from group 6, described his relation to expert advice on optimised preparation as one marked by both obligation and distress:

- Harry: I end up trying to sleep after school. Gather as much energy [as possible] to be able to go to training. But the problem with that is that then the days start to merge into one. You hardly get a break. You must always do something. Because I feel that you must sleep. Then it is a duty. I must take a power nap after school if I'm going to be able to go to training.
- Interviewer: So, it's like, on your to-do list?
- Harry: Yes, it is. So, doing nothing becomes doing something.
(Discussion, Group 6).

Harry's statement, that 'It is a duty [...] doing nothing becomes doing something', captures the affective forces of performance pressures produced within talent development environments. Indeed, even pleasurable activities like rest become restrictive and negatively impact athletes when valued solely for their functionality and contribution to gaining a competitive advantage. Within the power/knowledge relations reproduced in talent development environments, such as through selection processes focused on physical potential and attributes of coachability (Kilger and Jonsson, 2017), it becomes increasingly difficult to claim authority as a committed athlete without submitting to the technologies of self that constitute the disciplined, self-regulating body (Ojala, 2020).

As Foucault (1984/2020) reminds us, resistance does not stand outside of power but operates within its very relations. Moments of compliance or withdrawal are not oppositional but part of the same dynamic through which individuals both reproduce and reconfigure the norms governing them. In the next section, we explore these negotiations between discipline, freedom and pleasure, and examine how student-athletes' practices of self-care and enjoyment become moments of resistance to maintain a sense of balance and coherence in everyday life.

Health matters: balancing through covert resistance

Anna: Yeah, so, for me, it's my mum who kind of keeps an eye on whether I'm eating enough and stuff, but it's also a bit like... if I suddenly don't eat enough one day, then... I mean, she doesn't get angry, but she's sort of involved in.

Sofie: Maybe worried?

Anna: Yeah, she helps make sure I'm where I need to be. And I actually think it's good because it makes it easier to stay on track. But at the same time, it's like... um... it'd be wrong to call it pressure, but kind of... nah, I don't know how to explain it (Discussion, Group 1).

Noah: I'd just say, like, 'stop nagging all the time'. I often feel like there's way too much nagging.

Interviewer: About what?

Noah: Like, about going to bed, going to training, stuff like that. Sometimes you should just take a bit of responsibility yourself, do what you want to do. If you don't feel like going to training, it shouldn't be your parents deciding whether you go or not (Discussion, Group 6).

The extracts above illustrate how external surveillance operates through practices of care (see Gearity et al., 2023). By directing critique towards adults' interference in their choices, both Anna and Noah participated in discursive practices that located recovery simultaneously as a matter of personal autonomy and as a site of subtle domination by external authorities. In this way, balancing athletic and academic demands becomes intertwined with humanistic identity norms that emphasise respect for individual choice and self-determination, as well as with psychological discourses in which health extends beyond the biomedical notion of a functional body to encompass mental well-being, coping, agency, and quality of life.

Time management practices exemplify the belief that time is a resource available for individual control. Yet, for many student-athletes, this belief remains unattainable (Cosh and Tully, 2014). Those who positioned themselves as passive in designing their schedules often described a lack of *free* time, constructed as moments not already structured by institutional or parental expectations. This tension surfaced clearly in a discussion between Bella and Henny, facilitated by the interviewer and Alice in group 5. Here, they questioned the fairness of being evaluated according to standards of efficiency that were impossible to meet and, in doing so, enacted small but meaningful forms of resistance. Through these micro-practices, such as disregarding expert advice about sleep, they sought to reclaim brief moments of agency within an otherwise tightly governed existence:

Interviewer: Is it fair, though? That you get corrected [about sleep and food routines]

Bella: Yeah, but ... (gets interrupted)

Alice: They're just trying to look out for us, really.

Bella: Yeah, they mean well. But at the same time... On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, my training ends at 9 PM, and I live in the city, so I'm not home until around 9:45. Then I shower, so I'm not in bed until around 11:30. Things take time, right? You can't really help it. You have to shower and to eat after training. I can't just skip it; that would be wrong, too.

Alice: I get scolded at home quite a bit – especially yesterday and the day before – because I went to bed too late. But I'm trying to fix that. We've been taught about it since 8th grade, but it's still hard sometimes.

Henny: I need some me-time in the evening [several other interview participants voiced their agreement], just to gather myself a bit, like, 'okay, this day is over, now I can relax a bit'. Because if I get home at 8:45 and tried to go to bed at 9:30; it would feel like the next day just started right away, like I didn't get to gather my thoughts and relax. And that really affects the mental side, too.

(Discussion, Group 5).

The student-athletes often rationalised their coaches' monitoring of training quality and recovery as expressions of care since they helped them become athletes. Yet, this

uncritical acceptance also seemed to complicate their ability to establish clear boundaries around when and where they could alleviate the emotional labour of maintaining consistency in time – and energy management. A common rhetoric among both male and female participants emphasised not ‘overthinking’ or ‘overcomplicating’ these matters:

I care about what I eat, but... it's not like I overthink it if I have some sweets or drink a soda or something. It doesn't really matter to me (Vetle, Group 2).

I do think about such things, sleep and food and so on, but one shouldn't overcomplicate it too much. Because then, like you said, you end up not getting enough sleep and you just get stressed (Mie, Group 1).

This simultaneous accommodation of disciplinary practices (keeping recovery under surveillance) and resistance to them (avoiding obsessiveness) illustrates a distinct process of subjectification. The student-athletes positioned themselves as caring and responsible individuals, attentive to long-term performance and well-being through practices of optimal recovery, yet sought to avoid an overly serious approach that could attract critique for jeopardising mental health (Ronkainen et al., 2021). Balancing, then, appears less about strict compliance with institutional codes of conduct and more about locating social and psychological spaces where they can momentarily step outside the confines of their athletic identity (Roderick and Allen-Collinson, 2020).

However, many student-athletes chose to conceal such resistance, employing the language of physical health to justify their deviations when interacting with school coaches and thereby avoid correction. Within current debates in Norwegian talent development concerning the ‘vulnerability’ of youth athletes’ health, this served as a more legitimate explanation. Some even managed to redefine responsible practice to include the reduction of training hours. For example, George, a footballer from group 6 who had struggled with injuries, questioned the physical demands of his lifestyle and was supported by his coaches in designing a more flexible schedule that allowed him to spend more time with friends:

George: I didn't have much contact with my friends in 8th and 9th grade. Because I was very tired in the afternoons. So instead of going out with them, I stayed home and watched a series on Netflix. That's the worst part, really. That I maybe lost a bit of contact with them. But I've gotten better at reconnecting with them now. I have become better at managing my training load.

Interviewer: Can I ask what you mean by that? Did you get better at managing your load?

George: No, I have cut down some training sessions. I have talked with the coaches at school and the coaches at my club. And we have agreed that, if there are some days where I feel a bit off, then I can either not train as hard or, in some cases, take the day off.

(Discussion, Group 6).

What remains unspoken, however, is what actually made it possible for George to adopt such a strategy. The power/knowledge relations that shape talent development environments typically define athletic commitment through work ethic, progress, visible effort, and the capacity to endure high training loads (Kavoura et al., 2018; Manley et al., 2016). Departures from these normalised expectations, or an apparent lack of progress, can be interpreted as signs of weakness or a threat to the athlete's legitimacy within the talent hierarchy, unless the individual is embedded in a network that actively sustains their talent status (Olesen et al., 2020).

We do not know whether George was considered a 'talent', whether that status changed over time, or whether his coaches continued to believe in his potential and granted him access to developmental resources (Skrubbeltrang et al., 2021). What is important to underscore, however, is that his case illustrates a strategy made possible not solely through individual agency but as a form of structural resistance embedded within the sports school's organisational culture (Henriksen et al., 2020). Such arrangements can create spaces where young athletes are enabled to reinterpret responsibility and meaningful sport participation beyond the imperative of optimisation. We therefore argue that sport schools can play a pivotal role in broadening student-athletes' perspectives, particularly given their limited opportunities to encounter alternative discourses and practices outside the tightly regulated rhythms of everyday sport life.

Concluding thoughts

In this study, we explored the forms of knowledge through which young student-athletes regulated their free time in the context of dual career expectations. Our analysis shows that student-athletes predominantly mobilised discursive resources that reproduce dual career practices, foregrounding compatibility between sport and education and positioning efficiency as the ethical solution to balancing them (Kavoura and Ryba, 2020; Stambulova and Wylleman, 2019). When acting upon bio-scientific knowledge of recovery, balance was achieved through reduction rather than redistribution, either by lowering their academic expectations or by eliminating activities deemed to waste energy. Taken together, these ways of knowing are sustained by power relations that legitimise time optimisation and performance investment as the moral core of being a 'responsible' student-athlete.

Importantly, simply becoming more efficient was regularly voiced as insufficient for achieving a well-rounded everyday life, revealing how optimisation of time and energy alone can fail to open up meaningful alternatives for some student-athletes.

At the same time, the local emphasis on health introduced another regime of truth that could be strategically used to justify 'reprieve', and thereby served a contingent site for small resistances. We argue that this capacity hinges on institutional legitimation (e.g. coach-endorsed schedule flexibility), the athlete's situated status within the talent hierarchy, and access to discursive resources (particularly the ability to mobilise 'health' as a legitimate rationale for reprieve). This means that opportunities to step back or slow down easily become unequally distributed – not simply individual choices.

We recognise limitations in our approach. First, the study was conducted at a private school located in a resource-rich area. It is therefore likely that many of the

student-athletes come from relatively high socio-economic backgrounds, where parents are not only engaged in sport but also closely involved in monitoring their children's health and academic achievements (Eriksen et al., 2024; Krogh and Madsen, 2023; Saarinen et al., 2025; Skrubbeltrang et al., 2020). In contrast to studies involving older athletes, all participants in this study lived at home, where many everyday responsibilities, such as food preparation and household tasks, were largely managed on their behalf. While the study touches upon experiences of academic pressure, this remains an area requiring further exploration. Specifically, future research could more closely examine the student-athletes' academic positioning and how they navigate and enact legitimacy within the educational system (Hilt et al., 2024).

Second, although a more detailed analysis of gender differences could have been conducted, this lay beyond the scope of the present study. This decision reflects the observation that much of the existing critical scholarship on dual careers among younger student-athletes already offers sustained and nuanced engagement with gendered perspectives (e.g. Kavoura and Ryba, 2020; Ryba et al., 2021; Saarinen et al., 2023). Nevertheless, such gendered and structural conditions are likely to shape participants' experiences of free time and everyday responsibilities. Future research could therefore explore how these differentiations influence the uneven distribution of agency, particularly in relation to accessing, enacting, and questioning optimisation routines.

Our findings also have practical implications. Treating recovery and free time primarily as instruments for performance may close off young athletes' possibilities for imagining alternative futures (Ronkainen and Ryba, 2018). Rather than adding more corrective knowledging within the same optimisation logic, practices that widen the discursive resources available to them may better support recovery and sustain participation. This could be done, for example, through creating opportunities for open discussion between student-athletes and adults (coaches, parents, etc.), and through reflecting on the ways that certain practices, values, and beliefs might be linked to instrumentalised forms of care for some young people. Schools and clubs might also consider how legitimacy is conferred: 'doing balance well' need not be synonymous with high workload tolerance or the moralisation of efficiency.

Ultimately, our analysis raises a broader philosophical question for dual career research and practice: what version of the young athlete is being produced – and at what cost? If a dual career support simply refines the individualistic ethics of optimisation, then the field risk reduces the very pressures it claims to mitigate (Mills et al., 2024). A more ambitious version of 'support' could involve creating conditions where young people can meaningfully step outside the developmental rationalities that bind them. Without that, balance remains less a practice of freedom than another technique of power.

Consent to participate and consent for publication

Informed consent for participation and publication was obtained in writing from all participants.

Data availability statement

The data is available from the first author upon request.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. In Norway, students may apply to any upper secondary school irrespective of their residential area; however, admission is determined by academic grades. Consequently, competition for places can be intense, especially in larger cities.
2. Olympiatoppen, the national high-performance unit under the Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports, holds the operational responsibility for developing Norwegian elite sport and bears overall accountability for its international results.

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Paper 3



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“You can definitely tell she’s truly committed”: student-athletes’ discursive construction of athletic commitment during transitions in secondary school

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In this paper, we present how two female and one male student-athlete discursively construct and make sense of the “committed athlete”, highlighting key shifts across transitions between school levels and high-performance sport environments. Applying a Foucauldian perspective on power/ knowledge and vignettes from follow-up interviews, this paper highlights the relational nature of commitment, showing how it is shaped by broader discourses and institutional structures. Our analysis shows that a discourse of athletic performance investment dominates these transitions, yet the student-athletes also negotiate less instrumentalised constructions of the committed athlete as someone with internal love for the activity itself. However, as they move into upper secondary school programmes and more professionalised club environments, they are faced with fewer possibilities to enact alternative meanings of commitment. We argue that student-athletes positioned as talented are better able to benefit from holistic development initiatives within the talent development system, while those outside these hierarchies face limited possibilities to negotiate alternative forms of commitment. This analysis invites a critical rethinking of how dual career pathways might expand the discursive possibilities for what it means to be a committed athlete.

KEYWORDS

Foucault, talent development, dual career, athletic identity, youth athletes

1 Prologue

Theodor slid another weight onto the bar, the metal clinking like a challenge. “Come on, we’ve got this”, he said to Sivert, his voice steady, like he’d already decided for both of them. “Mate, imagine if we hit a new PB. Just think about it”. There was no stopping Theodor. There never was.

Elise sat on the floor, her back pressed against the wall, a resistance band looped around her ankle. She moved slowly, controlled, mechanical. Another week, another session, and still no real progress. A year of this. A whole year of following through injury routines while everyone else kept developing.

June stood at the edge of the air track, hands on her hips, watching the boys show off. “Watch this!” she called, loud enough to make the football girls glance up. She sprinted, jumped, and went for the front flip—but her heels hit first, and she tumbled onto her back. The thud hung in the air before her laughter broke it. “Almost nailed it!” she shouted, brushing off her too-big Nike track pants, with the national team’s logo barely visible in the folds.

This paper is part of the first author’s doctoral research, in which fieldwork was conducted at one particular lower secondary sports school, and she constructed the data material through various methods, such as document analysis, participant observations, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. These creative narratives were constructed from her observational notes during a school training session in a gymnastics hall in the fall of 2022, recollecting her first interpretations of Theodor, Elise, and June (pseudonyms). At that time, they were between 14 and 15 years old, and all shared the aspiration of becoming elite athletes in their respective sports.

2 Introduction

Transitions in high-performance junior or senior sport are increasingly recognised as critical periods that shape young athletes’ developmental, educational, and psychosocial trajectories (1). These transitions, whether between school levels, sport environments, or stages of maturation, are not merely logistical shifts but are laden with discursively constructed expectations about what it means to be simultaneously a committed athlete, autonomous citizen, and gendered individual (2, 3). Such periods are often marked by tensions, overlaps, and reconfigurations between multiple identities, all shaped by power relations and institutional structures within the athlete’s broader context (4, 5). Although existing research has significantly advanced our understanding of dual career pathways and transitional processes, there is a need for more context-sensitive studies that explore how young athletes work to sustain meaningful identities across changing environments. This is particularly relevant as athletes begin to engage more seriously with performance issues, while still holding on to fun and enjoyment as core motivational drivers (6).

Throughout, a growing body of theoretical perspectives, research, and practice on supporting transitioning athletes eventually grew into an European dual career discourse, highlighting the need to facilitate high performance sport participation in a socially responsible manner by promoting the simultaneous pursuit of studies or work (7). A key focus in Norwegian talent development has therefore been to secure professionalised and structured pathways that support both athletic development and education through specialised sport school programmes (8, 9). Recent developments have extended similar opportunities into lower secondary education, marking a significant shift in how early young people enter environments where athletic and academic pathways are structured.

These structures are often taken for granted and not examined for how they position the student-athletes within competing

discursive realities and power relations (10, 11). Studies have, for example, problematised dual career environments for normalising additional expectations of athletes, requiring them to achieve even more despite already facing significant pressures on time and energy (12, 13). Researchers have also suggested that dual career pathways are often structured around athletic performance, creating tension for coaches and policymakers to support student-athletes in adopting a more holistic approach to their athletic careers (14–16). For example, emotional distress, injuries, overuse, and burnout are common risks for young student-athletes, while an overemphasis on sport also tends to skew the dual focus (17, 18).

Within these environments, sociocultural discourses of high-performance sport that celebrate athletic commitment are often privileged [e.g., (19–21)]. Commitment is typically positioned as a moral virtue and performance imperative, often demonstrated through discipline, delayed gratification, and adherence to expert-driven performance regimes (22, 23). These regimes are underpinned by bioscientific knowledge systems that normalise the idea of the athletic body as a site of constant optimisation (24). Consequently, athletes are interpellated into self-governing practices that prioritise productivity, bodily control, and resilience, leaving little space for alternative ways of being or resisting dominant norms (25). Moreover, by positioning athletes as morally obligated to immerse themselves in the quest for excellence, reinforcing morality-based fears surrounding the “it’s really up to you” doctrine permeating scientific discourses on athletes’ health and development (26), individualised solutions are favoured in holistic development campaigns over structural solutions (2, 11, 27).

Several researchers have used social theory to illuminate how older athletes make sense of and manage their identities over time and within or outside the justification of a sporting system [e.g., (28–30)]. Departing from these ideas, we employ poststructural theory and Foucault’s power/knowledge framework to explore the discursive resources available to younger athletes during transitions between dual career development environments. By giving recognition to the “work” young athletes do to position as committed athletes within shifting power relations of talent development practice, we can shed light on the ways in which their local context privileges or complicates such transition processes. Specifically, we ask two questions: (a) How do student-athletes’ discursive constructions of commitment change over time and across educational transitions? and (b) What do these shifts reveal about the discursive possibilities for practicing commitment in high-performance junior sport contexts?

To address the first question, we trace the specific discourses through which the student-athletes construct and make sense of the “committed athlete”, highlighting key shifts across time and context. The second question is taken up in the discussion, where we juxtapose the vignettes of Theodor, Elise, and June to explore how the imperative to invest in sport is both normalised and negotiated and how, in different ways, they navigate, resist, or reproduce the disciplinary demands of high-performance environments.

In doing so, we contribute to the growing literature that critically examines the ethical and political dimensions of athlete transitions (3, 30–32). Our aim is not only to trace how the

committed athlete is constructed but also to consider what is *made possible or foreclosed* by these constructions, especially for young athletes navigating systems that both enable and constrain development. The study also foregrounds the implications for coaches and educators working within increasingly professionalised youth sport environments, highlighting how discursive flexibility—or a lack thereof—shapes young people's experiences of sport and education.

3 Theoretical perspectives: power relations and discourse

Our work draws upon the writings of Foucault. The work of Shogan (33), Markula and Pringle (34), and Avner et al. (35) have extended these ideas into sports coaching and are especially relevant for examining how possibilities for athlete development are constructed. Foucault's primary focus was not on defining the essence or origin of power but on examining how power operates dynamically and relationally. Foucault (36) asserts that the effects of power materialise through actions: "[It] does not act directly (...) it acts upon actions: action upon an action" (p. 789). His conception of power moves beyond a dualistic, top-down framework, positioning it as inseparable from the scientific truth-production of knowledge.

Foucault (37) uses the notion of discourse to describe dominant ways of knowing a particular social field (e.g., talent development), as well as understanding the dominant practices that establish what is constructed as reality:

The ensemble of more or less regulated, more or less deliberate, more or less finalized ways of doing things, through which can be seen both what was constituted as real for those who sought to think it and manage it and the way in which the latter constituted themselves as subjects capable of knowing, analyzing, and ultimately altering reality [(37). p. 463]

For example, practices that reproduce discourses of elite sport, such as writing training journals and tracking recovery, acquire their significance from being interpreted within the perspective of improved performance (38). These practices are implemented to generate knowledge about the athletic body, which then places an athlete in dependence with culturally or scientifically accepted standards that imply particular expectations as to how one should act upon this knowledge. These discursive practices thus provide the limits and possibilities for athletes and young people to produce meaning about sport participation and their sense of self (39).

No discourses are in themselves "good" or "bad", but they become problematic when the beliefs and truth-presumptions are naturalised and no longer questioned for their productivity (35). Within a socio-historical context where multiple discourses circulate (e.g., related to age, body size, health, or gender), tensions can emerge as certain "truth-games" meet and clash, complicating

the construction of a coherent sense of self and the negotiation of acceptable ways of being an athlete (5, 40). For instance, female student-athletes are expected to be autonomous, self-confident, and tough, attributes that are in contrast to how women in general are expected to behave (13). Hence, when looking at changes in how adolescents discursively construct meanings of commitment, it is important to trace how different discursive elements are organised and interconnected to render what effects these constructions have for adolescents' understanding of their moral obligations and self-governing practices (41, 42). This is central to revealing the power relations involved in the production of certain subject positions and understanding of the self (that is, positions in discourses that represent ways of being an individual) as privileged, more accessible, or constructed as "natural", while others are deemed "unnatural" or marginalised. In a talent development context, taking up or resisting privileged positions influences who is prioritised and granted access to resources or authority (43, 44).

4 Methodology

In this paper, we approach knowledge and meaning as constructed through interactions between participants and researchers, shaped by the social, historical, and political context of which the interaction is practiced (45). From this position, interviews are seen as dynamic discursive spaces where participants actively construct and articulate their understandings based on the subject positions made available to them (46). As such, we consider researchers' reflexivity, vignettes close to the student-athletes' own descriptions, and personal engagement with a dual career trajectory as important tools for deepening our understandings of the power relations shaping the lives of student-athletes (47).

4.1 The Norwegian context

The organising of talent development in Norway diverges distinctively from national elite sport systems or academy-based models prevalent in non-Scandinavian countries (48). In a country where football (soccer) and handball dominate as the most popular team sports among adolescents, significant resources are directed towards talent management systems designed to optimise player development and improve national performance outcomes (49). Within this structure, sports school programmes play a central role in better accommodating the dual career aspirations of student-athletes, operating autonomously while coordinating with club teams and sports associations, including age-specific regional and national teams (8). These schools are organised around a dual career policy request, that is, to arrange for athletes to engage in elite sport practices that make them capable of winning medals in the long run, and at the same time qualify for university and academic education (50). While Norway has a long-standing tradition of offering dual career programmes, including both elite sport and sports-friendly tracks (51), at the upper

secondary level,¹ recent developments have extended similar opportunities into lower secondary education.

The Norwegian Directorate of Education oversees 23 lower secondary sports schools, educating over 4,000 students aged 12 to 16 years, corresponding to grades 8 through 10. These schools, although operating as private institutions, receive 85% of their funding from the government and are required to follow the standard lower secondary school curriculum. Athlete development within these schools is integrated into education-focused training sessions, guided by the long-term athlete development framework that heavily shapes the policy documents governing Norwegian talent development. Their educational aim is to develop student-athletes' general athletic abilities, sport-specific skills, and the routines and mindsets that are considered essential to ensuring success in the competitive realm of elite sports (11).

4.2 The research process

The first author conducted three semi-structured interviews with Theodor and Elise: the first interview was conducted at their school in the autumn when they were 15 years old, followed by a second interview in the spring of their 10th-grade year. The third interview took place at a location of the participants' own choosing in late autumn the following year, after they had transitioned to upper secondary school and turned 16. June participated only in the two autumn interviews due to her busy schedule. No coaches or guardians supervised the interviews. The focus in each interview was to enquire how the participants came to speak of themselves as committed athletes. Each interview was designed to locate the participants within the discursive practices of talent development, which involved the first author calling upon them to differentiate, compare, and scrutinise elements of their lives in relation to established norms for long-term performance development, personal restitution (e.g., adequate nutrition and sleep), and healthcare (e.g., injury prevention and training load management).

Furthermore, in each interview, the participants were asked about their relationship with their school, what they did or did not like, how they perceived the social relations in their class,

how they had benefitted from the educational programme, and how they had coordinated school activity with their club activity. Since the last interview was conducted after they had transitioned to upper secondary education, we focused more on the differences between the educational programmes and the changes they had experienced when we designed the third interview guide than in the two former interviews. Each interview lasted 45–75 min, was audio-recorded using a digital recording device, transcribed verbatim, and immediately anonymised for storage and analysis.

4.3 Ethical considerations

The study received ethical approval from both the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (reference number 618455) and the Ethics Review Board of the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences. Prior to conducting the interviews, the first author obtained informed consent electronically from both the student-athletes and at least one of their parents. They received their interview transcripts via e-mail and were informed that any information they did not want disclosed could be excluded from the transcripts. They were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. All the participants were assured they would be given pseudonyms, and that references to coaches, teachers, or peers would be anonymised. In crafting the vignettes, we diligently balanced specific details with general characteristics to value the participants' privacy, ensuring as much confidentiality as possible.

While the first author did not attend a lower secondary sports school, she transitioned into a dual career development environment at the age of 16, navigating the demands of balancing athletic and academic commitments during several transitional stages. Her underlying assumptions about commitment and her position as a student-athlete balancing elite handball with her PhD studies were meaningful points of reflection throughout the research process. For example, during the interviews, she actively challenged some taken-for-granted assumptions about athlete development to distinguish herself from coaches and other experts whose job is to sharpen the student-athlete's awareness about "best practice". As an insider to the elite sport culture, the first author shared a similar schedule and understanding of social practices with the participants, whereas her subjectivity was also constructed through her negotiation between oppression and pleasure as two intrinsically linked entities. However, her insider status also created distinct power relations in the interviews when she made them accountable for why they saw themselves as committed athletes (52). Nevertheless, our focus is not on uncovering an objective "Truth" (e.g., whether they *are* committed) but rather on tracing the knowledge system, or what is "*within the true*" (e.g., what is constructed as legitimate practices of commitment) (53). These dynamics, therefore, can offer insights into the broader taken-for-granted assumptions inherent in Norwegian talent development.

The second, third, and fourth authors are experienced researchers whose expertise spans across youth studies, educational and sport psychology, and youth athlete development, and who

¹More than 110 Norwegian public and private upper secondary schools now offer elite sport programmes or sports-friendly programmes. Elite programmes are characterised by clear, formal arrangements with clubs and sporting federations, and include daily school training sessions. In contrast, the sports-friendly programmes consist of a three-year general and flexible academic education and five hours of sport training a week during school hours [Sæther, S. A., Feddersen, N., Andresen, E., & Bjørndal, C. T. (2022). Balancing sport and academic development: Perceptions of football players and coaches in two types of Norwegian school-based dual career development environments. *International Journal of Sports Science & Coaching*, 17(6), 1270–1282. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17479541221111462>].

were also significant in shaping the results. The fourth author's previous experiences as a teacher, and coach, and manager within the Norwegian sport school sector, the talent development pathway, and elite handball further substantiated our contextual understanding and interpretations. Through discussions, the second, third, and fourth authors acted as critical friends, challenging the first author's assumptions and interpretations. This collaborative process was crucial for assessing whether the vignettes provided meaningful insights into the social lives of student-athletes and ensuring that the analysis aligned with the study's underlying philosophical framework.

4.4 Analysis

We followed the recommendations of Bacchi and Bonham (54) on how to carry out a Foucault-influenced poststructural interview analysis. First, the first author noted references to commitment, paying attention to both direct and indirect statements about becoming athletes, such as discussions of future careers, training, and how sport intersected with school and social life. These insights were integrated into the construction of vignettes. Second, to trace the discourses available to student-athletes, we examined when and where commitment was discussed. For instance, Elise associated commitment with training sessions and personal motivation, while Theodor related it primarily to self-discipline outside of training. We then connected these statements to elements that rendered it difficult for student-athletes to construct commitment differently. For example, the objectifying gaze of the national team classified June as a talent, positioning her within tailored training schedules where commitment became intertwined with performance enhancement. This led us to trace their statements back to discourses already located in the scientific literature and to dominant knowledge systems (e.g., sport physiology and psychology) and related norms (e.g., about training loads). Finally, we linked these knowledge systems and practices to the power relations of talent development, identifying the discursive resources available for constructing and enacting commitment during transition processes.

4.5 Presentation strategy: vignettes

We decided to present a layered account of the participants' complex and nonlinear experiences of transitions between dual career development environments through a set of vignettes (55). The vignettes were constructed to provide the reader with a sense of the participants' own telling—insofar as the authors can ever create accounts that feel truthful and close. From the myriads of statements made during the interviews, it is us who have chosen the core of Theodor's, Elise's, and June's stories. From a practitioner's perspective working with athlete development, June's transition can be seen as a "success" story about fulfilling the dual career ideal of balancing elite sport and education, and the subsequent happy and rewarding engagement with the talent development system. In contrast, Elise's transition can, for

example, be interpreted as a story about her struggling to advance her sporting performance while also trying to fit in with the prevailing norms of youth culture. Similarly, Theodor can be seen as someone who diligently follows the expected pathways to achieve future success but continues to struggle for recognition within a system that prioritises current performance over potential.

Indeed, from our research position, which purports the coexistence of multiple social realities, we perceive such an interpretation to be a "valid" one. At the same time, however, if we pose questions from a critical sociocultural perspective, such as "What processes have constrained their talent development?" or "What and in whose interest does this type of talent development serve?", the stories immediately become more complex. Hence, the vignettes were purposefully made to integrate the myriads of experiences involved in the student-athletes' lives, within and beyond sport, to highlight the changes in conditions shaping their transitions. Each vignette was subsequently enriched with a more focused discursive analysis of how each athlete constructed the notion of commitment, allowing us to illustrate the parallel shifts in these constructions over time. Our Foucauldian reading of the key implications of their stories, and the shifting power relations that shaped them, is reserved for the discussion.

5 Transition vignettes

The following vignettes shed light on lives lived across time to avoid episodic focuses on single transitions (28). To assist in building our argument that identity constructions are fluid and relational, and to demonstrate that a transition process inevitably produces changes in other spheres of life, we present the student-athletes' experiences of identity management set against the context of their lives. We contend that this perspective offers an alternative to outcome-oriented research, which often obscures the "production process" of transition experiences in favour of static, descriptive accounts.

5.1 Theodor: manoeuvring investment and the promise of future returns

A focal point in Theodor's story was his non-selection for the elite sports upper secondary school programme he had aspired to. His educational transition proved challenging, shaped by heightened expectations and reduced support from new teachers. He also questioned the competence of his new school coaches, expressing doubt about whether they could provide the level of guidance he needed to support his athletic development. Despite maintaining strong performance at the club level and retaining his position as a first-team player, he was not re-selected to the Norwegian Handball Federation's Talent Pathway. The transition was therefore experienced as difficult and destabilising. In reflecting on the significance of his athletic ambitions and his friendships within handball, his non-sporting identities played a less prominent role in how he navigated and managed this transitional phase.

December 2023

I have three plans in life: handball, handball, and handball. My mom thinks I should have a backup plan, but at the same time, she gets where I'm coming from. She once told me, "You know, I struggled with school and motivation too". That's why I like this school, because they help me improve. The teachers understand us, and they don't give us any homework here, which makes everything more chill. School's tough for me, and to be honest, I don't find it that interesting anyway. My best friends, Sivert and Vetle, go to this school too, and we play on the same club team. We push each other and compete in a lot of things to make each other better. But sometimes I prefer training on my own to make sure the sessions are effective. It's easy to slack off when you're socialising during training. My motivation is to become the best, and I train really hard because I know I'll get something back from it. I was recently selected for a talent development initiative for the best players in the region. So, you notice that you get something back from the hard work, that it helps to train. But it's not important to be the best now—it's more important to be the best around 20–25.

May 2024

Of course, I'm gutted. I don't understand why I didn't get into the elite upper secondary sports school that picks the best players in the area. Or, that's not entirely true; I know my grades weren't too good. But I reckon the school could have turned a blind eye to that. Sivert and Vetle got in, but they worked hard at school and deserve it, so I try not to be too envious. Anyway, I'll keep working hard and prove them wrong. Right now, I try to, like, listen to my body and make sure I eat enough and drink enough water. Trying to, like ... eat right and eat, not necessarily a lot, but eat ... my weight could be a bit higher, so I'd benefit from it on the court. Not that I have any issues with eating or anything, but ... the calories burn off so quickly that I must eat loads to gain weight. So, I'm trying to eat more like an athlete. I just need to sort out my sleep routine because we've heard since, like, 9th grade—"preferably 9 h each night"—right? It'll help our development and also make it easier for me to concentrate at school.

December 2024

I think the biggest change from lower to upper secondary is the expectation to be self-responsible. In the lower secondary sports school, my teachers kept a close eye on me, but now I'm on my own. "Take responsibility for your own learning". Easier said than done. Also, I've kind of realised that sport isn't everything, even though it still kind of is. In my new class, almost no one cares if I score ten goals or get selected for some talent development initiatives. At the lower secondary sports school, everyone noticed stuff like that. There, you were cool if you did well in sports, not

because of who you hung out with or which parties you got invited to. I miss that. I don't really hang out with my classmates, yet it's still early days, but that's okay because I chill with my teammates, which I prefer anyway.

The thing is, you got to show you can keep it together in more than just one area of life. Honestly, I should've paid more attention in school. I guess you could say I'm committed, because I make a lot of the right choices for my sport. I train enough, perform well, take care of myself, and play for a really good club team. Plus, I don't party, which makes me seem more serious compared to others. My new classmates, for example. But I haven't really shown that I'm willing to put all the effort into my education. Truth is, I haven't done a single homework assignment since starting upper secondary school. I keep telling the teachers I'll do it if I have time between trainings, but honestly, there's zero motivation. I'm not really bothered about the grades themselves; it's more about proving to myself that I have enough discipline and can be good at multiple things at once. Especially if handball doesn't go well sometimes. I want to show myself that I can handle tough times and really work for something important, even when it's difficult.

Theodor positioned himself as a committed athlete through a specific way of knowing performance and development. Across his interviews, a committed athlete was constructed as someone who immersed themselves in the pursuit of excellence. As noted in the introduction, a discourse of performance development as an investment constructs an "ideal" figure: the self-regulating, forward-looking athlete who learns to act upon their body in ways that optimise the desired outcomes. This understanding positioned Theodor within a physiological and biomechanical framework of the body, aligning his sense of commitment with disciplinary technologies designed to produce "a training machine"—a biological body capable of sustaining high volumes and intensities of work (24). This construction mirrors patterns documented in numerous studies of youth and elite athletes, where commitment is equated with bodily control, compliance with expert regimes, and a willingness to subordinate other life domains to the long-term pursuit of sporting success [e.g., (56–58)].

During the transition from lower to upper secondary school, Theodor described feeling increased pressure to make responsible choices for his future self. Entering a new environment where athletic achievements were met with indifference, and where his talent status was further destabilised by non-selection to key talent development initiatives, he experienced uncertainty about what it meant to become a successful and autonomous citizen. In response, Theodor adopted visible self-presentation strategies to signal commitment and discipline, such as avoiding parties to differentiate himself from peers and appear more serious about his sporting ambitions. Certainly, he was aware of the public neoliberal ideal that people with a capacity to make self-enhancing investments through education serve as the most qualified actor in modern society (59), but these were clearly public, and not private, values. As such, these efforts can also be interpreted as part of

broader negotiations with traditional masculine ideals, including toughness, self-reliance, and a willingness to take risks, which continue to shape the way young men navigate and perform legitimacy in both social and athletic contexts (60).

5.2 Elise: at the edges looking in, looking out

In Elise's case, although her physical relocation occurred on a specific date, her transition from a lower secondary sports school to a non-sport upper secondary school unfolded gradually. In the months leading up to the decision, she had already begun reflecting on her desire to meet new people and prioritise her physical wellbeing. While both her family and coaches supported her decision, the transition marked a growing separation between sport and education as distinct, uncoordinated spheres. Elise received no structured support from either her coaches or her new school, and did not request any, leaving her fully responsible for navigating the dual demands. Her efforts to maintain an identity as a committed athlete were increasingly challenged by her club environment, where coaches no longer considered her deserving of a first-team position. Thus, while her educational transition opened space to engage more actively with non-sporting identities, it also disrupted her athletic belonging as she was no longer seen as part of the group most devoted to training.

December 2023

Now that the physiotherapist has figured out what was wrong with my legs, I can participate in almost everything without constantly checking in and worrying. I've had to be careful in training and take it easy quite often, which has been somewhat challenging because you want to participate, and you also want your training to look good when it's assessed at school. But for me, having had so many injuries, I've had to do exercises where I'm almost standing still. It can feel like you're not doing anything. But I love to exercise, and my motivation is really high at the moment. My family is a proper handball family, and my granddad is well proud that I play handball. It's always been like...making him proud, you know, it's a pretty big deal. Since I changed teams, I've made friends for life, and the practices have become more fun and challenging. Handball practices are definitely the most fun, but I also quite like the feeling of getting stronger from the strength training at school. That sense in your body after you've managed to push yourself properly—it's a good feeling.

May 2024

I was pretty chuffed when my coach debunked the myth that you must enrol in a sports school to become a good player, because people often assume that going to a sports school means you're serious about your sport. It gave me more confidence about my choice to apply for an upper secondary media school and focus fully on the club instead. My mum

thinks it's a smart move too, given how many injuries I've had recently. Plus, I'm looking forward to changing my environment a bit and being in a class where people have diverse interests. I feel like I need that. I've always believed that if you're going to commit to something, you need to be truly dedicated. For me, it's about being present at every training session, giving it your all, and really showing the coaches that this is something you want. Take the girl on our team who gets up at six in the morning to run before school. She's really good as well, so you can definitely tell she's truly committed. The coaches have said that to be considered for the team, you need to attend all the training sessions. So, I've made sure to let them know whenever I can't make it. I send a message like, "I can't come because of pollen allergy, we're sorting a doctor's note," so they understand. But I do think my coaches know that I want to get somewhere, because one of them is really focused on me and chats a lot with my dad.

November 2024

Lately, I've been feeling a bit demotivated. Everyone's been training lots while I've been ill this autumn, so many of the girls at my team have become really good. I'm still kind of stuck down here while they've developed further. It makes you become a bit, like...see yourself as a bit of a worse player and less valuable compared to the others. Even though the coach said everyone started with a clean slate this season, we [on the second team] can tell he favours the first-team players. I feel like I must show myself more; like, be positive and willing to be there. But, you know, those first-team players, they've got a good connection with the coach, they joke around and chat loads with him and just get plenty of attention from him. So yeah...I'm not entirely sure if I can confidently say that I'm still fully committed. Deep down, yes, I think I am. But right now, I feel uncertain. However, I don't intend to give it up. Besides, life's different now that I've started at an upper secondary media school. At the lower secondary sports school, it was constantly about sport, but now we chat more about parties and boys and stuff. It's really nice going to parties because I can meet more people. So, there's a lot of talk about what we'll do at the weekend and if anyone's got a place we can go to. So yeah, I've made more connections and can ask lots of people to hang out. Our coaches don't care as long as we don't drink or stay up super late before a match, so now I spend most of my free time with friends.

Elise's vignette illustrates a transition shaped by competing discourses and subtle but shifting constructions of what it means to be a committed athlete. Initially, her understanding of commitment was grounded in discourses of fun, intrinsic motivation, and social connection, positioning the committed athlete as someone who trains hard because they genuinely enjoy the activity and value being part of a community (61, 62). These meanings align with a humanistic sports psychology ideal that celebrates autonomy, emotional expression, and positivity (63).

However, this construction gradually intersected with performance discourses in which commitment was measured by work ethic, visible effort, and the ability to endure high training loads. Within this logic, motivation became less about joy and more about demonstrating persistence and *performing* commitment, especially for athletes who were not immediately successful and had to “catch up” through visible hard work. Elise’s injury experiences were foregrounded to resist dominant culturally accepted standards that equates commitment with volume and physical sacrifice (64), and her orientation towards health partly shaped her decision to leave the sports school pathway. Yet, following her transition, she struggled to meet performance expectations, and her continued emphasis on emotional engagement and relational values over rationalised discipline created tensions in how she saw herself as a committed athlete.

5.3 June: why so serious?

In June’s case, although she faced a comprehensive transition from junior to senior sport, her educational transition did not result in major overt changes, as both her lower and upper secondary schools were shaped by the same institutional arrangement and organisational culture. She never doubted that she would be accepted into the elite sport school programme, and she expressed confidence that the school would support her academic progression while enabling her to prioritise football. Her coaches and teachers collaborated to create a flexible, tailored schedule that would alleviate the time pressure often experienced by high-performing student-athletes. However, this flexibility had ripple effects, as she spent more time in her club environment and had fewer opportunities to spend time with friends her own age outside the football domain. She described her family as an important resource, noting that her two older siblings had successfully combined sports with higher education, and she often relied on them for support when facing challenges. Her parents never placed pressure on her to perform but instead kept reminding her to have fun with her sport.

December 2023

I still feel like a child, even though I’m playing football at a senior level and it’s much more serious. Although there are expectations to perform, it doesn’t really get to me, because I understand you can’t always play your best. I’ve always just loved playing with the ball; it’s been a fun thing to do with my friends. And it’s just grown from there. But it wasn’t until I got selected for the youth national team for the first time that I realised I could become quite good. It’s all about keeping up the training and focusing on what you can improve and keep having fun. Then you’ll keep developing bit by bit. The dream now is to be a senior national team player. I’ve picked up loads from the older players about how they carry themselves outside of football and how serious they are because they’re aiming to succeed. But it’s not like it’s strict or anything. Things like sleep and eating

well just sort of happen naturally. You know it helps you feel better the next day. You want to have energy, and when you’re also focusing on school, as it’s our last year and we’re aiming for good grades, you definitely notice that being well-rested makes a difference. It’s not just about training, even though that helps with performance too. Mostly, it’s about feeling good overall.

I reckon school is more important than sport, even though I do want to become a professional footballer. I think it’s crucial to have something outside of football. Injuries can happen, and I want solid grades to fall back on. That’s why the lower secondary sports school has been great. They make adjustments for us, like when we travel with the youth national team and all that. We get schoolwork to do while we’re away, so we don’t fall too far behind. Plus, the coaches and teachers are always there to help when we need it, so I don’t feel like there is too much responsibility, really. They also get that it’s important to have a laugh and that it can’t be all serious all the time.

December 2024

Last year, I had a lot more responsibility as a sort of leader for the younger ones on the team and with the national team and all that. But this year, I’ve been more in the background, a bit small, and I’ve stepped back from taking on that leadership role. At the same time, I’ve picked up a different kind of responsibility, having to perform well on the pitch. Last year, I wasn’t such a key player, but now it feels like I’m expected to play every match. So, the expectations are pretty high ... everything you do, the team sort of hinges on it. You can’t really make dodgy decisions because the whole team, and the club for that matter, are counting on you to deliver. We train with the club during the day, so my schedule is a bit all over the place. I have to check it to know when I’m actually at school. So yeah, I often catch up on loads of schoolwork, especially on Fridays. But when Sunday rolls around, I try to do as little as possible and just chill.

I make much smarter choices now than I used to. I’m a bit more organised, making sure I’m well-rested and eat enough before training and matches and all that. I reckon it’s partly the environment I’m in, too. When everyone else is doing it, it’s easier to follow suit. But that doesn’t affect me in any negative way, because it’s still fun. It all comes quite naturally, and maybe you let loose a bit when there’s no match or anything important going on. I don’t really feel the need to party, as I reckon it’s not great for the body. Plus, as a young athlete, if you drink and mess about, it might signal to the coaches that you’re not serious, and then they might not bother to prioritise you. It’s almost worse for those of us who are, let’s say, at the top of our age group, because people are always looking for something to catch you out on. Anyone who wants your spot and might be a bit jealous could use it against you.

I couldn't manage my education without the support from the teachers at the [elite upper secondary sports school]. For instance, before my midterms, I spent three hours prepping alone with my teacher. They're really flexible and helpful. I can also ask my siblings for help whenever I need to. To be honest, football comes first. It's become much more serious and intense right now. But I still find school really enjoyable, and my parents won't let me prioritise it less, and I don't want to, either. Don't get me wrong, they think it's proper fun following my football career, but they don't pressure me to do anything. They help me with the mental side of things and, like, let's call it the "drama" in the football environment, like, when everyone except one from the younger players on our team got selected for the national team camp.

Unlike Theodor and Elise, June had already been recognised as a talent and granted access to high-performance environments, including the youth national team and an elite club. Within such contexts, sporting talent is typically associated with a strong commitment to elite sport, a progressive learning trajectory, and aspirations for high-level adult performance (32, 65). These discourses of talent are closely intertwined with performance investment logics that emphasise discipline, work ethic, and goal orientation (66). Yet, June constructed commitment somewhat differently. She conveyed that a committed athlete was someone who is curious, resilient in the face of setbacks, and able to sustain joy and playfulness. She actively mobilised dual career discourses, portraying education and well-being as complementary to athletic success. Notably, her emphasis on "keeping it fun" functioned as a self-governing strategy that helped her manage performance pressures and maintain a sense of balance.

However, as she progressed into more professional environments and secured a starting position on her elite team, June became more entangled in, and voluntarily compliant with, the disciplinary regimes of high-performance sport. Here, commitment was rarely spoken of explicitly but rather enacted through the everyday routines and expectations that surround performance development. Drawing on dominant assumptions that quality training must be efficient, focused, and uninterrupted (67), these environments conferred privilege on athletes with access to superior institutional support, while embedding an implicit moral imperative: not to waste the opportunity. As June herself noted, in such settings, even small deviations from normative behaviours could be interpreted as a lack of seriousness and used against her by coaches and peers.

6 Discussion: discursive possibilities for practising commitment

Comparing the "stories" of Theodor, Elise, and June offers valuable insight into the power relations that govern transition processes through secondary school. Each athlete's experience illustrates how subjectivities are shaped within particular institutionalised discourses that define what counts as legitimate

knowledge, behaviour, and identity in high-performance sport. All three reproduced elements of dominant performance discourses, supporting the normative construction of the "committed athlete" as someone who successfully manages high volumes of quality training, and who embodies disciplinary values such as work ethics, self-regulation, and accountability [e.g., (19, 68, 69)]. Notably, Elise and June also governed themselves through alternative forms of knowledge, such as fun and motivation, to broaden the meaning of their commitment practices. This could point to the gendered nature of discursive formations in sport, where coaching practices often reproduce normative ideals of masculinity and femininity. Female athletes, in particular, are frequently positioned as more emotionally fragile and in need of "softer" coaching, with feminine enjoyment tied to sociality and cooperation rather than physicality, competitiveness, or excellence (10, 61, 70, 71). These intersecting discourses offer some athletes greater flexibility in how commitment is enacted, while constraining others within narrower, more disciplinary frameworks.

Additionally, the habits and dispositions formed during youth are also shaped by parental expectations and access to economic and cultural capital (72). Drawing on Stefansen and Strandbu (73), it seems that neither Elise nor June experienced an intensive parenting characterised by close monitoring of their athletic development. From a Foucauldian lens, the way parents discursively construct sports participation, and their position as caregivers within these constructions, are central to how athletes become implicated in the disciplinary processes of competitive sports (62, 74).

However, there is a key difference in how Elise and June are positioned within the social hierarchies of their club and team settings. By being considered a talent, June is positioned higher in the hierarchy, which gives her greater discursive authority to construct commitment in less instrumentalised ways. She highlighted that a committed athlete should prioritise learning and development—a discursive right, we argue, primarily preserved to those who can match or surpass the sporting progression of their peers. In contrast, Elise feels obligated to obtain a doctor's note to legitimise her absence from training to coaches; a move signalling her precarious rights to exert power within the performance investment discourse of sport.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this highlights the uneven distribution of discursive power within the web of power relations that characterise talent development systems, and aligns with Foucault's (75) observation that discourse governs not only what can be said and done, but also *who* may act (e.g., June), and *with what authority* (e.g., being a legitimate talent). June's position as a promising talent necessitates her to comply with performance norms, yet it simultaneously affords her the capacity to govern herself through dual career discourses centred on learning and personal growth, preserving her legitimacy within her environment. Elise and Theodor, on the other hand, are interpellated into disciplinary self-governing practices, where their legitimacy hinges on continually proving their commitment, not only to coaches and peers but also to themselves. These are different points of subjectification, shaping how commitment can be understood, negotiated, and enacted within talent—and high-performance sport environments.

By choosing to continue her education outside the sport school system, Elise enacted resistance to the performance discourse that equates increased training volume with better sport development. Interestingly, the fact that her decision required her coach's "permission" underlines the authority of sports school programmes within the current talent development landscape in Norway. Systematically institutionalising the investment ideal, these schools have been established as the "missing link" between systemic requirements for growth and development as well as individual orientations towards a career in high-performance sport (9, 50).

Elise's decision to step away from the dual career pathway came at a cost. No longer embedded within the structured legitimacy of the sport school system, she became more precariously positioned in relation to the regime of truth that defines what counts as legitimate commitment in high-performance sport. This shift exposed her to intensified gaze of evaluation in her club environment, prompting heightened identity management: every training session became a performance in which she had to prove her commitment and justify her continued presence. Although she continued reproducing ways of knowing commitment through the psychological concept of motivation, she lacked the institutional capital and performance markers needed to convincingly live up to coaches' expectations. Her efforts to reconstruct a credible athletic identity ultimately fell short of the norms governing recognition, illustrating how subjectivity in talent development is not merely a matter of effort or attitude, but of discursive legitimacy and unequal access to power, support, and recognition (44).

Building on this, and inspired by Carless and Douglas (25), we see becoming and being talented as performative engagement constituted by the disciplinary requirements of high-performance youth sport environments. Elise's aspiration to work in media, alongside her pursuit of social mobility and diverse relationships, suggests that by stepping away from a system designed, from a Foucauldian perspective, to minimise external distractions and optimise workload management (76), she instead accessed a repertoire of relations to alternative discourses that helped her navigate divergent social identities (39). Nevertheless, it can be a draining project to manage overlapping identities while fighting for recognition from coaches in a landscape characterised by competitiveness and uncertainty (29).

Accepting the institutionalised dual career pathway, Theodor became morally accountable to the individualised knowledge of the performing body, engaging in subjectification processes through which he called upon himself to correct his "weaknesses" in the pursuit of continual performance development. This mirrors how Foucault (77) describes the ways modern subjects render themselves governable. Theodor's practices of self-optimisation, including the regulation of sleep, food, and effort, reflected a sense of himself and his discipline to be, at times, contradictory as he didn't manage to convey such characteristics across various life domains. His difficulty in engaging in alternative ways of understanding or practising commitment can be linked to gendered expectations, as performance discourses in male sporting cultures often intersect with hegemonic constructions of masculinity that normalise an exclusive athletic identity (3, 78).

However, these processes must be seen in relation to a broader "identity work" and discursive power relations, a rationality of rule

in which Theodor is confronted with risk scenarios to his future life prospects in the face of educational marginality (28, 79). Within this logic, he is offered only a narrow set of solutions that rest on the promise of meritocratic progression but fail to address the structural conditions that constrain his choices. While performance discourses appear to offer agency, they individualise responsibility and displace attention from the wider network of actors and institutions that shape young people's opportunities and outcomes (32, 80). As Ronkainen and Ryba (81) argue, athletic performance discourses provide a powerful sense of direction for Theodor to "make it in life" outside the educational system. Yet, they may fail to account for critical uncertainties, such as unequal access to opportunities, the role of luck, and the often-overlooked stories of those who do not "make it".

Theodor's individualised solutions stand in stark contrast to June's transition experiences. From a Foucauldian perspective, June's case illustrates how power operates through normalisation, surveillance, and recognition, granting legitimacy to certain identity positions while rendering other less visible or credible (36). Her early success and alignment with performance metrics secured her a privileged position within the regimes of truth that governs talent development, allowing her commitment to be acknowledged not through constant self-justification, but via institutional validation, including a tailor-made schedule, expert endorsements, and sustained access to high-performance environments. In contrast, athletes like Theodor, who fall outside this network of recognition are denied both material resources (e.g., coaching access) and discursive legitimacy (44). From a relational perspective, these asymmetrical power relations reveal the contingent and unstable nature of agency in the talent development process, where the selection and validation of some athletes inherently destabilises others (32).

These reflections raise important questions about how current holistic development initiatives tend to reinforce performance investment as the central organising principle in young student-athletes' lives. While flexibility is presented as a benefit for student-athletes like June, such flexibility is tightly scripted within pre-structured schedules, which simultaneously serve as mechanisms of control that standardises effectiveness and reinforces the optimised use of time (82). Rather than addressing broader perspectives on well-being or recognising the multiple, performative ways athletes enact commitment, these practices remain focused on ensuring that athletes can meet escalating demands in sport and education without disrupting their training or performance (77). Commitment is thereby reduced to a measurable outcome, something to be optimised and sustained, rather than understood as a negotiated, context-dependent practice.

Extending this critique, the body of scientific knowledge circulating within holistic development practices often reinforce, rather than disrupt, narrow constructions of athletic commitment (4, 83). As our study shows, these initiatives more often benefit student-athletes who can maintain linear developmental trajectories and build trustful relationships with their coaches, while neglecting the ethical dilemmas, tensions, and structural inequities faced by less-performing student-athletes whose lives fall outside the dominant system of thought in high-performance youth sport.

6.1 Practical implications and limitations

A central challenge is integrating these ideas into discursive practices that actually allow student-athletes to ask some alternative questions about identities and experiences from multiple standpoints simultaneously (5). Importantly, our work shows that student-athletes reproduce the practices that prioritise commitment as an investment of the self, privileging high performance over other meanings in sport (84). If the aim is to incorporate elements that do not simply teach them to keep their identities separate and maintain them in separate spheres but to open the space of talent development to create possibilities for challenging the current norms and values that constrain them, then it is necessary to help student-athletes deconstruct the strong pull of sporting (and academic) practices underpinned by a familiar disciplinary logic (85).

This could include experimenting with different ways of knowing about development to challenge the economised and masculine investment assumptions underlying progress (13). For instance, poststructural and nonlinear coaching pedagogies are gaining attention in academic research, showing how practices, such as disrupting normative truths, decentering coach authority, working with contradiction, uncertainty, or resistance, and creating spaces for marginalised voices or subjugated knowledges, might disrupt traditional disciplinary practices that reinforce top-down expectations (86, 87). In professionalised club environments, there is potential to foster collaboration among stakeholders to engage in critical discussions about how they, often unconsciously, engage in maintaining relationships that promote certain types of committed subjects while devaluing others (15). Educators and institutions could implement workshops to critically interrogate normative assumptions about effective coaching and athletic commitment, helping athletes to identify and address, for instance, how their athletic identities may overshadow or suppress their gendered experiences for reasons of authority and fears of compromising credibility (71, 88). Moreover, creating spaces for dialogue between younger and older athletes during transitions could help the younger athletes to reflect on and create ideas about what “counts” as a possible and desirable life path (2, 3). Offering athletes opportunities to engage with tools that critically explore the emotional and micropolitical dimensions of commitment could serve as an example of how they might begin to question the “cruel optimism”² embedded in sanitised rationale of performance investment and development (89).

The ethical challenge lies in the daunting task of reconstructing the prevailing emphasis on performance within a talent development system built upon dichotomies and clearly defined characteristics of

potential. Many young athletes have significantly invested in a self-understanding that affords them privileges and access to resources, and they interpret its rejection as implying inadequacy or a lack of accountability. Furthermore, the repeated search for development holds a meaningful aspect of actively cultivating the physical body to experience one’s relation to self and the world differently (90). Therefore, as researchers, we must conceive of power and pleasure, discipline and production, as two intrinsically linked entities [e.g., (38)]. The idea is not to demolish, escape, or try to live outside of the network of relations that facilitate talent development but to participate and enact purposeful changes within it (91).

We purport our study’s limitations with privileging analysis of processes of social reproduction, deconstructing discursive possibilities for understanding and practicing commitment. However, through interviews conducted at different points during their transitions and by employing poststructural theory to reconceptualise commitment as relational rather than individual, we were able to trace changes in their discursive resources. This approach is a critical step towards challenging the emphasis on individual responsibility, which obscures structural marginalisation in high-performance youth and senior sport environments. Future research should prioritise researcher-coach collaborations to examine both the short-term and long-term impacts of practices designed to challenge the power/knowledge relations that uphold the investment imperative. As Konoval et al. (92) argue, this requires critically engaging with the educational, ethical, and political articulations that shape our understandings of coaching practices, particularly if we aim to better understand how coaches might exercise power with less domination to foster more ethical practices.

7 Conclusion

In this paper, we examined how student-athletes discursively construct and negotiate meanings of commitment during key transitions in education and sport. Using poststructural theory and Foucault’s power/knowledge framework, we highlighted how student-athletes come to understand and perform commitment within talent development systems shaped by dominant performance discourses. Our findings underscore the relational and contextual nature of commitment, underlining how these systems tend to privilege the student-athletes who align with established developmental trajectories and foster trustful relationships with their coaches.

While educational programmes in sports schools engage in practices to promote self-regulation, self-empowerment, and responsibility as tools to help young athletes navigate demands in high-performance sport, our study highlights how challenging it is to disrupt dominant discourses of performance investment based on individualised solutions. As such, we argue that supporting student-athletes’ ability to broaden their perspectives beyond sport extends beyond reinforcing their autonomy; it requires careful consideration of when, how, and in what contexts coaches can help student-athletes resist pressures of the moral imperative to

²Lauren Berlant’s term ‘cruel optimism’ refers to the affective structures that attaches an individual to aspirations, hopes, or goals that seem promising but ultimately undermine their well-being or prevent them from flourishing [Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press].

enact control and manage their body-machine relations to increase their performance development.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the transcribed interviews is only to be viewed by the first author. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to marielo@nih.no.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (reference number 618455) and the Ethics Review Board of the Norwegian School of Sport Sciences. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent for participation in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardians/next of kin.

Author contributions

MØ: Investigation, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Data curation, Methodology. MS: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology. JN: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Writing – original draft. CB: Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Project administration.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Appendix 2

**Approval letters from the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services
in Education and Research (SIKT) and the Ethical Review Board
of NIH**



Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger

Referansenummer

618455

Hvilke personopplysninger skal du behandle?

- Navn
- Fødselsdato
- Kontaktinformasjon
- Nettidentifikator
- Stemme på lydopptak
- Bakgrunnsopplysninger, som i kombinasjon vil kunne identifisere en person

Beskriv bakgrunnsopplysningene

Skole, klassetrinn, kjønn, og e-post. Bakgrunnsopplysninger som behandles vil avhenge ut fra de forskjellige utvalgene, men en kombinasjon av opplysningene som gjør deltagerne identifiserbare vil unngås i alle publiseringer for å ivareta deltageres anonymitet

Behandlingsansvar

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Norges idrettshøgskole / Forskningscenter for barne- og ungdomsidrett

Prosjektansvarlig

Christian Thue Bjørndal , christian.bjorndal@nih.no, tlf: 40898766

Er behandlingsansvaret delt med flere institusjoner?

Nei

Prosjektinformasjon

Tittel

Youth athlete learning in lower secondary sports schools

Sammendrag

Hovedmålet med dette prosjektet er å utforske sosialiseringsprosessene til idrettsutøvere i alderen 13-15 år i Norges spesialiserte ungdomsskoler. Vi er spesielt interessert i hvordan deltakelse i idrettsklasser på ungdomsskolen påvirker idrettsutøveres læring rundt det å være og bli en utøver.

Prosjektbeskrivelse

[Youth athlete learning at a secondary sports school - project description oct 2023\[52\].pdf](#)

Ekstern finansiering

- Norges forskningsråd (NFR)

Akademisk nivå

Forsknings-/dr.gradsprosjekt

Beskriv hva du skal forske på, og hvorfor du må behandle personopplysninger for å oppnå det angitte formålet

Skole og klassetrinn er avgjørende for å sikre utvalget som prosjektet har som hovedmål å kartlegge. Telefonnummer/e-mail er avgjørende for å distribuere ut spørreundersøkelser.

Totalt antall registrerte i prosjektet

100-999

Lovlig grunnlag for å behandle alminnelige kategorier personopplysninger (GDPR art. 6)

Ikke utfyllt

Supplerende lovlig grunnlag

Tillatelser

- Annet

Annen godkjenning

NIHs etiske komite

Utvalg 1

Beskriv utvalget

Tre 9. klasser fra samme skole. Utvalgets størrelse vil være et sted mellom 45 og 60 idrettselever

Beskriv hvordan du finner frem til eller kontakter utvalget

All kommunikasjon om prosjektet (info- og samtykkeskriv) skjer via skolen frem til ungdommene har mottatt informasjonsskrivet. Da kan ungdommene eller foreldrene ta kontakt hvis de har spørsmål (mail eller under informasjonsmøte). I forbindelsen med rekruttering vil vi forsøke å holde informasjonsmøter for både elever (spørretime) og foreldre (via teams eller foreldremøte) for å svare på eventuelle spørsmål de måtte ha. Samtykke blir gitt elektronisk fra foreldre i et skjema i SurveyXact.

Aldersgruppe

13 - 15

Hvilke personopplysninger vil bli behandlet om utvalg 1?

- Navn
- Fødselsdato
- Nettidentifikator
- Stemme på lydopptak

Hvordan innhentes opplysningene om utvalg 1?

Personlig intervju

Vedlegg

[Intervjuguide individuelle intervjuer idrettselever \(1\).docx](#)

Lovlig grunnlag for å behandle alminnelige kategorier personopplysninger (GDPR art. 6)

Samtykke

Hvem samtykker for barn under 16 år?

Foreldre/foresatte

Deltakende observasjon

Lovlig grunnlag for å behandle alminnelige kategorier personopplysninger (GDPR art. 6)

Samtykke

Hvem samtykker for barn under 16 år?

Foreldre/foresatte

Gruppeintervju

Vedlegg

[Intervjuguide Fokusgruppe .docx](#)

Lovlig grunnlag for å behandle alminnelige kategorier personopplysninger (GDPR art. 6)

Samtykke

Hvem samtykker for barn under 16 år?

ukjent

Informasjon til utvalg 1

Mottar utvalget informasjon om behandlingen av personopplysningene?

Ja

Hvordan mottar utvalget informasjon om behandlingen?

Skriftlig (papir eller elektronisk)

Informasjonsskriv

[Samlet infoskriv utvalg 1.docx](#)

Utvalg 2

Beskriv utvalget

Trenere, lærere for de tre klassene i Utvalg 1. Utvalget er knyttet til forskningsspørsmål 1 (se prosjektbeskrivelse).

Beskriv hvordan du finner frem til eller kontakter utvalget

Utvalget tar utgangspunkt i Utvalg 1 og består av trenere og lærere til ungdommene i Utvalg 1. Kontakt opprettes først med skolen slik at trenere, lærere og skoleledelse kan avgjøre om prosjektet er aktuelt for deres elever.

Aldersgruppe

25 - 60

Hvilke personopplysninger vil bli behandlet om utvalg 2?

- Navn
- Nettidentifikator
- Stemme på lydopptak

Hvordan innhentes opplysningene om utvalg 2?

Gruppeintervju

Vedlegg

[Intervjuguide fokusgruppe intervju trenere og lærere.docx](#)

Lovlig grunnlag for å behandle alminnelige kategorier personopplysninger (GDPR art. 6)

Samtykke

Deltakende observasjon

Lovlig grunnlag for å behandle alminnelige kategorier personopplysninger (GDPR art. 6)

Samtykke

Informasjon til utvalg 2

Mottar utvalget informasjon om behandlingen av personopplysningene?

Ja

Hvordan mottar utvalget informasjon om behandlingen?

Skriftlig (papir eller elektronisk)

Informasjonsskriv

[Fullt infoskriv utvalg 2 .docx](#)

Tredjepersoner

Innhenter prosjektet informasjon om tredjepersoner?

Ja

Beskriv tredjepersoner

Trenere, lærere, medelever, foreldre og skoleledere vil kunne bli nevnt/omtalt av elevene i intervju (Utvalg 1). Elevene vil kunne bli nevnt/omtalt i lærere eller trenere sine intervju (Utvalg 2).

Hvilke personopplysninger skal du behandle om tredjepersoner?

- Bakgrunnsopplysninger, som i kombinasjon vil kunne identifisere en person

Hvilke utvalg avgir personopplysninger om tredjepersoner?

- Utvalg 1: Tre 9. klasser fra samme skole. Utvalgets størrelse vil være et sted mellom 45 og 60 idretts elever
- Utvalg 2: Trenere, lærere for de tre klassene i Utvalg 1. Utvalget er knyttet til forskningsspørsmål 1 (se prosjektbeskrivelse).

Samtykker tredjepersoner til behandlingen av personopplysningene?

Nei

Mottar tredjepersoner informasjon om behandlingen av personopplysningene?

Nei

Begrunn hvorfor tredjepersoner ikke mottar informasjon

Mange av de som kan bli nevnt i intervjuer eller spørreundersøkelsene vet indirekte om det, da de selv kan være en del av prosjektet. I infoskrivet til f.eks. Utvalg 1, er det nevnt at trenere og lærere skal intervjues, men utover dette mottar tredjepersoner ikke informasjon om behandlingen av opplysninger. Intervjupersoner og tredjeperson vil bli anonymisert i alle utvalgene sånn at det ikke kan spores tilbake til noen av dem. Grunnen til at vi velger å ikke informere er at det kan gå på bekostning av relasjoner ungdommene seg mellom, men også på skolen i relasjon til lærere og trenere eller foreldre. Videre kan det påvirke graden av intervjupersonens ærlighet/åpenhet når de vet at tredjeperson mottar informasjon om behandlingen av opplysningene.

Dokumentasjon

Hvordan dokumenteres samtykkene?

- Elektronisk (e-post, e-skjema, digital signatur)
- Manuelt (papir)

Hvordan kan samtykket trekkes tilbake?

Elektronisk (e-post, mail, melding), muntlig eller for hånd (på papir)

Hvordan kan de registrerte få innsyn, rettet eller slettet personopplysninger om seg selv?

Deltagerne vil få muligheten til å lese gjennom transkripsjoner fra sitt intervju og få rettet og/eller slettet opplysninger om seg selv etter eget ønske.

Sikkerhetstiltak

Vil direkte personidentifiserende opplysninger lagres atskilt fra øvrige data ?

Ja

Hvilke tekniske og fysiske tiltak sikrer personopplysningene?

- Fortløpende anonymisering
- Adgangsbegrensning

Hvor blir personopplysningene behandlet?

- Maskinvare
- Mobile enheter

Mottakere

Hvem har tilgang til personopplysningene?

- Prosjektansvarlig
- Interne medarbeidere
- Eksterne medarbeidere/samarbeidspartnere innenfor EU/EØS

Overføres personopplysninger til et tredjeland?

Nei

Avslutning

Prosjektperiode

01.10.2022 - 01.01.2026

Hva skjer med dataene ved prosjektslutt?

Persondata lagres midlertidig

Når anonymiseres/slettes persondataene?

01.01.2031

Hva er formålet med lagringen av persondata?

Styret ved NIH har vedtatt at forskningsdata skal være tilgjengelig i 5 år for etterprøvbarhet og kontroll. Dataene skal i denne perioden lagres på en forsvarlig måte som sikrer et godt personvern.

Hvor oppbevares personopplysningene?

Internt ved behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Vil enkeltpersoner kunne gjenkjennes i publisasjon?

Nei

Tilleggsopplysninger

Tilleggsopplysninger

Om observasjonsdelen av prosjektet: forskeren som skal være deltakende observatør interessert i å følge klassenes hverdag: Hva gjør de, hva snakker de om i løpet av en dag (elevene seg i mellom og i interaksjon med lærere eller trenere), og hva forteller dette oss om hvilke verdier som kommuniseres i en idrettsklasse (både elever seg i mellom og lærere/trenere i samtale med elever). Observasjonene skal ikke filmes eller tas opp, men dokumenteres gjennom observasjonsnotater som gjøres i løpet av dagene observasjonen foregår. Forskeren vil følge klassene hele skoledagen i en til to uker én gang i halvåret.

Søknad 226 – 030522 – Idrettselevers læring, psykososiale utvikling, helse og velvære, og idrettsrelaterte helseproblemer i idrettsklasser på ungdomstrinnet -Oppstart av WP-2 og WP-3

Vi viser til henvendelse fra prosjektleder om godkjenning av oppstart av WP-2 og WP-3, vedtak fra komiteen datert 8. mai 2022, vedtak fra REK datert 29. juni 2022 og mailkorrespondanse med søker.

REKs vurdering er at søknaden for WP-4 er uklar og at WP-4 ikke er tilfredsstillende ferdigstilt til å kunne vurderes på nåværende tidspunkt. REK ber om at sendes inn en revidert søknad når planleggingen av WP-4 er ferdigstilt.

Prosjektleder opplyser til etisk komité at en revidert søknad vil bli sendt til REK når postdock stillingen som er knyttet til WP-4 er besatt. Det er ønskelig å flytte to spørreskjema fra WP-4 til WP-3 og det vil bli sendt en endringsmelding til etisk komite om dette i august/september. Prosjektleder ber om godkjenning til at WP-2 og WP-3 slik de fremstod i søknaden til etisk komite kan starte opp nå.

Vurdering

Prosjektet slik det ble forelagt etisk komite (behandlet av komiteen i møte 3. mai 2022) kan med unntak av WP4 starte opp. Eventuelle vesentlige endringer i prosjektet skal meldes til komiteen i forkant. Komiteen vurderer varslede endringsmeldingen vedrørende flytting av spørreskjema mellom WP-4 og WP-3 som vesentlig og meldepliktig iht NIHs retningslinjer.

Vedtak

På bakgrunn av forelagte dokumentasjon finner leder av komiteen at prosjektet med unntak av WP-4 kan starte opp og gjennomføres innenfor rammene av anerkjente etiske forskningsetiske normer nedfelt i NIHs retningslinjer. Det forutsettes at vesentlige endringer i prosjektet skal meldes til komiteen i forkant.

Komiteen gjør oppmerksom på at vedtaket er avgrenset i tråd med fremlagte dokumentasjon. Dersom det gjøres vesentlige endringer i prosjektet som kan ha betydning for deltakernes helse og sikkerhet, skal dette legges fram for komiteen før eventuelle endringer kan iverksettes.

Med vennlig hilsen



Professor Anne Marte Pensgaard
Leder, Etisk komite, Norges idrettshøgskole

Appendix 3

Informed consent forms

Infoskriv til ungdommene

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet

«Elevers læring og utvikling på idrettsungdomsskoler»?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å utforske hverdagen din med skole og idrett. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Prosjektet skal undersøke hvordan det å gå i en idrettsklasse på ungdomsskolen påvirker ditt hverdagsliv. Deltagelse i prosjektet vil innebære observasjon av deg og klassen din i skolehverdagen. Noen blir også spurt om å delta på individuelle intervju og/eller gruppeintervjuer.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Forskningssenter for barne- og ungdomsidretter ved Norges Idrettshøgskole er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Grunnen til at du blir spurt om å delta på dette forskningsprosjektet er fordi du går i 9.klasse på en idrettsungdomsskole og er mellom 13-15 år. Deres klasse ble plukket ut ved at vi tok kontakt med skolen, som ga oss muligheten til å spørre dere elever om dere ønsker å delta.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Prosjektet innebærer perioder med observasjon i skoletiden over to år. Dette er observasjon hvor forskeren ønsker å lære mer om skolemiljøet deres, så dere trenger ikke gjøre noe annet enn å gå på skolen som dere alltid gjør. Observasjonene vil ikke bli filmet. Noen av dere kommer til å bli spurt om å delta på intervjuer alene eller i grupper for å snakke mer om deres tanker om hverdagen med skole og idrett. All datainnsamling skjer i skoletiden, og du velger, sammen med foreldrene dine, hvilke deler av datainnsamlingen du ønsker å delta på. Det gjør du ved å krysse av i et samtykkeskjema du har fått tilgang til digitalt eller i papirform. Det vil også bli holdt intervjuer med lærere, trenere, skoleledelse og foreldre.

Hvis du eller dine foreldre ønsker å se spørreskjema og/eller intervjuguide på forhånd kan dere ta kontakt og få dette tilsendt.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. All informasjon vi har samlet inn om deg vil da bli slettet. Din deltagelse har ingenting å si for din skolegang eller oppfølging fra trener eller lærer, så det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi kommer kun til å bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Den enkelte forskeren og hans/hennes prosjektgruppe er de eneste som skal ha tilgang på dataene til de ulike forskningsspørsmålene. Hvis du bruker navnet ditt (eller andres), eller kontaktopplysninger vil disse aidentifiseres når vi transkriberer intervjuene, og listen som kobler navn til intervju vil lagres trygt og holdes adskilt fra andre data. Du vil aidentifiseres i intervju du deltar på, og vil derfor ikke gjenkjennes i publikasjonene som gjøres i prosjektet. Datamaterialet (intervjutranskripsjoner, observasjonsnotater m.m.) lagres på en sikker forskningsserver.

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?

Opplysningene anonymiseres når prosjektet avsluttes, noe som etter planen er 01.01.26. Dataene kommer til å lagres i fem år etter prosjektslutt etter NIH sine vedtak for lagring av forskningsdata. Dette gjøres for mulig etterprøvbarehet og kontroll.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra Norges Idrettshøgskole har Personverntjenester vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke opplysninger vi behandler om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene
- å få rettet opplysninger om deg som er feil eller misvisende
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å vite mer om eller benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

- Norges Idrettshøgskole ved arbeidspakkeansvarlig Marie Loka Øydna (marielo@nih.no) eller prosjektleder Christian Thue Bjørndal (christian.bjorndal@nih.no)
- Vårt personvernombud: Rolf Haavik (personvernombud@nih.no)

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til Personverntjenester sin vurdering av prosjektet, kan du ta kontakt med:

- Personverntjenester på epost (personverntjenester@sikt.no) eller på telefon: 53 21 15 00.

Med vennlig hilsen

Christian Thue Bjørndal,

Institutt for Idrett og Samfunnsvitenskap, Norges Idrettshøgskole



Infoskriv til skoletrenere

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet

«Elevers læring og utvikling på idrettsungdomsskoler»?

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er å utforske ungdomsskoleelevers hverdag med skole og idrett. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Prosjektet skal undersøke hvordan det å gå i idrettsklasser på ungdomsskolen påvirker ungdommer sitt hverdagsliv. For deg som trener/lærer vil deltagelse i prosjektet innebære å delta i observasjon, i tillegg til at noen også blir spurt om å delta med i gruppeintervju.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Forskningssenter for barne- og ungdomsidretter ved Norges Idrettshøgskole er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Grunnen til at du blir spurt om å delta i dette forskningsprosjektet er fordi du er trener for og/eller lærer i en klasse som deltar på prosjektet. Vi ønsker ditt perspektiv som trener/lærer for å få en bedre forståelse av hvordan kombinasjonen av skole og idrett på ungdomsskolen fungerer i praksis, og hvilke muligheter og/eller utfordringer denne kombinasjonen medbringer.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Prosjektet innebærer perioder med observasjon i skoletiden over to år. Dette er observasjon hvor forskeren ønsker å lære mer om skolemiljøet, så skolehverdagen skal ikke forandres noe i disse periodene. I forbindelse med observasjonen vil det bli gjennomført gruppeintervju som noen av dere vil bli spurt om å delta på. Gruppeintervjuene vil handle om hvordan dere som trenere/lærere legger til rette for å kombinere skole og idrett, samt deres perspektiv på og

opplevelse av utfordringer og muligheter ungdommene møter ved å gå på en idrettsungdomskole.

Hvis du ønsker å se intervjuguide på forhånd kan du ta kontakt og få dette tilsendt.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. All informasjon vi har samlet inn om deg vil da bli slettet. Din deltagelse har ingenting å si for skolens eller klassens deltagelse i prosjektet, så det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg, skolen eller klassen din hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi kommer kun til å bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrivet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Den enkelte forskeren og hans/hennes prosjektgruppe er de eneste som skal ha tilgang på dataene til de ulike forskningsspørsmålene. All bruk av eget navn (eller andres) eller kontaktopplysninger i intervju, vil aidentifiseres ved transkripsjon, og listen som kobler ditt navn til din transkripsjon vil lagres trygt og adskilt fra andre data. Datamaterialet (intervjutranskripsjoner m.m.) lagres på en sikker forskningsserver. Du vil aidentifiseres i både spørreundersøkelser og intervju du deltar på, og vil derfor ikke gjenkjennes i publikasjonene som gjøres i prosjektet.

Hva skjer med opplysningene dine når vi avslutter forskningsprosjektet?

Opplysningene anonymiseres når prosjektet avsluttes, noe som etter planen er 01.01.26. Dataene kommer til å lagres i fem år etter prosjektslutt etter NIH sine vedtak for lagring av forskningsdata. Dette gjøres for mulig etterprøvbarehet og kontroll.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra Norges Idrettshøgskole har Personverntjenester vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Dine rettigheter

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Med vennlig hilsen

Christian Thue Bjørndal,

Institutt for Idrett og Samfunnsvitenskap, Norges Idrettshøgskole

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet 'Elevers læring og utvikling på idrettsungdomsskoler', og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

☐ Å delta i observasjon

☐ Å delta i gruppeintervju

Jeg trener/underviser skoleklasse: _____

Jeg samtykker til at mine personopplysninger behandles frem til prosjektslutt, ca. 01.01.2026, og lagres i fem år før de slettes, ca. 01.01.2031

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix 4

Observation and interview guides in Norwegian

Observasjonsguide skoletrening

Hva undervises det i?

- Hvilke læreplaner og kompetansemål brukes?
 - o Etterleves de i timen?
- Hvilke aktivitetsformer brukes? (øving, lek, trening, utforske o.l.)
 - o Samsvarer de med timens kompetanseverb?
- Hva er forventet læringsutbytte? Hva sier lærerne? Hva sier elevene?

Hva fremstår som «riktig» og «viktig» - og hvordan uttrykkes det?

Å si (kunnskaper):

Å gjøre:

Å kunne (ferdigheter):

Hvordan kommuniserer lærere og elever sammen?

- Felles beskjeder, i grupper (inndelt etter idrett?), eller en-til-en?
- Hvilken terminologi benyttes (idrettspreget, helsepreget, dannelsespreget? Hverdagsspråk?)?
- Bruk av teknologi (treningsdagbok, treningsplan, OneNote o.l.)
- Hva gjør lærerne i samtale med elevene (korrigerer, positiv feedback, fremovermelding, stiller spørsmål?)
- Hva gjør elevene i samtale med medelever (korrigerer, motiverer, sammenlikner)?
- Hvilke atferder roses og hvilke korrigeres? Av trenere? Av elever?

Sosiale mønstre:

- Hvem henger med hvem?
- Hvem snakker høyest? Lavest?
- Hvordan grupperer de seg (etter klasse, idrett, kjønn)?
- Hva gir kapital i klassen?

Hvilke ritualer finner sted i undervisningen?

- Hva sies og gjøres under oppstart – aktivitetsskifter – avslutning?
 - o Hvordan organiseres elevene og hvor plasserer læreren seg?

- I hvilken form introduseres aktiviteter (Lærer viser/forklarer, lærer bruker elev til å vise (øvingsbilde), elever kan prøve ulike bevegelsesløsninger)?
- Hvordan bruker lærerne og elevene rommet (går de fritt, blir de plassert på bestemte steder)?
 - Hvilke muligheter og begrensninger skapes av rommets arkitektur?

Intervjuguide: Fokus gruppe med trenere

Bakgrunn	Introduser dere selv: • Beskriv deres rolle og fagområde, samt hvor lenge dere har jobbet på skolen. • Si noen ord om hvorfor dere valgte å jobbe her.
Idrettsungdomsskolen sin funksjon er:	Diskuter tankekartet dere har fylt ut på forhånd. • Hvilke utfordringer eller typer motstand møter dere som idrettsskole? Kan dere gi konkrete eksempler på situasjoner hvor dere, enten personlig eller som organisasjon, har måttet håndtere motstand? • Hvordan har skolen/organisasjonen respondert på denne motstanden eller utfordringen?
Hvilke kriterier for suksess arbeider skolen etter?	Skrive opp stikkord på tavle/papir. Skriv «10. klasse» i den ene enden av tavlen og list opp kriterier. Skriv «8. klasse» i den andre enden av tavlen, og tegn en pil mellom dem. • Hva skjer underveis her? Hvordan opplever dere at elevene møter og tilpasser seg kravene, spesielt i lys av sine egne (og foreldrenes) forventninger og ambisjoner? • Hvilke læringsutbytter ønsker skolen/org. at ungdommene skal oppnå? • Hva kjennetegner en god idrettselev?
Pedagogiske prinsipper og strategier	CASE fra egentreningsperioden: • En ungdom som trener med innsats og fokus, men lite spesifikt for utvikling i sin idrett. • Ungdom som ofte velger å redusere innsatsen på skoletreninger for å øke forutsetningene for å prestere i klubb eller på konkurranser. • Ungdom som er svært forbedringsorientert og er oppslukt i å optimalisere sin egen hverdag og få nyttig utbytte av treningen. • Ungdom med manglende motivasjon for videre dobbel karrieregang (Rå på skole/rå i idrett) Har dere andre erfaringer med at det oppstår spenninger mellom ungdommenes behov, skolens målsettinger, eller krav til at de må vise kompetanse i fag?

Jakob

CASE: Tilsynelatende manglende retning i egentrening

Idrett: Ishockey

Ambisjonsnivå: angivelig høyt

Foreldreinvolvering: Høy

Jakob er en fysisk og motorisk moden gutt som spiller på et lokalt hockeylag. Han har lenge vært foran de andre i sin fysiske utvikling og spiller hovedsakelig med gutter som er 1-2 år eldre. Til nå har han møtt lite motstand på sin vei mot å bli proff. Han blir alltid tatt ut til kretssamlinger og ligger i sjiktet til å bli tatt ut på sin første landslagssamling. Gutten viser selvsikkerhet både sosialt og på trening, og han har alltid innsats på treninger og skolearbeid. Under egentreningsperioden legger du merke til at han trener lite spesifikt med tanke på å utvikle seg til å mestre arbeidskravene. Han virker mer opptatt av å teste ut ulike ferdigheter og måle krefter mot sine medelever. Faren til Jakob er engasjert i hans idrettslige og akademiske utvikling. Han er tidligere elitespiller og har brukt mye tid på egentrening sammen med Jakob. I dag er faren også trener på junior-laget i klubben hvor broren spiller, så han følger opp både broren og Jakob tett.

Synne

CASE: Svært opptatt av å optimalisere sin egen hverdag

Idrett: Langrenn og dans

Ambisjonsnivå: høyt

Foreldreinvolvering: Høy

Synne er en aktiv og seriøs jente. Hun driver både med langrenn og dans, så timeplanen hennes er som regel fullstappet med trening. Kl07:15 drar hun hjemmefra og hun er ofte ikke hjemme før på kveldstid. Foreldrene hennes stiller alltid opp og kjører henne til og fra skole og trening, slik at hun skal rekke over alt. I helgene har hun ofte konkurranser eller renn, litt avhengig av sesong. Synne er i tillegg opptatt av å gjøre det bra på skolen og jobber alltid effektivt med oppgaver i skoletimene. På høsten i 8.klasse var Synne mye sliten. Hun fikk god veiledning fra skolen om totalbelastning og restitusjonstiltak, blant annet at hun burde passe på å hvile og spise nok. Året etter, i egentreningsperioden, legger du merke til at hun er veldig opptatt av å få mest mulig utbytte av treningen sin. I treningsdagboken kommer det frem at hun kun er fornøyd dersom alt går etter planen og dersom hun får spist riktig og hvilt nok i løpet av dagen. Hun blir fort frustrert dersom noe forstyrrer mulighetene til å optimalisere hverdagen. Hun har tidligere fortalt at hun er redd for å ikke henge med på utviklingstempoet som resten av klassekameratene viser og at hun ikke skal prestere godt nok til å komme inn på toppidrettsgymnas.

Kaisa

Case: Manglende engasjement for dobbel karrieregang

Idrett: Fotball

Ambisjonsnivå: Høyt

Foreldreinvolvering: Lav

Kaisa har lenge visst at hun er en talentfull fotballspiller. Fra tidlig alder av ble hun sammenlignet med store fotballstjerner og hun er allerede vært tatt ut til flere landslagssamlinger. Selv har hun store ambisjoner og ønsker å investere så mye tid som mulig på sin fotballkarriere. Det store engasjementet for idretten gir lite rom for andre interesser, inkludert skolearbeid. Kaisa viser lite interesse for det som skjer i klasserommet og bruker heller skoletimene til å se eller diskutere fotball med medelever. Hun har uttalt at flere toppidrettsgymnas er aktuelle skoler for videregående utdanning, og din ledelse har gitt beskjed om at de gjerne vil holde henne i organisasjonen.

Simon

CASE: Lav innsats på skoletreninger

Idrett: Tennis

Ambisjonsnivå: Høyt

Foreldreinvolvering: Høy

Simon har satset tennis siden han var 9 år gammel. Han synes det er gøy å konkurrere og liker å mestre nye ferdigheter. Derfor deltar han på alle turneringer og samlinger han kommer over. Foreldrene stiller opp og tilrettelegger for denne høye deltakelsen. De har begge drevet aktivt med utholdenhetsidretter og har god kunnskap om grunnleggende treningsprinsipper. Blant annet er de svært opptatt av treningsbelastning og konkurranseforberedelser. Simon presterer godt på sitt alderstrinn, men trenger høyere rating for å bli ansett som topp 20. Gjennom egentreningsperioden legger du merke til at Simon ofte skriver i treningsdagboken at han valgte å redusere innsatsen sin på skoletreningene. Begrunnelsen er da at han ønsker best mulig forutsetninger for å prestere på kommende turnering eller samling. På neste morgentrening legger du merke til hvor lite han faktisk gjør i løpet av treningen.

Intervjuguide: Fokus gruppe med idrettselever

Begynn med en «rundt bordet»-introduksjon: Be ungdommene si navnet sitt, hvilken type idrett de driver med, sine erfaringer med idrettsungdomsskolen og fremtidige planer knyttet til videregående skole.

Åpningsspørsmål:

- Som 8.klassinger trengte jeg/vi å lære ... fordi...
- Som 9.klassinger lærte jeg/vi... og det var bra/dumt fordi...
- Sammenliknet med 8.-og 9.ende klasse, har jeg/vi i 10.klasse blitt mer bevisst på...

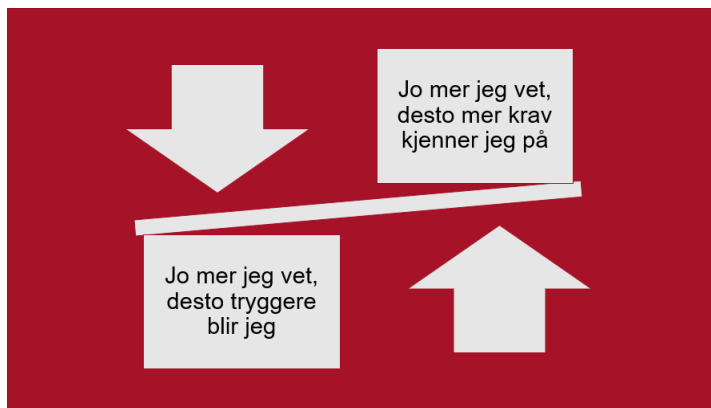
Vignett 1:

Det er morgentrening og du kjenner at du er sliten. Du hadde en middels tung trening i går, men brukte lang tid på å komme deg hjem, dusje og spise. Det ble bare to små brødsiver til kveldsmat. Det fristet ikke med noe mer. Du kom deg heller ikke i seng til det tidspunktet du hadde planlagt. Nå vurderer du om du skal si ifra til skoletreneren om at du må ta det rolig, men synes det er ubehagelig å bli konfrontert med spørsmål om hvorfor av treneren... Hva gjør du?

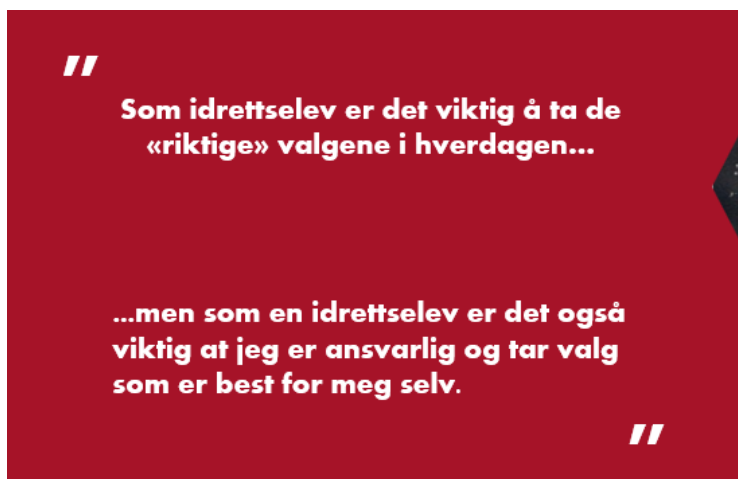
Vignett 2:

Du skal ha en tellende framføring i morgen, men har ikke øvd nok til å få den karakteren du håper på. Klokken er 20:00 og du har nettopp kommet hjem fra trening. Du må egentlig spise og dusje, pakke bagen til morgendagen, øve, men alt du har lyst til er å sove... Hva gjør du?

Aktivitet 1 og 2 (bruk hvis diskusjonen ikke flyter):



- Denne vektingen handler om at dere lærer mye om både trening og restitusjon. Hvordan pleier dere å forholde dere til forventningene som følger med denne kunnskapen? Vil dere si at: Jo mer jeg lærer, desto tryggere blir jeg på valgene jeg må ta? Eller at jo mer jeg lærer, desto mer press føler jeg for å ta de riktige valgene? Eller kanskje begge deler?



- Diskuter disse påstandene.

Generell intervjuguide individuelle intervjuer

Spesifikke spørsmål er fjernet for å beskytte deltakernes anonymitet.

Første intervju	
Oppgave gitt på forhånd	• Ta med en ting eller et bilde som du synes er «typisk deg» eller som beskriver hverdagen din. - Hvordan vil du beskrive deg selv som idrettsutøver/idrettselev? - Hvordan tror du lagkameratene dine ville beskrevet deg?
Idrettsengasjement	• Du bruker jo en god del av tiden din på idrett og trening. Kan du fortelle om da du begynte å få en økt interesse for det? Hva har skjedd siden da? • Når begynte du å tenke på at dette var noe du kunne bli god i? Har du noen eksempler på situasjoner som gjorde at du tenkte at dette kunne du satse på? • Hva er drømmen? Hvordan ser du for deg at det kommer til å skje? Hva ser du for deg?
Valget om idrettsungdomsskole	• Hvordan fikk du vite om den? • Hvem hadde meninger om valget og hva mente de? • Vurderte du andre alternativer – hva vurderte for/imot?
Hverdag	• Hvordan vil du beskrive hverdagen din? - Hva består en typisk dag av? Kan du ta meg gjennom hele dagen fra du står opp til du legger deg? • Hva er det beste/verste med denne livsstilen og hverdagen? - Hva ville du gjerne hatt mer av/mindre av? • Hva opplever du forventes av deg for å mestre denne hverdagen? Hva forventer du av deg selv? - Hvordan har det endret seg de siste årene imens du har gått på skolen?
Avslutning	• Ser du for deg å starte på et toppidrettsgymnas?
Andre intervju	
Hva har skjedd siden sist?	• Hva opptar deg for tiden? - Hva har du gjort for å håndtere eksamensperioden? - Hvordan går det med idretten*? • Kan du fortelle om inntaket ditt til videregående skole?
Hverdagsregimer	• Vil du fremdeles si at du er dedikert og seriøs? ○ Hvilke handlinger gjør at du kategoriseres som dedikert/seriøs i stedet for useriøs?

	• Har du noen eksempler på situasjoner hvor du bevisst eller ubevisst har forsøkt å leve opp til dine egne forventninger om hvordan en «seriøs utøver» skal leve?
Kritisk refleksjon	• Hva gjør du for å ta vare på deg selv og dine interesser oppi alt det her? - Får være den versjonen av deg selv som du vil være? - Kan kravene om å være på en bestemt måte noen ganger ha negativ effekt? • Har du noen personer i livet ditt som er kritiske til at du vil bli en utøver? • Hva er det med toppidrettslivet som appellerer til deg? - Har du noen eksempler hvor du har stilt deg kritisk til livet som toppidrettsutøver?
Tredje intervju	
Overgangen fra ungdomsskolen til videregående skole	• Hva kjennetegner det å være elev her sammenliknet på idrettsungdomsskolen? - Hvordan vil du beskrive de sosiale hierarkiene i klassen/på skolen? Hvem er de kule og hvorfor er de det? Hvordan passer du inn i alt dette? • Kan du gi eksempler på hvordan du har tilpasset deg det nye miljøet? På hvilke måter prøver du nå å vise ovenfor andre at du er like/mer/mindre seriøs med idrett og skole som før? • Gjennom denne overgangen, på hvilke måter vil du si at du har endret deg? - Som person? Som utøver? Som elev? • Hvordan ser hverdagen ut nå? Fritid og skolearbeid?
Ungdomskultur og sosiale relasjoner	• Vi er jo alle en del av større kulturer, som for eksempel norsk kultur, idrettskultur, ungdomskultur – men du er også en del av et miljø på skolen og en sosiale media generasjon. Føler du at noen av disse spiller inn på dine forsøk på å kombinere idrett, skole og et sosialt liv på en god måte? • Hvem er det du henger med for tiden, og hvor? • Hvordan vil du beskrive ditt forhold til ungdomskulturen som du er en del av? Festing og status?

Idrett og satsingsatferd	• Har du eksempler på at det forventes noe annet av deg nå, enten av trenere, foreldre, eller deg selv? Hva tenker du om disse forventningene? ○ Er det noen forventninger du er ekstra oppmerksom på å leve opp til for tiden? Er det noen du gjør motstand mot? • Føler du at du henger med? At du utvikler deg i takt med de andre? • Hva innebærer det for deg, i dag, å satse på idrett? Hva skal til for å lykkes? • Vi har tidligere snakket en del om å ta gode valg og det som følger med hvis man vil satse. Hvilke gode valg er du opptatt av for tiden? ○ Hva har du blitt mer/mindre streng på? Hvorfor?
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