

Young Female Elite Athletes in a Meritocracy

© **Stephanie Y. M. Jensen**
Centre for Youth Studies, Copenhagen

Published on idrottsforum.org 2017-10-30

Danish society has evolved into a meritocracy in the 21st century. Each individual is responsible for his or her own success in life. Young people, especially, face a mounting pressure on all sides to constantly perform their best in every area of life. The result of this is young people suffering from stress at an early age. In particular young girls appear to be more perfectionistic, addicted to control, success driven, and socially oriented, compared to young boys. Alongside increased social pressures, youth sport has become more professionalized and it requires a lot of dedication if you want to be an elite athlete, while at the same time continuing to be committed to school. The purpose of this article is to examine the challenges of combining elite sport, school and social life outside sport in the daily life of a young female elite athlete. In addition, this article examines how we can better understand these challenges based on the tendencies towards competition and success we face in the 21st century. Five young female elite athletes aged 15-17 (representing soccer, handball and swimming) have been interviewed

on topics about school, elite sports, experiences of well-being, social relations, and considerations about the future. The main results of the article show that (1) young female elite athletes experience identity diffusion across life arenas; (2) they struggle to relate to social life outside of elite sports; (3) that dedication and an internalized demand for perfection as fundamental parts of the female athletes' mindset lead to a constant self-monitoring resulting in them pushing themselves to the limit – and beyond it; and (4) that school is the life arena that means the most to the female athlete's future and career outside sports.

STEPHANIE Y. M. JENSEN graduated from the Department of Public Health, Aarhus University, Denmark, in 2016 with a master's degree in Sport Science and Psychology. Stephanie now works as a project manager at Center for Youth Studies on the research project "Good sports environments for young female athletes" in cooperation with DIF (Danish Sports Association) and 10 sports federations. Stephanie's primary research interests are in the field of youth sports.

At this team, they had an arrangement with cake after the match – player of the last match brought cake. However, I think we send out a wrong signal if we have cake in our opponents' locker room when we consider ourselves an elite club. Therefore, I have told the girls that we will end this cake arrangement and instead I have introduced a cuddly teddy bear to the player of the match– but the girls went bananas! They got so angry that I dared to take away their cake.

(Football coach)

Introduction

A study from University of Southern Denmark shows that the number of children and youngsters that are medicated with antidepressants has increased with more than 60% from 2005 to 2012 (Politiken, 2016; SDU, 2016). A study of Danish high school students found that almost one third of the surveyed youngsters often feel stressed, while 53% feel stressed once in a while, which leaves us with the impression that stress seems to be a central part of Danish high school students' lives to a certain point (Grube & Østergaard, 2010). The question is whether we have more fragile children today than we had ten years ago or if we can find the reason for this development somewhere else. According to a number of experts, the explanation can be found in the increased pressure on young people as we see it in the 21st century, where youngsters must take responsibility for their own lives to a greater extent, choose the right education, and constantly try to improve their qualifications (Politiken, 2016).

Ove K. Pedersen sees a development in our society from a welfare state to a competition state and sociologist Anders Petersen (2016) and psychologist Svend Brinkmann (2014), who talk about the Danish society in the 21st century as a meritocracy and an accelerating culture in constant change, respectively, support him. In the pursuit of being competitive, we must always do things more, better, and for a longer time and it is all about not being static. Everything is possible if we have the will – and if we do not succeed then we criticize ourselves (Brinkmann, 2014).

A concrete example of this performance culture is the so-called “A-grade culture” or “A-grade girls” that have become terms well known to all of us. (In Denmark, the highest grade achievable is 12, equivalent to an A on the international ECTS-scale.) The debate of the A-grade girls and the perfor-

mance culture are themes that continuously return to a number of papers, journals and magazines where an issue often seen is the pressure that the young people put on themselves.

With the term “A-grade girls”, it would be fair to ask whether only girls take in this performance culture. Helle Rabøl Hansen acknowledges that performance demands can both get to boys and girls but she emphasizes that it is a special girls’ issue (Asterisk, 2015). In a book by Rose & Perski (2010), which claims to be a “Survival Guide for Performance Princesses”, we can read about how young women and girls at a still younger age begin developing a mentality that they should be good at everything. Perfectionism, need of control, and so-called performance cravings are found all through this performance mentality that stresses even younger people.

It is not only the pursuit of A’s that is at stake when you are young. It is not an easy project to navigate around the various life arenas such as school, friends, sports, after-school job etc. as these arenas each contain different agendas for young people. In addition, in all of this, the young ones have to maintain the feeling of being “themselves”. The transition from public school to high school can be experienced as challenging in many ways with higher educational challenges and responsibility for your own learning and demands of priority of time as well as engagement in new social relations (Grube & Østergaard, 2010).

When young people enter into a new education it seems to have a negative effect on their participation in organized leisure, which may be due to the increased amount of homework, after-school job, or the wish to be part of the new social arena in high school. When leisure activities are opted in, it is often for the reason that “it is fun” and that it provides an opportunity to clear the mind of the hectic everyday life (Grube & Østergaard, 2010). However, is that also the case when it comes to sports becoming elite sports? We know that elite sports take up a lot of time for the young athletes, who also have to give school their full attention.

These overall contemplations on society and youth life lead into the center of the research interest of this article: young girls in elite sports.

We also see that the meritocratic turn is now present in youth sports, which has become more professionalized with more training hours, an increased number of matches and tournaments, increased demands for participation, and an earlier specialization within one kind of sports (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Martin & Horn, 2013). In order to achieve results, the young athletes need to muster more and more dedication to sports, which leaves less time for life outside of sports (Aquilina, 2013; Diehl et al., 2014).

Young people engaged in elite sports still have school to attend to and this places them in a duality in which they have to be good in school, which is marked by the above-mentioned performance culture and at the same time be part of the elite sports world, which is also marked by competition and performance.

It is a well-known fact among clubs and coaches that talented girls aged 15-18 years either quit sports completely or quit *elite* sports (Plum, Storm & Bech, 2008).

Danish Football Association (DBU) conducted a study of football girls showing that the social aspect of sports is central to girls where a positive assessment of social activities in the club and on the team are essential factors (DBU, 2016).

Christensen & Sørensen (2009) uncover young talented boys' experiences of everyday life with both school and elite football. Among other things, they find that the time pressure is an overall factor for all the boys when they describe the challenges in the pursuit of a successful football career – i.e. balancing life with elite sports and a youth education.

But how does this look like for elite sports girls now that we know that the girls tend to be more perfectionist, have a great need of control, and are socially more oriented than boys seem to be?

This article wants to uncover *what challenges are related to being a young elite sports girl focusing on personal and social challenges*, and further to examine *how we can understand these challenges in light of the trends for competition and performance that we see in the 21st century*.

The article will take its starting point in selected challenges from sports, school, and everyday life respectively, as experienced by a young female elite athlete in a meritocracy.

Elite sports in Denmark – a brief introduction

In Denmark, it is expected that elite athletes engage in an education while also engaging in elite sports (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). Securing an education while engaged in elite sports can be seen as a societal responsibility towards the young people spending time and energy in the sports arena.

Team Denmark is the institution that manages elite sports in Denmark and this institution's vision is to make Denmark the best place on earth for an athlete. They do this by offering flexibility in the elite athletes' everyday life with sports and education. Development of talent in Denmark focuses on the entire environment around the athlete and a central part hereof is the

ideology of “*the whole person*”, i.e. an understanding of the talents’ entire life situation (education, leisure, job, and sports) all through their sports career (Team Danmark & DIF). However, one thing is how Team Danmark wants the development of talent to look like for young athletes – another thing is how it is being practiced. Many coaches and other relevant club people are probably mostly interested in athletes that dedicate themselves 100% to the sports with one ambition only – to be the best within the sport in question (Information, 2014). Thus, it is relevant to ask whether the vision about international top performances and a harmonic dual ambition structure with education and elite sports is at all realistic (Information, 2014). Christensen & Sørensen (2009) experience that talented football players and coaches, who are socialized into an elite sports culture where hard work and dedication to sports is the core of the culture, do not necessarily share the enthusiasm for a dual ambition structure. In sports socialization, the players gain self-discipline, the will to win, and an understanding of the significance of targeted training from childhood. The ideal picture of “*the whole person*” seems to be far from the players’ experience when they are to handle conflicting basic assumptions within the two different life arenas and cultures in which they navigate (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009).

Method

Research design

This study used a qualitative methodological approach, as the desired scope for the article is to obtain insight into subjective experiences, intentions, actions, and motives. The focus is young female elite athletes’ experiences of everyday life by which a voice is given to a selected group whose stories and experiences that have not been heard before.

Participants

In order to get access to the actual field of interest, five informants were selected for interviews. The five girls are among the best in Denmark of their age within their respective sports. The choice of sports did not have any central significance other than a wish to reflect both individual sports and team sports, as there is a possibility that differences may be seen among the athletes within the different sports.

The informants are 15-17 years old and are attending either the 9th grade or high school at the time of the interview.

Description of informants

Julie: 16 years old, first year of four-year Team Danmark high school. She is training 26 hours a week and is in the top of Danish swimming. She is qualifying for international events and has been chosen for the national team. She is doing well in school.

Ida: 15 years old, 9th grade. She is training 26 hours a week and is in the top of Danish swimming. Qualifying for international events and she is medal winning. She is highly ranked on the international senior ranking list even though she is only a junior. She dreams of going to the Olympics in 2020. She is doing well in school and has ambitious plans of her future.

Line: 17 years old, first year in high school. Trains football four times a week and plays matches in the weekends for one of Denmark's best clubs for her age. Line is doing well in school.

Katrine: 17 years old, first year in high school. Trains football four times a week and plays matches in the weekends for one of Denmark's best clubs for her age. She is doing well in school as well as at football where she sees the possibility of being chosen for the national team "if she does her best".

Sofie: 17 years old, second year in high school. She trains handball three hours three times a week and plays matches in the weekends. She plays for one of Denmark's best clubs for her age. She often plays with the senior players. She is doing well in school.

Results

Everyday life as a young female elite athlete: It is about not being static, about wanting it all – and a little more

The handball and football athletes train about four times a week and play a match in the weekend. This does not sound much considering we are talking elite level sports, but for the girls, sports take up more time than just training hours, due to the performance demands that come with elite sports and the girls' performance cravings in general. The two swimmers in the study have the most compressed everyday life, with 26 hours' of training a week. They

get up at 4:30 am and attend morning training from 5:30 am to 7:30 am. After this, they go to school and then after school they go training again. At 7:00 pm, they are at home eating dinner, doing homework, and going to bed at 8:30 pm in order to be fresh for another day. On Saturdays and Sundays there is only training once a day. One of the swimmers says that when she is doing her homework it is something that she “just finds time for between school and training or whenever it is suitable” and that very often she does her homework during breaks at school. Common for the girls is that they experience the sports activities (from the first ball is thrown until the final whistle blows) as a break from the everyday life where they forget about everything else. However, according to Katrine, the thoughts about all that has to be done come back the minute that training is over:

The minute the training ends and we are stretching out I am thinking ‘I must go home and do my homework, what is it that I will have to do?’ I must do English, Biotech, and Danish.

(Katrine, 17 years old, football player)

This gives us an impression of an everyday life in constant move from one activity to the next, equivalent to Brinkmann’s description of today’s trend in society of being constantly moving. We find another example of this with Sofie, who has many and high expectations on herself as being skilled and not missing too many social activities while at the same time maintaining her image as an open-minded and happy girl. However, the greatest challenge for Sofie is not having enough time:

You would like to play on the first team, you would like to keep up in school, and you should preferably also be ‘a whole person’ when you are attending social events and not just be completely tired. So you are driving on that extra energy once in a while.

(Sofie, 17 years old, handball player)

Here we experience the high intensity in everything that Sofie engages with. Sofie mentions that it is important to be ‘a whole person’ and with Team Danmark’s specific “whole person” ideology it sounds good that she is aware of the social aspects and school as central arenas next to her sport. However, it is obvious from the interview that it is sometimes difficult for Sofie and that sometimes she does not thrive. She turns her challenges inwards and blames herself when it is difficult.

Julie is very much driven by the goals she sets for herself, and according to Julie, everybody around her in school and in swimming has a goal that they pursue. In that way they push each other in a direction where everything is done with the purpose of improving something and doing it well. Julie finds that it's okay for her but:

Sometimes there is a need of doing something without an actual purpose [...] be together with your friends without having to think that you must be good.

(Julie, 16 years old, swimmer)

Even though intensity is high within the various activities, and even though Julie feels okay with it, she also experiences a need of relaxing. Nevertheless, despite her seeing it as breaks, she cannot help thinking about the things she must do when relaxing is over – because when she has been lying on the couch “then I have to start myself up again”. This experience of never being able to relax completely mentally is also something that we find with the other girls. Sofie expresses it as “actually, it is a bit difficult to allow yourself to relax when there are so many things to be done”. If, for example, she allows herself to watch an episode of a series then afterwards she thinks about why she did not just do her homework instead in order to get it done. Katrine is aware that she needs to get better at relaxing – her mom tells her so, because when she is having dinner knowing there is homework to be done she constantly checks the clock:

I cannot sit for too long because then I just know that there will be less time for homework [...] I often think ‘oh shit, for how long must I sit here because I also need to do other things, right?’

(Katrine, 17 years old, football player)

Thus, the girls are constantly watching themselves and even though they may feel the need to relax it is difficult for them to let go of the pressure of constantly being on the move, and the bad conscience is ready to take over when they allow themselves a little relaxation.

One of the trends in the performance culture is creating your own way and success in life. During the interviews, I often get the impression that the girls are aware of this and that it takes up a lot of their everyday consciousness. The girls are aware that a good education is important, especially because they know that they cannot make a living from their sports in the long

run. Line is very much aware that she thinks a lot about the future without her being able to answer where she is going and why it takes up so much of her thinking. She has many thoughts as “what do I want to do with my life?” and with her own words it is “a huge thought to handle”.

An example of the tendency to adopt uncritically the meritocratic expectations about being able to and wanting it all is seen in Ida’s future plans. When I ask her how her life looks in about ten years from now, she answers:

Naturally, I would like to go to the Olympics in both ’20 and ’24 [...] I would like to have a boyfriend at that time. And I would very much like to have children. I guess not at that time, when I am 25 – maybe a little older. And then I would like to have a big house and a garden and be really well educated. I would like to be a judge or something like that [...] maybe a lawyer.

(Ida, 15 years old, swimmer)

This is a clear example of internalization of society’s performance culture where the trend is wanting it all and where having a good and successful life affects young people in their dreams of the future.

Identity and the social (youth) life.

“The others do not understand me”:

about having a different youth than the classmates

Earlier, we experienced that social relations mean a lot to girls in general. When we wish to understand more about the challenges that young elite girls face in their everyday lives then it is natural to look into how the girls’ social lives work.

In their ‘*self-determination theory*’, Ryan & Deci list three basic psychological needs that must be met in order to achieve optimal wellbeing. It is relevant to include the theory in this study because an understanding of the elite girls’ challenges in their everyday lives is assumed to take starting point in the lack of fulfillment of these needs.

An individual’s basic psychological needs are *autonomy* – the urge to be in control of one’s own life and to act in harmony with one’s self; *competence* – the experience of mastery; and *relatedness* – the experience of being connected to and caring for others (Ryan & Deci, 2008).

In the following, I will look into how *relatedness* is experienced in sports and school, respectively.

All the girls, except for Ida, experienced the transition from public school to high school, and it is true for all of them that they find high school significantly different from their time in public school. It is well known that high school is more demanding also in relation to prioritizing homework and assignments. The girls enter a new and unknown arena in high school where they really need to perform – but at the same time, it is also a new social arena with new roles and new relations in which the girls must settle. This challenge seems especially big, as they do not have the time to engage as their classmates have.

During the interviews, the girls are asked how it feels to be them and the first answer is that it is fine. As we get further into the interview it turns out that everything is not that fine after all. Line mentions how her classmates do not understand her and she does not really have the feeling of belonging. Ida is open about how she finds it the most difficult when she is in school, where they know her as another Ida and she does not feel a belonging with the class. She does not feel that she can be herself because “they do not know me in school like my team-mates do”. Ida says, “*it is like there are three Idas*”. In his identity theory, Erik Erikson explains the concept ‘identity confusion’ as something that emerges in adolescence, a feeling of alienation (Erikson, 2013). Ida’s experiences of herself can be seen as a feeling of alienation towards who she actually is. In swimming, they share common goals and interests that Ida can identify with, but she does not find this in her class. Thus, she experiences a social identity¹ with the others from the swimming that she does not find in school.

In general, the girls give the impression that the understanding of what they are doing is important but they experience that it may be difficult for their classmates to understand why the girls spend so much time on their sports and why they cannot just cancel training. It is obvious that the girls in general and Ida in particular find it difficult to identify with the social arena in school where they do not experience a strong degree of relatedness to the community.

The girls provide concrete examples of how social life in school can be hard to handle when for instance they are not invited to social events with the class. Ida has three friends in her class, who are the only ones with whom she spends time in school, but she is never invited for sleepovers because “I am going to training anyway and they know that so that is alright”. With these stories from the girls we get the impression that the girls’ wellbeing is

1 ‘Social identity’ is what makes you part of a group and excludes you from other groups (Jørgensen, 1999)

not optimal, which may be due to lack of relatedness to the community in school. Another possible explanation may be a lacking experience of autonomy in their everyday lives, where the degree of self-determination may be affected by the girls' dutiful mentality expressed as 'if you accepted to do it – you do it'. Thus, there are parts of youth life in which they do not have total self-determination and participation because they chose elite sports.

However, as the only one, Julie stands out from this experience of lacking relatedness to the community in her present class in school. Julie is in a Team Danmark class in high school and according to herself, this is overall essential for her wellbeing in the class. She did not feel that she had anything in common with her classmates in public school, where she was invited neither to parties nor into groups in the class. In the Team Danmark class, they share the everyday life that Julie leads and it means a lot to her that there is a joint understanding for the priorities that they all make. Further, Julie appreciates the possibility of living out her identity as other and more than 'a swimmer' because "maybe you also need someone where you are more than just a swimmer". Thus, to Julie it is important to switch between sports as one arena, where she experiences the identity 'swimmer' and school as another arena, where she is allowed to test other roles. She needs to have something else with which she can identify to avoid a frozen or unidimensional athlete identity². This shows the advantages of having more identities, whereas we have also seen how Ida has a negative identity-perception across the arenas. This will be discussed later in the article.

Sports as a social arena

The girls talk about that special atmosphere in the sports arena. They know each other well in the teams, spend a lot of time together, and share the same challenges and joys of the elite sports life. This is where they feel the most at ease, which is equivalent to leisure activities giving space and resources to be able to handle school (Grube & Østergaard, 2010).

I asked several of the girls what their lives would be like if they did not have elite sports. Many of their answers are only socially oriented, e.g. Katrine, who says "if I did not play football, my social life would be extremely boring". This is interesting as one possible answer could have been that the

2 A total presence of sports in the athlete's life will result in the athlete role becoming inseparable from other roles in life (Cabrita et al., 2014), which may lead to a so-called 'unidimensional self-identity', where the activity (in this case sports) in itself will be defining for the individual's self-perception and identity (Harris & Watson, 2011; Martin & Horn, 2013).

girls would actually have *more* time for their social activities, now that we were just informed that they often have to say no to social activities in and outside of school due to their sports.

When we learn that the elite girls do not experience being part of the community in school to the same extent as in sports, an explanation seems to be that the girls can identify with each other and share common values in sports – and in that way they develop very strong relations with each other and their social needs are fulfilled.

The unique thing about friendships in sports is that the athletes are not only friends, they are also competitors. However, the girls do not express this as a challenge. On the other hand, it helps them becoming better when they compete against each other in training. Thus, we see a trend that social relations are of great significance for the girls in sports, which is further emphasized when I asked the girls about what they find important for a good elite sports environment for girls. Their answers are largely socially oriented: there must be good social events and it is important that they are close and that everybody likes each other. Again, this indicates the “typical girls’ thing” where social relations are central for the girls’ wellbeing and form the basis for what they experience as a safe atmosphere (DBU, 2016). I see a concrete example of this where a rather new trainer tells me that he made some changes to the culture when he started in the club. He was really puzzled by one thing in particular and that is why the girls got so upset by his canceling the cake arrangement for the team in conjunction with matches (see the initial quote on page 2). Here we see a clash between two basic values: having clear values about an elite culture on one hand, and on the other strong view about a cake arrangement that for the girls is a symbol of something community-oriented, which is important for them as a team and which potentially strengthens their feeling of wellbeing internally in the team.

Even though we can see that the social aspects of sports are important to the girls, there is also a focus on the social aspects outside of sports. Line finds it safe to have diversity in her circle of friends. She is aware that a social life outside of her sports is important, as she does not know when the elite sports life ends. Julie admits that very often she would like to spend time with her friends outside of sports but that she does not have the time. She indicates that she is aware of the fact that she misses something in her youth life and that it can be difficult. Julie will have to think that she cannot be everywhere at the same time. Thus, she is aware that her choosing the elite sports life has the consequence of opting out of other activities with

other young people of the same age, but she cannot have it all and still get something out of her elite sports life. Ida uses the argument that she “chose it herself” when she, just as the other girls, faces an opt out of activities. It is also difficult for Line to say no to sleepovers or movies because according to herself she loves these things, “it is SO nice!”. But “other things are more important and I can go to the movies later in life”. So there is no doubt that these young girls face activities in their youth life that they will have to say no to – even though they would also like to be included in that particular community.

When we learn that the social aspects of sports are important to the girls then we can also understand the necessity of having a strong community there. One thing is that they have common values and can identify with each other in elite sports, but another thing is that they will have to look for security where they are sure to find it, even though they are aware that it will end at some point and that they will then have to go out into “civil youth life” and look for reassuring communities.

Constant self-monitoring as a consequence of the pursuit of perfect performances

Rose & Perski (2010) describe how perfectionism, need of control, performance cravings, and dedication is found everywhere in the performance mentality and seems to be a fundamental approach to everything. An obvious theme all through the five interviews is performance cravings and the inner pressure that comes with it in the pursuit of perfect performances. This perception reflects not only in the elite girls’ sports participation but also in all life arenas, and seems to be a permanent part of their mentality. The two swimmers both say that they feel the pressure in everything they do. Katrine says that she will have to pressure herself the utmost in order to make it work, because she accepted to do it. As an example, she talks about how she stresses herself if she must skip training due to a school assignment. Her thoughts about the consequences of this missed training makes her reason that if she misses training then the others had more training than she had, which will make them better and this may result in her starting on the bench during the next matches.

Sofie is fully aware that the inner pressure will be there. To her it is crucial whether she also feels a pressure from others because “that would only be double-up on pressure” as she sees it. She finds that her own pressure is the worst part, and this can be understood from Michel Foucault’s thoughts on

the ‘panoptic apparatus’. The self’s capacity of monitoring and controlling itself is essential for Foucault and with concepts such as ‘power’ and ‘subjectivity’, Foucault tries to understand different (especially pedagogical) practices of which we human beings are part of. The specific practices in school for example will aim at creating the individual in a certain way that takes its starting point in political strategies wanting to take society into a specific direction. An example hereof could be the competitive nation that must be able to act in global competition. In relation to modern exercise and technologies of power, Foucault introduces Bentham’s Panopticon as “the sight that searches for insight and creates sensation” (Foucault, 2002). The essence is that monitoring as we know it from prisons produces disciplined individuals. The interesting thing about this kind of power is that it is hidden to us. The disciplinary power is everywhere: it is found in ourselves, in the institutions where we are, but also in the social space (Foucault, 2002). This perspective is interesting in relation to understanding how the young elite girls are capable of driving and controlling themselves in the hectic everyday lives they seem to live.

One thing is that the elite girls want it all and put pressure on themselves in order to function in both school, sports, and social life outside of sports. Another thing is the expectations that they have to do this themselves in order to succeed. During the interview with Sofie, we talked about playing handball at a higher level than what she did. She said that to be perfectly honest she is relieved that she is not going to national gatherings because she is sure that this would stress her too much with tests and tours around the country. Before any test, she stresses herself and gets stomach aches because she expects herself to perform at her best:

It breaks me just thinking about it. The thought about not getting the best result.

(Sofie, 17 years, handball player)

The paradox of this is that what we must assume to be the most attractive for an elite sports athlete – to be chosen as the national top elite – is being overshadowed by performance fears with thoughts of what comes with being part of the top elite.

Line had to realize that it is not possible for her to perform at her best at all times. She always wants to present herself at the best. She thinks it is part of her nature. However, she also finds that she has become more mature about her view on this and that she has been forced to learn that not every-

thing can always be perfect. She always wants to be able to do everything and was never completely satisfied with an assignment before handing it in because “there is always something that can be improved”. And even though she does her best, she is left with a feeling of not being good enough. In continuation hereof, Line talks about how she has felt a pressure of achieving an A in all subjects. She still feels this to a certain degree, but in high school she was forced to realize that the challenges and demands are bigger, and thus, it is not the same expectations that she inflicts upon herself. However, despite of this, she still recognizes the A-mentality within herself because she would really like to shine in all subjects. The pursuit of the perfect performances and the As are also clearly seen with the swimmer, Ida, who with great regret talks about a yearly examination in Danish where she got a B instead of an A. This irritates her and she emphasizes that there was something that she did not do good enough since she did not get an A. Thus, we see clearly that the elite girls have self-expectations about doing everything to perfection, where possible.

When I ask Julie why she is engaged in her sports she answers that when she feels that her everyday life is tough and she asks herself why she does it, then the answer is that she wants to achieve her goals. Without goals, she would not be able to have the drive in her everyday life. The same goes for Ida, who also has to remind herself that she attends training because she has a goal – the Olympics in 2020. Ida thinks that in general she is good at setting goals and have targets in both school and sports. New goals help her “moving on and on and on”. Here we see the trend in society about constantly developing and improving. The girls show self-control, they are proactive in their own development, and they use self-technologies³ in a way that allows them to develop *with* themselves. This reflects the expectations existing in performance cultures.

In the pursuit of achieving the goal and getting through the high intensity everyday life that the girls live, the girls possess a central ability that seems to be essential for them in handling their everyday lives and challenges: their self-monitoring. Several times I get the feeling that the girls are their own worst critics. Earlier, we have seen how they pressure themselves in order to find time for everything and performing at their best. Katrine gives the impression that self-monitoring is highly relevant in her handling of her everyday life – for better or worse. Previously, we experienced in a quote

3 Self-technologies characterize the tools used by individuals in order to act according to themselves and creating, re-creating, and cultivating themselves as subjects in certain ways – as acting creatures (Brinkmann, 2014).

from Katrine how she is watching the clock while having dinner because she cannot allow herself to spend too much time sitting there before having to move on. When she plays a match, one bad pass sticks with her for the rest of the match and she keeps track in her head of good and bad actions. Via an inner dialogue she presses herself to deliver something good to offset the bad action.

As mentioned earlier, a clear consequence of the constant self-monitoring is the lacking ability of letting yourself take time off and relax. Even though this self-monitoring does not seem healthy, the point is also that the monitoring may have a disciplining effect, which seems to be an important skill for the young athletes in their handling of their everyday lives. The girls' discipline is clearly seen in their handling of their everyday lives and in their ability of saying no to hanging out with their friends because they will have to find time for homework before training. However, as we know, the interesting thing is that this disciplining seems to be part of the girls' mentality and their approach in general, and thus it is not only seen in sports. During the interview, Katrine mentions several times that if you said yes to elite sports then you must do it. Together with self-monitoring and disciplining, we see great dedication that does not only seem to be part of the elite sports culture but part of the girls' mentality in general. Ida emphasizes that they learn something from the elite sports environment that they do not learn in school. She learned to be goal-oriented and focused and how to structure her time and handle challenges, defeats, and victories. This matches Christensen & Sørensen's (2009) finding that through their socialization in the elite sports culture, athletes achieve a degree of self-discipline, a will to win, and an understanding of the significance of targeted training from their childhood.

Discussion

Dual career or other priorities in everyday life?

In Christensen & Sørensen's article (2009) regarding the tension between demands in both school and sports we find that the male football players aged 15–19 want to dedicate themselves 100% to sports. The young boys accept that school is important but what really means something to them right now is football. This does not seem to be the case for the girls in this study. On the one hand, we have seen how the girls dedicate themselves

to everything in which they engage themselves, but on the other hand, we also see that they are conscious about prioritizing school work higher than sports. They do not talk about “if” but “when” they are not able to perform in sports any longer. They are aware that elite sports must end one day and that it is therefore more important to focus on school and education and give it the necessary space and attention. If the elite girls are under pressure with handing in an assignment on time, then the consequence will be that they must cancel training. The consequence is not that they either compromise with the quality of their assignments or they do not hand in on time in order still to make it to training. Thus, school means more to them, and when school/education begins to take up more time they know that it will be at the expense of the elite sports. In that way, we can understand sports as a secondary occupation or an interest for which they are passionate as well as an arena for experiences and acknowledgment, where individual goals and enthusiasm is what drives them, rather than the dream of a future career. Thus, we do not see the same trends as regards ‘dual career’ and dedication *only* in elite sports among girls as Christensen & Sørensen (2009) find among boys.

The fact that school has an influence on sports matches the findings in the study “The Girls’ Voice” (“Pigernes Stemme”; DBU, 2016), where a link is found between the desire of playing football and the girls’ educational standpoint, as school is the factor that affects the girls’ time to play the most and that it makes it difficult to match school and football in the everyday life. It is noted in the study that it would be interesting to look further into whether the girls’ sense of duty towards school affects their participation in leisure activities in general. Seen from this study’s perspective, this seems to be the case to the extent as regards *elite* female athletes.

Is the ability of self-monitoring the girls’ “friend” or “enemy”?

Until now, we have seen that the self-monitoring seems to exist because of the performance culture of which we are subject in the 21st century. Further, we have seen how the elite girls have a mentality based on performance cravings and dedication that pressures them through a hectic everyday life of youths. Here it would be relevant to ask whether self-monitoring is good or bad for the young individual in our society. As long as the individual can control self-monitoring, it seems favorable, as the girls seem able to modify themselves in their everyday lives and in the pursuit of goals and successes. We know that it is up to the individual to look after itself under the conditions that are available for us in the society, and in this case, self-monitoring

becomes a central tool for handling and acting in the performance and competition culture, where we are responsible for our own success. However, we also see how self-monitoring leads to the girls pressuring themselves to the utmost – and a little further. In these cases, there is a risk that the ability of self-monitoring as a regulation mechanism will drive the girls to fail thriving and thus, it results in unintentional intentions.

Identity confusion vs. the powerful experience of several roles

According to Erikson (2013), identity confusion is not atypical in youth, where different roles are tested and where the individual must find his/her place and find out who they are and what they would like to become. In the analysis, we see examples of identity confusion, as for instance we see that Ida experiences three different versions of herself depending on the arena in which she is. Ida does not feel related to the youth culture and the identity perceptions that exist in her class in school and thus, she experiences how she is another person in school than who she is in sports and at home, where she recognizes herself better.

In the study of Christensen & Sørensen (2009), they found that 100% dedication to their sport may contribute to young football players' early identity closure in their youth lives. This may lead to identity confusion when they are in the middle of their identity creation process. A frozen identity in one culture will probably result in challenges for the young elite athletes. Society puts up demands and we must be flexible and ready to adjust them to changes, just as it is the case in the elite sports environment that these young athletes are part of (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). This may explain the challenges that Ida faces about her own identity across the various arenas.

On the other hand we have Julie, who reports that it is nice to have the possibility of being something else than a "swimmer" when she refers to her school class and her role there. Thus, there seems to be two opposite understandings of being more than your athlete role: the positive story experienced as a relief and a confusion about who you are and where you belong.

When Julie describes that it is nice with the possibility of taking on another role and how she thrives in her school class, we should perhaps question whether Julie actually sees herself as something other than a 'swimmer' if we are to understand 'something other' as something far from the athlete role. As mentioned earlier, Julie is in a Team Danmark class, where her classmates just as herself are elite athletes. It is easy to believe that a great deal of this community is based on the mutual understanding of choices

and opt outs in the everyday life, and what gives rise to Julie's wellbeing in school may rather be understood by the relatedness and mutual understanding that she finds here. Thus, the "nice" can probably be understood as her not standing out from the community here as she did in public school.

Some of the sports psychology literature describes the essentials of having more roles in life than the athlete role and the importance of having more activities in life. A strong athlete identity⁴ may result in a poorer development of other roles outside of sports (Miron, 2010), which may affect the development of an 'unidimensional athlete identity' that according to studies is often related to negative consequences for the athlete's wellbeing of both psychological and social character (Martin & Horn, 2013; Miron, 2010; Verkooijen, Hove & Dik, 2012). Julie, who experiences the possibility of being other than a 'swimmer' in school as a good thing, seems to thrive in her school class. So, here we see a match between literature that emphasizes that a broader understanding of your identity helps improving your wellbeing, and on the other hand Ida, who does not feel comfortable in the other roles that she experiences across the arenas. During my interview with Ida, I did not get the feeling that she only sees and refers to herself as 'a swimmer', but she feels that it's only in sports that her "real self" is expressed. Even though Ida does not explicitly express a strong athlete identity, then it is easy to observe her identity self-perception as such, based on her views about the feeling of her "real self". A strong athlete identity is connected with great dedication to the sports' goals and training (Miron, 2010; Verkooijen, Hove & Dik, 2012), which is significant in the case of Ida. However, it should also be mentioned that Ida is likewise dedicated in other life arenas.

The strong athlete identity has also been connected to positive psychological outcomes because of intensive training and successful performances as well as social relations with other athletes (Miron, 2010; Verkooijen, Hove & Dik, 2012). Ida seems to have high self-efficacy both when she talks about her performances and her goal of the Olympics in the future, and her goals outside of the sports, such as getting a good education, and she describes strong social relations to the other swimmers. Here we see a match between the views of literature about the strong athlete identity's positive sides. The confusion in Ida's perception of identity in the other arenas can probably be explained by the fact that the high demands that she meets in her athlete role may result in conflicts with other roles and important activ-

4 By athlete identity is understood that an individual's identity is built up around the individual's participation in sports and the role of being an athlete. The athlete identity is formed by the time and efforts dedicated to the sports activity (Cabrita et al., 2014; Martin & Horn, 2013; Miron, 2010; Verkooijen, Hove & Dik, 2012).

ities outside of sports, which in turn may lead to problems with socializing with other youngsters her own age as well as “social holes” (Miron, 2010). This seems to be the case with Ida.

Relatedness, autonomy, and competence are central factors in the entire everyday life

We have seen that the female elite athletes tend to get on better socially in their sports than in school where they seem to be less related to the community. In general, through their everyday life, as described by the girls, we get the impression that autonomy is lacking to a great extent, partly because the everyday life is so hectic, and partly because the degree of autonomy may be affected by the girls’ dutiful and dedicated mentality about “if you have said yes – you will do it”. On the other hand, autonomy is very much present as the girls themselves chose to prioritize elite sports and school knowing that this choice result in missing other activities.

Just as the two first needs, we do not only see the need of competence in sports, but in life in general for the young girls. We have seen how the girls to a great extent show a competence of being able to navigate in the different arenas and at the same time honoring the demands that they meet in each arena. This is the competence of knowing how and when the girls must act when they face momentary changes of perspective⁵ and will have to navigate in roles as the elite sports athlete, the daughter, the friend, the student, respectively (Møller & Thomsen, 2015). We see competences with-in postponing needs when the everyday life is too tough and the girls would rather like to relax or go to the movies or parties with friends. In the cases where activities with friends outside of the sports must be opted out there is a lack of relatedness to this group, but we also see a competence of being able to handle and accept the fact. Thus, the general impression is that the girls in spite of their perfection cravings, discipline, targeting, self-control, and dedication in all they do, have the competence to handle their everyday lives and its challenges.

Even though it is considered a strength to be so competent within these areas, we have also seen how it leads to an enormous self-pressure. In addition, as they want it all and naturally have limited resources to handle all of it, we are not left with the impression that the girls thrive optimally, even though all needs seem to be fulfilled to a certain extent. The girls’ self-mon-

⁵ Momentary changes of perspective: to be able to change focus, cf. Møller & Thomsen (2015: 31-32).

itoring, perfection cravings, and dedication in all that they do leave us with a clear impression that the girls drive themselves (too) hard. The central question will be how they will be able to balance the need for perfection and dedication and whether there is a risk that the girls will suffer from mental or physical overload when they want to do so many things to the full. In these cases, what possibilities do the girls have to handle the situation? And what help will be available to the athletes? The explanation can be the resources that are in the girls' systems or arenas in the shape of for example 'significant others', i.e. parents, coaches, and youngsters at their own age.

Earlier in the article, there was the question of whether Team Danmark's vision of international top performances and a harmonic dual structure of ambitions with education and elite sports is realistic. With the knowledge that we have now from this article and based on existing literature within the research field, it would be interesting to take a further look into a possible answer to the question: it does not seem to be the case for these young female elite athletes at present. The two swimmers may probably be heading towards performing in international competitions and maybe even in the top rankings – time will show. Common for the girls is that school and education are the most important factors as they are aware of securing themselves a future outside of the sports. Thus, it does not seem realistic with a dual structure of ambitions with education and elite sports. At present, it is difficult to determine whether it is the lack of future security within elite sports that results in a bigger focus on school – or whether it is the focus in school that will be at the expense of maximum dedication and goal-setting in pursuit of a future within elite sports. However, the trend is clear: to these young female athletes, sports is merely an arena of experiences while school is of highly significant career importance.

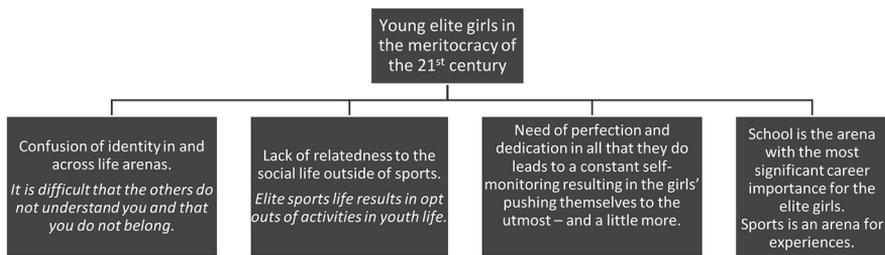
Conclusion

Now, we got an insight into the girls' everyday lives that seem to be compressed to the utmost and where the girls are in constant flux from one activity to the next. On the outside, the girls seem happy and open but on the inside, they are worried about making it, performing, and finding themselves in everything they do. The elite girls experience challenges such as confusion of identity in and across life arenas and a lack of relatedness to the community in school, where they find that their classmates do not understand them and the girls experience difficulties in belonging. The girls

experience a relatedness in sports where they are surrounded by equals, resulting in the girls' striving to do their very best in this arena. Even though the social activities outside of sports are important to the girls, there are also related challenges because elite sports life results in a lot of opt outs of activities in youth life with other youngsters their own ages of which the girls are also very aware.

School is the arena with the greatest career significance for the girls. This is very different from the focus that boys give elite sports and a future career in sports. Instead of being a career, to the girls elite sports become an arena of experiences and acknowledgment where your own goals are the driving force.

Besides unearthing the social challenges that may be connected to life as a young female athlete, the purpose of this study was also to explore personal challenges in everyday life. In this relation, we got an insight in the young girls' performance cravings, targeting, discipline, self-control, and dedication in all that they do. Even though these competences seem to be a strength for handling their everyday lives, we also see how the girls inflict enormous pressures on themselves and how they become their own worst critics, constantly watching over themselves. Thus, it also seems to be difficult to be *that* dedicated and self-monitoring. We learned how the young girls uncritically adopted the mentality of the meritocracy that undoubtedly takes up many thoughts with the girls. Overall, we see challenges relating to the wish of and the endeavor to being the best version of yourself, always perform at your best, and at the same time be in constant movement – all trends and structures recognized from the accelerating performance culture.



Acknowledgment

Thanks to Kristian Raun Thomsen, Associate Professor at Section for Sport Science, Aarhus University, for professional sparring during the process of my master thesis. Also thanks to Vivian Merklin Christensen for help to translate this article.

Litteraturliste

- Aquilina, D. (2013). "A Study of the Relationship Between Elite Athletes' Educational Development and Sporting Performance". *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 2013. Vol. 30, no. 4 , p. 374-392
- Asterisk (2015): "12-tals-piger: Da det blev et problem at klase sig godt". *Magasinet Asterisk* nr. 76. December 2015, p. 11-15
- Brinkmann, S. (2014): *Stå Fast. Et opgør med tidens udviklingstrang*. København. Gyldendal Business.
- Cabrita, T. M., Rosado, A. B., Leite, T. O., Serpa, S. O. & Sousa, P. M. (2014). "The Relationship Between Athletic Identity and Career Decisions in Athletes". *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*. 2014. Vol. 26, p. 471-481
- Christensen, M. K. & Sørensen, J. H. (2009). "Sport or School? Dreams and dilemmas for talented young Danish football players". *European Physical Education Review*. 2009. Vol. 15(1), p. 115-133.
- DBU (2016): *Pigernes Stemme*. I samarbejde med Københavns Universitet, Eir Soccer og Trygfonden. Rapport udarbejdet for Dansk Bold Union (DBU) i marts/april af Anja Kouly Lethin.
- Diehl, K., Thielmann, I., Thiel, A., Mayer, J., Zipfel, S. & Schneider, S. (2014). "Possibilities to support elite adolescent athletes in improving performance: Results from a qualitative content analysis". *Science & Sports*. 2014. Vol. 29, p. 115-125
- Erikson, E. H. (2013): *Identitet. Ungdom og kriser*. 2. udgave. København. Hans Reitzels Forlag
- Foucault, M. (2002): *Overvågning og straf. Fængslets fødsel*. Frederiksberg. Det Lille Forlag.
- Grube, K. & Østergaard, S. (2010): *Jeg har brug for et break! Perspektiver på sammenhængen mellem gymnasie- og fritidsliv*. Frederiksberg. Forlaget Ungdomsanalyse.nu
- Harris, B. S. & Watson, J. C. (2011). "Assessing Youth Sport Burnout: A Self-Determination and Identity Development Perspective". *Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology*. 2011, vol. 5, p. 117-133
- Information (2014): "Troen på det halve idrætsmenneske". <https://www.information.dk/debat/2014/05/troen-paa-halve-idraetsmenneske>
- Jørgensen, P. S. (1999): "Identitetsdannelse i ungdomstiden". I: *Den nye psykologihåndbog*. 2. udgave. København. Nordisk Forlag A/S.

- Martin, E. M. & Horn, T. S. (2013). "The Role of Athletic Identity and Passion in Predicting Burnout in Adolescent Female Athletes". *The Sport Psychologist*, 2013, vol. 27, p. 338-348
- Miron, P. (2010). "Role identity and its implications in the athlete's personal development". *Timisoara Physical Education and Rehabilitation Journal*, 2010, vol. 3 (5), p. 7-12
- Møller, R. B. & Thomsen, K. R. (2015): "Fra Ideal til Virkelighed". I: *MOV:E*. Nr. 1. 2015, p. 26-33
- Petersen, A. (2016): *Præstationssamfundet*. Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Plum, M., Storm, R. K. & Bech, S. L. (2008). "De krydspresede elitepiger – et diskursteoretisk perspektiv på køn og eliteidræt". *Idræthistorisk årbog*, 2008, vol. 24, p. 123-133
- Politiken* (2016): "Ekspert: Unge er ikke blevet mere skrøbelige, de er blot pressede". <http://politiken.dk/forbrugogliv/sundhedogmotion/ECE3107200/ekspert-unge-er-ikke-blevet-mere-skrøbelige-de-er-blot-pressede/>
- Rose, J. & Perski, A. (2010): *Præstationsfælden: Overlevelsesguide for præstationsprinsesser*. Danmark. Dansk Psykologisk Forlag.
- Ryan, R. M. & Deci, E.L. (2008): "Self-Determination Theory and the Role of Basic Psychological Needs in Personality and the Organization of Behavior." I: John, O. P., Robin, R. W. & Pervin, L. A. (Eds.) *Handbook of Personality. Theory and Research*. 3. Udgave. New York. The Guilford Press. P. 654-678
- University of Southern Denmark (2016): "Stor stigning i børn og unges forbrug af antidepressiv medicin". http://www.sdu.dk/da/om_sdu/fakulteterne/sundhedsvidenskab/nyt_sund/stor_stigning_i_boern_og_unges_forbrug_af_antidepressiv_medicin
- Team Danmark & Dansk Idrætsforbund *Talent-HUSET: Værdisæt for talentudvikling i dansk idræt*. Fx. <http://www.teamdanmark.dk/Fokusomrader/Talentudvikling/Artikler/Vaerdisaet.aspx>
- Verkooijen, K. T., Hove, P. v. & Dik, G. (2012). "Athletic Identity and Well-Being among Young Talented Athletes who Live at a Dutch Elite Sport Center". *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*. 2012, vol. 24, p. 106-113