

Developing young athletes: The role of private sport schools in the Norwegian sport system

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to analyse the increasingly prominent role of private sports schools in the development of elite athletes in Norway. The context for the analysis is the apparent paradox between the emergence of a network of sports schools, the most successful of which are private and require that parents pay a fee, and the social democratic values of Norway. Data were collected through a series of interviews with 35 respondents from nine stakeholder groups, including athletes, coaches, parents and sport school managers. The research describes an elite sport system that is successful in producing medal winning athletes, but which is organizationally fragmented, uncoordinated and under-funded with regard to youth talent identification and development and susceptible to tensions between key actors. The primary analytical framework is Kingdon's multiple streams framework augmented by path dependency theory. The findings include, a picture of an elite youth sport development system in which multiple and overlapping problems have received, at best, only partial policy solutions some of which, such as the growth of private sports schools, have emerged by default. When focusing attention on the relationship between structure and agency in the policy process it is argued that the government, through its inaction, has allowed sports schools the policy space to expand. The consequence is that the government has, whether deliberately or not, enabled the strengthening of a commercial elite youth sport development system, while still preserving its egalitarian and non-interventionist credentials.

Keywords

Elite sport schools; Norway; sport policy, youth talent development, multiple streams, path dependency

Developing young athletes: The role of private sport schools in the Norwegian sport system

Among the characteristics which define modern high performance sport, two of the most striking are the intensification of competition between countries, despite the end of the Cold War, and the increasing competition between sports for a share of the pool of sporting talent (Green and Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan and Zheng, 2013). One consequence of these two characteristics is an increasing academic interest in, and public investment in, the identification and development of young sporting talent. While the age of peak performance has remained generally stable (Rust et al., 2012; Schultz and Curnow, 1988) the age at which coaches attempt to identify talent has got younger. The attempt to identify potential talent at younger ages is a consequence not only of the competition for market share of young talent among sports but also of the dominance of theories and models which stress the long term nature of the process of turning giftedness into talent. For example the Long Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model (Balyi et al., 2013) is dominant in many countries and shapes both public and national federation policy. The LTAD model is itself underpinned by the theory that the acquisition of any skill is directly related to the accumulation of practice and that a minimum of 10,000 hours (ten years) is required to achieve excellent levels of skill (Ericsson, 1996; Ericsson et al., 1993). The perceived need to start the process of talent development as early as possible is reinforced by the increasingly sophisticated and technical skills required by the aspiring athlete (Hodges and Williams, 2012). One outcome of this mix of political, organisational and scientific change is the increasing prevalence of *sports schools* which we define as those schools, whether state funded or private, which concentrate resources on the development of sporting talent either (or both) within the curriculum or through extra-curricular activities. Sports schools have been established in a wide range of countries including Germany, China, Canada, England, Sweden, Singapore, Italy and the

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Netherlands (De Knop et al., 1999; Radtke and Coalter, 2007; Way et al., 2010). Although sports schools vary considerably in terms of emphasis on sport, many countries see them as an increasingly integral part of their elite sport performance strategy. For example, 82% of German winter 2002 and summer 2004 Olympic medals were won by current or former sport school students, 90% of the Olympic ski medals won by Austria between 1992 and 2006 were won by students from the Austria ski school (Radtke and Coalter, 2007).

This paper provides an analysis of the role and significance of the leading group of sports schools, NTG, in Norway. Norway is an interesting case for two reasons: first, it is a country which has a strong social democratic tradition which was reflected in the controversy surrounding the decision to invest heavily in the development of an elite sport development centre – Olympiatoppen (Augestad et al., 2006; Hanstad, 2006); and second, because, as Skille and Houlihan (2014: 40) observe, ‘the very expression ‘elite youth sport’ contains a contradiction, as the word ‘elite’ for many Norwegians – laypersons and policy-makers alike – does not have a positive connotation when used in association with youth sport’. The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) still maintains significant restrictions such as the athletes being 13 years old before participating in international competitive sport. However, according to Ronglan (2014) there is also an acknowledgement that the mastery of complex skills requires athletes to begin the process of skills acquisition and refinement at ever younger ages and that to be in a system which nurtures their talent is highly desirable.

Educational and elite sport context

Education in Norway is mandatory for all children aged 6–16 (primary and lower secondary schools) and optional for the age group 16–19 (upper secondary school/high school). It is this latter optional level that is the focus for this research. Norway has a well-regarded public

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school system which caters for approximately 93% of students (Hagesæther, 2013). However, while the education system is dominated by public schools there has been a steady increase in the popularity of private schools such as international schools and sport schools.

It is at the age of 16, when young people start secondary school, that they are allowed to choose programs and have the opportunity to focus more on sport. However, the age of 16 is a time when many athletes are making the transition to a more intense and structured period of development (Bloom, 1985; Wylleman and Lavallee, 2004) and is also a time when educational demands intensify with the consequence that the management of their dual careers is a distinct concern. It is increasingly challenging for young athletes to balance the growing training load and desired athletic development with regular schooling without organizational help to adapt timetables, defer tests and exams, arrange study time etc. (Donnelly, 1993). Consequently, secondary education has also been accorded a prominent role in the development of talented athletes in a number of European countries (De Knop et al., 1999).

The Norwegian elite sport context

NIF is the umbrella organization for sport at all levels and has over 2 million members (from a population of 5 million), organizes the 54 national sport federations, 19 regional confederations, approximately 366 sports councils and also 11793 clubs (NIF, 2013). Hence, NIF is responsible for both elite sport with the aim of creating Olympic winners and recreational sport for all age groups. Through the unique regulations of NIF the youngest athletes are protected from the negative consequences of early intense competition by regulating the age at which young people can participate in different levels of competition (Kristiansen, 2014; Ronglan, 2014). From the age of 6 children are allowed to participate in local competitions, preferably in their own club. At the age of 11, lists of results, tables and rankings may be used for the first time, and the children may participate in regional

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competitions although there is no need to meet a qualifying standard in Norway. In 2007 the regulations were modified to allow children to compete at national and international championships from the year in which they turn 13 (Skirstad et al., 2012). While there is general support for the NIF regulations there is an awareness that Norway has never been prominent in technical sports that require early specialization such as gymnastics and diving (Kristiansen, 2014), arguably as a consequence of the NIF regulations. Consequently, there is a growing concern that the regulations are disadvantaging Norway not only in early peak sports but possibly in later peak sports due to the longer and more technical development process now required to reach world class standard (e.g., Helle-Valle, 2008).

Despite protection of the youngest athletes, Norway is a successful Olympic country due to its prominence in winter sports; and the senior athletes are well supported by the Norwegian Olympic Top Sport Program [hereafter *Olympiatoppen*]. Olympiatoppen has overall responsibility for the development of elite athletes and is generally considered to be a successful development agency since its establishment in 1989 (Andersen, 2009; Augestad et al., 2006; Goksøyr and Hanstad, 2012). The so-called 'Norwegian model' which involves the sharing of collective expertise from a wide range of sports through cooperation between Olympiatoppen and the different sport [National Sport Federations Governing Bodies](#) (NSFGBs), has produced success at the recent Olympic Games (Kristiansen et al., 2012). Olympiatoppen grants scholarships to talented performers, provides medical support to all national teams, and operates a well-equipped national training centre. However, Olympiatoppen has neither the capacity nor the money to focus on the younger athletes. The primary criterion for the allocation of Olympiatoppen resources is ranking not age and Olympiatoppen has no specific programs aimed at young people. This situation has created a problem – a gap in the talent identification and development process which has, to an extent at least, been filled by the network of sports schools [mainly for the 16-19 years olds although a](#)

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few schools are now being established for 13-16 year olds. Lately, sports school for the lower secondary students are also increasing in numbers since the first private offer in 2004. Moreover, the schools for 13-16 years old offers preparatory basic sports training for younger students who want to combine school and athletic training (NTG, 2013). This is an additional offer to an age group where well functioning local clubs tend to be a responsible stakeholder.

A key to national success in Olympic sports is structured talent identification and development systems (De Bosscher et al., 2006). In Norway there exists an effective talent development system for adult athletes who have been identified as elite, but the process by which young athletes with elite potential are identified and developed is far less coherent and effective as it depends on a network of voluntary sporting federations, local community-based multi-sports clubs and the contribution of volunteer coaches (Ronglan, 2014). According to the requirements of NIF, each individual sporting federation is responsible for the development of talent within their sport (NIF, 2015), and all sports are organized and operate in a broadly similar though complex manner. Handball, a major sport in Norway, is typical and is described by Bjørndal et al. (under review) as a complex web of diverse actors and initiatives, which involves clubs, sport schools, and the national and regional levels of the federation. Due to the importance of voluntarism and the local club ~~network~~structure a strong centralized structure is absent and the sport movement is characterized by a high degree of autonomy and self-regulation (Bergsgard and Norberg, 2010). The main sources of income for local clubs are membership fees and club fund-raising with public sector funding accounting for between a third and a quarter of total income (Ibsen and Seippel, 2010).

The absence of a strong tradition of competitive sport within the state school system (Nicholson et al., 2011) and the increasing pressure for early sport specialization has created a market in Norway for the development of sport schools the most prominent of which are in the private, fee-paying, sector. State involvement in sport has been focused primarily on the

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provision of high quality sport facilities at the community level (Bergsgard and Tangen, 2011). Not surprisingly, many private sports schools have positioned themselves close to these facilities, which adds to their attraction to parents and young athletes. The public profile of sports schools has been raised recently due to the award of the 2016 Youth Olympic Games to Lillehammer. This event has been labelled a 'milestone for NIF's work with regarding Youth Promotion for Norwegian sport', and is believed to give Norwegian sports a unique opportunity ~~to work purposefully~~ 'to develop tomorrow's young athletes' (Tvedt et al., 2013: 112). While previous studies have found an ambivalent attitude towards youth competition (Skille and Houlihan, 2014), the prospect of hosting the YOG has stimulated debate about the nature of elite youth sport and the development of young talent.

The Norwegian school system and The Norwegian College of Elite Sport, NTG

Since 1889 Norwegian school politics have been based on the principle of equal opportunities. The principle resonates strongly with the social democratic values of the country (see Sejersted & Adams 2011, Haug 2012, and Brandal et al. 2013 for a discussion of the character of Norwegian social democracy and Glenn 2013 for a discussion of the role of schools in developing social democratic values). Consequently, in 1981, when the Norwegian Alpine Gymnasium (NAG) was established by Roger Elstad in Bærum, it did not receive any public funding or support. Elstad was a father of an alpine skier who, in the absence of a school that could give his son the required time off to fulfil his athletic ambitions, established a private school for alpine skiers (Solheim, 2011). The school steadily expanded to include a wider range of sports, adding cross-country skiing in 1985 and further sports in 1993. Today, NAG operates under the title of the Norwegian College of Elite Sport (known in Norway as NTG) and has expanded to include 990 students. Currently, the NTG group has six schools in Norway focused mainly, but not exclusively on winter sports.

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As mentioned earlier the first NAG school received no governmental support when it was established. However, it gained state approval and modest funding following the passage of the 1984 Norwegian Private Education Act (Solheim, 2011). The level of government funding was increased in 1988 by the Ministry of Education although not to the same level as for state schools offering *top sport* as a program. Following the 2005 election, in which the future of private schools was a major issue, the private school law was changed and made it easier to establish private schools. Furthermore, in 2006 a comprehensive curriculum reform, the Knowledge Promotion Reform (KPR), was introduced (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2007). The reform permitted public schools to offer a range of specialist programs one of which was the *Sports and Physical Education*. According to the KPR this program should aim to support athletes who achieve good results at international and national levels and was justified by the perceived social value that top-level sport has in Norway (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2007). While this program prepares athletes for a university education, they have to choose sport as their major program rather than *Natural Science and Mathematics Studies* or *Languages, Social Sciences and Economics Studies-science*. With this restriction on the sport offer in public schools – the private schools, where NTG and Wang are the two major providers in Norway, offer the students the opportunity to combine intensive sport training with one of the other two non-sport specialist programs thus offering their student athletes a greater choice of both career and higher education study.

As a result of the recent reforms there are currently both private and public actors in the sports school system. As long as a school offers a course in ‘elite sport’, the school can call themselves an ‘elite’ (or top) sport school. There is no state regulation of the designation of a school as a sports school with the result that there is considerable variation in the quality of schools and the range of experiences available. There are approximately 113 schools offering specialism in cross-country skiing ranging from private (NTG) to semi-private and

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public top-sport programs. Within this largely unregulated market, the school with the most winter Olympians is NTG, which is a non-profit private foundation. State grants, school fees and sponsor revenues are the basis of funding, in contrast to the state schools which are funded exclusively by the state. According to NTG their vision is to become the leading institution for student athletes by supporting both their sports career and academic education in order that they might be ‘capable of winning medals in international championships, qualifying for university and academic education and developing excellent ethical principles’ (NTG, 2013). From the start the athletes ‘produced’ have achieved considerable success, accumulating around 600 national championship gold medals (NTG, 2013). Former and current students have taken 24 gold, 13 silver and 13 bronze medals in the Olympics (NTG, 2013), and for the 2014 winter Olympics 30% of the Norwegian squad were current or former NTG students. Of the thirty-five athletes who qualified for the 2015 winter European Youth Olympic Festival (EYOF) 14 (40%) were from the NTG schools and five from Wang.

Analytical Framework

The starting point for analysis is the observation of the rapid expansion in the number of sports schools, their popularity with students and their significant contribution to Norwegian sporting success. This prompts the question regarding the problem or gap in provision to which these schools are a policy response. Their popularity also prompts questions about how they are perceived by the public and government. One analytical framework which may be adopted to explore these issues is Kingdon’s (1984) multiple streams framework (MSF, see also Zahariadis 2003). Although there are few examples of the application of the framework to sport policy (for an exception see Houlihan and Green, 2006) it has been widely applied across a range of countries and policy sub-sectors (see Jones et al., 2015 for an overview). Kingdon’s framework gives greater emphasis to agency over structure and downplays the

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linearity and rationality of the policy process in favour of an emphasis on chance and opportunism.

However, as noted by Houlihan (2005) while the MSF is a valuable corrective to the exaggerated weight often given to evidence and rationality there is the risk that it diverts attention from the institutionalization of policy over time. To avoid this risk MS is applied in conjunction with path dependency theory which suggests that in relatively stable policy areas policy tends to become institutionalized and form structures which progressively constrain agency. [The MSF suggests that p](#)Policy-making depends on the inter-connection of three distinct 'streams'. The first, the problem stream, refers to the competition between advocates to bring their problem (such as the lack of developmental opportunities for young talents in state schools) to the attention of policy-makers (such as Olympiatoppen or NIF). The second stream contains policies (solutions to problems). Kingdon challenges the common-sense assumption that the identification of a problem precedes the search for solutions and argues that in reality it is often the case that there are advocates of policies (for example, market solutions to public policy problems) that are looking for problems (poor sport development opportunities in state schools) to attach them to. Policy entrepreneurs [can](#) play a key role in linking these two streams. The third stream relates to politics, particularly the attitude of the public and political parties towards a problem (such as disappointing national sport performance or early specialisation for children). The value of the MSF is its emphasis on the separation between problems and solutions as this provides a useful corrective to those theories which over-emphasise the institutionalisation of policy choices. However, the emphasis on chance and entrepreneurial skill needs to be tempered by an acknowledgement that these streams do operate within an institutional framework that reflects what Schattschneider (1960) refers to as the mobilisation of bias.

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While the MSF has value in challenging models which over-emphasise the rationality of the policy process and in challenging the analytical distinctions between policies, problems and politics, it runs the risk of exaggerating the role of agency, especially with its focus on the role of policy entrepreneurs. The concept of path dependency (Kay, 2005) provides a useful complement to the MS framework and is particularly valuable in focusing attention on the relationship between structure and agency in the policy process (Houlihan, 2005) and on the potential for shifts in the balances between structure and agency as policies become institutionalized and the scope for agency diminishes (see Green and Collins, 2008; see Houlihan, 2009 for applications in relation to sport policy).

A path is often formed incrementally with the accumulation of decisions making subsequent policy choices more predictable. According to Sydow et al (2009) there are three phases within path dependency, first 'preformation' characterized by unconstrained policy choice. It is at this stage that there is the closest fit with MS theory as connections between problems and policies are tentative and provisional and there is still scope for the agency of policy entrepreneurs. 'Formation' is the second phase in which policy choices have narrowed due to previous decisions and a 'path' is emerging. Most problems, such as how to develop elite talent, reveal themselves gradually often as a response to policy feedback from initial policy responses. Not only may the complexity of a problem be gradually revealed but the context (economic, social and political) will also be changing resulting in frequent, if not continuous, interconnection between the problem, policy and political streams. The assumption on which path dependency is based would suggest that the scope for policy entrepreneurial activity will be more constrained as will be the scope for policy modification. The third phase, 'lock in', is where the dominant decision pattern becomes fixed and gains a deterministic character (Kay, 2005; Sydow et al., 2009). Once the 'lock in' stage has been reached the costs of reversal might be high (in both organizational and personal career terms)

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in addition to which institutional arrangements and environmental conditions may be obstructive (Greener, 2005). Once this stage has been reached the latitude for policy review and redirection suggested by the MSF is severely limited. The concern with the increasing prominence of elite youth sport is heightened by the central role that governments or government funded organisations, such as NIF and high schools, play in the funding, organisation and general support of elite sport systems. Elite development systems can rapidly become institutionalised and once the ambition of elite sporting success has been embedded in a policy sector it is not only difficult to retreat, but it is also difficult to avoid moving in a direction which involves incorporating ever younger people into the elite system. Institutionalisation constrains policy options and resonates with the concept of path dependency, which suggests that ‘the trajectory of change up to a certain point constrains the trajectory after that point’ (Kay, 2005: 553).

Methodology

After obtaining approval from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services, informed consent was obtained before conducting interviews in autumn 2014 to summer 2015. A purposeful and convenience sampling procedure (Bauer and Gaskell, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was adopted. The round of interviews began with seven athletes who met the following criteria: had competed or were competing at international level; had experience either of a sports school or a non-sport school development process; and were involved in one of Norway’s major Olympic sports. This first round of interviews helped refine the interview schedule for the series of interviews with other major stakeholders involved in the development of the 16-19 age group. Interviewees in these groups (see Table 1) were selected on the basis of organisational seniority and relevance and depth of experience.

Table 1 near here

At the beginning of each interview, the interviewees were informed that the information they provided would, should they wish, remain confidential, and that they could terminate the interviews at any time. The face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted wherever was convenient for the participants. Interviews lasted between 50 and 105 minutes, the interviewees showed a lot of interest in the topic and contributed significantly more information than the researchers had anticipated. The interviews were conducted according to ethical guidelines and criteria stated by Patton (2002) and those of the researchers' host institutions. The interview guide was tailored to the different participants and their stakeholder position. The athletes were questioned about the different stakeholders' (school, federation, Olympiatoppen, parents, coaches, teachers) roles in talent development and how they perceived the challenge of balancing of school and sport. On the other stakeholders were questioned about each other's role in youth talent development —and who they considered felt had the primary responsibility. The school interviewees were in addition questioned about the importance of their work and due to the preliminary findings—the relationship school organization, the relationship between the school and other stakeholders especially the NSFs and to Olympiatoppen. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, which resulted in 189 pages singled-spaced raw text. In order to protect the confidentiality of interviewees, only their stakeholder grouping is mentioned. Data were analysed through content analysis and pattern matching (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003). Emerging findings were compared again with the data to verify understanding and were discussed with colleagues. The interviews were conducted in Norwegian, so when quoting the interviewees, a careful translation was made. The answers were aggregated to maintain anonymity, following ethical guidelines. This process together with the use of multiple sources of evidence

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increased the validity of the findings (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Finally, several interviewees were sent the first draft of the article and asked to comment on the degree to which the analyses were concordant with their own interpretations of the situation. Meetings with school representatives, federations and Olympiatoppen followed in order to discuss findings and previous interviews, and minor changes were made in order to clarify some issues.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are presented according to the three main themes to emerge from the data: first, the factors affecting the choice of school; second, the challenge of being a student athlete; and finally, the relationship between NTG and Olympiatoppen.

Athletes, parents and developmental choices

There was no consensus among the federations that the production of the next generation of elite athletes was a problem to which sports schools were a solution. Indeed the perceived importance of the years 16-19 varied by sport with one interviewee (Federation A, a late peak sport) commenting that 'In my mind, there is no such thing as a [youth] talent'. Few of the interviewed athletes talked about the importance of their federations when discussing this phase of their career. During these years, it was the school, the coach and the club, which dominated the athlete's environment. This assessment was supported by Federation interviewee B:

We do not spend money on talent development per se. We have a handful sport schools (private, semi-private and public) that we support (symbolically, only by attending meetings) and have supported for several decades. These schools are never recommended to parents – but we have a focus on these to keep the quality of the student-athletes high. We educate coaches and support venues so everyone has the

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competence, facilities and consequently the *opportunity* to develop into a successful elite athlete.

In the sport in question, there exist over 100 sport school programs for young athletes.

However, the more popular sports often had a good club system that might also develop talent similar to a sport school although such clubs tended to be confined to the bigger cities as

noted by Parent 8, (father of a winter sport athlete) who said 'if we had lived in a bigger city she could have stayed at home and trained with the local club'. The consequence of the

limited involvement of the federations and the uneven distribution of adequate local clubs is

that young athletes (and their parents) are left to decide how best to ~~help the young athlete~~ achieve their ambitions. Youth talent development was consequently a more pressing problem for the young athletes and their parents than for the federations and Olympiatoppen.

A small number of young athletes were coached by their parents, such as athlete X who commented:

I think it is great to have my dad as a coach.... I have a great relationship with my parents, I am my father's only athlete, and that is perfect for me...and my mom takes care of laundry, cooking and support; I see no rush in moving out. [Young female winter sport athlete]

For other parents their role is one of general support as indicated by the comments of Parent 1

Many talented kids out there never made it because their parents did not make time to support them. For a kid to make it to a competition like YOG or EYOF; I think it is vital that the parents show some interest in sports and help. [father of an winter youth athlete]

However, for many parents and young athletes the solution to their problem of talent development is the opportunities provided by sports schools. As one very successful elite athlete put it:

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I wanted to become as good as possible and the private school could offer me that besides giving me the opportunity to take all the regular courses ... you need to be structured ...very motivated and have the required support from home [Female summer sport, senior]

If the parents choose to send their children to a sport school such as NTG in order to better ensure consistency and a robust and balanced development system, they are also able to transfer responsibility for their child's athletic and educational development to the schools.

The following comment from a parent was typical:

Our daughter attends a sport school 80 kilometers from home ... [she has] a superb coach that almost functions as a 'father', great facilities and a waxing team that follows them at competitions. ... Our role is more relaxed, we feel safe because she in a good system, so we can actually just be parents... However, *it costs*, it costs a lot.

[Parent 2, mother of young winter sport athlete]

Other parents were concerned at the cost with Parent 3 (mother of a young winter athlete) commenting that the money spent yearly on their child 'is something we try not to add up, but it is a lot'. Another mother added

the nearest club is great, but we sent her to NTG due to the driving distance [to the club]. We could not cope with two trainings a day and driving her early (4.45 am) and late in the evening. The adapted school and training schedule is worth what it costs... ... Altogether with food, travel expenses etc., I think it costs us around NOK 200,000 yearly [Parent 7, mother of a young summer sport athlete].

Some parents make substantial sacrifices to locate near a sport school: 'When my third kid started at NTG, I sold the house and got a job here in order to be closer to them' [Parent 5, father of winter sport athletes].

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Private schools receive 85% of the funding allocated to state schools with the bulk of the remainder coming from student fees. Modest additional funding is provided by some federations which helps the schools maintain a higher quality of sport development opportunities than their state counterparts. According to school Sport Director A:

What we get depends on whether it is an individual sport or a team sport. The federations primarily help with the funding [rather than with] ... expertise. We are in charge of the actual talent development and cover the costs with little help. [Sport Director A]

For many athletes and parents a reason for moving to a private sports school was the professionalism of the staff – in coaching and technical support (e.g. in ski waxing) with a number of former students attributing their success to their time at the sports school. The following comment from a retired female winter sport athlete was typical:

I would not have succeeded if NTG had not existed! ... they had faith in me, I had so much guts, but really lacked expertise and structure, [they] saved my career. They gave me the structure I need to excel. I had no local club and was never part of the national team as a junior. [Retired female athlete, winter sport]

Another current student supported this sentiment, noting that – 'it would have been impossible for me to reach this level without the opportunity I got at NTG'. Furthermore, one athlete who did not attend a sports school perceived it as a missed opportunity and a possible explanation for his underachievement:

I am quite sure I never reached my potential, there are so many things that I should have done differently – I simply never had good enough coaches. It took me too many years to reach the technical and tactical level I should have learned while in high school – or a sport school like NTG. [Retired male athlete, summer sport]

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Whether his comment is simply a rationalization of his underachievement or an accurate assessment of its cause it reflects a widely held perception, endorsed by other athletes that sports schools contribute positively to youth elite development.

What gives the NTG schools a market advantage in the eyes of young athletes and especially their parents is the offer of a stable, high quality and systematic development environment that is not dependent, as is the case in many clubs, on the potentially short-term commitment of individual volunteers. The quality of coaches working at NTG is considered, by the senior management, to be a significant marketing advantage. Not only does NTG aim to recruit good coaches, but it also invests in developing its coaches. Evidence of the effectiveness of the NTG system of professional development for their coaches is that they often see their best coaches head-hunted by federations for permanent positions and as volunteer coaches to support junior squads to international competition. This is a constant frustration as ‘we spend a lot of time and money to educate and train promising coaches, and when they start to get results, they are tempted to move on to better offers’ [Sport Director A]. However, the movement of coaches often means that ~~On the other hand,~~ when attending the major events and moving up as seniors in the system, many athletes already know the coaches.

From the foregoing discussion it is clear, but not surprising, that parents play a crucial role in deciding the educational and sport developmental path that their children should take. Moreover, while sports schools are popular it is also evident that not all parents see sports schools as the optimal route with some choosing to relocate to be close to particular clubs. What is perhaps more notable is the lack of involvement of the federations in advising parents and athletes on the developmental path that they might take. The concept of a talent pathway, which has been adopted in a number of countries, is conspicuous by its absence in Norway.

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As Federation representative A pointed out, 'The federations need to have a system as the athletes (and the parents) are not fully aware of what would be in their best interests'.

Utilising the multiple streams framework the composition of the problem stream is unclear. There is little evidence that youth talent identification and development are seen as problematic within the politics stream either by the government ([as evident from the 2013 government commissioned ~~see discussion of the~~ Tvedt report ~~below~~](#)) or by the federations.

However, for young talented athletes and their parents the selection of the appropriate developmental pathway is clearly problematic. The sports schools, which emerged to address the problem faced by one family have expanded rapidly and are positioning themselves as the solution (policy) to a problem which is not acknowledged as significant by the federations.

The challenge of balancing training and education

'Naturally the student-athletes are tired; it is hard to combine school and sport' [Olympiatoppen Representative D]. Managing a dual career can be exhausting (Doll-Tepper, 2013; Kristiansen, Under review; Stambulova et al., 2009) an observation frequently offered by interviewees. Not surprisingly NTG managers argue that they put considerable effort into appointing staff who understand the young athlete's priorities. According to an NTG Educational Director [C], [it ~~is~~ ~~is~~](#) a:

Lifestyle to be a teacher here and even more so for coaches ... The challenge for teachers is that they will have to cope with students being away for much of the time; they need to constantly adapt and understand the elite sport culture.

Similarly, although coaches need to be effective developers of sporting talent they also 'need to be aware of the athlete's dual goals for the three years' [Educational Director B]. This was supported by the athlete interviewees with one typical comment being 'it would have been impossible for me to reach this level without the opportunity I got at NTG' [Male, winter

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sport]. However, maintaining awareness across all staff of progress in both sport and academic studies is often difficult as one NTG coach admitted:

The total workload in relation to school and sports may easily ruin it for some ... [there] may be divergence between what the parents want and what the athlete wants in relation to school grades. Moreover, they need to sleep, eat, rest, and stuff ... I would appreciate it if it was possible to have a webpage, somewhere we could go and check the status of absence, grades etc. I need to know what is going on, in order to catch the problems early if I want to be a good coach. [Coach A]

This is a view reinforced by a retired elite athlete and current club sports coach who argued that

It is important to monitor the total load of training and school ... Unfortunately, we lack [in the federations] a system that collects this information and the athletes are sometimes too young to know what is best for them to do. ... Here I think the sports schools have a huge advantage compared to athletes attending other sorts of schools. [Coach E]

The resources available at NTG enable athletes to be given extra tutoring 'to help after longer period of absence' [Teacher A] as well as having access to the services of nutritionists, nurses, physiotherapists and other support personnel to deal with issues related to their athletic career, which according to one member of the support staff 'no one has so far prioritized [for] junior athletes' [Entourage 1]. Having these resources 'in-house', is an advantage that was mentioned by both the athletes and parents. While the state schools may offer time off to practice and might adapt the school day they usually are not able to offer the same range of support services as the private schools. As one NTG Sport Director argued the advantage that NTG has over state schools is depth of resources which allows for greater continuity of services and support. State schools, the NTG director suggested 'may create a good system' but it is often

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‘dependent on individual’s short term commitment’ [Sport Director B]. A further advantage of the private sports schools, especially NTG, is the quality of training partners. As one athlete-female summer sport athlete commented, ‘I have always put a lot of effort to be among skilled people that I can learn from, seek new knowledge’. Being able to offer young athletes and their parents both a high quality education and equally high quality support for their sporting ambitions is the marketing advantage of private sport schools, but it is costly and consequently available only to those with the necessary finance. In the words of one NTG director ‘We need to protect our reputation and continuity by constantly having the best coaches and teachers – it costs’ [Sport Director A].

Not only do the sports schools have an advantage over state schools in terms of developmental continuity they also have an advantage over club-based development insofar as the sports schools are better able to manage the competing calls on the athlete-student’s time. One retired elite summer sport athlete noted ‘a shift in coaches’ understanding that school is important too’, but he nonetheless recognised the continuing problem concerning ‘What ... the young athletes [should] prioritize, and who should have a final say about what is the right thing to do if they want to succeed?’. This problem of balancing education and training is often one of the main reasons given by parents when investing in sending their child to a sport school: ‘We must help them to organize their days in order to keep the total load “under control”. NTG keep track on the total work load for their athletes: for other young athletes – the parents have to do it’ [Parent 2, father of summer sport athlete].

A number of interviewees reported that the federations ignore the advice from the sports schools about the importance of supporting young athletes in their dual career. Some federations assume that the two hour rest in between different training sessions is enough time in which to complete school work: in contrast the sport schools have the resources to ‘add extra hours [of tuition] to keep up with school in addition to the recovery time’ [Teacher C] if

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students are away at training camps or at competitions. The accumulated study obligations that athletes face when they return from competitions/training camps is a major stressor for the young athletes. According to one teacher 'you can really see them struggle because the federations do not understand sufficiently how vital it [education] is for them' [Teacher B].

As has been shown the challenge of seeking an optimal balance between educational and sporting achievement is seen as primarily an educational issue for schools, whether private or public, rather than an issue to be addressed by the federations. The schools feel that they contribute more to the federations than they get back. As one NTG coach admitted; 'the federation really wants to help, there is a lot of goodwill and enthusiasm. Unfortunately there is no money for [youth] talent development, and without us they would struggle to pull together a national team [NTG coach B]'. Another NTG coach commented that 'Our federation has never been particularly positive about these sport schools, the head coach will attend meetings, but we do not get any help' [Coach C]. As sports school Coach D noted 'It is our former students that will be representing Norway in the Olympics to come. We think it is weird that [Olympiatoppen] demands more of us than of the federations'.

The exploration of this theme refines the conclusions drawn from the earlier examination of athlete and parental choices insofar as it adds the problem of balancing educational and sport development ambitions. What is also apparent is the lack of a coherent policy response to this problem from the federations and Olympiatoppen and the positioning by NTG and other private institutions of ~~by~~ sports schools as the policy solution.

NTG and Olympiatoppen

There must be a balance between the various stakeholders for the age group 16-19, because at this age you are very easily affected - so everyone must pull in the same direction. Parents and coaches are very important because of their daily influence, but

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the opinions of the other stakeholders may easily affect parents and coaches – and their choices [Female summer sport, senior]

Olympiatoppen has no official role in youth talent development due to being a service ~~forte~~ the senior athletes. Moreover, it has no authority to influence how the federations spend their money. The autonomy of the federations was emphasized in interviews with Olympiatoppen staff, one of whom commented:

One of our challenges is that we cannot decide for the federations. They can ask us for advice, and that happens more often with the federations with weak finances. When we help, we can make demands and require them to follow our guidelines. The ski federation, as an example, has more money than all our departments together; we have no influence on their use of resources or on [their] talent development [strategy].

[Olympiatoppen Representative C]

From this, it is reasonable to assume that the relationship between the sports schools and Olympiatoppen may be an important one as both are concerned to influence the policies of the federations and NIF.

Olympiatoppen should be more involved in youth development because it is important to them. However, they push it over on us. They think that the different NSFs will do the work, and that they should cooperate with us. But we do not have good enough connections to most of the NSFs for that to happen. There are simply too many amateurs out there in order to create an optimal situation for talent development [Sport Director B]

The limitations on the role and capacity of Olympiatoppen are considerable and they consequently have to operate within an environment in which each federation can determine its own development system and allocation of resources. Each sport federation is able to choose its own direction and set the criteria for participation at national competitions and for

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the selection of athletes to send to international youth competitions such as YOG (Kristiansen, 2015; see also Olympiatoppen 2011). According to one Olympiatoppen representative ‘we have only had resources to work at the political level’. He added that the support that they could offer to student athletes was limited to trying to ‘ensure the quality of sport schools’ and providing advice on higher education scholarships [Olympiatoppen Representative A]. In relation to the quality control of sports schools Olympiatoppen prioritized the formulation of criteria for accrediting sport schools. This mandate was given them by the Ministry of Culture and NIF in order to “secure today’s and future top athletes’ opportunity to combine top sport development with education’ [Olympiatoppen Representative B]. However, it was accepted that the ‘main responsibility for athlete development rests with the individual NSFs – and sometimes the schools’ (Olympiatoppen, 2011: 6).

Not surprisingly NTG was supportive of this initiative and saw endorsement by Olympiatoppen as a way of clearly differentiating their schools from the many other schools that had labelled themselves ‘elite sport ~~school~~ colleges’. According to an Olympiatoppen representative ‘It took two years from when we started until the first school was approved, and we did not receive any extra funding for this task’. After six years they have approved six schools (each case takes almost two years) and most of their governmental funding for young athletes has been used for this purpose. Not only are private sports schools groups such as NTG and Wang supportive of accreditation, they would also like a ranking system as they are confident that their schools would feature at, or near, the top. However, in a social democratic country like Norway, ranking of public or semi-public services rarely occurs, which is a frustration for NTG: “I think NIF and Olympiatoppen are very toothless in this matter, they try to help all schools and do not dare to say that one program is better than another” [Sport Director C]. Moreover, Olympiatoppen are aware of the problems faced by parents in the absence of clear quality indicators:

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We get complaints from parents questioning the different programs, and after our approval one school had just added one sport – and not followed our guidelines¹.

These are the issues we have to deal with, and we think it is an important task as parents and their off-spring are being deceived by the lack of structure in the system... we must make our system more transparent and not let every school offer all sports without having competence or facilities for doing so [Olympiatoppen Representative A].

The limited capacity of Olympiatoppen, the unwillingness of the federations to work with sports schools and the expansionist ambitions of the sport schools has resulted in mutual frustration. According to NTG Sport Director A

Very few people have a mandate in the system to work with young athletes, so we get it. I know they [Olympiatoppen] do not have the resources to help the young athletes, but they should at least have something to offer the coaches working with the athletes? We need the Olympiatoppen to understand that our coaches are the most important target group they have. [Sport Director A]

This was a view echoed by Director of Education B who argued that ‘we would simply like some sort of recognition, like “you are doing a great job” or something. It is the system around Olympiatoppen, that is wrong, and not the people working there’. One issue on which there is agreement between Olympiatoppen and NTG is that the system needs urgent improvement:

We cannot fool ourselves that the Norwegian *dugnad* [Norwegian culture of volunteering] will continue to work well. NIF needs to enter into cooperative agreements with the NSFs; they should select some schools and tell them which sports would fit in there. No one has dared to say anything so far, but we must get there

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eventually. At least if we want the talent development to continue [Olympiatoppen Representative A]

The central role of NIF and the individual federations as the source of policy solutions to sports development problems puts Olympiatoppen in a difficult position. While Olympiatoppen acknowledges the problem of dual career young athlete development the organisation's limited resources and sensitive relationship with the federations hampers its ability to take the lead in shaping policy. Its role in accrediting sports schools is clearly sending policy signals to the federations and NIF but hardly constitutes policy leadership. However, from the perspective of NTG and the other private sports schools the tentative steps being taken by Olympiatoppen in relation to accreditation facilitate the policy ambitions of the private schools.

Discussion

The foregoing section has painted a picture of an elite sport system which confirms the general assessment (Andersen, 2009; Goksøyr and Hanstad, 2012; Kristiansen et al., 2012) that it is successful in producing medal winning athletes, but is also organizationally fragmented, uncoordinated and under-funded with regard to youth talent development and susceptible to tensions between key actors.

Kingdon's (1984) multiple streams framework helps to analyse this complex pattern of practices and relationships. In terms of the problem stream there are, as indicated, a number of inter-related problems around the issue of elite youth sport development and a number of competing sources of problem definition. The central problem is the absence of a systematic or even coherent approach to elite youth development. Olympiatoppen is marginal, though trying to become a more central actor; the federations offer variable quality of support, the government, despite the conclusions of the Tvedt report (2013) are reluctant to intervene and

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the sports school network is largely unregulated leaving young athletes and their parents to plot a course through these crucial years. A second and related cluster of problems, and ones recognized by various stakeholders, concerned the weaknesses in youth coach development namely, the lack of a systematic approach (a particular concern for Olympiatoppen), the poaching of successful youth coaches from sports schools (a problem for NTG managers) and the heavy reliance on volunteers even at the elite athlete level (a concern for some federations and Olympiatoppen). The third problem articulated mainly by parents, was poor dual career management of young athletes outside the sports school system and the tension between sports schools and federations over how athletes balance their educational and sporting ambitions. The fourth problem, acknowledged by Olympiatoppen if not by NIF, relates to the position of NIF which, on the one hand, is strongly protective of children involved in elite sport, while on the other is reluctant to encroach too far onto the autonomy of member federations in relation to the development of talented youth. The final problem is the identification by Olympiatoppen that the youth talent identification and development system needs reform, but similar to NIF Olympiatoppen lacks the resources to challenge the policy leadership of the federations.

A key source of complexity in understanding the nature of the policy stream is that in relation to elite youth sport there are three significant policy arenas within which policy can be made – NIF (as the government-funded national sport organization), Olympiatoppen (as the government-funded elite sport agency) and the individual federations. As previously mentioned the relative inaction within these three arenas has created a policy vacuum into which sports schools have moved and provided, with a substantial degree of success, solutions to the ‘problems’ of youth elite development, dual career management and youth coach development. While it would be tempting to criticize the inaction by NIF, the federations and ultimately the government for the creation of the policy vacuum in relation to elite youth sport

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development it can also be argued that due to the political sensitivity of elite youth sport inaction was a sensible policy option and allowing ~~non-state actors~~ (the sports schools) to respond to the problem enabled these actors to achieve a partial resolution of their problems while keeping their principles intact. This rationalization notwithstanding the growth of sports schools has created a new set of problems for sport policy actors. The first is that of quality control which Olympiatoppen is partially, but slowly addressing and the second is the challenge that fee-paying sports schools pose to the social democratic ethos of Norwegian society. These problems lead to a discussion of the third stream – the political stream. As previously mentioned the political stream refers to the political mood of a country and particularly the receptiveness of government and public opinion to problems and policies. From the evidence presented it is apparent that the mood of government was ambivalent: on the one hand demonstrating a continuing reluctance to encroach too obviously on the autonomy of NIF and the federations and, on the other acknowledging, [via Olympiatoppen](#), that elite athlete development at the youth level was in need of reform, Public opinion is less easy to summarise. There was certainly little overt opposition to the development of fee-paying sports schools or the medals that their graduates produced. There was also no shortage of parents willing to pay to obtain an advantage for their children in their sporting career. [The ambivalence of government and the lack of vocal opposition from the public is perhaps symptomatic of the very gradual erosion of the social democratic values which have for so long characterised much of Scandinavia \(see Dahl 2012 for a general review of the encroachment of and resistance to neo-liberal ideology and Wiborg 2013 for an analysis of the impact of neo-liberalism on education policy\).](#)

In summary the application of the MSF provides a sharp picture of elite youth policy where multiple and overlapping problems have received, at best, only partial policy solutions some of which, such as the growth of private sports schools, have emerged by default. This

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interplay of problems and policies has taken place within a political context in which major political actors, particularly the government, but also NIF have not given a clear policy lead. There is also the suspicion that both the government and NIF are content to see the emergence of private sports schools as it allows them to avoid compromising their principles while at the same time benefiting from the initiative of NTG and similar organisations.

At first sight there would seem to be little evidence of an emergent policy path that follows Sydow et al's (2009) model. Most policy paths have a clear primary policy actor, usually government and, as previously mentioned, the government was a relatively passive actor in relation to youth sport. However, a policy path can be constructed partly through government action but also through government inaction when, as is the case here, the government appeared content to allow a path to develop through the actions of other actors. In terms of action the accumulation of small decisions – to provide some public funding for private schools in 1984, to increase the funding in 1988, to make the establishment of private schools easier in 2005 and the curriculum reform of 2006 – provided private sports schools with the policy space within which to strengthen their claim to be the optimal pathway for aspiring elite athletes. Inaction by key policy actors (Olympiatoppen, NIF and the federations) has resulted in the absence of a clear alternative policy path thereby enabling the consolidation of the claims sports schools have made to policy leadership in youth athlete development.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier the MSF was a useful heuristic for the research, but was more useful as an organizing device rather than an analytical framework or a theory of policy-making. It had value in identifying the series of overlapping problems that were clustered in the policy area of elite youth sport development and, as such, was a useful reminder that it is rare for the

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issues in a policy area to constitute a single agreed problem on which policy stakeholders can focus. The MSF was also useful in emphasizing the extent to which contemporary governance structures have non-governmental organisations as lead policy actors albeit with the tacit approval of government. However, the utility of the MSF was significantly enhanced when used in conjunction with path dependency theory which alerted the researcher to the potential institutionalization of a policy path that reinforced the role and significance of private sports schools and, arguably at least, constrained the scope of agency.

Apart from providing insights into the policy process for elite sport in Norway the research also adds to the growing evidence that access by the young to an elite sport career is, in some countries, increasingly dependent on parental wealth (Collins, 2014; Collins and Buller, 2003) and that elite sport, especially Olympic sport, participation is heavily skewed in favour of those from upper income backgrounds (Smith et al., 2013). That the issue of the link between social class and access to elite sport has not received public debate or even acknowledgement within NIF and the major federations is worthy of further investigation. A second topic that deserves research is the extent to which sports schools add value to the young athletes development and whether there is significant variation in benefit across sports. A third area for further study would be the response, if any, of the major sports clubs to the loss of their young elite talents to sports schools. A final area for research would be extent to which the sports schools promote their interests within government and the major elite sport stakeholders.

Notes

¹ Olympiatoppen (2011) has ten ground rules for sports schools, that they: 1) should be open to all qualified applicants although the schools can set their admissions procedures; 2) should have complete curriculum plan for the athletic development; 3) the teachers should demonstrate an understanding of the need to balance the demands of sport and school; 4) the school coaches should demonstrate competence in how to develop talents; 5) the school coach together with the school leaders are responsible for creating an environment where the student athletes experience a focus on mastery and own development; 6) the school is responsible for monitoring the athletes in all arenas and with their home team; 7) the sports facilities should be adequate and nearby; 8) the school must adhere to sports' ethical values; 9) the school should offer and help to establish the development of the 24 h athlete; and 10) the school is responsible for offering the student-athletes career guidance.

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Table 1. List of interviewees

Stakeholder	Number and sports covered	Label in text
Athletes	N = 7(from different sports)	<i>Retired male wintersport, Retired female winter sport, Retired male summer sport, two Female summer sport, Male winter sport, young female winter sport</i>
Director of Sports at different sports schools within NTG	n=3	<i>Sport Director A, B, C</i>
Coaches at sports schools	n=4 (from different sports)	<i>Coach A, B, C, D</i>
Elite youth coaches not at sports schools	n=3 (from different sports)	<i>Coach E, F, G</i>
Director of the Education at different NTG sports schools	n=2	<i>Director of Education A, B</i>
Teachers at sports schools	n=4	<i>Teacher A, B, C, D</i>
Olympiatoppen Centre	n=4	<i>Olympiatoppen A, B, C, D</i>
Parents	n=8	<i>Parent 1-8</i>
Federations	n=4	<i>Federation representative A, B, C, D</i>
Elite entourage members	n=3 (manager, nutritionist, special trainer, psychological and physiological scientists)	<i>Entourage 1, 2, 3</i>

Young athletes and sport schools

Note. A small number of interviewees were members of more than one stakeholder groups e.g. one of the teachers had formerly been both Secretary General of a federation as well as head coach. Collectively, the interviewees represented a broad range of sports (e.g., golf, judo, swimming, cross-country skiing, ice-hockey, handball, chess, table-tennis, water sports, alpine skiing)

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