

THE ROLE OF INFORMAL SPORT: THE LOCAL CONTEXT AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF ELITE ATHLETES

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of informal sport in the development of top-level Icelandic athletes. The approach is explorative and intended to develop an empirically grounded theory. We conducted semistructured interviews with 10 Icelandic elite athletes. Our analysis suggests that the development of free play may be of central importance to the development of elite athletes. Free play offers the opportunity to foster intrinsic motivation, mastery of skills, flow, craftsmanship, and aesthetic experience. We suggest that these qualities are important in the development of top athletes, especially in their early sport career. Our analysis also highlights the importance of unsupervised informal peer interaction. A pool of unsupervised peer networks can serve as a prerequisite for the development of informal sport that may promote qualities that are desirable for the development of top-level athletes. Our analysis further

Revisiting Symbolic Interaction in Music Studies and New Interpretive Works

Studies in Symbolic Interaction, Volume 42, 133–160

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ISSN: 0163-2396/doi:10.1108/S0163-239620140000042008

suggests that the contribution of informal sport depends on how it interacts with other elements in the social context and its relationship to formal sport.

Keywords: Informal sport; local context; elite athletes

INTRODUCTION

While a term such as an informal, local context has the feel of overgenerality to the point of lacking any compelling meaning, it still has some vitality in the world of sports and participatory athletics (Bengoechea & Streat, 2007; Skille, 2007). Specifically, such a context as applicable in sport worlds resembles a “temporal thickness” that Mead (1938, pp. 364–368) discussed when articulating the relationship between individuals and their environment. Such thickness involves not only duration of activities, of course, but also the emergent connections that develop over time through intense and relatively nonprogrammed contact with others. In this regard, those observing the thick world of sports have recognized how more informal, emergent, and actively participatory contact with others has contributed to participation in formal sport activities or in environments guided by a consensual recognition of a “normative order.”

Mead’s particular emphasis on thickness correlates with his theoretical discussion of play (1934, pp. 150–151). Specifically, Mead theorized play as a distinct activity, understood in a broader societal frame that emphasizes consequences, coordination, and temporality, or the intertwining of hypothetical futures, noticeable pasts, and an immediate present. The unique “property” of play, from Mead’s perspective, suspended consequences and “bent” temporality while retaining coordination. The bending of temporality toward a present (and limiting the hypothetical “intrusion” of pasts and futures) provides a social context in which people continue to fit activities but do not necessarily affix such identities toward a specific hypothetical future. In this regard, our version of the social context also includes Mead’s notion of a present, relatively free from past productions and future reproductions.

The application of an informal and local context as representing flexible public time and place, in which participants move in and out freely, contrasts with more formal expectations that involve adhering to more anchored “symbolic stones” such as “punch-clocks” (see Goffman, 1963;

Scott & Lyman, 1968). Formal expectations, or in the frame we provide, formal sporting activities, connect the institutional relations participants have outside of such arenas. Primary foci involving institutional formality include families (Bloom, 1985; Cote, 1999; Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008; Kay, 2000), coaches (Chelladurai, 1990; Morgan & Giacobbi Jr., 2006; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002), and socioeconomic status (Collins & Buller, 2009; Telama, Laakso, Nupponen, Rimpela, & Pere, 2009). Research on more formal participation in sport activities that count wins against losses key on the influence of particular social agents as socializers (Bloom, 1985; Carlson, 1988) and motivators that encourage ongoing engagement in sports “that count” (Cote, 1999; Vallerand & Rousseau, 2001).

Rather than contributing to the “either/or” dialogue that defines most discourse on sport (who wins; who loses), our intent, to “take the road less travelled,” attends to the aforementioned informal and local context that can also involve parents, peers, and coaches. However, in this particular social context, peers and authorities comprise a social network that creates more subtle and nuanced appreciation of specific sporting activities (beyond playing to win or avoiding losing) on the local, informal social level. In regard to such informality, sociologists have theorized that people who play become embedded in ongoing social relationships and networks that not only emphasize “the love of the game” for and in and of itself, but also have an impact on the mood and behaviors of athletes (Granovetter, 1986; Thorlindsson, 2011; Yan & McCulloch, 2004). This perspective implies that social mechanisms that influence sport related behavior, other than socialization processes that emphasize an “achieving excellence-to-win narrative,” require further specification.

Lack of attention to the more informal relationship-building aspects of athletics beyond outcomes may be due to three reasons. First, formally organized sport dominates the media and public discourse. Success in formal sport competition involves colossal amounts of money. Its knowledge base, which includes the entire spectrum of scientific disciplines, ranging from biology to economics tends to focus on individual aspects of sport performance. For instance, several researchers have keyed on the functions of the body in sport physiology, emphasizing an individual athlete’s ability to produce oxygen (VO₂max), aerobic endurance, neuromuscular performance, morphological components, and motor attribute (Klissouras, Geladas, & Koskolou, 2007; Wilmore, Costill, & Kenney, 2007); other researchers, adopting an outcome approach, have examined the benefits of sports medicine (Moorman, Kirkendall, & Echemendia, 2010);

still others who discuss sports in the context of winning have looked at the mental aspects of performance in sports psychology, emphasizing personality traits and motivation of athletes (Chantal, Guay, Dobрева-Martinova, & Vallerand, 1996; Howe, 1986; Pensgaard & Roberts, 2002; Singer, Hausenblas, & Janelle, 2001; Vallerand & Rousseau, 2001). In effect, vast amount of research has compared successful and less successful athletes, drawing attention to how particular types of regimentation contribute to success (Abbot & Collins, 2004; Ericsson, 1996; Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons, & Keeler, 1993; Starkes, 2000).

Second, the overemphasis on formal socialization in various activities (Granovetter, 1986; Thorlindsson, 2011) and the idea that individual motivation is the driving force of sport activity (Roberts, 1992) have drawn attention away from the social context. The overemphasis on formal socialization grounded in the “path to success” (winning) paradigm underemphasizes, dramatically, the social involvement in athletic networks and relationships (Granovetter, 1986). Formal socialization is of central importance in mediating social influences and shaping individual behavior, but other aspects of social organization that are contained in social organizations of groups need to be considered (Thorlindsson, 2011).

Third, the relationship of formal sport to the local social context is complex and hard to entangle. For one thing, formal sport tends to represent the exterior front of the local scene. Particular social networks involving family, friends, and representatives of institutions constitute facilitators of placement. Individuals recognizing such placement direct specifically talented people toward formal sports, which, as Goffman (1967, p. 194) noted in another context, provides the routinization of competition. Secondly, and linked to the routinization of action, those associated with the exterior competitive front iterate through dialogue and accompany such iterations with financial support. Such support emphasizes the importance of engagement in formal sports, creating what Bourdieu (1977, pp. 488–489) termed cultural capital, or the effective interface between enduring beliefs and resourceful (e.g., material support) commitments to sustain beliefs.

In light of the aforementioned processes, it is difficult to overestimate how formal sport overlaps with any particular societal plan of action. Through continual interaction processes and transactions, formal sport is embedded in diverse networks and relationships, which serve as going concerns within the local community (see Hughes, 1971, pp. 15–17). However, as Mead (1932) noted, even though particular realities appear obdurate (such as formal sports networks), the ongoing processes that apparently

bolster their symbolic power also create novel, implicitly objective, and compelling alternatives and do not fully correspond with the more formal and established plans representing such realities. In effect, emergent networks and concomitant social relationships may create more informal associations. To use a prosaic example from the United States for instance, the proliferation of informal “pickup” games of basketball dotted throughout urban areas has coincided with the apparent strength of commitment to formal participation in these same areas.

Participation in informal sports tends to cohabit with a formal sports culture. Such a proposition seems to have some empirical indications. Research from diverse areas indicates that informal networks not only cluster in relatively smaller enclaves (amid a broader population of formal participation) but also thrives in such areas. The moral density aligned with thriving in small enclaves may explain this geographical concentration of success (Buchanan, 2002; Watts & Strogatz, 1998; Zucker, Darby, & Armstrong, 1998). For instance, Fine (1979) argued that most cultural elements that derive from formal participation in sports also become part of an informal communication system of a small group within a relatively small geographical space (a particular suburban neighborhood, for example). The small group system, in turn, creates its own idiographic culture, adding and subtracting from the broader, formal standards, as participants within the arcane culture see fit. This view of emergent realities suggests that, among other things, we need to pay special attention at local levels to the role of informal networks in encouraging and guiding the way sports are played.

Informal and local networks associated with playing at sports not only emerge but may also involve the intentionality of those involved in localized enclaves. People interested in sports and activities associated with sports perceive desirable outcomes that can arise from creating more informal participation that may not be as evident in the broader formal culture. For one thing, and as Huizinga (1950, pp. 20–21) noted, participants may offer opportunities to engage in free play that may enhance intrinsic motivation, a sense of flow, craftsmanship, and a sense of mastery and enjoyment that comes from doing things for their own sake (Bale, 2007; Carlson, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Deci & Ryan, 1985; Sennett, 2008; Thorlindsson, 1994). Research on sport psychology further shows that task oriented athletes who tend to focus on the here and now, as opposed to goal oriented athletes who tend to focus on results, are more successful in competition (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; MacDonald, Cote, Eys, & Deakin, 2011; Smith, Small, & Cumming, 2007). This kind of day-to-day craftsmanship has been

noted in various domains, as reported in Chambliss' (1988/2006) study on elite swimmers, Fine's (1996) study on professional cooks, Thorlindsson's (1994) study on skippers, Harper's (1987) study on automobile repair workers, and Gawande's analysis on surgeon's work (2007). Informal games not only allow for honing of skills but also provide a good opportunity to foster intrinsic motivation, flow, and craftsmanship (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Ryan & Deci, 2000). On the contrary, an overly structured and formally organized environment and an authoritarian and rigid style of coaching may reduce intrinsic motivation, the experience of flow, and the craftsmanship, all of which are essential aspects of long-term success (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Roberts, 1992).

In the following pages, we intend to contribute to the emerging knowledge of the importance of the local and cultural informal context using in-depth explorative interviews with top-level Icelandic elite athletes. We maintain that the engagement of local community that provides opportunities for informal participation is vital as it provides a "social corrective" for the more formal and relatively rigid organized sports clubs (see Piaget's (1932/1965) description of the moral development of children in the social context of peer-play). Further, we hypothesize that more informal local elements may in part explain the geographical variation in sport performance. In maintaining a focus on informality, we focus on first, the formation of sport- or play-oriented peer culture at the community level and second, opportunities that the local communities offer to play, informally, outside the organized sport clubs.

As mentioned, that which encourages more informality also promotes an unstructured or semistructured idiographic social environment in which participants "join in" an ongoing game, regardless of the sport involved. In this regard, we also consider informal sports in a social context as emergent catalysts that encourage children, teens, and even young adults to try many sports rather than to restrict activity to a specialized sport. Rather than advocate that informal sport participation replace participation in formal sports, we suggest that collective efficacy of sport achievement is in part rooted in the way the formal tradition of sport training and the local tradition of free play come together. Focusing on the following three related aspect at the local context on sport development, we aim to assess (1) how the social context enhances informal sport and free play; (2) how free play and informal sport enhances the sport careers of top athletes; and (3) how the informal sport interacts in complex way with other elements in the social context to produce an effective sport careers.

METHODS

Data Setting

Many consider Iceland a successful sporting nation. In terms of per capita measures, the country is overrepresented by elite athletes in many sports, even in medal tables (Bale, 2003; Wolensky & Wieting, 2005). Iceland, with a population of 320,000, is the smallest nation that has won a medal at the Olympic Games in a team sport. According to Magnusson (2001), sports are one of the favorite pastimes of the Icelandic people. Locals often describe the country as a sporting nation. Most Icelandic sports take place at an amateur level. The main sports, especially ball sports, such as football, team handball, and basketball, are semiprofessional to varying degrees. Very few Icelandic athletes make a living by playing sports in Iceland exclusively, but a growing number of them play sports professionally in other countries (Magnusson, 2001).

Participants and Data Collection

Our approach is qualitative and explorative, based on 10 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Icelandic elite athletes. Since a representative probability sampling was not a goal of the study we did not aim to partake in formal sampling procedures. Following Glaser and Strauss's (1967/1999) grounded theory approach, we selected the sample on theoretical grounds (pp. 45–77). We based the selection in reference to our main purposes of the study – to understand how the social environment influences the athletes' career and to propose a theoretical perspective of athletic achievement.

While we relied, generally, on Glaser and Strauss' encouragement to gain in-depth understanding of how participants define their situations, we did not situate our study, entirely, in a grounded theory approach. Our main focus, to assess the merits of participation in the social context (at the local level), did provide depth, but obviously, given the limited number of interviewees, lacked breadth. We also did not engage in constant comparison as again, obviously, we restricted our focus to a relatively homogenous group of athletes. Principally, however, we followed through on one of the key aspects of the grounded theory approach – to allow the words and perspectives of those we interviewed shape our conceptualization.

In accord with our reading of Glaser and Strauss, we developed a set of criteria that allowed us to define the parameters of our small sample population. As implied earlier, we read Glaser and Strauss' work as encouraging researchers to understand, sympathetically, the social worlds inhabited by participants and to also gain a more concrete understanding of such worlds (i.e., the more literal characteristics). In order to define our participants concretely for the purpose of engaging in sympathetic understanding, we engaged in the necessary selective perception advocated by Glaser and Strauss (1967/1999, pp. 73–75). First, the athletes had to be known internationally and their achievements had to be considered world class. All selected athletes had a high status in Iceland; eight were still competing and two were recently retired. Six athletes held the Icelandic Sports Person of the Year award. Seven athletes, all except the football players, were among the top 10 athletes in the world in their sport at some time. Second, we made sure that the participating athletes represented various sports (both group and individual sports). Specifically, the interviewed athletes included three professional handball players, three professional football players, three Olympic track and field athletes, and one Olympic swimmer. Finally, the athletes needed to be available at the time of study. Seven males and three females were interviewed.

The first author¹ conducted in-depth interviews in a private environment at various locations over a period of few months. The interviews were semi-structured where the interviewer based the initial questions on the social context of the interviewed athletes. The initial focus of the interviews was specifically on the introduction to sports, the development of sport in the athletes' lives, their families and friends, and on issues such as work ethic and motivation. The athletes described their sport careers from early on emphasizing what was relevant to them during this process of becoming an elite athlete. All interviews were recorded on a tape or video recorder and coded into emerging themes. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes.

Data Analysis

Following Glaser and Strauss (1967/1999), the aim was to develop an integrated set of concepts to provide a thorough theoretical explanation of social phenomena. The research project initially focused on the broad central issue of the social aspects of sporting excellence of the interviewed athletes throughout their developing years. Based on a grounded theory, which stresses a process of ongoing and constant comparison, the interviews

drew increasing attention to the topic of informal sport and intrinsic motivation, which became the focus of the chapter. In effect, the grounded theory approach allowed us to develop an emergent and particular focus on the basis of our more general conceptual orientation.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF SPORT

As implied earlier, attention to formal sport does not merely cause interest in local sports. Rather, participation in local sports and attention to formal sports intertwine in complex ways. Attention to and appreciation of formal sport is not only embedded in local sports but also thrives on the basis of fans' support of local sports activities. In effect, a burgeoning local sports environment can influence selection of various formal sport disciplines, making some more (less) attractive to the young. Participation in local sports may support general values of achievement and perseverance as well as the elements of free play that invites both participation and performance. Such participation may also increase the involvement of parents and schools in supporting and encouraging more formal sport participation among youth. Local sports contexts foster a peer culture favorable to participation in more formal sports.

Participation in local sports may also produce knowledgeable fans, parents, and educators who can influence sport participation in numerous ways. The greater the knowledge base of a local community, the more open to broader developments in more formal sports activities. Formal sports do not simply exist "above and away" from the local communities; people in local communities see how their participation contributes to the development and refinement of formal sports activities. The local community, via informal sports networks, may provide a window of opportunity that encourages future participation in formal sports, which, obviously, is vital for the success of more formal sports participation.

Importantly, while appreciation of informal sport activities as contributing to the symbolic capital of formal sports cannot be overemphasized, the opportunity to engage in informal sport and play is another vital element in this complex social matrix that makes up the local context and influences sport development. The opportunity to engage in local sports activities creates a theater of play that celebrates the process of cooperative participation, even amid competitive goals. Several scholars have emphasized the importance of cooperative play and how it serves as a ground for

coordinating informal relationships as well as developing skills in various activities (Chambliss, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Fine, 1996; Gawande, 2007; Harper, 1987; Mills, 1951; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sennett, 2008; Thorlindsson, 1994). These scholars have advanced a basic understanding of the cooperative basis of achievement, whether conjoined or competitive.

Each of the scholars also focuses on play as an autotelic process or an ongoing appreciation of activity in and of itself. Such a process involves the intrinsic appreciation associated with doing things well, appreciating intricate details, and absorbing the moment as a sacred point-in-time. Ideally, play provokes a focus on improvement and learning one's capacities, regardless of objectified (and arbitrary) outcomes. In light of this focus on process over outcomes, we maintain that informal play, including informal sport, fosters the elements of spirited cooperation and self-improvement, which is crucial for the development of a good sport tradition.

Earlier, we mentioned how informal participation in a game such as basketball allows for greater appreciation of more formal and organizational basketball systems. In this vein, informal pickup games among children and adolescent may be both intense and competitive. However, informal games emphasize that the autotelic character emphasizes each particular moment of play rather than the broader outcome of winning, regardless of what occurred in previous moments. Some informal games may last for hours while others may last for only a few minutes. Youth can join a game in progress almost at any time. If they get bored, they can simply leave. There are no permanent or fixed teams. They play with different kids at different times. Their current teammates can be their prior opponents. No authority figure, such as a permanent coach, criticizes or holds them responsible for their mistakes. Participants in informal play enjoy the autonomy that provides them with a sense of self-control and freedom to explore and express themselves. They are free to play with their heart, motivated by an intrinsic desire to develop and improve their abilities outside of stringently defined parameters, defined by an "either-or" dichotomy (resulting, often, in "win or lose"). Liberation from a dichotomous "paradigm" allows for a primary focus on having fun and displaying skill and mastery. With play at the center of the activity, any game that emerges becomes self-regulating; the skills involved are matched automatically with the expectations goals and the rules of the game.

The meanings and motivation of sport participation vary greatly across cultural contexts (Guest, 2007). Further, the types of play, games, and sport, as well as the emphasis on competition, vary from time to time and from society to society (Seppanen, 1989). Play, game, and sport forms are

the products of culture in which cultural messages are communicated and transferred from one individual to another (Allison, 1982). Within this dynamic system of messages, informal play becomes one of the central mediating activities that link individuals to a broader culture. Appreciation of informal play and its enhancement then allows for feelings of social connection and visibility within any broader culture.

Several factors in the social environment can enhance informal play. First, the existence of a relatively big pool of informal peer networks that embrace informal sport provides a fertile soil for informal play. The emphasis on informal networks and a culture that encourages intrinsic motivation and mastery of skills may be expressed through these informal sport settings. These factors may then carry over into the formal aspects of sport organization, where it becomes an essential ingredient of a good sport program. Second, values and norms that emerge from a cooperative environment of play promote further participation in informal sport as congruent with broader cultural norms and values. Cultures that value games and play as “object lessons” in intrinsic motivation and the demonstration of skills value informal sports participation as conduits into the peer culture. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, establishing a tradition of informal sport coincides with broader cultural values that emphasize hard work and achievement. Such values, when embraced by people in their local environments, combines enjoyable (play) activity with instrumental (methodical) measures, often associated with “being successful.” Rather than adopting an overly simplistic equation of hard work with success, then, participation in informal play introduces the intervening variables of enthusiasm, interest, pleasure, and internal gratification when combining hard work and success. Informal sport participation fosters an achievement orientation as well as emphasizes a good work ethic and mastery of skills, beneficial to conventional success in sport (Bale & Sang, 1996; Salema & Morales, 2004). Through the encouragement of play, broader cultural values may be enforced through parental support and community participation. Engagement in play can also allow for the reinforcement of such values through imitation and iteration, two key elements of play.

In short, the social context (emphasizing informal participation and play) may influence the formal organization of sport in many ways. Key aspects of the social context may also interact with a broader, more formal sports system to produce a variety of positive results (or outcomes that participants deem worthwhile). As informal sport represents one of many key elements of a culture, examination of it and its benefits can also allow

for examination of its contribution to a successful sport tradition combined with other key elements in the local social context.

INFORMAL SPORT

Intrinsically motivated athletes seek fulfillment by mastering a task, making improvements, and creating criteria that allows them to assess their progress in their own frameworks. The search for fulfillment often reflects aesthetic activity with the body and mind aligned. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) termed such alignment as optimal experiences or flow. Participation in sports can invite optimal experiences, provided that athletes seek the flow rather than simply “play to win” for the sake of winning itself. The key element of the flow experience, the aforementioned autotelic state, stresses experience as an end in itself, the fundamental basis of informal play. According to Csikszentmihalyi:

When a culture succeeds in evolving a set of goals and rules so compelling and so well matched to the skills of the population that its members are able to experience flow with unusual frequency and intensity, the analogy between games and cultures is even closer. In such a case, we can say that the culture as a whole becomes a “great game.” (2002, p. 81)

The flow that emanates from participation in informal sport and its contribution to sport development in general is illustrated in our interviews. The interviewees, especially the team ballplayers, emphasized the solidarity associated with the flow. A common sentiment, “All my friends were going to practice and playing,” pervaded the interviews. The sentiment revealed that participating in these sports constitutes a consensual norm, or one in which all abide by with the feeling that the expectation binds, rather than constrains, relations. A track and field athlete, for instance, recalled the importance of growing up in a community in which the community members embraced track and field activities. Another track and field athlete remembered the rural environment in which she grew up this way:

In the countryside, everyone was playing sports, and when we met in the evening, we were always playing running games and all kind of games. It was natural to us. And if we weren't playing games, we were running after the sheep. We were always running around.

Students of urban life have noted that collective involvement in sporting events within the community can entice even the most socially

estranged community members (see Stone, 1972, p. 156). These students have also noted the importance of the literal and physical open spaces in local areas. They not only become conducive for specific activities but also evoke a sentimental attachment to such places (Wohl & Strauss, 1958, p. 527; Karp, Stone, & Yoels, 1991). Regardless of size and appraisals of aesthetic beauty, open spaces and access to sport facilities provide opportunities for children to create emergent play episodes. Such episodes bolster the friendship bonds with fellow children and allow for arcane identification with place. One athlete spoke of the local sports hall as his second home:

The local sports hall holds the best memories from my childhood. It was like our second home. The janitors there were like grandparents to us when we were kids. They looked after us and after we had practiced and played around, they sent us home late in the evening. They probably saw more of us than our parents did.

The emotional attachment to specific places also creates an evocative commitment to the game itself. The commitment merges bonding in place with competitiveness. One football player from a small town that has produced many of the top footballers in Iceland remembered that football was always very competitive between the local boys. Football was the talk of the town. He grew up playing unorganized although very competitive football games. While the final score meant something, the main things that this athlete remembered had to do with the lived experience of playing the game as if one's life depended on it. In his view, these games shaped his attitude and character as a football player.

Without exception, the athletes we interviewed perceived their participation in sport and games as a natural activity based on fun, freedom, and spontaneity, rather than merely on systematic training. Their subjective orientation to play as an in-itself passion suggests the importance of intrinsic motivation for the commitment necessary to be successful. To the young Icelandic athletes, sports are not a means to an end. Participants in their early days of sport practice, their parents, and society did not perceive extrinsic rewards, such as a career in sports, as the primary purpose for participation. Rather, sports invited the athletes to recognize vital characteristics of their selves, indicating that the athletes became aware of the connection between sports and intentionality, or broadly speaking, self-motivation. One athlete described his feelings:

The motivation was always strong. The sport was a pure pleasure. I had a pure joy for the game ... The only reason I practiced the sport was that I loved it. I went to practice because I loved practice. On practice days, I woke up with a smile on my face.

Returning to Mead's notion of emergence, our interviewees regarded playing and practicing as acts that created insights into the flow of the game. The more the athletes played and practiced, the more they recognized the beauty (from their perspective) of the sport; in turn, the more fun they had when participating. The athletes did not seem to think of their years of commitment and hard work as a negative factor or an external burden in their lives. Instead, they saw it as an integral part of their lives. As they became more emotionally attached to sports through play and practice, they regarded their activity as "natural," as one might regard particular routines to which he/she becomes accustomed. One track and field athlete said, "It's such a kick to do well and improve; it's a natural high." In this light, sport did not represent any particular crucible or invite any out of the ordinary sacrifice. Rather, the meaning of sport coincided with continued involvement to the extent that the sport symbolized an extension of the athletic self. One of the handball players further noted:

I was happy in sports so it wasn't sacrifice to me [to skip other activities with peers] because I was doing something more fulfilling instead. I felt more comfortable in the sporting environment than in other domains.

Another athlete related the sport career to the pursuit of general happiness in life, stating:

There is a sense of life-satisfaction involved. People are always seeking to be happy in life. And if you think you can find happiness through sports than you are willing to go the extra mile.

The athletes we interviewed seem to make a crucial distinction between self-involvement in sports and self-discipline. The former, again in relation to Mead, implies that one becomes an object to him (her) self as an athlete immersing him/her self in a compelling process. The latter, in contrast, implies that one defines him/her self in terms of an outcome, brought about by and through rigid commitment to means leading to ends. One of the athletes said that he did not think of self-discipline in relation to his work in sports. He went on to say that:

Self-discipline is a negative word, like I would have to force something on myself that I didn't want. It wasn't like that. Each day I was doing something that I truly love doing.

By distinguishing self-involvement from self-discipline, the athletes we interviewed illustrated the difference between intrinsic motivation and external pressure. Whereas the aforementioned athlete, in particular, eschewed the notion of self-discipline when it came to sports; he felt that

such a concept applied to his participation in music. He told us that his mother wanted him to learn to play the flute and drove him to his flute lessons each week:

The flute lessons were the opposite of sports. I never did connect with the flute so I finally quit. The coercive reasons for my participation weren't good because I was learning for somebody else instead of myself.

Similarly, another athlete stated that there were times when motivation to engage in instrumental tasks outside of sports decreased. He compared such tasks to his involvement in sports by noting, "This kind of thinking never came up when I was on the practice floor; they were entirely outside issues."

The intrinsic/external distinction also applies to interactions between younger athletes and older more advanced athlete. The latter encourage a more intrinsic view of sports by developing solid relationships with the younger athletes. In this regard, the older athletes serve as "docent others" who encourage a particular perspective on sports as part of a social process of belonging, rather than as mere mastery of a game in order to win it. Older athletes may help the younger athletes pick up techniques and tacit knowledge to improve their game, but they also point out the values associated with athletic roles and dispositions. Through interaction with older athletes, younger athletes learn how athletic selves emerge in terms of belonging to a community rather than restricting self-conceptions to demonstrating skills in an arena. One athlete described his sports relationship with older boys in the following way, "I used to hang out in the sports hall watching the older boys practice, hoping to be allowed to join in the game if they needed a player. Luckily they often did."

Older athletes do not merely stress the love of the game or the commitment to community. The older athletes can also provide younger athletes with a sense that they have a realistic chance to succeed in sports if they really have the desire to do so. Two of the ball-sport athletes said that an important part of the sporting tradition of their neighborhood sport club allowed them to hang out with higher status athletes. They pointed out that their club had a special atmosphere shaped by a long tradition of champions, national team players, and elite professionals. One of the ball players stated that:

National team players were training in the same sports hall as us, the youngsters. We usually had practice before or after their practice and of course, we knew them. They were our role models.

A female track and field athlete also noted:

I remember exactly when I quit gymnastics that one of the female track and field athletes won a European gold medal. I thought it was great. It even brought tears to my eyes. Two years later, I was training with her.

By establishing copresence with younger athletes and providing ongoing responsiveness to the younger athletes' concerns, the older athletes encouraged the younger athletes to regard the opportunity to succeed in sports as realistic (cf. Miller, Hintz, & Couch, 1975, pp. 481–483).

Our discussion of specific informal sport illustrates three important aspects of sport activity in general. First, informal or free play allows for the development of particular talents and capabilities associated with competence in formal sports. Beyond competence, however, informal, free play combines self-control with freedom to explore and express oneself, demonstrating, in broader terms, a convergence with Mead's (1934, pp. 134–137) "I" (impulsive) and "Me" (practical/disciplined) functions of the self. Informal sport serves as a dynamic, stimulating, and sociable context for younger athletes who begin to associate the sport with creativity, rather than strict mastery.

Second, peer culture plays a central role in the development of good sport tradition. Playing with friends provides a good atmosphere that increases the fun element in sport and supports the feeling of intrinsic motivation. Peer-play also demonstrates the crucial correlation between engagement in sports and socialization. Even sports that emphasize individualistic outcomes (e.g., track and field) locate such outcomes in a collective gathering. Track and field athletes enjoy the company of others while practicing; those who practice the flute do so in isolation or under the supervision of an authority figure. The opportunities to develop skills may also foster a sense of mastery that contributes to intrinsic motivation and a sense of flow. Interestingly, the peer culture can influence sport in many ways and work differently at different points throughout the life span, as illustrated in the following quotation from an athlete, intrinsically motivated to play handball (this quotation also suggests that a strong intrinsic motivation may work differently depending on the type of experiences):

After the age of 15, the world is filled with other kinds of temptations, such as girls, and you begin to do things for someone other than yourself. Then you just want to be cool, score more goals, and look nice. But then you lose some of the pureness you had for the game. What is of vital importance to be successful at this age is to regain some of the pureness. To enjoy the game, and not to let some outside factors put you off-balance, not a pay check, media attention and fame or domestic issues. With healthy

focus, we can keep the pureness for the game without letting life outside the sport interfere.

Third, our interviewees suggested, in their own words, that several factors in the social environment may contribute to intrinsic motivation. Access to sport facilities outside regular practice session not only provides the necessary physical space for play but also promotes opportunities for emergence; younger athletes can make spontaneous decisions to play at several given moments. A supportive network of others who appreciate the merits of informal/free play symbolizes a social environment that encourages free play and the ability to create such play “on the spot.” Finally, an egalitarian ethos recognizes the primacy of development – that younger athletes will become veteran athletes one day and assume a docent role in regard to a future-younger athlete. An overly structured environment and an authoritarian and rigid style of coaching may reduce intrinsic motivation that is an essential aspect of long-term success.

THE INTERACTION OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL ASPECTS OF SPORT DEVELOPMENT

In the preceding sections, we highlighted the role of informal sport as a key element in the development of a successful sport career. We further recognized that the role of informal sport is only one element out of many environmental and situational factors. Also, we have stressed the dynamic relationship between a free-play element in informal sport and competence in formal sports. From a more institutional perspective, one benefit of participation in informal sport is the continued interest in formal training that accompanies performance in more formal, organized sports. In effect, we argued that participation in informal, free play not only installs an emotional attachment to activities but also invites a cognitive disposition, stressing the necessity of honing, developing, and adjusting skills to meet various demands of the game itself. The athlete emerging from free play does so with a heart for play and a “mind-set” for the game.

We regard the mind-set for the game as beneficial attitudes that are nurtured through the informal sport of peers. Such attitudes carry over into the formal sport context as essential orientations that help produce a cohesive formula for success (Halldorsson, Helgason, & Thorlindsson, 2012). Through informal sport participation, athletes recognize their intrinsic motivation along with the perceived social benefits (belonging) associated

with the game. This recognition serves as the grounds of a work ethic defined by passion rather than restricted to routine. Through formal sports participation, athletes develop highly specialized sport knowledge, an appreciation for achievement, and a dedication to traditional craftsmanship. The concomitant dimensions of formal and informal participation allows for the iteration of the process we described as flow, or the reciprocal relationship between reaching a desired outcome and dedication to the process of desire.

The social issues involved in such a dialectical alignment are often quite complex. First, the family may influence the sport activity of their children in many ways both directly and indirectly. Parents and other more formal agents may transmit intrinsic values and emphasize mastery of skills simply because it is a part of the general local culture. Two of the most famous experts on Icelandic culture have both noted that the value of sport is in its emphasis on intrinsic motivation and the demonstration of skill. In 1933, Gudmundur Finnbogason wrote:

The athlete takes part in sport because of the sport itself and for himself. He masters his body and soul in order to complete his tasks ... and the only real value of the task is that it displays the ability of the athlete. All the focus is on the performer, his strength, skill, and the art that comes to life in the doing and then in the reputation of the completed task. (Finnbogason, 1933, pp. 62–63)

Sigurdur Nordal (1987) further argued for the value of sports and physical exercise:

It becomes the duty of the experienced men to urge to others that physical exercise and sport have their own benefits, more valuable than any outside elements ... It is beautiful that the amateur ethos does not allow athletes to exploit their sport. If they don't do, what they are supposed to do, only for the sport itself, then it's better to do it with competitiveness and ambition rather than being bought or coerced to do it – or not to do it at all. (Nordal, 1987, p. 301)

These quotations imply that Icelanders value sport because of its emphasis on intrinsic motivation, mastery, and demonstration of skill. Sport represents the values that Icelanders find rewarding. Sport also symbolizes the trust that Icelanders share when it comes to cooperative activity, even in the context of competition. One athlete said:

My parents always encouraged us to play outside. Then after we had played for a while we went home and my mom made us sandwiches and something to drink and then sent us out to play again. They said it was good for us to be outside playing with our friends.

Specifically, Icelanders trust that the ambition to do well translates into the development of character. Beyond outcomes, the play itself, the

excitement of competition, and the demonstration of skill and mastery under difficult circumstances served as primary rewards. The emphasis on intrinsic motivation, skill, and craftsmanship in Icelandic culture demonstrates an even broader trust in the Icelandic society itself. Whatever the specific outcome of any particular game, the broader outcome will involve the development of internally directed participants who nevertheless have a great appreciation for the external “rules of the game.” Thus, the local culture may promote directly some of the values fostered through informal sport.

Second, key social agents, such as family, may transmit core social values and provide support and social control for the young athletes. The family may be instrumental in transmitting values that support good work ethic and achievement (see Bloom, 1985). An athlete that grew up in the countryside acknowledges her parents as her role models.

My ambition comes from my parents ... They are my role models. They are farmers who raised five kids and have been through a lot in their life. My dad was 19 when he decided to become a farmer and started building everything from scratch. Today he has a big and ... farm. He is the most industrious man I have met and his attitude and work ethic showed me that since he could do that, I could also — in my own field.

The social values of hard work and achievement that exist in the local social environment may be transmitted to the young athletes and mix with the values fostered through informal sport, helping the athlete move from one stage of development to another. The athletes mentioned that family support was especially important in their early years of performing sport and then again in their late adolescence. A swimmer said, “The support was always there and I don’t recall any pressure. Both my parents told me that I was not swimming for them, but for myself.” None of the athletes faced parental pressure in their sport. One athlete even said:

My parents never pushed me to practice sports. My dad was even surprised that I always wanted to practice. Sometime I had to ask if I could go to practice.

Some of the athletes talked about the importance of family support in terms of interest, encouragement, and motivation that resulted in identification with a particular sport discipline. For three of the four individual athletes, the families’ interests in sports transferred to the athletes and resulted in an athletic identity. These findings support earlier studies that discussed motivation as depending on whether an activity is linked to one’s sense of social identity and feelings of belonging (Cohen & Garcia, 2008).

Apart from families, coaches represent the formal organization of sport more than any other social agents do. They are also held responsible for the more instrumental aspects of sport, such as winning. However, they may also promote the informal social aspect of sport and key social values. The personal informal contact of the young athletes with coaches was one important aspect of the local context that the athletes mentioned. One athlete stated the importance of the coaching approach in the following way:

I always had great coaches ... the most influential coach emphasized especially the social side and regularly held hot-dog parties and social gatherings when we were teenagers.

Coaches also set the tone for the athletes' attitude toward sport training and a sporting lifestyle. One athlete stated that:

The coach set the standard by always being prepared, being on time, and being always enthusiastic about practice. He probably taught us these things without us noticing that.

Another athlete said, "... I received a lot of trust from my coach, and I learned to be a leader on the field. I have never before or after met such a strong character." Rather than restrict themselves to superordinate positions of authority, then, coaches demonstrated that their activities could serve as extensions of athletes' activities and achievements.

Parents and coaches exist in a broader community of other actors, as well as values, beliefs, and emotional attachments to traditions. Two values and traditions that the local community offers, choice and opportunity, encourage younger athletes to try many sports prior to settling on one in which skills will be refined. The Icelandic elite athletes described their childhood as growing up in an environment where playing diverse informal sports constituted a communal norm. The norm not only served as an expectation, however, but also encouraged a broadening of a social network in which participants could meet varieties of players from different sporting events.

Along with increasing opportunities to socialize, another key benefit of participating in diverse sports allowed for the development of variegated physical skills that could serve the athlete well, once he/she specialized in a sport activity. The development of one's physical mastery and coordination, in turn, inspired a motivation to advance into more demanding competitive arenas. Icelandic athletes learn early on, through diverse participation in many activities, that different sports can complement each other. One

athlete talked about this beneficial aspect of multisport experience by stating, "For me it was beneficial to try as much as possible; I even tried yoga, which was very good for me." Another athlete said, "It's important for kids to try many sports. It advanced my performance to play many sports in my younger years."

Returning to the issue of trust, the athletes did not feel pressure to select one sport over another until their late teens. The Icelandic community in general exhibited confidence that athletes would know when and how they could decide to specialize. Combinations of perceived success, community recognition, and particular windows of visible and practical opportunities helped athletes select a particular sport. All ball-sport athletes made their decision after receiving positive feedback on their competence in that particular sport. One handball player chose handball over football because he was selected to the junior national team in handball at a critical time. The same dynamic of trust applies to the athletes in individual sports. One track and field athlete noted, "To become an athlete was always my big dream. This was something I was good at and had confidence that I could do." The athletes based their decision on their perception of competence in a sport that they enjoyed, on their interests, and on opportunities given to them at critical time early in their career.

In short, the interaction between the formal and informal sport is complex and takes place at both the individual and collective level. Informal sport, an important element in the early development of sport, coincides with other social factors in the local environment as well as formal sport organizations. Taken together, informal sport, social contexts, and formal sport organizations represent a dynamic and emergent milieu that emphasizes the positive characteristics of informal sport. Such characteristics can lead to the development of a successful sport career, but more importantly, it can lead to appreciation of characteristics valued by the Icelandic community in general.

Three important elements are linked to the complex relationship between formal, informal, and community contexts. First, cultural values affect general behavior and practice within a given culture. If society emphasizes play and sport, a general culture and practice of play and sport is likely to become the norm. Second, a society that emphasizes strong work ethics will teach, encourage, support, and award people for following these values. These values are taught to members of that culture both formally, through formal institutions and instructors, such as coaches and teachers, and informally by parents and peers. Third, since these practices and values are dominant in the culture, society provides opportunities for the

positive deviants of the common values to master their art and succeed in their field.

CONCLUSION

We have explored the role of informal sport in the development of some top-level Icelandic athletes. Our approach is explorative and intended to develop an empirically grounded theory. Our analysis suggests that the development of free play may be of central importance to the development of top-level athletes. It offers the opportunity to foster intrinsic motivation, mastery of skills, flow, craftsmanship, and aesthetic experience. We suggest that these qualities are important in the development of top athletes, especially in their early sport career.

Our analysis has some important limitations. First, we focused on the role of informal sport in the social context. However, we also stress that informal sport is just one of many elements in the social context that influence formal organization of sport in order to produce top-level athletes. Social norms and values can play an important role in the development of formal sport. These values and norms may exist in the general culture, where they may influence individuals directly through their social environment. They may also combine with cultural values that emphasize games and sport as well as a big pool of informal peer networks that emphasize informal sport and thus produce a fertile soil for sport to grow and develop. Norms of achievement and hard work may exist in a culture that looks down on sport and informal play and produce a social environment that does not facilitate sport development. Sociologists such as [Carlson \(1988\)](#), [Chambliss \(1988\)](#), and [Seppanen \(1988\)](#) have provided some important insights into the sociocultural aspects that play a role in sport performance, but more research is needed on the interplay of the various elements in the social context and their relation to sport development.

Second, coaches may teach many of the positive elements that are absent in the local culture in the context of formal sport. Thus, coaches may emphasize the play element in formal training and the interaction of participants before, during, and after training ([Light, 2010](#)). Values such as hard work, dedication, achievement, and commitment may be missing from sports in the local cultural environment. However, coaches can teach these values in a systematic way within the context of formal sport. The American basketball coach John Wooden created a legendary winning

tradition when he coached the UCLA Bruins. The tradition was in part based on the old-fashioned fundamental values and philosophy of success that he had learned from his father on a farm when growing up (Wooden & Jamieson, 1997). Wooden understood that values such as hard work, self-discipline, dedication, and intrinsic motivation are fundamental to success in sport. He felt, however, that the social networks of campus life did not nurture and reinforce these values. Therefore, they needed to be taught to the players as part of their basketball training.

In spite of these limitations, our analyses are quite consistent. They highlight the importance of unsupervised informal peer interaction. A pool of unsupervised peer networks can serve as a prerequisite for the development of informal sport that may promote qualities that are desirable for the development of top-level athletes. We realize that calling for less authoritative supervision most likely represents a minority position. The increasing emphasis on supervising, organizing, and controlling the lives of children and adolescents and reducing the opportunities for the formation of “out of control peer cultures” may be a response to the societies’ attempts to reduce various risks (Beck, 1992). It may be an attempt to protect children from harm and reduce the formation of deviant subcultures, especially among adolescents. However, efforts to organize and control peer culture through authoritative measures may have important unintended consequences. They may reduce free play and thus reduce the development of intrinsic motivation, the experience of flow, and the development of craftsmanship.

Consequently, a more authoritarian supervised arena of play can encourage children and adolescents to see their tasks only as instrumental means to an end. While we do not wish to critique the benefits of getting a good job or becoming a good athlete as valuable end points, we do suggest that an authority-laden approach to sports, emphasizing strict outcomes (winning) can invite a more passive approach to sports on the part of participants. By this, we mean that rather than develop a passion for the game, a strictly supervised approach that emphasizes singular end points can stress detached routinization rather than heartfelt appreciation.

These attempts to formalize and control sport activity among children and youth may also undermine the potential educational benefits of sport. The strong emphasis on outcomes and external rewards may not be the best way to socialize children and adolescents. Leading social theorists such as George Herbert Mead and Jean Piaget have emphasized the role of play for the development of morality, role taking, and the self. Also, participants learning the game under supervision, and restricting involvement to

instrumental goals, may miss out on some benefits of active learning. The instrumental approach to sports may indeed create respect for authority and a desire to win, but could do so at the expense of intrinsic motivation, joy, creativity, and personal fulfillment. An emphasis on free play invites viewing activities such as practice as emotionally connected to the game. In contrast, an instrumental view of practice places value on winning and immediate success. The experience of informal sport in the early years of sport may carry over into the formal context of sport training and help maintain a healthy balance between short-term and long-term goals. The formality and the immediacy of professional sport may in fact mix well with intrinsic motivation and the experience of flow that is essential in the development of skills and the enjoyment of practice. Our interviews strongly suggest that this may often be the case.

In short, our analysis strongly suggests that informal sport may be an important element in a successful career of top-level athletes. It also suggests that the characteristics of informal sport with its emphasis on play, intrinsic motivation, as well as the focus on the process rather than outcomes, may be an important element in social organization in fields other than sport. This may, however, be overlooked in quantitative analysis, which focuses on measurable variables of attitudes and outcomes. The overemphasis on the formal aspects of sport and no doubt many other social institutions may in part be due to the methodological premise that social relationships can be measured as they appear frozen in time. This approach draws the attention away from social process and the emergent nature of collective activity. This line of theorizing about the role of informal play with sport is somewhat incomplete and needs to be developed further. It is in line with earlier works of [Chambliss \(1988\)](#), [Csikszentmihalyi \(1990\)](#), [Fine \(1996\)](#), [Gawande \(2007\)](#), [Harper \(1987\)](#), [Mills \(1951\)](#), [Ryan and Deci \(2000\)](#), [Sennett \(2008\)](#), and [Thorlindsson \(1994\)](#). It lends support to these theories in the same way that they lend support to our findings. However, these theories represent different perspectives. They use different terminologies and analyze different topics. The total picture is still fragmented. A more comprehensive approach is needed to develop a systematic theory about the benefits of play and its role in the development of social institutions.

NOTE

1. Oskar Bjarni Oskarsson was a cointerviewer in some interviews.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The study was supported by RANNIS (The Icelandic Centre for Research) and the University of Iceland Research Fund.

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