

**The Black Swan of Elite Football:
The case of Iceland**

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Abstract

Icelandic football has recently attracted widespread international attention. Iceland – with a population of 340.000 – is by far the smallest nation to have qualified for major international men's and women's football championships such as the European Championship Finals and the men's World Cup. In this paper, I argue that Iceland can be identified as 'a Black Swan' (something which is highly improbable and unexpected but carries extreme impact) in modern elite sports. Firstly, because it has produced extraordinary results against prestigious football nations. Secondly, because Iceland's recent success is produced from a 'none-elite' sport system, which is built on different ideologies than is customary in the conventional youth sport academies of most nations. And thirdly, because Iceland's recent success has highlighted weaknesses in the customary international sports model, which larger football nations are currently trying to restore more in line with the Icelandic way of organizing and playing sports.

Introduction

Iceland – with a population of 340,000 – is by far the smallest nation to qualify for major international football championships. The men’s national team of Iceland qualified for the 2016 European Championship Finals, where it reached the quarter finals after eliminating England in the eight finals, and for the 2018 World Cup, where it drew against Argentina in its first match but did not qualify from the group stage. After being placed in the 133rd place in the Official FIFA rankings in 2011 the Icelandic men’s team reached the 18th place in the rankings in 2018. The women’s national team has qualified for three consecutive European Championship Finals in 2009, 2013 and 2017, reaching the quarter finals in 2013. The women’s team has secured its position in the top 20 in the Official FIFA ranking, having peaked at the 8th place in 2013. This success of the Icelandic national football teams has been greeted with disbelief in the football world and attracted widespread international attention¹. Interestingly, this emergence of the Icelandic teams at the top international stage has come about in the past ten years signifying *the golden age* of Icelandic football².

It is not only the small population of Iceland which is of interest in this case but also the fact that while the football world has in the last decades moved from an amateur status to full-time professionalism,³ Iceland’s recent football success has, surprisingly, been generated by a local amateur sports-for-all system, which contrasts the high-profile elite professional systems in profound ways.⁴ Thus, in the term used by the American uncertainty scientist Nassim Nicholas Taleb the emergence of Iceland to the top global football stage can be identified as *a black swan*⁵ of elite football, signalling something which was highly improbable and unexpected.⁶

According to Taleb a black swan is an outlier ‘as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility’⁷, and which we in retrospect wrongly, through linear cause-and-effect reasoning, see as predictable. Black swans can further carry extreme impact in any given field which needs to adjust to the black swans existence⁸.

The success of Iceland came as a surprise to most followers of the sport, even the Icelanders, who did not see this success coming. The popular narrative of this success was largely explained as due to the Icelandic FA’s (KSÍ) investment in building astroturf football pitches and emphasizing coaches’ education which shifted Icelandic football towards a more professional and international sports model⁹. However, as has been argued elsewhere,¹⁰ the aforementioned narrative of the reasons for Iceland’s football success is insufficient in explaining this black swan, as the narrative only accounts for a piece of the whole puzzle – at best. Such instrumental narratives tend to highlight explanations that fall within our realm of experience and paradigm of

thought (in this case that Iceland is becoming more like the conventional professional sport systems), but simultaneously they ignore other elements that do not fall into the neat, familiar and more customary categories. In other words, Iceland's football success was not the result of some grand masterplan initiated by the Icelandic FA through which it poured money into Icelandic youth football, the club teams and the national teams, with the intention of topping at this particular point (as perhaps was the case with Germany at the turn of the century¹¹). Other forces are at play here which could not have been predicted. Black swans are, in this sense, the result of inductive rather than deductive reasoning¹².

In this paper I will analyse the success of Icelandic football from a socio-cultural and organizational perspective, treating this success as a black swan. I will frame the case of Iceland within the social organization of youth sports, focusing in particular on talent development in football and highlight how different systems (as ideal types) emphasize different tasks and values that lead to different outcomes. This paper is a critical account of the ideology of youth talent development programmes in modern football. I will argue that the case of Icelandic football provides an interesting contrast with the conventional international organization of youth sports, which helped Iceland emerge to the top international football scene. Firstly I will contrast the social organisation of Icelandic football (the Icelandic Sports Model) with the conventional organisation of football in Western societies. Secondly I will argue that it was the distinctiveness of the Icelandic Sports Model, which coincided with detrimental trends in the global elite football world, that created a window of opportunity for the emergence of Iceland (as a highly improbable black swan) to the top elite football stage. And finally I will argue that Iceland's surprising success impacted the top-level football scene where prominent football nations and clubs have begun to reconstruct their youth development models and ideologies of building elite teams more in line with the ideology in which the Icelanders are organizing and playing sports.

The Professionalization of Youth Sport

First, let's turn to the conventional way of organising sports. Modern youth sports can be characterized by leading to two different pathways for participants; either through participation sports or performance sports. There is marked distinctions between the two in aims, methods and culture. Participation sports, on the one hand, are intended to foster friendships and highlight the joy of playing for the sake of playing, usually within the local community. Performance sports are, on the other hand, result-orientated and work to produce future elite athletes, most often within specific youth academies (talent development programmes) in professional sport teams.

With increased commercialization and glorification of global sports since the late twentieth century, performance-oriented youth sports have gained strength, at the cost of participation sports, and have become more formal and professional, shifting the emphasis of youth sports from play to work¹³ as Baker et al. noted¹⁴:

One of the most obvious trends in high performance sport over the past few decades has been the increasing systematization of athlete development and talent identification. There is increasing pressure to identify the most “talented“ athletes as early as possible so that they can be placed in “optimal environments.“

This trend is particularly noteworthy in football. The establishment of specific talent development programmes (TDP) for kids all down to five years old, within the sport clubs youth academies, has thus become the norm in contemporary elite sport organisations, separating the ‘talented’ kids (the few) from the rest (the masses), from early on.

At the outset however, we have to bear in mind that the identification of appropriate talents and skills in football are social constructs, as they are in the arts¹⁵, the model industry¹⁶ as well as in various other activities¹⁷. Thus ideas regarding what constitutes talent are not physical reality, but rather social facts emerging from a web of ties between team owners, managers, coaches, scouts and agents and become established as ‘the right ideas’ in the general discourse. Those ideas are, therefore, different from one time to another, and from one place to the next. For instance, in the 2000s French football academies mainly recognized and emphasized physicality (strong and tall players) as the prerequisite for admission into its youth academies at the expense of other qualities (such as technical or tactical abilities). French internationals Antonio Griezmann and N’Golo Kante were for instance considered too small and puny for the youth academies in France in which they never had a chance¹⁸. They, however, had an opportunity to try their luck elsewhere and later became key players in the French national team that won the 2018 World Cup. This was fortunate for French football since it denied those players access to its football academies in their developing years.

This trend to spot and train likely prospects early can be identified as ‘the professionalization of play’¹⁹. The professionalization of play, in turn, makes sport more structured, formal and serious to maximize the efficiency of training; as it emphasizes winning, early specialization and focuses on enhancing individual skills²⁰. This professional youth sport system has gained hegemony in modern elite sport - both in terms of practice²¹ and in general discourse²² - where teams in most countries have established youth academies to foster their talented youngsters. Successful examples such as Germany - which invested vast resources in its youth development programmes at the turn of the century and eventually won the World Cup in

2014 - are cases used to prove the point that the youth academies work, encouraging and even pressuring others, directly and indirectly, to follow their lead. This organisation of youth sports spreads out from one team to the next, from one country to another, and takes over as the 'right way' to develop future athletes which, in turn, leads to a general acceptance and establishment of this new way to organize and practice youth sport. Interestingly, however, the aim of many youth academies within professional football clubs is not necessarily to develop players for their own team but rather to cash-in by selling their best prospects to bigger teams, thereby profiting from investment in the youth academy. In this respect, performance sports are first and foremost a business.

For the outsider the football talent development programmes are attractive. They are the conventional and 'legitimate' route to develop skills and gain success, further intensifying the attraction that professional football is encircled by glamour, fame and potential wealth. Young football players and their parents are, therefore, eager for them to join the football academies. For the insider, however, the football talent development programmes are just like any other work; systematic, hard and mundane²³. They can even be noted as 'bad jobs' for youngsters— similar to the jobs of fashion models²⁴ – because they do not teach important life values²⁵, and strip fun, spontaneity and friendship from the youngsters' developing years²⁶. The professionalisation of youth football has further been noted to exploit masses of young hopeful footballers, especially from third world countries, even with links to human trafficking²⁷.

There is vast literature on youth sport development programmes and most of this literature is critical²⁸. This research on talent development programmes has highlighted two major trends: 1) how little we still know about how to produce elite athletes; 2) and how little success we have had in producing elite athletes despite massive investments in youth talent development programmes²⁹. Thus, only from 0,012% up to two percent of all young athletes in talent development programmes break through to the senior teams³⁰. The very small number of successful transitions from youth academies to elite level is no more than by chance alone. After all, those programmes select the most talented youngsters in their formative years and should be able to promote some of them to top level, even by doing nothing but letting them play sports.

There can be many possible reasons for the ineffectiveness of talent development programmes in their efforts to produce successful elite athletes and teams³¹. Firstly, places at top levels are scarce and therefore only available for a selected few – the very best of the best. Thus it is only logical that most players in academies fail to reach top level. Secondly, due to the emphasis on early specialization in only one sport some might choose the wrong sport for their potential physical, cognitive or social abilities, and are therefore never likely to make it through to the top

in their selected sport – or any other for that matter. Thirdly, also due to the early requirements of sport specialization, players focus on specific field position from early on. Thus, they could be locked in the wrong positions which works against their finding their ideal field placement and, furthermore, they may forgo the diversity of playing many positions in their formative years, which could decrease their motivation and hinder the development of understanding the game. Fourthly, young players depend on somebody with authority (coach, scout, team manager) believing in them and their ability and providing them with the opportunity to grow into elite players in the ‘optimal’ environments of football academies. An overwhelming majority of hopeful youngsters never get that chance and are written off in their childhood. However, the criteria used to select potential prospects may also structurally favour some over others. Research on the relative age effect (RAE)³² for instance, has shown that what we often mistakenly perceive as ability and talent might be due to varying levels of maturity. Those who are considered too small, too puny, too slow or too ordinary face even more limited prospects of being selected and reaching their potential compared to the early matured. Thus, they neither get the opportunity nor support to reach their potential (see also *the Matthew effect*³³). And finally, the professionalization of sport is built on scientific management supplemented by increased expectations, heightened seriousness and formalised and mechanical training. Critics of the talent development programmes have argued that the professional youth sports model undermines human fulfilment and creativity. Furthermore, the proposed rational structure of the youth talent development programmes can be seen as ‘dehumanizing’ sport as it mainly emphasizes the physiological and motor development aspects of young footballers and ignores, or even works against, the important cognitive and social development of participants³⁴. Hartman and Kwauk argue that many think character development occurs naturally through sport training and competition. But this seems not to be the case in football academies³⁵. The talent development programmes have thus been associated with increased player burnout, anxiety, depression, long-term injury, and dropout from sports, as well as the attribution of dubious social skills such as arrogance³⁶. All of this makes sport less enjoyable and effective and thus counter-productive for successful player development³⁷. In this context, the professionalization of play has changed youth sport from *play* to *work*³⁸.

Thus, the youth development programmes have been dysfunctional in the sense that they have largely been inadequate to produce elite players with the right characteristics and attitudes for team sports³⁹. However, not only the youth development programmes are to be blamed for those failures. Those programs are the products of a larger sport culture, which emphasizes the commercialization and idolization of elite sports⁴⁰. On the whole, modern sports culture has led to increased individualism in performance sports and nurtured an alienation of important psycho-

social values relating to positive personal development, as well as communal sentiments. This has resulted in failures of contemporary elite sport programmes and teams.

Sports in Iceland

Sports in Iceland are built on similar structural and cultural foundations as do sports in the other Nordic nations; Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden⁴¹. Those bigger neighbours of Iceland have through the years been a major influence on the development of Icelandic sports and the sport authorities of the Nordic nations have worked in close collaboration. The Nordic Sports Model, which lies at the core of the Nordic sport systems, has proven to be very successful⁴².

The main argument of this paper is that Iceland's recent success in elite football (as in other sports) is not only grounded in the socio-cultural organisation of Nordic sports⁴³, but more particularly in the distinct culture of Icelandic sports which has its own characteristics and contrasts the aforementioned international professional sports model in profound ways⁴⁴. The most remarkable feature of the Icelandic Sports Model (ISM) is that it does not distinguish between participation sports and performance sports as is done in most other countries⁴⁵. The two ideologies – most often perceived as opposites that do not mix which indicates the 'either/or' ideology - combine into a single sports model in Iceland where parallel emphasis is placed on both. This mixed system is a key distinctive feature of the Icelandic Sports Model which has two main aims in the customary sport clubs: 1) to foster the positive personal development of children and adolescents through sport, and 2) to develop elite athletes for sport competition. Interestingly, Iceland has been doing well on both accounts in recent years⁴⁶ and surveys of late adolescent participants (age 16-20) in the ISM overwhelmingly show that they enjoy training in the sport clubs and that they appreciate their coaches and their local sport clubs⁴⁷.

The Icelandic Sports Model, however, does not necessarily possess distinct elements that cannot be found elsewhere – for instance elements such as, state sponsored youth sports, formal training, emphasis on multi sports, participants split into ability groups, focus on fun and play, etc.– rather it is how certain elements regarding the structure and characteristics of sports combine in the Icelandic model and make it stand out as being somewhat unique in the world of modern sports. Thus, below I identify the key characteristics of the Icelandic Sports Model.

First, sports are popular pastimes in Iceland, predominantly practised in community based and owned multi-sport clubs. Icelandic sports are built around friendships within the local community. Kids can normally walk or cycle to the sport clubs. The sport clubs facilities are usually open to everyone; anyone can come and play whenever they want, if there is free space. This is particularly true of football where everyone can use the astroturf pitches for informal play with

friends. Furthermore, the sport clubs collaborate with neighbouring schools and together they form a complete day for children away from home, while their parents are at work. Kids are encouraged to join sport practice after school and some clubs even provide bus trips from school to the sport clubs for the youngest kids. The sport clubs have a hegemony in the Icelandic sports scene where private and commercial sports clubs are rare and peripheral in the sporting landscape. All football clubs are part of the multi-sport community sport clubs.

Second, on the structural level, resources are rather channelled to youth sports than elite sports in Iceland. The municipalities (and to a less extent the state) invest vast resources to help finance the local community-based sport clubs; they build sport facilities, employ some staff and subsidize up to half the participation fees. The sport clubs in Iceland offer formal coaching, by paid and educated coaches, for everybody, from the age of four. This is not the case in most other countries (including the Nordic nations) where parents tend to coach children and adolescents within the local community sport clubs. The clubs obtain participation fees, which range from 300 Euros (for 4 year olds who practise twice a week) to 700 Euros (for 19 year olds who practise six times a week) per year in football, which is intended to cover the coaches' salaries. Accordingly, Iceland has the highest percentage of educated coaches of the FIFA countries⁴⁸. Icelandic elite sports are however underfunded⁴⁹. Iceland does not maintain an elite sport system, as known in many Western countries. There are for instance no elite sport research centres in Iceland nor are there any specific elite development programmes, as for example in its fellow Nordic countries Norway (Olympiatoppen) and Danmark (Team Danmark). Furthermore, the Icelandic national teams only have a small proportion of the finances that most competing nations have⁵⁰.

Third, Icelandic sports are mostly at amateur level. Iceland does not host professional sport teams as is customary among most other Western nations. At highest level, the community sport clubs in Iceland are semi-professional, in the sense that they have paid coaches and staff and contracted players who are paid for their services. Most players and coaches have another job outside football or go to school along with their career in football. Sports in Iceland are, in this context, still in their early stages towards professionalism⁵¹. Some clubs offer the most talented kids extra training and education in sport, but in most cases this work is not very advanced. Icelandic youth sports have, for instance no player contracts nor is there a systematic scouting system in the Icelandic clubs. It is also recommended that kids up to the age of 16-17 should play with their friends in their local clubs rather than changing clubs within Iceland. Youth players in Iceland are also encouraged to play sports with their friends in a more informal context outside the sport clubs⁵². Thus, compared to other Nordic nations, Iceland remains somewhat behind in terms of the professionalisation of football whereas those nations have developed a full

professional sports organisation⁵³. Increasingly, however, players down to the age of 15 are picked up by professional football academies abroad, and most of the Icelandic national team players have played professionally abroad from the age of 17-18, which in many cases extended their football expertise⁵⁴. In other words, the Icelandic players have been brought up in the Icelandic system but have increasingly moved to more professional environments in their late teens.

Fourth, participation rates in Icelandic sport clubs are among the highest in the world⁵⁵ – despite the fact that all participants need to pay participation fees. The formal sport system in Iceland is a sport-for-all arrangement intended for everyone, with special emphasis on providing children and adolescents with formal sport training from the age of four. Playing sport within the formal sport clubs is considered a social norm for Icelandic kids. Over 90% of all kids in Iceland practise sports within the sport clubs at one time or another in their youth and around 60% of 15 year olds still do⁵⁶. The clubs are multi-sport clubs, providing local kids with the opportunity to select from three up to 13 sports in their local club. Multi-sport participation is generally encouraged in the sport clubs, at least for kids until the age of 13-14. The clubs generally organize training schedules so the kids can train more than one sport. In the Icelandic sport clubs, boys practise on average 1.9 sports and girls 1.6⁵⁷. In addition, some sport clubs track those kids who drop-out of formal sports and reach out to them so they have a pleasant departure from the clubs. The clubs even set up farewell parties for those who quit at the end of the youth sport programme at the age of 18-19. Giving those who quit a proper farewell from the clubs illustrates the social aspects of the Icelandic sport clubs. They are not businesses, supposed to produce one valuable champion, but an integral part of the local communities, intended to have positive impact on everyone.

Finally, Iceland has in recent years not only had remarkable success in elite sport competitions but also in regard to the positive personal development of its young participants through sports. Research has consistently shown that kids and adolescents growing up in the Icelandic Sports Model tend to develop good and healthy socio-psychological practices and skills. They do well in school, gain a good self and body image, self-confidence and social skills, and they are less likely than their non-sport peers to engage in deviant behaviour such as use of substances or tobacco⁵⁸. Thus practising sports within the formal sport clubs leads to positive personal development of kids and adolescents in Iceland. International surveys, however, do not show the same trend in most other countries where there is often little or no correlation between adolescents' sport participation and the attainment of good values⁵⁹.

To sum up. In recent years, Iceland has enjoyed noteworthy success in participation sports as well as in performance sports⁶⁰. This success is built on a sport culture which emphasizes youth

sport as both healthy and constructive⁶¹. With regard to Iceland's success at elite football level, the key characteristics of the Icelandic national teams, such as players' enthusiasm, character, sacrifice, friendships and agency⁶², are in part a result of their socialization in the youth sport system⁶³. The sport clubs in Iceland are intended for everyone with key emphasis on play, friendships and competition, all mixed together in the same pot in the local community based sport clubs. This is particularly true of children and adolescents who can train within the formal sport clubs from the age of four until the age of 19, irrespective of their skills. In other words, everybody can train in the sport clubs under the guidance of an educated coach and play for a team regardless of skill level. This for instance, means that a skilful and talented 18 year old football player who is also in the junior national team of Iceland and likely to play professional football abroad is training with a less skilful 18 year old who is mainly practising sport to be with his friends and to have fun. They are in the same club, go to the same practices and social activities, and even play together for the same team in competition. The best players in the Icelandic system usually do not receive special treatment. Everybody has to take part in washing cars, selling toilet paper, or gathering used Christmas trees in order to collect funds for team trips. Everybody has to participate in clearing snow off the pitch before practice and games in order to play in the middle of winter. Everybody has to serve as referees for matches of younger kids. And everybody has to pay for their own shoes. Although the Icelandic sports model often splits up training according to ability groups, where everyone is competing with peers, it does not break up friendships in favour of more individualistic performance goals, but rather mixes players of different skill levels, with different ambitions and different social settings all together in the same pot. The best players are just like the rest. They do not feel as privileged as the best players in the professional football academies and, in turn, they develop a healthier attitude towards their sport and their peers, from their socialization into this community-oriented culture⁶⁴. This system also gives late bloomers a chance to pull through to the top level. Interestingly, in Iceland's successful men's national team there were several 'late bloomers' who would never have had the chance to play at the World Cup, coming from a more professional youth sport system. Finally, the best players do not feel the same pressure to succeed in this system as their peers in the professional football academies. It is great for them if they turn out to be good enough to become football players; however, if they are not good enough there is no shame in that, they can just go and get their education and pursue a different career.

Iceland: *the Black Swan* of elite football?

One persistent argument as to why Icelandic football is doing well at this point is that it has taken important steps toward professionalism in recent years and thus become more professional than before⁶⁵. Halldorsson has, however, argued that Icelandic sports have in recent years become 'more professional but not too professional'⁶⁶ suggesting that the social organization and the amateur sports culture of Icelandic sports was highly influential in creating those successful Icelandic national teams. This argument maintains that Iceland is currently in a *sweet-spot* between amateurism and professionalism, where it is getting the best of both worlds. On the one hand, Icelandic football is more professional in terms of the football expertise of coaches, players and other personnel, as well as regarding access to good quality football facilities which has helped Icelandic players to become physically, technically and tactically better than before. On the other hand, Icelandic football can still be characterized by important elements of amateurism as it still builds on football being played for fun, and fosters creativity, friendships and teamwork through formal and informal play. All of this has helped Iceland stage teams that have become something more than the sum of their parts⁶⁷.

In other words, Halldorsson (2017) argues that many of the big nations seem to have missed some important elements in their culture as regards successful teamwork, such as players' enjoyment, friendships and team sacrifice, which has resulted in the failures of those teams to play to their potential. The failures of the 'big teams' have made them vulnerable to embarrassing results and provided 'smaller teams' which have emphasized more human and playlike sports, like Iceland, with a window of opportunity to beat them. The Icelandic men's team, for example, achieved great results from their encounters against highly talented teams such as; Argentina, Austria, Croatia, England, Holland, Hungary, Portugal and Turkey. It can be argued that all those teams have better skilled football players than Iceland. Only few, if any, of the Icelandic players would make the starting eleven in those teams which is understandable, if we take into consideration the low population of Iceland and the scarcity of football players (of the same sex and similar age) the national team gets to choose from at any given time. Thus, as has been argued elsewhere, the Icelandic teams have trailed most nations in terms of pure football skills, but they have had stronger teamwork and a better team spirit than many of their opponents⁶⁸. In a sport like football a team with less skill but an effective team spirit can often beat a group of individual talents.

Thus, this paper argues that the emergence of Iceland, as a black swan, to the top international football scene, is to a large extent based on the social and ideological advantage of the Icelandic Sports Model over the conventional and professional youth sport model. This advantage, is on the one hand, thanks to the strengths and distinctiveness of the 'healthy' youth

sport culture in Iceland in combining participation and performance sports, represented in the Icelandic Sports Model (described above); and, on the other, due to the problems of the conventional youth sport culture of most of Iceland's competitors in recent years, which shows in the failures of many of the big football nations in staging cohesive and efficient teams⁶⁹. Thus the conventional and professional youth talent development programmes have had the unanticipated consequences of losing out human, healthy and important team elements from their player development. The detrimental consequences of the emergence of the football development programmes are unintended in the sense that those team elements would not have been lost had the systems never been established in the first place.⁷⁰

Consequently black swans can have strong impact on flawed systems where they can upset the status quo⁷¹. The emergence of Iceland to the top international scene has affected the more vulnerable professional sport models where their developers and practitioners have had to self-critically re-examine their ideologies due to the models' failures. Thus, the recent tendency of professional sport models towards adjusting their ideologies as to the Icelandic model holds, is evident at many levels: First, after Iceland's recent international success, football teams from all over the world are examining how the Icelanders play football and how the Icelandic Sports Model works. Coaches and representatives of various clubs, have for instance visited Iceland in recent years in order to learn 'the Icelandic way' of organizing football.⁷² Second, it is noticeable that many teams are trying to change their culture and base it more on fun and play, as the Icelandic case denotes, than before with the intention of enhancing players' motivation and the team spirit, For instance, the men's national team of England, which faced a massive humiliation when they lost to the Icelandic team in the eight finals at Euro 2016, has rejuvenated its team culture and stood for a different kind of team spirit at the 2018 World Cup⁷³, which was more based on fun, play and team camaraderie than in past tournaments. Accordingly, the English team reached the semi-finals at the 2018 World Cup, its highest position in years. Third, prominent football nations (and teams) have made adjustments in their formal approach to youth development and made it more in line with the characteristics of the Icelandic model⁷⁴. Germany is an especially interesting case in this context. As mentioned earlier, German football has been regarded as the successful ideal type of how to use talent development for achievement⁷⁵. However, since the 2014 World Cup win the success of the German team has faded. The team did not qualify from the group stages at the 2018 World Cup and its youth national teams have as well been unsuccessful in recent years. The failures of the German teams caused the German FA to recently announce that it had reversed its policy with regard to youth training⁷⁶. The association confessed that the system was too formal and rigid and had driven joy and initiative out of its players. The Germans new

approach is to foster freer training with focus on creativity and enjoyment and to make football fun again for their talented youngsters. This is to be achieved with more small-sided games and with the establishment of the spirit of the streets. Consequently, Eurico Miranda, former president of Vasco da Gama in Brazil, has argued that "The biggest mistake they make in Europe is being too well organised. Brazil footballers are not a product of organised talent development. The secret is spontaneous, unorganised football"⁷⁷. Various researches have demonstrated the importance of informal playful activities for success in formal activities⁷⁸.

Thus, these efforts of the professional football bodies to move the emphasis in youth football back from *work* towards informal *play* are highly significant in the wider context. On the one hand, this indicates that the conventional youth sport talent development system has not been functioning as planned in producing elite players and building winning teams, and on the other hand, that those professional football bodies and clubs are influenced by the key characteristics of more informal sporting contexts, such as the Icelandic model proposes. The recent football success of Iceland can, therefore, be framed as what Taleb described as a 'positive accident'⁷⁹ where its surprising success has a constructive impact (like a true black swan) on the development of youth football programmes. As a result, some youth talent development programmes are increasingly starting to attend more to the positive personal development of their members and to foster growth mindset rather than focusing predominantly on the development of physical abilities through formal and rigid training⁸⁰.

Conclusion

It is customary in modern football to place young football 'talents' in 'optimal' environments within the talent development systems of professional football clubs, in order to develop their skills to full potential. Although this system of producing talent may at the outset seem rational and effective, this process and its success is not as straightforward as it may seem. Thus, this instrumental model of talent development has turned out to be flawed and ineffective⁸¹. Developing young talented players to make up future elite teams is a much more complex social production than many may think⁸².

Interestingly, however, even critics of talent development programmes have no reservations about the existence of such programs and their hegemony in youth performance sports as these programmes are assumed to be 'the most appropriate and adapted environment for long-term development of skills for a larger number of participants'⁸³. Thus, despite their inadequacies the youth professional sport development programmes, aimed at the selected few, are uncritically considered to be the most effective way to develop talent.

In this paper I have critically argued against the conventional idea that the customary talent development programmes are the most effective way of producing effective football players and teams. In turn, I have argued how the unexpected emergence of the national football teams of Iceland at the top international football scene can be represented as a 'black swan' and used the case of Iceland to challenge the conventional, but often problematic, youth talent development programmes which have become the norm in modern football.

The ideology and structure of the Icelandic Sports Model contrasts the ideologies and structures of most other nations in regard to youth sports. While the Icelandic Sports Model emphasizes both the positive personal development of participants through sport and sport performance at the same time, within a sport-for-all system, a clear distinction is made between participation sports and performance sports in most other countries, the latter being available only for the selected few. The 'none-elite' system of Icelandic sports has, however, been extremely successful in guiding players and teams to the elite level⁸⁴, as well as having a positive impact on the psycho-sociological development of its participants⁸⁵. The elite youth sport system, however, can be criticised for doing neither successfully⁸⁶.

The presence of Icelandic teams on the top level international football scene can however be shortlived. Iceland can disappear as fast from this scene as it appeared on it. Thus, even if Iceland had the best youth football system in the world it would always, due to Iceland's small population, be difficult for the nation to maintain its status at the big football stage. It is however not the argument of this paper that Iceland holds the best youth football system in the world, rather that this system has some important ideological benefits over many of the talent developments programs in contemporary football. Therefore, as Taleb maintains, the mere emergence of black swans – however shortlived – highlights 'the need to use the extreme [Iceland's success] as a starting point and not to treat it as an exception to be pushed under the rug'⁸⁷. In other words, even if Iceland fades from the top international football scene its mere presence on it in recent years can have an impact on the general organization and ideology of youth football, not only in order to improve sport team performance, but, even more importantly, to help enrich the experience of young football players in formal sport settings so they can learn good values and develop into strong characters and healthy human beings.

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¹ See Gregory, 'The little country that could'; and a summary of front page coverages of Iceland's success here: <https://kjarninn.is/frettir/afrek-islenska-landslidsins-a-forsidum-midla-ut-um-allan-heim/>

² Interestingly it is not only the national football teams of Iceland that have been doing well in recent years, Iceland has been doing well in all its main team sports, such as basketball, team handball and team gymnastics. See in Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'.

³ Anderson and Ronglan, 'Nordic Elite Sport'; Baker et al., 'Talent Identification and Development'; Collins 'Sport in Capitalist Society'.

⁴ Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'.

⁵ For a long time empirical evidence pointed to the fact that all swans were white. However, the appearance of a single black swan invalidated the general evidence that all swans were white. The black swan theory, according to Nassim Nicholas Taleb, illustrates the limitations and fragility of our common knowledge, when encountering black swans, and leads to the degradation of predictability of common "facts."

⁶ Taleb, 'Black Swan'.

⁷ Taleb, 'Black Swan', xxii.

⁸ Taleb, 'Black Swan', xxv.

⁹ Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'.

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- 10 Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'; Telseth and Halldorsson, 'Nordic Football'.
- 11 Honigstein, 'Das Reboot'.
- 12 Taleb, 'Black Swan', 27.
- 13 Gregory, 'The Little Country That Could'.
- 14 Baker, et al. 'Talent Identification and Development', 1.
- 15 Becker, 'Art Worlds'.
- 16 Mears, 'Pricing Beauty'.
- 17 Csikszentmihalyi, et al., 'Talented Teenagers'.
- 18 See coverage of Kante here: <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2704137-finding-ngolo-kante-the-men-who-discovered-the-pfa-player-of-the-year> and Griezmann here: <https://www.netflix.com/title/81049949>
- 19 Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland' 95-96; Telseth and Halldorsson, 'Nordic Football'.
- 20 Difiori et al., 'Overuse Injuries and Burnout in youth Sports'.
- 21 See the impact of conventions on that 'status quo' in Becker, 'Art Worlds' and in Mears, 'Pricing Beauty'.
- 22 Zerubavel has argued how discourse manifests itself in unconscious action, see 'Taken for Granted'.
- 23 Calvin, 'No Hunger in Paradise'; Egilsson and Dolles, 'From Heroes to Zeroes'; Platts and Smith, 'Health, Well-Being and Elite Youth Work', see also: Chambliss, 'Champions'.
- 24 Mears, 'Pricing Beauty'.
- 25 See for instance the story of footballer Rio Ferdinand who was unequipped to deal with human intimacy with his children when his wife passed away. He partly blamed his football education, see 'Thinking Out Loud'.
- 26 Abbott and Collins, 'Talent Identification', Martindale et al., 'Talent Development'; see also Mears, 'Pricing Beauty', 11-12.
- 27 See <https://theconversation.com/how-the-search-for-footballs-next-big-thing-is-fuelling-a-modern-day-slave-trade-121350>
- 28 See Baker et al., 'Talent Identification and Development'.
- 29 Baker, et al., 'Talent Identification and Development', 2-3.
- 30 Calvin, 'No Hunger in Paradise'; Doob, 'Great Expectations', 165-166; Güllich and Copley, 'Efficacy of Talent Identification'.
- 31 Doob, 'Great Expectations', 244-255.
- 32 Musch and Grondin, 'Unequal Competition'; Hill and Sotiriadou, 'Coach Decision-Making'.
- 33 Merton, 'On Social Structure and Science', 318-336.
- 34 Baker, et al., 'Talent Identification and Development'; Billing et al., 'Paradoxes of Professional Football'; Egilsson and Dolles, 'From Heroes to Zeroes'; Vierimaa et al., 'Elements of Talent Development'.
- 35 Hartmann and Kwauk, 'Sport and Development'.
- 36 Blakelock et al., 'Psychological Distress'; Gouttebauge, et al., 'Symptoms of Mental Disorders'; Sagar et al., 'Success and Failure'; Miller et al., 'Dubious social skills'.
- 37 See Merton, 'On Social Structure and Science', 173-182.
- 38 See Egilsson's and Dolles's account of young and talented Icelandic footballers, 'From Heroes to Zeroes'.
- 39 Baker, et al., 'Talent Identification and Development'; Merton, 'On Social Structure and Science', 96-100.
- 40 Eitzen, 'Fair and Foul'.
- 41 Green, Sigurjónsson and Skille, 'Sport in Scandinavia and the Nordic Countries'; Tin, et al., 'The Nordic Model and Physical Culture'.
- 42 Anderson and Ronglan, 'Nordic Elite Sport'.
- 43 See different accounts on the Icelandic sports model in: Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'; Halldorsson, 'Sport Participation in Iceland'; Halldorsson, Thorlindsson and Katovich, 'The Role of Informal Sport': Thorlindsson and Halldorsson, 'The Roots of Icelandic Physical Culture'. See accounts of different emphasis among the Nordic nations in: Anderson and Ronglan, 'Nordic Elite Sport', Telseth and Halldorsson, 'Nordic Football'; Tin et al., 'The Nordic Model and Physical Culture'.
- 44 The descriptions above of the professional youth sports model on the one hand, and the Icelandic sports model on the other, are of course ideal types in a Weberian sense (see Weber, 'Economy and Society'). They represent the general ways of doing things in the two different systems. There are variations in the ideologies of sport clubs in both systems where teams within the professional model emphasise healthy and constructive values and teams within the Icelandic model try to professionalise their youth sport to a greater extent than is customary in Icelandic sports.
- 45 See for instance: Anderson and Ronglan, 'Nordic Elite Sport'; Baker et al., 'Talent Identification and Development'; Hill, 'In Pursuit of Excellence'.
- 46 See favorable international press coverage of different elements of Icelandic sports: a) For positive development through sport see: <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/iceland-knows-how-to-stop-teen-substance-abuse-but-the-rest-of-the-world-isn-t-listening-a7526316.html> b) For sport performance see: <https://kjarninn.is/frettir/afrek-islenska-landslidsins-a-forsidum-midla-ut-um-allan-heim/>
- 47 Icelandic youth seems to be happy within the sport club system. See Guðmundsdóttir, et al. 'Ánægja í íþróttum' [Sport Satisfaction Survey].
- 48 Telseth and Halldorsson, 'Nordic Football' 694.

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- ⁴⁹ Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland; ÍSÍ, 'Kostnaður vegna Afreksstarfs' [Cost regarding elite activities]
- ⁵⁰ See ÍSÍ, 'Kostnaður vegna Afreksstarfs' [Cost regarding elite activities]
- ⁵¹ Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'; Telseth and Halldorsson, 'Nordic Football'
- ⁵² Halldorsson et al., 'The Role of Informal Sport'; Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'.
- ⁵³ Despite many similarities between the Nordic nations, which have been relatively successful in many sports through the years, they also differ in profound ways. For instance, all kids are coached by coaches in Iceland while parents tend to do the coaching in the other Nordic nations. Likewise, as Anderson and Ronglan, have argued the elite sports systems in the Nordic nations differ to some extent (see 'Nordic Elite Sport') where Iceland in particular stands aside, along with Finland, because they have not developed professional football leagues like they have in Denmark, Norway and Sweden.
- ⁵⁴ Most of the Icelandic national team players in recent years have thus played professionally abroad from the age of 17-18, which has helped them to gain more football expertise than they received in the Icelandic system – they were however brought up in the Icelandic Sports Model through their developing years. See also Magnusson, 'Internalization of Sports'.
- ⁵⁵ See in Green et al., 'Sport in Scandinavia'.
- ⁵⁶ Halldorsson, 'Sport Participation in Iceland' 89.
- ⁵⁷ Halldorsson, 'Sport Participation in Iceland' 90.
- ⁵⁸ Research dated back to 1992 to the present, from the population of Icelandic kids and adolescents, has consistently showed a positive relationship between youth sport participation in Iceland and their overall well-being. See for instance in: Halldorsson et al., 'Sport Participation and Alcohol Use'; Thorlindsson and Halldorsson, 'Sport and the Use of Steroids'; Þórlindsson et al., 'Gildi Íþróttá [Value of Sports]; Þórlindsson, et al., 'Félagsstarf og Frístundir [Leisure and Social Activities].
- ⁵⁹ See data from the European School Survey Project of Alcohol and other Drugs (ESPAD) here: www.espad.org.
- ⁶⁰ Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'; Halldorsson, 'Sport Participation in Iceland'; Halldorsson, Thorlindsson and Katovich, 'The Role of Informal Sport'; Telseth and Halldorsson, 'Nordic Football'.
- ⁶¹ Halldorsson et al., 'Sport Participation and Alcohol Use'; Thorlindsson and Halldorsson, 'Sport and the Use of Steroids'; Þórlindsson et al., 'Gildi Íþróttá [Value of Sports]; Þórlindsson, et al., 'Félagsstarf og Frístundir [Leisure and Social Activities].
- ⁶² See accounts of Icelandic national sport teams in football, team handball, basketball and team gymnastics: Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'; Halldorsson, 'Team Spirit in Football', Thorlindsson and Halldorsson, 'Cultural Production'.
- ⁶³ Bloom; 'Developing Talent'; Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'.
- ⁶⁴ Miller et al., 'Dubious social skills'.
- ⁶⁵ Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland; Telseth & Halldorsson, 'Nordic Football'.
- ⁶⁶ Halldorsson's argument rests on the fact that Iceland holds only semi-professional leagues and that the Icelandic athletes in the national teams are even playing alongside their childhood friends, see: 'Sport in Iceland'.
- ⁶⁷ Halldorsson, Thorlindsson & Katovich, 'The Role of Informal Sport'; Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'.
- ⁶⁸ Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'; Halldorsson, 'Team Spirit in Football'; Telseth & Halldorsson, 'Nordic Football'.
- ⁶⁹ Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'.
- ⁷⁰ Merton, 'On Social Structure and Science', 318-336.
- ⁷¹ Taleb, 'Black Swan'.
- ⁷² Representatives of countless football clubs from all around the world have visited the Icelandic FA and Icelandic football clubs in recent years with the intention of getting to know "the secret" of the Icelandic success and ways to adapt important elements of the Icelandic Sports Model to their own clubs and communities. Among them were representatives from FC Cologne from Germany, FC Copenhagen from Denmark, FC Stæbak from Norway, and coaches from the US. Soccer coaches association, to name a few.
- ⁷³ See for instance: <http://theconversation.com/how-to-build-a-winning-team-spirit-at-the-world-cup-98421>
- ⁷⁴ Representatives from Iceland have held presentations on Icelandic football in numerous countries all over the world and Iceland has further been visited by representatives from various football associations and clubs. Thus, the Icelandic model has in recent years been introduced to members of football communities of countries such as England, Ireland, Scotland, Belgium, Holland, Norway, Finland, Lithuania, Brazil, Chile, Suriname, USA, Japan and Mongolia, to name a few. Many of them have adjusted some elements in their system more in line with the Icelandic model. Here is an example of how the Icelandic system is influencing the ideology of football in Scotland: <http://www.youthfootballscotland.co.uk/prolegal/item/4517-youth-football-worldwide-iceland>
- ⁷⁵ Honigstein, 'Das Reboot'.
- ⁷⁶ See coverage of the press conference of the German FA here: www.trainingground.guru/articles/germany-focus-on-fun-and-joy-to-reverse-decline.
- ⁷⁷ See in Ankersen, 'The Gold Mine Effect', 86-87.
- ⁷⁸ Ford and Williams, 'Sport Activity in Childhood', Halldorsson et al., 'The Role of Informal Sport', Hornig et al., 'German Top-Level Professional Football Players'.

⁷⁹ Taleb, 'Black Swan', 204, 295.

⁸⁰ This has been the general emphasis in the presentations of youth football directors in recent football conferences such as at the UCV 2017 and 2019 in Valencia Spain. FC Villarreal is a particular interesting case where this trend is evident; See also Ward et al., 'Does Talent Exist?'

⁸¹ Baker et al., 'Talent Identification and Development'.

⁸² Bloom, 'Developing Talent'; Csikzentmihalyi et al., 'Talented Teenagers'; Halldorsson, 'Sport in Iceland'; Thorlindsson and Halldorsson, 'Cultural Production'.

⁸³ Côte and Lidor, 'Early Talent Development', 2; see also Abbott and Collins, 'Talent Identification'.

⁸⁴ See CIES 'World Football Expatriates' report which shows that Iceland tops the list of having most expatriates in professional football leagues.

⁸⁵ Halldorsson et al., 'Sport Participation and Alcohol Use'; Thorlindsson and Halldorsson, 'Sport and the Use of Steroids'; Þórlindsson et al., 'Gildi Íþróttar' [Value of Sports]; Þórlindsson, et al., 'Félagsstarf og Frístundir' [Leisure and Social Activities].

⁸⁶ See Baker et al., 'Talent Identification and Development'.

⁸⁷ Taleb, 'Black Swan', xxxii.