Young Athletes Becoming Disciplined: Exploring the Experiences of Young Athletes with Their Coach

Inge Claringbould, University Utrecht /Utrecht School of Governance
Annelies Knoppers, University Utrecht /Utrecht School of Governance

Management/leadership
Saturday, May 26, 2012
20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Salon C)

Abstract 2012-286

Although the membership of youth in sport clubs has hardly changed in the last thirty years (Kamphuis & Van den Dool, 2008), youth sport plays an increasingly important role in Dutch society. The Ministry of Public Health, Welfare and Sport (VWS, 2005) invests in the development of young talent in sport (elite sport) and stimulates youth to participate in sports and physical activity (sport for all). The importance of youth sport is often tied to the perception that it is an instrument to address social issues. This instrumental value assigned to youth sport has meant that coaches are expected to possess the skills and knowledge to guide youth in their social as well as physical development (Taylor & Garratt, 2010). Yet relative little scholarly attention has been paid to what young athletes learn from their coaches during their participation.

Although the negotiation of children with adults about what they do and do not do has become embedded in processes of individualization that are situated within Western neo-liberal discourses, adults still take major responsibility for children and are given the authority to protect them and to teach them normative societal values. A sport club is a situation, similar to the family and school, dominated by normative perspectives of adults. Coaches for example, use their values and standards to create the context in which youth sport takes place (McCallister, Blinde, & Weiss, 2000). However, this authority given to coaches seems to challenge neoliberal discourses that emphasize self-determination as reflected in exercising choice and taking responsibility. It also seems to ignore the motives, meanings and experiences youth may give to sport. Little research has focused on this process of negotiation between youth and adults (coach) in the sport setting. Yet such investigations can give insight into and add to understandings of how youth reproduce and challenge various discourses concerning their participation in sport. In this study therefore we use Foucalt’s understanding of disciplinary power to explore meanings children assign to their experiences with their coaches (Foucault, 1991).

We interviewed 29 children (13 girls and 16 boys) aged 8-17 years, participating in tennis, soccer, swimming or field hockey in Dutch sport clubs. Their coaches were mainly men; 25 of those interviewed had only been coached by a man.

The results show how the meanings these youth assign to their sport participation shift as they understand the power their coaches have to shape their experience. They gradually become involved in a disciplinary process directed towards improvement, performance, success and winning. Foucault described such processes as ‘the logic of discipline’ (Foucault, 1991). This logic makes the construction of a hierarchical relationship between young athletes and their coaches as common sense. When these youths joined a sport team they had a very vague image of what the sport may be. Their main orientation is to learn how to play the game and have fun. As they participate in the practices these young athletes became aware of the informal rules about how to behave during the sessions. Their coaches expected them to take the training seriously, to do the best they could, to be on time, to follow instructions, to work together (as a team) and to behave in a disciplined manner (as defined by the coach). The more talent these athletes display, the more they heard that having fun is not enough if they want to be successful. Instead they had to show they are tough by practicing hard and distinguishing themselves from others since there can only be one winner. Their main expectation of sport participation from just having fun changed to having fun because they develop as an athlete and become better than others. Fun therefore became defined in terms of achieving the status of being better than others. Athletes who were selected for special teams also understood that they needed to be disciplined if they wished to increase their performance. These athletes internalized their coaches’ expectations that they take the practices seriously. Their strong orientation towards a better performance meant they worked to become more committed and responsible players. They were incorporated by the disciplinary system with ‘success’ as the final goal.

Selection for special teams played an important part in this disciplinary process, and was legitimized by the use of so
called ‘objective’ criteria for certain positions within the system. However, these young athletes exercised agency by using these criteria strategically to obtain their positions they preferred. This disciplinary process was not neutral. Instead it valued behaviors like competitiveness and toughness and drew on dominant notions of heteronormative masculinity (see also Eng, 2006) (Eng, 2006). The more the behavior and ideas of these young people differed from what was constructed as normal within the sport context, the more difficult it was for them to successfully continue in the selection processes. In other words, the process of differentiation was not only based on the quality of their physical skills but also on the coaches’ perceptions of the ‘normalcy’ of the mental and strategic skills of the athletes. These young athletes learned that they could only be successful physically if they developed the appropriate mental and strategic skills. Obviously then, these youth learned that sport participation means accepting the norms and values of the coach. Their definition of fun had to change if they wished to acquire the physical capital needed to be selected for elite teams. It is hard to reflect on the extent to which this disciplinary process extends beyond the sport setting, but our study showed, contradictory to neoliberal discourses that youth had only little room for reflection, negotiation and practicing self determination.