

An opinion with insight

During the last few years the following points have been debated in Swedish child-youth sports.

- Early selection process
- Permanent ability groupings
- Loading teams with those who can perform best now at the expense of others
- League tables

We welcome the debate as we believe that it will improve child-youth sports. But there are a few aspects of the debate that worry us. Unfortunately, it is far too common for many to use anecdotes as proof for their argument ("I know a player that...."), adult based common sense ("it worked for me therefore it will work for everyone"), or good intentions ("it is the children themselves that want to train more, they want to invest time for their future and compete). We believe that child-youth sport, like most parts of society, should be grounded in research and the best available evidence in combination with the child's own views.

When you ask children, what is the most important reason for them taking part in a sport the most frequent answer is "to have fun". One of the less frequent answers is "to win" or "to be better than others". If we switch the question, some of the most common reasons why children and adolescents stop playing sports are "injury", "high levels of stress," and "it is no longer fun." Some of the reasons that children themselves give when they say that the sport is no longer fun are "you do not get to play as much as the others," and that "there is too much focus on performance demands".

If we want our children and young people to be active in sports then one of our main tasks is to create environments that promote happiness and well-being, and reduce stress and anxiety. We can also say that there is a good evidence base that shows children in both the short and the long-term risk physical and psychological negative effects because of early specialisation. **We wonder how it is morally and ethically possible to defend practices that advocate this?**

Team selection at the expense of others, permanent ability groupings, "lika barn leka bäst" (only the best can play with the best), early selection process. For us, these concepts/practices are not developing Swedish football and they certainly don't care about a child's development. Research clearly shows that children's sports activities carried out under the influence of these concepts segregates children and young people and leads to large drop out. In Sweden for example our reasoning is supported by researchers Jesper Fundberg, Lars Lagergren and Torsten Buhre at Malmö University. Riksidrottsförbundet (NGB for sport) with the help of scientists such as PG Fahlström, Per Gerrevall, Mats Glemne and Susanne Linner. This is all compiled and shown in a document that reveals how in Sweden an elite career often starts and looks ((RF rapport 2015:1, Vägarna till landslaget). RF Report 2015: 1, the roads to the national team).

With support from international and national research work there is a strong argument that child - youth sport should be based on a child's perspective. Especially, if we want more children to stay playing the game, feel good and become better at the game. A child's perspective informs us what children can do and what they understand: children learn football through play with a high degree of activity, they have a lust for discovery and a need for confirmation.

We are also aware that the research work done by BRIS (Children's Rights in Society) informs us that at least 10% of all children who play sports suffer in various ways, another 20% are at risk of suffering harm in their sporting activities. 10-30% of our children are at risk of harm within their sport and this is nothing we want to stand behind or encourage, which is indirectly being done

today. Naturally, early selection and exclusion are not the cause of all negative aspects in child and youth sport (there are many other things that also create problems) but this along with an environment that emphasizes the importance of performance over development is likely to contribute to creating a generally unhealthy environment where the risk for negative outcomes increase.

In line with trying to offer a sporting environment with a focus on happiness and well-being Hallands and Skåne Football Association (HFF and SKFF) have taken the decision to fundamentally change how things work with children and youth in their respective districts. The solutions will differ between the two districts but the motives are the same - a better climate for the district's children and youth. Unfortunately, the discussion tends to take as its starting point the Swedish Football Association (SvFF) district team tournament and elite training camp for 15 year olds. Neither HFF or SKFF decision is based on idea of refraining from participating in these activities rather it has become a consequence of the decision to do something different and right for the young players in our district.

To select a team of players who at that moment are the best players to play, in order to win a particular game, a series or a cup is an attitude that has characterized child and youth football as far back as we can remember. The best players at that moment get to play. For us it is an adult perspective which in no way benefits the development of children and young people's nor does it provide the stimulus/motivation for children to keep trying or dare to remain in football for a longer period. It influences long-term and sustainable motivation. For us, these concepts support the exclusion of children and young people from football. There is much evidence to show that exclusion at an early age means that children and young people choose something else.

So where do district teams and elite training camps come in to the discussion?

It is claimed that the current elite training camps are an expression of the development of football in Sweden. We claim that it can be just the opposite. A very small select group of children begin their journey to the camp at an early age. For us, the elite camp in its present form has no place in Swedish football. They is concrete evidence of how we select children early and let a few, fewer than 4% of all football-playing 15-year-olds in Halland and Skåne, participate in an elite camp over one week. The selection to take a place in this elite camp starts at the age of 14, in many cases already at both 12 and 13 years of age. This is an age when physical development is essentially valued more as talent than the actual footballing talent itself. In this age trying to predict the future top players (based on characteristics that later become less influential) goes against the best available evidence from research. Believing in this means that you are not only fooling yourself and your organisation but you are also fooling the children and their parents Although this assumption, that those we can see and identify early will later become good, is not supported, we suspect that there is widespread silence behind much of the structured talent work carried out in Sweden today, where the elite camps at an early age is a central framework.

No one can say that a 12-15 year old will become an elite player, or even a good senior player. We must also take into account the increased risk of adverse health effects related to the early elite investment, it seems obvious that there are better ways to both maintain children and young people in football while also becoming a better footballer.

So what should be the focus so that we both keep children and young people in sport while developing top athletes? Our answer is that we need to put more time and resources to train our leaders and further develop the environments in which our players are active in everyday i.e our

clubs. Since our leaders have a very large impact on the type of climate that exists in a group of children and adolescents, it is obvious that the focus should be on giving them all the tools that may be needed to create a sustainable motivational climate where all children and young people feel welcome while they develop as footballers and people. This is not the whole solution to the problems that exist, but we hope and believe that it may take us a big step forward.

"As many as possible as long as possible" - "in the best environment possible." Thus, we will also have a better elite football.

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