SELECTION AND PSYCHOSOCIAL PREDICTORS OF WELLBEING: A STUDY AMONG FOOTBALL ACADEMY PLAYERS

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Sport Psychology, 90-120 Ects Credits
Spring 2011
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Abstract

The objectives were to study: (1) if psychosocial factors (such as social support from coaches and peers), within a football context, could predict psychological well-being among soccer academy players (2) the relationship between selection and well-being among football academy players and (3) compare the age categories 11-14 and 15-19 in perceived wellbeing, experiences of selection and social support from coaches and peers. In total, 443 players from four academy settings participated in the study. The player’s ages differences were between 11-19 years. The instrument used was the Swedish health survey developed by the Swedish Health Institute with a number of football specific items added. Result suggests a regression model including two variables (social support from coaches and peers) explaining 16, 6 % of the psychological well-being. Further, a negative relationship was found between selection and perceived well-being. Another finding was that the youth players (11-15 years) experienced higher levels of social support and psychological well-being, but experienced selection more negatively compared to junior players (15-19 years). Recommendations are given to coaches to be aware of developing a supportive coaching style. Another recommendation to increase well-being is to develop support mechanisms to help the youth players in academy settings to cope with the pressure of selection. The results are discussed in relation to theoretical frameworks and previous research.

Keywords: Football academies, psychological well-being, social support and selection

**Sammanfattning**

Syftena med föreliggande studie var att studera (1) om psykosociala faktorer (såsom socialt stöd från coacher och lagkamrater) i idrottskontexten, kunde predicera psykologiskt välmående hos unga akademi-spelare i fotboll (2) relationen mellan selektion och psykologiskt välmående och (3) jämföra ålderskategorierna 11-14 och 15-19 i upplevt välmående, upplevelse av selektion och socialt stöd från coacher och lagkamrater. Totalt deltog 443 spelare från fyra olika fotbollsakademier i studien. Spelarnas åldrar varierade mellan 11 och 19 år. Instrumentet som användes var ett frågeformulär utvecklat av svenska folkhälsoinstitutet, med specifika fotbolls- relaterade frågor adderade. Resultatet föreslår en regressions modell med två variabler (socialt stöd från coacher och lagkamrater) som förklarar 16,6 % av psykologiska välmående. Resultatet visade även en negativ relation mellan selektion och välmående. En annan upptäckt var att de yngre spelarna (11-15 år) upplevde mer socialt stöd och högre psykologiskt välmående, men upplevde selektion mer negativt i jämförelse med de äldre spelarna (15-19 år). Rekommendationer till coacher är att vara medveten om att utveckla en stödjande coachning stil. En annan rekommendation för att höja välmående är utveckla support mekanismer för att hjälpa unga spelare i akademier att hantera pressen av selektion. Resultatet diskuteras i relation till teoretiska referensramar och tidigare forskning.

**Nyckelord:** Fotbolls akademier, psykologiskt välmående, socialt stöd och selektion
Introduction

Worldwide, millions of young talented athletes are fighting, training and making sacrifices daily, all for the same dream, be selected, move one step closer to their dream and become professional players. Basically, organized sport programs have the potential to positively influence the emotional and psychological well-being of young athletes (Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2010). Researchers have stressed both physical and psychological benefits of sport participation such as dedication, perseverance, identity development, leadership and teamwork (e.g., Coatsworth & Conroy, 2006).

To date, current trends in youth sport programs, such as football academies, are moving towards elitism, early selection and early specialization (e.g., Coté & Hay, 2002). As a result, these sport programs may not provide and facilitate optimal environment for youths’ overall well-being and development (Cote & Fraser-Thomas, 2006). Football is today the biggest sport in the world, and more teams emphasize the role of youth elite academies (Reilly, Richardson, Stratton & Williams, 2004). In fact, few players obtain professional status and academy athletes are under substantial pressure to perform (Appleton, Hall & Hill, 2008). Previous research has found a relationship between youth elite sport programs to sport-related injuries and eating disorders (Anshel, 2004), dropouts (Coté, Baker, & Abernethy, 2003; Coté & Hay, 2002) and burnouts (Appleton et al., 2008).

Accordingly, selection outcomes and youth athletes sport experiences in elite oriented environments appear to be dependent of multitude factors. Though, sport plays an important role in youth development (Cote, Deakin, & Frazer-Thomas, 2005), little attention has been given how youth athletes perceive their well-being in sport academies. Therefore, this thesis studies talent development from a well-being perspective.

Definition of key terms

Talent
There are several definitions of talent in the literature. Howe, Davidson and Sloboda, (1998, p. 399) defined talent as: “It originates in genetically transmitted structures and hence is at least partly innate. Its full effects may not be evident at an early stage, but there will be some advance indications, allowing trained people to identify the presence of talent before exceptional levels of mature performance have been demonstrated. These early indications of talent provide a basis for predicting who is likely to excel, and only a minority are talented, for if all children were, then there would be no way to predict or explain differential success. Talents are relatively domain-specific” Following definition is used in this study: “a talent can be seen as the individual cognitive, motivational and social possibility of achieving optimal performances in one or more areas” (Hellner, 1989, p. 141).

Talent development
Talent development has been seen in different ways in previous research. “A process of transformation of the innate potential of an athlete into qualities, abilities, skills and performance excellence that are required in his/her sport over years of practise and competition and through interaction with both sporting and non sport environments” (Henriksen, 2010, p. 27). Following definition is used in this study: “Talent development implies that players are provided with a suitable learning environment and resources so that they have the opportunity to realize their potential” (Williams & Reilly, 2000, p. 658).
Selection
Williams and Reilly (2000, pp. 658) defined talent selection as: “Talent selection involves the ongoing process of identifying players at various stages who demonstrate prerequisite level of performance for inclusion in a given squad or team”.

Well-being
The World Health Organization (Herman, Saxena, & Moodie, 2005, pp. 1) defined mental well-being as: “A state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community”. In addition, subjective well-being is defined by Snyder and Lopez (2002, p. 63) as “A person’s cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life. These evaluations include emotional reactions to events as well as cognitive judgments of satisfaction and fulfillment”.

Social Support
There are several definitions of social support in previous research. One definition is as following: “Social support refers to an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient” (Shumaker, & Brownell, 1984, p. 13).

Theoretical Frameworks
To better understand talent and talent development theoretical frameworks have been developed. In this study three theoretical frameworks will be presented; Athletic talent development environment model (Henrikssen, 2010), environment success factors model, (Henrikssen, 2010) and the developmental model on transitions faced by athletes (Lavelle & Wylleman, 2004).

Athletic talent development environment (ATDE) Model: A descriptive working model
Different factors in the environment might influence athlete’s well-being and therefore The talent development environment (ATDE) model is presented (Henriksen, 2010). The framework is based on the Ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1979; 2005) and the system theory (Patton & McMahon, 2006) and is an ecological and holistic way of describing prospective elite athlete’s environment. The model describes roles, functions and relations of different factors within the environment of the talent development process (see Figure 1). In the center of this model are the young athletes. The young athletes are surrounded and structured of two components (micro and macro level), and two domains (athletic and non athletic). The micro level refers to the environment closest to the athletes and is characterized by direct communication and interaction. This level includes the club environment e.g., coaches, managers, teammates, sport psychologists and other experts. Besides the club environment, the micro level also includes school, peers and related teams. The macro level refers to a wider environment and is characterized by both sport specific and non-sport specific components in form of, sport federations, educational systems, reference groups, and media. This level also includes different cultural contexts, such as specific sport culture, youth culture, general sports culture and the national culture. Henriksen (2010) suggest that some components can belong to one level and one domain, but some components can also transcend to other levels and domains. A coach, for example belongs to the athletic domain but can also have a strong influence in the non-athletic domain. Based on the model, the past, present and future represent the timeline and show that an environment is dynamic and also has to be regulated to fit to a broader context.
Environment success factors (ESF) model: An explanatory working model

The Athletic Talent Development Environment (ATDE) Model is a descriptive framework that describes the athlete’s environment (Henriksen, 2010). In order to explain what factors are contributing to the environmental success, the Environmental Success Factors (ESF) Model is presented (see Figure 2). The Environmental success model reflects six essential factors contributing to the environmental success. As a starting point, the model presents preconditions and the process. Preconditions refer to the environmental resources and include human, material and financial resources. Process refers to both specific and diverse activities such as camps, training competitions, and social events in a given environment. The model illustrates how this process has three outcomes, organizational development, the athlete’s individual development and achievements and team achievements. The relationships between these factors are directly related to the environmental effectiveness. Individual development and achievement relates to the athletes’ assets of skills and psychosocial competences. Team achievement refers mainly to the team’s success. Henriksen, (2010) suggest that the individual and the team’s success both are a product of process and organizational development/culture. The organizational culture is an important factor in the model and includes cultural artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions. The ESF model can be seen as a complement to the ATDE framework for the understanding of the complex environment surrounding the young athletes. Therefore, the ESF model predicts that the ATDE model success is a result of the relation between process, preconditions, team and individual development and achievement. The organization culture is seen as an element that integrates these factors.

Figure 1. Provides an overview of the athletic talent development environment model (Henriksen, 2010).

Figure 2. Environent success factors model. An explanatory working model (Henriksen, 2010)
A developmental model on transitions faced by athletes

The participants in the present study belong to different ages and developmental stages in their sporting career. Therefore, the developmental model on transitions faced by athletes (Lavelle, & Wylleman, 2004) is presented (see Figure 3). The model suggests a holistic approach in order to describe transitions and demands faced by athletes in different stages in their sporting careers. This model consists of four layers. The first layer illustrates the athlete’s transition stages throughout their sport career and is based on Bloms (1985) three stages model. This layer includes four stages that occur in different ages. The first stage is called the initiation stage and occurs when the athlete becomes introduced to the sport. Next stage is named as the developmental stage and is faced by the athletes in ages of 12-13 year. In this stage the athlete becomes more dedicated to the sport and is a transition to more intensive training. The mastery level, (in the ages of 18-19) is characterized of a transition into the highest level of elite sport. The discontinuation stage occurs when the athletes reach 28-30 years and consider to transits out of competitive sport level. The second layer of the model reflects the normative stages and transitions taking place at a psychological level. These stages are divided into childhood (up to 12 years old), adolescence (13-18 year) and adulthood (19 year and forward). The third layer focus on the athlete’s psychosocial development. These layers emphasize the importance of both marital and interpersonal relationships between the athlete and his psychosocial environment. For example, important relationships can be parents, coach and peers. The last layer presents the transitions at an academic vocational level. In the age of 6-7 years a transition into primary education takes place, followed a secondary education (12-13 years), and higher education (18-19 years). The last stage is the transition into vocational training and professional occupation which also can occur at an earlier age (eg., after high school).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>25</th>
<th>30</th>
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<td>Development</td>
<td>Mastery</td>
<td>Discontinuation</td>
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<td>Adolescence</td>
<td>Adulthood</td>
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<td>Siblings</td>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>Coach</td>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>Partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Academic Vocational level</td>
<td>Primary Education</td>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>Higher Education</td>
<td>Vocational training; Professional training</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. The developmental model on transitions faced by athletes (Lavelle & Wylleman, 2004).

Note. A dotted line indicates that the age at which the transition occurs is an approximation, and in this study age was limited up to 19 years.
Previous Research

**Talent Development and Sport Academies**

How can sport teams develop young athletes to reach professional status? Previous research in the area of talent development has been ambiguous to this question. Ericsson, Krampe, and Teach-Römer (1993) claimed that deliberate practise and early specialization were required in order to reach success and professional status in sport. More specifically, deliberate practise in the context refers to 10,000 hours of intensive highly structured and supervised training. This approach places primary emphasis on the belief that early specialization is a requirement to reach elite athlete status (Ericsson et al., 1993). Law, Côté, and Ericsson (2007) found that athletes on Olympic level spend more hours of practice and begin sport specific training earlier compared to elite athletes not attained Olympic level. The study also reported that early specialization could be related to lower levels of enjoyment and increased drop-out. The Developmental Model of Sport Participation suggests a second approach to talent development (Cote, Frazer-Thomas, 2007; Cote & Hay, 2002). The DMSP model proposes a diversity of sports, especially in the ages of 6-12, in order to promote less dropouts and longer sport participation. It has been reported that learning through sampling in early ages develops perceptions of competence and motivation for further sport participation (Kirk, 2005). More recently research proposes a more holistic approach. This view emphasizes to think outside the amount of training, and rather consider how to optimize environmental factors to develop and support youth’s sporting and personal development (Lavellee, 2005).

One elite oriented environment in youth sport is the academy, with the primary goal to foster young athletes into professional status (Holt, 2002). When the young athletes enter the academy the exposure of stressors, personal and interpersonal challenges are high (Richardson, Gilbourne & Littlewood, 2004). Holt and Dunn (2004) examined forty youth academy football players’ psychosocial competences. Four psychosocial competences were found and associated to soccer success: Discipline (i.e., dedication and sacrifices), commitment (motives and career goals), social support (i.e., ability to use informational, tangible and emotional support), and resilience (ability to cope with demands and obstacles). It has also been reported that lack of volitional behaviour, coping strategies, career planning and tangible support are characteristics’ among sub elite football players that don’t reach professional status (Holt & Mitchell, 2006). Reeves, Nicholls and Mckenna (2009) found that premier league academy football players’ experiences of stressors and repertoire of coping strategies were different between early and middle aged adolescents. The study indicates that middle adolescents (15-18 year) experienced more stressors, and had a greater number of coping strategies compared to early adolescents (12-15 years). Common stressors for early adolescents were opponents, making errors, and family. Middle adolescents experienced coaches, lack of social support, social evaluation, and playing at a higher level as key stressors.

Another study by Van Yperen (2009) aimed to identify psychological factors that could predict career success in professional male adult football. Two groups were distinguished, players that successfully progressed into professional status, and players who did not reach professional status. Differences between the groups were made on data gathered 15 years later, in the athlete’s academy years. The result showed that goal commitment, engagement in problem-focused coping behaviors, and seeking social support were psychological predictors to career success.
Selection
Many youth sport programs worldwide are trying to discover and detect gifted athletes in early ages (Abernethy, 2008). This selection approach is based on the assumption of existing prerequisites, such as psychological and physiological variables to predict young athlete’s future success (Holt & Dunn, 2004). Tranckle and Cushion (2006) pointed out that talent detection and talent identification are concepts that have been used interchangeably, and describes the process of selecting athletes into talent development programs (Williams & Reilly, 2000). Researchers have argued that there are several advantages using a selection approach such as increased motivation, better financial support (Hohmann & Seidel, 2003) and better conditions to accelerate the development for selected athletes (Vaeyens, Lliich, Warr, & Philippaerts, 2009).

However, the attempt to select young athletes based on talent detection and identification processes has been highly questionable for a number of reasons in more recent research (Lidor et al., 2009). First, talent is a complex structure in nature, which makes it difficult to measure who is talented. In fact, this enable athletes’ with different skills and prerequisites to succeed in sport in several ways (Hohmann & Seidel, 2003), and stress also the risk of selecting or de-selecting wrong players (Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001). A second problem is that most selection models are based on research about current elite athletes. The quick development of today’s elite sport level makes it doubtful that future demands will be similar to current demands (Henriksen, 2010). Another issue is the relative age effect. The birth date has been reported as a predictor of athletic success, because athletes born in the beginning of the year are more likely to be selected and advance to the senior team (Helsen et. al 2005). Campo, Vicedo, Villora and Jordan (2010) suggested that an explanation to the relative age effect could be found in the maturation theory (Reilly et al., 2000). The theory suggest that athletes born in the first months of the selection year have a range of anthropometric, cognitive and physical advantages over other athletes born in the later months of the year. A final problem is the lack of scientific evidence concerning detecting talented young athletes. Therefore, coaches and scouts must more often rely their selection decision on a subjective basis (William & Reilly, 2000), such as visual experience and perception of the athletes potential (Christensen, 2009).

Furthermore, concerning selection some risks have been identified. Pain and Harwood (2008) found that academies in England start to select athletes from eight years of age. How et al. (1998) reported that non – selected athletes lose motivation and are unlikely to receive support and attention from coaches and other significant people in the sport context. Reeves, Nicholls, and Mckenna (2009) found that soccer academies’ middle adolescents (15-18 year) experienced selection more stressful compared to early adolescents (12-15 year). Stambulova (1994) study among 554 Russian athletes reported similar findings. Stambulova reported that one characterized demand in the transition from junior to senior was to cope with the pressure of selection. Based on the issues and risk concerning the selection process, more recently research has promoted a more inclusive approach for youth sport programmers (eg., Lidor et al., 2009). Henriksen (2010) suggested that this recommendation appears to be even more appropriate in small countries, and a number of researches have shift focus from talent selection to talent development and a more multidisciplinary view of talent (for a review see Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001).

The psychosocial sport environment and wellbeing
Youth athletes sport experiences in organized sport programs can be quite varied, and appears to be depended of multitude factors including psychosocial elements (Strachan, Côté, &
Deakin, 2009). Studies within the sport environment have found that psychosocial factors play an important role for youths sport experiences and development (e.g. Henriksen, 2010). For example, in youth football, it has been reported a negative relationship between psychosocial stress and well-being (Brink et al., 2010).

In previous research, the coach – athlete relationship has attracted increasing interest from sport psychologists. Becker (2009) examined 18 elite athletes’ perceptions of great coaching. The result showed six dimensions of perceived great coaching, coach attributes, the environment, relationships, the system, coaching actions and influences. Perceptions of good relationship between athlete-coach has been linked to wellbeing among young athletes (Jowett, 2005). In contrast, researchers have found that lack of trust and dominance are factors negative related to athletes wellbeing and effectiveness (Blanchard, Amiot, Perreault, Vallerand, & Provencher, 2009).

Another study by Reinboth, Duda and Ntoumanis (2004) examined how dimensions of coaching behavior were related to wellbeing among 263 soccer players. The study indicated that the perceived coach-created sport environment such as social support and autonomy support were predicted indices of wellbeing. It has also been reported that ego-oriented environments can negatively be related to wellbeing among athletes (Reinboth & Duda, 2004). Ommundsen, Glyn, Lemyre and Miller (2006) examined how supportive and pressuring influences of coaches were related to psychosocial outcomes. The result showed that social support from coaches could be beneficial for the psychosocial status (such as relationship with peers, positive competency perception) and facilitates wellbeing among athletes.

Social support has been reported as a crucial factor in the coach – athlete relationship. Gillet et al. (2009) found that athlete’s perceptions of coach autonomy support from their coachers were positively connected with self-determined motivation. Self determination has in previous research been found as a predictor to athlete’s wellbeing (Donahue et al., 2006). Athlete’s perception of autonomy support from the coach has also been reported to predict happiness among young athletes (Lafreriene, Jowett, Vallerand, & Carbonneau, 2011). Holt and Dunn (2004) study among 40 elite adolescent foetball players showed that social support could help players overcome obstacles and develop resilience. Research indicates also that coaches have an important role in helping young athletes to cope with stressors (Reeves et al., 2009), and coaches social support can facilitate prolonged sport participation among young athletes (Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Briere, 2001).

Another environmental factor within the sport context is the relationship between athlete and teammates. It is today well known that peer relationships play an important role in development and personal growth especially when children become adolescents (Moran & Weiss, 2006). Previous research has also reported that outcomes of this relationship are depended of the quality of the friendship. Weiss and Smith (1999) found six dimensions of friendship quality in sport, companionship, emotional support, loyalty, intimacy, things in common and conflict resolution. Perceptions of positive quality of friendship between athlete and teammates has been associated with satisfaction, self-perceptions, enjoyment, and enhanced performance (Parker & Asher, 1993; Weiss & Stuntz, 2004).

Moreover, Kristiansen and Roberts (2010) examined how youth elite athletes experienced and coped with different stressors. The result showed that lack of social support, and especially emotional support from teammates, was related to poor performance. Social support from
peers could also be beneficial in protecting athletes from harmful effects of stress (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Another study by Nicholson, Hoye, and Gallant (2011) among Australian football players indicated that social support, especially from teammates was related to individual success in sport. Ulrich-French and Smith (2006) study among youth football players found that peer relationships could predict enjoyment, perceived competence and motivational outcomes. The study reported also that peer acceptance could be a predictor to lower stress levels and higher self-determined motivation. It has also been reported that perceptions of team identification are significant related to better psychological well-being (Wann & Pierce, 2005).

Furthermore, previous research has indicated that coaches and peers could play different roles in diverse phases of the athlete’s career (Lavelle & Wylleman, 2004). It has been suggested that social support is the athlete’s most important coping resource across the athlete’s career (Cote, 1999). Research suggest that coaches should be encouraged and supportive in their coaching of children (Cote & Frazer-Thomas, 2007), and task oriented in order to promote development and prolonger participation (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2006). When the athletes become older the interaction between athlete and coach changes and the coaching approach becomes more technical and skill oriented (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2006). Stambulova (1994) reported that athletes in ages 6-12 experienced that satisfaction with peers and the coach were particularly important coping resources. In the transition from junior to senior many athletes experienced relationship problems with coaches, peers, and received less social support. Common demands in the junior-senior transition were for instance win prestige among peers and to cope with relationship problems. Roberts (1993) found that peers in ages of 10-14 starts to compare competences between each other, and how the athlete’s perceived themselves were associated with both development and further participation. Another study of Smith, Smoll and Cumming (2007) among athletes in ages 10-14 indicated that athletes who perceive coaches as mastery involved experienced lower levels of anxiety compared to perceptions of ego involved coaches.

In previous research it is well established that there is a relationship between psychosocial factors within the sport environment and different forms of psychological wellbeing. The importance of these relationships has been found to be experienced different between ages (Lavelle & Wylleman, 2004). Studies have also reported that experiences of selection can be age related (Reeves et al., 2004). To date, many sport programs emphasize the role of elite academies (Reilly et al., 2004), and it is not sport in itself that is harmful or beneficial, rather the context that the sport experience occurs in (Nasey, 2004). This makes it particularly important to examine young athlete’s perceptions of the sport environment in order to assure that youth sport involvement leads to positive rather than negative outcomes (Frazer-Thomas & Cote, 2006). However, little attention has been given to young athlete’s psychological wellbeing in elite-oriented environments. The present study aims to contribute to the understanding of how youth sport programs can create performance-environments and promote wellbeing among young athletes. Therefore the present study examined the following:

**Objectives**
The main purpose is to examine: If psychosocial factors (such as social support from coaches and peers), within the soccer context, can predict well-being among soccer academy players. Further, the aim is to study the relationship between selection and wellbeing among soccer academy players. A last purpose is to compare the age categories 11-14 and 15-19 in social support, perceived wellbeing and experiences of selection.
Method

Participants
In total, 443 male soccer players, from four different teams in Swedish premier league (in Swedish: Allsvenskan) participated in this study. The player’s age differences were between 11-19 (M=14, 17). All players were part of the academy teams (first/representation team in each age category). 250 players belonged to the younger age category named youth, 11-14 years, and 193 players belonged to the older age category named junior, 15-18 years. The players practise on average 7, 2 hours per week. The selection of the teams and participants was made strategically and in cooperation with the Swedish Soccer Association.

Instrument
A survey collected from FHI (Public Health Institute) in Sweden was used in this study to measure the athlete’s perceived well-being. The survey is based on SDQ (Goodman 1997), PSP scale a Swedish questionnaire developed to measure psychosomatic issues (Hagquist, 2008) and Kid Screen (Ravens-Sieberer, 2005). The instrument consists in total of 49 questions. The instruments scales varied consistent in a range of 1-5. The original survey has been used to investigate elementary and high schools students’ well-being in Sweden. In order to make the instrument more sport related, questions concerning selection and interpersonal relationships within the soccer context were added. The instrument was also implemented in a factor analysis, because of the use of different instruments that were included in the survey and to adapt the present study’s purpose. The different questions collected from the survey, were included in the factor analysis. A factor analysis with quartimax rotation was conducted in order to determine if the 13 items from the original scale could be reduced into a smaller number of factors. The data was reduced and the cross loadings (with 35 or more) in at least two categories were later excluded from the factor analysis (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006). The factor analysis resulted that 13 original scales were reduced to twelve (see appendix 1). The cronbach-alpha values in the present investigation ranged from 0.69 and 0.89. These twelve scales explained 66, 9% of the total variance. The result indicated also that all twelve factors twelve had eigen-values greater than one

After the principal component factor analyses were performed, 8 original scales were reduced from the present study. The reason was that only four components were related to the purposes of the present study, which were, peers, coach, selection and well-being. One factor labelled as coach, (a=86) included items from the category your football explained 5, 1% of the total variance. Factor two labelled as friends, (a=66) included items from the category your football and friends explained 3, 4% of the total variance. These findings are presented in appendix 1. Furthermore, two single items were identified and used in the present study, labelled as selection and well-being.

Procedure
The present study was possible to implement through cooperation with the Swedish soccer association. In order to investigate functionality and time to complete the survey, the instrument was tested by the author in a pilot study before the data collection. The result from the pilot study showed that the participants had problems to understand some of the new added questions and the time aspect occurred also to be an issue. In the pilot study, the time to complete the study varied between 35-65 minutes. The author took this into consideration, and these questions were reformulated. Further, the selection of participants in this study was
made in cooperation with the Swedish soccer association. Before the completion of the survey, the author explained the instrument and encouraged the participants to ask questions to avoid misunderstandings. The data collection of data took place in September 2010 at one occasion in rooms free from distractions. The time to complete the survey varied between 15-45 minutes, and the author was present in all collection times to answer questions regarding the survey. To avoid potential influence, no parents or coaches were present in the completion of the survey. Three players received the survey through mail retrospectively, and these participants did the survey at home and were later submitted to the author.

**Drop-outs**
The total population of academy players in the four academies was 519 soccer players. Of these players, 446 players participated in this study. This gives an external drop-out rate of 14.1%. Of these 446 players who completed the survey, one participant withdrew during the completion, and two participants did not complete the survey properly. Overall 443 players completed the survey and were included in the present study. That gives an internal drop-out rate of 0.006%.

**Ethical Considerations**
Before the data collection the research design was sent to Lunds University ethical board, and the study become later authorized and approved. In the first contact, all teams were informed about procedure and the purpose of the study. The teams were all asked and agreed to participate in the study. Some days before the data collection all parents, players and coaches received an informal paper about the purpose and relevant ethical information (see appendix 2). Before the data collection all players also received a consent form (see appendix 3), and were informed verbally about the purpose and ethical information such as voluntariness, confidentiality, treatment - presentation of data and ability to withdraw from the study without consequences. This consent form was also received and signed by all coaches. All players, except from two signed and agreed to participate.

**Data analyze**
To address the purposes of the study a quantitative analyze was used. The data was analyzed by SPSS (18.0). To analyze relations and predictions between variables a linear multiply regression analysis with backward elimination was used. In order to investigate differences between groups one way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was applied.

**Results**

*Objective 1 – Psychosocial predictors of wellbeing*
The regression analysis showed positive significant relationship between well-being and the predictors Coach (Beta = 0.260) and Peers (Beta = 0.242), $R^2_{\text{Adj}} = 0.166$, $F(2,439) = 43.609$, $p = 0.001$ (see figure 4). The result showed that the predictors could explain 16.6% of the total variance of the dependent variable well-being.
Objective 2 – The relationship between selection and wellbeing
The regression analysis among soccer academy players showed a negative significant relationship between well-being and the predictor selection (Beta = -0.117). $R^2_{Adj} = 0.014$, $F(1, 440) = 6.075$, $p = 0.014$. The result showed that the predictor could explain 1.6% of the total variance of the dependent variable well-being.

Objective 3 – Differences between the two age groups

Table 1. Differences in well-being, social support from coaches and peers and experiences of selection between the categories 11-14 and 15-19.

<table>
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<th>Variables</th>
<th>Youth players (11-14 year, N=250)</th>
<th>Junior players (15-19 years, N=193)</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>df</th>
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The result showed significant differences between the age categories 11-14 and 15-18 years, in social support from coaches and peers, perceived well-being and experiences of selection (see table 1). Thus, the results showed that youth players experienced significant higher levels of social support from coaches and peers than junior players. The result also showed that younger players experienced selection significant more negative, and higher levels of well-being compared to junior players.
Discussion

The purpose of this research were to examine: a) if psychosocial factors within the soccer context could predict psychological well-being among youth academy players; b) the relationship between selection and psychological well-being and c) compare different age categories (11-14 and 15-18 years) in psychological well-being, social support from coaches and peers and experiences of selection. The results are discussed in relation to presented theoretical frameworks and previous research in following discussion.

Psychosocial factors and well-being

The relationship between psychosocial variables and youth sport experiences is well known. In the present study, the result showed a model included two variables (coach support and peers support) which explained 16.6% of the psychological wellbeing among the young athletes. Ullrich-French and Smith (2006) found that peer relationships could predict enjoyment, perceived competence, and motivational outcomes among youth soccer players. Research has also indicated that social support from peers could be related to individual success in sport (Nicholson et al., 2011), and help athletes to cope with high levels of stress (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Reinboth, Duda and Ntoumanis (2004) examined how coaching behavior was related to well-being among 263 football players. The study reported that the perceived coach-created sport environment such as social support and autonomy support were predicted indices of well-being. Previous research has also reported that a supportive coaching style could be beneficial for athlete’s psychosocial status (Ommundsen et al. 2006). Thus, findings from this study support many aspects in previous research.

According to the Athletic Talent Development Environment Model (Henrikssen, 2010) a crucial criterion in the environmental success is that the environment provides competences, skills and support in order to help the athlete to cope with demands and challenges in both the athletic and non-athletic domain. The result from this study supports this model, and underpins the importance of the micro environment in terms of coaches and peers to promote well-being among youth academy players. Further, the ATDE model includes two domains, the athletic domain and the non-athletic domain. The athletic domain involves the parts of the athlete’s environment that is directly related to sport, whereas the non-athletic domain represents all the other parts of the athletes lives. The model also suggests that one component can belong to one level and one domain, but one component can also transcend to the other level and domain. For example, peers belong to the athletic domain but can have a strong influence in the non-athletic domain. This study indicates that coaches and peers significantly influence the perceived well-being among athletes. It is today well established that the perceived wellbeing can influence both athletic performance and the personal development (eg., Voigh & Callaghan, 2006). Therefore, the result in this study support the ATDE model also in terms of components in the athletic domain can transcend and have a strong influence in the non-athletic domain.

The present study also reinforces the developmental model of transitions faced by athletes (Wyller & Lavelle, 2004), because representing the importance of considering athletes not only in the sport context, but also from a psychological and psychosocial view. One explanation why coaches and peers could be an important well-being predictor could be the amount of time the athlete’s spend in the academy context, and therefore develop team identity. This identity has in previous research been related to psychological well-being (Wann & Pierce, 2005). Therefore it is also likely that coaches and peers in the academy-team become experienced as significant others and their potential to influence athletes well-
being are high. In addition, another explanation could be the player’s careers ambition. The primary purpose of football academies is to develop youth players into professional status (Holt, 2002). Thus, it is likely that the player’s career ambition is to become professional as adults. It is well known that coaches has a crucial role in selecting the most appropriate players into next step in their career, such as the transition youth-junior and junior-senior (Christensen, 2009). It is therefore possible that the perception of be supported by the coach can have a major contribution to the athlete’s psychological wellbeing.

The relationship between selection and well-being
The second objective was to explore the relationship between selection and well-being. The result showed that there was a significant relationship between selection and well-being among the athletes. Reeves et al. (2009) reported a relationship between selection and high stress levels among football academy players in the ages of 12-18. It has also been found that one characterized demand in transitions in sport is to cope with the pressure of selection (Stambulova, 1994). One explanation why there is a negative relationship between wellbeing and selection could be that the athletes feel pressure to perform and be selected, and do not have appropriate coping strategies to cope with this demand. Van Yperen (2009) found that players who successfully progressed into professional status were more likely to use appropriate coping strategies in terms of problem-focused coping. In fact, the selection approach has received critics by a great number of researches of multi factorial reasons (e.g. lack of scientific evidence, relative age effect and complexity of talent). The present study highlights the importance of consider the role of well-being then applying selection in youth sport programs, and add a new dimension to the selection approach.

However, a second possible explanation why selection could be a negative significant predictor even if it only explains 1, 6% of the perceived well-being, could be that selection might influence other predictors. It can be concluded that a great number of athletes have selection as a predictor that influence wellbeing in a negative way. But on the other hand, it can be other predictors that determine if selection influences the perceived well-being. For example, selection could be a negative predictor to well-being among the athlete who have less number of coping strategies and skills. Accordingly, this reflects the importance of developing appropriate support mechanisms such as social support within sport academy settings, in order to help athletes cope with the pressure of selection and promote well-being.

Differences in social support, well-being and selection between the age categories
The last purpose of this study was to compare the different age categories in social support from coaches and peers, well-being and experiences of selection. In the present study, the players were divided in to two age categories, youth players 11-14 years and junior players 15-19 years. Findings from this study showed that youth players experienced significantly more social support from coaches and peers compared to junior players. According to the developmental model on transitions faced by athletes, an athlete faces different challenges and demands in relation to their developmental stages in their sporting career (Lavelle & Wylleman, 2004). Lavelle and Wylleman (2004) suggested that the relevance of different psychosocial factors, such as marital and interpersonal relationships might be age and career stage related. More especially, in the childhood stage (up to 12 years) the family and peers are important psychosocial variables, in the adolescent’s stage (13-18 year) peers, coaches and parental relationships become more crucial. In line with the development model on transitions faced by athletes, this study reinforces that relationships between the athlete and his/her psychosocial environment can be experienced different between age categories. The findings
in the present study is also in line with Lavelle and Wylleman's (2004) model, because coaches should engage in more social support in the younger players to facilitate development and well-being.

Moreover, according to the environmental success factor model (Henriksen, 2010), one crucial factor to the environmental success is individual development and achievements, in terms of assets of psychosocial competences and skills. One important psychosocial competence in sport is social support. Thus, the youth players in the present study experienced more social support than junior players, and would therefore be more likely to contribute to the environmental success. The result is also related with findings suggested that adaptive coping resources, such as social support, could predict success in football (Holt & Dunn, 2004; Van Yperen, 2009).

Furthermore, Stambulova (1994) found that athletes in ages of 6-12 experienced that satisfaction with peers and admire the coach were particularly important coping resources. In the transition from junior to senior, many athletes experienced relationship problems with coaches and peers and lack of social support. The result from the present study is in line with these findings. One explanation why youth players experienced more social support from coaches and peers compared to junior players could be the motivational climate in the athlete’s environment. Ego-oriented climates have in previous research been negative associated to wellbeing among young athletes (Duda & Reinboth, 2004). In older ages it is likely that the climate is more ego-involved, because of the internal competition to advance into the senior teams and professional status becomes more intensive. In such climates, focus is rather on winning, peer comparison and individual success than build relationships and supports one another. Further, it has been found that coaches’ shift from task involved toward result oriented coaching based on perceived environmental demands (Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010). Research has also indicated that the coaching approach is more technical and skill oriented in the coaching of older athletes (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2006). In turn, it is possible that in the coaching of older ages coaches shift from mastery-oriented to performance-oriented coaching, and place therefore less emphasis on supporting the athlete’s. This reflection can also be related to Stambulovas (1994) findings regarding common demands in the junior-senior transition were for instance win prestige among peers and to cope with relationships problems. The findings from the present study are also in line with Reeves, Nicholls and Mckenna (2009) study among football academy players, where middle adolescents (15-18 years) experienced coaches and lack of social support as key stressors.

Considering the result regarding the differences in social support between the age categories, this can be a possible explanation why the players differ significantly in wellbeing. In the present study, the result showed that the youth player’s perceived higher psychological wellbeing compared to junior players. Following the result from purpose one, it can be concluded that social support from coaches and peers are prominent factors that contribute to the adolescent’s psychological wellbeing. Therefore, social support can be seen as a variable and explanation to the differences between the players wellbeing. Previous research has also indicated that differences in social support between adolescent youth football players who successfully progressed into professional status in football and those who did not (Van Yperen, 2009).

Henceforth, the result from the present study showed that youth players (11-14 years) experienced selection more negative than junior players (15-19 years). This finding is contradictory to previous research, where selection has been experienced to be the most
stressful in the junior to senior transition (Stambulova, 1994) and among middle adolescents football players (Revees, Nicholls & Mckenna, 2009). In Revees et al. (2009) study it was also found that middle adolescents had more appropriate coping strategies compared to early adolescents. Therefore, one explanation to the result in the present study can be that youth players did not have sufficient coping strategies to cope with the pressure of selection.

**Methodological reflections**

One limitation in the study is the fact that it is problematic to measure perceptions of interpersonal dimensions of relationships at just one occasion. It is likely that perceptions of relationships changes over time, and should therefore be followed over a longer period. Based on the great number of participants this was not applicable. A second limitation is that the instrument not earlier is tested on a sport related population. The instrument has earlier been used to examine high schools and elementary students perceived well-being, but has not been applied in sport. The instrument also consists of three instruments (SDQ (Goodman 1997; PSP scale (Swedish questionnaire developed to measure psychosomatic issues) and Kid Screen (Ravens-Sieberer, 2005). All these instruments are validated but have never been used collectively before. In order to facilitate this issue, the instrument was before the data collection tested in a pilot study with two athletes in the same age and sport. The author did also a factor analysis because of the different instruments the survey includes. The present study was also authorized and approved of Lunds University ethical board. Another issue is in fact that the parents only received an informational form, and not a consent form. The main reason was the great number of participants. In order to elude this issue an informal paper was sent to all parents before the data collection, including information about voluntariness and possibility for their children to not participate. In addition, all coaches (loco parentis) as well the players signed the consent form before the data collection. The present study included also 250 in the players in the junior age category (15-19) and only 193 youth players (11-14 years). In fact, it is possible that this difference in numbers of participants between the age categories can have influenced the result. In contrast, the great number of participants facilitates to generalize the result to a wider population. Some other final limitations considered are that the present study only is based on one sport and all participants were males, which makes it doubtful to generalize the results to other populations.

**Implications**

Following the result, psychosocial factors such as coaches and peers was found as prominent and contributed to adolescent’s psychological well-being. It can be considered problematic to perform on the football field, without perceived well-being. Therefore, recommendations are given to coaches in youth football to be aware of the importance to develop a supportive coaching style across all age’s categories in order to increase athletes psychological well-being. Considering the results, interventions that aim to promote well-being are recommended to consider the differences between the age categories found in this study. For example, implementing interventions among junior adolescents should include mechanisms to increase social support from coaches and peers in the athletes sport context. Interventions among youth players should rather focus on develop support mechanisms and strategies (such as social support) to help these players to cope with the pressure of selection. In addition, sport academies are also suggested to consider the role of selection, and to be aware of the negative relationship between selection and well-being, especially in young ages. Further, academy settings are suggested to educate coaches and athletes regarding well-being strategies. Given young athletes knowledge about the importance of coping strategies, such as seeking social support could make them prepared for future challenges.
Future research
This study highlights the importance of specific factors in the sport environment that contribute to adolescent’s psychological well-being in youth soccer. Therefore it would be interesting to implement this research and findings on other populations in sport. Such research would have a wide range of implications, especially for implementing interventions that aims to facilitate wellbeing in youth elite programs.

Another interesting area in future research is longitudinal studies. Following the result from this study, perception of social support and experiences of selection were different between the age categories. What factors underlies these results? Longitudinal research is sensitive to developmental changes, and has the potential to identify how interactions and perceptions of dimensions of interpersonal relationships change over time.

The result in the present study also showed that social support from coaches and peers are crucial factors from a psychological well-being perspective. Future research is recommended to further investigate these findings, in order to identify exactly what forms of social support, (such as emotional or tangible support) that makes major contributions to the youth’s psychological well-being.

Conclusion
This study aimed to study talent development in academy settings from a well-being perspective. The result showed that the psychosocial sport environment is a crucial factor among youth academy athletes in relation to their psychological well-being. These findings support the ATDE model (Henriksen, 2010), and highlights the importance of the micro environment in terms of coaches and peers to promote well-being among youth academy players. Another conclusion that can be drawn was the negative relationship between selection and perceived well-being. Further, significant differences between the age categories in social support from coaches and peers, and how the players experienced selection was found. Findings suggested that younger players experienced more social support from coaches and peers, but also experience selection more negatively. In sum this study advance previous research by highlighting the sport environment as an important context for youth athletes overall well-being. Though, more research has to be done, this study highlight the important roles coaches, peers, and selection can play in harm or facilitate youth’s perceived well-being. These findings suggest that particular aspects of the social environment may be prominent in promoting wellbeing among youth athletes in academy settings.
Acknowledgement

First of all I would like to thank my friend and classmate Kjetil Hagen for four years and many study hours together. Second, this study was not possible to implement without the cooperation with the Swedish soccer association. I would like to thank Johan Fallby at the Swedish football association for the opportunity to be a part of this project. Third, I am very grateful to my supervisor Hansi Hinic who guided me throughout the whole process. I really appreciate your support and our cooperation. Finally, I am deeply grateful for all the support I have received from my family throughout this process. Your support has been really valuable, and without you I would not be where I am today.
References


Content of appendices

Appendix 1: Factor analysis. Factor loadings, alpha values, Eigen-values and total variance of the twelve components

Appendix 2: Informal form

Appendix 3: Consent form
Table 1. Factor loadings, alpha values, eigenvalues and total variance of the twelve components

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Informationsbrev och förfrågan angående medverkan i en studie gällande unga elitfotbollspelares välbefinnande.

Vi heter Henric Lilja och Kjetil Hagen och är två studenter som studerar psykologi inriktning idrott vid Halmstad Högskola. Föreliggande studie berör unga elitfotbollspelares välbefinnande och är ett samarbete mellan svenska fotbollsförbundet och Centrum för Forskning om Välstånd, Hälsa och Idrott på Högskolan i Halmstad.

Syftet med studien är att undersöka unga elitfotbollspelares välbefinnande. Detta kommer att göras med hjälp av enkäter. Deltagandet i studien är frivilligt och du har rätt att när som helst avbryta din medverkan utan att ange orsak. All information som samlas in under undersökningen kommer behandlas konfidentiellt. Utomstående kan inte identifiera dina svar när studien redovisas.

Med vänlig hälsning
Huvudansvariga studenter, kontaktperson och forskningshuvudman

Henric Lilja
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Telefon: 0768040370

Kjetil Hagen
Kjehag07@stud.hh.se
Telefon: 0047 92059767
Skriftligt, informerande samtycke till idrottare angående medverkan i en studie om unga elitfotbollsspelares välbefinnande.

Jag har informerats om studiens syfte och om hur informationen som samlas in kommer att behandlas. Jag har även informerats om att mitt deltagande är frivilligt, att jag, när jag vill, kan avbryta min medverkan utan att ange orsak samt att jag kan ställa frågor. Jag samtycker härmed till att medverka i denna studie som handlar om unga elitfotbollsspelares välbefinnande.

Ort/Datum__________________________________________________________

Namnunderskrift______________________________________________________

Namnförtydligande______________________________________________________

Målsmans Underskrift___________________________________________________

Namnförtydligande______________________________________________________

**Forskningshuvudman**
Urban Johnsson
[Urban.johnsson@hh.se](mailto:Urban.johnsson@hh.se)
035 16 72 61