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Deconstructing high performance Nordic sport:  
The case study of women's handball ('the team as method')

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## **Abstract**

The principal purpose of this study was to record and explore the changing coaching landscape within elite Norwegian women's handball from 2003 to 2005. This was in relation to critically understanding the culture created within the context, and the precise role(s) of head coach Marit Breivik, the assistant coaches, and the athletes in question, in its creation. The significance of the paper lies in enhancing understanding the 'Nordic model' of society, inclusive of its emphasis on equality, tolerance, consensus and cooperation, and the ways in which this is constructed, explored and challenged within and through sport. When appointed in 1994, Breivik inherited a high performance system not unlike any other in international sport; one dominated by metrics, compliance and control. It was one she wanted to change to better reflect the Nordic values of integration, interdependence and egalitarianism. The study's method comprised an in depth ethnography where the principal author spent two years embedded within the setting. The results, deduced from inductive analysis of the collected data, are discussed in terms of two principal themes. First, the initial attempts at culture change by Breivik and the inevitable resistance experienced; and second, the relational strategy she adopted to overcome such resistance (including that of establishing the 'team as method'). Finally, a conclusion reflects on the meaning of such findings, touching on the dual explanatory notions of 'progressive repair' (Dant, 2010) and that of the coach as a 'virtuoso actor' (Flybjerg, 2001).

## **Setting the scene**

*Norwegian female handball can be viewed as a precursor to the overall Norwegian 'elite sport adventure' which first emerged in the 1990s. Marit Breivik, a former international player, was appointed head coach of the Norwegian female handball team in 1994. She inherited a high performance system not unlike any other in international sport; one dominated by metrics, impersonality, compliance and control. It was one she wanted to change to better reflect the Nordic values of integration, interdependence and egalitarianism, with worth alternatively being placed on developing 'human capital'. When she left in 2009, after the most successful period ever for Norwegian women's handball, she was recruited by Olympiatoppen (the organization responsible for the development of elite Norwegian sport) as head coach for team sports and, from 2014, as the principal sports manager for Norwegian summer sport. Thus, Norwegian female handball, and Marit Breivik in particular, have had (and continue to have) considerable influence over the coaching strategies employed within elite sports in Norway. The purpose of this article is to give a storied account of that development through recourse to an 18 month long ethnography. Here, the principal author experienced, tracked and made sense of the unfolding context which was, in turn, subject to numerous power plays.*

## **Introduction**

During the past 15 years, sports coaching has increasingly been considered a complex social and relational endeavour. The emphasis here has moved from a traditional functionalist, structural perspective to one grounded in context and culture. The result has been an on-going tension between two vying standpoints; one that is agential and situationally dynamic, and the other grounded in rationally construed action (see Jones & Ronglan [2017] for a fuller discussion). Not surprisingly, Norway has not been exempt from such tension, with opposing advocates tending to talk passed rather than with or to each other. As a consequence, the

relationship between structured linearity and the messy 'everydayness' of practice (a practice often subject to the whims of power), has resulted in a 'blind spot' not easily accessible through simple recourse to reflexivity (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Despite some attempts to acknowledge (North, 2013) and reconcile (e.g., Jones et al., 2016) both standpoints, an absence of work exists which addresses this limitation of vision; work that illustrates how seeming inconsistencies and incoherence can be conjoined and accommodated. Accepting that sports coaching possesses elements of both, a call has subsequently arisen to further explore and address the activity of coaching as institutionally structured yet context dependent.

The general aim of this study was to explore and report on the coaching practice evident within elite Norwegian women's handball. This was particularly in relation to critically understanding the culture created within the context, and the precise role(s) of head coach Marit Breivik, her assistant coaches, and the athletes in its creation. More detailed research questions centered on exploring (1) what characterized the coaching evident within the Norwegian national female handball team (the LKS) both before and after Breivik's appointment? (2) What were the particular outcomes when innovation met established practice? (3) What 'power plays' were at work in coming to a consensual working arrangement, and how was such power manifest? And finally, (4) what roles or positions did the athletes play in the overall process? In line with a critical agenda, the story we tell is not a linear tale. Rather, it is intertwined in and with the complexities of modern day sport; a phenomenon inclusive of inherent paradoxes, relative values, and problematic practice encased in 'shades of grey' (Jones, Edwards & Viotto Filho, 2016). The story is also bound within cultural shifts and constraints. This is particularly in relation to the adoption of, and resistance to, the more egalitarian and democratic practices introduced by Breivik; practices that increasingly accentuated the traditional Norwegian social values of equality, transparency and effective social integration.

In terms of structure, following this introduction, we briefly describe the data gathering process(es) employed within the study which included ethnographic methods within a case-study design. This is followed by a discussion of the three main ‘findings’; (1) the initial attempts at culture change by Breivik; (2) the possibilities and problems associated with such change; and (3) how these problems were managed allowing for a more realistic perspective in terms of power’s omnipresent nature to emerge. Finally, a reflective conclusion further explores the meaning of such findings, touching on the dual notions of 'progressive repair' (Dant, 2010) and that of the coach as a 'virtuoso actor' (Flybjerg, 2001).

## **Method**

The study's method comprised an in depth ethnography where the principal author spent 18 months embedded within the elite handball context. The aim here was to thoroughly understand the case in question (Stake, 1995); that is, to “observe the workings of the case, to record what was happening” and to examine its meaning (p.8). Far from being a static observer, however, this role also extended into interpretation, leading to a re-direction of observations and lines of inquiry (an aspect of the research discussed in more depth a little later). In this respect, the method could be termed case-study research.

As Stake (1995) reminds us, the “real business of case study is particularization not generalization” (p.8); to really understand that case well both in terms of its uniqueness and commonality with other cases. In terms of the latter, we claim that case studies, although being grounded in the immediate context, have a certain reach beyond it. This was the contention made by Flybjerg (2001) in his text ‘Making Social Science Matter’, in asserting that the “power of the good example” is often underestimated (p. 77). In support of such a position, we invoke the concept of naturalistic generalizations (Stake & Trumbull, 1982), where readers are invited to reflect on the details of a presented case in relation to their own experiences and

understandings. This process then, involves a transfer of knowledge from a study sample to another population (Melrose, 2009). According to Melrose (2009), such generalization emphasizes “the practical application of research findings that intuitively fall naturally in line with readers’ ordinary experiences” (p.2).

Furthering the discussion related to the value of case study research, Flyvbjerg (2001) presented the notion of the critical case as something which can increase a case’s generalisability. A critical case can be defined as having particular strategic importance to a wider issue or problem (in this instance that of developing elite sporting cultures). The precise case involved in the current study comprised the Norwegian national female handball team (the LKS [Landslaget Kvinner Senior håndball]) during the period from the autumn of 2003 to the spring of 2005. The LKS was adopted as a case study for many reasons. These included the widespread political interest in Norway as the team became increasingly successful, and the claimed adoption of a new pedagogy for elite sport modelled along the lines of individual responsibility and shared leadership. In relation to the former, the LKS has been the most successful women’s international handball team during the past 20 years. Consequently, both players and coach(es) have been awarded several national and international accolades, with Marit Breivik even being appointed a ‘Knight (1<sup>st</sup> Class) of the Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav’ for her services to Norwegian sport; an award rarely given, and only for remarkable accomplishments on behalf of the country. In terms of the research focus, attention was paid to the case’s complexity and contextuality in relation to its evolution towards what can be described as an increasingly egalitarian Nordic model of practice. What also made the LKS a critical case, in line with the above criteria, was its standing as a successful, novel example of practice, against which other cases could be compared. In this respect, the case was purposively sampled as being information rich or ‘very likely’ to yield the understandings we sought (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Consequently, the driving question of the research revolved around

discovering what was the organization's 'cultural pattern of life' (Walsh, 1998), and what could be learned from it.

The precise methods of data collection undertaken to explore the case were; field notes from observations, and semi structured interviews. Drawing on such sources allowed the 'intense field study' (Andersen, 1995) necessary to deconstruct and understand complex social phenomena such as the one in question (Flyvbjerg, 2004). Despite the first author having an implicit knowledge of the setting which no doubt facilitated ease of access, we do not wish to claim some 'authentic insider' status here. Rather, in line with Clifford's (1986) view of ethnography as only capable of producing 'partial truths', we consider the findings from such work to "emerge out of an open-ended series of contingent encounters" (p.8). Nevertheless, what was undertaken here was guided by Geertz's (1973) notion of 'thick description'; to study actors in their natural settings whilst seeking to "document the world in terms of their particular meanings" (Walsh, 1998: 220). The subsequent ethnography then, sought to capture interpersonal behaviours, interaction, language, material productions, and beliefs (Angrosino, 2007). In terms of actuality, the events which took place at the LKS were primarily recorded through a combination of detailed hand written and audio-recorded notes. These notes were supplemented by interviews with several of the principal actors within the LKS. The interviews were always to greater or lesser extents semi-structured in nature (Kvale, 2007), which helped navigate a path between flexibility and control. The interviews then, were often akin to "casual conversations" whilst holding to an 'implicit research agenda" (Fetterman, 1989, p.48). Additionally, prompts were included within the interviews to tease out various strands of the participants' narrative and meaning making. They were also linked to the observations, thus allowing opportunities for further probing and clarification. In this sense, the design of the study held a progressive element.

#### **Data analysis:**



The data were primarily subject to discourse analysis; an approach which centers on taking a critical and interpretive “attitude towards the use of language in social settings” (Tonkiss, 1998: 245). In this way, language, far from being considered a neutral form of communication, was studied as a social practice; as a domain in which knowledge of the world is actively shaped (Tonkiss, 1998). Here, more or less ‘organized ways of talking’ were identified and interpreted in terms of their intentionality and their (latent) effects. A central question was to discern how statements were represented and how they became meaningful to the coaches and players within the LKS.

The first step in this analytical process was a phenomenological reading of the data as they were recorded (van Manen, 1990). This allowed a general impression of the ‘totality’ to be constructed, before embarking on a second phenomenological analysis. The purpose of this second more focused reading was to identify dimensions that ‘made a difference’ (Bateson, 2000, 2002), particularly in relation to the meanings created. As ever, the focus of such analysis lay on what people actually do and say “in the context of their everyday lives” (Rapley, 2007, p. 21). Here, not unnaturally, interpretation played a key role in deciding upon data that provided ‘key insights’ into the issues(s) under study (Tonkiss, 1998).

This quasi-phenomenological process was also shot through with Foucauldian ideas of discursive abstractions (Mills & Denison, 2013). Although by nature such practice is flexible and un-prescriptive, the analytical process undertaken moved from the identification of often repeated key terms to determine dominant concepts, to deciding how these concepts were linked together to form meaningful statements (Markula & Silk, 2011). From discerning how these statements were connected, an attempt at theorizing, or theme construction, was made. Such a bottom-up process as outlined is not to claim some atheoretical consideration. Rather, that engagement with literature existed ‘*alongside* data collection and analysis as part of the process of gaining relevant information” (Bamkin et al, 2015, p. 219). Nevertheless, as with any

inductive reasoning, primacy was given to the key and continuous actions of sifting, comparing, revisiting and contrasting data segments to check, clarify and further develop understanding. The purpose here, as opposed to rigid methodological compliance was adherence to the wider critical sociological project of understanding how people and ideas interact with each other in the ways they do.

### **The role of the researcher and ethical considerations**

Within such interpretive investigation, the role of the researcher always merits some discussion. Being reflexive about personal leanings, following Geertz (1995), the ‘field’ itself was allowed to be a “powerful disciplinary force: assertive, demanding, even coercive” (p. 119) within the project. Here then, every effort was made not to allow pre-existing knowledge to dominate interpretations; of making the coaching observations more concept-centred than they really were (Lieberman, 2013). This, as others have attested, is not an easy task (e.g., Wolfinger, 2002). In recognising such tension, we position the work beyond some ‘cleaned-up’ methodology (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), to better inform exactly how the investigative work was undertaken and the field notes documented. More specifically, although well informed about the theoretical insider/outsider dichotomy, the role(s) adopted in context proved more problematic, often dependent on who or what was the subject of interest at that particular time (e.g., the athletes, the coaches, or the interaction between them). Here, having competence in relation to local practices was important, as was the judgement of when and where to step in and out of the ‘researcher role’. For example, at times, despite having developed social relationships with many of those under study, the ‘professional stranger’ (Agar, 1980) persona was adopted to more ‘formally’ collect data. In this respect, taking a lead from Purdy and Jones (2013), a continual reflexivity was engaged in related to the quality of the work undertaken through critically self-reflecting upon issues such as social background, assumptions, positioning and behaviours (Finlay & Gough, 2003). The purpose was to promote challenging

questions regarding personal and others' experience as a springboard for interpretation and insight.

Engaging in this process also served as a continual reminder that carrying out such field work places much discretion in the hands of the researcher (Wolfinger, 2002); which not only involves what to document and how those notes should be interpreted, but also to the ethics of the research practice. Formally, the ethical procedures associated with this study were addressed through recourse to the host university's given guidelines. These principally involved issues of confidentiality and anonymity; fundamental considerations that resonate with the work of many (e.g., McNamee, Oliver & Wainright, 2007). Having said that, taking into account the visibility of the project (e.g., Marit Breivik was, and continues to be, a national figure, while other contextual actors can be somewhat deduced from the study's time frame), the participants' consent was not assumed as a once-and-for-all event, but rather a process subject to constant re-negotiation as the project unfolded (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). What guided action here was McFee's (2010, p.157) notion of treating 'like a friend', in the quest for 'ethically appropriate' behaviour (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.228). The sentiment relates to acting in the best interests and well-being of those being researched, in addition to that of the work itself. Finally, a process of 'checking' (McFee, 2014) with the participants about the data gleaned further allowed the preservation of anonymity, an increase in sensitivity, whilst also assisting with interpretations. That said, 'final decisions' regarding such interpretations and analysis resided with the research team.

### **Discussion of results**

The results of the study, deduced from the inductive analysis described above, centered on two general themes. Firstly, the initial attempts at culture change by Breivik in terms of her strategic construction of a more egalitarian discourse, and the inevitable resistance experienced. Secondly, we chart and interpret the relational strategy adopted by her to

overcome such resistance (including that of establishing the ‘team as method’). The presented narrative is also located within broader notions associated with the possibilities and problems of cultural change, and the alignment between rhetoric and practice in terms of existing power relations.

*Trying to change a culture: Initial steps and institutional resistance*

There is little doubt that to be disciplined, or to engage in disciplined practice, is a natural part of elite sport. One cannot reach the highest echelons of team and individual performance without ample quotas of hard work, sacrifice, self-consideration and compliance. In this respect, disciplined practices that normalize through regulation are an important part of the everyday life and work of elite sport contexts. In contrast to the often claimed functional requirement (e.g., Kidman & Hanrahan, 2011), the realpolitik of resultant cultures and discourses locates the identity possibilities of contextual social actors within a power-knowledge regime (Denison et al., 2013; Denison & Scott-Thomas, 2011; Cushion & Jones, 2014). Here, it has been argued that while coaches are often considered ‘pedagogue-judges’ and purveyors of a given truth (Åkerstrøm Andersen, 1999: 39), athletes are often deemed disciplined, docile bodies complicit in their own domination (Markula & Pringle 2006; Pringle & Crocket, 2013; Shogan, 1999). Consequently, a general consensus exists among more critical scholars that coaching is inevitably (and perhaps necessarily) underpinned and shot through by various power relations (e.g., Cushion & Jones, 2014; Taylor & Garratt, 2010; Potrac & Jones, 2009). The issue at point then, is not whether the resulting discipline is good or bad, but how, how much, and when it should be exercised and evident.

The culture first experienced by Marit Breivik when appointed Head Coach of the Norwegian women’s handball team (the LKS) in 1994 was one laced through with notions of performance productivity and efficiency. Hence, frequent testing and monitoring of athletes, the keeping of training diaries, instruction, and repetitive practice were viewed as natural and

necessary aspects of work. Being greatly influenced by more radical pedagogies, allied to a belief in individual agency and the importance of sincere action, Breivik set about to change it. The motivation here, however, was not altogether or even particularly altruistic. Rather, it was rooted in the conviction that such an altered approach would garner better results and, hence, more successful international campaigns. Consequently, and somewhat paradoxically, the decision taken towards the creation of a more egalitarian, humanistic environment was firmly rooted in the performance or outcome based agenda.

An important idea which became something of a guiding principle for Breivik in this early phase was that of the collective being the responsibility of the individual. Hence, a discourse of ‘we’ related to notions of team development, was allied with an emphasis on personal responsibility to make such mutuality happen. Players, hence, were made accountable (i.e., ‘in charge’) for their own advancement and of the wider training context. In the words of Breivik;

*Each has to ‘gear up’ to be as good as possible, to be in charge of her own situation, her own training and personal development, and to use this into our community, to team development.*

One of the first, and perhaps most significant, obstacles faced during this part of this process was to ensure the players’ ‘bought in’ to the proposed changes. Breivik was aware that the shift was a challenging one for many, therefore, the process had to be a considered one. Her demands subsequently became very sensitive to context. An aspect of this alteration included requesting the athletes engage in work away from LKS team gatherings. Here, the players were expect to work both on particular skills and individual reflective tasks while at their home clubs (in preparation for the next LKS camp). Again, such a process took time and effort in order to overcome the inevitable athlete’ frustration and resistance.

Although such practice gave the players a sense of desired agency, perhaps not surprisingly, the transition was not unproblematic. What exacerbated the difficulties was the relationship between the LKS and the elite handball clubs in Norway, through which the athletes received most of their daily coaching. The general shift towards an increasingly holistic and humanistic approach within the LKS conflicted with the rule-based practices dominant at the clubs. Hence, the club coaches continued to follow a more traditional top-down authoritative model of leadership, focused on prescription, repetition, and direct feedback in relation to such instruction. Following a Foucauldian analysis, such a system has been described by Denison (2011, p. 30) as anti-humanist, as a “rational and technical practice [where] inputs produce specific outputs [and where] the making of choices is only permitted within its own rules”. It is a regime which emphasizes a particular a view of learning, believing that problems can be solved through recourse to systematic rationality, individual will, and an ever increasing work ethic. It is also a system constructed and supported by a certain discourse which regulates what can be said, and by whom.

Breivik’s subsequent frustrations related to a perceived misalignment between the LKS’s and the clubs’ respective coaching philosophies and ways of doing things. Here, as mentioned, while the club coaches gave primacy to repetition and instruction, she and her team within the LKS increasingly emphasized the importance of individual responsibility in terms of a flexibility of play and performance. From Breivik’s point of view, this conflict inevitably slowed the development of the players;

*They are used to be told what to do, to ‘come to a set table’. So, they need time to get used to our working methods, the language and the way we communicate. This is not easy.*

To depict either side of this emerging epistemic clash as being in sole possession of a `correct way`, however, would be rather naive. It is also a position taken to task by many critical thinkers (such as Foucault) who caution against merely replacing one perspective with another. Indeed, discourses in and of themselves are neither true nor false (Markula & Pringle, 2006). In this case, the approach taken by the club coaches was merely grounded in recognizable practice, in how they had come to define themselves in role, and in related efforts to garner even greater respect and subsequent improved performances from athletes. There were also similarities between the discourse found at the LKS and the clubs. For example, elements of testing, training and analysis were evident in both as, was the emphasis placed on individual responsibility. The difference in relation to this latter issue, of course, lay in the intended meaning; in that one pushed for sole account of technical efficiency while the other advocated responsibility over cognitive discernible judgement. Nevertheless, during the early attempts at culture change, the athletes found themselves in a problematic situation; one where loyalties, desires and expectations were challenged. The extract below highlights some of the tension evident;

*Trude: 'If we say anything (to the club coach), we must consider if it will be accepted or not. Usually he does not accept our input. At the national team it's different, they always ask our opinions. It is very different'.*

*Sissel: It is not so easy (for the players). When we are with the national team we are supposed to be engaged and enthusiastic, but at the club team we are scolded. We are not supposed to say anything; we're not even allowed to clap at games. With the national team though, they are dissatisfied if you don't clap! It's not always easy, sometimes you can't win'.*

In challenging the dominant discourse, Breivik introduced a new ‘grammar of coaching’ (Jones & Wallace, 2005) to Norwegian handball. The attempt both highlighted the agency of individuals to do such work, and the institutional reaction from traditional authority sources. A clash of discourses was evident emphasizing the plays of power in high performance sporting environments. Such conflict again draws attention to the fallacy of functional research which posits or portrays the necessity of such environments to be ‘smooth frictionless’ social spaces. This is not to argue against the goal of such unified thought. Rather, it is to present the case for the inevitability of conflict and disagreement in such contested contexts and, therefore, the need to work with and within them.

As stated, what caused the relative frustration and uncomfortableness among the players was Breivik’s introduction of a new coaching ‘language’ into the LKS. It marked a shift towards a collective, pedagogic and relational discourse (and subsequent practice). A problem for the players was dealing with this break, not so much in terms of what they received at their clubs being in conflict (as discussed above), but in relation to their own ontological security as top-level players. That is, they had been produced and reproduced by a system which emphasized an instrumental approach to problem-solving, the primacy of technical and bio-scientific knowledge, and the coach as a purveyor of truth (Curzon-Hobson et al, 2003). The players knew their positions within the given system; a knowledge which gave them a certain security. Changing or weakening the power of this discourse then, brought a degree of resistance from the players who were, at the very least, comfortable in their expectations of context. Such insecurity was often expressed in comments from the players such as;

*‘In the LKS, we do not spend enough time on systematic repetitions and drills. As a consequence, individual technical and tactical qualities are missing....this is something we need to practice’ (Sissel).*



*“There is a huge difference [between the local club and the national team]. I am one of the very best players in the club, while at the national team, most players have as much playing time as me. I’m not used to that” (Kristin)*

No doubt then, a tension existed between the traditional and the newly introduced regimes. Many established athletes found it difficult to now reposition themselves as squad members. The associations of not starting or of being substituted were difficult to shed, as was accepting the notion that the most important thing for any player was to have ‘played well’ (i.e., not winning). Here, a search for clarity and certainty was evident, with the athletes somewhat calling for a return to familiar territory, to what they knew.

Criticism of this policy became even more acute both from within and without the LKS following a relatively unsuccessful 2003 international campaign. Nevertheless, Breivik and her coaches held to the strategy; a strategy explained in depth (again) to each player during the formal evaluation process. Such meetings, however, were viewed more than merely a chance to justify practice or give ‘points to improve’. Rather, they were considered opportunities for hegemonic work (Neumann, 2001); to (re) gain loyalty to the agenda and confirm the developing discourse (*‘having a regular starting team and a permanent substitute bench is not part of the vocabulary’*). To be successful, this process of negotiation had to be both contextually sensitive and productive in re-setting the discursive meaning making process (Neumann, 2001).

The changes introduced by Breivik, included an emphasis on collective action, curiosity as a means of progression, and the idea of using the ‘team as a method’. What loosely informed her approach here was Kierkegaard’s (1964) concept of ‘Hjælpekunst’; roughly translated as ‘the art of helping’. This is a uniquely Nordic idea rooted in ‘other understanding’, particularly in terms of the current position of that other. It also relates to creating conditions for a positive

encounter between the helper and the one to be helped, thus fashioning an appropriate ‘fit’ in terms of the pedagogic connection established. Constructing the relationship in any other way, according to Kierkegaard, only benefits the egotistical needs of the helper. The concept has some relation to that of mentalization devised by Skårderud and Sommerfeldt (2008), who advocated the development of competence to envisage the mental state of both self and others in order to understand and progress behaviour.

More specifically, the language in use within the LKS changed both implicitly and explicitly to *‘How can we enhance their understanding in relation to X?’* *‘How can we pedagogically improve their game understanding?’*, *‘To make mistakes is a part of the learning process, even in important games’*, *‘I am looking forward to see, how many of them will flourish in this Championship’* and *‘Let’s explore this issue with them’*. Experience and reflection were thus introduced as key concepts within a learning dominated discourse. In Bateson’s terms, the change represented Breivik’s attempt as establishing the ‘difference that makes a difference’. Such thinking was also philosophically grounded in Schön’s reflective epistemology of practice (1987, 1991), and Dewey’s (1910/1998, 1938/1997) experience-based thinking. The athletes were subsequently transposed from being ‘subjects-in-position’ to ‘subjects-in-process’ (Hemmestad, 2013). An example was the absence of the idea of a substitute’s bench within the LKS. This did not refer to only using starting line-up players, but to where a starting team would (very) rarely practice together. It was believed that doing so, eliminated ideas of a quasi-permanent replacement bench, placing value on each player as a squad member to be used depending on context. Hence, the associated learning environment created was conceptualized as both contextual and relational (Winch, 1998, Flyvbjerg, 2001). A principal means through which this strategy was delivered was through the earlier mentioned concept of ‘team as method’, and it is to an explanation of this and how it helped secure the all-important staff and athlete ‘buy in’ to the new way of working that we now turn.

*The 'team as method': The action and processes involved in generating athlete and staff 'buy in'*

The fundamental idea behind the slogan of 'team as method' was to use everyone within the context as resources; resources which could and should be drawn on to further drive individual and collective development. Unsurprisingly, discourse played an important role in the generation of change. In particular, a constant theme here was that the group was 'greater than the sum of its individual parts' (*'the team grows together stronger; the whole is a larger resource'*). However, as opposed to some vague inclusivity or superficial questioning activities, this was a strategy that possessed a clear structure; one grounded in action. Various smaller teams were thus established within the larger group. For example, there was a captain's team, a penalty shoot team, a left-handed team, a medical team and even a humour team! Within this structure, the goalkeeper 'team' comprised the three selected goalkeepers and the goalkeeper coach. The remit of such teams was to facilitate the creation of the 'best athletes in the world' (in those specific positions). In this respect, the athletes, together with the coaches, were expected to give feedback to each other. Hence, when one athlete was actively involved in a practice or in a match, the others were charged with observing her and to give insightful guidance for improvement. In this way, all the athletes were variously involved in (almost) all the activities, all of the time.

Although the above gives a clean description of what happened, from a critical interrogation, a different picture emerged. This relates to the inherent internal competition among high performance sports teams and players. To ignore such power issues and present a simplistic view of complex practice would do the activity (and the field of sports coaching in general) a disservice to say the least. On the one hand then, considerable persuasive work was done by Breivik to convince those that needed it of the merits of the peer-learning approach. In

addition to laying out a clear ‘theoretical’ case from a conscious position of institutional strength (*this is the way we will work`*), what appeared to further convince contextual actors were the practical outcomes. From the athletes’ perspectives, this involved having access to alternative opinions and considerations (easily discernible as being grounded in sporting experiences) from which to draw upon.

Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the concerted collective action resulted in more intense, insightful practice, hence, further catalysing individuals’ improvement and associated athletic performance. In such ways, the desired internal cooperation came to outweigh, although never totally negate, the inherent competition. In essence, the value of the approach emerged. The philosophic change was also justified by Breivik along more instrumental lines. Here, she argued that in tournaments, where a number of games are played in a short space of time, and on which she was ultimately judged, the mean quality of the squad as a whole had to be higher. The emphasis, therefore, lay on individual development which was, in turn, directly linked to that of the group (Breivik: “*The more you work with the individual, the greater the likelihood they can give more to the team*”). Consequently, improving so-called ‘second string’ or squad players both to put pressure on and potentially give respite to those considered more natural ‘starters’ made considerable sense. What was achieved through such action was a context which encouraged the mutual benefits of both security and insecurity; security in terms of supportive, collective action, and insecurity in relation to the creation of a fast paced dynamic learning environment where less than full engagement by individuals risked their being overtaken by the quicker development of others.

What the athletes came to value about the altered approach in the LKS was the perceived authentic opportunity to influence their own, and the team’s development. However, the issue of athlete ‘degrees of freedom’ was the subject of ongoing debate among the coaches; one that was never resolved, just revisited. Interestingly, once the initial decision to award greater

freedom was made, subsequent discussions nearly always centred on how to reverse it! Nevertheless, this relative (cautiously given) autonomy extended to athletes being able to take time away from the LKS if it was deemed necessary (for example, to spend with families). Being the opposite of more authoritarian club practice (Sissel: “*You are nearly never allowed to take a day off, and then you must send an application at least two weeks before*”), the LKS environment came to be perceived by the athletes as being constructed in their best interests; a belief that facilitated considerable commitment and ‘buy in’.

Similarly, the policy of ‘allowing mistakes’ as an essential part of the learning process created confidence among the players. Here, if errors occurred they drew both praise and constructive criticism encouraging a climate of supportive experimentation. In borrowing from Sitkin’s (1996) notion of ‘intelligent failure’, such an approach puts empirical meat on the theoretical ‘scaffolding’ advocated by Jones and Thomas (2015). Here, the case was made that small failures resulting from experimentation at the limits of what is already known should be welcomed and not avoided by coaches. This is because such failures represent the antecedent to the discovery of new understandings and techniques (Jones & Thomas, 2015): it is where learning occurs. In the words of two of the athletes from the current study;

*Hilde: “I think everyone feels a part of this team. And we are allowed to make mistakes. If you make a mistake, just continue. Let’s try again! I think we have a collective self-esteem,— we believe in each other, and I think we are good at backing each other.”*

*Marie: “We trust each other. You can make a mistake, and if you do something really good, the other team mates are proud. You experience from the other: You can make mistakes, and we can be supportive. We have worked a lot on this.”*

Similar to the players, other LKS coaches also had to be convinced of the merits of the approach, albeit to a lesser degree. Here, Breivik adopted a very inclusive style with her assistants (or co-coaches as she termed them), to the extent that she divided and allocated performance responsibilities (e.g., between offensive and defensive play). Her purpose here was to generate greater investment and care by the assistants in their now ‘front line’ work. It also allowed a focussing of staff expertise in areas in which knowledge could be best used. Similarly, it enabled the co-coaches agential space to build their own relationships with athletes, thus strengthening the collective bond. Echoing that of coaching as orchestration (Jones & Wallace, 2005, 2006), it was a strategy to engender increased professional obligation among the staff to the programme. Despite the increased pressure, the co-coaches were generally grateful for this promotion as they came to consider themselves vital parts of the overall coaching team which, in turn, increased their loyalty, reference and obligation to Breivik; they were converted to the cause. Building on previously reported research by Santos, Jones and Mesquita (2013), what Breivik demonstrated here, as opposed to some underhand Machiavellian scheming, was skilled contextual action to ‘get things done’ along desired lines (Hemmestad, Jones & Standal, 2010).

In line with the newly adopted language, the coaches engaged in exploratory practices with the athletes. Instead of directly providing suggested answers, actions were now manifest in open ended exercises where possible solutions were allowed to emerge in and through the practice itself. Examples of this stretched from discussing with players how to maximize the LKS camps (“*How can we make this training camp as good as possible, both on and off court?*”), to giving the athletes a degree of responsibility in deciding on team tactics for upcoming games (Breivik: “*we don’t need to control them all the time*”). In this way, the introduction of differing ideas held the potential for multiple interpretations. As previously mentioned, a learning through experimentation at the edge of collective knowledge was thus

embarked upon, again emphasizing both security in permission to ‘fail’, and insecurity in facing new and novel challenges with uncertain outcomes (Sitkin, 1996). In this way, frustration at any perceived lack of concrete observable progress was kept to a minimum.

Such apparent freedom, however, was bounded or framed within given objectives (Breivik: *‘Remember what the goal is here’*). Hence, although peer and self-coaching were often heard as employed concepts, their primary purpose was motivational in terms of enabling the *‘player to push herself to her potential’*. Consequently, although there was a strong and sincere belief within the LKS of ‘the athlete as resource’, such ‘resources’ were used at the disposal of Breivik to improve the collective performance. In this respect, although the language of athlete individual responsibility and even ‘empowerment’ loomed large, the athletes’ participation with the decision making process was bounded within already set limits; Breivik: *“although they are invited to negotiate about many things, it is always within a certain frame....although the athletes are charged with pointing out central themes, the co-coach and I have already decided upon some performance objectives”*. From such a position, Breivik could be conceived as someone exercising her craft through judicious judgment on coaching’s inherent complexity, as opposed to a practitioner tied to a particular model, metric or sequence (Jones & Wallace, 2005; Jones & Standage, 2006).

According to Neumann (2001: 169), resistance against hegemonic representations is always a possibility, indeed, almost an inevitability. Similarly, we consider it appropriate to discuss and track some of the resistance faced by Breivik, lest an overly functional picture emerge of complex practice. Far being obstructive, the resistance expressed could be conceived as some kind of ‘creative protest’ (Neuman, 2001), a process which kept the overall project grounded in everyday reality. In this way, some of Breivik’s more radical ideas within her inclusive agenda were tempered as the athletes did not unconditionally ‘buy in’ to them. Rather, within a broad culture of consent, they accepted, rejected, linked and amended some of the

introduced elements they believed were relevant and beneficial to their learning and performances. Through such actions the players reaffirmed their positions as ‘being in the context’ (Neuman, 2001). Such actions also, had to be necessarily accommodated and accepted by Breivik as evidence of sincerity to her own cause.

A specific issue to overcome here was that of trust. According to Meyer and Ward (2009) an agreed definition of trust continues to prove elusive, particularly (and perhaps ironically in the context of some of the language used within the LKS) in relation to dependence. An initial challenge for Breivik was to win the confidence and trust of the athletes, so that they could ‘talk’ in the LKS context. As expressed by two of them.

*Tuva: “I have not had the guts to tell, to speak up. I have never been good at this. I don’t know what to say, so feel bad for saying nothing”*

*Sonja: “to succeed with this strategy [with team as a method], we all have to be engaged, and feel free to talk. That’s not always the case. I’ve always had opinions, but didn’t say anything, because I was scared of them thinking I was stupid or something.*

Dealing with such insecurities became central to Breivik’s work at the LKS. Here, she consciously went about building relationships with both athletes and coaches to construct an environment which was perceived as a trust-worthy one. In this respect, Meyer and Ward (2009) define trust as a social thing, in that it occurs as a result of communication. Communication, defined as ‘talking with’ (as opposed to ‘talking to’) the athletes (and coaches), was fundamental to Breivik’s overall project; something the athletes, in particular, came to value.

*Hilde: ‘I feel recognized in the relationship now’*



*Sonja: 'The coaches take time to listen. They are more open to critical input. Thus, the players are more open and dare to say what they mean.'*

*Tuva: 'Our relationship is getting better. I think she (the coach) understands me a little better, and I understands her'*

The intentional move from 'instruction to dialogue' bore fruit in terms of the coaching within the LKS becoming more relational in nature which, in turn, generated greater 'buy in' to the changed practice.

The case for sports coaching as a relational activity is, of course, not particularly new or novel. Indeed, over the past decade it has become, to a degree, the mainstream school of thought within the discipline (see Jones et al [2014] among many others). What the present case study highlights, however, are elements of the complexity involved in this relationality. For example, it could be argued that what Breivik achieved (be it intentional or not) through her desire to include athletes and others in her more egalitarian coaching practice was, paradoxically, increased enthusiasm and motivation to comply with the given agenda. She did this by adhering to the concepts of 'team as method' and 'actors as resources'. In placing such value on others, the obligation to partake and engage in Breivik's novel project on those others was augmented. According to the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1979), trust thrives in situations of risk. Taking elite sport performance as a very risky context, Breivik's coaching here would appear particularly fit for purpose. In generating a degree of trust through building relations and 'allowing mistakes', she minimized the perceived risk of failure (and its feared consequences) for athletes, thus allowing them the courage to work at the edge of the capabilities; to improve. In many ways, the coaching actions here echo those of Carl Axel Hageskog, the successful Swedish tennis coach, who claimed that the key to winning (the principal objective) was to find the athletes' strengths and maximize them ("It's all about winning, which you can make it

happen if you use your strengths” [Fahlström & Hageskog, 2010: 49]). It could be argued that in identifying and somewhat returning to long established Nordic values, Breivik made an attempt to utilize deep rooted, ‘live’ social beliefs which became powerful motivators in a collective effort through individual achievement.

### **Reflective conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to provide insight into cultural change and development within high performance sport. It was to explore the effect of Marit Breivik’s appointment to the Norwegian national female handball team, particularly in relation to establishing a new (more traditionally Nordic) way of working, the ‘power plays’ evident in coming to a consensual working arrangement, and the experience of the athletes and other contextual actors in the general process.

On one level, it tells a critical story of a realized vision, inclusive of some of the bumps experienced along the way. On another, however, it cites the return of elite sporting activity to what can be considered more traditional Nordic values; in particular, those of magnanimity, democracy, inclusivity and tolerance. This is not to posit the practice described as some kind of ‘gold standard’ of coaching; such a universal concept cannot sit well with contingent contextual practice. Nevertheless, the LKS provides some interesting considerations in terms of maximizing resources, further supporting coaching as a relational practice, and valuing collective above (albeit through) individual development. As we have emphasized through the piece, however, this was not, and continues not to be, an unproblematic clear-cut process. In this instance, where there are ‘winners’ there are also those who have not won. Within this latter category were athletes who, having being subjected to other coaching discourses and means for so long, just could not (or did not want to) adapt well or easily to the new regime. Consequently, far from dissipating power, the new structure merely consolidated it in other modalities. Such

analysis takes to task those who naively advocate 'empowerment' as an unproblematic means towards contextual equality or even coach redundancy. Similarly, Breivik's rise to her present position as the principal sports manager of Norwegian summer sport at Olympiatoppen is not without context. For example, the success achieved by the LKS was not an aberration. Indeed, women's handball had been internationally successful since 1986, thus Breivik's work built on an established tradition; it came from an existing power base within high performance Nordic sport. Nevertheless, her success provided an alternative contextual discourse, one that challenged the dominant rationality through an inclusion of more mainstream Nordic social principles. We also believe that the study has value on another level; particularly in drawing attention the plays of power (Westwood, 2002) evident in high performance sport and how they were agentially managed. In challenging hegemonic discourse, a reaction was inevitable; a retort that could not be ignored. Consequently, in tracking and interpreting Breivik's actions and reactions to context, a picture emerges of how change processes are instigated, further emerge, and negotiated by contextual actors at a micro level, within results-driven organizations.

In returning to the value of the paper, while recognizing the limited scope of a single case study design, we nevertheless believe the study has relevance beyond its immediate setting. Here, we invoke the power of the good example; of being 'relatable' research (Bassey, 1981) inclusive of thick description where the findings can be extrapolated to similar 'people-events-situations'. Through such detailed description and considered interpretation, as offered in this paper, generalizations can be made about particulars (Stake & Trumbull, 1982). Nevertheless, in line with interpretive research, the findings and analysis presented here should be considered as suggestive as opposed to absolute in nature (Crotty, 1998).

In concluding this paper, we briefly evoke the dual notions of 'progressive repair' and that of the 'virtuoso actor' (Flyberg, 2001) to better understand Breivik's work of cultural

change; this is both in terms of making changes happen and in acknowledging how much change is enough. In doing so, we further the case for coaching as ‘practical wisdom’, and coaches as constant and constructive deliberators in relation to values and power (Hemmestad, Jones & Standal, 2010). In a recent paper, Dant (2010) contrasted the work of production with the work of repair, arguing the latter as an ‘artisanal process’ in tune with the notion of being human. It was claimed that amongst the distinctive characteristics of such work are the use of a complex repertoire of gestures, a variable emotional tone, and the discernible gathering of knowledge. Similarly, rather than having any static associations of returning to an original position (as in repairing to an initial state), the work of repair as conceptualised is to do with progression, albeit it in a contextually sensitive way. Consequently, it builds upon Puddifoot’s (2000) critique of what counts as a ‘social process’, arguing that such a course is continuously subject to and shaped by the practice vagaries of everyday life, whilst being inclusive of notions such as ‘drift’, ‘tinkering’ and ‘improvisation’ (Smith, 2005). Whilst engaging in the work of repair may be considered time consuming and frustrating for coaches when things don’t work ‘the way they should’, athletes, no more than new ideas, are not there simply to be discarded, to be thrown away when the reward is not immediate. The work of repair thus counters a ‘just-in-time’ version of coaching; that is, a fast paced automated process with no time for thought, reflection or social interaction. The concept also acknowledges that resistance to change is inevitable; it is how one responds to it that matters. Thus, even when tasks appear the same, each new interaction or situation is considered different, hence, demanding novel consideration. Similarly, it appreciates that often the nature of the task can only be ‘imprecisely specified in advance while its actual demands emerge as the work progresses’ (Dant, 2010: 2.5).

Such were the actions of Breivik in our study. Here, her work comprised of both careful initiation and reaction. We consider the demonstrated expertise to come not only from a determined vision, desire and design to change a culture, but more how she engineered the on-

going process. In this respect, although she openly used and pushed the communal language of shared leadership through individual responsibility, she was also aware that this (eventually) became the dominant discourse within the LKS, complete with normalisation and disciplinary dangers. We consider that her actions within the process can also be viewed as those of a ‘virtuoso social and political actor’ (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 2). Here, Flyvbjerg borrows from Dreyfus’ thinking on expertise in describing someone adept at intuitively creating social change; someone who can read and react to social contexts to secure desired ends through insightfully “intervening in a field of forces” (Standal & Hemmestad, 2011, p. 49). In this respect, she brought to bear the Nordic values of community building (and social capital), consensus and cooperation to challenge the more individualistic high-performance sport discourse. As opposed to the rigidity of the culture she inherited at the LKS, and increasingly in line with developing more socially responsible ‘citizens’, we consider such actions to hold the potential for a more sustainable way of working for coaches; a way which demands further attention.

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