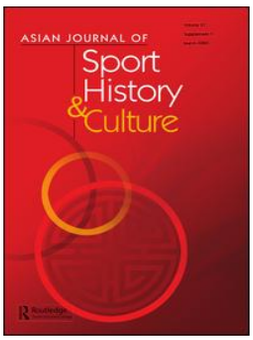

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Educating the Elite in an Egalitarian Context: The Emergence of Sport Schools for Elite Talents in Sweden in the 1970s

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ABSTRACT

How is an elite sports education introduced in a political context like 1970s Sweden, where egalitarian ideas about education and sport for all were the norm and anything hinting at special treatment for talented youths was potentially controversial? This article analyzes the history of how Sweden designed and implemented a nationwide system for elite sport education, and how different actors negotiated the balance between elite sport and education. The Swedish sport schools were initiated in 1972 to solve the issue with the growing importance of elite sport, in parallel with the increasing importance of upper-secondary education. One innovation in these schools was the introduction of a school subject called Special sport. Starting with two schools and 80 students in the early 1970s, there are now more than 50 schools and 1200 students. Since the very beginning, these schools have had a dual mission – produce more and better elite athletes and give sport talents a full education to fall back on should they not become professional athletes. The introduction of sport schools in 1970s Sweden was part of a broader sportification process and has in some sports become the only realistic path toward an elite career.

KEYWORDS

Sportification; dual career; sport schools; physical education; Sweden; skiing

Educating the Elite – A Tale of Two Logics

Today, elite sport education is common practice throughout the world. State-funded, private and club-based schools and academies gather talented athletes and aim to offer optimized conditions for training and development for talents recruited from near and far. However, despite the long tradition in many countries of institutes for physical education, the formal blending of education and elite sport training is fairly recent. The 1990s and early 2000s saw the rise of elite-oriented sport schools in many countries, often after heated debates over the balance between elite sports and education.[1] Given the sheer volume of research during the last two decades on talent development in general and the *dual career* issue in particular, there seems to be a

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lingering tension between the logics of elite sport (i.e. sportification) and the logic of equal education for all.[2] Indeed, the dual career model has been criticized as a form of legitimization strategy for elite sport education.[3]

Historical studies can give new perspectives on how this tension between elite sport and education has been managed in various political and organizational contexts, not least in the light of the sportification model and the idea that sports develop towards increasing specialization and rationalization.[4] From this perspective, elite sport schools can be seen as a form of sportification of the education system and as a tool to promote earlier and more elaborate specialization among talented athletes.

With this fundamental tension between education and sport(ification) as a point of departure, this article will look into how elite sport schools were introduced in 1970s Sweden. At the time, Swedish society embraced egalitarian ideas about education and indeed for society as a whole.[5] Sport for all was the norm and anything hinting at special treatment for talented youths was potentially controversial.[6] This article analyzes the history of how Sweden designed and implemented a nationwide system of upper secondary sport schools, and how different actors negotiated the balance between elite sport and education. The article begins with a broad background on the introduction of the Swedish sport schools, and then zooms in on one of the sports included: cross-country skiing. Cross-country skiing is a suitable case because the Swedish Ski Association was one of few sport organizations involved throughout the startup phase, and because the sport schools have been immensely important for cross-country skiing in comparison to other sports.[7]

While Sweden certainly was not the first country to integrate elite sport with education, the influence of international forerunners was limited. The American model, with stipends for talented athletes which gave them admission to colleges and universities, was ruled out as inappropriate for Sweden. The different approaches to sport management in Europe and the US have been thoroughly researched. Where the American model for intercommunion between education and sport has focussed on elite sports and organized those elite ambitions in tandem with high schools and colleges, most European countries have prioritized exercise sports for the broad population and school sports with exercise and public health in focus.[8] The Scandinavian countries, with their social democratic model of society and their focus on equal opportunities for all, advocated sports for all, both through individuals being members in sport associations and clubs, and throughout the school system. Swedish school sports was, according to sport historian Pia Lundquist Wanneberg, 'a civic education of the body' where the important thing was to activate as many as possible rather than allowing a few talented athletes to fulfil their potential.[9] In addition, the growing importance of science-based training theory had led to a scientific turn in Swedish sports, at first manifested in elite endurance training but gradually finding its way into school sports as well during the 1960s.[10] Both of these trends – school sports as a civic education and the growing influence of rational training methods – were primarily aimed at the broad population. The American model, where athletes gained access to prestigious educations based on athletic skills rather than school results, was simply seen as too elitist for a Swedish context.[11]

Equally controversial in relation to the Swedish amateur regulations and the political climate were the Eastern European authoritarian regimes and their model

of de facto state-funded professionals training during work hours on their jobs in factories or the military.[12] As for their sport schools, the Soviet Union together with East Germany had been the forerunners. There were elite sport schools for several sports throughout the Soviet Union, starting in 1962. In East Germany such schools were up and running already in the 1950s.[13] Though the Russian work with periodization and scientific influence on training was well-developed, their approach to early specialization and elite boarding schools was not seen as a viable alternative for Swedish conditions.[14] The few study visits that Swedish representatives conducted in the Soviet Union appear to have made little impact on the sport school project, which could partly be explained with the difficulties in getting a clear idea of how the Soviet system actually worked, and partly due to the reluctance of copying a politically controversial country.[15] For similar reasons, the East German sport schools did not provide any notable influence in the Swedish process.[16]

The Swedish upper secondary schools for elite sport talent were initiated in 1972 in a joint effort by the Swedish National Agency for Education and the umbrella organization for sports, the Swedish Sports Confederation. These sport schools set out to recruit the most talented young athletes in several sports. The start-up had been preceded by a decade-long discussion about how to solve the issue with the growing importance of elite sport, in parallel with the increasing importance of upper secondary education. It was an initiative from various Swedish sport federations and associations, backed by politicians across the ideological palette, many of whom had direct ties to sport federations and/or with a background as athletes. The idea was to gather talented athletes in a good environment, provide them with optimized training facilities, coaches, scientific testing and opportunity to train during school hours, while still providing them with an upper secondary education at par with what regular students had.

The Swedish sport school system expanded continuously during the following decades. Starting with two schools and 80 students in the early 1970s, there are now more than 50 schools and 1200 students. Since the very beginning, these schools have had a dual mission – produce more and better elite athletes *and* give sport talent a full education to fall back on after their time in elite sport should they not become professional athletes. This dual mission, building on a dual career ideal, is perhaps the most obvious way in which sport schools balance the aims of elite sports and education.

Swedish sport schools have become an important part of many elite athlete careers. A study from 2015 initiated by the Swedish Sports Confederation, on the career paths of elite athletes in several sports, shows that sport schools play a significant role. Responses form 328 elite athletes clearly indicate that in sports like badminton, basketball, gymnastics, floorball, orienteering and skiing it is hard to pursue an elite career without attending a sport school.[17] Choosing a sport school for upper-secondary education has become a breaking point, where talented athletes either pursue an elite career and thus apply to a sport school or in practice give up their elite ambitions. It has also meant that the age when you transfer to upper-secondary school (16) is also the age when specialization and rationalization accelerate for elite talents.[18] This illustrates how sport schools have led to earlier and more far-reaching specialization.

In some sports, such as cross-country skiing, it is now almost impossible to reach the national team without passing through the Swedish elite sport school system. In today's national team all skiers have a background form the sport school system, and historically this has been the case for decades. Since 2001 there are only two cross-country skiers who have competed for Sweden in FIS World Championships or Olympic games without having attended a sport school. If you include under-23 World Championships, another two skiers could be added to the group, but during the same time period 100 students from sport schools have been selected at this highest level of elite skiing.[19] Clearly, the sport school system has become more or less mandatory for skiers with elite ambitions. This is another reason for the focus on skiing in this article. In sports such as figure skating and gymnastics, specialization starts well before the age of 16 and the sport schools in this case is a continuation of specialization already at lower secondary level.[20]

Traditionally, most cross-country skiers had a totally different career path. For male skiers, it was work in the forest that provided the base training. Up until he 1960s, almost all male skiers in the national team had a background as forestry workers. Only the odd knifemaker (Nils Karlsson) or baker (Rolf Rämgård) nuanced that image.[21] For female skiers, it was mainly through hard physical work on farms or in old-fashioned, labour-intense rural grocery stores that they gained extra endurance and strength training. As this gradually changed from the 1950s onwards, a physically demanding daytime job was replaced by a rationalized form of science-based training, building on physiology.[22]

Sport and physical activity had been important in the Swedish welfare state project during the 1950s and 1960s, not only for athletes but for the whole population. It was an egalitarian approach to sport, where the participation of the masses was prioritized over the international competitiveness of Swedish elite athletes.[23] Even the far-reaching cooperation between sport organizations (i.e. the Swedish Ski Association) and physiologists was framed as basic research, that would produce results for the good of the whole population rather than just raising the performance levels of elite skiers.[24] This illustrates how elite sports, and certainly elite sport schools, were an anomaly in the welfare society designed by the Social Democratic Party and had to be motivated through its direct or indirect contribution to public health. Why, then, were elite schools introduced in this context?

In the following, this paper analyzes the tension between elite sport and education in sport schools, through the case of how such schools were established in Sweden. Why did a specialized education system for sport talent arise in Sweden in the 1970s (which was rather early in an international perspective)? Which sport organizations and other actors were involved and how did they negotiate between sport and education in these new sport schools? To contextualize this change, the historical balance between elite sports and exercise sports in Swedish society will also be addressed.

Sportification and *Rational Amateurism*

The introduction of sport schools in general, and more specifically the Swedish case, was part of a broad sportification process. Specialization and scientization were used to address a perceived need for more and better training at an early career

phase. Simultaneously, the generally increasing demands for reaching elite level in many sports became an issue in relation to upper-secondary education. Sportification has been ascribed with various criteria over the years, but it usually includes most of the following: specialization, rationalization, standardization, regimentation, organization, equalization and quantification.[25] In relation to the Swedish sport schools, sportification is useful to understand how and why the schools were set up the way they were, and why the need for such schools was perceived as more and more pressing in the early 1970s.

In addition, the concept of *rational amateurism* as laid out by Swedish sport historian Torbjörn Andersson will be used to frame the argument from proponents of the sport school system. Andersson argues that the Swedish sport model, though lifting the amateur regulations in 1967 and thereby in theory opening up for professional sport, continued to be based on amateurism as an ideal.[26] However, it was an amateurism that aimed to be rational, science-based and systematic - in essence, a sportified version of amateurism that was professional in everything (not least the time invested in training) but economic terms. This stands in sharp contrast to, for example, elite football in many countries in the 1970s, where the players were professional in terms of personal economy but acted like amateurs in many respects relating to issues such as nutrition.[27]

This study aims to investigate the tensions between sport and education in the emerging sport schools. To do this, archival sources from the Swedish Sports Confederation, the Swedish Ski Association and the Swedish National Agency for Education will be analyzed. These archives include a rich variety of protocols, strategy documents and meeting minutes. For this article, the meeting minutes from the Swedish Ski Association's education committee have been in focus. It was in this group that the planning, implementation and development of sport schools were discussed, and the committee can be said to represent an elite sport perspective. Regarding the Swedish Sports Confederation archives, this article builds mainly on the minutes from their working group on sport schools. Together, these two sources have provided hundreds of protocols and other documents with details on how the discussions developed during the 1970s and 1980s. However, they first and foremost represent the sport sector. To include the view of the education sector, this article also uses evaluation reports from the Swedish National Agency for Education. In addition, propositions by individual members of the Swedish parliament, as well as the Swedish Government Official Report 1969:29, *Sports for all* (*Idrott åt alla*), will be used to analyze the political debates related to this new initiative.[28]

Building on this material, and earlier research on the scientization of endurance sports and the tensions between elite sport and education, this article sheds new light on how the introduction of sport schools were a manifestation of increasing sportification of Swedish sports. The schools became an important tool for spreading ideas about scientific, rational training among elite talents, and a way to subject younger athletes to the scientific training and testing regime that until then had been aimed primarily at athletes who were already in the national teams.[29] This development is framed as a result of a long discussion involving actors from sport and from politics at many levels, providing new details about how Swedish sport was related to politics. As earlier research has shown, Swedish sport embraced an

apolitical self-understanding and sought to avoid any kind of boycotts or protests at international level, even when it led to controversy.[30] It was perceived as neutral, while sport at a domestic level is nevertheless part of a broad political project to rationalize the population and introduce a more healthy lifestyle.[31] The sport schools were a political compromise between two increasingly important sectors of Swedish society: elite sports and upper-secondary education.

There is not much historical research on the Swedish sport school system. In 1981, barely a decade after the first sport schools were started, Martin Johansson from Umeå University conducted an evaluation. As he was a researcher in pedagogy, he focussed mainly on the educational perspectives of these schools.[32] There have also been comparative studies where Swedish sport schools have been contrasted against other cases.[33] This article focus on how actors from Swedish sport organizations aimed to introduce elite sport logic in the otherwise egalitarian Swedish school system, and succeeded in making these schools contribute to earlier specialization and rationalization. By zooming in on the Swedish case, this article provides an in-depth analysis of the political context and the organizations and actors involved in the process. While some references to the sport schools of other countries will provide valuable context, a more elaborate comparative approach lies outside the scope of this article.

Sports for All and a New System for Talent Development

Discussions about talent management in Sweden had been ongoing during the 1960s. It had become apparent that to be an elite athlete in many sports had become more time-consuming, following the accelerating sportification in sports such as cross-country skiing, football and tennis.[34] There were concerns in many sport associations that earlier specialization and increasing training load was needed, and that this was hard to achieve without integrating sport-specific training in the upper secondary school system.

In parallel, the upper secondary school itself had become more important. As the Swedish state was transitioning from an industrial economy to a more diversified, service-based economy, a higher percentage of the workforce went on from secondary to upper secondary education. In 1971, it was reformed and organized with a new curriculum: Lgy 70.[35]

The debate about the role of sports, and especially elite sports, in Swedish society was lively during the 1960s. While there was still a clear focus on sports for all as a tool for public health and instilling democratic values through being part of a local sport association or club, there were also signs of an increasing importance of elite sports.[36] Two examples of this were the lifting of the amateur regulations in 1967, and the trial introduction of special sports platoons in the Swedish army that same year. The army management argued that this could enhance the physical performance of the soldiers, while from a sports perspective it would allow for a continuation of elite sport exceptionalism through both civic and military education.[37] The military aspects of elite sport education lie outside the scope of this article but it should be noted how the civic and military initiatives were launched more or less simultaneously.

If elite sports were increasingly important, the same can be said for education. Sweden in the 1960s was characterized by a tireless inquiry of how to organize and optimize education at a time when the Swedish economy was transitioning and the need for higher education levels had become clear. Several Swedish Government Official Reports were published during the 1960s, and they had in common an ambition to bring order in the upper-secondary education system.[38]

Regarding sports, there were two main perspectives voiced in these discussions. On the one hand there was a genuine fear that elite athletes would miss out on a proper education, leading to unemployment and all kinds of related problems once their career was over (or even worse, if it failed altogether). Such fears had a long tradition In Sweden and had even been voiced by one of the most well-known authors already in the 1930s.[39]

On the other hand, elite sport organizations saw a need for earlier specialization and special solutions to allow elite talent to devote more time to training. In relation to population numbers, Sweden had generally been successful in international sports throughout the twentieth century. However, fears of falling behind in the increasingly hard competition had been voiced form within the sports movement since the 1950s, and such fears had accelerated a process of scientization of training.[40] In the 1960s, those fears were again heard throughout the sports sector. How would Swedish athletes be able to devote enough time to their training if they were required to pursue a full-time upper-secondary education until they had reached their twenties? Would it not be reasonable to allow for special treatment of those with special talent, so that they could fulfil their potential and bring medals and pride to the nation? In essence, Sweden should allow for earlier specialization in response to the ongoing sportification and the resulting increase in performance levels required to compete at international level.

The issue of sport and education made its way into the highest levels of political discussion during the 1960s, most clearly marked by the appointment of the *Sports for all* inquiry (Swedish: *Idrott åt alla*) on November 30, 1965. Social Democratic politician Gunnar Lange, then head of the Department of Commerce who administered the inquiry, pointed at the importance of sports in society and specifically mentioned the potential of elite sports to enthuse the masses.

> The importance of elite sports to stimulate active involvement in sport should not be underestimated. A rich sporting life with eminent elite sports also has an ability to engage large groups of people without those people being active in sport themselves. Thereby, sport has an indirect and certainly not unessential meaning for large parts of our people through giving excitement and recreation.[41]

The directives from Gunnar Lange to the *Sports for all* inquiry group show how elite sports was an integrated part of the job and illustrated a recognition of the role of elite sports in society in a way that was rather unusual in the Swedish welfare state bureaucracy. However, there was a long tradition within the sport sector to see elite sports in such a way. Though the dominating system for physical exercise during the nineteenth century – Ling gymnastics – relied more on exhibitions of skill in non-competitive formats and shunned the idea of elite athletes specialized on a certain type of performance, elite sports had been appreciated already by the

man who became known as the father of Swedish sports. Viktor Balck (1844–1928), though heavily inspired by British sports ideals, was far less invested in amateurism than most of his contemporary sport leader colleagues.[42] When summarizing the 1912 Olympic games in Stockholm, Balck was convinced that the displays of superior athletes in the competitions had raised interest for sports in general and would result in more people taking an active part in sports in the years to come.[43] This idea of elite sports as inspirational for the masses rather than something with intrinsic value resurfaced in other evaluations and documents published by organizations like the Swedish Sports Confederation.[44]

It was as if elite sport in itself was a bit controversial in an egalitarian society like Sweden, and mainly valuable as a source of inspiration to get more people involved in a healthy and rational lifestyle. At least, that was how elite sports were portrayed in the 1969 *Sports for all* inquiry.[45] In *Sports for all*, a definition of sports was articulated: 'All competitive and other physical activities that people engage in to reach a certain result or to get exercise and physically active recreation'.[46] In addition, sport and outdoor recreation is said to have become more and more indivisible. Even though the inquiry did acknowledge the growing importance of elite sports in society, it was still in many ways a confirmation that *sports for all* was the most important part of the sports sector. It was the positive public health effects and democratic fostering that justified state funding of sports, rather than any international medals.[47]

The inquiry group argued for a review of how to combine elite sports with upper-secondary education and eventually a career outside of elite sports.[48] There were two important problems to solve. The first one was to prevent that young athletes with elite ambitions who eventually did not make it to the highest level would find themselves lacking relevant education and thus risking unemployment. Given the increasing demands on elite athletes in many sports, it was feared that such issues would become more common. Here we see how the effects of sportification, exemplified by early specialization and young athletes aiming for professional status, applied an external pressure on the Swedish education system.

The second problem to solve was how to design a system for talent development that would ensure that Sweden stayed competitive on international level. Again, sportification in the form of rationalization of training and specialization of athletes in other countries could lead to tougher international competition if Sweden did not match those efforts. If the first issue came out of the educational sector, the second issue was an issue raised by sport organizations. With these two quite different approaches to talent development and elite sports written into the *Sports for all* inquiry, they had basically laid the foundation for the initiation of sport schools.

Let us dwell for a moment on the duality of this model. On the one hand, it can be understood as an equalizing measure to provide elite talent with a satisfactory education in parity with the rest of the young population. With such a perspective, the sport schools were (and are) in line with a broader equalization target of Swedish educational politics.[49] If instead we look at Swedish sport schools from an elite sport perspective, it is a way to keep up with increasing demands due to sportification, and the main goal is not to equalize but to specialize, optimize and produce elite athletes of the highest possible standard.

With the balance between sport and education as a key ingredient, the possibility to draw on sport school management in other countries was rather limited. Both the North American elite-focussed stipend model and the Eastern European state-funded early specialization of elite athletes were deemed unsuitable for Sweden. Instead, the *Sports for all* inquiry suggested that upper-secondary schools and universities should enable athletes to pursue their education by offering specially adapted courses of study, distance education and similar solutions. This was not uncontroversial either, but as argued in the inquiry the development of elite sports had made some sports, such as cross-country skiing, a full-time commitment during at least part of the year.[50] In combination with the growing importance of upper-secondary education, which was to be reformed from the academic year 1971–72, this called for compromises that would allow elite athletes to pursue a dual career path. From an elite sport vantage point, making talented athletes study full-time until the age of 19, instead of 16 as had been the case hitherto, would decrease the chances of Sweden to produce successful elite athletes. While the concerns from an educational perspective centred on a fear of athlete students failing their courses, there was a common will to avoid putting such students in a position where they had to choose between sport and education. Sport schools could provide a solution acceptable to both sides, a compromise between sportification and education.

The *Sports for all* inquiry suggested that it was the Swedish Sports Confederation, together with individual sport associations such as the Swedish Ski Association and the Swedish Football Association, who should draw up the framework for the new sport schools.[51] While *Sports for all* was not elite-sports friendly per se, it did give the Swedish Sports Confederation a mandate to design a new form of upper-secondary education that would help sport talents to a good education *and* provide Sweden with more top-level athletes. They did not rest on their laurels.

Designing Sport Schools: A Negotiation between Education and Sport

It would take less than three years from the publication of the *Sports for all* inquiry to the launch of the first sport schools. In 1969, a working group was formed. It was led by Paul Högberg, the Dean of the Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences and the task at hand was to suggest a design for the sport schools.[52] He was joined by representatives from the Swedish Ski Association (C-G Briandt, who also had a connection to The Swedish School of Sport and Health Sciences where he worked as a teacher), the Swedish Gymnastics Association, the Swedish Football Association, the Swedish Sports Confederation and the Swedish National Agency for Education. The odd man out was the headmaster of an upper-secondary school in Sollefteå, located in north-eastern Sweden.[53] He was part of the group because Sollefteå had been identified as a possible location for one of the first sport schools. The other members of the group were more expected names, representing either the sports sector or educational authorities. It is worth noting that both Paul Högberg and C-G Briandt had already been active players in the scientization of Swedish endurance sports, building on their networks in both science and sport.[54]

The working group presented a report in June 1970. They identified three major challenges in combining elite sports with upper-secondary education. The first

challenge was training, which would demand lots of time and access to good training facilities and top of the line equipment. The training facilities needed to be specialized, to enable the best possible training for the specific sport conducted at each school. A second problem was the long travels which elite talent had to undertake to train on snow early in the season and to participate in national and even international competitions. This was an effect of the organization regionally, nationally and internationally, which had resulted in an increasing number of competitions on all levels. A third issue was the sport-specific demands that meant that the schools had to be adapted for the demands of certain sports. A school focussed on cross-country skiing would not automatically be a good place for developing tennis players. There were no universal, generalist solution and instead the schools should be as specialized as possible. All three of these issues, it was argued, could be solved with a boarding school system that allowed for training during school hours but outside of the curriculum.[55] In that way, schools would have the students in place full-time which would allow for flexibility in scheduling training. The working group suggested extended study counselling for young elite athletes, and starting two boarding schools on trial, one with focus on skiing and the other with focus on indoor sports. They argued for the importance of a good environment for talent development, and that included both training and education. In terms of outdoor sports, local geography was an important factor.[56]

The boarding school setup was not a new idea. Even though there were few international examples to build upon, some ideas were gathered from the Austrian ski school in Stams, Tirol, that had started in 1968.[57] In the fall of 1969, C-G Briandt went there to learn more about their setup. What he found was a boarding school with flexible study hours, training during daytime classes formed by sport and admission based on athletic ability and potential.[58] Moreover, the school in Stams had developed an early attempt at dual career paths, by offering courses in tourism, training science and ski lift construction.[59] It was clear that for those who did not become top-level athletes, the school still offered a possibility to work with skiing through alpine tourism. Briandt reported back that the Austrian model worked well, and this served as a confirmation for the Swedish Sports Confederation to go ahead with their plans.[60]

Finally, and perhaps most controversially, the report explicitly called for appreciation of how intense the workload would be for the student athletes at times, and that his would have to be allowed to take its toll on their performance in school. In such cases, sport school students should be exempt of some of the consequences which otherwise applied. In addition, it was argued that sport schools, unlike regular upper-secondary schools, should allow for national uptake, meaning that students from all over the country could apply.[61] The general procedure for ordinary schools was that students went to the nearest school, preferably in the same municipality.

The proposal of the working group was realized in most aspects, with the change that instead of Sollefteå the ski school ended up in the tiny village of Järpen located in the mountainous region in mid-Western Sweden not far from the Norwegian border. The explicit argument to choose Järpen over Sollefteå was that the economic and educational aspects were better there.[62] Another thing was the advantages with

having the student athletes living in a place with very little to offer in terms of distractions outside of school. Järpen, like Stams in Austria, was quiet to say the least.[63]

When the first sport schools were inaugurated in 1972, there were two schools with a total of 80 students. It was a joint effort by the Swedish Sports Confederation, Swedish National Agency for Education and an umbrella organization for Swedish municipalities. The national federation of each of the sports involved also had influence over the project. The sports in question were cross-country skiing and alpine skiing in Järpen, and badminton, basketball, table tennis, tennis and volleyball in Malmö.[64] There was also a parallel initiative with a swimming school in southern Sweden that would eventually become a sanctioned part of the Swedish Sports Confederation's project.

The 80 students were admitted based on proven ability and potential, with grades in ordinary school subjects merely a baseline requirement that was not decisive for admission. In effect, athletic ability was more important than academic ability. At this stage, the sport schools were formally set up as a test and therefore needed to be evaluated. This was unknown terrain, given the innovative blend of education and elite sports. The solution was as unsurprising as it was telling – the schools assumed responsibility for educational performance, while all other evaluation of student performance (social issues, training, performance in competitions etc) fell on the coaches and the sport federations.[65] Though formally part of the ordinary upper-secondary school system, the role distribution in the evaluation of student athletes signaled that a certain tension between elite sport and education was built into the system, and was handled through a division of labour between the school and the sport organizations involved. That said, training was still conducted outside of the curriculum. The student athletes could use parts of the day for training and then had extra classes in the evenings.[66] It was a flexible schedule, but it was still not training as a formal part of education. However, another innovation was on the horizon.

Training as Education: Introducing a New School Subject

In 1977, sport schools got their own school subject. *Special sport* (*Specialidrott*) allowed for five hours of training per week as part of the curriculum and was graded like any other subject.[67] It was a game changer for the sport schools. Now they could use more of the time during school hours for training, without having to burden students with additional workload in the evenings and weekends. In effect, *Special sport* made it possible to replace part of the ordinary theoretical courses with training theory and practice. This was similar to how some more practically oriented upper secondary school programmes incorporated practice in car repairs or electrical installation and underlined the changing view on elite sports from an avocation to a possible profession.

The introduction of the new school subject *Special sport* signaled a stratification of physical education. The ordinary PE subject, *Physical education and health*, already had a clear focus on exercise sport and outdoor recreation and have continued to evolve toward less sportification.[68] It introduced the student to many different sports and recreational activities and was directed towards public health. In line with those

ambitions, *Physical education and health* was included for all students in upper secondary education. On the contrary, *Special sport* was only available for students at a sport school. It was a specialized subject focussing on preparing the student for elite performance in their respective sport. It included aspects of injury prevention, nutrition, psychology, physiology, training methodology, and performance enhancement. Its general content was specified according to which sport the student were supposed to perform in.[69] When comparing the specialized subject *Special sport* to the generalist PE subject *Physical education and health*, the latter aims more at physical activity as a tool for improved movement ability and health than on performance. In line with this, there is also a difference on the teaching side. *Physical education and health* is taught by university-educated PE teachers, employed at the school where they teach. *Special sport* is often led by coaches who may or may not be educated teachers, and who may or may not be employed by the school.[70] It would not be a mischaracterization to frame those who teach *Special sport* at Swedish sport schools as coaches rather than teachers. One effect of introducing elite sport logics as an integrated part of education has been that those logics have become a guiding principle at sport schools, sometimes in conflict with the overarching values of Swedish school system.[71] Framing teachers as coaches and students as athletes is one of many indications of this development, and it illustrates how specialization has permeated the sport schools. Neither the general PE courses nor the generalist PE education seems to be sufficient for the specialized talent development in the sport school system.

The Sport School Test Made Permanent

The first decade with sport schools was, despite some minor problems during the first years, deemed a success. There was a growing interest in the sport school format and when some municipalities launched their own initiatives, both the Swedish National Agency for Education and the Swedish Sports Confederation saw a need to centralize the sport school system and clarify where it was suitable to place such schools.[72]

When the responsibility for the test schools was transferred to the Swedish National Agency for Education in 1977 it was a signal of intent. No more local initiatives, stricter control and follow-up from education authorities. By then, 11 sports distributed over 12 schools were part of the project which continued to expand. After a number of political initiatives and motions from individual members of the Swedish parliament, the government approved an expansion of the sport school system in 1979.[73] More schools were added and in 1982, a decade after the first school started, the test was made permanent. Now there were 14 different sport schools only in skiing.[74] The sport schools' programme for elite athletes was formally named *Combination with Special sport* (in Swedish: *kombination med specialidrott*).[75] The division of responsibilities had found its form. The government decided on the number of sport schools to fund while the Swedish Sports Confederation and the Swedish National Agency for Education chose which sports to include, where to place the schools and how to distribute the number of students for each sport and school. On paper, they were also responsible for the admission process. In practice

though, it fell upon each school and sport (i.e. on the sport school coaches and the sport federations) to judge which students who showed the most potential.[76]

Despite the formalization and consensus around the general setup, the underlying tension between sport and education re-surfaced on occasion. What was really the primary target of these sport schools? The Swedish National Agency for Education somewhat reluctantly pointed out that elite sports had become increasingly important and time-consuming, and argued that sport schools primarily were tools for giving talented athletes who would otherwise down-play their studies a good education to fall back on.[77] The resignation in the face of this development was apparent.

The Swedish Sports Confederation, and even more so some of its member organizations, saw elite sports as a legitimate goal in itself. They were backed by an increasing number of politicians and officials. When the possibility of making the sport school project permanent was up for debate in the late 1970s, several political initiatives argued in favour of an expansion of the system. Former cross-country ski star Rolf Rämgård had after his career become a politician and minister of sport. He argued that sport had become a full-time engagement and that it was directly comparable to other forms of cultural expression for which society had a responsibility. Rämgård wanted more talented athletes to be able to pursue their potential through attending a sport school, and his views are a good example of how many with a background from elite sports framed the sport schools.[78] Even those who saw elite sports more as an inspiration for the masses than a value in itself embraced the sport schools, and articulated a form of linear model for sports and public health, which suggested that elite sports inspired the masses to be more active and healthy. Such links between elite sports and mass participation has come into question on several occasions, most recently in a report by the Swedish Research Council for Sport Science in which the decreasing participation in organized sports is partly explained by its focus on competition and elite ambitions.[79]

Sport Schools as Sportification

The first decade of the sport schools was characterized by both consensus and conflict. On the one hand, it was a compromise to solve the problems made evident by sportification and the increasing demands of elite sport as well as the upper-secondary school becoming increasingly important from the early 1970s. On the other hand, there was continuous debate over how to maintain a balance between elite sports and education in these schools. In retrospect, sportification can be used as a framework to understand why the demands of elite sports became more and more difficult to combine with education, and how the sport schools were designed to meet such demands.

The sports schools can be understood as a continuation and acceleration of the sportification of Swedish (elite) sports. Some sport federations had sought to cooperate with physiologists already in the 1940s and 1950s.[80] By the 1960s, more sports had followed, and the introduction of sport schools opened up new ways to introduce athletes to scientific training models.

Another factor was the slow and meandering professionalization. The upheaval of the amateur regulations in 1967 would prove important, though it did not have

an immediate effect as there was simply not enough money in Swedish elite sports back then.[81] Nonetheless, allowing professionals in sport was a big step and part of the sportification process. It made it feasible to talk about a dual career for talented athletes, where one of those careers was their sport. A decade earlier such talk would have been highly controversial.

The sport schools enabled earlier specialization, rationalization and scientization of training through the school subject *Special sport*, which is the most articulated sign of sportification within the sport schools. It can be contrasted to the development of the ordinary PE subject *Physical education and health*, which has undergone a de-sportification process and become increasingly focussed on a healthy lifestyle rather than performance.[82] Introducing upper secondary sport schools in general, and the subject *Special sport* in particular, allowed for earlier and more far-reaching specialization as the athlete students could focus on their sport rather than spending their PE classes trying out a variety of different sports and outdoor recreation activities.

Sport schools also furthered standardization through the establishment of certain scientific tests that all students were subjected to, and through the standardized criteria for how a sport school should be designed. When the sport school project was made permanent in the early 1980s, there were more or less articulate criteria which needed to be fulfilled in order to host a sport school. A strong tradition within sport, commitment from the local municipality that would oversee the daily work, excellent facilities for training and highly skilled coaches were important features.[83] At the level of individual sports, the demands became more detailed. The Swedish Ski Association had a list of specified requirements that included an asphalt track for roller-skiing, a flood-lit track for running and skiing, and indoor facilities for strength training. This standardization of training environments is similar to how Swedish physiologists designed a landscape for jogging during the 1960s. It was a model which could be implemented in any geographical setting, in essence a portable training landscape.[84] The standardization of sport school training landscapes followed a similar logic, though aimed at an elite rather than at the masses.

Last but not least, the sport schools accelerated the specialization and professionalization of coaches. While there had been few positions for full-time coaches in Swedish sport, landing a job as a coach at a sport school often required both personal experience of elite sports and a formal education in PE. Personal experience of elite sports was no longer the only qualification to become an elite coach, but neither did a PE education alone suffice if the coaching ability and level of specialization for the sport in question was not up to standard. A combination of theoretical and practical knowledge was the new norm.[85] As a result, most coaches still have a background in sports themselves, and that they are firmly rooted in a sport-based community of practice that guide their behaviour more than the regulations and norms of education.[86] In summary, the sport schools were both part of sportification themselves as detailed above, and a response to the already far-reaching effects of sportification that had transformed elite sports from a (albeit serious) leisure activity to a full-time commitment.

The Dual Mission of Elite Sport Schools – Balancing Conflicting Logics?

In the 1960s, the increasing sportification and subsequent professionalization of Swedish sport led to increasing demands on elite athletes. Earlier specialization, increasing training load and more travels to national and international competitions impacted the possibility of athletes to pursue an alternative career and higher education. From the perspective of the sports movement, this was problematic as it could stop talented athletes from committing enough time and effort to their sport. From the perspective of Swedish authorities, the risk of ending up with uneducated and unemployable former elite athletes needed attention. The compromise allowed for the sportification process to continue. While the balance between a classic theoretical education and physical education echoed the Renaissance ideal *mens sana in corpore sano* (a sound mind in a sound body) it was in essence a step away from the traditional, health-focussed PE in Swedish schools in favour of a more elite-oriented PE for those deemed worthy. With the sport schools, the last remnants of the Ling gymnastics universal idea of the body as an aesthetic, symmetrical figure were cleared out of Swedish PE. In its place, a division between elite sports and sports for all made its way into the curriculum.

The Swedish sport schools was and is a compromise between two perspectives, elite sport and education, negotiated through the active management of the schools by actors from the sports movement. Individual associations such as the Swedish Ski Association and the Swedish Football Association, the municipalities that hosted the schools and the Swedish National Agency for Education were the key players. In an international perspective, Sweden was a forerunner in the organization of upper secondary sport schools. Most other comparable efforts were introduced in the 1990s, when the Swedish schools had been up and running for two decades.[87] Many of the neighboring countries used the Swedish sport schools as a model for their own attempts, except Finland as their sport schools were started around the same time as the Swedish ones and were motivated by similar arguments and ideas.[88]

The sport schools embodied a compromise between two logics already evident in many parts of the Swedish sports movement: sport as a means for building a stronger society and sport as an end to win medals at international level.[89] The dual mission – to produce more and better elite athletes and give sport talent a full education – is still the guiding principle. Its roots lie in the increasing importance and demands of elite sports in the 1960s and 1970s, when sportification had made elite careers in sport a full-time commitment. It was an attempt to rationalize talent development through incorporating it into the Swedish school system. Despite the abandoning of the amateur regulations in 1967, Swedish professional athletes were still a rare sight. It was therefore not primarily a professionalization that the sport schools would contribute to, but rather to what has been labelled *rational amateurism*.[90] Building elite sports into the education system, and thereby increasing the ability of sport federations and educated coaches to influence young athlete's training and general behaviour, would prove so important that it in some sports became more or less impossible to compete without passing through the sport school system. In general, the graduates from Swedish sport schools remained amateurs but with

a degree of specialization and rationalization that surpassed many professional athletes across the globe. This *rational amateurism* became a competitive advantage for Sweden in international sports and could potentially be part of the explanation to some of the quite remarkable accomplishments of Swedish athletes during the 1980s.

Other countries had solved the issue of talent development differently, but neither the individualistic American system with college stipends, nor the explicitly elite-oriented boarding schools or the state-sponsored de facto-professionals of the Eastern European authoritarian countries was politically feasible in the Swedish welfare state. The more or less simultaneous Finnish sport school project did not have any apparent influence on the Swedish setup, though the joint effort from education, sport and politics resemble how things worked out in Sweden.[91] Instead it was the less controversial Austrian boarding school in Stams which served as inspiration, and was held up as a positive example.

It has been argued that the Swedish sport schools project gained momentum in a sport-friendly climate in Swedish society.[92] That is partly true, though it was *sports for all* which had a strong political backing. There was a lingering hesitation towards elite sports, as seen in the *Sports for all* inquiry and in the reluctance to articulate the sport schools as anything close to special treatment for those with extraordinary talents.[93] Framing the special treatment of elite athlete talent in the school system as something that was made out of concern of their future *as ordinary citizens* was the perfect compromise, satisfying both the ambitions of the sport movement and the public authorities. In that way, these elite schools were not to be perceived as elitist but equalizing, and they bear witness of the political climate in Sweden during the mid-twentieth century. Introducing schools with a different status than ordinary schools has been controversial also in other countries, even when not aimed specifically at sports.[94] In a similar way, later attempts to introduce elite classes in Swedish upper-secondary schools were met with resistance from the education authorities. Instead of the explicitly elite-oriented and meritocratic classes suggested by the Swedish government in the early 2000s, the result was a compromise that has been called 'inclusive elite education'.[95] It was strikingly similar to the compromise around elite sports education three decades earlier.

The balancing between sport and education meant that elite sports had to adapt to the school system and articulate the demands for elite athletes in a new school subject – *Special sport*. The introduction of a school subject with focus on elite sport was also early in international comparison. The authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe were a special case due to their political context, but countries like Australia, France, Italy and West Germany had not developed a comparable network of sport schools until decades later.[96] For example, it would take until 2006 before Norway, a comparable country to Sweden in many aspects, had something similar to *Special sport* in place.[97] In return, upper secondary education had to allow the logics of elite sport to affect admission, grading, curriculum and management of the sport schools. While both parties have been able to live with the compromise, it has nonetheless been continuously debated. The underlying tension between elite sports and equal education has not been resolved, in Sweden or elsewhere. The complexities of a dual career remain for many elite athletes, across many sports and geographical areas.[98] If anything, the issue has made its way into younger age groups.

The specialization of 16-year-old athletes at upper secondary sport schools, as controversial as it was in the 1970s, has been followed by an increasing number of lower secondary schools with sport on the agenda. At least 25 per cent of Swedish lower secondary schools now offer training during school hours in various ways.[99] Balancing elitist and egalitarian ideas is a continuous source of controversy in the Swedish school system in general and in the sport schools this type of tension is a concern for coaches, teachers and athletes.[100]

From the perspective of elite sport, the Swedish sport schools are tools for sportification as they have allowed for earlier specialization and more training hours. From an educational perspective, sport schools are rather a way to ensure that talented athletes fulfil their upper secondary education and maintain the possibility of a dual career. Sport schools can therefore be understood as a form of institutionalized duality, both advancing sportification and mitigating its effects.

As so often, sports can provide insights into broader political issues. The Swedish case illustrates how management of elite talent in different countries have been shaped by political climate and management traditions. Further national case studies, and international comparative research, would be welcome in order to shed new light on the history of talent management and its relation to education politics in different political and geographical contexts.

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