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Reproduction and Opportunity: A Study of Dual Career, Aspirations and Elite Sports in Danish SportsClasses

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the patterns of retention in SportsClasses of promising young athletes in Denmark. Since 2005, SportsClasses have provided extra training for potential elite athletes in Grades 7-9 in designated Danish public schools. They were introduced after the Danish Ministry of Culture lowered the age of recruitment for athletes from 15 to 12 in response to increased competition in the world of elite sports. The SportsClasses attempt to balance collaboration between two different organizations: Danish public schools and sports clubs.

Using a survey of the student *population* in 2013 and a follow-up sample in 2015, we explore the respondents' social backgrounds and experiences in order to understand their likelihood of retention during the program and their career aspirations. Focusing on socioeconomic status, the role of having parents in elite sports, gender, and type of sport, we study what key experiences and relationships lead students to abandon or sustain their interest in careers related to sports and how this differs for boys and girls. By applying Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and types of capital, we conclude that the program

produces elements of both reproduction and opportunity but that the patterns strongly favor the retention of boys compared to girls.

Keywords:

Talent development, Dual Career, Elite Sports, Gender, Education

Introduction: Talent development in international perspective

With its increased mediatization (television and online), the ceaseless migration of top athletes, and the expansion of fan bases across the world, sport has become among the world's leading globalizing institutions (Maguire, 1999; Karen and Washington, 2015). Aside from being a multi-billion dollar industry, sport functions as an important global- as well as local-level institution (Giulianotti and Robertson, 2004; Karen and Washington, 2015). Global sport mega-events, national and continental leagues, and international sport organizations in many sports have created new athletic opportunity structures as individuals and nations increase their aspirations for sporting stardom (Dunning, 1986). As a result, talent development has become even more the focus for local clubs as well as national sports associations (Green and Houlihan, 2005; Houlihan and Zheng, 2013). Nations that adopt talent development policies are challenged to ensure that there are clear routes to the top as well as a future for athletes if the career in sport fails or is cut short due to injuries (e.g. EU Expert Group, 2013).¹ This has, given rise, especially in Europe (Guidotti, Cortis and Capranica, 2015), to so-called *Dual-*

¹ Of course, some countries (like the US), do not have national-level talent development policies and do not have any safety nets for athletes' who fall short of elite status.

Career initiatives that are designed to ensure that athletes have opportunities to pursue careers in sport and education/vocation simultaneously (Stambulova & Wylleman, 2015).

So far, most research in Europe on the development of athletic talent has focused on former or current elite sport athletes' roads to stardom (Elferink-Gemser *et al.*, 2011) and on psychological research on Dual Career, where the focus is on how programs can help athletes develop life skills and make less problematic transitions into and out of elite sports (Wylleman, Alfermann and Lavalée, 2004; Aquilina and Henry, 2010; Stambulova and Wylleman, 2015). This research has relied predominantly on retrospective accounts and individualistic psychological studies in order to find the athletic precursors that made the athletes successful (Wylleman and Lavalée, 2004; Stambulova *et al.*, 2009). Research in the US, on the other hand, has focused on individual aspiring athletes who attempt to ride the escalator to elite college and professional sports but never arrive at their destinations (see, e.g., Dohrmann, 2010; Frey, 2004).

In this paper, we focus on Danish SportsClasses – a combined school-and-sport program. While other countries, such as China (Brownell, 1995) the former German Democratic Republic (Dennis and Grix, 2012), and the former Soviet Union (Green and Oakley, 2001), have had a long tradition of state involvement in selecting talented young athletes for programs that combine elite sports and education, it is a relatively new

initiative in Denmark (Bøje and Eichberg, 1994; Evalueringsinstitut and Idan, 2009; Kulturministeriet, 2011).²

According to the Act on Elite Sport, talent development and elite sport had to be conducted in a “socially and societally sound manner” (Act No. 643) in order to ensure the development of ‘complete sports persons’, who could become winners both on and off the pitch. One way of doing this has been, since the late 1980s, to provide athletes above the age of 15 with opportunities to combine elite sports with studies in school. The minimum age of 15 was set in 1984 to protect those younger from participating in overly competitive activities because such activities could affect their overall well-being (Team Danmark and Danmarks Idræts-Forbund, 2006). Denmark first introduced its elite sports high school tracks in 1988 in regular public high schools. Much like other sports school programs around the world (Radtke and Coalter, 2007), these schools had separate tracks for athletes that provided enough flexibility for sports training so that student-athletes could both improve on the sports field as well as prepare for higher education. Legislators were concerned about the age minimum of 15 (other countries started at age 12) and the lack of integration between the sports and education parts of athletes’ schooling. In 2004 the minimum age was changed to 12 and in 2005 the first SportsClasses were introduced (Pedersen, 2012).

² In Scandinavia more generally, athletes have been able to combine sport and high school education since the 1980s (Andersen and Rongland, 2012)

Sports classes

Since then, SportsClasses have been a key element in national sport talent development and in Team Denmark's pursuit of more medals for Denmark; at the same time, this policy has provided talented athletes aged 12-18 with the possibility of combining school and sports (Team Danmark and Kulturministeriet, 2009). The SportsClasses represent a collaboration among Team Danmark, the Danish Sport Association (DIF), and the Ministry of Education (Team Danmark and Danmarks Idræts-Forbund, 2009). They are structured around the academic and athletic training needs of the student-athletes and differ from regular classes in public schools in three important ways: 1. the athletes must apply for the program and pass a highly selective athletic admission test (experts and representatives from the sports associations or local sports clubs evaluate the applicants and serve as admissions gatekeepers for the SportsClasses); and 2. local sports clubs manage morning training lessons at the school (twice per week); and 3. teachers adapt assignments and deadlines to facilitate the student-athletes' attending to the demands of their sport.

So far, most research on sport talent development in schools has focused on high school (secondary school) programs (e.g. Radtke and Coalter, 2007; Massey, 2010; Brown, 2015, 2016; van Rens, Elling and Reijgersberg, 2015; Ferry and Lund, 2016; Kristiansen and Houlihan, 2017) whereas the Danish SportsClasses target younger athletes in lower secondary school (7th-9th grade, ages 12-15). It brings sport talent development to the public schools with the goal of encouraging simultaneously the development of sports talent and the pursuit of an education – a type of Dual Career initiative. Our primary focus is on the role of social background in these young athletes'

attempts to realize their dreams in elite sports. Inspired by sociological research focused on how high-stakes, specialized school programs cater to middle class families (Apple, 2001; Cucchiara, 2013; Ferry, 2014), we focus on *who* benefits from these Dual Career programs.³ We proceed by asking: 1. *What are the social backgrounds of the athletes enrolled in the SportsClasses*; 2. *How are gender, social background and choice of sport related to the students' experience of the SportsClasses*; and 3. *how do these variables relate to participants' future aspirations with respect to both school and sports?*

Theoretical Background

In order to address these questions, we draw on a Bourdieusian approach that puts issues of reproduction and opportunity at its center. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, and field highlight the ways in which social structure is embedded in social processes and how social actors' aspirations and (non-) mobility are constrained by social structure (Bourdieu, 2010; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). These concepts guide our analysis of the selection, experiences, and outcomes of the student-athletes in the SportsClasses. They allow us to focus on the patterns of reproduction and opportunity that occur at this early stage of athletes' incipient "careers."

The student-athletes' positions in the social structure (social class) are defined by their families' location in the distribution of economic (income and wealth), cultural

³ In a subsidiary way, we are assessing the SportsClasses as a social policy in that we are examining whether the Danish state's interest and investment in the educational and occupational development of these potential future athletes is actually reflected in their aspirations in sport and education.

(educational credentials and embodied “knowledge”), and social capital (networks). At the extremes, the dominant class (or class fraction) in society would be at the high end of the distribution of all three types of capital and the subordinate class would be at the low end. Bourdieu argues that the “meritorious” are rewarded based on ostensibly neutral criteria that favor the already advantaged (the cultural arbitrary). The student-athletes confront the athletic *field* with a particular vision defined by their perceptions of probabilistic opportunities for success; this is their largely class-based habitus, which is informed by their understandings of what “talent” is based on their social class and their parents’ experience in elite sport.

Fields are structured social spaces, imbued with power, that are characterized by conflict among individuals and organizations as they struggle to maintain or enhance their status or distinction. Fields can be conceived of as multi-layered, with many struggles for distinction taking place within many sub-fields.⁴ We consider elite sports in Denmark as a field in which youth compete for access to sports clubs and, since 2005, to SportsClasses. Student-athletes apply for access to this (sub-) field in specific sports, the sports themselves stratified and located in more and less powerful positions within the elite sports field. So, in this paper, our focus is on the competition for access to the SportsClasses as the student-athletes vie for status and distinction (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993). Scouts and coaches, using their practical sense of the field (Cushion and Jones, 2006; Christensen, 2009), act as gatekeepers and choose the individuals with the greatest

⁴ For example, a national sports field might have football as the dominant sport within the field as well as many struggles for status and distinction within the football field (or sub-field).

athletic ability and potential in their chosen sport (e.g. technical skills and tactical understanding in football, skating skills in ice hockey⁵).

In this field, the competition among individuals intersects with the status of the sport the athlete plays. In the quest for distinction, individuals of given social origins (including social class, region, gender, immigrant status) “choose” certain sports/practices that fit with their habitus – their expectations and hopes for future comfort, sustenance, and mobility (Reay, 2004; Bourdieu, 2010). The student-athletes deploy their resources/capitals in a field which, shaped by perceptions rooted in one’s habitus, offers differentially valued – and differentially valuable - opportunities to affect one’s current and future social position (Bourdieu, 1988).

Cultural capital may play a rather unique role in the SportsClasses. Apple (2001) and Lareau (2011) found that children of parents with high cultural capital were more likely to send their children to specialized school programs. We expect that we will find a similar pattern with SportsClasses, with students disproportionately coming from homes with higher cultural capital. At the same time, these students might be somewhat resistant to the lure of an athletic career, having been raised in an environment that encouraged deep educational investments and their conversion into professional / executive occupations. We also expect that students with parents who had elite sport experience might be advantaged by a specific kind of cultural capital. Such a family can be helpful to the aspiring athlete in a variety of ways. Not only might the parent have dense networks (social capital) with athletic and physical therapy/training knowledge (a type of cultural capital) necessary to navigate the crucible of athletic competition, the athlete will have

⁵ See Skrubbeltrang & Rasmussen (2014) for a more detailed account of entrance exams in SportsClasses.

been raised in an environment that “naturally” conveys how physical and athletic obstacles are overcome.⁶

To concretize and deepen our research questions in terms of this theoretical perspective, we wish to explore a number of relationships about these students. Empirically, due to the dominance of football in the Danish sports field, we expect that most athletically-inclined Danes (especially boys) gravitate toward football⁷. Their choices and success, however, will vary based on their resources and opportunities, i.e. whether they have the economic capital to access football clubs and to which clubs they have access (both a financial and geographical issue). Further, we wish to explore more deeply how social origins shape a student’s choice of sport and how it affects their school experience (Scheerder *et al.*, 2002; Bourdieu, 2010). For example, we expect that students from professional backgrounds are more likely to participate in sports with less physical contact among competitors (e.g. swimming, tennis), whereas those from working class backgrounds would be more oriented toward sports in which the body is subjected to the rough and tumble (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 218). We anticipate that those from homes with a combination of high cultural and economic capital will be more attuned to and comfortable with the general demands of the school, receive better grades, and be more likely to persist. At the same time, they will also have been more focused on

⁶ This is directly analogous to Bourdieu’s point about the traditional educational process in which upper middle class parents provide their children the untaught “tools of appropriation” to access the knowledge being taught (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). We should note that we hesitate to designate the kind of cultural capital related to sport as “sports capital” or “sporting capital.” Over the course of his career, Bourdieu became less inclined to label field-specific forms of capital, often seeing them as a subset of his primary three forms of capital. He would, however, designate any given field-specific form of capital as “symbolic capital” – a very effective but disguised and unrecognized resource.

⁷ The Danish Football Association was the Sport federation with, by far, the most members (332.313). Danish Gymnastics federation was second (190.461), and Danish Swimming federation third (184.717) (DIF, 2017).

professional/executive occupations as a future aspiration. A focus on these students will help us understand the dynamics of reproduction and opportunity in a particular social class location. In addition, we expect that those with parents with elite sport backgrounds will be more likely to persist and succeed in their chosen sport. Finally, SportsClass students who are in sports that are more central in the sports field will get more support and be more likely to succeed.

Method

Sample

This research relies on two surveys of Danish SportsClass students that were conducted in 2013 and 2015. Data were gathered from all SportsClass students in 7th – 9th grade (n=1170) in schools in 15 Team Danmark-supported municipalities. We received permission (with constraints) to link student ID's to information on students' parents' education, occupation, and income from Statistics Denmark (Nielsen and Olesen, 2014; Nielsen, Olesen and Skrubbeltang, 2017).

In the two online surveys, the students were asked about their history of sport participation, experience as SportsClass students, aspects of their everyday lives, and their future aspirations. The first survey was focused on how the students experienced the SportsClass program and class environment while they were part of the SportsClasses. At the time of the second survey, most of the respondents had already graduated from the

SportClasses and the rest were graduating the year of the survey. This second survey, therefore, was more focused on how they had experienced the SportsClasses and their aspirations for the future. The surveys were linked with data from Statistics Denmark about students' socioeconomic background.

Out of the 1170 SportsClass students, 1010 (86.3%) answered the first survey and 632 answered the second survey. A total of 577 students answered both surveys^{8,9}.

Variables

In each survey, all SportsClass students were asked to report what sport they played. Respondents' gender was retrieved from Statistics Denmark based on the social security number.

Though we would have preferred to isolate parents' educational, occupational, and income resources directly as measures of cultural and economic capital, due to the relatively small number of cases, Statistics Denmark restricted the use of multiple background variables as well as multiple controls in given analyses for fear of violating assurances of confidentiality. Instead, we use the same index for socioeconomic background as was used in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey (Adams and Wu, 2002; Ehmke and Siegle, 2005) as a combined gross indicator

⁸ The response rate in both surveys for boys and girls was the same. In the second survey the response rates for soccer players were slightly lower than for the other sports compared to the first survey. In addition, there was a higher response rate in the second survey among those with higher academic achievement and orientation (as indicated in the first survey) than those who were more focused on elite sports.

⁹ For those analyses related to Socio-economic background we have a total N of 631. The missing respondent is due to missing social security number information for a non-citizen.

of cultural and economic capital (SES). We constructed three categories corresponding to the top quarter, the middle 50%, and the bottom quarter.

In the first survey the respondents were asked if one or both parents' had been elite sports athletes. We have chosen to include this as a background variable, because we see parents' elite sports background as a potentially valuable capital.

To investigate the students' experiences with the SportsClasses, we selected the questions in survey 2 that were related to how students experienced the SportsClass environment. Some questions were presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale with a neutral answer in the middle. We have selected 2 questions that were focused on the positive aspects of the SportsClasses and 3 questions that were focused on potentially negative consequences of being in the SportsClasses.

To investigate the students' future aspirations, we selected two questions in the second survey: if their goal was to be among the best in their sport of choice and how they would prioritize sport and education in the next 5 years.

Analytic strategy

As noted, due to Statistics Denmark's confidentiality rules, we were constrained in our use of a multivariate approach. Our analyses, therefore, rely primarily on two- and three-way crosstabulations, using chi-square to help us determine whether our results can be inferred to the larger population. Also, both for clarity purposes and to ensure

sufficiently high expected-frequencies in the calculation of chi-square, we combined some answers on Likert-scale questions.

Findings

Social background of SportsClass students

Gender distribution

The first survey revealed that the gender distribution is skewed towards boys: 633 (62.67 %) of the students were boys and 377 (37.33%) were girls.

Sports represented in the SportsClasses

Of the 1010 students who answered the first survey, almost 1 in 3 (326) played football and almost 1 in 4 (244) played handball. Thus, more than half of SportsClass students played just these two sports. After these two sports, swimming (8.3% with 84 students), ice hockey (7.2% with 73 students), badminton (6.9% with 70 students), and basketball (4.6% with 46 students) follow in relative popularity. In total, 5 out of 6 students (83.5%) play these 6 sports with the remaining one-sixth of students distributed among more than 30 other sports.

TABLE 1 NEAR HERE

TABLE 2 NEAR HERE

Note: Girls were more likely than boys to respond to the second survey. The largest gender difference by sport was among “other” sports.

These two tables demonstrate the strong effect of gender on type of sport. In Table 1, for example, this effect reveals itself most strongly with the distribution of ice hockey players across genders (almost no girls choose ice hockey) but is also evident in the distribution of swimmers, with the percentage of girls choosing swimming twice that of boys.

Socioeconomic background

SportsClass students disproportionately come from higher socioeconomic backgrounds: three in ten students are in the top category, six in ten are in the middle, and only one in ten is in the bottom.

As table 3 shows, there is great variation in the socioeconomic composition of the athletes in different sports. Compared to the overall distribution of SportsClass students, basketball and swimming disproportionately attract more athletes from higher socioeconomic backgrounds while football and ice hockey seem to attract more athletes from the low socioeconomic category. Interestingly, badminton and basketball players rarely hail from low SES backgrounds.

TABLE 3 NEAR HERE

Elite sports parents

In the first survey, the students were asked whether one or both parents had been elite athletes. Rather remarkably, this was the case for half of the students. There was no significant difference in the socioeconomic backgrounds of the students with and without elite sports parents.

Choice of sport, gender, social background and the students' experience of the SportsClass

Positive aspects of the SportsClass experience:

The SportsClass students were asked if their stay in the SportsClasses had had a positive influence on their opportunities in pursuing a career in elite sports. 3/4 of the SportsClass students agreed that the classes provided better opportunities. Boys tended to be somewhat more positive than girls about the role of the SportsClass in this respect but the differences were not statistically significant. Similarly, there were no significant differences by type of sport, SES, or having elite sport parents.

The students' evaluation of the SportsClasses might possibly have to do with their assessment of how morning practices affected their athletic performance. 44 percent of boys compared to 33 percent of girls indicated that the morning practices helped them improve "to a great extent."

All sports indicated that they felt they improved at least to some extent by having morning practices in school but none as much as ice hockey, which was almost unanimous with 98% who claim to have benefited at least to some extent. Swimmers were least likely to indicate that they benefited “to a great extent” and most likely to say they didn’t improve – perhaps because this experience was not very different from their usual routine. There were no statistically significant differences in the assessment of the morning practices by SES or parents’ elite sport background.

TABLE 4 NEAR HERE

Negative aspects of the SportsClass experience:

The students were asked directly about the negative consequences of being a SportsClass student. As table 5 shows, whether in terms of pressure that was felt to diminish enjoyment or cause injury or the classes simply led to a lack of motivation to attain elite status, approximately half of the students felt that the SportsClasses had some negative effects.

For the three questions reported in Table 5, boys and girls differed in their responses by 15 to 20 percentage points with girls feeling the negative effects much more than the boys. There were also differences among the six most common sports. Handball players and swimmers were more likely than average to report that they had pushed themselves in ways that negatively affected their enjoyment of the sport.¹⁰ Football,

¹⁰ Differences among sports in affecting enjoyment of the sport were not statistically significant.

handball, badminton, and basketball players reported concerns about injuries more than average. Swimmers, badminton, and basketball players – arguably the athletes from the highest SES backgrounds - reported a greater than average reluctance to invest the time and energy to attain elite status¹¹.

Looking across these three indicators of negative effects, we found that 30% of the boys answered no (a *very* positive response about the SportsClasses) to all three questions, while that was only the case for 10% of the girls.¹² On the other hand, 29% of the girls answered yes to all three questions, while that was only the case for 16% of the boys. The girls' negative experiences, therefore, could be seen as more consistent and comprehensive than those of the boys. Although it is not statistically significant, it is notable that students from the highest SES category report having had slightly more negative experiences. Students from families with a combination of greater economic and cultural capital (i.e. higher SES) and who likely have more options for future educational and occupational success find the SportsClasses less enjoyable than are those from less advantaged families.

TABLE 5 NEAR HERE

We examined whether these negative consequences vary by gender for each of the seven sport categories. Though many of these relationships lack statistical significance (the Ns are small), we find some strong differences by sport: 73% of girl handball players

¹¹ This is consistent with Lareau's finding that children from upper middle class home displayed higher degree of exhaustion at the end of the week (Lareau, 2011).

¹² Data available from the authors.

and 72% of girl swimmers report this lack of enjoyment compared to 36% of boy handball players and 42% of boy swimmers. The differences between boy and girl handball players are significant across all three questions. The gender pattern here is unmistakable: with seven sports across three questions (21 possibilities), there is only one instance in which boys' dissatisfaction is higher than that for girls (basketball regarding injury).

Sport, SES, parents' elite sport background and the students' future aspiration in school and sports

In pursuing the question of how the SportsClasses affect the athletes' attachment to their sport over time, we examined how gender and socioeconomic and elite sport background affected athletes' aspirations for the future and whether and how this differed by sport.

Table 6 reports student answers about retention (students are still playing the same sport) and about goals "to be among the best" by sport, gender, SES, and parents' elite sport background.

TABLE 6 NEAR HERE

We find that more girls than boys both drop out of sport and have their elite aspirations cooled. Swimming and basketball have the highest dropout rates among the sports while badminton has the highest percentage of athletes who abandon their elite goals. We also find, though the results don't quite reach statistical significance ($p=.06$), that the higher one's socioeconomic background, the more likely one is to drop out of one's sport and to lose one's aspiration to be among the best. Ice hockey, with the lowest SES students (see Table 3) once again stands out with, by far, the lowest dropout rate (5%). In separate analyses, we found large differences by gender in likelihood of dropping out of specific sports. Though the numbers are small, the only sport that had higher dropouts among boys than among girls was basketball. The largest differential between boys and girls was in swimming, with 59% of girls dropping out compared to only 8% of boys.

Table 6 also shows a very strong relationship between gender and wanting to be among the best in their sport. 75% of boys have this as their goal compared to 61% of girls. Ice hockey stands out as the sport in which most of the SportsClass students (93%) are still oriented towards becoming the best in their sport. Students whose parents were elite athletes are somewhat more likely than those from non-elite sports backgrounds to be retained in their sport (not sig.) and to want to be among the best (sig).

Finally we examined athletes' answers about their future occupational orientation towards elite sport. Here we find that once again gender and type of sport are significant factors. While 26% of boys want to pursue a career as a full time athlete, this is true of only 2% of girls. In addition, 46% of girls prefer a life without elite sports compared to 25% of boys. Ice hockey players, by far, are the most oriented toward full-time athletic

status than any of the sports with 44% aspiring to be a full-time athlete; the next highest sport is football at 24 percent. Only 11% of ice hockey players indicate that they reject a life with elite sport; handball players, who reject such a life at almost three times that rate (32%), are the next closest sport. Swimmers are the group least likely to pursue a career in sport – full time or combined with education or job – and most likely to want a life without elite sport.

Socioeconomic status shows a very consistent pattern in its relationship to orientation to elite sport: the higher the SES, the less likely the respondents are to have elite sport a part their lives. While 13% of high SES respondents aspire to be full-time athletes, 29% of low SES respondents do so. In terms of those who are oriented to a life without elite sport, 39% of high SES respondents compared to 18% of low SES respondents chose this option.

TABLE 7 NEAR HERE

Discussion

The SportsClasses program set the stage for athletes to pursue Dual Careers early on with the intention of creating a system in which students have the opportunity to develop their athletic talents while also developing non-athletic career aspirations. The program is set in a country that prides itself on having equal access to education and a strong social safety net. Though the SportsClasses are designed to support elite athletes from all backgrounds (Team Denmark and DIF, 2009), the program's ability to recruit

and retain them differs greatly across categories of athletes.

Gender

We have found that more boys than girls attend the SportsClasses *and* that the boys are four times more likely than girls to prioritize sports over education. Our findings support the many analyses that find the field of sports is male dominated (Kane, 1995; Kirk, 2005; Messner, Dunbar, & Hunt, 2000; Messner, 2002; Wright, Macdonald, & Groom, 2003). This type of hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Pearse, 2014) is reflected in the extensive media coverage of men’s sports compared to women’s, thereby reinforcing the perception of a much more open opportunity structure (especially in certain sports) for male athletes compared to female athletes (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrum, 2013; Kane, 1996). Tomlinson, Markovits, and Young (2010, p. 46) have argued that understanding “sports space as contested cultural territory is fundamental to an understanding of how particular sports become part of an established culture and are reproduced – or not—with that culture.” Though Tomlinson et. al. are referring to how specific sports dominate (or don’t) within a given society’s sports space, their argument would certainly encourage thinking about a sport-gender interaction.¹³ This difference in how boys and girls perceive the opportunity structure may also explain why the girls in the SportsClasses are more likely, even if they wish to continue in sports, to indicate that they wish to combine elite sports *and* education. This may be an indication that women’s elite sport simply is not a career path on its own but has to be combined with a non-

¹³ Indeed, they would likely consider each sport’s male and female versions as having its own separate space.

athletic career, as findings in a recent report on women football players suggests (FIFPro, 2017).

If the intention of the SportsClasses program is to ensure all athletes have equal opportunities to pursue a career in sports, actions might be needed to challenge the established culture in which possibilities for a career in sports appear so limited for the female athletes even though the SportsClass programs allow for equal access.

Sport

The specific sport that an athlete plays is related to her/his social class background (Bourdieu, 1988, 2010; Engström, 2008; Stuij, 2015; Warde, 2006) and its associated habitus – perhaps especially how the athletes perceive the opportunity structure in the sports field. That more than half of the students in the SportsClasses play either football or handball is not surprising since these two sports are among the most popular sports in Denmark and are played by both boys and girls (DIF, 2017).

The SportsClass students in two other sports, however, help us understand better some of the dynamics of (self-) selection and opportunity. Ice hockey players and swimmers are distinguished by their cultural capital and their trajectories.

Athletes playing ice hockey are more likely than all other athletes to maintain their aspirations for a career in sports and have the lowest SportsClass drop-out rate. Of the top 6 sports, ice hockey players are disproportionately from lower class backgrounds and would typically have lower educational aspirations. This might lead the ice hockey players to be more inclined to think of a career in sports as a chance for upward mobility

and to spurn educational opportunities that typically lead to university. Indeed, with broad opportunities in global ice hockey, the players may see the route to playing on the best or second-best team in a given club as a reachable goal.

Swimmers' (and, to a lesser extent, basketball players) dropout rate is higher than the other top 6 sports with 39% dropping out. Sixty percent of the swimmers prioritized education over sports compared, for example, to only 35% of ice hockey players. Though there were differences by gender in likelihood of drop-out, swimmers and basketball players were both likely to have experienced negative effects of the SportsClasses.

Social background

What stands out in relation to the SportsClass students is their social background compared to the rest of 7-9th graders in Denmark. The socio economic index that we used combines social, economic and cultural capitals and, on average, the SportsClass students come from homes with more resources (Nielsen and Olesen, 2014). Since the students are selected for their athletic potential, their embodied cultural capital within a given sport field, we might expect that the distribution of SportsClass students would mirror the socioeconomic distribution of the larger population, but as Nielsen & Olesen (2014) found, students from families with greater resources were able to parlay their athletic potential into success in the admissions tests for the SportsClasses. Whether this success was due to having the financial means to be associated with local clubs or the cultural capital associated with navigating the athletic transmission belt (choosing the right club, coach, trainer, and program) students from backgrounds with greater cultural and economic capital and those whose parents were themselves elite athletes were

disproportionately successful in gaining access to the SportsClasses. Collins and Buller (2003) have argued that a reason for this may be that young people from low income backgrounds do not develop the social capital needed to gain access to the opportunities needed to perform sport at the highest level. Other researchers (Apple, 2001; Ferry, 2014; Ferry and Lund, 2016) have pointed to similar sport-specific or universalistic programs that end up advantaging the already advantaged (especially as family cultural capital is activated for the next generation).

What is interesting about this program is the lower-than-average retention in the SportsClass program of students from middle and high socio economic background because of what we believe is the joint calculation of the students about their likely futures: they perceive the likelihood of success as an elite athlete to be quite low *and* they perceive many attractive, attainable non-athletic destinations in the social structure that would be well-compensated. On the other hand, the students from low socio economic backgrounds who are underrepresented in the program as a whole often maintain their aspirations towards elite sports (as opposed to a Dual Career focus). This outcome could be understood based on their perceptions of the opportunity structure: they see very few outcomes that are attainable that would provide even a modicum of the rewards that would be associated with an elite sports career and do not necessarily perceive the available educational opportunities as particularly relevant to them (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 2010). In addition, these athletes from lower class backgrounds may be over-selected: they overcame the disadvantages of their social location (lack of information about clubs, coaches, programs, etc.) to be selected for the

SportsClass program so they may have more athletic potential than others in the SportsClasses.

Parents' elite sports background

We had initially expected that students with elite sports parents would have an advantage in the SportsClasses due to a certain type of cultural capital. What we found was that this kind of capital may play a role getting in to the program but it doesn't seem to play a significant role with respect to positive or negative experiences within the SportsClasses. Students with elite sport parents are slightly more oriented toward maintaining a focus on elite sports in the future (table 7), but the relationship is not statistically significant.

Conclusion

In this article we describe a Dual Career program - the Danish SportsClasses that establishes a framework for talent development that gives every student deemed a "talented athlete" an opportunity to pursue a career in sports while combining it with education. The aim of the SportsClasses, according to Team Denmark and in accordance with the Danish Elite Law, is to ensure the development of "complete sports-persons," who are able to combine careers on and off the 'field.' Overall, our analysis of student

responses reveals that the SportsClasses yield outcomes that reflect elements of both reproduction and opportunity.

We find that social background is not a significant factor in how students experienced the SportsClasses and yet social class background *is* a significant factor in the participants' future aspirations. Almost all students believed that SportsClasses provided better opportunities to pursue a career in sports. However, we find that even though SportsClasses are open to every talented athlete, the students in the SportsClasses tended to come from high and middle SES backgrounds. We see these student-athletes as being in a rather unique place in the Danish social structure: virtually guaranteed a spot in higher education on the way to occupations in management or the professions while preparing for a highly improbable yet visible and remunerative short career as an elite athlete. The results of this study suggest that this habitus reflects the way the class structure intersects with educational and athletic opportunity; indeed, this is how capital, habitus, and field are relevant for our analysis. The observed relationship between class background and gaining access and matriculation to SportsClasses is a function of the way families with different kinds and amounts of capital relate to the educational system and to special programs offered through the schools. In addition, students with parents with elite sports backgrounds made up half of the students in the SportsClasses. The very same patterns of social reproduction that happen 'naturally,' due to the way youth and elite sports are organized, are being reinforced under the umbrella of this ostensibly democratic program.

The program does come with certain disadvantages, especially for girls, insofar as close to 2/3 of the girls reported that they had experienced burnout and injuries during

their time in the SportsClasses. At the same time, the idea that school and sports may go together provides an attractive and attainable goal for many of these students. For girls, however, the perceived opportunity structure marginalizes sports and reinforces education as central to their futures.

We also find that the SportsClasses seem to attract disproportionately from certain sports – football and handball in particular – and that choice of sport plays a role in how the SportsClasses are experienced. It could be argued that this has to do with how the sports field in Denmark is structured. Football and Handball are the most popular sports and, when the national teams play, it draws national attention. It is not surprising that the most popular sports recruit the most students and this is reflected in the students' future aspirations. In sports with established national and international leagues such as football, handball and ice hockey, the responses seem to indicate a perception of a more open structure of opportunity – especially for male athletes. For smaller less popular sports, the opportunity for athletic success may be perceived as more limited, which might help explain why this group - along with the girls in the study - are more focused on future academic achievements. Interestingly, ice hockey players, who are disproportionately from lower class backgrounds, perceive great opportunities for themselves and are investing strongly in this chance for mobility.

The results of this study suggest that the Danish policy focused on earlier selection of elite athletes produces some unintended consequences and offers cautionary tendencies for other Dual Career initiatives. First, it may be that, due to lack of knowledge and/or other resources, talented athletes from lower SES backgrounds either do not pursue access to SportsClasses or do not matriculate if they are admitted. Athletes

from higher SES backgrounds are overrepresented in these programs. Second, since they perceive strong connections between specific educational trajectories and professional occupations, athletes from higher social backgrounds accept the dual-career channeling and end up losing their focus on a career in elite sports. Third, both in recruitment processes and in their experience of the classes, girls' aspirations to become elite athletes declines; their gender and their SES conspiring to push them toward a dual-career track.

The challenge for future Dual Career policy development in Denmark and beyond is to further democratize access to these programs, disrupt the 'natural' tendency for high SES students to pursue high SES educational and occupational outcomes,¹⁴ and to broaden the opportunity structure for female athletes.

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¹⁴ Perhaps policies could be developed that would facilitate athletes' resumption of their educational careers after their experience as elite athletes.

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