

Talent Production in Interaction: Performance Appraisal Interviews in Talent Selection Camps

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Abstract

In sports, there is an extensive interest in identifying and selecting talented children in order to develop elite adult athletes. The process of selecting and screening talents involves not only physical and technical skills but also efforts to find adequate personality traits. Therefore, different types of performance appraisal interviews (PAIs) are becoming increasingly common within the field. Departing from fieldwork in two selection camps for Swedish youth national teams in soccer and hockey, we will take a closer look at the PAIs employed during these camps. This article takes on a narrative approach, emphasizing PAI as a narrative genre and a framework for a specific form of interaction. Our findings show how eligibility is performed in interaction through following three practices: (i) showcasing gratitude without tipping into flattery, (ii) using temporality as a way of displaying developmental potential, and (iii) adopting the role of the self-reflecting subject. This genre of interviews not only produces certain practices but also preferred subject positions and narratives. The PAI is thus a narrative genre where the players are encouraged to perform talent in order to appear selectable.

Keywords

talent selection, performance appraisal interviews, narrative analysis, small stories, positioning

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In sport, talent scouting has become an increasingly significant practice. As McGarry (2010) shows, the number of young people prepared to invest in becoming professional athletes is constantly growing, and several countries such as Canada, Belgium, and Britain have expanded the work with talent programs, through targeted training from an early age (Balyi & Williams, 2009; Martindale, Collins, & Daubney, 2005). Hence, various strategies for finding young talents have been developed as well as debated. Issues such as the questionable accuracy of identifying junior talents, as well as the social costs associated with the activity, have been critically discussed in the literature (Anshell & Lidor, 2012; Burgess & Naughton, 2010; Peterson, 2011).

One obvious difficulty here is the need not only to assess an individual's current ability but also his or her ability to develop and show continual signs of progress in the future. Nonetheless, researchers within this field often point out that selection not solely can be based on current capacity but also should consider personality, ambition, and capacity for development (MacNamara & Collins, 2012; Meylan, Cronin, Oliver, & Hughes, 2010).

Therefore, different types of individual development dialogues, development appraisal interviews, or performance appraisal interviews (henceforth PAI) are becoming increasingly common within the field even though they until today have been very sparsely studied (e.g., Asmuß, 2008; MacLean, 2001; McGarry, 2010)—we would like to do that here.

PAIs as a Tool for Selection

The concept of PAI sometimes differs depending on the context. Nonetheless, for the purposes of this study, it can be defined as “a general heading among a variety of activities through which organizations seek to assess employees and develop their competence, enhance performance and distribute rewards” (Fletcher, 2001, p. 473). Such interviews have been frequently used as a tool for mapping the interviewee's performance and development. The responses provided by the interviewees in the PAI are considered to say something important about them as individuals with attitudes, characteristics, abilities, or talents, that is, something related to the very purpose of this genre of talk: To solicit information about the young athlete so as to make fair and just decisions about who should be selected for the main team.

This trust in getting to know young athletes through interviews makes PAI a significant tool with crucial impact on the selection practices. Needless to say, very much is at stake for the young participants during these minutes of talk. Therefore, this article will take a close look at how an appraisal instrument is used in practice between coaches and players in the context of selection camps for youth national teams and district teams. In order to do that, we apply an interactional approach to the field of sports research and the previously well-documented studies of coach and athlete relations (Reinboth, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2004; Stewart & Owens, 2011;

Turman, 2003). We subscribe to a broadly social constructionist perspective, according to which PAI is regarded as (i) part of a narrative genre and (ii) something that constitutes an event in which social interaction takes place and identities are negotiated (De Fina, 2013). We will emphasise how the PAI, as a genre, sets the framework for a specific form of interaction and how young sport talents are constructed in and through interaction.

The aim of this study is to analyse how the use of PAIs produces (and reproduces) certain subject positions and interactive practices, and in addition, how eligibility is produced through small stories told in the interviews. Thereby, our overall concern is not limited to study PAIs as a narrative genre but, more specifically, to analyse the positionings and selections of young people in sports. Put differently, we want to show how the use of PAIs in selection camps produces certain subject positions and interactive practices and how selection is accomplished in interaction.

Previous Research on PAIs

Much research on PAIs has been conducted in areas other than sport, such as in schools or in workplaces. The focus has been directed at the possible benefits of appraisal interviews and how they should be constructed to be more effective in achieving targeted organisational goals (Granath, 2008; Grote, 2002; Losyk, 2002). Moreover, organisational effects, such as increasing employee's satisfaction (Mani, 2002; Roberts, 2002) or creating and shaping an organisational culture (Fletcher, 2001; Scott & Einstein, 2001), have also been topics for research.

In the field of sports, a central issue concerns the need for both adequate and fair selection and for analyses of how the selection process might achieve higher accuracy (Anshel & Lidor, 2012; Burgess & Naughton, 2010). It is for this reason that there has emerged an increasing interest in studying the personality traits of the candidate, thereby taking the identification of talent beyond what is observable in the form of technical skills. If the child of today is to become a future elite adult athlete, then the conductors of assessments have to identify the individuals, endowed with the appropriate personality, attitude, and character. On an individual level, a number of studies have focused on both the personality traits and psychological factors used to measure *true and genuine talent* (Aidman, 2007; Connaughton & Hanton, 2009; Eysenck, Nias, & Cox, 1982; Gulbin, 2008; MacNamara & Collins, 2012). However, Henriksen (2010) states that such research suffers from a variety of methodological flaws, ranging from, inter alia, the use of inappropriate sampling methods to a poor theoretical grounding. As a consequence, this body of research fails to establish any common personality factors separating the elite athlete from the average sportsperson.

Furthermore, the process of selection is carried out continuously and is often done from a young age. Engström (2011) believes that a central part of children and young people's participation in sport involves accepting *the logic of competition* that prevails therein. It is therefore important for the participants from an early age to

become competitive subjects. This includes appreciating, or at the very least accepting that competition is a natural and constitutive element of sporting activity—especially in the context of organised sport.

However, as pointed out (Asmuß, 2008; Van De Mierop & Schnurr, 2014), research in this area has paid insufficient attention to the interview as a discursive practice, where coaches and young athletes are engaged in mundane talk. Such criticism is well summed up in Cranmer and Myers' (2015) call for an organizational perspective on interaction, emphasizing the organizational framework as a unique context. A discursive framework would provide the conditions for analyses of specific organizations and institutional interaction and analyses of the discourses of talent development, where explicit set of rules and regulations of conduct are produced (Pringle & Crocket, 2013). In our study, we subscribe to the notion that the contextual framework makes specific interaction and positions desirable and discursively possible. As mentioned, the positions displayed and the small narratives produced in these contexts are the target of our investigation. In the following, we will elaborate on this narrative approach and its possible contribution to the field of PAIs in sports.

Theoretical Considerations: Analysing PAI as a Narrative Genre

We live in a storytelling society in which life is made intelligible through the practice of telling narratives (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). In this article, we regard the PAI as an event, where such an ongoing process of storytelling takes an explicit form. The interview event departs from an idea of the possibility of collecting the biography of an individual, which can then be used as an instrument to disclose the identity of that young athlete and how he or she is performing in the chosen sports. This perspective resembles the efforts to grasp the informants' assumedly undistorted stories, an approach which for a long time has constituted the standard for qualitative interviews. Within this paradigm, the prototypical interviewer tries to avoid intervening in the conversation (at least, not more than is necessary) in order to capture the informant's own words.

However, as Bamberg (2011) remarks, stories are always told for specific purposes. This means that what is expressed and what is omitted when someone tells a story can only be understood in relation to what the narrator is trying to accomplish with the same narrative with respect to the copresent participants and the specific context. This is what Bamberg calls a small story perspective. Through investigating small stories in local interaction, Phoenix (2008) claims that we can learn something about canonical narratives—how people through everyday language use can position themselves in a larger, established narrative. Therefore, our analysis of personal stories told in PAIs will examine what is at stake in the specific interview context of sport appraisals. By saying that, we align with the theoretical perspective of viewing interests as a topic to be rhetorically handled in interaction; rather than treating it as the participants' underlying cognition or motivations, we instead focus on the

interactional work that the young talents do and how they deal with motives and interests in the interviews.

Stokoe and Edwards (2006) suggest that we should study what people are doing when they tell stories, and by extension analyse, what stories are designed to do. This is a perspective which, in Bamberg's words (2006, p. 140), investigates "what people do with their talk—and more specifically, how they accomplish a sense of self when they engage in story-telling talk." The challenge for us as storytellers, Davies and Harré write (1990), is to create a coherent and consistent story about ourselves out of a variety of and often contradictory sets of everyday experiences—and, indeed, if we do not, then others will require it of us in order for us to appear understandable as subjects. Furthermore, in order to conceptualise how young athletes and coaches produce representations of self during these interviews, we will use the notion of subject position, initiated by Foucault (1977), and subsequently operationalised by Davies and Harré (1990). In our study, we regard subject positions as discursively produced in and through communication. Of all the possible versions of a subject that can be told, and of all the memories and experiences we can use in the story of ourselves, the subject position that emerges in a specific telling context always implies a limited selection: we are putting together parts that fit the purposes we have for our story, and we become the stories through which we tell about our lives (see Riessman Kohler, 2003).

Accordingly, we will follow Georgakopoulou's (2007) call to investigate how we do selves and others in specific narrative genres. One such site of engagement is the PAI—we understand PAI as a particular type of focused interaction that has its own social context with specific expectations (Goffman, 1981). Moreover, and following Rampton's (2006, p. 28) definition of a genre as "a set of conventionalised expectations that members of a social group or network use to shape and construe the communicative activity that they are engaged in," we regard the PAI as a specific narrative genre with its own particular characteristics as well as supposing accessibility to rhetorical resources (Potter, 1996).

From what has been described earlier, appraisals seem to follow particular trajectories and they assume a specific form, relative to a given discursive environment. In this way, the content of PAIs in the context of talent scouting is to be distinguished from other types of performance appraisals present in other discourses. For example, what is deemed and evaluated to be a rational activity in one type of discourse may not apply in another. This means that the specific context, the expectations, and negotiations are all discursively specific and must be taken into account when studying genres. In line with Dowling Næss (2001), we would claim that the manner in which "the talent" is produced does not take place in a social or political vacuum, but within systems of meaning, of discourses that are imbued with power. The discourse of sports in general—alongside the sporting discourse that includes the selection of talent, in particular—are both crucial in studying PAI as a genre in the discourse of selection camps. We thereby subscribe to the view emphasised by Depperman (2013) and De Fina (2013), namely, to pay closer attention to the notion of genre when analyzing positioning in interaction.

Method and Empirical Material

Narrative research is well suited for issues concerned with young people in transition and the ways in which young people construct narrative identities (Heath, Brooks, Cleaver, & Ireland, 2009). Our study is based on stories, told in performance appraisal in two selection camps for the Swedish youth national teams in hockey and soccer. More specifically, the empirical material comprises 26 individual appraisal interviews, between one or sometimes more coach(es) and the young males and females (age 15 years) participating in the selection process. These data are part of a larger data corpus, which, as part of a larger study, also includes interviews with players as well as participant observations by the first author.

The interviews, under investigation in this article, were recorded during the final selection camp, when the young persons faced elimination from the youth national team in hockey (boys) and during the final selection camp for the girls' regional soccer team. The interviews lasted from about 5 to 12 min, comprising together about 160 min. They were conducted and recorded by the national team coaches without the presence of the researchers. The interview guide used was in all cases the coaches' own, and there were no known examples during the fieldwork of adjusted questions or arranged interviews to fit the research situation. On the contrary, the PAIs were a routine practice and a recurring element of the selection camps. Therefore, we regard the data presented here as a form of naturally occurring talk and as a type of conversation which we have found to be of crucial importance for the selection procedure.

The coaches were equipped with recording equipment from the researcher, and the interviews were audio recorded by the coaches. The excerpts cited were transcribed by the first author, using a modified, and less detailed, version of Jefferson's transcription conventions (2004), followed by thematic codings by both authors. Our theoretical orientation has shaped both the design of the transcriptions and the coding of the data. After repeated listenings to the recorded interviews, the material was indexed with respect to prevalent content types. Out of this thematic content coding, narrative practices or coding categories were identified and analysed (Lampert & Ervin-Tripp, 1993). The identified narrative practices and the rhetorical tools were tagged and analysed through the theoretical framework of positioning theory and narrative analysis. The excerpts presented in the results section are used to illustrate archetypical narratives or specific rhetorical devices, used in the participants' positionings. More specifically, we have identified what we call three forms of balancing acts, which were more or less present in all the interviews. In the results, we present those three acts, with help from a limited number of excerpts in order to pinpoint some of the most striking and recurring themes in the whole data set.

Due to a lack of female hockey players, no selection camp took place. Furthermore, during the soccer selection camps for boys, no PAIs were taking place. This is in itself an interesting observation that raises questions about gender and sports. However, due to restricted text space, no discussion surrounding these points will

be offered in this article. Finally, for ethical reasons, all coaches, players, and parents were informed about the project in advance and had accepted that the interviews were to be recorded. Participation was voluntary, and those who did not want to participate had the opportunity to decline participation both before the onset of the interviews and afterwards. However, everyone chose to participate. The participants were also informed that the material would not be available for the coaches in retrospect.

Praise but Not Flattery

In the following, we will present three different narrative practices that were articulated during the PAIs. All three of these practices are about balancing between various positions and thus, in light of this, we have chosen to describe them as involving *acts of balance*. As stated earlier, unlike the trainer conducting the interviews, we are not interested in finding the characteristics of any specific individual. Instead, our interest lies in the interactional work that goes on within the context of PAIs.

The first narrative practice, or act of balance, involves the candidate's ability to rhetorically showcase understanding of the camp as exclusive and the trainers as competent and skilled. But this has to remain implicit. The player should not make it appear as if he or she is engaging in flattery by telling the coach what they know are the "right" answers. Brown and Levinsson (1987) state that compliments are speech acts, which, explicitly or implicitly, attribute something positive to the addressee in order to strengthen their self-image. At the same time, though, if too much praise is heaped on a particular person, and thus the balance tips into flattery, then the responses might be viewed as maladaptive or disordered (Speer, 2012). The further problem is that praise is often directed downwards. However, in this context, praise is directed in an inverted way. This results in various speech acts. For instance, the work of praising has to be balanced in a certain way, according to which the player needs to narratively display gratitude and unity with the coach. In the following excerpt, the interview starts with Joanna being asked about her experiences of the camp.

The opening question "how have you experienced this camp?" is a standard question in our material. All interviews start with this particular question (together with "what is your sporting goal?"). Moreover, by stating that they only have a limited number of questions, the coach (Line 1) places greater significance on the few questions that they are actually posing. There is no doubt that the "how have you experienced this camp—question" calls for an answer where the question of being selectable is at stake.

One rhetorical tool employed here is to acknowledge the excellence of the camp arrangement. What needs to be balanced, however, is that the preferred answer is too obvious. After all, who would take this particular occasion to criticise the camp, especially when those very people responsible for the setup of the camp are on the

Excerpt 1. Displaying gratitude.

-
- 1 Coach: Ah, ah. Oh, there are really only two questions from our side that we want to hear
2 what you think about. And one is how you have experienced this camp (1), what
3 are your impressions?
- 4 Joanna: Ah, it's very professional [mm] and exciting [mm] you get to know people, of all,
5 from other teams here as well [mm]. And very good training sessions. I thought it
6 was pretty cool that we got to be with the national team coach [yes] and I thought it
7 was great to meet them, these other districts [yes]. It feels like, a bit cool [a bit cool,
8 yes], ha-ha. (1) It is, it seems to be great fun and so on [yes, yes] a dream as well
9 [yes] (2). Yes.
-

selection committee, presiding over the decision whether the young athlete should be selected for the final squad? Therefore, the interviewees are supposed to deliver a compliment in a way that appears to be sincere and authentic. In Lines 3 and 4, the player, Joanna, demonstrates gratitude. She also appreciates that this is a special event and does so by pointing out the presence of “the national team coach.” The invocation of the national team coach, who is not present during this PAI, functions as a sign for both the high standards and the exclusivity of the camp. By invoking the presence of the national team coach, she manages to give credit to the arrangement, without sounding explicitly servile. Put differently, by appealing to a third party, she manages to balance the extent of her praise by implicitly complimenting the arrangement made by the coaches, rather than explicitly praising the coach sitting in front of here.

Furthermore, in Line 7, Joanna uses the word “dream” as a way of displaying how important it is for her to be selected. We can understand this as a form of extreme case formulation (Pommerantz, 1986), which further underlines her determination to be nominated for the final team. Potter (1996) emphasizes that extreme case formulations are often used to underline and legitimize claims in order to convince others. By showing both gratitude and an understanding of the exclusivity of the camp—alongside a story about her own determination—Joanna positions herself as eligible. Indeed, to rhetorically display awareness of the fierce competition and to be respectful by this is something that is repeated during the interviews.

This position, however, is co-constructed by Joanna and her coach. The need to show desire as well as a good work ethic is demonstrated by the trainer, who displays the preferred answer by acknowledging answers (“yes” and “mm”) and repeating others (“a bit cool, yes”). Also using rhetorical questions such as “it looks just like you think it was pretty funny?” indicates the way in which the player is supposed to respond. The concepts that are recurrently invoked were “professional,” “learning,” “good training session,” “exciting,” and “cool.” Moreover, the principles of pleasure and fun were recurrently invoked. That is to say, it appears that the driving force for player participation is that it is fun, rather than describing that he or she has been pushed into it or finds the selection

Excerpt 2. Displaying the right goal.

1 Coach:	NHL perhaps, you say (yes, or NHL). Well [laughter]. But what is then
2	required from you, to get to the NHL, then?
3 Andy:	Hard work (yes). Good habits [laughter]
4 Coach:	Oh [laughter]. Well said. Good habits.
5 Assistant coach:	There it is! [Laughter] (laughter)
6 Coach:	Lovely!

process as such anxiety inducing. Also, the presentation of the camp as unique, particularly in the challenges that it sets as well as its exclusivity, is something that is foregrounded. The sense of accomplishment of being selected and getting to play at such a high level is emphasised by the player and is backed up and reinforced by the coach in the conversation. It thus seems paramount that one adopt the position of already having been selected, at the same time as performing that one is indeed privileged to be in a position of being selected as well as, finally, that one is actively engaged in the process and that, precisely, selection is something for which the individual is striving.

This theme is a recurring one, throughout our collected interviews. In our second excerpt, collected from the hockey camp, Andy and the coach are talking about how to reach goals and what it takes to get there.

As for contextual information, the coaches have earlier at the camp underlined the importance of “good habits” and hard work in order to gain success. For example, on the very same afternoon that the young participants arrived to the camp, the coaches presented a PowerPoint presentation, emphasising the importance of having good habits. In Line 3, though, Andy is displaying subservience which is just overly apparent. He offers an explicit answer that is too obsequious and that has to be interactionally balanced. It is the answer that both parties seem to see as the right one, but this is so obvious that it must be handled jokingly or with an ironic wink. Note how Andy’s answer good habits is followed up by the coaches with the replies “well said” and “There it is” followed by laughter.

The description of Andy’s attitudes to the sport and training is jointly constructed by his coaches and himself in interaction (see De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). The feedback from the coaches constitutes a recurring theme in our data. This form of *active voicing* often used as an interactional strategy in order to constitute a social category (Potter, 1996) is here used to display that the player has been listening and understood and accepted the coaches’ expectations, but at the same time, the player needs to manage the apparent flattery. The interviewee needs to tell a story that nonetheless is in line with the genre expected, but it has to be done in such a way that it comes across as authentic and trustworthy. If the answer is too ingratiating, such as, for example, a verbatim repetition of the coaches’ previous words, it needs to be handled. Here, laughter and joking can be effective tools as well as meta-comments such as “there it is” in order to mitigate the apparent flattery.

In sum, we conclude that it is essential to show gratitude, or to some extent, to praise the coach during the PAI. This must, however, be balanced, and as a result, the praise remains neither too obvious nor explicit. The problem with flattery involves that it can be perceived as an (immoral) act that jeopardises the legitimacy of the selection process. After all, the purpose of the PAI is to find the young athletes' authentic attitudes towards training and the objectives of elite and competitive sport. The coaches are looking for the most talented young players with the highest potential and cannot be influenced by rhetorical adornments. The risk of basing selections on random or nonobjective criteria is here at stake.

To sum up this point, to express gratitude, seems to be highly important when one's possible selection is at stake. The camp is described as special, more advanced than the usual club training and, moreover, the athletes are expected to show happiness about being part of all this. Yet, it is important that candidates show this appreciation without explicitly flattering the coach.

Talented, not Fully Developed

A key balancing act that the players must master is to show signs of development as well as self-reflection and an understanding of one's own development. Moreover, in this narrative genre of PAI, the players need to display a will to improve. This is of particular importance when selection is at stake. Here, two rhetorical strategies were employed in our data: (a) the use of temporal indicators in the telling of past, present, and future selves (Börjesson & Blomberg, 2013) and (b) a display of positive self-esteem, without tipping the balance into the realm of bragging. A successful narrator therefore involves a balance between self-enhancement, accuracy, and humility. On top of this, in their narratives, the players need to strike a balance between not displaying too much or too little self-esteem, that is, between bragging and modesty (Speer, 2012). Too much self-regard can be viewed as maladaptive or, in other words, egocentrism.

Furthermore, the task is about showing potential development and self-awareness, to be aware of areas for development, without appearing as a poor performer. In the context of a young person making the transition from youth to adult elite player, indicators of development show themselves through levels of perceived maturity. It is therefore important to display mature behaviour, or rather, to put the point more precisely, and to show an absence of immaturity. The quest of performing one's maturity becomes even more important if this quality can be linked explicitly to development. Here, the empirical material shows us that it is all about emphasising temporal identity change, stressing, for example, how a previously immature and selfish dribbler has now turned into a *team* player, working hard in "both directions," or, for that matter how an unfocused slob has been transformed into a serious working professional. Such examples, and others like them, constitute standard narrative figures in the PAIs.

Excerpt 3. Demands for development.

-
- 1 Coach 1: So, then we have Ali here (yes). What is the stuff that you've been working on, the
 2 hardest, in your game?
- 3 Ali: That's a lot. Well, what can one say then? It's very much the defensive game, as
 well as control like this, to 'box-out' in front of goal, like (.) (yes)
- 4 Coach 1: So it's the game without puck then, mostly?
- 5 Ali: Yes, pretty much the game without the puck. And also with puck, of course
 (mm) (2)
- 6 Coach 1: Mm (3). Do you have anything Johnny? (Coach 2)
- 7 Coach 2: (Clears throat). I was going to hear a little about the physical game, how do you
 8 feel about that? Can you add a few percent in that area?
- 9 Ali: Yeah, of course, I would like to be a little tougher (mm). Yes. I think so. Yes, I
 10 would like to be a little tougher.
- 11 Coach 2: It's a general question, I think we all think (yes, yes). We find that from now on
 12 you are beginning to go from boys' hockey to, play a little more physical and then
 13 if you play internationally, it is of course yet another notch as well (yes, yes). So
 14 it's something you have to build in. (yes). Mm. (3)
-

The next section will focus on two different excerpts (Excerpts 3 and 4), taken from the same interview. In this particular interview, the coach and Ali are exchanging views about what the latter ought to improve on in order to further develop his game.

In Lines 3 and 4, Ali is trying to establish his new defensive thinking. By demonstrating understanding of the defensive game and his own interest in the part of it that takes place “in front of the goal,” Ali demonstrates that he is a mature athlete who works for the team. Also the coaches emphasise (Lines 8–9) that development is crucial. When asking about the transition from youth hockey to senior hockey, they place stress on physical toughness as an indicator of adulthood and maturity (Lines 12–16).

Here, both time and place are recruited as central resources in the construction of a narrative surrounding elite sport. The subject position of “the future elite player” aims for the future, to a time when he will become an internationally recognised professional. The international future equates to a more senior and, by extension, a more physically challenging and tougher game. It is therefore incumbent upon the interviewee to talk about herself as in a process of development, where at some point in the future, all the necessary characteristics for elite sports will be properly realised. It is not a problem that he or she does not yet have these abilities fully, as long as he or she can describe a future self where existing limitations are overcome. In this respect, both a past and a present self must be used as important resources in seeking to find a point of balance between the position of a reflexive and a goal-oriented subject, on the one hand, and an idea of the unfinished young talent with still untapped potential, on the other.

Here, Oscar showcases his own development—how he used to be less skilled at the game along the boards, but now, after some work, he has developed this part of

Excerpt 4. Improving the small things.

-
- 1 Coach: (2) What do you need to work on extra in your game, do you think?
 2 Oscar: Yes (1). Yes (1). Thus, the small things (.) a bit (.) I want to be a little bit better
 3 alongside the boards. Have, have tried to work on that, I've tried to think
 4 about that. Before, I was pretty bad at picking up pucks alongside the boards, I
 5 have been trying to, what's it called, get me out of small situations (.)
 6 When it's muddled.
-

his technique. He rhetorically displays not only the ability for self-reflection and maturity but also an understanding of how hard work pays off in social practice. While Börjesson and Blomberg (2013) convincingly have shown how tellers may recruit a number of “past-time-selves” in order to explain their actions in the present, here the task is to recruit “future selves” in order to describe personal development. The material also shows how progressive development generates future selves. First a present self is displayed, which through self-reflection, now is in a process of development so as to become an elite adult player. Showcasing work discipline seems to be a strong norm in sports in general and is particularly something that is strongly displayed in the ice hockey PAIs. It is therefore important to tell a story of one's great capacity for work and the exceptional ability to hard work. Put differently, to display those requisite abilities, which nonetheless need further development, is crucial in the construction of the talented. This point was raised by most of the players interviewed.

In summary, then, both a past and a future time serve as valuable resources in the project of constructing oneself as (a) an experienced and self-reflexive subject who can point out one's own personal development and (b) a subject who sets high goals so as to be concordant with one's future self as a senior elite athlete.

Positive Self-Assessment but Not Self-Righteous

A significant part of the self-regulatory efforts to “make oneself eligible” is to display one's position as a professional player, with, for example, knowledge of preparation for performance and, moreover, the requisite know-how about how to train with both accuracy and determination. The player is assessed as a potential professional as well as a self-regulating player and thus as someone eligible for future selection. The extract below shows how negotiations surrounding the proper planning process are constructed, and how the player plans to manage both extensive training sessions and the great number of matches. Here, the interviewee has the opportunity to showcase his or her work ethic by recognizing that the road to success will require hard work. A recurring motif is how one is prepared to work harder than everybody else: to practice more, when the others stop, continuing with the overall task and refining techniques in order to gain an advantage.

Excerpt 5. Development through hard work.

- 1 Coach 1: Alright, what will it take to reach your goal then? You say you want to be as
 2 good as possible and the NHL eventually, and that sort of thing. What will be
 required of you then?
- 3 Philip: No, it is, that you (.) Yeah, take care of everything very professionally, do your
 job every day (mm), and don't start taking things for granted.
- 4 Coach 2: Do you do that in Robertsfors then? How serious are you in the activity?
- 5 Philip: No, and then maybe somebody sometimes, but I have to try. As, sometimes
 6 when (.) I run the physical-training in the hockey gymnasium during the week
 7 and so on, then. I try to add a couple of off-ice sessions in the weeks and so on,
 8 but I get to take care of things like that on my own, then. There are not so many
 9 others who have a drive like that.
-

Another key element to the narrative is about setting oneself high goals. The opposite, that is, to have too low targets is handled with jokes and irony, showing that a modest goal is never a proper goal. Interestingly, this question about objectives has its own specific part during the vast majority of the recorded interviews. It takes the form of a challenging internship, in which the coaches try to test and question the individual player's purpose and motivation. The players' task is to clarify and explicitly describe their goals, and these goals are very homogeneous. It is part of the genre of PAI in sports to know that this is the correct answer, namely, striving for the highest international top level. By showing awareness of the importance of hard work, the players are thereby displaying maturity and professionalism, two attributes that are taken as necessary for life as an adult athlete.

In the following excerpt, Philip is describing what is needed to reach his goals and the activities that ought to be connected to the realization of his goals.

In Lines 2–3, Philip is performing the position of “a professional.” He talks about his training as work that needs to be performed everyday. It is also, though, about demonstrating a work ethic, that Philip is a person who comes to work everyday. This shows Philip's discursive understanding of what is considered to be necessary to reach the level of an elite athlete and the importance of occupying the position of a *hard worker*. Meanwhile, Lines 4–5 illustrate how the issue of responsibility gets negotiated. Philip reveals his efforts to take responsibility by practicing on his own (Lines 9–10). In the last step (Line 11), Philip once again seeks to occupy the position of the professional, that is, a diligent and hard worker with an inner drive, whose training is not yet complete. To try or to make efforts to evolve shows self-reliance and the right ambitions. It is a matter of knowing that you are skilled, without explicitly expressing that “I'm the greatest.” An emphasis on “trying” and a commitment to self-improvement and development are central elements of the rhetorical work that needs to get done here. They are ways in which to perform positive self-assessment without showing complacency.

Excerpt 6. Displaying high goals.

1	Coach:	What are your goals with playing hockey?
2	Adam:	Become, become, as good as possible.
3	Coach:	Mm. And how good is that?
4	Adam:	The best. Sort of (mm). At least you can try.
5	Coach:	I write, best in Dalarna (the local region). Or?
6	Adam:	[giggles]. Best in the world (yes).
7	Coach:	What will be needed to get there then?
8	Adam:	(2) (two, two times). And eating and resting and everything. Good habits.

Another way of showing potential of self-improvement is to talk about high future goals. Excerpt 6 shows an example of a very common topic in the selection interviews.

Interestingly, Adam's vague account, "as good as possible" or "the best" is countered with the coaches' teasing question, in Line 5, about whether he by that merely means "best in Dalarna?" By that comment on aiming to be the best in a small region, the coach suggests, for a second, a goal that would be too modest an answer for qualifying to the national team. Accordingly, in the next turn, Adam follows up the coaches' question with the discursively preferred answer, to be "best in the world."

This section again deals with the future self, which we have already discussed. The point is not to be at one's peak today, but that one's optimal performance must be in the making if one is to become an adult elite athlete. Also note how the coach's question about becoming the best in Dalarna (the region) serves as a test in which the preferred answer is not to agree with the question but rather to prove that one's goal is much higher than that. In Line 8, Adam displays his understanding about what is expected from him. He directly cites the words good habits of the coach and thus gives what is the discursively right answer.

Furthermore, it is also highly important, in the studied interviews, to make a serious impression through talking about preparations. In an interview, from the girls' soccer camp, Liz is handling the question of in what ways she is planning her preparations in order to qualify for the elite team.

The importance of understanding the need for professional preparations is here displayed by Liz (Lines 4–5). This extract also illustrates the personal responsibility Liz accepts and showcases her capacity for self-reflection in seeking to identify problems in her development as well as her capacity to act in such a way that she is best prepared to overcome any difficulties.

Furthermore, an understanding has to be reached that not only focuses on the training and the importance of training hard but also equally on how the training should be organized and arranged so as to optimize outcomes. These are rhetorical devices used in order to display the category of the self-reflecting, professional athlete. Liz, in turn, receives positive feedback from the coach, both in Lines 6 and 12.

Excerpt 7. Knowing how to prepare.

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- 1 Coach: If it would be an elite camp then (1). How do you know that you can prepare
 2 yourself in a good way? Now we have the nagging about it, all the
 3 preparations and, very much, so.
- 4 Liz: Yes, but that I feel I can do that [yes, yes]. Hm. So I do not really know how it is
 5 then [no], but probably we run some training sessions, but if we don't have
 6 enough training [no, no] I guess I'll train a little for myself [yes]. You do not,
 7 after all, run your hardest (2).
- 8 Coach: No, no [prior]
- 9 Liz: One can train pretty hard about a week before [yes] and then a few days before, a
 10 little chill [yes].
- 11 Coach: I was thinking about, if you don't have any training, do you feel that you can get
 12 some help, to keep going then?
- 13 Liz: Yes.
- 14 Coach: Yeah, yeah. Good. Good.
-

Within the task of making a positive self-assessment without being self-righteous, it is important for the interviewees to tell the right story of how to become a professional athlete. This work is facilitated by the coaches' ways of suggesting a moderate goal, where the preferred answer to that proposal is to reject it for another, higher, one. By answering the questions posed, rather than raising the issues themselves, the young athletes may occupy the position of future professional players, without sounding self-righteous. This work of doing positive self-assessment while not bragging is also achieved with the help of the word "try," which both points out a willingness to make an effort, at the same time as it softens the risk of complacency. "Try" is a word that helps the interviewee to combine, the dilemma of both showing humility and the self-presentation of being an elite player. Through emphasizing the word "try" or "trying," the athletes can, in a humble way, show their willingness to work to achieve the goal of qualifying for the elite team.

To sum up the results, we have shown how various narrative practices in the selection interviews take the form of what we have called three balancing acts, meaning that it is a matter of ensuring a rhetorical balance so as to appear selectable, both in relation to others (the selectors, e.g., the coaches) and with respect to oneself. This is a common theme throughout our data, of which we show some examples in this article. In seeking to achieve this balance, some rhetorical practices are particularly valuable. For instance, showcasing gratitude without tipping into flattery, using temporality as a way of displaying developmental potential and, lastly, adopting the role of the self-reflecting subject who knows how developmental goals are to be achieved. Such displays of a self-reflecting subject also include an act of balance with respect to others, in the form of expressing gratitude and appreciation for being part of this camp and for having been selected, without, though, turning such complements into too obvious flattery. Furthermore, it is a preferred rhetorical action that one has a sense of inner belief without this coming across as cockiness. When

using temporal indices in interaction, the intention is to address a balance between present and future selves (Börjesson & Blomberg, 2013). This practice coheres around the importance of showcasing individual development; for example, the transition from being an immature selfish slob to a professional team player. Through such formulations, the player invokes both temporality and self-reflection in order to be seen as a subject in a process of development. This self-awareness and knowledge of the work that is required in order to become an elite sportsperson is crucial. At the same time, the candidate must also showcase the range of abilities that he or she has at her disposal in order to handle these requirements. This means that the subject under selection knows the work that needs to be done and is capable of undertaking this work.

Concluding Remarks

The PAIs were described by both coaches and players as an important element in the process of selecting young talents. This seems to be an integrated element within the wider search for talent, as well as in the process of selection as such, which seemingly goes beyond the observable—that is, finding not only the current best performer but also those who are ripe for further development (MacNamara & Collins, 2012). Much academic work has described the use of PAIs in various contexts within and outside the field of sports. Significantly less has been said neither about the interview's relation to the selection process and what impact this might have nor about the interactional work taking place in the interview situation as such.

Undoubtedly, it seems as though this mode of interviewing has increased in many areas within sports, and it is now seen as an accepted ingredient in the player–trainer interaction (MacLean, 2001). In this article, we have approached these interviews as a discursive genre, in which certain types of interactional actions take place (Cranmer & Myers, 2015; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012). This means that we have sought to identify the specific ways in which the position of a talented young athlete is constructed in interaction and the practices involved for selection to be achieved.

In our findings, the conformativity of interviews indicates that the individual player is often well aware of how to talk in order to make oneself selected. Using PAIs in selection camps can be seen as a manifestation of a holistic idea of selection based on the individual's potential for development, rather than on a selection based on the current capacity (Henriksen, 2010). However, the possibility to estimate and assess a young person's ability to develop into adult elite players based on these interviews can certainly be questioned. It is unclear what this form of talk more specifically is aiming for and what impact this might have for ensuring a more legitimate selection. The rhetorical practices that we have shown in the data undeniably contribute to understand how specific narratives and subject positions are produced in this genre of interaction.

When the young players are displaying the grateful and the confident, yet humble, developing subject, or narrating the road to success and displaying high goals—we

argue that he or she is performing what is discursively expected. Thus, the young athlete is providing a culturally established narrative on being talented. This raises some crucial questions. What happens, for instance, to those who resist such self-descriptions, those who are quiet, or those who do not master the art of telling the proper stories.

Through our small story approach, we have tried to investigate how the PAI is used in order to produce the subject position of *a selectable talent* in the discourse of sport selection. This tells us much about the PAI as a genre, but it also divulges much with regards to the discursive production of talent selection in sports. We can truly say that the players who participate in selection camps for youth national teams are talented storytellers and are skilled in social interaction. This is something that they have to accomplish in order to appear selectable. And this genre of interviews not only produces certain practices but also preferred subject positions and narratives that cannot merely be seen as the individual's own true identity narrative. Identifying talent in interaction is much more complex than that. Therefore, we would conclude that in order to be selected and to qualify as a young elite athlete at the selection camps studied in this article, it takes both (a) physical performance on the pitch and (b) social interactional skills in order to construct selectable talents in talk.

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