

Top-level sports and children; practice for life?

A discussion on how to best serve the child's interest in top-level sports;
freedom, happiness and virtue.

Master Thesis Applied Ethics

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Introduction

The moral relevance of sports-association's policies in relation to child's best interest: a description of existing problems.

During the past ten years I have been engaged in youth sports, first as a parent watching with pride and joy, sometimes with irritation, beside the lines. Later on I began to be more involved in organisational aspects of the youth sport, in my case field hockey. Being a coach for a team of seven seven-year old boys, all wanting to have the ball or dreaming away and looking at a butterfly flying past, and the opponent's coach telling me I wasn't applying the rules of the game strictly enough, I realized that, as a parent, coaching young children isn't an easy job. This and other aspects, on which I will later comment, became even more clear when I started to train young children and was involved in the organisation of hockey for six to ten year – olds at the hockey-club. Not only the role of parents, but also of trainers and the clubs, behind which the Royal Dutch Hockey Organisation (KNHB), has an important impact on the way children practice and experience sports. The question came up what the morally important issues are in youth sports, especially in top-level sports. How to accommodate the inherent tension between top-level sports and children's best interest? What is meant with the child's best interest? It is important to start early in life in order to achieve high skills in a certain sport, but at which cost? What values are attributed to sports and which values are considered paramount to children's development? What is the impact of training programs and trainers' attitudes on children's sport-experience and enjoyment?

What is the influence of society on the development and maintenance of top-level sport and is this influence morally relevant?

In this paper I will discuss different views on top-level sport and the child's best interest. As there is an inherent tension between top-level sports and child's best interest, it is morally relevant to analyse the different views on the child's best interest and to discuss whether the practice of top-level sport by children might be a cause of problems. In chapter one I will elaborate on these tensions. I will give an overview of moral issues in top-level sports practised by children and relate these issues to the KNVB's¹ policy on top-level sport and children as an example of a sport association's policy.

The central question is whether one-sided development, i.e. focus on top-level sport, is problematic and, if so, how, from different points of view on the child's best interest, this problem can be handled by sport associations and parents.

The concept of child's best interest is a complex and normative concept and is interpreted differently, depending on the ethical point of view. The child's best interest is not only situated in present but also in future interests. Ultimately, the definition of the child's best interest is an interpretation of the question what constitutes a good life.

Feinberg, Hare and MacIntyre are influential representatives of three important theoretical frameworks, namely liberalism, utilitarianism and communitarianism or virtue ethics. These authors are relevant for this subject as they have different theories on value and, consequently, on the conception of a good life.

The child's best interest can be interpreted as the interest a child has in developing into an adult who lives his or her life autonomously. In this view autonomy is a paramount condition to lead a good life. This view has been brought forward by the landmark article of Joel Feinberg.² He discusses the concept of the child's best interest from the liberal point of view, children's right to an open future.

¹ KNVB: Koninklijke Nederlandse Voetbal Bond, Royal Dutch Soccer Organisation.

² J. Feinberg, The Child's Right to an Open Future, in *Freedom and Fulfillment: Philosophical essays*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 1992, pp. 76-97

Another interpretation is the interest a child has in leading a happy life and in developing into an adult leading a happy life. Conditions to attain that goal are the conditions necessary to be able to fulfil one's preferences. To elaborate on this view I will discuss Hare's utilitarianism³.

To these two interpretations can be added a third: the interest a child has in leading a flourishing life in the present and future. The question then is what is regarded as a flourishing life and what are essential conditions to lead a flourishing life. To elucidate that question I will discuss MacIntyre's virtue ethical approach.⁴

The child's interest has to be promoted by adults, as a child cannot sufficiently protect its own interest. In top-level sport, the adults involved in serving the child's interest are parents and trainers, the institutions involved are sport clubs and associations. The question is what the responsibility of these parties is with regard to the child's interest. In chapter two and three I will elaborate on these interpretations and their concomitant conceptions of responsibilities and duties of the parties involved. To be able to use the concept of a child's best interest as guidance for policies in sport clubs and associations, it is necessary to explore and discuss the various interpretations of that concept and discuss the relation between the *child's best interest* and the issue of *one-sided development*.

How to define one-sided development? One side means that a choice has been made between two or more sides. One-sided development can thus be defined as development of one side due to a choice between several sides. But this definition does not say anything about the substance of the choice; how the choice was made and if it was influenced, by whom and in a negative or positive way, what the choices were and who made the choice, and in what context the choice was made.

To put down one-sidedness as a problem is to make a judgement about the choice. Whether it is to be a moral judgement depends on the point of view one takes. I will approach the

³ R.M. Hare, *Moral Thinking, Its Levels, Method and Point*, Oxford University Press, 1984

⁴ A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A study in moral theory*, Third edition, University of Notre Dame press, 2007

problem of one-sidedness from different points of view and discuss whether it is a problem and a morally relevant problem.

Why focus on one-sidedness? Inherent in top-level sport is the pyramidal structure. That means that at the basis, the starting point in sports, many children can participate. As they grow older the number of children sporting at top level will decrease, either through selection or for other reasons. This selection is based on excellence, meaning that only athletes who excel in their sport can reach the top.^{5 6} This excellence can only be achieved by a great investment in time, training, energy and, dependent of the sport, finances. As a result many children who specialize early in one sport will not be able to reach the top nor will they be able to make a professional career of their sport, while having spent a major part of their childhood and adolescent years to that sport at the cost of other activities and attended with possible risks.^{7 8} For example, in soccer many children start with the extra investments in training and travelling as early as nine years old. It is difficult to estimate and evaluate talent at that age, and to predict one's success in soccer. Only at the age of fifteen or sixteen will the prediction of talent and future success be more reliable. Thus it is possible that children will invest a great deal during many years, years important for their development to adulthood. The question is whether this influences this development in a negative manner, is dependent on the conception of what constitutes a good life. The problem of one-sidedness resides not only with children who will drop out at adolescent age or later, but also with adults having pursued their career in sport. Will they be able to lead a good life during and after their career?

How is this problem to be dealt with by parents and sport clubs or associations?

⁵ In the following I will discuss the conception of practices as developed by MacIntyre. To achieve excellence is important in this view.

⁶ For example, "A 7-yr follow-up of German athletes in seven Olympic sports indicated that only 15 of 4972 (0.3%) selected at the youngest level in each sport eventually ranked among 10 best international senior athletes, while a 3-yr follow-up noted that 192 of 11,287 athletes in elite sport schools (1.7%) attained a medal in an international championship." R.M. Malina, *Early Sport Specialization: Roots, Effectiveness and Risks*, *Current Sports Medicine Reports*, Vol. 9, No. 6, Nov. Dec. 2010, Pg. 367

⁷ I will elaborate on these risks in chapter 1.

⁸ The average age at which elite athletes have started with their sport is four years earlier than ten years ago. R. Luijt, N. Reijgersberg, A. Elling, *Alles voor de sport!?* (Gestopte) Topsporttalenten en hun ouders over investeringen, opbrengsten en offers, W.J.H. Mulierinstituut, 's Hertogenbosch, juni 2009, pg. 81

Finally in the fourth chapter I will summarize the different points of view one can take in children's top-level sport and which can ground discussion and critical thinking about this subject.

The aim of this thesis is to contribute to the awareness of moral issues in top-level sport practiced by children and to contribute to raising a discussion on the child's best interest and how to serve it in top-level sport, between people involved in children's top-level sport. My aim is not to bring the discussion of different views to an end but rather to clarify the different points of view and thereby to facilitate well reasoned discussions on the subject.

Chapter 1.

Moral issues in top-level sports education and training of young children.

Several moral issues are important regarding the subject of top-level sport and children. In my view, these issues arise from the inherent tension between top-level sport and the child's best interest. In top-level sports there is a tension between the goals of sport, like health, pleasure and development of valuable character traits, and the negative effects practising top-level sports can effectuate. Three groups of problems can be distinguished. The first is the problem of *overburdening* of children. The way to reach top-level sport puts a considerable strain on children, not only physically, but also psychologically and socially. The second is the problem of *one-sided development*. Engaging in top-level sports most often means a time-consuming activity, resulting in less time to be spent on other activities. The development of children participating in top-level sports could risk to be extremely one-sided and, as a result, to lead to a neglect of other talents and skills.

The third is the problem of *disparity in power* between children and parents and children and coaches.

A fourth morally relevant issue is the economic and commercial interests that stakeholders such as clubs and sport organisations in general have in sports and youth. Even though this last issue is beyond the scope of this thesis but still of interest, I will touch upon some matters in this specific area. Top-level sports are a part of society, with the concomitant

political, economical and media influence on sports-associations. The society has influence on the way sports-associations are funded and stimulated and the way sports are regarded by the general public. Society sets the goals attached to top-level sports, like enhancing national pride and international prestige. The influence of sports-institutions consists of their policy regarding top-level sports. Their aim can be directed to encourage both sport at top-level as well as sport for all. Their policy translates in relative distribution of funds and trainers to top-level sport and sport for all, education of their trainers and the demands on the trainers. State policies can exert influence on sport-institutions by distribution of funds and by setting a target value: for example, the Dutch policy to advocate the Netherlands as a top-level sport-country by striving for a place in the top-ten countries in the Olympic sports and by organising top-level sports-events like European Championships.⁹ Another target value is the striving to enhance sports participation by the whole population in order to promote health, social cohesion and wellbeing. These policies have an influence on each of the three first mentioned problems, as they manifest themselves both at the national level, the level of sports associations and the level of clubs. I will now describe the three problems in more detail.

Overburdening of children.

The overburdening of children can be found on the physical, psychological and social level.

Regarding the *physical* effects, every practice of sport can cause injuries. In top-level sports however, the risks of getting injured are greater as training-programs and –hours are more intensified than in normal-level sports. The risk is even greater as young athletes are finding difficulty in balancing exercise and necessary rest, due to insufficient knowledge of injuries. Pressure from the athlete herself, like ambition and not wanting to be labelled as ‘weak’, or from the team is contributing also to this risk.¹⁰ Due to intensive training muscle, tendon and spinal injuries can occur, or even bone fractures due to overstraining. “The risks of overuse are more serious in the paediatric / adolescent athlete for several reasons. The growing bones of the young athlete cannot handle as much stress as the mature bones of

⁹ Ibid. pg. 17

¹⁰ Ibid. pg. 65

adults.”¹¹ “ There are no scientifically determined guidelines to help define how much exercise is healthy and beneficial to the young athlete compared with what might be harmful and represent overtraining. However, injuries tend to be more common during peak growth velocity, and some are more likely to occur if underlying biomechanical problems are present.”¹²

A special concern is intensive training for young girls, as intensive training with a concomitant loss of body weight can delay the hormonal development in girls with the resulting problems, known as the female athlete triad: disordered eating, menstrual dysfunction and osteoporosis. This can result in growth-retardation and a greater risk of fractures and skeletal deformities.¹³

An example of sport where these problems can arise is female gymnastics. Disordered eating¹⁴ can occur when much strain is put on weight-control, light-weighted being an important success-factor. Children start as early between the ages of five and seven years and start intensive training by the age of ten, it is in this period of development that the physiological, neurological and psychological growth is rapid and the vulnerability for injuries increases. As in female gymnastics the age to be successful is restricted to a shorter period in comparison with boys, who achieve their peak-performance normally after puberty, the physical and psychological stress is even bigger and occurs in a more vulnerable period.¹⁵

Early sport specialization has the potential to limit overall motor skill development, due to the limited range of skills performed. This in turn may influence negatively the long-term physical activity involvement. Moreover, early sport specialization can lead to drop-out of sport due to lack of enjoyment.¹⁶ “ Young athletes who participate in a variety of sports have fewer injuries and play sports longer than those who specialize before puberty.”¹⁷

¹¹ J. S. Brenner, the Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness, Overuse Injuries, Overtraining, and Burnout in Child and Adolescent Athletes, *Pediatrics* 2007; Vol.9; pg.1242-1245, pg. 1243

¹² *Ibid.* pg. 1243

¹³ I.R. Tofler, Physical and Emotional Problems of Elite Female Gymnasts, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 1996, Vol. 335, Nr. 4, pg. 281-283.

¹⁴ Eating disorders' prevalence in the general population is one to three percent, among female athletes it can be between fifteen and sixty-two percent, *Ibid.* Pg. 281

¹⁵ P. Frei, I. Lüsebrink, D. Rottländer, J. Thiele, Belastungen und Risiken im weiblichen Kunstturnen, *Schriftenreihe des Bundesinstituts für Sportwissenschaft*, Teil 2: Innensichten, Pädagogische Deutungen und Konsequenzen, Verlag Karl Hofmann Schondorf, 2000, Band 102, pg. 16

¹⁶ J. Baker, Early Specialization in Youth Sport: a requirement for adult expertise? *High Ability Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 1, June 2003, pp. 85-94, p. 88

¹⁷ Brenner, 2007, pg.1244

On the other hand, sports-participation in general benefits health, in generating a better overall physical condition and developing motor skills. It can develop a healthy life-style.

Considering the *psychological* effects, the literature mentions: “ Repeated failures; criticism; poor role models; negative peer interactions, including ostracism; and overambitious internal and external pressures to perform are all risk factors for the development of psychological disability and low self-esteem.”¹⁸ Burnout or overtraining syndrome can result from this, expressed in psychological and physical problems. These problems are “..chronic muscle or joint pain, personality changes, elevated resting heart rate, and decreased sports performance”¹⁹ and the athlete’s impairment during training, “..with signs of decreased concentration, increased anger, slowed mental function, and diminished self-esteem.”²⁰ Not only these problems are risk factors, but also a too heavy focus on sports can cause a “..distorted, uni-dimensional development.”²¹ Positive psychological effects are “..the development of positive, realistic self-esteem, self-concept and mental toughness..”²² and certain character-traits like perseverance, leadership skills, self-discipline and sportsmanship. Though the question remains if the development of these character-traits can be attributed to the participation in sport. The correlation could be such that persons with these traits are more attracted to and more successful in sport.²³

Regarding the effects on the *social* level, top-level sports participation can put pressure on the time left for non-sport related activities. Due to intensive training hours, school attendance and intellectual development is under strain.²⁴ Not only in the formal education

¹⁸ Tofler, 2005, pg. 789

¹⁹ Brenner, 2007 pg. 1243

²⁰ D.B. Hollander, M.C. Meyers, Psychological factors associated with overtraining: Implications for youth sport coaches, *Journal of Sport Behavior*, Mar. 95, Vol. 18, Issue 1, pg.3

²¹ Tofler, 2005, pg. 798

²² *Ibid.* pg. 787

²³ S.D. Dixon, *Organized Sport: A Necessary Part of Childhood? Professional Ethics*, Vol. 9, Nos. 3&4, Pg. 32

²⁴ Research on the influence of practicing top-level sport on their choice of study with talent-status (i.e. a status a sportsman or –woman can receive from the Dutch Olympic Committee to enable further development through training, medical, schooling and financial facilitation) and ex-talent-status, showed that for the majority top-level sport participation had influenced their type of study, for example LOOT schools (LOOT-schools, secondary schools where the program is adjusted to the sports-program) or studies directed to sports like ALO (Academie voor Lichamelijke Opvoeding, Academy for physical education). For one fifth of the group (18% of the ex-talent-status and 22% of the talent-status) top-level sport participation had lead to a lower

but also in social development the risk of one-sidedness is present. Less time is left to socialize with friends outside the sports-environment and the family can experience pressure as well.²⁵ In some cases, children participating in top-level sports have to move to a central trainings-centre to get the specialised training by top-level trainers, often resulting in having to stay with a guest-family. The engagement of one child in top-level sport can influence the other family-members as well, as top-level sports can be time-consuming for and a financial burden on the family.²⁶

Overburdening and the policy of the KNVB.

The policy of the KNVB is directed to prevention of overburdening by setting the age at which children can start the trajectory of the schooling to become a professional soccer player at eleven years. The view behind this policy is that children below the age of eleven would best play soccer at amateur clubs in order to provide a safe and secure pedagogic environment.²⁷ Children will be able to play soccer in one's own environment and with one's own friends and will not be subjected to excessive stress, tight time schedules and travelling time.

Besides, the length of the training trajectory when started at an earlier age makes it difficult to oversee for children.

A problem with this regulation is that most BVO's^{28 29} though, get round this regulation by creating E- and F-teams³⁰ which are formally not a part of the BVO but of the 'soccer-school'. Training in this 'school' is mostly restricted to once a week and players still play at their 'own' amateur-club.

educational level. N. Reijgersberg, M.Gijsbers, A. Elling, Dromen van de Top, Over investeringen van (ex-)talenten en de invloed van topsportbeoefening op hun leven, W.J.H. Mulier Instituut, 's-Hertogenbosch, december 2010

²⁵ Tofler, 2005

²⁶ The problem for the parents can be that time, attention and financial possibilities are disproportionately spent on their child participating in top-level sports at the cost of other family-members.

²⁷ W. van Dijk, A. Kiesel-Griffioen, A. Buisman, A. Jonkman, E. Lankhuijzen, Naar een professionele opleiding tot beroepsvoetballer, Rapportage literatuurstudie KNVB, CLU, Universiteit Utrecht, september 2007, pg. 45

²⁸ BVO: Betaald Voetbal Organisaties, Payed football organisation.

²⁹ Only one BVO conforms to the regulation of the KNVB, most start their trajectory at 9 or 10 years. W. van Dijk, A. Kiesel-Griffioen, A. Buisman, A. Jonkman, E. Lankhuijzen, Naar een professionele opleiding tot beroepsvoetballer, rapportage onderzoek KNVB, CLU, Universiteit Utrecht, mei 2011, pg. 52

³⁰ E: 10-11 years old, F: 6-8 years old.

The BVO's motives to start early with the trajectory are inter-club competition in recruitment of talented youth, creation of better conditions to develop talent³¹ and making use of the young children's susceptibility to learn.

Some BVO's decide not to start early, motivated by pedagogic aspects³² and efficiency aspects: insecure investment in children due to difficulty of talent-recognition and prediction of development, and the risk of early drop-out.

One-sided development

One-sided development can be analyzed in different aspects. As mentioned before, it can lead to physical and psychological problems, and when quitting top-level sports, problems in adjustment to a life in which sport is not playing a significant role anymore. The composition of top-level sport is pyramidal: broad at the bottom, the youngest, and small at the top. That means that a great part of the children who are selected will not reach the top. As "...only an extremely small percentage of involved children will ever compete athletically at the elite or professional level..."³³ the children that won't reach that level have to "... contend with a major life change. Without their sport they often feel ill-equipped to function in and contribute to adult society. The closure of an intense athletic career is often fraught with adjustment-related depression, identity difficulties, and an unrealistic sense of failure and lack of purpose..."^{34 35} The guidance of parents and talented young athletes by sport-associations and trainers often is insufficient, due to inadequate information about the content and impact of a top-level sport-career. The choice for such a career is not so much a well considered one as one that just happens.³⁶

Factors of influence on the process of adjustment to a life without top-level sport are personal and external factors. The personal factors are "...the athlete's appraisal of the

³¹ Better in the sense that 'schools' can provide better educated trainers and better players to play with and against, compared with amateur-clubs. Van Dijk, 2011, pg. 49-50

³² To keep children in their own environment and to prevent the prioritising of club-interest to child-interest. Van Dijk, 2011, pg. 51

³³ Tofler, 2005, pg. 789

³⁴ Ibid. pg. 789

³⁵ Though by others this closure can be regarded as a 'social rebirth'. J. Stier, *Game, Name and Fame- Afterwards, Will I Still Be the Same? : A Social Psychological Study of Career, Role Exit and Identity*, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 2007 42: pp. 99-111, pg. 101

³⁶ R. Luijt, N. Reijgersberg, A. Elling, *Alles voor de sport!?* (Gestopte) Topsporttalenten en hun ouders over investeringen, opbrengsten en offers, W.J.H. Mulierinstituut, 's Hertogenbosch, juni 2009, pg. 57

situation and his or her ability to meet the demands of the situation, self-attitudes, and the degree of personal control the athlete perceives he or she has with respect to the end of one's career..."³⁷, but most importantly "...the degree to which an athlete's identity is immersed in sport, or self-worth is defined by sport..."³⁸.³⁹ ⁴⁰ ⁴¹

External factors are the reasons for quitting or type of exit⁴², the nature of the sport, experience including coach-athlete relationship, social support systems and the extent to which one's socialization occurs primarily in the sport environment.⁴³

Sport associations and clubs are using selection to achieve the best results in their field of sport. Elite athletes are dependent for their career on these associations and clubs. In this sense sport associations and clubs have a responsibility towards athletes, the successful as well as the drop-outs, in the way they handle the issue of the consequences of the inevitable selection in top-level sports and the one-sidedness inherent to the practice of top-level sport.

One-sided development and the policy of the KNVB.

Regarding development, the trajectory's aim is clear; first of all to maximally develop soccer-talent.⁴⁴ In concrete terms this means that BVO's have a target, a certain percentage of the youth from the trajectory should eventually become a professional soccer player.⁴⁵ The player's interest, in the sense of development as soccer player, is prior to the team's and other interests⁴⁶, though a tension between these interests can arise.

³⁷ G. Kerr, A. Dacyshyn, (2000) 'The retirement experiences of elite, female gymnasts', *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 12: 2, pp.115-133, pg. 116

³⁸ Ibid. pg. 117

³⁹ For example, identity formation in elite, female gymnasts is at risk of being problematic. They tend to experience role restriction and identification with their role as gymnast. Loss of sport-related relationships when leaving the sport and an experienced lack of personal control during their athletic career hinder identity formation. Acceptance of one's body and appearance is important in identity formation in adolescent girls: "Issues around food, appearance, and weight are so prominent during the gymnasts' careers and do not seem to dissipate during retirement." Ibid. pg. 129

⁴⁰ On the other side, formation of a top-level sport identity, understood as giving priority to sport, is a necessary condition to reach top level. Luijt, 2009, pg. 11

⁴¹ This identity is further reinforced by the existence of specialised schools, like LOOT schools. Ibid. pg. 82

⁴² For example a serious injury, leading to an abrupt ending of a sport-career.

⁴³ Kerr, 2000, pg. 117

⁴⁴ Only one BVO provides possibilities to practice another sport, like gymnastics or judo. Van Dijk, 2011, pg. 18

⁴⁵ Van Dijk, 2011, pg. 14

⁴⁶ These interests are prevention of degradation, keeping up the status of the club and trainer.

Secondary aims are development of players' personality⁴⁷ and preparing unsuccessful⁴⁸ players for their participation in society, by alignment to sport-oriented schools.⁴⁹

A player should acquire certain capacities as mentioned in the competency-profile.⁵⁰ These capacities are mainly capacities to be able to play soccer well and to cope with life as professional soccer-player. To acquire these capacities a schooling-plan serves as guidance. Children participating in the training trajectory are often in special schools, the so-called LOOT-schools.⁵¹ The benefits of these schools are the adaptation of the school-program to the sport-program and the contribution to prevention of school drop-out for children coming from a less structured familial background, by the structure the trajectory provides in combination with the LOOT-school.

Negative aspects of the LOOT-schools are restriction of the social environment to the soccer social network and the connection between the school and the trajectory; if a child drops out of the trajectory, a change of school is necessary.

One-sidedness can be a problem by focus on a specific trajectory, where the chance to be successful is small, successful in the sense of future career as a professional soccer player, due to difficulty in prediction of success at an early age⁵² and the pyramidal structure of the trajectory. A concomitant problem is that early specialisation enhances the chance of drop-out by loss of interest and pleasure.⁵³

At the moment, by order of the KNVB research on the children who dropped out of the training trajectory is undertaken in order to evaluate and possibly make adaptations in the trajectory. The research questions are the children's experiences of the trajectory, their reasons for drop-out and their current schooling or work activities.

⁴⁷ Among others, disciplined behaviour.

⁴⁸ Unsuccessful in the sense of not being able to pursue a career in soccer.

⁴⁹ MBO 2, 3 and 4, MBO: Middelbare Beroepsopleiding, Intermediate Vocational Training.

⁵⁰ 1. From a assigned position within the team being able to contribute to team-functions during a match. 2. To be able to prepare for a training or a match. 3. To be able to develop oneself and ameliorate one's performances. 4. To be able to reflect on one's own football-development. 5. To be able to cope with media, public and sponsors.

⁵¹ LOOT: Landelijke Organisatie Onderwijs en Topsport, National Organisation of Education and Top-level Sport.

⁵² Only at the age of fifteen or sixteen this can be determined, Van Dijk 2011, pg. 41

⁵³ van Dijk, 2007, pg. 45

Disparity in power

Are children enabled to make their choices to engage in top-level sports well-considered and autonomously or are they directed in their choice by parents, coaches or indirectly, by sport-institutional and national policy? Can parents make well-informed choices on behalf of their child regarding involvement in top-level sport?

Especially in top-level sports, like gymnastics or soccer, where children start intensive training before they are twelve years old, it can be questioned where or by whom the choice is made and what the motives behind these choices are. Children can have their own motivation to want to excel in a certain sport and develop their talent, enjoying their skill and the challenge it poses. Parents can be motivated by the enthusiasm of their child but also by their own ideas about excelling in sports and the importance it has in their own life-conceptions. Especially young children⁵⁴ cannot oversee the long-term consequences of their decisions, so that parents, sometimes in consultation with or lead by coaches or trainers, have to make the decisions for their child and its best interests. The balance between the child's interest and the parents' or coach's interest can be delicate, especially when "...a parent's self-worth and even financial well-being can become so dependent on the successes and failures of the child in sports that the pressure the parent places on the child becomes far and away his or her primary stressor."⁵⁵

Coaches or trainers can have child-centred reasons to stimulate children in top-level sports, as recognition of talent and enjoyment of sport and wanting to develop these. But motives like reaching a certain goal, like winning competitions or getting a medal in championships, or putting their own career as a successful trainer on the foreground can also play a role. As the trainer is the one who assists the children in their sport-development but also is the one who judges them and is an important, if not decisive, factor in the decisions concerning further sport-career, this creates a dependency of the child on the trainer which can work out in both a negative as a positive way. The trainer can be regarded by the child as a role

⁵⁴ No exact demarcation line can be drawn due to varying psychological and intellectual development of children.

⁵⁵ Tofler, 2005, pg. 793

model and thus exert positive influence, but the trainer can also overcharge a child and find difficulty in differentiating “.. the needs and goals of their athletes from their own.”⁵⁶ The problem here is that a child in this position possibly could have difficulties in pursuing its own goal, being under the influence of both trainers and parents with each their own interests, which may not coincide with the child’s interest. This point is reinforced by the fact that children are very sensitive to parents’ and coaches’ judgments and have little autonomy in judging their own goals and performance.

These issues show that it is difficult for a child to choose autonomously, due to developmental age and external influences. Parents have the responsibility to make choices for their child on their child’s behalf.⁵⁷

The moral relevant issues are whether parents and trainers are acting in such a way in order to promote well-informed decision-making in the child’s interest, and whether sport-clubs’ and -associations’ policies are aimed to the promotion of the parents’ and child’s ability to make well-informed choices and the trainers’ ability to act in accordance with a child’s capabilities, physically as well as psychologically.⁵⁸

Disparity in power and the policy of the KNVB.

Regarding the promotion of the ability of parents or children to make a well informed decision about entering the trajectory and which trajectory to choose, the KNVB aims to increase the transparency of the different trajectories. The factual information of the trajectories of various clubs, regarding way of training, attained level of football or percentage of drop-out is not readily available. The choice for a training trajectory within a certain club is determined partly by the adherence of the parents to a certain club and by the reputation of the trainings-trajectory of a certain club.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ With the child’s increasing age, this decision-making will increasingly be done by the child itself.

⁵⁸ This coaches’ ability is relevant as his or her way of coaching has impact on the physical and psychosocial well-being of a child and the way a child is promoted to develop autonomy. The policies of sport associations and clubs influence on their turn the coaches’ abilities by their demands on coaches regarding their schooling and experience.

⁵⁹ The choice is more on emotional than rational grounds.

Once in the trajectory, individual interviews between trainers and children are held⁶⁰, to discuss the goals for the coming season and to evaluate one's progression. To stimulate self-knowledge and -reflection on their development video-analyses and personal development interviews are used.

The problem with these interviews is that for his or her development⁶¹ the child is dependent on the one who will make a judgement on his or her development and that that same person is the one who takes the personal interview. In this way the child's ability to discuss freely will be confined.

The fact that only a very small percentage of the children will actually pursue their career as professional soccer player is often mentioned to children and parents in these interviews.⁶² Whether and how such information is given prior to entering the trajectory is not documented.

To promote the trainers' abilities to act in accordance with the developmental stage children are in, the KNVB has made a system of requirements regarding the trajectory for professional soccer-player organised by the BVO's. These requirements are the presence of a teaching plan with pedagogic didactic aspects and concomitant a classification- system of the trajectory. These requirements are applicable to the trajectory for professional soccer-player and not to soccer schools. The clubs themselves are responsible for the composition of the training in the soccer schools.

The requirements the trainers should meet, as formulated by the KNVB, are knowledge of the soccer-game and knowledge of communication and handling with children. The trainers' schooling is a combination of learning and practice; trainers have to train children in the different age groups to become aware of the differences between these groups and to learn how to deal with these differences and learn to reflect on one's competence as a trainer. The trainers' background, especially in the training trajectory of children of eleven years and older, is mostly a background of great knowledge of and experience with soccer, often a former professional soccer-player. In the training of children younger than eleven the

⁶⁰ Beneath the age of 14 parents are also present.

⁶¹ The trainer decides whether a child can play or has to settle for being a substitute player, having consequences for its development as a player. The more one plays, the more one develops.

⁶² Van Dijk 2011, pg. 73

trainers' background is more differentiated, as more trainers have a background of CIOS or ALO.⁶³

Clubs introduce specific expertise in their training trajectory, like assistance in homework and school, social and medical assistance.

Recapitulating: I have made a survey of the various effects participation in top-level sports can have on children and the moral issues in top-level sport and children, followed by a discussion on the policy of the KNVB on several of these issues. I will now first discuss the view on child's best interest and one-sidedness from a liberal and utilitarian theoretical framework.

Chapter 2.

Child's best interest and the liberal and utilitarian view: freedom and happiness.

In this chapter I want to discuss the point of view on the child's best interest in top-level sports from the liberal and utilitarian theoretical framework. As this is quite an extensive area to explore, I will focus on one author, in the liberal view this will be Joel Feinberg, as his article has raised much discussion. In the utilitarian view I will discuss the view as presented by Richard Hare. I have indicated that top-level sport practiced by children can cause problems of overburdening of children, one-sided development and disparity of power. As explained before, I will focus on the problem of possible one-sided development. I will put this one-sidedness in the different contexts of the liberal and utilitarian view, and further on in the virtue-ethical view.

⁶³ CIOS: Centraal Instituut Opleiding Sportleiders, Central Trainings-institute of Sportleaders, AIO: Academie voor Lichamelijke Opvoeding, Academy for Physical Education. Exact numbers of the percentage of trainers with this background are not available.

The liberal view: Freedom

Starting with the liberal view: What is meant in this view by the child's best interest? How could it best be served? Can one-sided development be regarded as morally problematic in this view and if so, what are possible responses? Finally I will evaluate the liberal view.

I will use Feinberg's work on rights of children as a paradigm for the liberal view.

Joel Feinberg has developed a point of view on this matter known as the 'open future' argument.⁶⁴ I will first discuss his line of reasoning.

He distinguishes two sorts of rights characteristic of children: dependency rights, rights derived from the dependency of children upon others for the basic instrumental goods of life, like food and shelter. The other rights are "rights-in-trust"⁶⁵, rights that children cannot exercise while being children, as their autonomy is not yet fully developed, which means that children are more or less incapable of making well-informed decisions about their interests.

These rights-in-trust are future rights, in the sense that the child cannot exercise them being a child, but having developed into an autonomous adult he or she will be able and will want to exercise these rights by making choices of his or her own. Feinberg argues that these "anticipatory autonomy rights"⁶⁶ are to ensure that certain "key options"⁶⁷ remain open until the child has reached autonomy. A violation of these rights leads to closing of certain key options, thereby limiting the choices one can make as an autonomous adult. What is morally problematic about that? Feinberg argues that the right of autonomy is not only based on the good of the person, where good could be equated with self-fulfillment, but also on the notion that protecting autonomy is morally basic. On the one hand the right of autonomy is grounded by the idea that autonomy leads to or is a necessary element to achieve self-fulfillment, on the other hand the right to autonomy is grounded on the conception that autonomy itself is of paramount importance.

What does Feinberg mean with self-fulfillment? He notes that various interpretations exist, but that some elements are necessary: "... the development of one's chief aptitude into genuine talents in a life that gives them scope, an unfolding of all basic tendencies and

⁶⁴Feinberg, 1992

⁶⁵ Ibid. pg. 76

⁶⁶ Ibid. pg. 77

⁶⁷ Ibid.

inclinations, both those that are common to the species and those that are peculiar to the individual, and an active realization of the human propensities to plan, design, and make order.”⁶⁸ Self-fulfillment in this sense can be equated with a person’s good.

So the answer to the question what is morally problematic in violating anticipatory autonomy rights is that it can endanger a person’s good, i.e. self-fulfillment, and it is the violation of a basic morally important issue of autonomy.⁶⁹

Conflicts between these anticipatory rights and rights of parents and community’s interest are quite common. Feinberg gives some examples of conflicting rights. I will elaborate on the following example to explain Feinberg’s view on education. A well known and much discussed example is that of the case of *Wisconsin versus Yoder*.⁷⁰ In this case the conflict of rights was situated between the rights of Amish parents to raise their child according to their religion, traditions and their way of life and the right of a child on education, and the duty of the state to protect the child’s interests.⁷¹

The religious rights of the parents were given priority over the rights of the children on education. Feinberg argues that although he doesn’t disagree with the final decision, he is of the opinion that “..education should equip the child with the knowledge and skills that will help him choose whichever sort of life best fits his native endowment and matured disposition. It should send him out into the adult world with as many open opportunities as possible, thus maximizing his chances for self-fulfillment.”⁷²

The answer to the question, what the child’s best interest according to Feinberg’s view is, I would formulate as follows. The child’s best interest is the interest the child has in future self-fulfillment and in future self-determination, and this can be achieved by keeping certain

⁶⁸ Ibid. pg. 91

⁶⁹ In my opinion Feinberg justifies the right to an open future in two ways: not only the essentialism of freedom, the ability to choose on one’s own power one’s life, but also the instrumental component of freedom as a means to achieve self-fulfillment.

⁷⁰ <http://supreme.justia.com/us/406/205/case.html>

⁷¹ The parents argued that prolonged schooling of their children after graduating from the eighth grade, would endanger the parents’ religious liberty and the traditional Amish way of life by bringing the child into contact with conflicting views of life. Furthermore the child wouldn’t need the knowledge from school were he to live an Amish life, which is centred on farming and self-supporting along religious principles. The state of Wisconsin argued that formally a child should follow schooling until the age of 16, in order to be able to lead a good life as an adult. But the final decision was in favour of the parents arguing that the child would be able to lead a good life in his own environment and traditional way of life.

⁷² Feinberg, 1992, pg. 84

key options open. This view imposes on the environment that has to deal with the upbringing of children, (parents, teachers and state), a negative and positive duty: to refrain from actions which close those options prematurely and a duty to actively keep key options open.

To start with the negative duty, what does it entail for parents? It means that parents should refrain from raising their child in such a way that its future possibilities are limited. But here lies also the difficulty of determination of the definition of 'restricted'. When are possibilities restricted? It raises the question whether it is feasible or desirable to keep as many as possible options open. Claudia Mills criticizes this argument. She claims "...that it is both impossible and undesirable to try to provide children with an "open" future in any meaningful sense."⁷³

The first problem is that it difficult to define what open or closed options are, in the sense that determination of what open or closed options are, is dependent of the perspective from which these options are viewed. Viewing from the mainstream Western position capabilities necessary to be able to pursue a career and achieve professional satisfaction are considered paramount to one's self-fulfillment. Viewing from a different position, for example the Amish position, the important goals in life are not the worldly achievements but "...living in harmony with God."⁷⁴

The other problems Mills indicates are on the practical side as well as on the substance of options. The practical problem is that time is not endless and the number of activities that can be done in a certain time is restricted, which restricts the number of options. "To open one door is inescapably to close another."⁷⁵ On the substance of options, to be able to choose between various options one has to know what the options entail, i.e. what certain activities mean and what their content is. This getting to know the various activities takes time, for example learning to play an instrument or to practice a sport, and thus takes time from other possible activities. According to Mills the objective to keep as many options open

⁷³ C. Mills, The Child's Right to an Open Future? *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 34 No. 4, Winter 2003, pp 499–509, pg. 499

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 500

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* pg. 503

as possible leads to a superficial way of life, as many options can only be touched upon without the possibility to really get acquainted with and appreciate one.⁷⁶

Feinberg, as Mills also concedes, does not approve of the smorgasbord approach. He states that a child should go in the future with as many options as possible, but he admits that environmental factors like the social and religious background will exert their influence on the child's future options. But the point made, that it is difficult in this way to decide whether options are restricted or not, is clear. However, "... a certain degree of parental shaping of children is inescapable. If our goal is our children's future self-fulfillment, we can't help but shape the interests whose later satisfaction will prove fulfilling; if our goal is our children's self-determination, we can't help but shape the self which is to do the determining."⁷⁷ This means that due to parental background, traditions, culture and circumstantial influences certain options will be not as much foreclosed but not encouraged. A child cannot be regarded as growing up without the influences of his parents and environment, which partly shape the personality of a child. Feinberg describes this shaping as a reciprocal process, where the nature and character of a child influences the choices parents make for that child, which on their turn influences the choices the child will make. To come back to the question, how parents should exercise their negative duty not to restrict future options of their child, I suggest the following interpretation. Parents should not hinder the exposure of their children to different views and values of life⁷⁸ and should not hinder the development of capabilities necessary to be able to exert autonomy in adult life.

Regarding the positive duty to actively keep options open Mianna Lotz gives a different interpretation of these duties than Mills does. Mills interprets the positive duties as duties to provide possibilities to pursue all options,⁷⁹ whereas Lotz interprets these as "...a duty on parents *to seek, within their capacity, to provide adequate conditions for a child's emerging*

⁷⁶ She calls it "smorgasbord approach", pg. 503. The example given is that of parents, themselves a-religious, giving their child an introduction to the different religions available in their community. Subsequently the child wanted to be a Shinto.

⁷⁷ Ibid. pg. 507

⁷⁸ Parents should "...take their chances with outside influences."(Feinberg, pg. 83)

⁷⁹ Which Mills argues are undesirable and unattainable as explained above.

*autonomy.*⁸⁰ What are the adequate conditions? Lotz formulates them in a different way putting more emphasis on the feasibility and value of options and not the maximization of options. To be able to choose autonomously the skills and capacities for information seeking, critical reflection and deliberative independence are necessary elements. These skills and capacities should be encouraged by parents to be developed.

“...the options presented to a child will need to be varied, relevant, culturally meaningful, and in a broad sense representative of the diversity of ways of life. Central to autonomy is the capacity to authentically choose one’s projects, commitments and more generally one’s life plan. For all of us there will be life plans that are contingently but nevertheless firmly out of reach.”⁸¹

Resuming I would define the child’s interest in the liberal view as the interest the child has in developing his or her autonomy in order to be able to choose his or her life-plan and lead a self-fulfilling life. In order to be able to do that parents should not hinder this development by not hindering the exposure of their children to different views and values of life and by not foreclosing prematurely certain key options. They should encourage this development by letting them acquire the skills and capabilities necessary to make autonomous choices and by “... ensuring that their child is provided with a range of feasible and valuable options.”⁸² This entails that options should be relevant to or valued by the social and cultural background and that options should be to a certain extent realistic options.

I will return now the problem of one-sidedness associated with top-level sports practiced by children. How does this relate to the view I have discussed above? Is one-sidedness a problem? What are possible responses?

One-sidedness in this view is problematic as it leads by definition to foreclosing of certain key options. Especially early sport specialization would close certain key options.

Possible answers are not to specialize early in sport but to provide a range of different (sport) activities. This does not entail confrontation of a child with all possible sports, but sport as one of the child’s activities.

⁸⁰ M. Lotz, Feinberg, Mills, and the Child’s Right to an Open Future, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Vol. 37 No. 4, Winter 2006, 537–551, pg. 546 (italics from the author)

⁸¹ *Ibid.* pg. 547

⁸² *Ibid.* pg. 547

Young children are not yet able to make autonomous choices concerning their future as they cannot foresee the long-term consequences of their choices. This means that others will have to make those choices taking into account the nature of the child, children's preferences, talents and physical and psychological abilities and will have to help children to make choices. Those others are parents but also teachers and coaches and trainers.

The choice for participating in a certain sport or certain sports is based on a mixture of the child's enthusiasm and physical and psychological nature, the parents' and trainers' ideas about sports, friends participating in a sport and environmental factors like sport and financial facilities .

Especially with very young children, the choice whether to start top-level sports or not, needs to be scrutinized, as the choice will much be directed by the parents' and/ or the trainers' motives. These motives can be genuine and in accordance with the child's nature, but they can also be informed by self-interest: prestige, status and financial gain.

Just as parents should not hinder and should promote the development of children's autonomy and should not foreclose certain key options, so should trainers do: depending on the age and development of children, trainers should encourage and provide the conditions for the development of skills and capabilities necessary to make autonomous choices and by providing them with a range of feasible and valuable options.

This means that trainers and parents should encourage children to form their own ideas about their sport-participation, not only their achievements but also the fun and satisfaction they derive from it, and the expectations they have of it. Trainers nor parents should let their own expectations or goals influence the child's choice.

Consequently, sport-associations should facilitate that autonomous development by their selection of trainers, by their way of programming the instruction and by providing information. In order to make a well-balanced choice information about the specific sport participation concerning time- and financial investment, expectations, possible injuries and the developmental trajectory of the sport should be provided.

Involvement of older children in top-level sport whose ability for autonomous choice is more developed and whose physical, psychological and intellectual development is such that the relevance of certain options is clear, would in this view not be problematic. " For children

with supreme natural athletic ability, extensive participation in sport best fits their native endowment and is a rich source of self-fulfillment.”⁸³

Now I will turn to the evaluation of the liberal view.

The emphasis in this view is on autonomy, with little regard to the context of the whole life of an individual. Though some references are made to feasible and valuable options, these are not further elaborated. To understand what feasible and valuable options are an interpretation of these is necessary. These options have to be put in a broader context, in the context of the community where one lives with its social and historical aspects. The problem of the liberal approach is that in order to keep as many options as possible open, it does not supply the relevant actors, child, parents or other educators how to make the best decisions and how to make them consistent with a child’s capacities and social background. Parents’ identity is not taken into account in a meaningful way, not only in the sense that parents, through their social being, shape a child’s development, but also in the sense that parents have to guide that development.

The utilitarian view: Happiness.

Having discussed the child’s interest from the liberal view, I will now turn to the utilitarian view. What is meant by the child’s best interest in the utilitarian view?

How can it best be served? Can one-sided development be regarded as morally problematic in this view and if so, what are possible responses? I will end with an evaluation of the utilitarian view.

Before I can answer these questions I first have to give an explanation of this view and I will do that by discussing utilitarianism as elaborated by Richard Hare⁸⁴ and his view on education.

⁸³ N.Dixon, Sport, Parental Autonomy, and Children's Right to an Open Future. *Journal of the philosophy of Sport*, 2007, vol:34, iss:2 , pg. 152

⁸⁴ Hare, 1984

Hare argues that moral conflicts cannot be resolved by moral intuitionism as intuitions will conflict and do not lead to a solution but to "... tragic situations".⁸⁵ What is necessary to resolve moral conflicts is a two-level structure, which is workable. With workable is meant that the principles given by the structure are simple enough to learn them, are unspecified enough to be able "...to cover a variety of situations all of which have certain salient features in common"⁸⁶ and do not give rise to temptations to make exceptions. A one-level structure cannot be workable as "...any attempt to set up what is called a hierarchy of principles, telling us which is to override which, and when, will, if it is to do justice to the moral judgements which we actually make in cases of conflict, soon become extremely complicated"⁸⁷ and "...we are unlikely to be able always to put principles in the same order of priority"⁸⁸.

What does Hare mean with this two-level structure? The first level, the intuitive level, is the level on which relatively general principles guide much of our moral conduct. These principles are prima facie principles which express prima facie duties. These "... are associated, owing to our upbringing, with very firm and deep dispositions and feelings."⁸⁹ But these principles alone are not sufficient to decide in cases of conflict, as every new situation will have some differing aspects which can be morally relevant. To decide which principles are appropriate to handle new conflicting situations one has to resolve a conflict by using critical thinking. "What critical thinking has to do is to find a moral judgment which the thinker is prepared to make about this conflict-situation and is also prepared to make about all the other similar situations. Since these will include situations in which he occupies, respectively, the positions of all the other parties in the actual situation, no judgement will be acceptable to him which does not do the best, all in all, for all the parties."⁹⁰ This results in giving equal weight to the interests of each in impartial critical thinking.

The relation between prima facie principles and critical principles is such that prima facie principles have to be selected by critical thinking. "...if we are criticizing prima facie principles, we have to look at consequences of inculcating them in ourselves and others;

⁸⁵ Ibid. pg. 31

⁸⁶ Ibid. pg. 36

⁸⁷ Ibid. Pg. 34

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid. pg. 38

⁹⁰ Ibid. pg. 42

and, in examining these consequences, we have to balance the size of the good and bad effects in cases which we consider against the probability or improbability of such cases occurring in our actual experience.”⁹¹ The other function of critical thinking is the resolving of conflicts, by examining the prima facie principles and qualifying them.

How does critical thinking proceed? It is important to find out which features of an action are relevant by applying to the action a moral principle which mentions the feature, the principles determine what is relevant. “...(critical thinking) requires us to pay attention to the satisfaction of preferences of people...and to pay attention equally to the equal preferences of those affected...”⁹² According to Hare, the moral relevant features of an action are the likely effects of those actions on people. Effect not only in the sense of knowing what factual happens but also in the sense of what it is like for a person, what a person experiences. In order to resolve a moral conflict one should represent oneself to the situation of others and balance the conflicting preferences.

Up till now I have discussed the way a moral conflict could be solved from the utilitarian view. I will return now to the question what is meant by the child’s interest in this view and how it can best be served.

The child’s best interest in the utilitarian view is a general condition to preference-satisfaction or a condition relative to the opportunity to get what one wants. Thus something is in one’s interest if it promotes the opportunity to get what one wants and contrary to one’s interest if it restricts these opportunities. But it is not only the preference-satisfaction that is important but also the inculcation of certain dispositions and developing the ability to think critically that are important. I will explain that below.

In the two-level approach the prima facie prudential principles are selected by moral principles through critical thinking. In upbringing a child, the child’s interest would be served by the maximization of its preference-satisfaction. In order to be effective, in the sense that not only the present preferences are satisfied but also the future preferences, it is necessary to be guided by prima facie and moral principles and to develop attitudes towards them or virtues. Some of these principles will coincide, like the principle of temperance: not pursuing

⁹¹ Ibid. pg. 48

⁹² Ibid. pg. 90

the pleasure of the moment but seeking long-term good ends. Temperance is instrumental in the way it can lead to maximization of preference-satisfaction but if it is only practiced for success' sake it misses the 'body'; temperance should also be felt. Hare distinguishes instrumental and intrinsic virtues. Instrumental virtues are necessary instruments "...to make a success of practicing the more intrinsic virtues such as beneficence or justice."⁹³ Examples of these instrumental virtues or virtues of the will are courage, self-control, perseverance.

But the objective of child-education is not only the maximization of the child's preference-satisfaction and interest, but also "...the interests of all those who are affected by his actions."⁹⁴ To secure those latter interests it is necessary to inculcate moral principles in the child.

In other words, the child's interest is best served by not only determining its own interest but also the interests of others by inculcating moral principles. Hare gives several reasons for this statement.

The first is the problem of predicting the future of a child, resulting in educators having to guess at the best principles for the child to have in its own interest. Moral principles are in its interest because of the impossibility of human beings to live successfully without them.⁹⁵ Another reason is the beneficial effect on society. "It is better for nearly all of us if social rewards and penalties are attached to socially beneficial and harmful acts..."⁹⁶

The last reason is that having inculcated these moral principles, "...not merely a *policy or practice* of obeying these principles, but *firm dispositions of character* which accord with them..."⁹⁷, will lead to greater happiness. "...the dispositions which will make possible mutual cooperation and affection, without which all our endeavours would miscarry, and all the joy and warmth in life would disappear."⁹⁸ These dispositions are positive as well as negative: the positive are as mentioned above, the negative, like feeling remorse after having done something not according to the principles, are necessary "...to secure consistent

⁹³ Ibid. pg. 193

⁹⁴ Ibid. pg. 193

⁹⁵ Hare gives the example of the impossibility of human beings to act immorally without being detected or punished. Even if people have been successful in criminality and for example have gained a fortune, this will not have made them happy and thus will not be in their own interest.

⁹⁶ Hare, 1984, pg. 196

⁹⁷ Ibid. pg. 197

⁹⁸ Ibid.

obedience to the principles.”⁹⁹ Furthermore, feeling remorse about transgressing moral principles will be disadvantageous to his well-being.

So to instil not only moral principles but also the concomitant moral feelings would be in the child’s interest. To determine the stringency of the moral principles one needs to identify the principles appropriate for oneself and according to one’s capacities.

What are these principles?

They have to be principles which have to be accepted by nearly everyone¹⁰⁰ to be workable and fulfilling their purpose to promote social life in its broadest sense.¹⁰¹

And they are the principles specific to one person and others like him .“...principles which are desirable in those who occupy certain roles, or vocations in the professional sense...”¹⁰² and the principles that are appropriate for one in a personal sense.

According to Hare then, the best way to serve the child’s interest is “... to try to inculcate into him some prima facie moral principles, with the attendant moral feelings.”¹⁰³ Whether these principles are ‘run-off-the-mill’ principles or more demanding ones is dependent of one’s capacities. Hare postulates that if one has the capacity to live by more exacting principles and one accepts these, this would contribute to one’s happiness.

How is one-sided development to be regarded in this view? Is it problematic? What are possible responses? One-sided development in this view is the restriction of opportunities to maximize the preferences.

One should educate along lines which would most promote the opportunities to maximize the preferences. Focus on development in top-level sport could be in one’s interest if, first and foremost, one has the physical capacity and psychological interest, and one has the capacity to live according to the more demanding dispositions participation in that kind of life requires and if this would fulfil one’s preferences. Dispositions or virtues which are desirable in the top-level sport could be perseverance, honesty, temperance and justice. Focus on development on top-level sport would be not in one’s interest if, first of all, the

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ An example is honesty and truthfulness leading to mutual confidence.

¹⁰¹ “..those minimal requirements which are the foundations of life in society...” Hare, 1984, pg. 200

¹⁰² Ibid. pg. 201

¹⁰³ Ibid. pg. 203

physical and psychological capacities were not present, and if it would restrict opportunities to satisfy one's preferences.

As a parent or other educator cannot predict a child's future, nor its preferences in the future, they are faced with a dilemma when considering involvement of the child in top-level sport. The dilemma is starting early to specialize in one sport with its concomitant risks (overburdening, one-sidedness and disparity in power) in order to achieve top-level and postpone specialization in order to minimize these risks but running the risk of not achieving top-level. As mentioned before, one should represent oneself to the situation of others and balance the conflicting preferences. That results in the question for the parents what they would choose, were they in the child's position, in order to satisfy their preferences. First of all, what would the preferences be? The current and future preferences must be described. The child could now have a preference to become an elite athlete¹⁰⁴. A first requirement to enable preference-satisfaction is the child's physical capacity and psychological interest in sport, i.e. to enjoy sport. Necessary for satisfaction of this preference is dedication to sport in hours as well as energy and start at an early age¹⁰⁵. To be able to persist the child will need the instrumental virtues like perseverance, patience and endurance, inculcated by education, and the psychological interest and physical abilities. Support from his environment being indispensable, in the practical as well as educational sense, parents should provide this support. Other preferences of the child could be to play with friends and to spend time with family. In order to fulfil these parents should enable the child to have time to do these things. These and the first preference could be in conflict.

Future preferences can only be described in general terms as parents cannot predict a child's future preferences. These preferences would be health, to be able to take care of oneself, to have good social relationships. By being able to take care of oneself I mean able to earn a decent living not necessarily pursuing a specific career.

¹⁰⁴ It is questionable whether a child at an early age can already have that preference. Model elite athletes can influence this, as do parents, peer group and trainers.

¹⁰⁵ Baker, 2003. The author contrasts the '10-year rule' and power law of practice (pg. 86-87), holding that early specialization and a certain amount of specialized training-hours leads increases the chance to reach elite level in sports, with results from other studies, where early specialization was not a condition to reach elite level in sports, but rather variable sport involvement in early stages of development.(pg. 89)

In order to have a good health now and in the future parents should shape the conditions to be healthy, for example by using a balanced diet or exercising regularly. Besides these conditions temperance is a crucial virtue that should be acquired through education.

To be able to take care of oneself in the future a child needs education. How extensive the education should be is dependent of the society a child lives in and the child's capacities.

Essential are skills to be able to function well in his or her society. Parents should facilitate the opportunities to develop these skills. The virtues instrumental to this preference are wisdom and justice.

To have good and meaningful social relationships a child should learn already at an early age what it means to have these, in feeling, behaviour and reciprocity. Parents should promote the development and sustenance of relationships by shaping conditions for these to develop and sustain. The concomitant virtues are loyalty, trust and honesty.

To satisfy these future preferences it is essential to start in childhood to provide the opportunities for development of these 'instruments'. These preferences can also conflict with the preference of future elite athlete.

Thus, one-sided development in top-level sport is problematic in the utilitarian view if this would lead to negative effects on the child and its social environment not counterbalanced by positive effects.

How do parents¹⁰⁶ have to decide between the conflicting present and future preferences? According to Hare they should transcend the intuitive level to think at the critical level.

Which principle can rule over these conflicts? I think it must be the principle of maximization of the preferences of all concerned, not only of the child itself. The well-being of the child will be promoted by satisfaction of her present and future preferences. As these conflict, the impact of these various preferences on well-being have to be determined and to be weighed against each other. To become less abstract: for example, early intensive specialization in sport can lead to injuries, some of them not temporary. This clearly conflicts with the present and future preference of health, which is an important condition to satisfy other preferences.

¹⁰⁶ I have only discussed the role of the parents. To discuss the role of trainers : the child's interest is set against the trainer's and other's (team, club, association, state) interests. Conflicts of interest also arise here. For example, a club would start early with schooling of talented children in order to be a high level club. This could conflict with the child's interest.

The preferences of other family members should be considered as well. Intense sport participation of one child in the family will demand much attention, time and possible financial investments from the parents, which will influence the attention and time spent by parents on other family members.

The outcome of the weighing would be such that to safeguard the present and future preference satisfaction of the child and others concerned, early sport-specialization would only be admissible if the conditions to protect health and to assure social and intellectual development, and the conditions to protect others' interests can be met.

A problem of this approach is, first of all, the determination of preferences. The idea to want to reach top-level sport can arise from the child, out of fascination and enjoyment. This idea can be influenced or even promoted by parents, peer group and trainers.

To be able to form its own preference, a child should be able to get a well-informed idea about this preference. At an early age children are not yet able to do this.¹⁰⁷ Consequently the risk that other's interest play a role in that preference is great and the child's interest is subordinated to others' interests.

However, the main problem of this approach is the way guidelines of action are developed. Preferences have to be given a 'weight' and all the preferences of those concerned have to be summed. It could turn out in this calculus that the child's interest would be subordinate to other interests.

For day to day circumstances, we are to apply the prima facie principles, like 'one should not lie' or 'one should be nice to one's friends'. Only when conflicts arise between these principles one should apply critical thinking, one should act in such a way that most preferences of those affected by the action would be maximized. According to McDonough¹⁰⁸ this would lead to frequently applying the critical level principles as in day to day life many conflicts arise. More importantly, it would lead to conflicts between the prima facie principles and critical level principles.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ By this I do not mean that young children do not know what they want or don't want, but that their notion of long-term consequences is not developed.

¹⁰⁸ K. McDonough, Moral Rules, Utilitarianism and Schizophrenic Moral Education, *Journal of the Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 26, No.1, 1992, pg. 85

¹⁰⁹ For example, according to the prima facie principle that we should have special duties towards our next of kin, but according to the critical principle we should consider all interests equally.

In this view, virtues are only important as instruments to the maximization of preferences. But the ability to make judgments requires more than just the application of rules, it requires the ability to take into account the complexity of situations.

“Sensitivity to the particularity of situations, including aspects particular to the individual agents involved or to the salient human relationships involved, is needed to determine how a principle is to be applied in any particular case.”¹¹⁰

MacIntyre argues that to consider virtues only as instrumental would lead to consideration of virtues as mere ‘conventions’ and ‘professional’ skills. “Someone who genuinely possesses a virtue can be expected to manifest it in very different types of situation, many of them situations where the practice of a virtue cannot be expected to be effective in the way that we expect a professional skill to be.”¹¹¹

MacIntyre gives in his virtue ethical approach a different account of the virtues. The way to develop virtues is to be a part of practices. Virtues are considered as valuable in themselves, as an expression of the nature of human beings. I will now turn to MacIntyre’s account of virtue ethics.

Chapter 3

The virtue-ethical view: Narrative Unity.

What is meant by the child’s best interest in this view?

How can it best be served?

Can one-sided development be regarded as morally problematic in this view and if so, what are possible responses?

Finally I will evaluate the virtue-ethical view.

Before answering these questions I will first give an exposition of the virtue-ethical view according to MacIntyre.

¹¹⁰ McDonough pg. 76

¹¹¹ MacIntyre 2007, pg. 205

MacIntyre argues that a core conception of the virtues can be discovered, one of the features is that the virtues are secondary to a “..prior account of certain features of social and moral life..”.¹¹² The development of the concept is in three stages: “ The first stage requires a background account of what I shall call a practice, the second an account of what I have already characterized as the narrative order of a single human life and the third account a good deal fuller than I have given up to now as what constitutes a moral tradition.”¹¹³

The practice MacIntyre means is “.. any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”¹¹⁴ Examples of practices are arts, sciences, sustaining family life.

Goods are internal to a practice if they can only be obtained by participation in a certain practice and recognized by the experience of participating in a specific practise, thereby being specific for that kind of practice. The example given is that of chess-playing as a practice in which the internal goods are “..a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity..”.¹¹⁵ Goods are external to a practice if they are achieved not specifically from a certain practice but can also be acquired by way of alternative practices. MacIntyre gives the example of prestige, fame and money.

Not only the achievement of goods are involved in a practice but also acceptance of the specific standards of excellence and obedience to the practice-specific rules.

Consequently, the difference between internal and external goods is that internal goods’ achievement “ is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice”¹¹⁶, whereas external goods are “some individual’s property “¹¹⁷ and “objects of competition”.¹¹⁸

¹¹² Ibid. pg. 186

¹¹³ Ibid. pg. 187

¹¹⁴ Ibid. pg. 187

¹¹⁵ Ibid. pg. 188

¹¹⁶ Ibid. pg. 190

¹¹⁷ Ibid. pg. 190

¹¹⁸ Ibid. pg. 190

Following from this a virtue can be defined as “... *an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.*”¹¹⁹ As a person within a practice is in relationship with other practitioners of that practice that person has “... to learn to recognize what is due to whom;”¹²⁰ the virtue of justice, “..[...]to be prepared to take whatever self-endangering risks are demanded along the way;”¹²¹ the virtue of courage, and to be attentive to his or her own inadequacies; the virtue of honesty. Within a practice, technical skills and virtues are ways to achieve the internal goods and ends of a certain practice. These ends are not fixed in time but transform over time, building on the traditions of a certain practice. The way institutions are related to practices is such that practices can’t survive without institutions, sustaining the practices and concerned with acquiring external goods like money. An example of an institution is a sport association which sustains the practice of sport. The ends of institutions, the achievement of external goods, can influence the practices by prioritizing external goods before internal goods. This influence can be counteracted by exercising the virtues.

“ It is of the character of a virtue that in order that it be effective in producing the internal goods which are the rewards of the virtues it should be exercised without regard to consequences.”¹²² This is clearly in contrast with the utilitarian view where virtues are seen as instrumental, important to reach maximization of preferences.

Virtues are to be regarded not only as means to achieve internal goods of and excellence in certain practices, but within a “...overriding conception of the *telos* of a whole human life, conceived as a unity.”¹²³ Without this conception rivalry between the quest for internal goods from different practices will lead to conflicts and choices will be made on individual grounds. Virtues serve “..some overriding good, some *telos* which warranted putting other goods in a subordinate place.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ Ibid. pg. 191(italics from the author)

¹²⁰ Ibid. pg. 191

¹²¹ Ibid. pg. 191

¹²² Ibid. pg. 198

¹²³ Ibid. pg. 202

¹²⁴ Ibid. pg. 202

“These two considerations are reinforced by a third: that there is at least one virtue recognized by the tradition which cannot be specified at all except with reference to the wholeness of a human life- the virtue of integrity or constancy.”¹²⁵

According to MacIntyre , the concept of the unity of human life is “..that particular actions derive their character as part of larger wholes..”¹²⁶ This concept entails that different phases, like childhood, in life are not demarcated sharply but seen as a part of the whole, an ongoing process. Furthermore virtues are not only means to achieve internal goods of some practice but can be manifested in very different types of situations. “ And the unity of a virtue in someone’s life is intelligible only as a characteristic of a unitary life, a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole.”¹²⁷ Prior to the concept of unity of life is the concept of unity of selfhood; “ .. a concept of a self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life to death as narrative beginning to middle to end.”¹²⁸

This narrative is characterized by unpredictability. Certain other features determine the narrative; the narratives of other people and their intertwining with one’s own narrative, the beginning of one’s narrative that was not one’s making and the social settings in which the actions take place.

Another characteristic is “ a certain teleological character. We live out our lives, both individually and in our relationships with each other, in the light of certain conceptions of a possible shared future, a future in which certain possibilities beckon us forward and others repel us, some seem already foreclosed and others perhaps inevitable.”¹²⁹

Thus the unity of an individual life consists in “.. the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life.”¹³⁰ The good for a person is the best way to “..live out that unity and bring it to completion..”¹³¹ , and the good for all is the common feature of the best ways. To find out what the good is one needs to query for it by encountering and coping with various situations that can distract, harm or endanger. The narrative unity can be understood as a concept of life in which one’s actions lead to the fulfilment of one’s goal in life in such a way that those actions are consistent and constitutive of one’s self.

¹²⁵ Ibid. pg. 203

¹²⁶ Ibid. pg. 204

¹²⁷ Ibid. pg. 204

¹²⁸ Ibid. pg. 204

¹²⁹ Ibid. pg. 215

¹³⁰ Ibid. pg. 218

¹³¹ Ibid. pg. 218

But the individual cannot seek the good of life individually, as an individual is embedded in and originating from social and historical communities.¹³² As practices have a historical embedding virtues have to sustain relationships to the past, the present and the future in order to sustain the relationships required for practices. But the practices are a part of larger social traditions. Traditions not in the sense of conservative, but in the sense that development within an institution is framed by some traditional mode of thought, and development is made by criticism and invention. “A living tradition then is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition”.¹³³

Relating this conception of virtues to dilemma’s confronted by individuals leads to the premise that which course of action an individual chooses to take, leads to ‘some authentic and substantial good’, understood in the practices such as family-life or profession, so that there is no right choice.¹³⁴

What is meant by the child’s best interest in this view? How can it best be served?

Considering the life of a person a narrative unity, the child’s best interest are the conditions necessary to be able to form that unity. That unity can be seen as an on-going process.

Children have to be guided in this process by the creation of conditions for fulfilling that unity. Those conditions are the ability to develop virtues inherent to the various practices, as practices are the source and carrier of virtues. Those conditions are “...the development of those powers that enable children to become reflective and independent members of their families and political communities and the inculcation of those virtues that are needed to direct us towards the achievement of our common and individual goods.”¹³⁵

This entails involvement in practices which can be diverse. For example, in top-level sports that would mean the ability to develop in a sport not only excellence in a technical sense (skills) but also in the sense of required attitude (disposition, virtue), like a sense of justice (fair play) and persistence. This involvement in sport will yield internal goods that are

¹³² MacIntyre notes the contrast with individualism, where one is what one chooses to be.

¹³³ Ibid. pg. 222

¹³⁴ “To perform his or her task better rather than worse will be to both what is better for him or her *qua* individual and *qua* parent or child or *qua* citizen or member of a profession, or perhaps *qua* some or all of these.” Ibid. pg. 224

¹³⁵ A. MacIntyre, J. Dunne, Alisdair MacIntyre on Education: In Dialogue with Joseph Dunne, Journal of Philosophy of Education, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2002, pg. 2

valuable to the athlete and the community participating in that sport. Examples of internal goods are thrilling soccer matches or beautiful service in tennis. The dispositions or virtues developed in a practice like sport will not only be valuable in this practice, but will be valuable in other practices as well as being valuable in themselves.

To ensure that the process of unity development is continuous, anticipation on possible interruption of the process and integration of that interruption in the whole of one's life is of paramount importance. These possible interruptions have a personal and external aspect. In top-level sport, excellence is not predictable at an early age, neither is continuation of an athletic career predictable. Whether one will pursue his or her athletic career to the end or will have to end it prematurely, is dependent on personal factors, like native endowment and character, and on contingent external factors, like injury.

To be able to accommodate and integrate interruptions one needs certain dispositions and skills. These dispositions are truthfulness and perseverance, truthfulness to be able to regard oneself and one's life and its path truthfully without self-deception, and perseverance to be able to continue one's life. The necessary skills are intellectual development to be able to imagine other possible paths in life consistent with character and endowment. These possible alternative paths should be a realistic possibility, in the sense that the necessary capacities are present.

How can this best be realized?

To enable children to form a unity of their life parents should be attentive to their children's development, its talents, temperament and capacities, in order to be able to choose certain practices for and with them in accordance with children's character and talents. As the development of children, the involvement in practices is dynamic too. Adjustment to the development is important. Necessary for that adjustment is attentiveness of parents towards their child and of other educators taking care of children. Attentiveness alone is not sufficient, conditions to be able to cope with adjustments should be provided. These conditions are the support of the family, development of the child's psychological stability through caring social relationships and development of certain dispositions or virtues like truthfulness and perseverance.

Is one-sidedness problematic in this view? And what are possible responses?

Inevitably one has to choose between practices during one's life. It is impossible to concentrate on many practices *and* to strive for excellence in all those practices.

One-sidedness is problematic if involvement in one practice would not cultivate virtues that transcend that particular practice, if it would lead to disruption of the narrative unity and if it would not bring internal or communal goods.

Necessary to excel in sport are certain dispositions. Perseverance is one of them, without which an athlete would not endure the drills necessary to achieve a certain standard.

Perseverance is an important disposition in many other practices, like doing homework for school. Other virtues of paramount importance are honesty, to be able to participate in a sport in a fair way, and courage, to be able to rise above one's capacities. Without the virtue of honesty other practices, like sustaining social relationships or science, would be doomed to disappear. Whether it is possible to develop virtues while being mainly involved in a sport practice at an early age is uncertain. Involvement in top-level sport does not exclude *per se* cultivation of virtues that can transcend the practice of sport.

Internal goods of sports are certain aspects of a sport that can be experienced by everybody involved in that practice and can only be achieved by exercise of the virtues. For example in soccer, internal goods are a beautiful goal or a thrilling match, while examples of external goods are fame and wealth. Financial means are necessary to maintain practices like soccer. If the balance between internal and external goods is such that external goods dominate internal goods, that the aim of soccer is shifted from the aim of playing a match well, fairly and just, towards the aim of getting wealthy and famous and regarding sport as an instrument to these aims, one-sided involvement in sport is problematic.

To be able to develop the unity of one's life virtues are essential.

"The virtues therefore are to be understood as those dispositions which will not only sustain practices and enable us to achieve the goods internal to practices, but will sustain us in the relevant kind of quest for the good,..[...],and which will furnish us with increasing self-knowledge and increasing knowledge of the good."¹³⁶

Dependent on the way involvement in sport is practiced, one-sided involvement in sport does not have to exclude cultivation of virtues and thus will not have to be an impediment to development of the unity of one's life. One-sided involvement in sport does not have imply one-sided development. There is a risk though, that extreme involvement in sport can hinder

¹³⁶ MacIntyre 2007, pg 219

the development of virtues due to focus on external goods. The sport practice is then mainly instrumental. When the sport practice will end, be it for internal or external reasons, the person involved will be left empty handed. The period of time of sport involvement will then not be a part of one's life but rather an intermission or a loose end, without meaningfulness for one's life, which means a disruption of one's life plan.

Evaluation of this approach.

This view has its merit in placing an individual in his or her social context, taking into account the history and social background of that individual. Social relationships as a practice and their concomitant virtues are of paramount importance as are the development of self-knowledge. It does not regard an individual as an atomistic part of a society, like in liberalism, neither is one's good of life predominantly determined by one's preference-satisfaction, as in utilitarianism. The interdependency of practices, their reciprocal influence on each other are a reflection of life.

This view could guide parents and other educators in such a way that in education and raising of children it is important to emphasize the development of virtues, that is to engage in activities with the motive to engage wholeheartedly and with care for the activity itself and the relationships within that activity. Parents should, in order to anticipate on a child's life plan, create opportunities to engage in activities and be sensitive to the child's talents and temperament.

Chapter 4.

Conclusion.

In this thesis I have discussed whether one-sided development, i.e. focus on top-level sport, is problematic from different points of view on the child's best interest. At first sight, top-level sport practiced by children is at odds with the child's best interest. Sport associations and clubs face the conflict between the aim to reach the top by engaging children at an

early age in a training trajectory and the aim to protect children against overburdening, power-abuse and one-sided development. In a somewhat different sense, parents face the same problem, though the aim to reach the top would rather be the aim to develop a child's talent.

The purpose of this discussion is not to give a definitive answer on the question how to solve this dilemma, but rather to show that the child's best interest can be interpreted in different ways. Consequently, whether one-sided development can be considered as problematic and what exactly constitutes the problem of one-sidedness differs according to the view one takes.

From the liberal point of view one-sided development is problematic as it forecloses prematurely certain future key options. Top-level sport is only acceptable when it is clear what the feasible and valuable options will be, which will exclude the practice of top-level sport by young children.

From the utilitarian point of view one-sidedness is problematic if it will hinder the maximization of the child's present and future happiness. If the conditions to protect health and to assure social and intellectual development, and the conditions to protect others' interests, are met, top-level sport would not be problematic.

The virtue-ethical approach considers one-sided development as problematic when the involvement in sport is only instrumental and without regard for the intrinsic value of sport and if one-sided development would disrupt the unity of life.

In order to develop a policy on top-level sport and children based on the child's best interest and in order to make a well-balanced choice by parents and children regarding top-level sport, it is essential to know what is meant by child's best interest and what issues are present in top-level sport. This thesis offers tools to structure discussion on these subjects and could form an element in curricula of sport-educational schools. Discussion on this subject within sport associations and clubs will contribute to a better understanding of the dilemma's inherent in top-level sport and increase the sensitivity to this subject.

To apply these tools in practice further steps have to be taken. This discussion is predominantly theoretical and would need further elaboration to be applicable in practice. Interaction between theory and practice through debate and feedback will enhance the applicability.

Summary.

The central question is whether one-sided development, i.e. focus on top-level sport, is problematic and, if so, how, from different points of view on the child's best interest, this problem can be handled with by sport associations and parents.

An interpretation from the notion of child's best interest and one-sided development is given from the liberal view as brought forward by Feinberg, from the utilitarian view as brought forward by Hare and from the virtue-ethical view as brought forward by MacIntyre. The purpose of this discussion on the child's best interest is to offer tools to parents, sport associations and clubs, to structure debate about this subject and increase sensitivity to this subject.

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