Young Swedish Athletes’ perceived Social Support and Well-being in Football Academies

Abstract

The objectives of the study were to examine: (I) if different categories of social support (family, friends and school) can predict well-being among Swedish male football academy players. Moreover, the purpose is to (II) compare if two age groups of male academy players (11-14 years) and (15-19 years) differ in perceived social support (e.g. family, friends and school) and well-being. The participants in the study were 443 male football academy players (M = 14.17) from four different elite clubs. The questionnaire that was used in this study consists of a modified extended-form health survey collected from FHI (Public Health Institute) developed to examine adolescents’ subjective well-being. The survey is based on SDQ (Goodman, 1997), PSP-scale (Hagquist, 2008) (Swedish questionnaire developed to measure psychosomatic issues among children) and Kidscreen (Ravens-Sieberer et. al., 2005). The result showed that different categories of social support (e.g. family, friends and school) could predict 20.4% of the total well-being among Swedish academy players. Additionally, it was found that younger academy players (11-14 years) experience a higher level of well-being and more social support in terms of friends and school in relation to older academy players (15-19 years). The results are discussed in relation to theoretical frameworks and previous research.

Key words: Football academies, well-being, perceived social support

**Sammanfattning**

Syftet med studien var att (I) undersöka om olika kategorier av socialt stöd (familj, vänner och skola) kan predicera välmående hos svenska akademi fotbollspelare; (II) undersöka eventuella skillnader i avseende socialt stöd (familj, vänner och skola) och välmående mellan två åldersgrupper av akademispelarna (11-14 år) och (15-19 år). Antalet deltagare i studien var 443 manliga fotbollspelare (*M* = 14.17) från fyra olika elit klubbar. Instrumentet består av en modifierad hälso-enkät insamlad från FHI (Folkhälsoinstitutet), som var utvecklad för att undersöka ungdomars subjektiva välmående. Enkäten är baserat på SDQ (Goodman, 1997), PSP-scale (Hagquist, 2008) och Kidscreen (Ravens-Sieberer et. al., 2005). Resultatet i studien visade att olika kategorier av socialt stöd (familj, vänner och skola) kan predicera 20.4% av det totala välmående hos svenska akademi spelare. Vidare visade sig att yngre akademi spelare (11-14 år) upplever ett högre välmående och mer social support från vänner och skola i jämförelse med äldre akademi spelare (15-19 år). Resultatet diskuteras utifrån teoretiska referensramar och tidigare forskning.

**Nyckelord:** Fotbolls akademier, upplevd social support, välmående
Introduction

It is well known that the relationship between sport participation and psychosocial development of children is a popular area within sport psychology (Duda, 1987). Organized sports have a major function in developing children and adolescents, and today are the psychological and physiological benefits of participation in sports well known (Cote & Frazer-Thomas, 2007). From early ages, children are chronologically assigned to different age-teams to make sure that each individual have equal development opportunities (Mujika et al., 2009; Musch & Grondin, 2001). In research it has been discussed whether children should specialize in one sport or participate in variety of sports (Hill, 1993; Cote & Hay, 2002; Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009). Empirical evidence supports the notion that early specialization among other factors has both positive and negative impact on the athletes’ psychological well-being (Raedeke, 1997).

In a study by Weirsma (2000) it was recommended to incorporate important variables such as, education and social opportunities into the training seasons. In this way the young athletes have an optimal opportunity to achieve success under proper physical, social and psychological conditions. Furthermore, it was found that few youth sport programs would survive without the commitment and social support from parents.

In 2002, FA (Football Association of England) created a new strategy called “psychology for football”. It was based on a long – term educational initiative to develop players, coaches and staff support among football academies, professional elite clubs and national teams in England. The purpose of the strategy was to create awareness in how to apply sport psychology in football and educate these groups in football psychology (Cale, 2004) and as a result of this strategy more and more clubs are now integrating sport psychology into their programs (Harwood, 2008; Johnson, Andersson, & Fallby, in press). In scanning the FA structure focusing on youth football, it was found that football players could be as young as eight years old and be scouted and then signed for a professional football club. The children could start fulltime at the academy at the age of nine years old, and only the best players were selected for the youth England team (under 16 to 21) (Pain & Harwood, 2004). Moreover, it was found that only 25-30 players from all 40 academies in England represent the senior first team after ended football academy (Reeves, Nicholls, & McKenna, 2009).

Thus, Hill et. al., (2008) indicated that the youth athletes’ within the academies is under pressure to perform to fulfil the dream to be a professional football player.

There is hardly any research conducted within the area of well-being among young talented football players, at least not in Scandinavia. Therefore, this is an important study and it is relevant to investigate and gain more insight if different variables of social support can predict well-being among Swedish football players. Moreover, to establish a knowledge of the field regarding prevent and promote mental health within the football academies.

Definition of key terms

Well-being
The World Health Organization (WHO) defined mental well-being as: “A state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (Herman, Saxena, & Moodie, 2005, pp. 2).
Social Support

There are several definitions of social support in previous research. One definition is as following: “Social support refers to an exchange of resources between at least two individuals’ perceived by the provider or the recipient to be intended to enhance the well-being of the recipient” (Shumaker, & Brownell, 1984, pp. 13).

Talent

Howe et al. (1998, pp. 399) defined talent as following: “Talent may be characterized by properties that are genetically transmitted and partly innate. Talent may not be evident at an early age, but there will be some indicators that enable trained people to identify its presence. These early indicators of talent may provide a basis for predicting those individuals who are more or less likely to succeed at some later stage. Very few individuals are talented in any single domain; if all children were talented, there would be no way to discriminate or explain differential success. Finally, talent is specific to that particular domain”.

Talent development

Talent development has been defined as: “Talent development implies that players are provided with a suitable learning environment and resources so that they have the opportunity to realize their potential” (Williams & Reilly, 2000, pp. 658).

Sports specialization

Specialization has been defined as following: “Limiting of participation to one sport that is practiced, trained for, and competed in on a year-round basis” (Hill & Hansen, 1988, pp. 76)

Theoretical frameworks

A developmental model on transitions faced by athletes

A theoretical framework of athletes’ development on transitions was developed by Wylleman and Lavelle (2004) to give a broad and holistic perspective throughout athletes’ careers. The participants in their study face the specific transitions and belong to the different age stages presented in the model (see figure 1), and are therefore adequate to apply as a theoretical framework. The model highlights a “beginning-to-end” perspective and reflects the nature of normative transitions in athletic, psychological, social, academic and vocational levels. The model consists of four different layers (see figure 1). The first layer represents the athletic level, which basically consists of the transitions the athletes faces during their career and includes three different stages; Initiation, development, mastery and discontinuation (Bloom, 1985). The initiation stage mainly introduces the athletes’ into organized sports and occurs in the age range 6-7 years of age. During the developmental stage, the athletes’ competitive level increases and meets a more intensive level of training and competition. This is the moment when the athletes’ are recognized as talented (12-13 years of age). The third stage is the mastery level. This level reflects the athletes’ top competitive and performance level (18-19 years of age), and the fourth and last level is discontinuation, which represents the athletes’ way out of sport in a competitive level (28-30 years of age). The research data is based on career development of previous active as well as active athletes, elite athletes and professionals, and Olympians (Wylleman & Lavelle, 2004).

The second layer describes the transitions occurring in a psychological level. It consists of four different stages of psychological transitions that include childhood, adolescence and adulthood. The third layer represents the changes that can occur in the athlete’s social
environment and is related to his or her athletic involvement. It situates those people that the athletes’ perceives as most significant at the different stages. The changes in context include the athletic triangle (athlete-parents, athlete-coach and coach-parents relationship) (Wylleman & Lavelle, 2004), the peer relationship (Smith, 2003), the athletes’ relationship within the athletic family (Hellstedt, 1995), and partner relationship (Jowett & Meek, 2000). Finally, the fourth layer reflects the academic transitions during an athletes’ career. It includes the transition from primary education (elementary school), secondary education (high school), and higher education (college or university). The final stage in the fourth layer represents the vocational training also known as professional occupation.

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*Figure 1:* The developmental model on transitions faced by athletes (from: Wylleman & Lavelle, 2004).

**Cognitive appraisal model**

The cognitive appraisal model explores the relationship between an individual’s emotions and physical health. In a study by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) cognitive appraisal was identified as essential to psychological vulnerability and determines the way in which environmental stressors are translated into a behavioural or emotional outcome. Moreover, Cassidy (1994) suggested an ecological model of stress, which proposes that seven different factors of cognitive style and coping could be implemented in order to explain an individual’s aspect of the stress process (See figure 2). The factors consist of attributional style, problem-solving style, achievement motivation, perceived control, hopelessness, emotional reactivity and perceived social support. In turn, the model proposes that support and control in all life domains (See figure 2) can affect the personal variables, which can result in that all factors can be considered as integrated, and in collaboration with each other contribute to an individual’s health outcome. Moreover, Kristiansen and Roberts (2010) examined how youth elite athletes experienced and coped with different kind of stressors. The result indicated that lack of social support, and in particular emotional support from teammates was related to poor performance, which in turn, is more likely to lead to a negative health outcome. It is recommended that among the different kind of coping strategies, appraisal coping strategy can be employed to manage stress.
Previous research indicates that there is a dominance of qualitative research methods in the area of talent development (e.g. Christensen & Sorensen, 2009; Bloom, 1985; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2001; Cote, 1999; Sagar, Lavallee, & Spray, 2009). Five categories of previous research are especially important to highlight because of its impact on the development of the youth sport participation, that is; well-being, talent development, and three different factors of social support in terms of family, friends and school.

Well-being

Previous research has found that regular sport participation and physical activity enhances the psychological well-being (Hagger & Catzisarantis, 2005). In addition, social influence has consistently been identified as being strongly related to psychological well-being and motivated behaviour in the physical domain (Weiss & Smith, 1999).

More specific, regarding young athletes, previous research indicates that young athletes vary in their involvement in sports. In addition, this can lead to categorically different sports-related identities being produced, which involve different characteristics and implications for psychological well-being (Miller & Hoffman, 2009). In a study by Sagar, Lavallee and Spray (2009) it was found that young elite athletes’ fear of failure before competition affects well-being, interpersonal behavior, sport performance, and schoolwork in a negative way.

A recent study by Adie, Duda and Ntoumanis (2010a) indicates that football players in the age 11-18 years old and concerning self-/task incompetence perceived negative effect on their self-esteem as they continue training and competing. In addition, players that were more eager about developing personal improvement were more likely to use competition as an opportunity for personal growth and enhancement. Henceforth, Ryan & Deci (2001) found in their study that their participants sustained a high level of well-being in terms of self-esteem and positive affect, and low levels of participants that experienced ill-being measured

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**Figure 2:** An individual-in-context model of the stress process (from: Cassidy, 1994).
through two seasons. Recent research by Adie, Duda, & Ntoumanis (2010b) suggests that to play on youth elite football level it is necessary to sustain a high level of different factors; in form of psychological and emotional well-being as well as on the other hand avoiding being distracted by negative affect and seeing competition as a threat. Thus, the above mentioned study indicate that there was a difference in perceived well-being between the football players that stayed in the football programs compared to the players that were forced to leave.

Furthermore, in a study by Reeves et. al., (2009) stressors and coping strategies was examined among early (12-14 years) and middle adolescents (15-18 years) premier league academy players. The result indicated that the players’ experiences of stressors and repertoire of coping strategies were different between early adolescents and middle-aged adolescents. Moreover, it was found that middle adolescents experienced more stressors and reported a greater number of coping strategies in relation to early adolescents. Common stressors experienced by early adolescents were family, making errors and team performance. Coaches, social evaluation and playing at a higher level were more prominent among the middle adolescents.

Talent development
Concerning youth development in sports Hamilton, Hamilton, and Pittman (2004) suggested that optimal development in youth sports enables the children to live a healthy, satisfying, and productive life as youth, and later as adults. This will benefit the children in terms of gaining competence to earn a living, to engage in civic activities, to nurture others, and to participate in social relations and cultural activities. Henceforth, in a study by Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Römer (1993) it was found that there was a relation between the children’s starting age and their performance. Several studies indicated that children that were born in early months during the same year would benefit and have advantages for developing their talent (Ericsson et. al., 1993; Helsen, et. al., 2000; Campo, et. al., 2010). In contrast, it was found that the relative age effect had a major impact on the children that is born later in the quartile of the competitive season is more likely to drop out, which could be as early as 12 years of age (Helsen et. al., 2000). Thus, children that start practicing sports at an early age were more likely to perform at a higher level and benefit from this in terms of more social support. Van Yperen (2009) found in his study on identifying psychological factors that predict career success in football academies, that on the basis of three significant psychological factors (e.g. goal commitment, problem-focused coping, and seeking social support), a great majority (72.3%) of the participants were correctly classified as ultimately successful or unsuccessful. The athletes were also more likely to seek social support when encountering problems and drawbacks. Van Yperen (2009) suggested that relative to the unsuccessful participants, the successful participants may have been better able to adapt to the stressful circumstances they inevitably encountered during their football careers, possibly by using their coping skills and social resources more frequently and more flexibly. In addition, particularly in competitive contexts, a high value is placed on achievement, success, and excellence in order for the individuals who were perceived as high potentials may have received most attention and support which possibly could facilitate further development (e.g. Solomon, et. al., 1996).

Henceforth, it was found that youth athletes would benefit and improve their performance level with a high amount of deliberate practice and early specialization. However, the athletes were also more likely to experience physical health issues, reduced enjoyment and increased drop out (Ericsson et. al., 1993). Another line of research was presented in Cote et. al., (2009) who found that it is necessary from early ages of youth development with a sampling range of sports before specializing in one specific sport. Thus, this could be achieved by a gradual move from deliberate play to deliberate practice as a health-promoting route to top-level
performance. In Durand-Bush and Salmela’s (2001) study, the result indicated that talented athletes were more committed, self-confident and able to cope better with anxiety in specific situations, for instance before and after competition, compared to less talented athletes. To identify football talents at an early age certifies that players receive specialized coaching to increase the talent development process. In order to develop and nurture young athletes, the role of coaches, scouts and administrators is significant to outline key elements of talent identification (Williams & Franks, 1998).

**Family**

Hellstedt (1995) found that the family influences the involvement and achievement of athletes in sport more than coaches. Furthermore, in a study by Alfermann, Lee and Wuerth (2004) it was reported that parental involvement in youth sports were measured to a moderate level in terms of social support and sport involvement. In Cote and Frazer-Thomas’ (2006) study it was found that parents play a significant role in children’s sport participation and development, and children’s self esteem can be mediated by the effects of family cohesion and parent-child communication on a child’s physical activity (Ornelas, Perreira, & Ayala, 2007). Henceforth, the result showed that parents had a major influence on the children’s self-perception and it was of importance to emphasize self-comparison, rather than peer comparison during early stages of the athletes’ career (6-12 years of age). During later stages in their career (13-17 years of age), parents were recommended to help the children to increase the ability of self-reference from their performances and provide performance contingent feedback (Cote & Frazer Thomas, 2006).

In general, parents were more involved in their children’s sport activity in early phases of the athletes’ careers, but from the athletes’ perspectives it was shown that they experienced high levels of support and parental involvement over a longer period of time. However, it was also shown that athletes that tends to be more successful, receives more parental support in terms of praise and understanding, which could result in better and more positive support. Thus, this increases the chances for the athlete to achieve a higher career level (Alfermann, et. al., 2004). Nevertheless, the study indicates that there was a difference in perceived self – perception between the parents. The athletes’ mothers were more likely to see themselves as more supportive and engaged in their children’s sport activity, compared to their fathers that were more plausible to involve in a more directive behavioural way, in terms of giving specific sports related instructions and advices. Henceforth, respective study indicates that the athletes’ siblings play a significant role on the children’s talent development. Results showed that younger siblings tended to be, in some instances, jealous and bitter on the athlete during early stages of the athletes’ career, while older siblings tend to have a better influence in terms of social support, by helping the athlete to make decisions and to put effort into a specific sport (Alfermann et. al., 2004). Moreover, related results were found in a study by Van Yperen (2009) where successful athletes had more siblings in relation to unsuccessful athletes. Thus, with the athletes’ family background with divorced parents, it was indicated that the siblings may form a kin group bound by strong ties of trust and support, and may increase social skills which may be helpful to progress in team sports in particular. In a study by Weirsma (2000) it was found and recommended that parents and coaches take more active part and responsibility for when the athlete is ready and mature enough to specialize in sport and specialization programs (e.g football academies).

Gould et. al., (2006) found in their study that pushy parents and negative behaviour perceived to have a negative influence on the children’s development.
Furthermore, it was shown that parents interfere with their children’s sport activity in terms of pressuring is perceived negative (Wiersma, 2000). In order to avoid this, it is necessary not to be too heavily involved in the child’s sport, and balance the interaction without taking too much responsibility regarding the training of the young athlete (e.g Alferman et. al., 2004). Similar results were found in a study by Smoll and Cumming (2006), where some parents identified themselves with their children and their performances in sport. In the parents attempt to make their children happy and to help them achieve their goals, some parents experienced high levels of strain when they witness disappointments.

In Cote’s study (1999) it was found that from an early age it was important for the child to have the opportunity to be all-round sport engaged, rather than too early specialization. Henceforth, the study indicates that the family and parent support changes throughout the child’s career. Moreover, the parents established more of a leadership role in terms of encouraging the child to be involved in various kinds of sport. The parents changed their behaviour in later stages of the child’s career and became more of a supporter to the athlete’s preference of sport. In addition, the parents sacrificed more from their personal life to allow the child to have optimal training conditions. The parents’ focus during this stage was to create an optimal learning environment rather than exposing the child to pressure. However, early specialization can result in different negative outcomes (e.g drop out, anxiety, isolation) (Hecimovich, 2004). These psychosocial factors can influence the children’s psychological well-being negatively (Raedeke, 1997).

Friends
In a study by Rubin, Bukowski and Parker (2006) it was found that peer relationship is important to socialization outside and within the sport context, and the interactions can contribute to positive experiences, as well as quality of young athletes’ overall experiences in sport (Smith, 2003). Previous research has found that children tend to rely on parental feedback in early stages of the children’s career to judge their competence. During later stages of their career, peers become more important as significant others, and has a major function in providing the child with information in terms of peer comparison, social support and feedback (Horn & Weiss, 1991). However, it was found that the athletes’ family members influence sport participation and enhance sport performance more than peers and teammates (Donohue, et. al., 2007). Furthermore, it was found that athletes with relatively high task goal orientation had higher acceptance by their teammates and experienced lower perceptions of conflict with their best friend in the team (Smith, Balaguer, & Duda, 2006).

In a study by Reeves et. al., (2009) it was shown that it is recommended to develop a social support network that provides informational and emotional support to help the youth athletes to cope with stressors. This could facilitate the athletes to identify the type of support they require from peers, coaches and parents. In Smith, et. al, (2006) it was found that young male athletes did not require friends that accompanied them when participating in sports and the youth male athletes were more likely to be isolated or ignored by their peers compared to females. Hartup (1996) suggested that three distinct aspects of friendship are crucial to psychosocial outcomes in a youth. It was based on whether or not the child has any friends, what kind of friends and the quality of the friendship. Furthermore, the quality of friendship is associated with e.g. school and social competence and the friendship quality has the potential to exert significant effects on self-esteem and motivation (Weiss & Smith, 1999).

In Donohue’s et. al., (2007) study it was reported that several problematic themes could occur in the peer relationship and influence the athlete negatively in terms of experiencing more
pressure to perform and lack of social support. Moreover, Holt et. al., (2008) suggested that young athletes considered and emphasized the team in peer relationship in order for the team to function effectively. In addition, Smith et. al., (2006) found that athletes’ perceptions of peer relationships are more closely attuned to the group, since football is a team sport. Perceived social acceptance among friends may be more motivationally salient than perceptions of a specific friendship within competitive sport, where the goals are focused upon the collective outcomes.

**School**

In young talented athletes everyday life, it is expected that they balance the demands and pressure that occurs from combining education and elite sports (Bourke, 2003). In Ericsson et. al., (1993) it was found that from a very early age, innate differences can be detected to aid parents, teachers and coaches to guide the children into the domain that is appropriate for their talents. Moreover, it was found that football academies provided the athletes with access to homework and school support (Cote, 1999). Henceforth, in a study of schools with sport profiles (Elbe, Beckman, & Szymanski, 2006) it was found that young elite athletes’ are put under a lot of pressure and have a tight schedule in school regarding daily basis training and sports related competitions. The result indicated that students finding themselves in these specific situations developed an ability to calm down and cope positively with failure during threatening situations. Furthermore, it was found that young elite athletes, as well, have the ability to focus on specific tasks and lose themselves in the sport activity. However, previous research indicates that social contact outside of school and sport are limited for athletes that train together because of the high training frequency (Wiersma, 2000; Rowland, 1997).

More specific, in a study by Elbe, Szymanski, and Beckman (2005), they compared young elite athletes at schools with sport profiles to regular students in the same age. The result indicated that young elite athletes perceived higher values in self-optimisation and stayed at this higher level over a longer period of time. Furthermore, the study shows that regular students and students at the sport specific school develop differently. Regular students’ self-impediment continually increased, but this did not develop in the young elite athletes’, who experienced that self-impediment strongly decreased after 14/15 years of age. In addition, boarding house students experienced a more favourable development as they were confronted with new situations when entering school. The result showed that they were more dependent on making new friends not only in school and practice, but also in the boarding house. This result can be compared to Kuhl and Kraska (1989) who found that these are the conditions for the development of a conflict free self that enables efficient self-regulation.

In Elbe’s et. al., (2005) study it was found that young elite athletes show a positive personality development that is beneficial for their athletic career as well as for pursuing further goals in life.

In school, teachers are expected to offer different options of physical activity, however, sometimes not be able to offer more than one hour per week during the school year. The students are exposed to different demands as well, and are expected to develop motor skills, increase their physical fitness and self-esteem, and reduce the level of disease risk factors, while maintaining or enhancing academic performance (Trudeau & Shephard, 2005). In a recent study by Christensen and Sørensen (2009) it was found that the insistence from parents, society and the field of education on completing a youth education is so manifest that influences young elite football players self perception and behaviour. The result showed that the participants struggled to meet the requirements from both regions (football and school).
Furthermore, it was found that it is common among youth elite players to put half-hearted effort into school, which can result in that the resources of the individual football player does not reach its fully potential. The combining of a football career and school education is often seen as the ideal picture of the sports person. However, in contrast, it was found that the youth athletes experienced something completely else and were struggling with the underlying conflict (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009).

There is limited documentation and perhaps attention given to this area, however, empirical evidence supports the notion that e.g. school, friends and family influences the athletes psychosocial well-being (e.g. Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Weiss & Smith, 1999). In the present study, a broader perspective is given to facilitate specific factors that influence well-being. Therefore, the author thinks this study is important and relevant to investigate if different psychosocial factors (e.g. family, friends and school) can predict well-being among young Swedish football academy players and if there is any perceived difference among different age groups. The result of the study can provide guidelines to schools, family and friends on how to cope with difference in perceived well-being in the future.

Objectives
The purpose of the study is to examine (I) if different categories of social support from family, friends and school can predict well-being among Swedish male football academy players. Moreover, the second purpose is to (II) compare if two age groups of male academy players (11-14 years) and (15-18 years) differ in perceived social support (e.g. family, friends and school) and well-being.

Method
Participants
The participants were 443 male adolescents football players, between 11 – 19 (M = 14,17) (Sd = 2,06) years of age, that all were playing at competitive youth level in Sweden. In cooperation with the Swedish Football Association four different Swedish premier league teams were selected based on a strategical sample of elite clubs situated in a major city in Sweden. All players represented each club’s football academy (first team-players) in each category. From the 443 players, 250 players were in the age category 11-14 years and named as youth football players, and 193 players in the age 15-19 years named as junior football players.

Instrument
The questionnaire that was used in this study consists of a modified extended-form health survey collected from FHI (Public Health Institute) developed to examine adolescents’ subjective well-being. The survey is based on SDQ (Goodman, 1997), PSP-scale (Haquist, 2008) (Swedish questionnaire developed to measure psychosomatic issues among children) and Kidscreen (Ravens-Sieberer et. al., 2005), and was modified by adding football related questions to the survey. The alpha value in the present study ranged from 0.69 to 0.89. A principal component factor analysis was conducted to determine whether the items from the 13 original scales could be reduced into smaller number of factors. The scales varied in a range of 1-5, where 1 represents the lowest perceived social support-variable and 5 represents the highest. This was based on the instrument’s different identical scales for answer alternatives. Furthermore, the data were reduced and the result showed that cross-loadings (with .35 or more, as recommended by Tabachnick & Fidell, 2006) occurred in at least two categories and were later excluded from the factor analysis (see appendix 1, Table 1). The
factor analysis resulted in that the 13 original scales were reduced to 12 scales. The total variance of these twelve scales explained 66.9% of the total variance; the result indicated all twelve factors with eigenvalues greater than one.

After the principal component factor analysis was completed, nine original scales were excluded from the present study. This is because there are only three factors that relates to the purpose of the study, which is mainly family, friends and school. On factor one, labelled as family \( (a = 0.88) \), included items from the category support from family explained 9.3% of the total variance. Furthermore, factor two was labelled as school \( (a = 0.87) \) and included items from the category support from school, which explained 7.9% of the total variance. Finally, factor ten was labelled as friends \( (a = 0.66) \) and included items from the category support from friends, which explained 3.4% of the total variance (See appendix 1, table 1). Furthermore, one single item were identified and applied in the present study. This item was labelled as well-being. In addition, because of the large amount of participants and broad perspective of the survey, a larger factor analysis was performed in order to facilitate future research within the same area, including different perspectives.

Procedure
Potential clubs where contacted and time and place for the data collection was arranged. It was accomplished in September 2010 in cooperation with the Swedish Football Association. In turn, the author and colleague completed a pilot study, including two participants in the age of 12 years old, before the data collection took part. It was collected from 443 male adolescent football players during a four-day period, including four different clubs (one day with each club). Before the data collection started, the participants were informed about how to complete the survey and were acquainted to the subject’s educational purpose. The data collection took part in each football academy’s club-house and were organized into age groups. The author was present during the whole survey in order to avoid misunderstandings and answer possible questions regarding the study. Overall, the study lasted approximately 30-45 minutes, depending on the players’ age. After the data collection was completed, three participants received the same survey by mail and completed this at home.

Ethical considerations
All participants were informed about the purpose and the method of the study. They were also informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions. The participants were reassured that their responses would be treated confidentially and their identities would not be revealed in the reporting of the findings (see appendix 2). A week before the study took part all the players, parents and coaches received an informal paper about the purpose of the study and necessary ethical information (see appendix 3). The ethical standards in the study were approved by the regional ethical review-board, which serves Universities in the southern part of Sweden.

Data analysis
First, a linear regression analysis with backward elimination was conducted to single out psychosocial predictors in relation to well-being. Furthermore, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed in order to investigate if the two age groups (11-14 years and 15-19 years) of male academy players differ in perceived social support (family, friends and school) and wellbeing.
Results

Drop-out
The total number of participants was 519 football academy players. Of these participants, 446 players took part in the study. That gives an external dropout rate of 14.1%. Moreover, one player withdrew during the study and two players were excluded since they did not complete the study properly in terms of not answering all the questions. In addition, from the remaining participants, 446 players completed the survey, which resulted in an internal dropout rate of 0.006%. Overall, 443 participants took part in the present study.

Purpose 1
The result revealed positive relations between the dependent variable well-being and the psychosocial factors of social support; family, friends and school R²adj. = .204, F (3.437) = 37.381, p = 0.001. All predictors contributed significantly to well-being. Significant predictors were family (beta .219), friends (beta .182) and school (beta .194) that together explained 20.4% of the total variance of the dependent variable well-being.

Purpose 2
Results from the ANOVA-analyses showed that the younger players scored higher on the variable friends (p=.030), compared to the older players. Furthermore, the younger players scored higher on the variable school (p=.001), compared to the older players. In addition, the younger players scored higher on the variable well-being (p=.001), compared to the older academy players.

The result showed that younger players experience more social support from friends and school, and perceive a higher level of well-being compared to older players within the football academy (see table 2). Additionally, there were no significant results found in the variable family in perceived difference in social support.

Table 2 Differences in the perceived social support (e.g. family, friends and school) and well-being between younger players and older players.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social support variables</th>
<th>Younger players (11-14 year)</th>
<th>Older players (15-19 years)</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>p-value</th>
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</table>
Discussion

The purpose of the study was to examine if different categories of social support (family, friends and school) can predict well-being among Swedish male football academy players. Moreover, two age groups of male academy players (11-14 years) and (15-18 years) was compared to distinguish the perceived social support (e.g. family, friends and school) and well-being. The result from the present study showed that three categories of social support, including family, friends and school could predict well-being among young Swedish academy players, including family, friends and school. Regarding the second objective, it was discovered that younger players experience a higher level of perceived well-being in relation to older players. The result also showed that younger players experienced a significant difference in terms of social support from friends and school compared to older players.

Prediction of social support and wellbeing in youth football players
In Christensen and Sørensen’s (2009) study, it was indicated that parents, society and the field of education have a significant impact in influencing young elite football players’ behaviour and self-perception. The result showed that the participants struggled to meet the requirements from both regions (football and school). In the present study it was found that social support from school was significant concerning the players’ perceived well-being. It can be indicated that to cope with the requirements from both football and school in the future, an increased focus on social support from the school is necessary. Furthermore, it was found that the players put half-hearted effort into school, which can result in that the players do not reach their fully potential (Christensen & Sørensen, 2009). Thus, the present study’s prediction of the social support from school, friends and family, could be seen as significant factors to well-being by predicting 20.4% of the total variance of well-being. Furthermore, Alfermann et al., (2004) found in their study that athletes tend to be more successful by probably receiving more parental support in terms of praise and understanding. In addition, this would increase the chances for the athlete to achieve a higher career level if the support is perceived positive. In a study by Reeves et. al., (2009) it is recommended to develop a social support network that provides informational and emotional support to help the youth athletes to cope with stressors. From early stages of the athletes’ career it has been found that athletes tend to rely on parental feedback, and during later stages of their career, team-mates become more important as significant others and has a major function in providing the child with information in terms of peer-comparison, social support and feedback (Horn & Weiss, 1991). The result from the study indicate the importance of providing the athletes’ with social support from family, friends and school in order to increase well-being. According to Weiss and Smith (1999), social support groups could contribute positively with the quality of friendship, and it can be based on the individual’s ability to develop social competence in order to establish a good relationship with their peers and receive appropriate and required social support.

Henceforth, according to the cognitive appraisal model (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) the relationship between an individual’s emotions and physical health is explored. More specific, it was suggested that an ecological model of stress, including perceived social support of cognitive style and coping could be implemented in order to explain the individual’s aspect of the stress process (Cassidy, 1994). According to the model, all life domains can affect an individual’s perception of social support, which in this case could be friends, family and school. Thus, based on the perception of social support, this could lead to a positive health outcome. In addition, the availability and control over the different types of life domains is more likely to affect the perceived social support and how the athletes’ cope with the
situation. If the athlete experience minor control over the perceived social support from different life domains (e.g. family, friends and school) it can affect the perception of social support, which in turn, could lead to a negative health outcome.

Differences in social support between younger and older youth academy players
In relation to purpose one, it was found that younger academy players experienced a higher level of well-being in relation to older players. This result indicate, compared to the cognitive appraisal model (Cassidy, 1994), that younger players experience more social support in different life domains from e.g. family, friends and school, which in turn, is more likely to lead to positive health outcomes and increased perceived well-being (see figure 2). However, the result from the study indicates that there was no significant difference in perceived social support from the family between the two age groups. This could be based on the fact that the athletes perceive equal social support from their families in early ages and later stages of their career. According to Alfermann et. al., (2004) it was suggested that the athletes’ experience high levels of support and parental involvement over a longer period of time. In addition, this result can be related to the different age categories and the fact that the youngest players in the study (11 years old) are older than the youngest players presented in the “developmental model on transitions faced by athletes” (6 years old) (see figure 1). The model was developed by Wylleman and Lavelle (2004), to give a broad and holistic perspective throughout athletes’ careers. The participants in the study face the specific transitions and belong to the different age stages. The model highlights a “beginning-to-end” perspective and reflects the nature of normative transitions in psychosocial, academic and vocational levels. In the present study the result indicated that the athletes uncovered a structure that is similar to the psychosocial level. However, the present study only includes the two first age categories related to the four different levels that are included in the model. The result from the present study is not entirely in line with the different types of psychosocial relationships that the athletes required on the psychosocial-level in the first (peers, parents, and siblings), and second stage (peers, coaches, and parents) of their career. In comparison to the model, it is suggested that for the youngest players parents, siblings, and peers are the most influential and significant groups in the psychosocial level. In turn, when the athletes enter the second stage in their career, it is speculated that the transitions are not extensive in the study, and the athletes receives the necessary and required social support from their family throughout the two stages. An additional explanation could be that the younger athletes experienced a higher level of well-being in relation to the older players. In comparison to the cognitive appraisal model (Cassidy, 1994), the family seem not to be a significant factor of different life domains that influences the athletes’ well-being. Nevertheless, it was found that perceived social support from friends and school could be interpreted as significant factors that affect the athletes’ health outcome.

In Reeves et. al., (2009) it was found that the football academy players’ experiences of stressors and repertoire of coping strategies were different between early adolescents (11-14 years) and middle-aged adolescents (15-18 years). Moreover, it was found that middle adolescents experienced more stressors and a greater number of coping strategies in relation to early adolescents. In line with the result in the present study, it can be indicated that older players experience more stress, based on the results of perceived well-being, which can lead to a negative health outcome. However, different kind of stressors was identified among the players. Common stressors experienced by early adolescents were family, making errors and
team performance. Coaches, lack of feedback, social evaluation and playing at a higher level were more prominent among the middle adolescents (Reeves et. al., 2009). These findings indicate that there are different environmental factors, such as lack of feedback from friends and teammates among middle adolescents, that contribute to decrease the perceived well-being, which is supported by the findings in the present study.

Furthermore, in a study by Cote (1999) it was found that the family and parental support changes throughout the athletes’ career. Moreover, the parents established more of a leadership role in terms of encouraging the child to be involved in various kinds of sport. The parents changed their behaviour in later stages of the child’s career and became more of a supporter to the athlete’s preference of sport. In Cote & Frazer-Thomas’ (2006) study it was found that during younger stages of the athletes’ career it was of importance to emphasize self-comparison rather than peer comparison. During later stages, parents were recommended to help the children to increase the ability of self-reference from their performances and provide performance contingent feedback. In relation to the result of the present study, it is speculated that friends play a more significant role in providing the athlete with social support compared to the family, and in particular the parents. This can be explained based by the athletes’ time spent with their friends within the football context and it is more natural for the athletes to identify themselves with someone in the same age and on the same level. Similar results were found by Horn and Weiss (1991), where the athletes during later stages of their career, perceive peers more important as significant others, and has a major function in providing the child with information in terms of peer comparison, social support and feedback. In addition, Smith et. al., (2006) found that young male athletes did not require friends that accompanied them when participating in sports and the youth male athletes were more likely to be isolated or ignored by their peers compared to females. In contrast, the result from the present study suggested that the athletes perceive more social support from their friends and teammates.

Henceforth, in Ericsson’s et. al., (1993) study it was found that from a very early age, innate differences can be detected to aid parents, teachers and coaches to guide the children into the domain that is appropriate for their talents. Moreover, it was found that football academies provided the athletes with access to homework and school support (Cote, 1999). Based on results from the present study, younger academy players’ perceives more social support from school in relation to older players. This result indicates that during later stages of the athletes’ career, the academical requirements increase proportionally in collaboration with the competitive level in football. This proportion is also supported by a study of Christensen and Sorensen (2009), where it was found that the athletes struggled to meet the requirements from both football and school. An additional explanation could be that from early ages, it is of importance to emphasize a sampling range of sports before specializing in one specific sport. The fact that the competitive level could be increased during later stages of the athletes’ career is more likely to contribute to decreased well-being and perceived social support from e.g. friends and school. This notion is supported by Cote et. al., (2009), who found that it is necessary from early ages of youth development, to be all-round engaged in sports. Thus, this could be achieved by a gradual move from deliberate play to deliberate practice as a health-promoting route to top-level performance. In addition, concerning the competitive level, it was found that only 25-30 players from all 40 academies in England represent the senior first team after ended football academy (Reeves et. al., 2009).
Methodological discussion

One potential limitation concerning the instrument is that the survey includes a large amount of questions that is not applied in the study. Furthermore, a factor analysis was performed in order to reduce the different factors into a smaller number that suits the present study. Several interesting areas could be investigated based on the twelve original factors that were included in the first factor analysis. However, the factor analysis was performed in order to gain more insight and provide a thorough description in the present research. Based on the broad perspective of the survey and massive amount of participants it can facilitate the process of research within the same area in the future. Henceforth, an additional limitation is that the instrument is previously not tested on a sport related population. The instrument has been used to examine high schools and elementary students perceived well-being, however, it has not been applied in sport. Furthermore, the instrument consists of three different instruments; SDQ (Goodman, 1997), PSP-Scale and Kid screen (Ravens-Sieberer, 2005). All three instruments are validated, but several football-related questions were added to the survey. In order to solve this issue, the instrument was tested in a pilot study with two athletes in the same sport and age category, before the data collection took part.

Based on the athletes’ age group, some misunderstandings occurred concerning the meaning of some particular questions, despite that a pilot study was performed. In addition, some of the participants had a foreign language as their mother tongue and in order to proceed the survey, additional help from interpreters, coaches or parents were required. Another limitation regarding the study is the fact that there were only males participating in the study in one specific sport. This will make it difficult to compare the result to other studies and it could be arduous to generalize the result.

Conclusion

The result from the present study showed highlights three psychosocial factors that can predict well-being among young Swedish academy players, including family, friends and school as presumed social-support factors. In addition, younger players experience a higher level of well-being and perceive more social support from friends and school in relation to older players. There was found no significant difference between younger and older players’ perceived social support from their family. In summary, this study aims to highlight previous research outside of the sport context and predictions to well-being as well as highlighting the importance of different social support from family, friends and school to facilitate the athletes’ perceived well-being.

Implications

Different recommendations can be drawn from the study. One is given to the football academies concerning the importance of social support, based on that 20.4% of social support (family, friends and school) can predict well-being. They will also be recommended to consider what kind of social support that the athletes perceive and be aware of the fact that younger players experiences more social support from friends and school in relation to older players. In summary, the result from the study can be a guideline for future interventions and facilitate the academies approach towards developing football academies in cooperation with the school and the family. A close engagement, relationship and increased communication between the academy, school, friends and the family could increase the athletes’ well-being and based on previous research, it can increase the performance enhancement and the talent development.
Future research

It would be of interest to expand the study and investigate a broader population. For instance, a nation-wide population would be beneficial in order to establish better knowledge in social support in relation to well-being. Moreover, it would also be of interest to investigate what kind of social support the athletes’ perceive as most important in order to provide the athletes’ with specific social support. An additional challenging area for future research could be to investigate more specific age groups e.g. the Junior elite-team from a different perspective. A qualitative research method could be applied in order to gain more insight and knowledge concerning the athletes’ perceived well-being and social support. Moreover, another interesting line of research could be to do a longitudinal study in order to investigate if the perceived social support and well-being changes over time. Based on the factor analysis, several other areas within social support (e.g. coach influence, player’s mood) can be investigated in order to achieve a broader perspective of different factors that can influence well-being.
References


Content of appendices

Appendix 1: Principal component analysis

Appendix 2: Consent form

Appendix 3: Informational form
### Appendix 1

Table 1: Factor-loadings of the twelve components

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Items</th>
<th>1 Support from Family</th>
<th>2 Support from School</th>
<th>3 Spare time</th>
<th>4 Negative mood</th>
<th>5 Positive mood</th>
<th>6 Coach support</th>
<th>7 School bullying</th>
<th>8 Physical looks</th>
<th>9 Sport satisfaction</th>
<th>10 Support from Friends</th>
<th>11 Football bullying</th>
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Appendix 2

Skriftligt, informerande samtycke till idrottare angående medverkan i en studie om unga elitfotbollsspelares välbefinnande.

Jag har informerats om studiens syfte och om hur informationen som samlas in kommer att behandlas. Jag har även informerats om att mitt deltagande är frivilligt, att jag, när jag vill, kan avbryta min medverkan utan att ange orsak samt att jag kan ställa frågor. Jag samtycker härmed till att medverka i denna studie som handlar om unga elitfotbollsspelares välbefinnande.

Ort/Datum______________________________________________________________

Namnunderskrift_________________________________________________________

Namnförtydligande________________________________________________________________

Målsmans Underskrift______________________________________________________

Namnförtydligande________________________________________________________________

Forskningshuvudman
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Urban.johnsson@hh.se
035 16 72 61
Appendix 3

Informationsbrev och förfrågan angående medverkan i en studie gällande unga elitfotbollsspelares välbefinnande.

Vi heter Henric Lilja och Kjetil Hagen och är två studenter som studerar psykologi inriktning idrott vid Halmstad Högskola. Föreliggande studie berör unga elitfotbollsspelares välbefinnande och är ett samarbete mellan svenska fotbollsförbundet och Centrum för Forskning om Välfärd, Hälsa och Idrott på Högskolan i Halmstad.

Syftet med studien är att undersöka unga elitfotbollsspelares välbefinnande. Detta kommer att göras med hjälp av enkäter. Deltagandet i studien är frivilligt och du har rätt att när som helst avbryta din medverkan utan att ange orsak. All information som samlas in under undersöknings kommer behandlas konfidentiellt. Utomstående kan inte identifiera dina svar när studien redovisas.

Med vänlig hälsning
Huvudansvariga studenter, kontaktperson och forskningshuvudman

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