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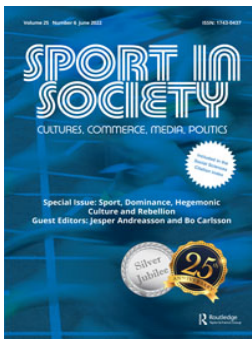
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# What's at play? Power, transnational coaches and the global hegemony of performance within Danish elite swimming

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the discourses in power in Danish elite swimming from 2003 to 2013. Gramsci's perspective was used to deconstruct the hegemonic cultural leadership enacted by coaches and administrators in the Danish Swimming Federation and Team Denmark. Transnational coaches were also engaged in the hegemonic practices towards elite swimmers in Denmark in the quest for Olympic medals. With the exception of a few abortive rebellions, the athletes complied with the hegemonic practices because their coaches and the Danish Swimming Federation were the gatekeepers of their success. These findings are discussed in the context of the evolution of a neo-liberal funding structure for elite sport in the Western world. The transnational coaches appear to be representing an ideological superstructure in which sporting performance became the sole measure of success (and allocation of funds) in Danish elite sport policy. This study suggests that there is a need of ensuring that athletes' voices are being heard through an independent regulatory council.


## KEYWORDS

Abuse; Antonio Gramsci; elite sport; migration; global

## Introduction

*He yelled and screamed and was throwing things around and ordered a strict training regime. He decided when we were done. It was like a prison camp. You did what he said and was afraid to answer him back. Chairs were thrown at us. You got used to it, this was the new normal. (Danish female elite swimmer, Kammeradvokaten 2020, 84).*

This quote is taken from an independent investigation report conducted by the preferred legal advisor, *Kammeradvokaten*, to the Danish government. The independent investigation was ordered by the Danish Ministry of Culture, the Danish elite sports institution, Team Denmark, and the Danish Sport Confederation (DIF) as a result of Denmark National Broadcasting Company's (DR) TV documentary *Swimming stars – below the surface* (April 21, 2019). The independent investigation concluded that two transnational swim coaches,

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Mark Regan (Australian) and Paulus Wildeboer (Dutch), had mistreated several elite swimmers in Denmark within a climate of fear and abusive behavior in the quest for Olympic medals during the period of 2003–2013 (Kammeradvokaten 2020).

When such devastating conditions were first identified in the Danish media, the transnational coaches and their ‘foreign culture’ appeared easy to blame. Yet, in this article the transnational coaches will be seen as cultural leaders of the global hegemonic performance discourse in elite sport that in the first decades of the 2000s were also embraced by sports managers in Denmark. The conditions in Danish elite swimming followed in the wake of a political change from governing elite sport in Denmark according to welfare state principles, to a higher degree of neo-liberal governing (Storm 2011; Ibsen, Hansen, and Storm 2013). In the neo-liberal approach Team Denmark, along with the affiliated sports federations, such as the Danish Swimming Federation, are provided with annual contracts and support dependent on their performance. This development in Denmark further aligns with observations that elements of the high performance systems in Eastern Bloc societies have increasingly been adopted by western nations in the beginning of the 2000s (Green and Oakley 2001). Also, elite sport policy in Denmark as well as a number of other countries have become the objects of sport management studies of their capability to produce sporting success in the shape of medals, with attention directed towards the increasing intensity of the competition between nations that has been described as the global sporting arms race (De Bosscher 2008).

Without knowledge about this political and historical context, it is tempting to solely blame the individual transnational coaches for the conditions that evolved in Danish elite swimming in the first decades of the 2000s. Further, existing literature may be used to describe how their coaching style stands in sharp contrast with earlier descriptions in which Scandinavian sport coaching is characterized as democratic (Annerstedt 2006) and in which coaches appear to be open to their athletes’ viewpoints and to engage in dialogue (Annerstedt and Lindgren 2014; Dohsten, Barker-Ruchti, and Lindgren 2020; Lindgren and Barker-Ruchti 2017). Paying attention to the ways in which the global hegemony of performance in elite sport became prevalent in Danish elite swimming in the first decade of the 2000s, does not negate, however, that other studies have demonstrated cases in both Denmark and Sweden where a holistic, athlete-centered approach has proven instrumental in helping especially young athletes succeed (e.g. Henriksen, Stambulova, and Roessler 2010a, 2010b).

In other words, coaching is not a uniform practice that belongs to a specific coach or country but rather a social system of beliefs, structures and practices, that exercise a systemized influence on the ones that are part of a particular coaching discourse. Elite coaches are often the most respected and to whom others listen; they are assumed to embody a discourse of expertise (Mills and Denison 2018). As a result, their discourse of expertise exerts a great deal of power on the ones that are part of the coaching regime (Stirling and Kerr 2008; Cassidy, Jones, and Potrac 2009; De Haan and Knoppers 2020). Moreover, transnational coaches are often hired because they are assumed to be better skilled and capable of delivering better results than the elite coaches in the host country (Chen and Mason 2018). Their expert knowledge as well as their position in society turn transnational coaches into prime representatives of a globally distributed hegemonic sporting culture (Knoppers and De Haan 2020). Research has shed light on how coaches (Cushion and Jones 2014) alongside sports directors (Blackett, Evans, and Piggott 2017) attempt to legitimize their own practices and discourses about a ‘right way’ to go about elite sports in order to maintain

their status as well as to deliver the expected results. For instance, Adams, Anderson, and McCormack (2010) suggested coaches frequently drew on discourses about war, gender and sexuality to facilitate and elicit aggressive and violent responses that presumably enhanced athletic performance.

Examining the coaching discourses in power in Danish elite swimming in the beginning of the 2000s, the aim of this paper is to analyze how transnational coaches exacerbated a hegemonic focus on performance spanning across elite sport globally with negative consequences for athletes, including those who tried to be rebellious and challenge the 'new normal.' By doing so, we respond to this journal's call for articles regarding hegemony and rebellion in sport in a Scandinavian context.

### **Prior research of transnational coaches**

Existing literature on transnational coaches is scattered around small pockets of research. For example, there is a small body of research that explores why transnational coaches are moving to coach in different countries (Borges et al. 2015; Kerr and Obel 2018; Orłowski, Wicker, and Breuer 2016, 2018; Wicker, Orłowski, and Breuer 2018). These studies demonstrate that it is not merely the level of performance in the host country but rather a mix of job-related personal and competitive factors that is a decisive factor for coach migration (Wicker, Orłowski, and Breuer 2018; Orłowski, Wicker, and Breuer 2016, 2018).

Similarly, few studies have explored transnational coaches through a gender lens. Kerr and Cervin (2016), for example, concluded that native women coaches were not hired in New Zealand and Australia for elite coaching positions. Instead, sport organizations prioritized transnational male coaches to those positions. De Haan and Knoppers (2020) and De Haan and Norman (2020) further suggested that transnational coaches used gendered practices to constitute elite athletes in a way that discounted elite women athletes and lifted up male athlete performances as the norm.

Perhaps most relevant for where this study is situated is research examining the ways in which transnational coaches impact on the sport system in the receiving context and to what extent these coaches are adjusting to the norms of the host country. Girginov and Sandanski (2004), for example, argued that Bulgarian coaches had an impact on the cultural transformation of British rhythmic gymnastics. The authors described it as a 'co-production' because the case illustrates the collaboration between the resources of the western world and eastern European coaching expertise, as described by Green and Oakley (2001). Moreover, Girginov and Sandanski (2004) stressed that the Bulgarian coaches as well as the host country needed to adjust in order for the British medal count to rise. In contrast, Bairner and Barbour (2005) suggested that the work of seven elite coaches from South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia who migrated to Ireland to develop rugby programs/clubs can be described more as a 'single-production.' These transnational coaches had a profound impact on the programs they were involved with as well as the style of play in the host country as a whole.

Other studies have also explored adaption strategies by transnational coaches in order to be successful (Cummings 2014; Kerr and Moore 2015; Sasaba et al. 2017). For example, in Canada, transnational coaches needed to adjust to their communication styles and have a better understanding of the nature of the coach–athlete relationship, which traditionally had been (non)hierarchical in nature (Cummings 2014). Similarly, Kerr and Moore (2015)

studied former Soviet Union coaches, who coached gymnastics in New Zealand, and suggested they drew on discourses about childhood, parenting, and social ideologies to make sense of their experiences. The coaches realized that they needed to adjust their (Russian) autocratic coaching style. These coaches also realized they needed to speak softer, avoid giving tough criticism, and deliver the message with a smile in order to keep kids in gymnastic programs.

In sum, prior research on transnational coaches has mostly focused on their impact along with adaptation to the receiving context. More research is needed to explore the role of transnational coaches and the extent to which these coaches may inform, disrupt, or reinforce the discourses that shape the structure of sport in the host country (Knoppers and De Haan 2020). As such, this article responds to a broader call within the sports sociological research field, as it will explore the power relations in the triad among transnational coaches, sport organizations, and the athletes. This is where this study is situated.

### Theoretical perspective

As its theoretical orientation this paper will use a 'Gramsci horizon' in order to analyze the power relations at play in Danish elite swimming. Hegemony and power are at the center of Antonio Gramsci's writings. Gramsci did not have a specific definition on hegemony, but Sage (1990, 21) suggest Gramsci alerted attention to an image of hegemony that provides a 'powerful framework for analyzing social organization and social processes within societies.' Gramsci's starting point is useful because it rejects determinism and assumes that cultural dominance, in a broad perspective, is based on more than power and economic dominance and that this hegemony – a general consensus – must constantly be normatively reproduced and ensured through either negotiation or encapsulation. Hegemony can never be guaranteed to a single group and can only be sustained if it remains responsive to some of the demands of the subordinate group (Sage 1990; Storey 2021) - a 'compromise equilibrium' must take place once in a while (Storey 2021).

Gramsci stressed what he called rule by consent or ideological domination. In this view, people on the floor tend to endorse and internalize the dominant group perspectives and thus through their consent ideological domination succeed (Sage 1990). Yet, the ruling groups have major advantages in controlling cultural values and controlling their institutions. In this way, Gramsci emphasizes cultural leadership and cultural hegemony – in its capacity as ideological superstructure – as prerequisites for dominance and control systems. Specifically, the Gramsci horizon is inspired by Gramsci's (1982) writings on the strategies available to those in power to exercise and retain authority over subordinate groups, and the extent to which these strategies are used and how they fluctuate between acts of coercion and consent.

In a sporting context, cultural leadership and cultural hegemony replace direct force as the major means of exercising control and domination. Cultural leadership is secured through the articulation of ruling ideas which is then accepted by the subordinate group if they are left unchallenged (Bennett 2006). Using a Gramsci lens, it will be important to explore to what extent and in what ways do the subordinate group challenge this apparent subjugation and if they are unsuccessful in their challenge, will the subordinate group receive punishment (Gramsci 1982). A dominant group can only sustain cultural leadership if it listens and responds to some of the demands of the subordinate group. In this perspective

we can examine the interrelations between the dominance of the transnational coaches and sport federations and the athletes as the subordinate group. Yet, at the same time we will include attention to the delicate balance between obedience and rebellion in considering how athletes may refrain from protesting about the ideological changes towards a novel training regime because they believed it helped them in their quest for Olympic medals or they feared the consequences of such rebellion.

As such the perspective of Gramsci turns attention to the power dialectics that is at the center of the coach-athlete relationship in high performance sport. Moreover, Gramsci offers a perspective on the dualism between consent and disobedience in the coach-athlete relationship that can help nuance the media representations of the Danish swimming case. Thus, we shall see that power does not simply reside with the transnational coaches but in a social system in which also Team Denmark and the Danish Swimming Federation are involved. We will also examine the options (and challenges) for the athletes to rebel rather than consent with the conditions.

## Method

Our limited options for accessing the discourses at play in Danish elite swimming retrospectively will be through the methods of document analysis and visual analysis. The primary document to be analyzed is the independent investigation report of 230 pages that is based on a number of not publically accessible documents as well as a survey and a large number of interviews with the involved partners. As such the independent investigation report can be considered central in an intensity sampling approach (Patton 2002). The primary visual to be analyzed is the Denmark National Broadcasting Company's (DR) documentary *Swimming stars – below the surface* (April 21, 2019).

The independent investigation and the documentary provide comprehensive information about what has been termed 'the swimming case' and is the focal point of this paper. The independent investigation was conducted by the Danish law firm Kammeradvokaten that has been the external legal adviser to the Danish government since 1936. Kammeradvokaten created a reference group to help them understand the findings in relation to an elite sport context/culture. This reference group consisted of university professors from Denmark and abroad as well as current and former elite athletes. The objective of the independent investigation was to describe the training environment and its consequences for the elite swimmers with a primary focus on the years 2003-2013. The independent investigation also examined the organizational framework in the Danish Swimming Federation, to determine if the framework actually allows elite swimmers to speak out about potential issues related to swimming. Finally, the independent investigation had to determine whether or not Team Denmark and DIF have lived up to their responsibilities in the supervision of elite sport in Denmark. The conclusions in the independent investigation are based on a survey, interviews and a collection of relevant reports and email correspondence. For the anonymous survey, 183 swimmers were contacted and 76% responded. Forty-four current or retired swimmers, 36 leaders of sport organizations (Team Denmark, Dansk Swimming Federation and DIF), relatives of swimmers and some of the coaches were interviewed.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was used as an analytical tool to help make sense of the data. CDA is a useful approach when trying to explore power relations and the consequences they have for groups, institutions and individuals (Markula and Silk 2011). We



followed the four steps as outlined by Markula and Silk (2011). The first step is to describe the context of the text. In this step the researcher describes ‘what is in the text.’ We started watching the DR’s documentary in order to get a better understanding of the case that later prompted the independent investigation from Kammeradvokaten (2020). The Director of the Danish Swimming Federation is interviewed as well as swimmers experiencing the abuse. In this step we also looked for key words in the text, primarily from the interviews and emails from the independent investigation report. Examples of keywords are fat/weight and related antonyms such as slim, fit. The next step is to engage in an intertextual analysis where the researcher focuses on the discursive practice and what narratives, themes or discourses emerges (e.g. the weight of athletes, training environment, disobedience). Thirdly, we connected the discourses to particular ideologies (e.g. neo-liberalism, performance). The last step in the CDA approach focus on how the discourses came into power. Who might be some of the dominant groups that benefit and stand to lose from the discourses at play are essential questions to ask. In this case it is relevant to explore the role of not only the transnational coaches, but also the Danish Swimming Federation and their response to the discourses.

## Findings

In this section we will present the findings related to the critical elements just described (the training environment, weight as discourse, disobedience and (the lack of) response from the Danish Swimming Federation).

### *Training environment*

In 2003, the Australian coach, Mark Regan was hired. The independent investigation concluded that the environment under Regan can be characterized as hard, aggressive and degrading (Kammeradvokaten 2020, 74). Other words to describe the training environment in the independent investigation included hierarchy and unstable (Kammeradvokaten 2020, 81). An example is provided in the independent investigation of the training environment:

‘He was wild, he had a temperament that was extreme...I was asked to break up with my partner because he believes it disturbed my concentration.... I have experienced he gave me the F... finger. We were also asked to continue swimming in the outdoor pool during thunder and lightning.’

Several of the swimmers explained that Regan would throw objects like training equipment and chairs after the swimmers in the water. He would yell to them how poorly they performed and he would claim some swimmers were too fat if they had gained just a couple of 100’s grams in weight. Regan would punish them in different ways. One swimmer noted the need to take pain killers before practice because Regan did not allow swimmers to miss any practices. Another swimmer also raised the issue regarding a lack of understanding for trying to balance school and swimming. If you have to leave practice early in the morning due to school then it was noted how much you owed him in terms of swimming meters and you had to swim that on a different day for example on a Sunday when other swimmers had their day off.



The Dutchmen Paulus Wildeboer replaced Mark Regan in 2008 and he was offered an extension in 2012 but resigned after the Olympic games in 2012. The Dutchman continued the abusive behavior as he was also throwing chairs and swim plates after the swimmer. As one swimmer noted: ‘it really hurt. As I am adult I do not understand why I just accepted it. I just took on my goggles and cried in them and carried on’ (Kammeradvokaten 2020, 83).

Several swimmers experienced physical or mental pain during the time. Jeanette Ottesen believe she broke a rib due to overtraining. Amalie Emma Thomason (14-year old) who was targeted by Wildeboer to lose weight and threaten to be kicked out of the national team if she did not lose weight. Retrospectively, she asks herself why she accepted it:

‘It was like being in prison. It was really tough for a 14-year-old girl to be in such an environment. There was extreme focus on the weight. It was like your personality was taken away from you. I just remember not being myself.’

Another girl, Trine Gudnitz Allpass explains how her leg was tied together in order to optimize her stroke. As a result, she was “fastened”. She began to have pain in her back. The physical therapist asked permission to examine her back but was denied by Wildeboer. Instead Trine Gudnitz Allpass was to take pain killers which was provided by Wildeboer.

### ***The discourse around the weight***

The policy from the Dansk Swimming Federation states that weighting athletes should be done in a closed off room and should not take place with children under the age of 16. However, the public weighing of swimmers that had begun under Regan continued with Wildeboer. The weight was placed publicly at the pool and he would comment and make fool of swimmers that he thought was gaining weight. He would belittle those swimmers in front of the other swimmers. He even named a group of swimmers *the fat group*. He would also offer medicine to swimmers if he found that they needed to lose weight. He would write to the entire group pr. email and individually with statements like this regarding the bodyweight issue (Kammeradvokaten 2020, 156–159):

‘Please take a good look at all the fat KG you are moving with you the whole day!!! (team email)

Remember the mirror!!!!!! (team email)

If you are not able to do it yourself, we will increase the work load with extra running and so on until you have a better body composition (team email)

If you still do not lose weight you will not be allowed to participate (individual email)

We have quite a lot of girls who know how to take care, we train enough to have a very nice, slim and fit body. If you do not want to collaborate, I will stop to give you the chance to participate and it will start with the competitions (individual email)

You don’t want to look beautiful or you prefer to be fat and sloppy?’ (team email)

It is clear that Wilderboer created a discourse in which weight was closely regulated and he used both the image of punishments as well as a beautification of the female body to get

consent from the athletes. Some athletes accepted this behavior from Wildeboer while others tried to be rebellious.

### **The rebellions**

Two athletes, Katrine Jørgensen and Mette Jacobsen acted against the new norms and the new cultural leadership. Katrine Jørgensen was one of the athletes that struggled under Mark Regan's leadership and the focus on the weight and the public weighing. As a result, she developed an eating disorder, bulimia and depression during her time with the national team (DR documentary 2019). She had the best time to qualify as a backup for the relay team that were going to the Olympics in 2004. Despite this, she was told she was not selected. As she asked for explanation by Regan she was belittled and yelled at for 45 minutes in the pool while he was bouncing a ball hard to the ground (Kammeradvokaten 2020, 122). Regan used words such as traitor and told her she was not to be trusted. After the incident she reported the episode to Team Danmark. She decided to move her training session to her home club, instead of the national training center and she wanted to inform Team Danmark about the reason for this decision.

Another swimmer, Mette Jacobsen who at the time was the only athlete in the world to have been a finalist in 5 consecutive Olympics, was a member of Team Danmark's board representing the athletes. She also reported Mark Regan's behavior to the Danish Swimming Federation – a month after Katrine Jørgensen reported it. Mette Jacobsen believe that Mark Regan's coaching style and culture was not congruent with the traditional values in Danish elite sport.

According to the independent investigation (Kammeradvokaten 2020) Jakobsen's comments was ignored by the Danish Swimming Federation and it was explained that Mette Jacobsen was part of the 'old school,' which means she did not agree with the new approach and culture regarding high performance at the Danish Swimming Federation (Kammeradvokaten 2020, 136). As her complaint did not change anything she decided to train with her home club and did not participate in training activities with the national team. She claimed that Mark's leadership style was *Management by Fear* and he would name certain swimmers 'bitches' (Kammeradvokaten 2020, 133). As a consequence, she was denied the opportunity to participate in the world championship in swimming. Pia Holmen, director of the Danish Swimming Federation wrote in an email to key stakeholders that she was ready to break with Mette Jacobsen: 'If she does not take part in the preparation she will not be elected to the team. Hell will break loose! We are ready to take the fight (with her). Perhaps do it once and for all' (Kammeradvokaten 2020, 133).

The complaint from Katrine Jørgensen reached the next level as it was on the agenda at the Team Danmark board meeting. Despite representing the athletes, Mette Jacobsen was asked to recuse herself, notwithstanding that another coach had confirmed the verbal abuse Katrine had experienced. This defeats the purpose of having an athlete serve on the board if the athlete cannot discuss such an issue and can be viewed as an attempt to oppress the subordinate group.

Before the board meeting, the director, Pia Holmen wrote to the board of Team Danmark about the incident and argued that the swimming federation wanted to close the case as

quickly as possible as the World Championship was coming up (Kammeradvokaten 2020, 126). She further stated that Mark Regan felt he was not supported and he might want to resign. It is clear in the letter that the Danish Swimming Federation supported the story from Mark Regan and that no action should be taken. In the letter she also discredited Mette Jacobsen and Pia Holmen claimed that Jakobsen did not support the new approach that the swimming federation is taken. The independent investigation concluded that the federation failed to act on behalf of their athletes and should as a minimum have retrieved more information from the involved parties including Mette Jacobsen. Instead the swimming federation decided to close down the case and thereby gave consent to the hegemonic performance discourses practiced by the transnational coaches. The Danish Swimming Federation simply refused to negotiate with the athletes. The sides did not reach a 'compromise equilibrium.' Rather than talk with the rebellious athletes, the cultural leaders shut them down.

The independent investigation also addressed the issue of athlete representation. In a Gramsci perspective, negotiation with the people in authority, in this case the coaches, could happen through the representatives of the subordinate group. However, the athletes were not really in position to show disobedience to the coaches by going against the new norms or express concern about their leadership. This confirms the asymmetrical power relations between coaches and their athletes. Athletes were afraid to lose their spot on the team if they went against the transnational coaches. As Katrine noted she did not feel that the athletes' representative had any desire to support her:

'It's one of the things I think was completely insane. He (the athletes' representative) also lay and always swam there, and was deeply dependent on Mark liking him too.... He did not dare to say anything... We did not have anyone who was objective or one who stood outside, who had nothing at stake. He had too much at stake' (Kammeradvokaten 2020, 128).

Such a set-up alerts attention to the hegemony through which elite sport is governed by the performance principle. There was too much at stake for individual athletes and the system knows this (coaches and administrative leaders). As the coaches serves at gatekeepers to future success most of the athletes chose to accept the new norms. By staying silent, the athletes' representative chooses to consent to the hegemony practices by the coaches. As a result, the domination of the performance ideology succeeds for years to come. The question is now what was the role of the Danish Swimming Federation and Team Danmark and how did they respond?

### ***'The (lack of) response from the Danish Swimming Federation and Team Danmark***

The independent investigation concludes that the Danish Swimming Federation and Team Danmark failed to act on the abuse of the Danish swimmers. The (lack of) response from the Danish Swimming Federation can be seen to follow in the wake of the Elite Plan 2002 which had the stated goal of winning medals to Denmark at international championships. As a result, new norms were accepted. According to the independent investigation (Kammeradvokaten 2020) the Danish Swimming Federation and to some extent Team Danmark failed to respond and see the bigger picture. They did not respond to athletes' complaints thoroughly and did not follow up when changes were made. For example, they

did make guidelines for how the athletes should be weighted but did not ensure that the transnational coaches followed the guidelines. Both coaches were given contract extensions even though the Danish Swimming Federation were aware that the coaches did not fulfil their duty of care for the athletes.

Just like coaches are assumed to embody a discourse of expertise (Mills and Denison 2018) federations and their sport directors are as well (Blackett, Evans, and Piggott 2017). The host bears a great deal of responsibility for their choice of coach, recruitment and selection but also the ways such appointments may shape a sport and sport culture (Knoppers and De Haan 2020). In line with Gramsci (Sage 1990), when the federation accepts the behavior from the coaches then the swimmers are also likely to endorse and internalize the new norm and values. As one swimmer said: ‘it is a culture thing, you are born into it, so if you come as elite swimmer number 60, why should I ask questions about it?’

Another swimmer added: ‘At last you comply. If the Danish Swimming Federation has hired him then they must believe he is the right person. He has created result. Then maybe its ok for me as well.’ In this sense, coaches and sport leaders produced and reproduced the hegemonic performance discourse. There was never a counter-hegemony from stakeholders within the swimming environment.

## Discussion

The findings indicate that the hegemony of a narrow performance focus in elite sport, enacted by transnational coaches, with the consent of the Danish Swimming Federation had taken root in Danish elite swimming. The Danish Swimming Federation wanted to become more successful at the big events such as the world championship and the Olympic Games. This would ensure further funding from Team Denmark. In the broader neo-liberal approach to funding, the winner is rewarded as recourses allocations are tied to performance (Moynihan 2006). In this way of funding elite sport, it is possible to secure an element of high accountability about how to best use public money and assign responsibility in case of failure (Peters 2018; Sam 2012). This is the most common funding strategy in most Western and European countries (De Bosscher 2008; Green and Houlihan 2005; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, and Quick 2008). Moreover, countries have experienced a substantial increase in government funding for elite sport which add to the pressure on national sport federations. As a result, nations are copying and adopting their policies and practices using other successful countries as a benchmark (Bohlke and Robinson 2009).

This process also occurred in Denmark. Transnational coaches are hired as they are often considered superior (e.g., Chen and Mason 2018). Transnational coaches had a great impact on the swimming culture in Denmark but also in other sports and elsewhere (see for example Knoppers & De Haan, 2020). As such Denmark became part of a globally distributed hegemonic sporting culture and bought in to the “tough love” style of coaching (see Knust & Fisher, 2015; Jacobs et al., 2017). For example, in Portuguese gymnastics, young elite athletes also witness similar weight control measures and the demand for competing with injuries as in the Danish Swimming case (Pinheiro et al. 2014). Stirling and Kerr (2008) describe how elite swim coaches have thrown object after Canadian swimmers as well as name calling athletes and belittle them in public. Bullying and harassment also occurred in Holland’s gymnastics (Smits, Jacobs, and Knoppers 2017) and British cycling (Pielke et al. 2020).

To create discourses about the perfect slim body and practices such as public weighing is not without risks. Unfortunately, it happened in Denmark even if people within the system such as dieticians as well as existing studies have long warned that coaches should avoid critical comments and body comparisons (Thompson and Sherman 1999) so that athletes do not compare their bodies to those of their teammates (Mosewich et al. 2009). Moreover, several of the swimmers did develop eating disorders (e.g., binge-eating and dietary restraint), as well as feelings of guilt, shame, and anxiety that have long been identified as a severe risk (Biesecker and Martz 1999; Kerr, Berman, and De Souza 2006; Muscat and Long 2008). As a result, some swimmers, decided to quit the sport without attempting to challenge its norms.

The hegemonic performance discourse was embraced despite that Denmark has a law that determines how the government should support high-performance sports. The criteria in Danish elite sport is that has to be ‘conducted in a just and socially sustainable manner.’ Furthermore, young athletes’ well-being has been recognized as a fundamental right in the European Union (EU). According to the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights:

‘Children have the right to the protection and care necessary for their well-being. According to Article 165 TFEU, protecting the physical and moral integrity of sportspeople, especially the youngest sportspeople, is a way to develop the European dimension in sport and therefore a specific aim of Union action in the field of sport’ (Official Journal of the European Union 2019, 3).

Lastly, it had been suggested that coaches are expected to adopt a heightened standard of care due to their training and expertise (Partington 2014). Very few stakeholders, for example other club coaches and directors, exhibited such a standard of care by saying no to hegemony practices. Jacobs, Smits, and Knoppers (2017, 139) describe the paradox that on the one side sport directors govern for development and pleasure, yet on the other side they create a context where ‘emphasizing high performance’ informs ‘coaching behavior in other (unintended ways).’

Our findings demonstrate that the director of the Danish Swimming Federation sanctioned the entry of the performance discourse in Danish elite swimming. Only two athletes who tried to ‘negotiate’ the cultural leadership of the coaches and protect the well-being of the athletes engaged in the kind of rebellious defiance described by Aggerholm (2020). For those athletes, the suppressive authority that the transnational coaches employed appears unjust, unfair or arbitrary. Furthermore, athlete representation in Danish swimming appeared to be more for show than for actual influence. This appears to be connected to the fear of repercussions if speaking out. Athletes’ voices might be institutionalized in the elite sport setting but this is not the same as decision-making influence (Geeraert, Alm, and Groll 2014). There are little checks and balances in sport, partly because there are no independent ethics committees (Geeraert, Alm, and Groll 2014). Elite sport needs dialogue with the athletes in order to be sustainable (Dohsten, Barker-Ruchti, and Lindgren 2020). In the wake of publicized sexual abuse cases in swimming, taekwondo and gymnastics, the United States Olympic Committee has created a unit dedicated to compliance and good governance in national sport federations. However, this work might challenge the traditional autonomy that national and local governing bodies in the United States have historically enjoyed (Pielke Jr. et al. 2020).

Moreover, the Danish swimming case reminds us about the relevance of evaluating the current elite sport system as a whole to understand the power relationships and how it affects its athletes (Babiak 2009; Babiak and Thibault 2009; Scheerder, Claes, and Willem 2017; Sotiriadou 2009). Shilbury (2000) recognized early that Australia's sport federations consider alternative forms of structure and supervision procedures to ensure best practice. Jacobs et al. (2019) highlighted that the number of stakeholders (e.g., local and national government, coaches, federations) started a power struggle in South Africa's elite sport. As suggested by Gramsci (1982), it is often a coalition of powerful groups, not a single group, that enacts hegemonic leadership and practices. In Danish swimming, the responsible stakeholders were not in an internal power fight, quite the contrary. According to Jacobs and colleagues (Jacobs, Smits, and Knoppers 2017) abusive behavior by coaches is often sustained by institutional decisions by directors and managers of sport clubs. Moreover, Skille and Houlihan (2014) argued that because elite development systems institutionalize so quickly, they are difficult to change; once the ambition of elite sporting success has become embedded in the sport system it is difficult to reverse.

If a national sport federation wins medals, the organization will tend to be viewed as world class and therefore require less oversight and accountability. But as Pielke et al. (2020, 483) write: 'Importantly, success in one facet of NGB business (e.g., medal wins) does not suggest the same in other areas of their business practice (e.g., safeguarding young athletes)'. This might help explain why Denmark's hegemony practices went on for more than a decade. The actions stakeholders are willing to take are shaped by the requirement of elite sport and the engagement in new social practices and new cultural norms in the quest for Olympic models (Green 2004). The female swimmers performed well, winning international championship medals, but the Danish Swimming Federation and Team Denmark were negligent when it came to the athletes' welfare.

This negligence might also have consequences for other sports in Denmark due to the interconnectedness and autonomy of the sport system. One stakeholder's reputation can affect all other stakeholders and sport itself (Chappelet 2016). Other sports federations now face the risk of increased scrutiny and control. The Ministry of Culture has suggested that changes to the Danish elite sport system are necessary in the wake of the Danish swimming case (Press release, Ministry of Culture, July 2, 2020). This might prompt a temporary takeover on the part of coercive power from a 'repressive state apparatus' (Storey 2021). Conducting a follow-up study that monitors potential organizational changes to the Danish elite model would be worthwhile to see if the hegemonic performance discourse is discontinued as a result of those changes and if a dialogue is opened to determine a new set of norms and values among coaches, leaders and athletes.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the discourses in power in Danish elite swimming up through the 2000s. The work of Gramsci were used to deconstruct the cultural hegemony leadership enacted by coaches and administrators in the Danish Swimming Federation and Team Denmark. This paper offers new insight into the use of Gramsci's concepts that, until now, have been used sparingly in the sport research field. Traditionally, there has been a tendency to link hegemony theory to the distribution of power in relation to unequal distribution of economic resources and social class distinctions at the macro level. In sport, a competing



mix of interests and values are often at play and a ‘compromise equilibrium’ between different interest groups are often needed in order to keep sport sustainable. The emergence of abuse cases within sports has demonstrated that hegemony cannot be enclosed to inequity in economic resources and social class issues only. Using Gramsci to explore power relations at the micro/meso level results in a new understanding of systems of cultural leadership and the power relations that create and sustain them. On the surface it appeared that the transnational coaches had disrupted the Danish elite sporting culture, but the coaches were representing an ideological superstructure that evolved in the wake of the transition from welfare state principles to neo-liberal governing of Danish elite sport policy. Except on a few occasions, the athletes accepted the hegemonic practices as the coaches, and the Danish Swimming Federation, were the gatekeepers of their success. This is the context of the elite sport system. Those who defied the new performance discourse were punished. As the responsible leaders failed to act, this paper argues for the need of a new institutional set-up where athletes’ voices are being heard and where an independent regulatory counsel is formed. From a Gramscian perspective, the voices of the subordinate group need to be heard.

## Disclosure statement

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