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TALENT DEVELOPMENT IN TIMES OF COMMERCIALISATION
AND GLOBALISATION: THE PROS AND CONS OF
INTERNATIONAL STARS IN DANISH WOMEN'S HANDBALL

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TALENT DEVELOPMENT IN TIMES OF COMMERCIALISATION AND GLOBALISATION: THE PROS AND CONS OF INTERNATIONAL STARS IN DANISH WOMEN'S HANDBALL

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SUMMARY

In light of globalisation, the international labour market has become more flexible and workers are now crossing national borders to a greater degree than ever before. This practice rapidly accelerated in the sports field when the famous Bosman ruling by the European Court of Justice in 1995 removed obstacles to freedom of movement of workers, making possible migration of professional sports players within the borders of the European Union. This text describes developments in Danish women's handball and focuses on the potential problems of commercialisation; it provides an analysis of the flow of international players into the Danish women's handball league after its rapid commercial development.

TAKE-HOME MESSAGE:

- Do international stars in national leagues represent a threat to the competitiveness of a country's national team? The answer is not a simple yes or no. According to the findings from our study, foreign players can contribute to the progress of young local players by passing on their skills and experience and acting as role models, and by promoting a high level of performance and competitiveness among team members. However, too many international stars on a team may block the growth of local talent through dominating the sport with their prowess and excellent skills.



INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has had a significant effect on economies all over the world. At the national level, this trend is evident in governments' concerns over increasing levels of competition and the threat of outsourcing jobs to firms in foreign countries with low labour costs. According to Pedersen (2011), national populations are now considered 'soldiers of competition' serving to secure the wealth of their respective nations in the global competition.

In Denmark, politicians have even pointed to the importance of attracting a highly specialised labour force to the country to secure Danish economic growth. Observers and corporate interest organisations such as *Dansk Erhverv* (Danish Chamber of Commerce) and *Dansk Industri* (Confederation of Danish Industry) have also stressed the importance of lowering Danish income taxes to prevent the best and most educated Danish workers from moving to firms in other countries, which in turn threatens Danish economic growth.

A variant of this discussion on international competitiveness has arisen within some professional sports in Denmark, such as football and team handball. As part of the rapid commercial development of women's handball – which took place between 1994 and 2010 – several clubs in the Danish league employed international star players, making the Danish league one of the best in Europe. However, as a parallel development, the results of the previously successful Danish national team began to deteriorate – especially between 2005 and 2010.

Denmark's fall in international standing initiated a discussion on whether the growing number of foreign star players competing in the national league prevented upcoming Danish talents from competing at the highest club level. Some felt that this situation had a knock-on effect on the national teams. The debate has highlighted the concerns about the falling international competitiveness of the national teams, which has coincided with the rising number of international star players in Danish league teams after the commercialisation of these sports. However, the fact that it may be necessary to import international stars to remain competitive has been largely ignored.

This text describes developments in Danish women's handball. It focuses on the potential problems of commercialisation by providing an analysis of the flow of international players into the Danish women's handball league following its rapid commercial development. The text also discusses the advantages and disadvantages of the migration of foreign players and concludes that foreign players can assist the development of local Danish players. However, if international star players are not used actively to foster positive local developments, the performances of Danish players could suffer.

In the text, we first outline the development of women's team handball in Denmark, from both sporting and economic perspectives. Second, we describe the effects of the commercialisation process, especially the increase in migration of international players into Danish women's handball clubs. Third, we provide an analysis of the potential advantages and disadvantages of foreign 'sports migration' and investigate the extent to which commercial developments have affected the competitiveness of both Danish league clubs and the national team.

Finally, we discuss how the results foreshadow future developments in Danish women's team handball that will likely arise against the backdrop of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 and the ongoing credit squeeze.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S TEAM HANDBALL IN DENMARK – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The development of women's team handball in Denmark can be approached from both a sporting and commercial perspective. We will take the sporting perspective as a point of departure, as this provides the background for understanding the sport's commercial development and the issues surrounding migration of foreign players.

The beginning

Denmark's success in team handball took off in 1993 when the Danish women's national team, at that time led by head coach Ulrik Wilbek, won a silver medal at the world championship tournament in Norway. Two million Danish television viewers – a record-breaking figure – saw the Danish team lose to a strong German team in an extremely close match. The team's march to the final paved the way for more than a decade of Danish sporting success at the club level, as well as the national men's and women's teams.

The impressive result in Norway came only a few years after the Danish Handball Federation (DHF) was close to folding the women's national team because of stagnating results and falling interest from players, the media and sponsors. Therefore, the Federation's decision to continue supporting the women's national team, despite the 'female handball depression' in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is perhaps the most important one it ever made. The Danish handball boom would probably have evolved very differently were it not for this particular event, although this successful period was influenced by other important developments that occurred after the victory.

The development

The Danish upturn in handball from the 1990s and beyond was founded on the DHF's determined efforts to foster the development of talent through systemic organisation and a focus on cooperation with national league clubs. But also of significant importance for the stabilisation and further development of Danish handball after the mid 1990s were developments in the Danish media. In 1998, the two national public service broadcasters in Denmark, the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (DR) and TV2 Denmark, witnessed the private commercial media company Modern Times Group build a successful platform around the media rights to Danish football. This success prompted DR and TV2 to increase their focus on club handball, which had proven popular among a wide range of television viewers.

The newly revitalised public interest in team handball, initiated by the international sporting results, came at just the right moment. Team handball became extremely popular, and this paved the way for a television rights deal that led to massive exposure of team handball on the public service (free-to-air) channels. This exposure attracted sponsors, which fuelled an explosive growth in revenues for the clubs, as illustrated in Figure 1.

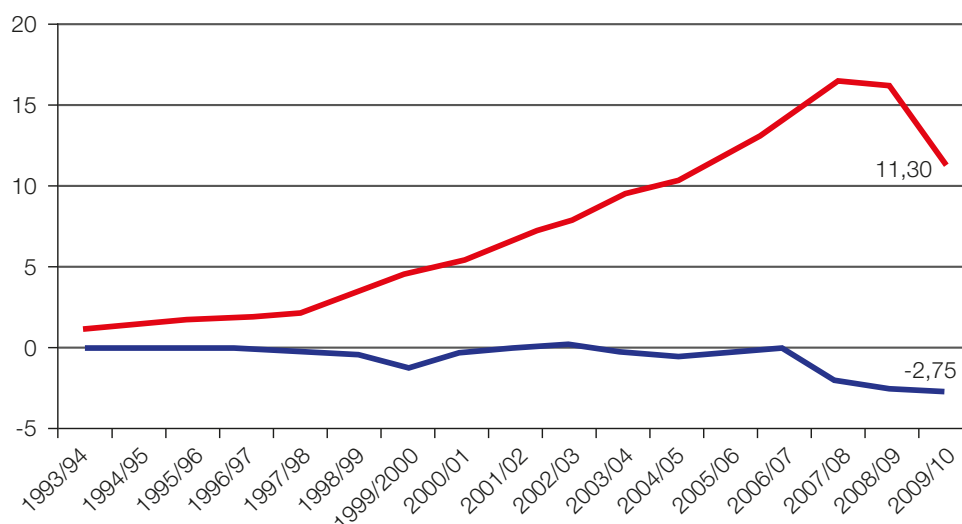


Figure 1. Average revenue and net profit (in million kroner) of Danish women's and men's handball league clubs during the 1990s and 2000s. The red line represents the average revenue of the clubs and the blue line shows the average net profit of the clubs.

As shown in the figure, the teams' revenues increased significantly from the beginning of 1993, rising even more sharply after 1998 when growth rates hovered around 20% per year. However, this progress came to a sudden halt when the GFC struck the Danish economy in 2008 and resulted in – among other things – decreasing sponsorship support.

In 2010, the average revenue of a men's or women's league club was 11.3 million Danish kroner (about €1.6 million). At its peak in 2007–08, average revenue was as high as 16.5 million kroner (about €2.2 million).

More international stars

With the growing income of the Danish league clubs, players' salaries rose significantly and the clubs funded larger squads that included international star players from all over Europe. The women's league, in particular, imported an enormous number of foreign players, with up to 40% of players registered in league clubs during the late 2000s being non-Danish.

Clubs such as Viborg HK, Slagelse Dream Team, Ikast-Bording (now FCM Håndbold), and Aalborg DH were some of the big spenders when recruiting international star players. With this influx of talent, the Danish women's league became the best in Europe. The victories of the Slagelse Dream Team (2004, 2005 & 2007) and Viborg HK (2006 & 2009) in the Champions League are testament to this success.

Table 1 summarises international player recruitment in the Danish women's league from 1999 to 2010 in relation to the financial development of the clubs and the sporting performance of the national team. The influx of international players into Danish women's handball teams has been significant: the number of international players in the Danish league almost tripled from 1999 to 2008, peaking in 2008. However, since then the number of international players has decreased, primarily due to a knock-on effect from the GFC that forced Danish league clubs to reduce costs in the face of large economic deficits (Figure 1). Of course, player salaries are a major expense for the clubs.

Table 1. Statistics on the Danish women's team handball league, 1999–2010¹

Season	Danish players	Foreign players	Total players	Foreign players (%)	National team performance	Average revenue per club (million kr)
1999–2000	173	30	203	15	WWHC2: 6; OGHC3: 1	4.7
2000–2001	156	46	202	23	EWHC4: 10	5.4
2001–2002	166	45	211	21	WWHC: 4	6.9
2002–2003	182	49	231	21	EWHC: 1	7.9
2003–2004	154	70	224	31	WWHC: 13; OGHC: 1	9.5
2004–2005	138	67	205	33	EWHC: 2	10.1
2005–2006	137	68	205	33	WWHC:4	12.0
2006–2007	162	71	233	30	EWHC: 11	14.2
2007–2008	131	89	220	40	No qualifications	16.5
2008–2009	140	75	215	35	EWHC: 11	16.2
2009–2010	132	69	201	34	WWHC: 5	11.3
2010–2011	185	58	243	24	EWHC: 4	N/A

¹ Based on Hjorth, Agergaard, & Ronglan (2010, p. 26) and updated with data from 2009–10 and 2010–11. Note: the figures for the last two seasons were collected from all clubs (2009–10) and from the website, info-sport.dk (2010–11), whereas the original figures are from the Danish Handball Federation (the archival material of the DHF is currently undergoing a reorganisation); ² World Women's Handball Championship; ³ Olympic Games Handball Champions; ⁴ European Women's Handball Championship

A closer look at the international results (see column headed *National team performance*) reveals the success of Danish team handball on an international level. The height of success of the women's national team was its three successive Olympic gold medals in 1996, 2000 and 2004. However, the team's results began to deteriorate from the 2005–06 season. Since then the team has been in a transitional phase of developing new players.

THE PROS AND CONS OF INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS

The downturn in the Danish medal portfolio suggests a trade-off between the high number of international players in the Danish league clubs and international team performance. The current coach of the Danish national women's team, Jan Pytlick, has frequently expressed his concerns in the press about the lack of Danish players with key positions in the best women's handball league teams, and stresses the difficulties of recruiting national team players from the national league.

So, are international players only bad news for Danish team handball? Or are there also benefits to be had from importing foreign players?

A closer examination of these questions requires qualitative information about the interactions and cooperation between foreign and national players. Such information can be obtained from interviews with experienced coaches (Hjorth, Agergaard & Ronglan, 2010). One focus of these interviews is the question of whether – and in what ways – foreign players can contribute to young players' learning processes and talent development. To study the learning processes of young talents in their social environments, we can view the team as a

community of practice. In this sense, the question is whether such a community facilitates a positive learning process through which young players are included as an integral part of the team, or whether it fosters a firmly cemented hierarchy in which the (international) top players push the young players to peripheral positions in the team. This hierarchy often develops because the foreign players have been imported by the club and are expected to exhibit a higher degree of skill and experience than that of the younger national players.

For the young talents to become fully accepted members of the team, they must first possess a certain degree of legitimacy. This legitimacy can arise from the coach's support, acceptance from key players on the team, or both. The young players' apprenticeships are often centred on one specific mentor, usually the coach, who is responsible for introducing the new player into the community. However, they may also be decentralised, with potential members learning from many experienced participants (such as international top players) through interaction and involvement in practice.

The tension between cooperation and competition with regard to local and foreign players means that young national talents can be sidelined for some time. This situation frequently occurs, despite the fact that increased participation by peripheral members would probably benefit both talent development and the community of practice in the long term. Clubs tend to prefer experienced foreign players who can 'hit the ground running', because the team's short-term accomplishments take precedence over talent development in today's highly commercialised environment of elite sports.

From our perspective, the focus on results delays the learning processes of the young national players, a situation that only worsens the longer they are locked in the phase of legitimate, but peripheral, participation. This status allows participation in training, but not in real competitions that offer the vital and unique experiences necessary to become a senior elite athlete. All the coaches interviewed in the qualitative study emphasised that you cannot develop into a complete handball player – and thereby become a legitimate full member of the team – without participating in (and growing through) matches as well as training.

Having experienced foreign players on the team is advantageous, however, despite the tendency to deadlock young players in peripheral positions. These international stars have the necessary skills and experience to be valuable mentors for young local players. The coach interviews indicated that a large part of the interactions between younger and older team players involves young players learning from senior players through observing practice. Such observations are incredibly important for the young talented players; by seeing how the best players operate, they can understand what is necessary for them to develop a similar level of skill.

According to Wenger (1998), the various members of a community of practice participate to different degrees. *Peripheral* participation is considered the most important form. Here, the participatory aspect is important in working towards full membership in the community, while *marginal* participation is characterised by a high degree of nonparticipation. This prompts the question: Are Danish women's handball teams developing young talents effectively? As noted above, observation is important, but are the national talents becoming marginalised while sitting on the bench only observing the star international players?

It could be argued, for example, that rather than having the young players only observe, the learning processes within the community should be more actively improved. Training methods that break the traditional team hierarchy and allow young players to participate alongside imported players could achieve this goal. For example, athletes playing in the

same position on the court could share the responsibility for promoting that position. Another option to reduce the marginalisation of local talents would be to structure the tournament system so that these players can play matches at the second-highest level while engaging in *participatory* peripheral participation in a national league team. However, the structure of the Danish league may not be the only factor that hampers development of local talent. Other contributing factors include the ability and willingness of clubs to tailor their development plans to provide the most benefits for individual players.

To ensure that young players continue to grow and develop after joining a senior team at the top of the national league, they must first be accepted by the established older players. The senior players also have a responsibility to teach and foster the inclusion of young players to develop their skills and knowledge of the practice. This focus on educating and including young players, however, requires established players to relinquish some of their hard-earned time on the court so that younger players have a chance to participate. Paradoxically, these young players may one day threaten the senior players' position on the team, so maturity and altruism are also required of the international stars.

SUMMING UP: FINAL COMMENTS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

This text has provided an analysis of Danish women's team handball, its commercialisation and the influx of foreign players that followed, in order to answer the question: Has the growing number of international players in Danish league clubs negatively affected the national team's standing, as claimed by observers critical of the path taken to develop Danish handball?

The findings presented above do not definitively answer this question. On the one hand, foreign players can contribute to the progress of younger players through sharing their skills and experience; they can act as role models for potential national players and promote a high level of performance and competitiveness among team members. Alternatively, because of their prowess and excellent skills, too many international players may dominate a team and block the growth of national talents. Nevertheless, the same may be said of professional, experienced senior players in general. High, and growing, expectations of performance in the Danish league may have equally played a part in the diminishing interest in, and lack of focus on, developing talent in Danish women's handball.

Likely future developments

At the time of writing (2012), the majority of Danish league clubs are suffering significant financial problems, and several have been close to folding. Table 1 illustrated that the growing number of international players was positively correlated with the growing turnover of players among the clubs, which peaked in the 2007–08 season. After the GFC, average turnover rates decreased significantly and the number of international players also decreased.

Many international star players have left Danish handball during the last two seasons (2008–2010), which could be viewed as an opportunity for young Danish players to rack up more minutes on the court and to assume more responsibilities on the team. Yet it could also be argued that including fewer foreign 'stars' will weaken the league and produce teams that are not competitive at the elite international level.

In Norway, recession meant that a number of international players disappeared from women's club handball around the turn of the century. Since then, young talented players have quickly filled the vacant positions at the highest national level, simply by acquiring team responsibilities at an early stage. Something similar might occur in Danish women's handball, and local talents may have better development options in the near future. However, players may be unable to fully develop their skills in an environment that, while at a high national standard, falls short of the international level. The reason that Norway can still develop accomplished and competent senior players may be that the players acquire important skills by moving to Denmark and playing for Danish teams at senior level.

Thus, national team performances cannot be improved if answers are sought in isolation from the international environment of elite sports. Also, improvements cannot be expected without financial and political support to develop talent.

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