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Steffen Greve, Jessica Süßenbach, Ole Stabick*

It's (not) the winning – The Special Olympics national handball teams in the trade-off between desire for sporting success and social support

Gewinnen ist (nicht) alles – Die Special Olympics Handballnationalteams im Spannungsfeld von sportlichem Erfolgswunsch und sozialer Unterstützung

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Zusammenfassung: Special Olympics ist die größte Sportorganisation für Menschen mit geistiger Behinderung. Bei den Special Olympics World Games 2019 war Special Olympics Deutschland mit zwei Handballteams vertreten, einem Frauen Traditional-Team und einem Unified-Team (bestehend aus Menschen mit und ohne Behinderung). Die Mitglieder beider Teams wurden aus mehreren Bewerber*innen bei Sichtungslern ausgewählt und bereiteten sich anschließend in Trainingslagern auf die World Games vor. Diese Prozesse wurden mit Hilfe von teilnehmenden Beobachtungen und Leitfaden gestützten Interviews mit den Spieler*innen und Trainer*innen wissenschaftlich begleitet und evaluiert. Die Ergebnisse offenbaren ein Spannungsfeld zwischen sportlichem Erfolgswunsch und sozialer Unterstützung, in dem sich die Teilnehmer*innen bewegen.

Schlüsselwörter: Grounded Theory, Special Olympics, Leistungssport, National-Teams, Unified Sports

Summary: Special Olympics is the world's largest sports organization for people with intellectual disabilities. At the Special Olympics World Games 2019, Special Olympics Germany was represented by two handball teams: a Women's Traditional team and a Unified team (consisting of people with and without

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disabilities). The members of both teams were selected from several applicants at various try-outs and then prepared in training camps for the World Games. These processes were evaluated by way of participant observations and guideline-based interviews with the players and coaches. The results reveal that the participants without disabilities find themselves caught between the conflicting priorities of desire for sporting success and social support.

Keywords: Grounded Theory, Special Olympics, competitive sports, national teams, Unified sports

1 Introduction¹

In March 2019, two national handball teams from Special Olympics Germany took part in the *Special Olympics World Games* in Abu Dhabi: a *Unified team* (mixed teams consisting of women and men with and without intellectual disabilities) and a women's *Traditional team* (exclusively women with intellectual disabilities). The players for these teams were selected from several applicants and prepared for the event in five try-outs and training camps between June 2018 and February 2019. This selection procedure is a deviation from the usual procedure of Special Olympics Germany. Normally, the team that wins the *National Games* competes as the national team at the *World Games*. Such teams are usually from facilities for people with disabilities (e.g., workshops) or teams that are organized in the context of sports clubs. Building an elite team of players from different teams is not provided for in the statutes. The coaches of the handball teams, however, wanted to adopt a new approach. First of all, they really wanted to field the best team for the World Games. And second, all players should have a chance to qualify for the World Games. This is not the case following the usual procedure, as many teams are too weak to win at the *National Games*.

In competitive sports for non-disabled people, game performance (Deutscher Handballbund 2019) or physical and motor skills (Diekmann et al. 2018) are important factors for success and serve as selection criteria during try-outs. Social factors are given little consideration (Conzelmann et al. 2006). For athletes with intellectual disabilities or Unified athletes, there are no scientific studies on try-

¹ The authors dedicate this contribution to Timo Schädler (†). Without his help, this research could not have been conducted. The authors would like to thank Vanessa Meiburg and Kim Christin Burmester, who worked on the project as part of their Master's thesis. The authors would further like to thank very much Judith Keinath from Universität Hamburg, for the translation of the article.

out processes so far. The results-oriented setting described above is particularly interesting for us, as it has not been researched either.

Therefore, the present study examines the selection criteria, the coaches' decision making process, and the ways in which the players interpret and experience the try-out process. Our research interest also extends to the training of elite teams preparing for tournaments like the Special Olympics World Games, which has not been researched yet, either. Therefore, we also examine the views of coaches and players on the further process of preparation for the World Games. To this end, we conducted 22 guideline interviews with trainers and players in order to reconstruct the actors' experiences with and interpretations of the selection and training process. The data was analyzed using the Grounded Theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1996). In Unified sports, people with and without intellectual disabilities play together and also against each other. Therefore, the competitive design of this setting seems particularly difficult. Handball is a very complex sport (König et al. 2019). Tactical (and thus intellectual) skills are enormously important in order to win. The findings on this head are therefore of high relevance for the further development of Special Olympics competitions.

2 Special Olympics – Theoretical Context and Empirical Findings

2.1 Intellectual disability – a derogatory concept as precondition for participation

There are numerous definitions and interpretations of the term *disability*. For this article, we classify and discuss definitions that are both relevant and utilized in our field of study. To this end we look, first of all, at the interpretation of this term in the official Special Olympics documents. Afterwards, we critically discuss the meaning of this specification based on further definitions. This is necessary because the actors in the investigated field could not be expected to uniformly use the term in the sense of Special Olympics for several reasons: Most evident are the complexity of the term and the heterogeneity of the participants. In addition, we assume that the participants do not know or accept all details of the Special Olympics statutes. Particularly in settings in which people with and without intellectual disabilities interact constantly, subjective theories about the causes and effects of intellectual disabilities frequently prevail (Cloerkes 1988, 2007). Special Olympics sporting events generally belong to this type of setting.

Special Olympics is globally regarded as the sports movement for people with intellectual disabilities with the largest number of members (Special Olympics Germany 2020). The statutes of Special Olympics International are valid in all member associations. The statutes contain the following passage on the preconditions for participation: „To be eligible to participate in Special Olympics, you must [be] identified by an agency or professional as having one of the following conditions: intellectual disabilities, cognitive delays as measured by formal assessment, or significant learning or vocational problems due to cognitive delay that require or have required specially designed instruction“ (Special Olympics International 2020).² Besides requiring official diagnostics, this passage contains various terms that specify and restrict the group of participants. It points to a rather deficient-oriented view on disability, e.g., by using the terms “problems” and “delay”. Hence, the people in this target group are perceived as requiring specific assistance and services.

These attributions overlap with the current interpretation of the term by the World Health Organization (World Health Organization 2020). According to WHO, a disability arises from the interaction of a person's health condition or impairment and a multitude of influencing factors in the person's indirect and direct environment. The environment is interpreted as the physical, social and political context. The conceptual construct *disability* thus refers to the causal damage as well as to the resulting social consequences for the person (Cloerkes 2007). This interpretation of the term is called the bio-psycho-social model of disability. This model puts emphasis rather on the person and his or her abilities than on the impairment. To this end, the social context is of great importance: the dimension of time, the respective subjective confrontation, the different areas and situations of life, as well as the culturally specific social reactions (towards people with disabilities). The active and self-determined participation of people with disabilities in all areas of social life is a goal the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) aspires to. Organized sport in Germany generally committed itself to this goal (German Olympic Sports Confederation 2018) as well.

To achieve this noble goal, it is necessary to take a closer look at the social environment of people with disabilities. Cloerkes pointed out that for many people a “disability (...) is a permanent and visible deviation on the physical, mental or emotional level generally attributed with a decidedly negative value” (Cloerkes

² Special Olympics International (2020) defines intellectual disability according to various criteria. It is based on the American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. According to this, a person has an intellectual disability if he or she meets three criteria. His or her IQ is below 70-75, he or she has a significant limitation in two or more adaptive areas of daily living (e.g., communication or self-care), and the condition manifests itself before the age of 18.

1988: 87). The negative value judgement of many people is usually caused by "undesirable deviations from expectations, however defined" (Cloerkes 1988: 87). For people with disabilities, therefore, it is not the damage that is decisive. It is the social reaction of fellow human beings that causes negative consequences. This can be, as mentioned, due to a negative value judgement. Often, however, it stems from excessive reactions (Cloerkes 2007). Many people feel the need to help people with disabilities in order to experience themselves as a charitable person (Zimpel 2012). Greve and Möller (2020) were able to make these phenomena visible when studying a competition-oriented setting for people with and without intellectual disabilities. They emphasize the need for further research on this head to better understand the cooperation of people with and without disabilities in the context of sports settings. This would allow for improvement in the design of competitions.

2.2 Special Olympics – Olympic Games for people with intellectual disabilities?

Special Olympics is officially recognized by the International Olympic Committee and may therefore use the *Olympics* label. Special Olympics International acts as a global umbrella organization. The German subsidiary operates as Special Olympics Germany and holds the status of a central association of the German Olympic Sports Confederation since 2018. The self-defined goal of Special Olympics Germany (2019) is to "help people with intellectual disabilities to gain more recognition, self-confidence and ultimately more participation in society through sports". In doing so, Special Olympics Germany explicitly aims at implementing the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (United Nations 2006). For Kiuppis (2018), this comprises the recognition of people with disabilities as athletes in sporting competitions. The process is promoted by the increased public awareness that is expected to accompany the Special Olympics events. To implement the convention, athletes with intellectual disabilities need choices. They must be able to decide for themselves whether they want to participate in an offer with disabled people only (called *Traditional* in the context of Special Olympics), or whether they want to participate in a *Unified* team (people with and without disabilities doing sports together).³ Special Olympics Germany's activities can be divided into three areas: promoting sports in facilities for disabled people, cooperating with sports clubs for disabled people, and cooperating locally with sports

³ For a detailed discussion on the significance of these options in sports for people with disabilities, we recommend reading the article by Kiuppis (2018).

clubs that are part of organized sports, in which people with and without intellectual disabilities play sports together (Pochstein and Albrecht 2015). For Schulke (2017), Special Olympics consistently combine the Olympic mottos *faster, higher, stronger* and *It's not the winning, it's the taking part*. Special Olympics offers sports programs at different levels to allow as many people as possible to participate. It provides numerous offers with and without official competition character, as well as programs for health promotion.

The competition offers are an important component of the Special Olympics concept, and they are genuinely result-oriented. These events are held on regional, national, continental and global levels. They are labelled *Special Olympics Games* (plus the respective extension, e.g. *World or National*). Up to 30 kinds of sports are included in an event. There are various Olympics related ceremonies, such as award ceremonies or opening ceremonies (Special Olympics Germany 2019). The biggest event is the *Special Olympics World Games*. These are held every four years, according to the Olympic cycle, in winter and summer versions. Also in line with the Olympic procedure, athletes and coaches go through a lengthy qualification process for participation. In Germany this includes regional games (e.g., in the respective federal state) and national games. For participating in regional games, it is rarely necessary to meet sports-specific performance requirements. Selection processes based on sports-specific performance are primarily to be found in explicit competition offers and in the qualification for the *World Games*. Sometimes there may be qualification requirements for national games if the number of applicants is greater than the number of starting places. This means that most people supported by Special Olympics Germany can take part at least in regional and national games (Schulke 2017). Attending the *Special Olympics World Games*, however, seems to be the preserve of an elite. This elite is defined through sports-specific abilities and skills, similar to competitive sports for people without intellectual disabilities. In addition, some unrelated sports factors are relevant for participation (fitness to fly, whether care can be provided by persons outside the immediate environment, availability of support from one's own family and/or the workshop for people with disabilities).⁴

⁴ The nomination for National Games and World Games is a very sensitive process. Therefore, the nomination criteria are adapted again and again. Special Olympics Germany has currently published the criteria for the National Games 2022 and World Games 2023. Try-outs are not included.

2.3 World Games Competitions – Traditional and Unified

Besides being divided into sports disciplines, the competitions at the Special Olympics World Games are subdivided according to gender and the systems *Traditional* and *Unified*. In handball, competitions in 2019 were held in the Unified system and for women also in the Traditional system. In the Unified system, mixed-gender activities are possible, in the Traditional system they are not. The Traditional system is reserved for people with disabilities only. In the Unified system, people with and without disabilities are both allowed to participate. The Special Olympics Unified Sports Program was established in the 1980s. Until then, doing sports at Special Olympics was, quite traditionally, reserved for people with intellectual disabilities (Special Olympics Germany 2015).

The Unified Sports program intends to provide people with and without disabilities with the opportunity to do sports together on an institutional, structural and personal level. Partners (people without disabilities) and athletes (people with disabilities) are meant to jointly train and compete in competitions. All participants should have the opportunity to contribute to the success of the team by using their own skills and abilities, which is termed "meaningful involvement" (Special Olympics Germany 2015). The program further emphasizes that partners may not behave dominantly. This is to be regulated by the coaches if necessary. For competitions, an equal number of partners and athletes is compulsory, and the players must belong to a similar age category. For this purpose, an age span between the youngest and the oldest player is specified. Further, it is desirable that the athletes have a similar performance level (Special Olympics Germany 2015; Curdt and Schuppener 2012).⁵ The Unified concept – as the concept of Special Olympics in general – can be viewed in the light of a two-group theory (Hinz 2002). The partners in this concept have clearly defined tasks to support the athletes. The coaches and parents, who are extensively involved in the offers, have further supportive tasks.

Besides following the criteria externally set and controlled by the Special Olympics organization to realize a sporting competition that is as open-ended as possible, the Unified System also pursues the goal of social inclusion (Special Olympics Germany 2015; Dowling et al. 2009). The joint sports setting shall provide people with and without disabilities with the opportunity to build relationships that ideally also persist outside of sports.

⁵ In addition to the competition-oriented approach, there are also the player development-oriented and the recreation-oriented approach. This, according to the regulations, is reserved for underperforming athletes (Special Olympics Germany 2015).

2.4 State of research on Special Olympics competitions

Success-oriented sports settings for people without disabilities focus on athletic potential (Albeck 2018), performance (Deutscher Handballbund 2019) and physical motor skills (Diekmann et al. 2018) as selection criteria. Social factors, in contrast, tend to play a subordinate role when selecting members for a team and are seldom subject to exact criteria (Conzelmann et al. 2006).

But how are the listed criteria addressed when assessing the sports-specific performance of people with intellectual disabilities? Detailed analyses to this end are not yet available due to methodological problems in carrying out such studies (Knoll and Fediuk 2015; Wegner and Pochstein 2009). In general, playing sports is considered to be important for increasing the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in society. Special Olympics offers have often been proven to provide such participation (Tint et al. 2017). Access to sporting opportunities is still difficult for people with intellectual disabilities, however, which is mirrored by the low level of physical activity of people with intellectual disabilities in general (Knoll and Fediuk 2015, Breuer and Feiler 2019). The small number of people with intellectual disabilities organized in sports clubs leads to a limited selection of participants for performance-oriented or result-oriented sports settings. This makes selecting competition squads a challenging task. Wegner (2014) was able to show in a study that participants in Special Olympics competitions tend to emphasize social and health-related motives for doing sports. The motivation of a comparison group consisting of young competitive athletes without disabilities (members of a talent development project of a state training center) focused more on performance and training discipline.

Research on Unified sports and similar joint sports offers for people with and without intellectual disabilities yields some informative results, although studies on performance or result-oriented sports are largely lacking. The studies mostly focus on the participants' social interaction (Klenk et al. 2019). Their results point to positive effects on social skills (e.g., increasing self-confidence, breaking down prejudices, increasing tolerance and cooperation) but also to a lack of social support and the exclusion of people with disabilities (Klenk et al. 2019; Radtke 2018; Wegner 2014; McConkey et al. 2013; Hassan et al. 2012; Dowling et al. 2010; Goodwin and Watkinson 2000). People without disabilities are mostly motivated to participate in such offers by soft factors such as fun, fairness, team spirit, cohesion and joy at the sporting progress of people with disabilities (McConkey et al. 2013; Wegner 2014; Greve and Möller 2020). The increase in their own athletic performance or athletic success seems less important for them.

This article focuses on the sports game handball. Handball is considered to be extremely complex in terms of game and rule structure (König et al. 2019). In

sports games, depending on the degree of competitive orientation, the success of the game generally “focuses on countable wins or rather on victory and defeat” (Kolb 2005: 27). The joint handball game of people with and without disabilities is also shaped by success (in the sense of scoring more goals in accordance with the rules than the opposing team) as a decisive component. It should be noted, however, that the result of a sports game generally not only depends on the athletes' performance in the competition, but also on many coincidences (Greve and Bechthold 2019).

The few studies that explicitly focus on competitive sports in sports games for people with and without intellectual disabilities document hierarchical relationships. These dependencies usually arise from the category of 'disability' and are reinforced by competitive settings. People without disabilities have rather the function of an assistant for people with disabilities than the role of an equal player (Greve 2016; Greve and Emamifard 2018; Greve and Bechthold 2019). A similar logic can be assumed in the Traditional system for the relationship between coach (without disability) and athlete. The latter relationship pattern, however, also applies to settings in popular and competitive sports for people without intellectual disabilities (Bechthold 2018).

3 Methodological approach

This study has two intertwined research interests. On the one hand, it examines the selection criteria of the coaches, while we investigate how the participants interpret and experience this try-out process. On the other hand, it investigates how the participants experience and interpret the elite teams' training processes when preparing for the World Games. To explore this and to assess the sportive and non-sport-related routines between the actors during the training process, the researchers attended the try-outs and training camps. The Traditional team held one try-out camp (June 2018) and one training camp (November 2018), the Unified team organized one try-out camp (June 2018) and two training camps (September 2018, February 2019). The constant participation of the researchers was meant as a process of *Gate Opening*. In the Unified team, for example, it took the researchers until the last training camp to gain the trust of the players without disabilities. Beforehand, interviews with them were not fruitful. The researchers carried out participant observations during training, friendly matches, meetings and other events (e.g. barbecues or cultural excursions) and took field notes (descriptive and interpretive information; Wolfinger 2002). On the one hand, through their theoretical preparatory work, the researchers were sensitized to the

demands of the setting in advance, and observed accordingly. On the other hand, the researchers maintained an openness to phenomena of the setting which may have been unexpected. For example, before the observations the researchers were not aware of the fact that there are no clear criteria for screening the players.

The most relevant data source are 22 guided interviews which were conducted with the players and their coaches. The interview guidelines were compiled in an affirmative process based on preliminary theoretical considerations, the observations and the field notes. In this way, concrete situations observed were used as narrative occasions. Throughout this process, the researchers reflected on their own actions. In research meetings, they critically reflected the procedures in training or non-sport-related events as well as the research process and adapted the interview guidelines. This procedure led to optimizations of the approach during fieldwork. This was important to avoid conducting biased interviews.

Since the focus of research is on the actors' perspectives and the sparse research situation provides our research interest with an exploratory nature, the interviews are the most important data source for answering our research questions. The concept of theoretical sensitivity (Strauss and Corbin 1996) allowed us to make qualified choices of priorities and to identify relevant topics. The interview guidelines contained open and closed questions on individual experiences during the try-outs and training camps. The topics included criteria for selecting the players from the perspective of both coaches and players, the interaction of the actors on and off the court, and dealing with the competitive situation within the teams. Examples of questions are: "Let's move on to the team. The team has now been put together. Can you tell me how that worked out from your point of view?"; "Let's go back to the training camps. Can you describe how they went from your point of view?"; "Can you describe the focus of the training?"; "Did you set personal and team goals? Did you achieve them? Or not?"; "Can you describe your view on the Unified system?"; "From your point of view: What is the function of the partners in the game and in the team?"; "The sportive discrepancy between athletes and partners should be kept as small as possible. How did that work out for you?"

Since interviews with people with intellectual disabilities represent a particular challenge (Hollomotz 2018), we adopted measures to take this into account: The questions for the players with disabilities were translated into "easy language" (Network Easy Language 2018), and the interviewers were made aware of the peculiarities to expect when interviewing people with disabilities. One of the researchers had a lot of experience in conducting interviews with people with intellectual disabilities. The other researchers were trained according to his experiences, especially regarding the following components (Hollomotz 2018): It was

important, for example, not to ask simple yes/no questions, as people with intellectual disabilities often tend to simply agree. People with intellectual disabilities often need more time to answer questions, making it necessary to wait out pauses in speech. In addition, we reflected extensively on our approach during research meetings. After the first interviews, the interviewer reflected on the interview and the research process with the other members of the research group. For this purpose, the interview was listened to and analyzed according to the components described above. This resulted in suggestions for improvement for the next interview. This way we optimized our practices during fieldwork.

To evaluate our data, we chose the procedures of the “Grounded Theory” methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1996). This is due to the fact that subjective perspectives are at the center of our research interest and we thus focus on “understanding individual action and experiences, [as well as] subjective interpretations of the self, the world and others” (Mey and Mruck 2009: 102). The goal of analyzing social actions and processes, the ascertained fundamental lack of theoretical appraisal of the topic, and the premise of an authentic approach (in the sense of: directly oriented towards the actions of the researched persons; Krieger 2016) further support our choice of the evaluation method.

In the present study, only open and axial coding were used. Since the development of an object-based theory was not the focus of our research interest, the core category ‘selective coding’ was not part of our analyses. To answer our questions, we identified and described phenomena and patterns of action. Therefore, the coding methods used appeared sufficiently profitable. The knowledge gained after the first rounds of open coding and the phenomena, or rather the developed categories (provisionally) classified as relevant were differentiated and substantiated more precisely by further data collection and axial coding.

In this circular process, the researchers jointly coded the data and discussed the results continuously. When interpreting the interview data, the constant participation of some researchers in the field was very useful. The fact that not all researchers were present at all field accesses, in turn, made sure that the research group kept the necessary distance to the objects of research.

Since we take the perspectives of different groups of actors into account (trainers, players with and without disabilities), we use the term ‘perspective triangulation’ (Flick 2015). According to Schröder-Lenzen (2013: 149), “especially in the context of primarily qualitative designs, triangulation can also refer to the consideration of different perspectives (...) of actors in the field of research”. Our perspective triangulation clearly shows that the interpretations of the three groups (coaches, athletes, partners) differ in some places, however, interesting overlaps also become visible. This kind of perspective triangulation offers a much deeper insight into the field. Looking at a single perspective in this setting would

have led to a less informative analysis. If only the perspectives of people without disabilities were considered, the perspectives of people with disabilities would have been ignored. And vice versa, if only the perspectives of people with disabilities had been analyzed, the intentions of people without disabilities would not have become clear. Thus, the triangulation of perspectives of people with and without disabilities leads to a more accurate reconstruction of the phenomena that determine the setting. Hence, a more thorough and critical analysis of the phenomena is possible.

Table 1: Overview of the interview participants

	Coaches	Players with disabilities	Players without disabilities
Unified team	2 men	5 men	1 woman, 3 men
Traditional team	2 women, 1 man	8 women	-

4 Results

During the steps of our analysis, we identified several categories from the generated data material that are relevant for our two-tier, intertwined research interest. To provide a coherent structure, we presented them in two clusters. We first focused on the nomination and screening process, then turned to the further training process on the way to the World Games. For each category, we first outlined the general content. Afterwards, anchor quotes and their interpretations illustrate specific content. The different situations in the Traditional and Unified teams were taken into account whenever applicable.

4.1 Lack of structure in the nomination and selection process

The statements of the actors document a variety of problems and inconsistencies in the nomination and selection processes of the two teams. This includes lack of understanding for, and criticism of the basic formal requirement that athletes had to register for the World Games in advance in order to be nominated for the World Games at all. Additionally, statements about the screening process itself, i.e., the coaches' choice of the final team squad, show a lack of pre-defined criteria, which led to a large individual and subjective leeway in this context.

4.1.1 Restricting formalities for (pre-)nomination

The interviews pointed to virulent problems in the nomination and selection process on the level of formal organization. The actors described ambiguities and incomprehension regarding formal nomination criteria for admission to the selection process. This included: unreasonable registration deadlines, incomprehensible age restrictions in the Unified system, and the inadequate flow of information on these provisions in general. Athlete F. from the Unified team describes his view of the process as follows:

F.: Well, there were certainly criteria, but er ... the nominations were a bit chaotic, you know, because it was said that it should only be a pre-nomination really, so that at the second course, which took place in autumn, that this would be the fixed point of nomination. And yes that was, well, for me it was somewhat confusing, because you don't ... or because I don't ... well, how should I say that ... Well, it was said that you have to register until, I think, August it was, that was a bit strange to me, that it is only the pre-nomination course and then the real nomination course in autumn. Yes, because it just didn't fit somehow. [...] Yes, the registration would have been over by autumn then. And then you can't say: Now, none of you is going to attend! [...] So what I know is that there is a certain age, like from which age you can start [...] and then there is a strange regulation where from a certain age, there can be only five years to where the oldest is like. And ... yes.

F.'s statements addressed the try-out and the first training camp of the Unified team. According to the original planning, the Unified team should not be finally selected until after the second appointment. But due to the nomination modalities and reporting deadlines at Special Olympics International, this had to be changed in the process. This obviously bothered F. It becomes clear that deviating from these previously defined processes represents a rupture that has irritated the athlete lastingly. However, it seems to be clear to F. that the decision to appoint the team after the first event made sense. Participation in the World Games would not have been possible otherwise (for formal reasons). The pragmatic acting of those responsible seems to have been explained to the athlete, at least in part, but F. cannot describe this in detail. F. further describes the age regulation, and the formalities of which he can outline simply. He does not seem to have grasped the meaning of the 'strange' regulation, however it becomes clear that while F. grappled with the various components of the nomination and selection process, he apparently did not completely understand them. For equal participation in relevant processes that are common in competitive sports, it would be necessary to adapt such processes to the target group.

Trainer B. also criticized the formalities for nomination in the following interview passage.

B.: Exactly. Well, it was really stupid that you actually had to apply in advance for all of these world games before the national games in Kiel. Basically, whoever applied online... we had the problem that Y. unfortunately had not applied online ... yes, basically, they were allowed to participate. So the selection was pretty damn limited. [...] and I actually invited all the girls to the selection process ... those of whom I knew that they had registered online, and I actually asked a few other girls I saw, those who attended and who played really well there, and where, actually, so far they always tolerated it, well, with Y., as I said, that was just mhh because [...] with normal people, actually, nomination is after the games basically and not before the games like this time.

B. describes the need for an early application to obtain a place in the squad for the World Games, which was specified by Special Olympics Germany for a variety of sports. The athletes' registration for the games in Abu Dhabi had to take place before the National Games (May 2018), and this criterion was obviously non-negotiable. B. describes the case of a player whom he wanted to nominate for the Traditional team, which was not possible for formal reasons. He criticizes this fact, also with a view to other athletes, whom he first became aware of at the national games. He remarks that in previous competitions, late nomination did not lead to such negative consequences. The pre-registration seems to have been a barrier for these athletes. It is possible that too little information was available regarding the World Games, which is why these players did not register. In this regard, it seems irrelevant whether the players didn't know anything about the World Games or whether they did not notice it to be an option for themselves due to a lack of further information. B. further mentions that 'with normal people' the nomination only takes place after one competition for a subsequent competition. This statement contains a criticism of the perceived disadvantage for the athletes he supervises. The chosen language suggests a hierarchical image in the relationship between athletes with and without disabilities. This further emphasizes the lack of understanding for the formalities specified by the national association, which from B.'s point of view led to an unnecessary restriction of the selection process.

4.1.2 Ambivalent, individually supposed selection criteria

Besides the illustrated lack of clarity regarding the (pre-)nomination criteria, we found ambivalent views on the actual criteria for selection during the try-outs themselves. The players were not aware of the criteria that led to the coaches' decision on the final squad for the two teams. In addition, the interviews with the coaches contain ambivalent statements about the basis for establishing the

squad. Due to the lack of clarity, the actors, including coach B., describe the individually applied selection criteria.

Interviewer: Um, let's come back to the selection process. Did you define criteria for selecting the players?

B.: [...] In the end, we have, well, I wouldn't necessarily have only gone after the best players, as I said. But it was decided by the majority in this way, and then I accept it in the end, because it was a democratic decision. Um, that's always the question. As I said about this try-out, you see each other for two or three days, you never know what to expect. [...] As I said, in my opinion there weren't any major criteria, in my opinion, it was simply decided according to, well, certainly according to performance, and according, uh, also according to physical performance, sometimes endurance, and as I said, there was definitely one welfare case included, it must be said, where we said, well, she simply deserves it because, that is definitely also part of it, uh that was definitely F. where we said she has to participate in any case, well at least that's how I felt.

Interviewer: Were these criteria clear to all coaches during the selection process or how were they determined?

B.: [...] I think, we did it just how we felt. Well, we certainly selected according to skill level, I think [...]. It is always, there are always two hearts beating in my chest. As I said, for one, there is the social component, that's just the way it is, and then the athletic component, as I said. Well, my personal opinion is that I rather go there with a weaker team to help them improve, on the one hand, but also to really let people experience something they would otherwise probably never experience in their life, that's the case with F., we said, she just has to experience it, she's been taking part for so long and deserves it.

B. describes the decision-making of the coaches based on the try-outs. B. seems partially uncertain and points out that 'no major criteria' have been set. He is convinced that athletic performance was the most important criterion for a player to be appointed to the team. He describes this in various terms and names components such as 'endurance' and 'skill level' as well as 'physical performance'. It is noteworthy that no handball-specific terms are part of the criteria at this point, and their description remains rather superficial. There are no specific norms (such as fitness values) or other (handball-)specific attributions (such as the throwing hand, the position held or special technical or tactical skills in offense and / or defense). Besides athletic performance, B. describes another criterion for the appointment of a certain player. He chooses the term 'social component' and explains that the player, due to her constant participation, had earned a reward in the form of being accepted into the team for the World Games. He further points out the dichotomy between athletic and social decisions. He deliberately tends to neglect athletic success in order to provide underperforming players with this experience. Besides, he perceives this approach as a possibility of improving athletic performance. He does not specify why this might not be the case with a stronger team, though. However, it shows that he certainly wants to develop his

team's sports skills despite the socially minded concessions when composing the team. It becomes clear that both components have a great influence on his actions and that he reflects on this.

Likewise, partner T. expects the focus to be on athletic aspects and support of the athletes when the partners for the Unified team are selected.

Interviewer: Has anyone ever told you how it came about that you were selected or not? From the coaches in some way or so? Was there anything like that?

T.: Yes, it has been said that in Kiel they will look to see who will attend and there was also such a try-out. [...] No, I don't know. No idea. We haven't talked about that. Well, I can guess, but no one has told me.

Interviewer: And what is your guess? How ... according to what did they ...

T.: Well, I think the teamwork, the general handball skills, yes – the teamwork with the athletes, I think that was a priority.

Interviewer: Yes. Speaking of which, the teamwork with the athletes: can you describe your role here in this national team? How do you see yourself? What are your tasks?

T.: Yes, on the court mainly as a ball distributor, of course it's not about us scoring the goals, we rather should put the athletes in the limelight – that was actually always a clear rule in every competition, that it was not about us – very clearly. And, yes, besides, I'm also there for the athletes if something is wrong; that you help them on the court, that you are there for them and raise their spirits and animate them to continue. [...] If everything goes well, then you just carry on, it's just a lot of intuition, but the message is clear: the way we are doing it at the moment, that's basically okay and that's good and we should go on like this.

Interviewer: Do the coaches say something?

T.: Yes, but I don't think we get that much input. Because we are doing it quite well and I think if we weren't doing it well now, then I don't think we would go to Abu Dhabi. It is fact that just the best will go and therefore – yes ... I don't want to praise myself to the skies here, but ... It is actually logical that those go who manage things best somehow.

T. also has no information about the reasons for his nomination. He is only aware of the external structure (the try-out and the national games in Kiel, where the coaches were able to get an overview). He assumes handball-specific skills to be a genuine criterion. The interaction with the athletes, for which he paraphrases certain axioms, seems particularly important. He describes that the partners take on roles of support for the athletes during the competition, a task in which he already gained experience during previous competitions. This role comprises various components that can relate to handball-specific situations in attack and defense as well as to more general emotional or affective aspects. He points out that partners should hold back in favor of the athletes with regard to their countable handball-specific success experiences. A differentiation on the basis of intellectual disabilities becomes clear, which is also set down in the Unified set of rules. T. describes that he can 'manage this somehow' with appropriate success, which is why he was selected for the national team. He assumes that his own handball

skills meet the requirements. This surmises a skill level that allows being successful in competition. But from his point of view, holding back these abilities in favor of the athletes seems particularly relevant for the selection. In addition, he emphasizes the ability ('intuition') to be able to support the athletes, in particular, emotionally. This combination shows that the competition in the Unified system creates special challenges for the partners.

4.2 Purposeful, pro-social togetherness

The other categories we identified document phenomena from the preparation process for the games in Abu Dhabi. It became clear from the interviews that the actors involved saw the World Games as a common focus for the participants in the teams. This manifested itself in the training content and in the teams' communicative interaction. The specific setting of partners and athletes in the Unified team was examined in greater detail. The observed phenomena in this system are of particular importance for the design of cooperation and competition in competitively oriented joint sports for people with and without disabilities.

4.2.1 Training sessions dominated by offense tactics

The interviews showed that the training camps were used to prepare for the event in a handball-specific way. The aim, as the interviewees emphasized in unison, was to be as successful as possible at the World Games. For the actors, success meant positive results when competing with other teams, a certain placement in the final ranking, or a game that was enjoyable to the audience with few mistakes by the athletes. During the training itself, the study and improvement of specific team tactics for the offense were prioritized, as well as the coordination of set plays between players from different clubs. While in the Traditional team this procedure was primarily justified by the fact that 12 women from six club teams had to be formed into a national team, for the Unified team other motivations were decisive. This is described by M., a partner from the Unified team.

Interviewer: Yes, about handball training in the training camps. What was addressed? Or - yes, which were the priorities?

M.: Well, the focus was on ... set plays I would say. That you can manage a smooth game, with a focus on the athlete. We developed a set play for each athlete, where each athlete has a way of attempting a goal. So, for A., for instance, we have - 'Roti' and 'Lusi' are the names of the set plays, where you can shoot on the goal from the circle. Then for P. we have a set play called 'Maik', for H. we have a set play called 'Lochi', so there are just different

set plays that allow each of the athletes to shoot on the goal. That, really, was the main focus. And then the basics of training camps, catching the ball is the be-all and end-all. We have now practiced that incidentally – I would say. There weren't any extra catching units or anything. For that, all of them are too good already. And then strength, condition also as an aside, but mainly I would say – set plays.

M. describes a clear focus on the offense-specific tactical element of set plays. In contrast to opening actions and free-lance play afterwards or completely free-lance play in small groups, set plays have a rigid structure and a fixed player that makes a goal attempt (Brack 2002). In the Unified team, it seems of enormous importance that appropriate tactical means do work. A set play was created for each athlete providing them with their respective tactical situations for creating a goal chance. This prevented situations in which athletes may be unable to independently generate a goal-scoring situation during free-lance play. Such support of the athletes follows the predominant focus of the Unified team that the partners should play for the athletes and not seek to shoot on the goal themselves. A game that is 'smooth' to look at should also be generated in this way, which can be deducted from M's belief that the athletes need adequate support in order to achieve the desired form of play. This desired form corresponds to a subjectively existing norm, which is based on existing ideas about the handball game. It stands to reason that M., who – besides the national team and the home Unified team – is also active in a popular sports team for people without disabilities, wants to come closer to those ideas and does not perceive the existing skills and prerequisites of the athletes as the starting point for developing a game philosophy.

4.2.2 Positive cooperation within the teams

The interviewed participants from both teams described a friendly atmosphere within the teams. This should be emphasized, since the majority of the athletes only knew each other from competing against each other. In addition, their first joint appointment was the try-out. This circumstance constructed a special situation of competition. Coach U. describes the cooperation in the Traditional team, which extended beyond the courses.

U.: In the two units, as I said, they got along actually relatively well socially, I have to say. They formed their WhatsApp group and they really got on well with each other there in D. Yes, I can't say now that there has been any major friction where I could say they attacked each other or something (laughs).

U. reports that the players formed a positive relationship during the courses. They also communicated outside of the courses by using social media. From other interviews we further learned that the players in said group verbalized their joyful anticipation of the World Games via voice messages and corresponding postings. In addition, this social medium was used for further coordination processes, such as choosing uniform items of clothing for Abu Dhabi. In the Unified team, a WhatsApp group was used in the same way. Corresponding communication channels are an important tool for organizing internal team processes in many team sports, as demonstrated by this example.

4.2.3 Asymmetrical structures between athletes and partners in the Unified team

The cooperation in the assembled Unified team was described as harmonious. However, the data trace asymmetrical structures in the interactions based on the difference category 'disability'. The statements of partner S. when describing the team-building phase illustrate this:

Interviewer: And how do you like the team spirit? Describe it, from the first course to the current one.

S.: I actually found it very good right from the start. Well, at the first course everyone was still present and it was the first real encounter. We all knew each other from previous tournaments, [...] but only as opponents of course. We had a few matches against each other, of course. But it ran smoothly, getting used to each other, and then it was clear that we will be pulling together, that we are a team now [...]. So that was actually quite close-knit from the start and then in the second course and in the third course it was no longer a question. We were really looking forward to training and playing together again. The team spirit is really good. I believe it really holds true there: all for one - one for all.

Interviewer: Is there someone or several you have a lot of contact with?

S.: And so, I have the closest contact to the Unifieds [which stands for "partners"; Remark by the authors]. Well, and we as Unifieds are of course a close group, but of course now ... don't get it wrong, of course, not in the sense of forming groups, separating we and them, but these are of course the ones with whom I get along best spontaneously.

S. describes their teaming up, which from his point of view happened without any problems. It worked well although the players and their club teams had previously played against each other. In addition, he states that he got along with the other partners 'best spontaneously', and that this constellation is 'of course a close group'. He makes a distinction between players based on the difference category disability in the sense of a two-group theory (Hinz 2002). S. immediately denies this. This denial could be attributed to the phenomenon of social

desirability regarding equal rights for people with disabilities (Cloerkes 2007). The statement may be interpreted as evidence that he perceives the partners as helpers for needy athletes. This was confirmed in the further course of the interview.

Interviewer: And can you say what you did for team building? Did you do something significant at all? Can you think of anything?

S.: It wasn't really necessary for us to actually take any team building measures, with some joint activities or so. Simply the connecting elements: handball, that we are really looking forward to the World Games and are incredibly happy about the opportunity, all that created a strong bond. And then just as well – I am convinced that you simply get people who are committed to this, to sports with mentally disabled people, who can really be happy when they hold themselves back and an athlete then scores the goal. We are all like that and of course that unites even more. Well, it is not as if we are now like the current national handball team, who is really only united by their professional status, they are simply all handball professionals. And then it's only the sport that counts and it doesn't have to work out in terms of character. Well, it's just important that they perform on the court. But here are just people who have such a basic attitude, that well that and ... I think that's just an essential factor. As you say: there is more to it. There is no such thing here that ... how should a real egoist get here as a Unified partner? That makes no sense. So, and, I don't know, I do have the feeling that the idea of fairness in Unified sports is even stronger than what I may experience now in my regular club in W. Which just, well – I think it has to do with the fact that someone who is antisocial wouldn't participate in something like that.

The option of participating in the World Games is seen by S. as a cohesive element; he does not consider specific actions outside of handball to be necessary in order to strengthen the team building process. From the total of S.'s statements, however, it does not become clear whether, in his opinion, all team members feel equally responsible for the positive cooperation in the team. Rather, they suggest that the partners (or the cooperation between the partners) determine the comprehensive cooperation between partners and athletes in the team. According to S., the partners are generally characterized by a prosocial 'basic attitude'. He heroizes them as a kind of counterpole to the professionalism in the national team (of people without disabilities), where 'it doesn't have to work out in terms of character [...]'. These statements show a specific dilemma of the Unified approach in competitive sports, regardless of how one may assess his assumption on professional handball (which is debatable). The partners must be willing to devote themselves completely to the task of supporting the athletes on the field. Generating one's own success experiences in terms of the game idea is not the focus. A really equal cooperation of all players in the competition means that all players can, may, and want to contribute all their strengths and weaknesses depending on the situation. This seems difficult to achieve, which has already been reconstructed in other similar settings (Greve and Bechthold 2019). A competition

is being staged in favor of the athletes with disabilities. To this end, the described restraint of the partners is to be seen as an axiom for success. From S.'s point of view, these roles are extremely productive, as they address a specific target group for the role of partner. Corresponding modes of action represent 'fairness' for him, and fairness is fundamental in Unified Sports for him.

Besides the positive implications of cooperating in the Unified team, other phenomena became visible during the interviews. The structurally asymmetrical interactions between partners and athletes sometimes led to strange situations. This is described by coach A.

A.: [...] and there were such situations, like where the athlete J. freaked out. He makes a push, he passes the ball nicely to his wing-player, who is a partner, and the partner just doesn't shoot. And that is completely absurd and, in my eyes, it also contradicts the thought of inclusion, that he ... and it is also difficult to make someone understand why the partner doesn't shoot. Also to explain to the athlete J. why the partner doesn't shoot when he has released him – that was ... yes that is difficult and then in the end it contradicts the idea of inclusion, because then you treat people exclusively again.

The situation happened during a game in the last training camp. J. had pulled two defenders (half-back and full-back) towards him by pushing into the back-court. Then he passed the ball to his wing-player, a partner. The latter took the ball and played it back to J. instead of shooting on the goal himself, which would have been appropriate in the situation. A. expresses that he is critical of this action. For him, it does not correspond to 'the idea of inclusion', although it is a normal approach in Unified teams. In order to follow the game idea of handball, all players should shoot on the goal in appropriate situations. Athlete J. has internalized this and reacts with frustration. Coach A. expresses understanding for this. The restraint of the partner leads to tensions, as it violates the competitive nature of handball, which points to the dilemma of competition in a Unified setting.

5 Discussion

The results show strong ambivalences between the pursuit of success in sports and the desire for social support of people with intellectual disabilities, at least from the perspective of coaches and players without disabilities. The desire of people without disabilities to help people with disabilities (Zimpel 2012) is mixed up with the pursuit of sporting success at the World Games. Both intentions are genuinely present in the various components of the Special Olympics'

competitive pillar (Special Olympics Germany 2019). They appear very comprehensible in their context, but at the same time strange in many respects. Already when selecting the teams, both intentions guide the actions of the coaches, but they are not communicated clearly. It becomes clear that a selection process in the context of Special Olympics has to be adapted closely to the needs of the target group. This applies to both the Traditional and the Unified system. The data show virulent problems in the different phases of the selection process, which apparently can only be solved through targeted information flows. It should be noted that the coaches have significantly fewer options with regard to game observation, number of athletes, etc. compared to, for example, professional sports. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) is the basis for the endeavor to recognize people with disabilities as athletes in sporting competitions (Kiuppis 2018). Forming an elite team to represent (Special Olympics) Germany at the World Games is the logical solution. Those responsible must be aware, however, that problems may arise in such a selection process, such as annoyance at non-nomination. In addition, athletes should be provided with adequate support in the selection process and training camps.

The positive cohesion in the training camps was strongly linked to the anticipation of participation in the World Games. The sport-specific content was adapted to the personal attitudes, at least from the point of view of the actors without disabilities. As a rule, the coaches and partners determined the setting completely. Only in a few activities the athletes were allowed to participate in the decision-making process. The way of acting in the Unified team is particularly striking here. The partners described their position in the team in the above-mentioned field of tension between the desire for sporting success and the axiomatic support of the athletes on and off the court. Ambiguities regarding the different roles in Unified competitive settings become clear, in line with other studies in similar settings (Greve and Bechthold 2019; Greve and Möller 2020). Sports competitions on an equal footing (for which processes of exclusion and selection are constitutive) can only be constructed if the partners withdraw from this competition. They have to withhold their own sport-specific competences during the game, supporting the athletes and giving them leeway instead. This behavior also reproduces differences between athletes and partners illustrating asymmetrical power relationships, which are based on the category 'disability' (Curd 2018). Playing with and against each other in a competitive setting only seems possible if the participants have similar sport-specific skills. This can generally be assumed to be valid for all sports games (Dietrich 1986), and the statutes of the competitive model of Unified Sports expressly request such a setting (Special Olympics Germany 2015). In practice, however, this is a noble goal that often seems to be missed.

6 Conclusion

Our data shows that in practice the game is determined by the participants without disabilities in both the Unified system (by partners and coaches) and the Traditional system (by coaches). This was presented through the interviews conducted with the partners and coaches. Such results are not surprising, since the partners are defined as supporters in the Unified system (Special Olympics Germany 2015) and coaches in general have a higher position in the hierarchy than the players (Bechthold 2018; Cachay and Borggreffe 2015). However, the data also reveals that these hierarchies are based on 'disability'. From the perspective of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006), questionable hierarchical processes and problematic convictions among actors without disabilities become visible. This shows the need for a constant reflection of the actors without disabilities, on their role(s) in the context of competitive sport in Special Olympics. Such a process is indeed necessary, to avoid beliefs that the differential category 'disability' consolidates hierarchical relationships between people with and without disabilities in the context of competitive sports (Greve and Krieger 2019).

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