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Timo Räikkönen & Juha Hedman

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Unlocking the power of sports: an exploration of the nexus between shared place, community competence, and sense of community

Timo Räikkönen and Juha Hedman

Department of Social Research, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

ABSTRACT

The article introduces a novel conceptual framework that enables grasping the special qualities of sports and argues that current storytelling revolving around sports overshadows its true force in community building. By relying on Finnish pilot data, the paper builds a dialect between theory and practise, leading to identifying sports as a unique social space where communities come together. A shared place where individuals – in this case, adults engaged or involved in the collective action within local sports clubs – create and reinforce convivial interactions and community relationships, also enhancing their willingness and ability to address problems and opportunities collectively (i.e. community competence) and meet their needs for belonging and purpose (i.e. sense of community). Building on the developed conceptual framework and pilot data, the paper demonstrates how the special qualities of sports can be scrutinised and validated at the local level through empirical analysis and further harnessed into service of knowledge informed decision making. More generally, the paper offers means to (re)identify, (re)interpret, and (re)construct the central societal relationships within the field of sports, which in itself underscores sports' ability to cultivate profound connections, promote personal growth, and foster community cohesion within local communities.

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Introduction

The bonds between the welfare state, civil society, and global economy ultimately manifest themselves in the ways in which people come together and connect locally in festivals, rallies, shows, concerts, games, demonstrations, and countless other more or less regular events and gatherings. Ballparks, town halls, churches, schools, etc., are the evident symbols that communicate the centrality of these shared places for the very existence of any community. Nevertheless, in recent decades, scholars and commentators have observed with growing concern the erosion of social ties and the decline of community within modern societies (Bauman 2001, Putnam 2000). These trends highlight the significance of shared places as essential elements that shape and sustain community life (e.g. Gustafson 2001).

However, amidst the prevailing narrative of disconnection, notable examples exist of thriving communities that have managed to preserve and foster a sense of solidarity and collective engagement. One such exceptional case lies in the Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. In his book 'Fractured' (2021), Jon Yates explores how these societies have succeeded in

CONTACT Juha Hedman  juhedman@utu.fi  Department of Social Research, University of Turku, Turku, Finland

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avoiding the divisions and distrust that have afflicted other Western societies. Voluntary pursuits have emerged as powerful catalysts in these communities, actively bringing individuals from various backgrounds together, fostering rituals, and establishing institutions that strengthen the bonds within these societies.

One such powerful voluntary pursuit identified by Yates (2021) is active participation in local sports clubs. Beyond its surface-level narrative, sports play a significant role as social venues and shared places, providing opportunities for community cohesion and enhancing individual well-being (see critical discussion in Coalter 2007). However, the prevailing discourse surrounding sports often fixates narrowly on quantifiable outcomes and commercialisation, focusing on metrics such as tournament victories and financial gains (Stenling and Fahlén 2009, p. 132). This limited perspective fails to capture the holistic impact of sports, neglecting the intangible benefits such as personal growth and community cohesion. By relying solely on easily measurable markers, sports' broader achievements and transformative power in fostering social connections and enhancing shared experiences remain underestimated and undervalued.

For instance, the Union of European Football Associations' (UEFA) model for calculating Social Return on Investment (SROI) for grassroots football promises to accurately hit all politically important goals with 'one shot'. The standardised model for calculating the positive effects of grassroots football condenses under the title of 'indirect economic benefits' into one – in UEFA's own words – 'precise' figure (UEFA 2020). The procedure resembles one that researchers often warn about when they remind that sports (and exercise) is not a 'panacea' and exaggerating its power may, in fact, significantly limit the feasibility of sports (and exercise) in achieving political goals (e.g. Berg *et al.* 2014, Dionigi and Gard 2018). Even though participation in sports would cause one to experience diminishing risk of marginalisation, poverty, or illness, it is not yet enough to lower marginalisation, poverty, or illness in society. On the other hand, it is likely that when the prevalence of the aforementioned factors decreases in society, participation in sports will increase. Even though participation in sports alone is not yet enough to elevate developing nations or minority groups (e.g. Walseth 2006), it may still provide a key element in maintaining already achieved stable conditions and even improving them.

Recognising these limitations and the need for a more encompassing approach, we set out to establish a conceptual framework that effectively captures the distinct qualities of sports in community development. We acknowledge the crucial importance of managing not only sports but also the intricate relations between local communities and the field of sports (see Gammelsæter 2021). By addressing this vital aspect, our framework provides a more thorough understanding of the dynamic interplay between local communities and the realm of sports. This comprehensive approach fills a significant gap in the current literature, which has primarily focussed on isolated elements, necessitating an integrated approach to explore the synergistic nature of community and sport (Misener and Mason 2006, Schulenkorf 2012, Eime *et al.* 2013, Stenling and Fahlén 2016). Our approach to constructing the framework can be characterised by iterative refinement and adjustment. This means, for instance, that we have not adopted any theory- or data-driven approach but rather focused on building a fresh or novel dialect between theory and practice; or theory and data. The result takes the form of a logical narrative rather than providing an exact description of the process itself. Nevertheless, our exploration is grounded in an extensive review of previous studies and scholarly discussions. Throughout our exploration and analysis, the concepts of shared place, community competence, and sense of community organically emerged as central and robust pillars upon which our framework is constructed.

As we construct our conceptual framework that interweaves shared places, community competence, and sense of community, we strive to illuminate the often overlooked aspects of sports in the development of communities. This framework equips us with a deeper understanding of the capacity of sports to foster positive change within local communities, transforming the way we relate to sports. Socially impactful storytelling (see Davis 2002) surrounding sports predominantly highlights the games played, the victories secured, and the skills exhibited. Our framework pushes

the boundaries of sports storytelling by (re)thinking through the shared experiences and profound sense of purpose that sports elicit. By employing this more comprehensive approach, we highlight the often overshadowed elements of sports.

While we aim to shed light on the frequently neglected aspects of sports that contribute to community development, we acknowledge the multifaceted nature of sports, encompassing both positive and negative elements. We are fully aware of the existing challenges, including doping, overuse injuries, mental health concerns, racism, and inequality (see Coakley 2021, Sage *et al.* 2022). Nevertheless, instead of dismissing these challenges, we underscore the untapped potential of sports as a unique form of voluntary and spontaneous collective action. Thus, by developing storytelling around sports, we aim to raise awareness of the existential power of sports residing in the heart of welfare states and cultivated communities, serving as caretakers of social harmony and stability.

To complement storytelling and to test our conceptual framework, we utilise unique data from Finland obtained through 'a test for sense of community'. The test has to date engaged some 25 000 adults involved in sports club activities as leaders, coaches, caretakers, parents, supporters, etc., and provided invaluable firsthand information on the key differences between sports clubs for evidence based policy and knowledge informed decision making.

Background for the framework

Our conceptual framework begins with sport at its centre. Practically everyone has, at some point in their lives, taken part in such activities, allowing them to recognise that, under appropriate conditions and with proper support, sport can foster physical, mental, and social development (e.g. Uchiyumi 1978). Our framework, however, focuses not on any physical leisure activity such as hiking, biking, or walking but, more specifically, on sport as a competitive physical activity with accompanying competitive rules, regulations, and practices. Consequently, engaging in sport is inherently a communal practice, a shared performance rather than a solitary pursuit. Moreover, the goal-oriented nature of sport, which involves competition, risk-taking, and the pursuit of excellence, is related more tightly to all kinds of advantages and benefits than less comprehensive and intensive leisure pursuits. For example, the discussions on the 'counterculture of commitment' (Davis 2021) and 'the committed life' (Brooks 2019) inform us of what commitments, such as participating in sports, can give us: constancy and coherence through routine practice, opportunities for building identity and character, and a heightened sense of belonging, community, and purpose. Studies also indicate that the competitive aspects of sports performance are firmly related to good mental health, notably through the development of life skills (such as goal-setting and resilience), self-efficacy, and self-esteem (e.g. Breistøl *et al.* 2017, Appelqvist–Schmidlechner *et al.* 2021). However, while competitive sports can positively affect mental health and life skills, they can also present potential physical and psychological risks. Therefore, it is crucial to manage and mitigate competitive pressures and ensure a balance between competition and well-being (Mountjoy *et al.* 2015, Rice *et al.* 2016).

Not everyone has to be involved in sports. However, as Brooks (2019), p. 58) describes, our commitments – which in sports often involve constraints – allow us to move to a higher level of freedom; freedom as fullness of capacity, 'not freedom from, but freedom to' (Berlin 1958). This kind of 'freedom to' becomes possible through sustained practice and manifests itself, for example, in the case of Olympic gymnast Simone Biles, as the freedom to pursue and land a triple-double in the floor routine. This kind of freedom and excellence epitomises the non-instrumental value of sports that, in more existential terms, 'carry the potential to bring meaning to people's individual and collective lives, and might teach us important lessons about what it means to be human' (Ronkainen *et al.* 2021, p. 6). Participating in sports is thus a slowly developing but potentially rewarding process with many physical, mental, social, and even existential benefits.

In addition to many functions of sports, the management of sports also has many different and often contrasting philosophical approaches. At one extreme, sport is viewed as a unique cultural

institution with a rich history, emotional connections, and social relevance, and at the other extreme, as a more or less generic business enterprise subject to the usual government regulations, market pressures, and customer demands (Smith and Stewart 2010, p. 1). Let it be noted that we concur with Gammelsæter (2021), p. 264 that 'without athletes and institutionalised practice communities that make sport performance at different levels possible, there would be no externalities, no sport industry, national sport policies or community initiatives'. Thus, sport is a distinctive institution and a social space where 'pleasure and pain collide in uniquely generative ways, where communities come together, and where positive health outcomes can be made' (Newman 2014, p. 611). Also, similarly to Gammelsæter (2021) and Newman (2014), we contend that sport as competitive play has a value of its own as a site of joy and pleasure and an instrument through which we can live meaningful and enriching lives. It is essential to stress the autotelic position of sport and trust that the rest will follow, i.e. the pyramidal structures of sport, the games, races, and the trophies (see Gammelsæter 2021, p. 265).

Sport has the ability to transform not only people's lives but also communities; to reach the places people live, improve those places, and build a sense of pride and belonging (Sport England 2021). Thus, central to our conceptual framework is the formative role of sports facilities in contributing to the physical infrastructure of communities, providing a shared place and a social focus for the community, and consequently positively influencing people's quality of life (e.g. Jarvie 2003).

Our conceptual framework further indicates that when people come together through sport's shared places and build trust and communal relationships, it also enables them to make more reasoned decisions about issues confronting them (e.g. Iscoe 1974). More precisely, to become what Cottrell (1976), p. 197 characterises as 'competent communities' that can effectively identify the community's problems and needs, achieve a working consensus on goals and priorities and collaborate in the required actions.

From sports practice and facilities emerges the potential for individuals' physical, mental, and social development, as well as the formation of communities characterised by celebration, belonging, and engagement. These community dynamics, which we encompass within our conceptual framework, exemplify the positive aspects of sports when they are at their best. Borgmann (1993), p. 135 eloquently describes the process from sport and ballpark to a sense of community:

A thoughtful and graceful ballpark tunes people to the same harmonies. It inspires common pride and pleasure, a shared sense of season and place, a joint anticipation of drama. Given such attunement, banter and laughter flow naturally across strangers and unite them into a community.

Sport brings people together voluntarily and provides shared places and community connections different from family, work, or school environments. To Friedman (1989, p. 286), the key to 'modern communities' is voluntary choice, that is, 'the motivations arising out of one's own needs, desires, interests, values, and attractions, in contrast to motivations arising from what is socially assigned, ascribed, expected, or demanded'. As Friedman's (1989) analysis of modern voluntary communities indicates, the power of sporting communities is also grounded and sustained by shared interests and values, mutual affections, and possibilities for generating mutual respect and esteem. Furthermore, Davis (2021) discusses the power of 'voluntary commitment', which is the option to dedicate oneself to particular causes, places, communities, and people. The way to make a positive impact on institutions, communities, and people is by committing and entering into relationships with them, 'by learning their nuances, by building a rapport, by having enough trust and flow to respond nimbly to unexpected circumstances' (Davis 2021, p. 7).

We can thus approach sport as the nexus between shared place, community competence, and sense of community, that is, as a binding force that holds these different elements together (Figure 1). Within this nexus, we unlock the potential to enrich sports storytelling. The key concepts, in turn, offer means to analyse sports as a certain social mechanism providing well-being and security for local communities. While acknowledging the existence of alternative perspectives and approaches, such as viewing local sports clubs as 'community hubs' (Sport England 2021), 'vehicles

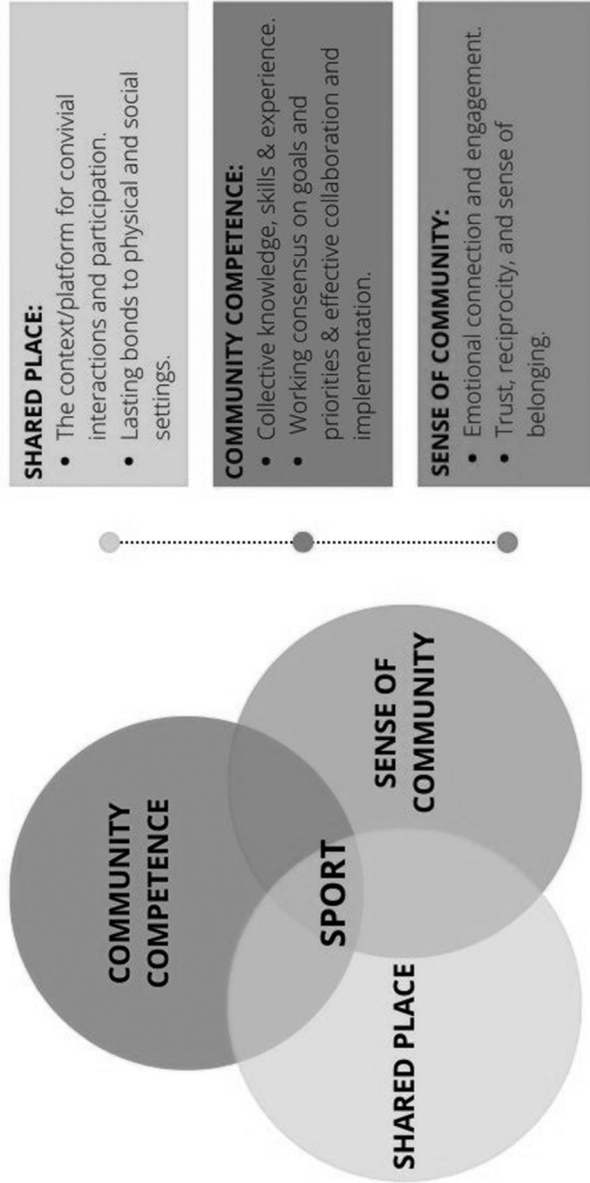


Figure 1. Conceptual framework: sport as the nexus between shared place, community competence, and sense of community.

for local-level action and civic engagement' (Arai and Pedlar 2003), and a 'force for the common good' (Jarvie and Ahrens 2018), our exhaustive review and synthesis have identified shared place, community competence, and sense of community as the foundational elements for understanding the essence of sports in community development – encompassing its meaning, requirements, and operationalisation within the context of sports and exercise policy.

Next, we will zoom in on our conceptual framework to get a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of sport's shared places, community competence, and sense of community. Thus, we will describe how sport's shared places provide rich opportunities for individuals to form social and community connections and how community competence and sense of community evolve through these sustained interactions and social relationships.

Three key elements of the conceptual framework

Shared place

As Western societies and economies have grown, many social, educational, safety, and medical functions have been outsourced and transferred to institutions (Vos 2020). A current example of shifting functions from families and communities to governmental institutions comes from Vollmer's (2010) 'Schools Cannot Do It Alone', a book that goes through the ever-expanding list of academic, social, medical, psychological, and nutritional responsibilities assigned to schools. Lesgold (2019) agrees with Vollmer's notion that schools cannot do it alone, especially when providing and promoting communicative and collaborative competencies for the 21st century (see also Joynes *et al.* 2019). Instead, what is needed is cultivating a wide range of places that can be 'the loci for learning opportunities not as readily attained in home or school' (Lesgold 2019, p. 98). Ideally, these more relaxed and accommodating environments (compared to formal institutions) provide more varied opportunities for individuals to practise interacting and collaborating with people from different backgrounds and learn from failures through trial and error (Voogt and Pareja Roblin 2012, Lesgold 2019).

Suppose we start with Arai and Pedlar's (2003) notion that 'community' is not about building something but more about clearing space for individuals to come together. Similarly, for Brooks (2019, p. 282), the loss of belonging and sense of community is not necessarily a result of a terrible culture or overpowering economic forces but simply that 'sometimes there are just no places for people to get together'. This need to (re)instate meaningful social ties and connections through physical gathering places has engaged community psychologists and scholars from many disciplines (e.g. Yuen and Johnson 2017, Delanty 2018). They have already discovered and theorised about the shared gathering places which provide a context for connection, learning, and civic engagement, particularly through the notion of 'third place'.

Local sports clubs as convivial 'third places'

In short, third places are social places away from home ('first place') and work ('second place'). Following Oldenburg (1999), third place gatherings can be characterised by their informal, voluntary, accommodating, and low-profile nature. They usually take place in settings that outsiders hardly find exciting or noteworthy (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982). Libraries, cafes, arts venues, curling clubs, parkrun events, and many other settings have been examined as third places (e.g. Mair 2009, Slater and Koo 2010, Hindley 2018). These non-home/non-work places act as mediation between the individuals and the larger society, arrange their patterns of everyday interactions, and have the potential to contribute to their well-being, community identity, and participation (Jeffres *et al.* 2009, Yuen and Johnson 2017, Dolley and Bosman 2019, Littman 2022).

Suffice also to acknowledge the scholarly discussions on 'virtual communities' (e.g. Rheingold 1993, Fernback 2007) and 'virtual third places' (e.g. Ducheneaut *et al.* 2007, Markiewicz 2020). These shared online places potentially contribute to forming and maintaining social ties and

supplementing the third places of the physical world. However, we share the concerns of Borgmann (1993) and Sardar (1995) on the 'thinning' of the complexities of human engagement that is difficult to prevent in the virtual world where you can shut people off at the click of a mouse and go elsewhere. A telling example of the continued importance of real people in real spaces having real conversations and forming real connections (e.g. Borgmann 1993) is the habit of esports organisers hosting regular in-person events and conventions despite the availability of advanced virtual event platforms and capabilities.

Local sports clubs can be approached as third places that provide opportunities for individuals – in our case, adults engaged or involved in the collective action within sports clubs – to form social and community connections (Warner *et al.* 2013, Bjork and Hoynes 2021). Many municipalities acknowledge the social value of sports clubs and their accommodations in bringing neighbourhoods and communities together (Waardenburg 2016). Thus, local sports clubs and their facilities (such as clubhouses, football pitches, basketball courts, and running tracks) operate as 'a technology for convening' – as a way to replace distance between people with spaces of connection and belonging (Brooks 2019, p. 274).

Third, places bring people together in close proximity – but then what? For example, Gieryn (2003, p. 476) draws upon place-sensitive sociology and presents two possibilities: engagement or estrangement. The conditions for one or the other outcome are relevant for local sports clubs' community development. Through a third place lens, we can examine the essential characteristics of local sports clubs conducive to participation and engagement.

With different third place criteria abound (e.g. Oldenburg 1999, Campbell 2017), it is less helpful to debate whether something is a third place than explore the implications of 'third placedness' for the communities they serve (Sandiford 2019). Third placedness (i.e. the regular encounters and shared experiences) is an often-ignored component within local sports clubs, but one that can provide valuable insights and perspectives into their community development efforts. Sandiford (2019), p. 1104 characterises third places as 'primarily convivial spaces adopted by individuals and groups for the creation and reinforcement of relationships within and across various types of communities'. Community development occurs through these relationships and an infinite number of small steps: 'in each invitation we make, each relationship we encounter, and each meeting we attend' (Block 2009, p. 33). Similarly, for Brooks (2019, p. 309), this process consists of 'a million subtle nudges' towards supportive relationships, trust, and a sense of belonging.

Accompanying the scholarly work on third places, community development and place attachment research extends our understanding of the relationship between positive bonds to physical and social settings and community engagement (Brown *et al.* 2003, Scannell and Gifford 2013). These positive bonds ('place attachments') develop and grow through convivial interactions and accumulated personal or shared experiences, be they fulfilling, terrifying, or triumphant (e.g. Milligan 1998, Kemp 2010). Furthermore, according to Dang *et al.* (2021, p. 1740), community members with these kinds of emotional bonds are more willing to donate their time, effort, and resources for collective undertakings (see also Manzo and Perkins 2006).

Local sports clubs and grassroots sports rely heavily on voluntary work and the active involvement of their members (e.g. Wicker and Breuer 2012, Griffiths and Armour 2013). A third place perspective emphasising conviviality, incidental interactions, and 'the making of community through a number of routine practices and performances' (Nowicka and Vertovec 2014, p. 350) informs us of the inner workings of local sports clubs. This under-the-hood perspective on community development can direct local sports clubs' attention to the 'micro-processes of community-making' (Neal and Walters 2008, p. 294) that are often overlooked but far from irrelevant.

Community competence

Local sports clubs can either thrive, stagnate, or struggle with community development efforts. Continuously learning and adapting local sports clubs rest on their members' and volunteers'

willingness and ability to address problems and opportunities collectively. We refer to this willingness and ability to problem-solve and innovate as 'community competence', but we also draw insights from neighbouring concepts such as 'community capacity' and 'community empowerment' (e.g. Chaskin 2001, Laverack 2001, Edwards 2015).

In our conceptual framework, local sports clubs' community competence (as well as a sense of community) begins with a place. A shared place that brings people together to form convivial connections and meaningful relationships. Members' and volunteers' emotional bonds to shared places (i.e. local sports settings) influence their level and quality of cooperation and collaboration. Through these emotional bonds, people are motivated to persevere, overcome challenges and protect and improve shared places that are meaningful to them (e.g. Milligan 1998, Manzo and Perkins 2006).

Local sports clubs have a shared place but also a shared practice (i.e. community competence) that will develop and evolve over the years through sustained interactions and social relationships (Gherardi 2000, Brown and Duguid 2001). For Wenger *et al.* (2002), p. 38), for example, a shared practice denotes 'a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create the basis for action, communication, problem-solving, performance, and accountability'. Local sports clubs' shared practice ranges from concrete objects (e.g. manuals, websites, documentation) to less tangible or visible displays of competence, such as a particular way of behaving or approaching problems, ideas, and solutions, or an ethical stance. That is, a sort of mini-culture that binds the community together (Wenger *et al.* 2002, p. 39, see also Coyle 2018).

Several factors and conditions can enhance communities' shared practices and ability to cooperate and collaborate, effectively recognise and discuss critical issues and respond to arising needs and opportunities. According to Cottrell (1976) and further specified by Goepfinger and Baglioni (1985), competent communities have members who are willing and committed to working on community affairs, who can collectively identify pressing needs and practical solutions, and who can collaborate successfully in the required actions. Moreover, these competent communities are proficient at acquiring and utilising resources and support from the larger social system (Goepfinger and Baglioni 1985, p. 510).

Successful community development efforts thus necessitate different levels of social agency and competence. For Chaskin (2001), p. 297), the individual level concerns human capital and leadership: the skills, knowledge, and resources of individuals participating in community-improving activities (see also Becker 1975, Luthans and Youssef 2004). The level and quality of human capital within local sports clubs contribute to community competence as a collective resource and as specific individual contributions and leadership that catalyse action and accelerate progress (Chaskin 2001). Besides human capital and individual social agency, competent communities thrive through social capital and collective social agency, that is, through positive social relations built on trust and support (e.g. Coleman 1988, Putnam 2000). However, we concur with Brooks (2019) that the term 'social capital' comes with its complexities, especially while suggesting that the thing it measures is quantitative. Nevertheless, it is certainly possible to approach local sports clubs' community competence through the notions of human and social capital as long as we remember that mutual support and caring for one's club and community is primarily qualitative.

Community competence is valuable for local sports clubs in collectively addressing their internal problems and challenges (e.g. Misener and Doherty 2009, Millar and Doherty 2016). However, the fact that ordinary people get to practise using their human agency within local sports settings can have significant broader societal impacts and benefits. Participating in collective undertakings within local sports clubs could be seen as a trial heat or a practice ground for broader civic engagement and community development (e.g. Wolfe 1989, p. 233). For example, the benefits of volunteering and citizen participation in developing various competencies and empowerment have been identified in previous research (e.g. Harris 1998, Kay and Bradbury 2009, Darcy *et al.* 2014). These benefits range

from learning new skills to becoming more vocal and gaining knowledge about other community members' experiences, needs, and opinions (Arai and Pedlar 1997, Peachey *et al.* 2013).

Sense of community

Individuals spend less and less time in organisations like political parties, church groups, or school PTAs, but this does not necessarily indicate the 'decline of civic engagement' (see Putnam 2000). Instead, people are simply searching for belonging and community in different and more varied locations. For example, Bjork and Hoynes's (2021) research on youth sports parents demonstrates that individuals continue to construct meaningful frameworks for interacting with others and invest significant amounts of time and energy in communal and collaborative activities with other adults. However, the settings and places may have changed from religious and political gatherings to the stands and the sidelines (Nicholson and Hoye 2008).

Local sports clubs, as contemporary community hubs, 'set the stage' and provide structure for creating and reinforcing convivial interactions and community relationships. However, as Brooks (2019), p. 278) emphasises, gathering people together is a start of a community, but it is not yet a community; there has to be combustion – something that connects members on a deeper level of trust, belonging, and reciprocity. What is needed, then, is something that steers and supports the early stages of community development towards more substantial engagement (as opposed to estrangement): a sense of community (e.g. Sarason 1974, McMillan 1996).

Previous research on community development informs us that place attachment is a substantial precondition for developing a sense of community (e.g. Rivlin 1987, Manzo and Perkins 2006). However, what interests us at this point is how the adults involved in the collective action within local sports clubs progress from convivial interactions and participation towards a more emotionally connected engagement. Towards a more heightened sense of community that McMillan and Chavis (1986), p. 9) describe as 'a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together'.

The connections between the concept of sense of community and sports settings have already been examined, for example, in the context of sport participant experience (Warner and Dixon 2011, Scotto di Luzio *et al.* 2019); youth sports program design (Lin *et al.* 2016, Fader *et al.* 2019), youth sport's parental experience (Legg *et al.* 2015); and sports event volunteering (Dickson *et al.* 2017). In addition, how a sense of community contributes to community development and engagement has also been closely explored, especially in community and environmental psychology (Wandersman and Giamartino 1980, Miranti and Evans 2018) and sociology and political science (Talò *et al.* 2014, Piscopo *et al.* 2017).

Block (2009, p. 260) succinctly summarises the core idea of community development through a sense of community: 'without a shift in trust, social capital, belonging, relatedness – call it what you wish – our capacity to solve problems, organise work effectively, or end the suffering around us is greatly diminished'. From Brooks (2019) 'combustion moment' to McMillan's (1996) 'spark of friendship' and Lane and Maxfield's (1996) 'generative relationships', some common threads emerge on what this kind of shift from sporadic and incidental participation to a more profound and emotionally connected engagement entails

Fostering generative relationships for the common good – the crucial role of youth sports parents

Active parents are the lifeblood of many local sports clubs, so it is worth considering how they proceed collectively from convivial 'shared place interactions' to a more engaged sense of community. As with our conceptual framework, parents' sense of community begins with sport at the centre, namely the child's experience in a preferably well-organised and safe sports setting. For example,

Warner *et al.* (2015) demonstrate that if the parents see their child having a good experience and the coaches are showing up for practice ready and organised, they can focus more freely on meeting and building relationships with the other adults.

Besides light conversations and idle sideline banter, youth sports parents often execute numerous vital tasks, from coaching and 'bus-driving' to organising events, finding sponsors, and managing the team's social media account. Legg *et al.* (2015, p. 81) emphasise how parental involvement in sports serves a practical function of 'simply getting tasks done while also increasing the parents' sense of community, which then has a snowball effect on parents wanting to contribute more to the community'. This positive feedback loop of doing, connecting, and contributing nudges the parents from passive to active engagement; towards 'generative relationships' (Lane and Maxfield 1996).

Generative relationships are critical to youth sports parents' sense of community. However, for these relationships to become generative as opposed to barren or unproductive, there needs to be aligned and mutual directedness, heterogeneity, permissions, and action opportunities (Lane and Maxfield 1996). Thus, for youth sports parents' sense of community to flourish, there is good to be a generative mix of common interests, different perspectives and competencies, recurring patterns of convivial interactions, permissions to talk to one another (i.e. psychological safety), and opportunities for joint action (Lane and Maxfield 1996, see also McAdams *et al.* 1998, McMillan 1996).

Youth sports parents and other adults involved in the collective action within local sports clubs do not gather merely for the sake of gathering or getting to know each other. Instead, by fostering generative relationships, the resulting sense of community is meaningful when connected to the common good. In Erikson's (1982) terms, this common good is about 'generativity', that is, about the well-being of the next generation, which necessitates from the parents (and other adults) both the role of a responsible guardian and a contributing community member (McAdams *et al.* 1998).

From theory to practice: analytical strategies for understanding the dynamics of local sports settings

Our descriptive analysis starts by asking how the dual goals of sports and exercise strategy actualise in various EU countries. The relevant data for comparing mass participation across EU countries is obtained from Special Eurobarometers (sports and exercise) from the years 2002, 2009, 2013, and 2017. The quality of elite sport is here measured based on the country's contribution to the international success of the European Union elite sports in the Olympic games of 2002, 2004, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2016, 2018, and 2020. Success is measured by the number of medals (International Olympic Committee 2022) in relation to the country's population (Eurostat 2022a). For sake of clarity, contribution is operationalised as the natural logarithm of the ratio of a country's share of (EU's) medals and country's share of (EU's) population.

In Figure 2 EU countries place themselves in the quadrants based on to what extent the dual goals of sports and exercise policy are met (cf. Nessel 2021). The horizontal axis describes the extent to which mass participation in sports and exercise is met, and the vertical axis, in turn, the extent to which improving the quality of elite sports is met. It is noteworthy how Finland and Sweden are the only countries that place themselves in the top right quadrant, where mass participation goals are met exceptionally well and elite sports' goals fairly well. If we were to lower the bar for mass sports participation, which clearly turns out to settle at a demandingly high level, Denmark and Slovenia would join Sweden and Finland as countries most likely meeting the dual goals of sports and exercise policy. Figure 2 sets out a question whether dual goals are even desirable for most EU countries. Based on the most recent data from Eurostat (2022b) concerning government spending on recreational and sporting services indicates that Nordic countries spend annually about twice as much as other EU countries per person on sports and exercise. As far as the Nordic countries are concerned, there is no clear reason to restrict the level of public spending on recreation and sports since the countries are meeting (in relative terms) the dual goals of sports and exercise policy. Naturally, this descriptive analysis does not allow far-reaching conclusions, but it does provide

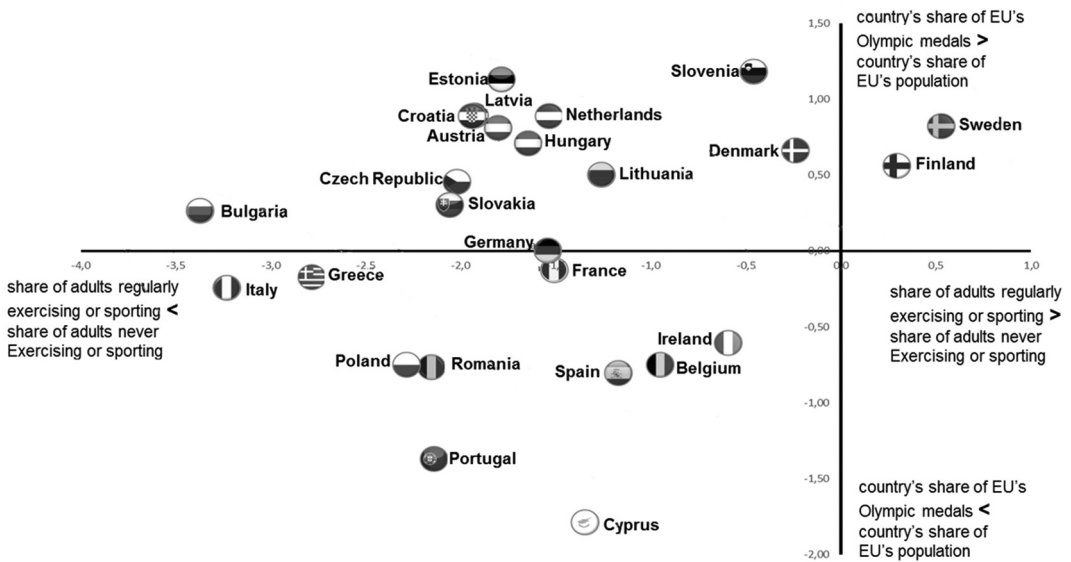


Figure 2. EU countries placed according to the extent to which they meet the dual goals of sports and exercise policy: natural logarithms of the ratios (Iceland and Luxembourg are omitted due to insufficient data).¹

reason enough to take a closer look at the Nordic countries, when pondering whether reasonable success in elite sports and high level of participation in mass sports and exercise can reside, not only in one and the same country but also in one and the same local sports setting.

Let us return to the thematics of estimating societal effects or impact of grassroots sports brought up earlier. By applying our conceptual framework to a traditional human capital setting, we briefly demonstrate the basic rationale behind 'achieving policy goals through building indicators from the bottom up'. The concept of human capital generally refers to such skills and aspirations of the workforce, which can be transformed into resources, property, or wealth (Becker 1962, Goldin 2016). In the Western world, human capital has extremely positive associations, and it is used abundantly in various contexts. At the core of human capital is goal-oriented action, investment-like behaviour, and constant improvement of productivity, i.e., the ratio between input and output (see self-investing habits in Figure 3). The immense popularity of human capital can be explained by the fact that utilising the concept enables defining a plethora of activities as investments in human capital, i.e., work-like activity with goal-orientation and a clear opposite to leisure or pastime. It is enough here to refer to Bailey *et al.* (2013) for an extensive analysis and overview concerning human capital, particularly in sports.

Figure 3 describes how ultimately, the way in which sports influences society is decided by the way sport has organised itself (cf. Warner *et al.* 2017). Local sports settings are described here as the ways in which subsequent generations (children, youth, parents, and grandparents) are organised together in the name of shared goals. Referring to Gilbert Ryle's (1949) famous Category Mistake examples, we may say that when you have seen the caretakers and field masters at their work, coaches in their practices, players in their games, fans in the stands, and alumni in their postgame speculations do not ask anymore, 'where is the urheiluseura' (sports club in Finnish) because you have just seen it. When Finns invest their time and money in local sports settings, it is an act of 'doing good' but not necessarily charity or civic duty. Everyone expects to get something in return, not due to the market mechanism or bureaucracy, but due to the nexus between shared place, community competence, and sense of community.

Let us put the investment framework presented above to work with a short description of the design of the data collection and its further utilisation. Since a sense of community by definition

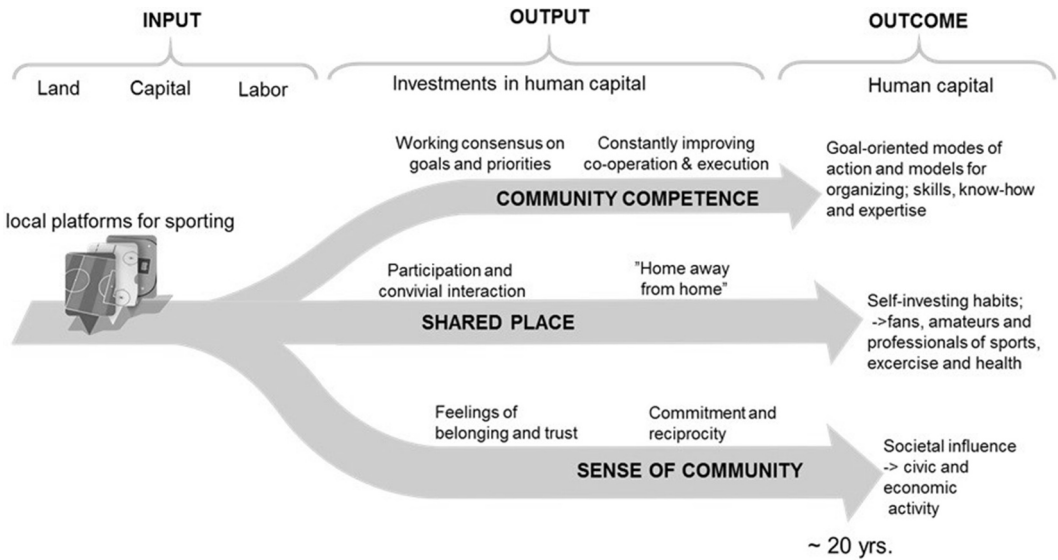


Figure 3. Conceptual framework in connection with an input-output-outcome model.

resides in relations, we study the sense of community as a series of digital acts critical in building a sense of community. In this quest it is utmost important to get directly in touch with the relations between people. A specific digital platform solution developed for the purpose enables us to analyse the sense of community as a joint process of different groups, teams, boards, sets, etc. The very same platform allows the sports clubs, in turn, to define, measure and steer their societal impact and learn about themselves. The key dimensions of sense of community are constructed as partaking (vs. non-partaking), goal-orientation (vs. aimlessness), criticality (vs. uncriticality) and unanimity (vs. friction) and based on simple digital acts made 'under one's own name'.

The first pilot of a large-scale test for sense of community actualised in January 2022. The pilot consisted of three sports (ice hockey, football, and floorball), which were locally organised under one 'logo' by three different associations and two different corporations. Altogether over 4 000 people were identified to take part in the test; i.e., adults involved in any other role than that of a full-time athlete or player (i.e. leaders and coordinators, coaches and trainers, managers and caretakers, and supporters and fundraisers). Already in April 2022, the test actualised in seven other large clubs/locations across Finland encompassing over 10 000 participants. By April 2023 the test had engaged 17 clubs representing 5 sports and 15 locations and consisting of over 430 units (groups, teams, boards, sets, etc.) and over 25 000 participants. Accumulating data helps to evaluate cost-efficient means to measure sense of community regularly on a large scale and also allows access for the clubs to comparative indicators through dashboards. With appropriate leadership, the clubs are able to build a sense of community and strengthen community competence based on up-to-date data and evidence.

The index for sense of community (SCI) is then constructed so that sense of community can be compared across units of different sports (ice hockey, football, and floorball, ringette, figure skating, etc.). SCI of various units is compiled from four different dimensions, measured by partaking, goal-orientation, criticality, and unanimity. Altogether 430 units are compared and should a certain unit top the comparison in partaking, goal-orientation, criticality, and unanimity rates, it would receive SCI value 100. Similarly, if a certain unit would rank last in all four comparisons, it would receive SCI value 1. SCI value 50, then, serves as an apt divide between high and low sense of community. It signals a working compromise among adults responsible for

the operations of the units. Proceeding towards higher SCI values (than 50) could be characterised as finding a way of achieving together. The opposite direction, in turn, could be characterised as deciding on achieving separately.

In Figure 4, each unit places themselves in one of the quadrants based on their sense of community (SCI value) and human resources (number of adults in roles other than athlete/player). Human resources in Figure 4 is a standardised ratio of the number of adults in the unit in question and average number of adults across all units. These two dimensions are enough for presenting a snapshot of the community competence of a local sport setting. The origo marks the core (nexus) of all units: i.e., sport organised by the voluntary people for the voluntary people a'la Finland (limited to the current data on about 430 units, of course). Units' distance from the origo is rated so that units lying closest get rating A++ and second closest A+. Units furthest away from the origo, in turn, get rating A0 and second furthest A. Moreover, units lying in the left bottom quadrant can be characterised as hobby sets (small and not so committed), those in the top left quadrant as practice groups (large and not so committed), those in the top right quadrant as sports teams (large and committed) and those in the bottom right quadrant as athletic clubs (small and committed).

In a nutshell, the key characteristics of a local sports setting (*urheiluseura*) are that it will have units on all four quadrants and also units with all four ratings. Only then the setting is stable enough to offer a fair opportunity for the next generation to experience all that sports has provided to the preceding generations. It is worth noting that, according to the Finnish national database of sports associations, there are about 8,500 '*urheiluseuraa*' in Finland (see Mikkonen *et al.* 2022). We are set to find out the true figure on local sports settings' own terms.

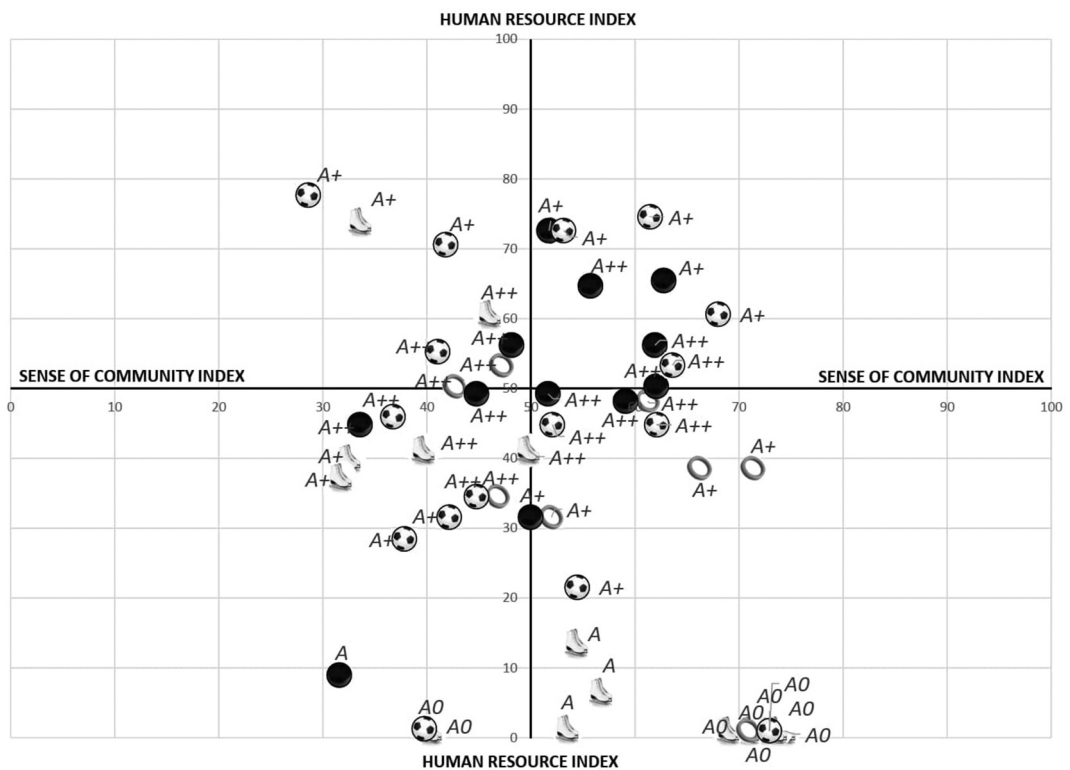


Figure 4. A snapshot of community competence of an '*urheiluseura*' representing four different sports (football, ice hockey, ringette, and figure skating).

The scattered pattern of the units in [Figure 4](#) indicates – as expected – a certain lack of clear leadership and even lack of awareness on the state of sense of community and community competence. Only time will tell how novel conceptualisation with unforeseen data and tools will help the piloting local sports settings to (re)identify, (re)interpret, and (re)construct their central societal relationships and furthermore how other local sports settings will react to this.

Concluding remarks

Throughout the EU countries, sports – encompassing games, exercise, and leisure – have evolved into a significant social mechanism that provides welfare and security at the local level. However, the unclear roles of different actors could pose future challenges in adopting effective sport policies (e.g. [Coalter 2007](#), [Mikkonen et al. 2022](#)). In response to recent criticism from authors like [Gammelsæter \(2021\)](#), our study examines critical elements for building a more sport-focused sport management theory and develops a conceptual framework for understanding local sports settings. Now more than ever, the strategic actions of key actors in the welfare state, civil society, and the global economy involve (re)identifying, (re)interpreting, and (re)constructing the central relationships within the field of sports.

Our conceptual framework recognises the significant role of local sports clubs as community builders and emphasises their intimate understanding of the local context, challenges, and opportunities. With their inherent understanding of the community, we argue that the local sports clubs are best positioned to facilitate community development using a bottom-up approach (see [Mansuri and Rao 2013](#)). This approach is about enabling community members to become producers of their own and their community's well-being rather than mere recipients of pre-designed programmes ([Chandler 2014](#), [Korosteleva and Petrova 2022](#)). By fostering relationships and engaging the community in identifying their strengths, potential, and aspirations, local sports clubs can stimulate positive change from the ground up (see [Willets et al. 2014](#)).

This bottom-up approach takes into account the discovered limitations of the top-down approach in determining sports' social utility and its effectiveness in delivering expected welfare outcomes ([Coalter 2007](#), [Ekholm 2016](#), [Harris and Adams 2016](#)). It also acknowledges that the predominance of volunteers in local sports clubs can constrain their capacity to meet expanding demands and engage in activities beyond their immediate competence ([Horch 1998](#), [Nowy and Breuer 2019](#)). However, by valuing local knowledge and fostering horizontal community engagement, sports clubs can effectively drive community development efforts grounded in their communities' specific needs and capacities.

In conclusion, our study provides a comprehensive conceptual framework that bridges the gap between theory and practice in understanding local sports settings. By adopting a bottom-up approach focused on shared places, community competence, and a sense of community, it is possible to unlock the true potential of local sports clubs in promoting community development. The expanding pilot case is an accumulating source of data and experience, which will also provide evidence in the years to come.

Note

1. Own calculations based on data obtained from Special Eurobarometer 472 ([2010](#), [2014](#), [2018](#)); Eurostat – Population ([2022a](#)); International Olympic Committee – Olympic Results (Sydney 2000; Salt Lake City 2002; Athens 2004; Turin 2006; Beijing 2008; Vancouver 2010; London 2012; Sochi 2012; Rio 2016; PyeongChang 2018; Tokyo 2020). Mass participation's goals are examined by how much more (>0) or less (<0) there are adults in the population who report to exercise or sport regularly, than there are adults who report to never exercise or sport. Elite sport's goals are examined by how much greater (>0) or smaller (<0) share of EU countries' Olympic medals the country has earned compared to the country's share of population. Hence, it operationalises the country's contribution to 'positive EU-brand' in the international sporting community.

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