Final Report

Creative Experiences in Children's Football

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Content

1. Executive Summary

1.1. Academic Contribution

Research on creativity in children's sports, and especially football, is skewed toward quantitative and experimental designs, where creativity is treated as an outcome (e.g., by measuring creativity before and after an intervention). Focusing purely on creativity as an outcome tells us little about who created what, how they did it, and what these creative experiences meant to them. There is a lack of qualitative studies on the application of creativity in sports that include the perspectives of those participating in the activities. Hence, the main academic contribution of this research is novel insights into coaches' and children's experiences of creativity-nurturing training activities. In this regard, the findings show that the particular types of creativity exercises employed in this project can promote qualities such as imagination, playfulness, community, involvement, habit breaking, unpredictability, and immersion in tasks. Moreover, the training reducing the focus on results (i.e., downplaying competitive elements such as scoring goals and winning). Accordingly, the project adds fresh insights into the potential of creativity training as a key to develop task-oriented climates and intrinsic motivation.

1.2. Practical Contribution

This research explores the practical utility of creativity training in children's football. It contributes with in-depth descriptions of coaches' and children's participation in and experience of a particular set of training activities that are based on creativity-nurturing coaching principles. The insights about the application and usefulness of creativity training can inform coach education programs across European football and be used to develop new coaching material for children's football. Furthermore, the results may inspire associations, clubs, and coaches to promote coaching with and for creativity as a way to reduce result-oriented practices and enhance enjoyment, community, and development.

2. Introduction

Across European and Western countries, there is an increasing focus on what influences immediate sports experiences and withdrawal patterns among children and youth (Battaglia et al., 2021; Cote et al., 2020; Rask & Eske, 2020; Toft-Jørgensen & Gottlieb, 2020). Result-oriented environments and coaching approaches (i.e., with excessive focus on competing, performing, and winning) are some of the recurring scientific explanations for dropout in team ball sports such as football. Research shows that narrow focus on competitive sporting success in the short term rather than long-term development often leads to increased burnout and dropout rates from children and youth sports (Côté et al., 2020). Result-orientation often entails prescriptive, authoritarian, and controlling practices, that violate children's motives for sports participation – having fun, being with friends, and learning new things (Muir et al., 2011). For example, research based on achievement goal theory (e.g., Harwood et al., 2015) shows that coaches tend to establish performance-oriented climates driven by comparisons to others (e.g., Who won? Who scored? Who was the best?) rather than mastery-oriented climates driven by self-comparisons in terms of competence or effort (e.g., How did I do? What did I learn?).

In such ways, many coaches tend to reproduce the practices they experienced as athletes themselves or those they observe in professional sports (Muir et al., 2011). This is deeply problematic since elite sports are far from adapted to children's needs and motives of doing sports. In a topical discussion of the conditions in children's sports, Kristi Erdal (2018) calls attention to the detrimental consequences of

adulteration. Rather than shaping sporting practices on the basic needs of the children, she argues that the needs of adults have changed children's sports for the worse (i.e., coaches' or parents' desire to be recognized for creating good results or developing an elite athlete). In this regard, Erdal accuses dominant sport practices such as 1) early competition, 2) early selection, and 3) early specialization of reducing children's enjoyment of sport. Similarly, result-orientated environments and approaches are criticized for diverting attention from long-term development (Collins et al., 2019), diminishing intrinsic motivation (Duda et al., 1995), reducing the joy of training (Temple & Crane, 2016), increasing performance anxiety, and reducing sport participants' overall well-being (Gjesdal, 2018). While performance climates are linked with such negative outcomes – and thereby increased dropout from sports – mastery climates (i.e., emphasizing autonomy and learning) are linked with enjoyment, positive affect, intrinsic motivation, well-being, and performance (Roberts & Neerstad, 2020).

Situated in the literature on positive youth development, The Personal Assets Framework (Côté et al., 2020) suggests that improvement of the immediate sport experience is key to cultivating short-term outcomes of doing sports such as competence, character, connection, and confidence, and, in turn, enhancing long-term outcomes such as participation, performance, and personal development. In this regard, the establishment of creative training environments and the application of creativity-nurturing approaches have been suggested as promising strategies to improve children's immediate experience of doing sports (Rasmussen et al., 2019; Rasmussen & Rossing, 2023). To date, however, the most research on creativity in sports treats creativity as an output rather than as an input variable. As argued in a review by Fardilha and Allen (2019), cognitive conceptualizations of creativity have led the field to be skewed toward quantitative and experimental designs. Such work is key to tracing the efficiency of creativity-promoting programs (e.g., by measuring creativity before and after), but tells us nothing about how the players or coaches experienced the alternative approaches, or whether these had an impact on the players' connection, confidence, participation, personal development, or other relevant elements. Focusing purely on creativity as an outcome tells us little about who created what, how they did it, and what these experiences meant to them.

Only two studies regarding creativity-enhancing frameworks encompass the perspectives of athletes taking part in creativity-nurturing training. In one of these, Santos and Morgan (2019) implemented creativity principles transferred from the literature on jazz (i.e., aiming for "empathetic attunement", p. 121) on a team of female volleyball players aged 10 to 14 years. The novel approach had a positive impact on players' tactical and strategic knowledge, communication, and improvisational match play in response to challenges occurring in the game. In the other study, Rasmussen and Østergaard (2016) applied the four creativity-nurturing pedagogical principles of *The Creative Soccer Platform* (e.g., no experience judgment, horizontal thinking) on a U15 recreational football team. This established a safe and playful environment, where the players enjoyed the process of exploring novel and unusual action possibilities, while not being afraid of making mistakes or being ridiculed by others. These qualitative studies demonstrate the potential of moving beyond studying the effects of certain training programs on sport-specific creativity. Thus, there is a need for more qualitative studies on the role of creativity in sports, focusing on the embodied experiences of the participants involved in creative activities (i.e., the players) – and those designing and delivering the activities (i.e., coaches).

3. Research Questions

This project's objective is to generate new and practical knowledge on the application of creativity-nurturing coaching principles in children's football. In this regard, the aim is to explore the usefulness of a creativity-nurturing training program that were applied at U9 teams in five Danish football clubs. Two research questions were formulated to guide the research process:

RQ1: How do children and coaches engage with the creativity training?
RQ2: How do children and coaches experience the creativity training?

Hence, the study focuses on the players and coaches' response to adopting the approach rather than evaluating the use of the approach. Whereas RQ2 points to an exploration of children's and coaches' perspectives on the utility and value of the program, RQ1 regards exploring how they respond to and participate in the new activities. In this regard, RQ1 includes exploring how the coaches facilitate the activities and what happens when the children are faced with these (i.e., how they solve the tasks).

4. Literature Review

In recent decades, the interest in studying creativity in team ball sports, and especially football, has increased exponentially (Fardilha & Allen, 2019; Zahno & Hossner, 2020). This development has been led by research aiming to conceptualize definitional criteria of creativity and its development in team ball sport (e.g., Aggerholm et al., 2011; Campos, 2014; Muller, 2014; Rasmussen et al., 2019; Santos et al., 2016; Tanggaard et al., 2016). Providing a classification of the conceptualizations and operationalizations in this field, Zahno and Hossner's (2020) review shows that the term is primarily understood and applied as a personal attribute, defined as a sport-specific aspect of divergent thinking. Further, most studies focus on creative game performance, rather than the creative activities that take place beyond competitions (e.g., exploratory processes or creative actions in training).

Among studies focusing on creative game performance, several study how the amount of deliberate play, deliberate practice, and diversification in athletes' careers affected their development of sport-specific creativity (e.g., Roca & Ford, 2020; Memmert et al., 2010; Richards et al., 2017). Similarly, researchers have studied relationships between cognitive-perceptual variables and creativity (e.g., Memmert & Furley, 2007; Memmert et al., 2013), and the effect of certain coaching interventions on creativity (e.g., Bosselut et al., 2018; Greco et al., 2010; Santos et al., 2017; 2018). These lines of research use observational methods to compare participants' creative potential before and after certain interventions, and/or relates the creativity scores to cognitive-perceptual variables, sport participation histories, or other variables. In this regard, creativity is measured by psychometric test instruments, variously employed in lab or field settings. Further, participants' creative performance is quantified by sport-specific divergent thinking components such as fluency, versatility (Santos et al., 2017), flexibility, and originality (Memmert & Roth, 2007). This is based on the idea that improved scores entail equal increases in terms of creative in-game behavior. As discussed above, creativity is treated as the dependent variable (i.e., as an outcome), and as a rare performance criterion. Such approaches may deprive the developmental and experiential qualities of creativity in sports.

In another line of research, where the present project is situated, creativity is treated as an input, or the independent variable. In such work, researchers are more interested in what it means to be creative and what kind of impact creative actions and experiences may have on sport participants' well-being, development and/or performance (Richard et al., 2021; Rasmussen & Rossing, 2022). For example,

Rasmussen et al. (2019) discussed the value of treating creativity as a developmental means rather than a performative end (i.e., the idea that creativity regards surprising opponents in matches which is primarily attainable after reaching a high level of expertise). In this work, creativity was defined as playful and curious exploration of novel and unusual action possibilities in socially and materially situated activities. From this point of view, creative actions are accessible to all players – not just to the few best players (i.e., those capable of deceiving and surprising opponents using rare technical or tactical skills). In this regard, creativity regards doing something (e.g., solving a task) in a new and unusual way compared to the given player's or team's habitual action repertoire (i.e., usual solutions in a game situation). In this process, any players may invent, discover, and utilize new and meaningful action possibilities compared to normal training sessions. From this perspective, it can be argued that creativity expands and enriches sporting experiences. This assumption will be explored in the present project by focusing on coaches' and players' experience of creativity-nurturing training activities.

5. Research Design and Strategy

5.1. Design

This project is designed as a multiple case study with a qualitative methodology (Stake, 2013). This was considered as a relevant design to gain in-depth contextualized insight into coaches' and players' engagement with and experience of creativity training. As argued by Sparkes and Smith (2014), case studies can be jointly extended to several cases to explore a shared phenomenon, special population, or general condition. In this case, the phenomenon sought to be explored, surrounds the usefulness of creativity training in children's football. In this regard, the research applies a qualitative explorative approach to empathize the views and perspectives of players and coaches, and prevent verification bias (i.e., only looking for certain benefits of the training and being blind to limitations). Further, this approach emphasizes the context in which the training occurs, acknowledging that the social, cultural, and interpersonal dynamics of the sessions are critical to understanding participants' experiences.

The study explores the experiences and perspectives of coaches and players taking part in a creativity-nurturing training program (described in section 5.1.2.). In this regard, recent action research studies have pointed towards a gap between creativity theory and practice (Rasmussen et al., 2022; Santos & Jones, 2024). For example, coaches' ability to design and apply creativity-nurturing training activities is limited by a range of conceptual (i.e., misconception of creativity and its value), pedagogical (i.e., difficulties in facilitating creativity), cultural (i.e., clash with assumptions about good training), and political (e.g., power relations to other actors) dilemmas (Rasmussen et al., 2022). Further, voluntary coaches as those participating in the project – and most football coaches in Denmark – have limited time to plan sessions. Hence, providing coaches with concise descriptions of the CT exercises to apply was considered a key to maximize the insights gained from observations and interviews.

5.1.1. The Creativity Training Program – "The Idea Academy"

The creativity training program consisted of eight sessions, each covering five types of exercises. The design of these exercises was inspired by a set of creativity-nurturing coaching principles developed by Rasmussen et al. (2023). While a simple, age-related basis design for each type of exercise was generally maintained throughout the program, a new variation of the creativity-relevant dimension of the exercises was developed for each session (e.g., same field size and number of goals and players, but changing the task constraint). Initially, the creativity-promoting exercises in the training program were designed by

the research team. Next, the content of the program was refined based on feedback from coach educators from DBU, and a coach supervisor from Aalborg BK, who all had extensive experience as children's coaches. As advised by the experts, the descriptions of training activities involved a detailed stepwise guide for how to organize, instruct, facilitate, and adapt the exercises. For example, the guide covered examples of how to present the task, how to encourage and reinforce creative behavior, and how to use questioning or role modelling to promote idea generation.

A. The Dream World	Coaches used different sets of cue cards (e.g., superheroes, insects, natural phenomena, cartoon characters, or other sports) to inspire playful, imaginative actions in a creative warm-up exercise, where each player dribbled with a ball within a given area.
B. The Idea Factory	The creativity principle, *AMSAP* (As Many Solutions As Possible) was used in formal, technical tasks (e.g., passing, receiving, dribbling, turning, shooting). For example, in *The Ice Cone Factory*, two players collaborated to find ways to get a ball up on a cone (i.e., held upside down), without touching the ice cream with their hands.
C. Play Workshop	The creativity principles of *Co-creation* and *No Repetitions* were used in one-dimensional 2v1 and 3v1 exercises with one goal, where pairs or trios took turns to defeat the defender. Since the same type of solutions could not be repeated, they had to co-create a new plan before each attempt. In each session, the design of creative plays was constrained by tasks such as inventing ways to surprise as much as possible, fixed passing direction (e.g., only backwards or forwards), or a limited number of passes or touches.
D. The Challenge	Small-sided games (e.g., 3v3 + Joker) with unusual tools and task constraints, inspired by the creativity principles, *unpredictability* and *improvisation*. In exercises called *Reload I* and *II*, for example, players on each team used a 16x16cm dice to reload passes or touches when running out of those provided from the beginning. In other sessions, these dices were used to provide random task constraints, which required players to improvise (e.g., fixed passing directions, a specific part of the foot for all first-touches or passes, or certain bodily movements to be execute after each pass, such as "spin 3 times").
E. Role Play	Based on the creativity principle, *Anti Habits*, the coach handed out different sets of role cards to the players in a series of alternative match formats (e.g., 5v5). For example, these cards comprised concise descriptions of football players with unique playing styles (e.g., Danish National Team Players, or International Football Stars) to help the players explore specific dimensions of the game that they did not usually engage with during training.

Table 1: An overview of the creativity training program.

5.1.3. Flexible Procedure

Reflecting the diverse training schedules of the five teams participating in the project, the programs were flexibly designed to last between one and one and a half hour. In this regard, the coaches had the possibility to skip one of the five exercises, or to add an extra exercise, that was described in the programs. The extra exercise could also be used to replace one of the other exercises. Moreover, the coaching teams were allowed to change the sequence of the exercises and to decide when (e.g., once or twice a week) and how to organize the sessions (e.g., one group, two parallel groups, or three or more stations). This depended on the number of players and coaches on the given team (see table 4).

5.1.3. Club Recruitment

Given the short timeline of the research project, a combination of the network method, opportunistic, purposive, and convenience sampling was used to recruit participants representing diverse football clubs to maximize the variety of experiences and perspectives (Smith & Caddick, 2012). As a point of

departure to recruit participants, creativity training was introduced as a new topic in a regional coach-development program governed by our local partner in the project, Aalborg BK (AaB). In this two-hour workshop, the researcher introduced the underlying creativity framework (i.e., described in section 5.3.), the five types of exercises in the creativity training program, and conducted a one-hour demo training with selected exercises from the program. AaB's head of regional collaboration assisted in inviting relevant clubs and coaches to the workshop. Among the 35 participants (representing U7 to U15). Among the 35 coaches who joined in the workshop (i.e., representing 25 clubs and coaching U7 to U15 levels), five coaches (and their teams) volunteered to participate in the project.

5.2. Methods

To explore the children's creative actions and experiences, the project applies a qualitative design, comprising 1) field observations of CT sessions, 2) focus groups with coaches, and 3) focus groups with players. These were chosen since qualitative research designs recognize socio-cultural features, and provide coherent, compelling, and contextualized insights regarding environmental, relational, and personal qualities that are important to the specific topic of interest (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

5.2.1. Field observations

For each team involved in the research project, a minimum of three training sessions were observed by a trained observer (Thorpe & Olive, 2016). To gain insight into how players and coaches engaged with the CT, the observer took notes on how the coaches facilitated the exercises and how the players' participated in the activities (e.g., how they solved the tasks individually or collectively). The observer took quick, concise field notes during the CT to capture immediate impressions, key points, notable behaviors, and significant interactions. These were elaborated and digitalized afterwards to ensure rich, accurate and comprehensible descriptions for the analysis. Notes from informal conversations with coaches and players before and after sessions are included in the field notes. These conversations also contributed to establishing rapport for interviews and focus groups (Krane & Baird, 2005).

All teams used the program from early September to late November 2024. In this period, four teams completed all eight sessions, while one team completed seven. As seen in table 2, a total 21 of the 39 creativity training sessions have been observed. All sessions were observed by the same observer, a research assistant, with a master in sports science, who had received training in qualitative fieldwork. Due to overlap in training times, it was not possible to observe all sessions across all clubs.

CLUB	CT1	CT2	CT3	CT4	CT5	CT6	CT7	CT8
Urban United (UU)	X	X		X			X	X
Northern Ninjas (NN)			X	X			X	-
Crazy City (CC)	X	X	X		X	X	X	
Eastern Eagles (EE)			X	X				X
Western Wizards (WW)	X		X				X	X

Table 2: Overview of observed which CT training sessions.

5.2.2. Focus Groups

A series of focus groups (Gibson, 2012) with three or four players are conducted to explore players' creative experiences. Focus groups were chosen over individual interviews to allow children to build on each other's ideas, fostering richer and more dynamic insights into how they perceive and engage with CT. The collaborative setting can also help children feel more comfortable to express themselves,

as their peers' contributions often spark memories or perspectives they might not recall independently. Furthermore, focus groups reflect the inherently social context of the CT sessions, providing a more authentic representation of the collaborative and interactive aspects of their experiences.

CLUB	FG_Players	FG_Coaches
Urban United	Completed (4)	Completed (1)
Northern Ninjas	Completed (3)	Completed (2)
Crazy City	Completed (4)	Completed (1)
Eastern Eagles	Completed (3)	Completed (2)
Western Wizards	Completed (3)	Completed (3)

Table 3: Overview of completed interviews in the five clubs (i.e., number of participants in brackets).

The main part of the interview guide was structured similarly to the CT sessions, with short, simple, open-ended, and neutral questions about their participation in each of the five types of exercises (e.g., What was the best thing about this exercise? What do you think about the exercises where you dribbled like superheroes or insects?). In this regard, illustrations from the training programs and field notes were used as stimulated recall to elicit players' memories (Lyle, 2003).

Besides the focus groups with children, focus groups with the respective coaching teams have been (and will be) used to gain in-depth insights into the coaches' experience of the usefulness of creativity training. In this regard, the semi-structured interview guide, comprising open-ended questions regarding the coaches' 1) background and experience, 2) their usual approach to coaching children's football, and 3) experience of facilitating the five types of creativity-nurturing activities (see table 1), focusing on one type of at a time. The latter part included open-ended questions about the coaches' perspectives on the usefulness of the exercises (e.g., what do you think this kind of exercise can be used for?), and how they experienced the children's participation in the exercises (e.g., how do you think the players responded to this kind of exercise?).

5.3. Unit of Analysis

In this explorative qualitative work, the precise concepts and dimensions of particular interest guiding the interpretations in the analysis was informed by the Situated Model of Creative Action in Sport (Rasmussen et al., 2023). This conceptual framework defines creativity as the exploration of new and unusual action possibilities in socially and materially situated contexts (see section 4). The framework identifies four interrelated aspects that shape the action possibilities – or affordances – available to a player in any given situation. These aspects could serve as a preliminary guide for the analysis and offer valuable insights into the potential impact and usefulness of creativity training.

1. **Materiality** – what players "could" do. The physical (e.g., equipment) and conceptual (e.g., rules and task constraints) resources that constrain players (inter)actions. Here, it is explored how coaches and players engage with and experience the CT tools and tasks.
2. **Normativity** – what players "should" do. Social and cultural norms, values, and expectations that define appropriate behavior and permissible deviations. In this regard, it is analyzed how the normative expectations in CT influence the range of actions explored.
3. **Intentionality** – what players "will" do. The directedness of action or action orientation (i.e., to have fun, challenge oneself, impress others, or win at all costs) influences what players perceive, do, and experience. Here, it is explored how CT shapes players' intentionality.

4. **Capability** – what players "might" do. The player's sport-specific (e.g., motor, technical, and tactical) and creative abilities (e.g., inventiveness, courage) influence how they might solve a given task or situation. Here, it is explored which capabilities are developed by CT.

By using this model to guide the interpretations of coaches and players engagement with and experience of the program, the study remains adaptable, while grounding its exploration in a coherent theoretical basis that emphasizes the situated and relational nature of creative action in sport. This approach aligns with the reflexive thematic analysis process, allowing for themes to emerge organically while being interpreted through a relevant conceptual lens.

5.4. Sample and Participants

Five U9 teams (i.e., 7- to 9-year-old boys) participated in the creativity training program. The teams represented five football clubs in the Northern Jutland Region (i.e., North-Western part of Denmark). The U9 age level was selected since it is better to start sooner rather than later to promote creativity (Santos et al., 2016). Further, some tasks in the program required reading abilities (i.e., dice and role cards). The teams are described in table 4 (with club pseudonyms).

Club	**Urban United**	**Northen Ninjas**	**Crazy City**	**Eastern Eagles**	**Western Wizards**
City size	120.000	25.000	120.000	1500	3000
U9 players*	28 (20)	16 (14)	8 (8)	12 (10)	30 (24)
Facilitators	Coach A (Alan) Coach B (Benny) Coach C (Carl)	Coach D (Dora) Coach E (Eric)	Coach F (Fred)	Coach G (Gill) Coach H (Haley)	Coach I (Irvin) Coach J (Jack) Coach K (Kyle) Coach L (Liam)
Orchestrator	Leader A (Anthony)	Leader B (Brian)	Coach F (Fred)	Coach H (Haley)	Coach J (Jack)
Organization	One group (A) Stations (B, C, D) Two groups (E)	One group	One group	One group	Two groups (A – E)

Table 4: Information about the teams participating. *Approximate number of players attending sessions in brackets.

At each team, a coach orchestrator was responsible for preparing and organizing the CT sessions (e.g., by sharing the coaching material with the other coaches, dividing tasks, informing parents) and served as the main contact person for the researchers. The orchestrators received the programs and materials (e.g., cue cards, dice cards and role cards) in both printed and PDF versions no later than one week in advance of the given session. This reflects the reality of voluntary coaches in Denmark, where descriptions of age-relevant training activities are offered by DBU through an App, with new programs each week. Besides participating in the recruitment workshop, as described in section 5.1.3., and reading the training material, coaches and leaders received no education regarding creativity training. Moreover, only one or two coaches (or the leader) from each team took part in the workshop.

5.4.2. Interviewee Selection

All orchestrators and were invited to participate in an interview. As key informants (Gratton & Jones, 2010), all orchestrators volunteered to participate in an interview. Further most of the coaches from the respective teams participate in the focus groups alongside their orchestrator (except for Crazy City; only one coach participated). Reflecting an overall positive impression of the CT, all coaches demonstrated a strong willingness to share their thoughts and perspectives. However, a few coaches were unable to attend the FGs due to scheduling conflicts. Despite efforts to provide flexible options, commitments to other professional and personal responsibilities prevented their participation.

Children were selected for focus groups if they had participated in at least five training sessions during the program. Orchestrators assisted in selecting children (e.g., posting the time of the interview in the team's Facebook groups with parents signing their children up). Further, they assisted in ensuring diversity in the focus groups in terms of skill level (e.g., A, B, and C players). Also, the selection process avoided grouping of close friends to prevent conformity of responses. In this regard, the researcher and orchestrator were sensitive to any children who may feel excluded or left out and ensured to communicate the reasons for selection in a way that minimized feelings of favoritism.

5.5. Analysis

The analysis strategy used is based on reflective thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2016), which involves six flexible and reflexive steps that emphasize the researcher's active role in interpreting data, namely 1) Familiarization (i.e., read and reread data transcripts), 2) initial coding (i.e., identify relevant data segments and develop a codebook), 3) search for themes, 4) refine themes and sub-themes, 5) define and name themes, and 6) write the report (i.e., weaving the themes into a cohesive narrative, supported by vivid data exemplars). Further, the analysis adopts an inductive approach, focusing on uncovering both semantic (i.e., surface-level themes evident in participants' narratives) and latent (i.e., underlying patterns, assumptions, and contextual influences) layers of meaning. This approach was chosen due to its flexibility in adapting the analysis to the research questions. Given the explorative nature of this research, it enables authenticity and resonance. In this regard, the strength of the results lies in their ability to provide rich, contextualized insights into the lived experiences of players and coaches.

5.6. Research Quality

Based on the pragmatist position of this research, the knowledge produced is to be considered time- and context-bound and cannot be seen as independent truths. In a changeable and contingent world, using universal approaches to appraise research would counteract innovative and valuable research. Hence, researchers should disclose which markers of quality guide their work (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Credibility, authenticity and resonance were emphasized in this study. To establish credibility, multiple sources of data are used, including focus groups with players and coaches, and field notes. Triangulation of these data sources enhances the depth and rigor of the analysis, ensuring that findings accurately reflect the participants' experiences.

In terms of authenticity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), the study strives to represent the diverse views and perspectives of players and coaches, capturing their unique experiences and insights. Further, this involves using several exemplary quotes and field notes that demonstrate coherence between themes and data. Reflexivity is maintained throughout the analysis, with the research team critically reflecting on their role and views to mitigate potential biases. By presenting rich, evocative descriptions that represent participant voices, the results may also foster resonance, or naturalistic generalization, as described by Smith & Caddick (2012). By sparking readers' curiosity, stimulating reflection, and encouraging them to draw connections to their own contexts, and inspiring actions or transformations, the research seeks to extend its impact beyond the immediate study setting, enhancing awareness and influencing broader practices and understandings of creativity and its value.

5.7. Ethics

The project was conducted in accordance with national and institutional guidelines for research ethics as approved by AAU Research Ethics Committee (project no 2024-505-00182). Before starting the

training program, informed consent was obtained from coaches and by both parents (or guardians) of each child (i.e., by signing a consent form). In the interviews and focus groups, coaches and children were informed about the purpose of the project, their role in the interview, that the interview was recorded, the confidentiality of their answers (i.e., that pseudonyms are used with quotes), and that their participation was voluntary (i.e., their right to not answer questions or to stop the interview). Furthermore, the focus groups are aligned with ethical and methodological principles for how to gain access to children's perspectives (e.g., Ryba, 2012), such as clarifying that "If you don't understand something I ask, just let me know, and I'll try to explain it in a different way" to help children feel comfortable to share their thoughts and experiences. Further, the focus groups were started and ended on a positive note, by asking more (i.e., tell me about your favorite footballer or football team).

6. Findings

During the identification of codes and theme development, various possibilities were considered for structuring the results. Ultimately, it was decided to organize the themes based on the five types of creativity exercises (see section 5.1.1.). This structure effectively demonstrates the usefulness of The Idea Academy by illustrating how players and coaches engaged with and experienced the different types of activities. For each type of exercise, two overarching themes are described, focusing on the most prominent aspects across teams. While similar patterns were identified across all five types, these were formed around central patterns of meaning in the data specific to the particular type of exercise (with a few exceptions noted). Although each theme is connected to the other types of exercises, they are presented in this manner to provide a clearer understanding of the varied dimensions of the program's usefulness and the internal coherence of the themes.

6.0. Initial Adaptation Period

The introduction of the creativity sessions marked a significant shift from the teams' habitual practice. While some teams embraced the new approach from the first session, others experienced an initial period of adaptation to overcome some hesitation and scepticism (i.e., see also 6.6.5.). Both coaches and the players needed time to familiarize themselves with the premise of the exercises.

> The first few times, both players and coaches, had to adjust and start training in a different way. So it wasn't just that autopilot you could switch on. So I think the most challenging part was actually forcing ourselves out of our comfort zone to try doing things in a new a way … But I think they responded quite well to it. At first, I think they thought, what's happening now? Why do we suddenly have to do this? But I quickly noticed that they found it fun … and the more times we did it, and the more we worked with it, the better they got at it. But I remember I had to keep myself committed to it at first. And be playful and so on, to get them on board. … It was definitely something we had to adjust to. But I like the consistency from session to session, that made it easier to facilitate once you got to know it. Once we had done it a few times, it got better and better. We became more creative as coaches in setting up the exercises and guiding them – and so did the players. But you had to start being creative yourself, as a coach. Because if the boys can't come up with something, you have to create something yourself. I think that's been the hardest part of it. To think a bit differently yourself as well. (Coach 1, UU)

Besides gaining first-hand experiences that the exercises could work in practice, and understanding what it was all about, the adaptation phase required patience and commitment in finding out how to effectively facilitate the exercises; and the better facilitation (i.e., creative engagement), the quicker players accepted the premise and engaged in the creative process (field notes; see also 6.6.3.). As players and coaches grew more comfortable with the exercises, they appreciate the joy, playfulness, inclusivity,

challenge and freedom it offered and saw it as a valuable addition to their training routine. This was stressed when asked about the most important thing they carry on from the project.

> Daring to think out of the box! That it's okay to do something that seems crazy. Some will love it, others will not. And that it's important to challenge the players in new ways. … This is a progression from the exercise banks I've previously had access to, where it is very much standard exercises. And I think that's sad, because you are not forced to think outside the box – neither as coach nor player. (Coach 2, WW)

6.1. The Dream World

As listed in section 5.1.1., this type of creativity exercise was an addon to a wide-spread and well-known chaos-dribble exercise (also among participants in this study), where each player runs around with their own ball within a designated area. In usual formats of this exercise the coach instructs a series of dribbles to be executed by all players, such as rolling the ball under the foot, using both feet, etc. In the dream world exercises, the players were encouraged to use their imagination to come up with different kinds of dribbles, inspired by words shouted from the coach. For each session, coaches were provided with lists 10 to 15 cue words within a particular category (e.g., superheroes, animals, other sports, amusement park attractions, natural phenomena, etc.). For example, in the exercise with the natural phenomena theme, the cue words e.g., included meteor shower, tornado, swamp, rainbow, sandstorm, waterfall, frost, and earthquake. The description of these exercises included a narrative relating to the theme, that could be used to set the scene for the players exploration. For the natural phenomena theme, the players were told they were going on a trip around the world to find new, interesting places to develop their skills; on this journey, they would face different weather conditions and natural phenomena. The description also advised coaches to start by guiding the players through an imaginative example (e.g., the coach demonstrating an idea for how to dribble like a tsunami) and to empathise that each cue could inspire many different ideas (i.e., not a single correct solution). When initiating the exercise, the overall guideline was to introduce one cue at a time and change it every 30 to 60 seconds when players seemed to run out of ideas or continued repeating the same idea.

6.1.1. Letting Imagination Roam is Great Fun

The Dream World exercises often created a lively, cheerful and energetic atmosphere, where players explored many unusual, difficult, playful and alternative tricks and ways to dribble and move around with the ball. Such playful immersion was often accompanied by sound effects made by the children, while embodying their imaginative ideas. This contributed to building a light-hearted atmosphere. For example, the 'meteor shower' cue from the natural phenomena theme immediately made them run around in random zigzag patterns with panic in their eyes, screaming "AAAH!" and "OH NOO!", while making quick and sudden changes of direction to avoid the imaginary meteors hitting the field around them. Next, the 'blizzard' scenario made the players dribble slowly due to the imagined heavy snow they had to push the ball through. And the 'sandstorm' cue e.g., made them put their hands in front of their face to avoid getting sand in their eyes while dribbling (field notes, CT4, NN). Players enjoyed personifying their imagined scenarios, with the ques leading to a broad variation of solutions.

> I really liked the one with the animals, because for example with the leopard, you had to run fast, and then there was the one with the elephant, where you didn't have to run as fast. So, you had to try many, many things that were different… I also liked driving like a go-kart. Because it was like, you squatted a bit, and then you ran a bit fast with the ball on your knees. It was fun. (Player 2, UU)

Besides such broad variation of solutions across cues in The Dream World exercises, most of the cues also prompted various responses among the players due to their open-ended nature. For example, the 'quicksand' que made some players simulate difficulty in moving their feet, mimicking the sensation of being stuck in quicksand while dribbling. Reversely, others moved their feet very quickly to avoid sinking in the sand. Others adopted a more dramatic approach, dribbling on their knees to convey the impression of having already sunk into the sand. Further, some made quick accelerations when they suddenly "escaped" from the sand (field notes, CT4, NN, UU). Although there were some similarities between actions inspired from a cue, each player engaging in the premise of the task, made their own impressions, and build on each other's ideas. For example, ideas spread among players when seeing others do it and thinking it would be fun to try. Even in cases where their moves seemed rather trivial or simple, there was a lot going on in their heads. For example, a player appeared to dribble around normally after getting the 'quicksand' que, but when the coach asking if he was not in quicksand he replied, 'yes, but I have snowshoes on that can't sink into the sand' (field note, CT4, UU).

Although some themes and cues were more difficult to transform into action than others, the players quickly picked up on the idea of these exercise and engaged in using the cues as inspiration to move with the ball in diverse ways. The training manual for the Dream World exercises involved the possibility to invite their players to come up with ideas for cues. This active participation and ownership engaged players even further (field notes). And often, showing their engagement and enthusiasm for the premise of the task, players actively approached the coach to propose ideas on their own initiative (field notes). In some cases, the coach merely needed to introduce the theme of the exercise to set the stage for players exploration, after which the player independently took charge.

> Not too long ago, when we did the safari theme. Well, I don't think I used any cues. I just told them that what we were going on a Safari trip ... And then, they came up with all of it themselves ... I didn't shout any cues ... they initially asked can we do that animal, and that animal, and so on. And I was like, yes, let's do it... And I didn't need to show anything... It was great to see ... And it was both penguins and elephants... I mean, it was just everything... It worked by itself. (Coach, CC)

As captured by this quote, the players enjoyed the process of using the cues to come up with new and unusual ideas and to translate their imaginative thoughts into bodily actions with the ball.

> I think the one with the different sports was fun. … because, when they [coaches] shouted something [cues], for example, if it was that you were running on a skateboard, then I would stand with one foot on the skateboard and dribble with the other. (Player 1, EE)

As in the examples above, The Dream World exercises were unanimously described by players in the focus groups as "fun" or "very fun." When asked what made it fun, players often started talking about the different solutions they came up with during the exercises. At this age (8- to 9-year-olds), players tend to think quite concretely, focusing on tangible and immediate aspects of their experiences. One way to understand these expressions is that the fun players derive from the exercises is closely tied to the process of generating and acting on new ideas. As expressed in the following excerpt from the focus group at Crazy City, they appreciated the opportunity to think independently and use their imagination. This allowed them to try new things, which they found particularly fun and engaging.

Interviewer The first exercises we did in these sessions were these, called The Dream World. You can try to look at these [interviewer shows illustrations of the exercises as stimulated recall].

Player 1, CC Oh yeah, I can remember those. Hulk … Tornado [the player reads cues on the illustrations]. It was really, I just think it was really fun. We dribbled like animals and all sorts of things. It was just really fun because then we could think our own thoughts and use our imagination for how we would do it. And then we could just, we could just do it … Because, if you didn't have imagination,

you couldn't do that. Because you had to think about what it is you want to do and how you think it dribbles [e.g., the superhero or animal from the cue].

Player 2, CC I think the one where you had to be different weather phenomena was really fun.

Player 1, CC It was fun with the animals, and it was also fun with the machines. Very fun.

Interviewer What made it fun? (interviewer)

Player 1, CC I think it is fun when you just play and dribble around like those things [the cues].

Player 2, CC Because it was some really strange dribbles, and because it's different from what we do when we play real football. It's a bit different from what we usually do.

Interviewer Okay. What do you do in your normal training?

Player 1, CC We usually do a lot where we have to run with the ball and roll it under the sole and such things. I think this is very different [emphasizes "very"]. And quite fun. Because you have to use your imagination much more. Because otherwise, the coaches tell you a lot what to do.

As evident in the above excerpt from the focus group at Crazy City, the players found these exercises quite different from usual training. This novelty value of the cues was also highlighted by coaches.

> It has been fun to work with this exercise. Before we became part of this project, we already did chaos dribbling exercises, but we didn't have the creative angle. But I experienced that they find it really fun to get these cues and immerse themselves in them. Especially if it's something they can really relate to. Like superheroes. That's one I can remember, where they were really ready to do some unusual things. And the one with machines, I also remember that one, as a great one. And the amusement park. (Coach 1, UU)

As empathized by both players and coaches, the imaginative element provided a stark contrast to their regular exercises, which typically involves more straightforward instructions. By encouraging playful and imaginative solutions, the Dream World exercises helped the players develop a greater sense of autonomy. Equal to the players' experience of having fun with imagining and attempting new moves, coaches also enjoyed these exercises and took pleasure in seeing the kinds of ideas the players came up with. They appreciated the creativity and spontaneity involved, cheering when extraordinary or unexpected solutions emerged (field notes). The players valued the autonomy these exercises provided, allowing them to think and act independently rather than following more direct instructions.

Player 1, UU In normal training, the coach shows us a dribble that we should try to mimic, but here, we actually just get to choose ourselves, as long as it resembles the thing the coach said [the cue]… It's much more fun than normal training.

Player 3, UU Yes, much more fun, because you learn much more and new, so you are allowed to maybe make quick feet and run and all kinds of things. And make quick passes. It's not just a boring normal training, like on Tuesdays, because we can do all kinds of different things.

As evident in this excerpt from the focus group at Urban United, the experience of being "allowed" to come up with other things than in usual exercises appears as a key element. The cues provided a framework within which the players could explore and experiment, enjoying the freedom to interpret and execute the cues in their own unique ways, which sparked the joy of coming up with something new and trying it out. As explored next, this both entailed playful experiences and stimulated a desire to come up with ideas for skills, dribbles and feints that could be used in matches.

6.1.2. Fostering Play, Safety and Inventiveness

The Dream World exercises proved useful in creating inherently playful activities, where the players engaged in the activities for their own sake, without caring about practical utility or goals external to the activity when exploring new ideas. This differed from normal exercises, where coaches typically instructed more functional skills and dribble techniques. In this regard coaches considered the Dream World exercises as useful activities to help players loosen up, cut loose, and shed inhibitions.

> I see this exercise as a warm-up. It breaks some boundaries, because some of the children are just a bit stiff by nature. It kind of gets everything started, in a very loose way, and a very out-of-the-box way. So that's what I personally have thought. I see this as a warm-up, and a good way to get something social going, and they get to laugh. Because otherwise, football doesn't have, a whole lot of laughs during a normal football practice. I think it serves a purpose as an icebreaker. And I think I will try to incorporate it into other exercises ... you could easily use the cues in some of the more formal warm-up exercises we typically do. In terms of having fun, and letting go of inhibitions, something like this is worth its weight in gold. (Coach 1, WW)

Coaches appreciated that the cues helped the players explore a wide variety of moves, with varying speed and body parts, and inspired them to attempt difficult skills with a high risk of failing, including skills and tricks they might be afraid of trying in other settings (e.g., due to fear of making mistakes).

> I think you can miss that sometimes on a team. That it is okay to throw yourself on the grass and do something silly. That sense of safety you get, you get a safety to each other because you dare to make mistakes and dare to go wild. That was a good thing with this exercise. It helped them dare to try some new things, and some really difficult things. And they carried this safety forward from the first exercise. They became a part of this universe where they could just cut their fantasy loose, because everything was accepted, and you were allowed to do all kinds of things. (Coach 1, NN)

These insights highlight the value of the exercises in fostering a safe and open-minded environment where players can experiment freely. By encouraging players to think independently and come up with their own solutions, the exercises promoted a playful and imaginative atmosphere that was beneficial for both players and coaches, and this impacted the rest of the creativity session.

> I think it's liberating for them because, in principle, they can't really do it wrong. It's about being creative, so I can't go over and say, "You're being creative in the wrong way," or "You're playing helicopter wrong," because they're just doing what they think a helicopter would do. So, there's a sense of freedom in it for them — where it's 100% acceptable to do it however you want. And that fits really well with something I think we all agree on – one of our core philosophies is that we have to dare to fail, we have to dare to do something silly. (Coach 2, WW)

The free and playful approach was further highlighted by a player from Crazy City who explained why the superhero cues were particularly fun: "Because when something can fly then you can do like this (put his arms to the sides), and then you can just run around" (Player 2, CC). When asked why this was fun, he replied, "It's fun because then you don't need to concentrate on how to dribble." This reflects the essence of play, where the activity is enjoyable for its own sake. Hence, The Dream World was experienced as play, not training. A game, but not a usual football game. The importance of play was also stressed by a coach from Urban United, who argued that these exercises allowed players to train without realizing they were training, making the exercises both effective and enjoyable.

> Well, I think the advantage is that they somehow have to figure out how an elephant dribbles. Try to get some images in their heads about it and then try to do something. And I think that's really good because then I think you unconsciously play dribbling into them, rather than if we have to show a dribble. It requires that we can do it ourselves. And that the boys can copy the way we do it. And that can also be fine, but I think that here they become more inspired by it, because they start to play with the ball. And then when they get older, they can learn all those standard dribbles. They will learn them anyway. I think it's more important for young players to just play with the ball, become comfortable with it, and get control over it. (Coach 1, UU)

While many players engaged in a playful approach, doing all sorts of things that would not normally make sense of a football field (i.e., crawling like a cat, jumping like a grasshopper, avoiding a volcanic eruption, or flying like a helicopter), the ideas explored also involved more match-relevant skills and challenging moves with the ball – elements that more coaches would likely perceive as proper training

of technique and ball control, compared to the more playful solutions which might be seen as childish or less purposeful (see section 6.6.5.). As argued by the coach from Crazy City,

> You can definitely use creativity training as a way of learning certain known, or what should I say, movements and ways of handling the ball that you and I are already familiar with, but the kids might not know yet. It just gives them a different approach and the courage to try it. (Coach, CC)

For example, in the sport theme, the 'Ice Hockey' cue made players try to perform hockey stops while turning with the ball. They also make small inside touches as if they were dribbling a puck, with their feet acting as the hockey stick (field note, CT2, CC). In the superhero theme, the 'Hulk' cue inspired players to jump around as Hulk while trying to make a rainbow flick and other difficult tricks that they did not yet master (field note, CT4, CC). Likewise, the 'tornado' cue from the natural phenomena theme initiated exploration of different spin-moves and ways to make the ball spin. As expressed by a player from Urban United, "The tornado could maybe be your body, and then you could try to make the ball curl... I mean, a tornado spins around. And then you could try to do that, and spin into the ball. Or you could do a trick with the ball, where you spin around yourself" (Player 3, UU). As described by a player from Urban United, the ideas generated in the exercises could be further refined and potentially used in competitive play. This aspect had been emphasized by Urban United coaches as a way to encourage the players to using these experiments as a possibility to expand their technical repertoire (field notes, UU).

> I think the good thing about these kinds of exercises is, it's like … the coach says something [a cue], and then we have to try to imitate those things. We constantly learn new tricks, and new ways to play football. It's really good, because then you can see if you get better at it, and then you can use them in matches. (Player 2, UU)

Further, coaches observed that players could sustain their engagement for longer periods when they were required to think for themselves. This suggests that the imaginative and autonomous nature of the exercises kept players more involved and motivated compared to more traditional chaos dribbling exercises. In this regard, the cues were described as a "quick and easy tool to implement" (Coach 1, NN). The coaches appreciated that they didn't need to spend a lot of time explaining what to do, how to do it, and why. The simplicity of giving a cue, such as naming the next animal or superhero to seek inspiration from, allowed the exercises to flow naturally and spontaneously.

> I think this was the exercise where they were most creative and were able to come up with something, invent something. You just had to say a word, and then they could really let their imagination run wild … and their own interpretation of some things. (Coach 1, NN)

6.2. The Idea Factory

Building on the imaginative and playful experiences in The Dream World, the next type of creativity-promoting exercise in the training program was called The Idea Factory. In these exercises, players were paired with one or two others to generate and attempt as many solutions as possible (AMSAP) in a formal, unopposed technical task, e.g., focusing on passes, dribbles, turns, feints, tricks, and shots. For example, in the dribbling task, pairs were asked to make their own dribbling path and get through it in as many ways as possible. Moreover, to empathize the principle of quantity over quality, players were encouraged not to repeat the same ideas, but to always try to do something different.

6.2.1. Creative Sparring Partners

The observations of The Idea Factory highlight how players readily engaged creatively in using each other as sources of inspiration and sparring partners during these exercises, resulting in a wider range

of solutions being explored. In their duos or trios, players eagerly talked about their ideas, for example how to set up and navigate their dribble courses. Attempting diverse techniques, the players inspired each other, built on each other's ideas, and challenged each other to attempt difficult and rare skills (field notes, UU, NN, CC, EE, WW). This collaborative aspect was also noticed by the coaches.

> They were challenged, but not in the usual way, in a different way. It gave them more creative ideas, like asking a friend, "Wouldn't it be cool if we did this?", showing it to each other, trying it out. I think that worked very well. (Coach 1, EE)

> You can use it to let the players learn from each other. I think that many of our players grow from being allowed to explain each other like 'What I did was like this and like this'. … And when they are paired with one at a higher level and tried each other's ideas ... and find out, 'Oh, I can actually do this difficult thing he could do' ... I think it makes the players realize that... that you can do many of the same things. (Coach 2, NN)

This collaborative process fostered creative engagement, as the players were inspired by each other's attempts, failures, and successes. In the words of the players, "mimicking" each other was fun, and this mutual challenge helped them develop their skills and learn new things about their teammates.

> It was fun because you could copy what the other person did. And then you learn what the other person has learned, but maybe you haven't learned yourself. (Player 1, UU)

> It was just super cool, because you could mimic each other and see what ideas others had, and then you can learn a bit about how they play. Whether it's someone who is very fast. Or someone with quick feet. … Or someone who is very strong. (Player 2, UU)

In The Shooting Range, for example, the players had to feint an imaginative opponent before making a shot at the goal – and this scenario should be played in a different way for each attempt. Often caring more about generating and attempting different feints and tricks than if they ended up scored or not, the players explored diverse skills, including stepover feints, body feints, fake shots, spin moves, and combining these tricks with various ways to shoot, e.g., using different parts of their feet, exploring various flick ups before shooting, and attempting difficult variants such as rabona kicks and backheel shots (field notes, NN, CC, UU, WW). As expressed by the players, such exercises were welcomed as rare possibilities to individually test, refine and expand chosen parts of their repertoire.

> I think it's been really fun, because we came up with some new things and tried to put some different feints together … And especially, with the shooting range, where you go to the cones and try to show your tricks and then try to get even better at them. So they can look even cooler. (Player 1, UU)

> I think it was really fun because you got to use a lot of your ideas, so you didn't just keep them to yourself all the time. […] because, um, you can at least get to do things and try really good things. Then you can become a good player. (Player 2, NN)

> It was cool. I mean, then you didn't have to, like, have it in your head and just remember it and do it [i.e., the way the coach shows or tells]. You could just decide it yourself. (Player 2, CC)

Another aspect illustrating that players enjoyed and engaged in the peer-led process of experimenting together – and indicating that they succeeded in coming up with personally new and unfamiliar ideas – is that they were often keen on showcasing their ideas to both each other, the coach and the observer (field notes, UU, NN, CC, EE, WW). This aspect of showing off new ideas was also noted by coaches.

> It encourages them to engage with their friends, "Isn't this cool?" and show their ideas to each other, which worked really well. … they were just like, "Hey, look at what I can do." And I think that was cool to see their excitement. And they succeeded many times with the things they tried. Also those who don't usually shine, but suddenly had some success with something that hadn't worked for them before. (Coach 2, EE)

The players' eagerness and willingness to display their ideas indicates a boost in creative confidence. They felt proud of their ideas and were excited to share them with others, and positive reactions from peers and coaches reinforced their efforts, encouraging them to continue experimenting. Successfully coming up with and demonstrating new ideas also gave the players a sense of competence, as they experience the satisfaction of having created something valuable and worth sharing. Again, this shows that The Idea Factory exercises generally helped the players explore action possibilities that were not being generated, discovered, utilized, or attempted in usual training sessions. However, some players and teams had a harder time than others exploring many different ideas.

> In a way, I think it was difficult. We had to constantly come up with new ideas. I just think that's a bit hard. But I also think it was really good because we got to use all our ideas. (Player 2, UU)

6.2.2. Community, Participation and Inclusion

The process of collaboratively exploring multifaceted action in The Idea Factory fostered a special kind of community and togetherness among the players. From the coaches' perspective, the creativity training sessions fostered a unique form of unity, where exploring new and unusual possibilities with each other, and learning new things from each other, was prioritized over football prowess: They were challenged in a new way, where there's not just one who dominates it (Coach 1, EE).

> I think it created a different kind of connection in the group, where there was room for quirky adventures, where the best and worst players were somehow equalled, because maybe football isn't the most important thing here. […] it gives a good dynamic to a group, some more togetherness, so you don't have such a big separation between the less skilled and the best players. (Coach, CC)

> It's a different way to be together, another experience, where they got to know each other in a new way. It was not just football that was in focus. So the best player was not necessarily the best player. Instead, it was all about who had the best imagination. And that's typically not the best player." (Coach 2, NN)

Moreover, coaches experienced that the focus on exploring new and unusual action possibilities with their teammates allowed players to "see each other from new sides" (Coach 1, EE), "created a sense of security with each other" (Coach 2, NN). This enabled players to break away from hierarchies, roles and group dynamics typically seen in football teams. Furthermore, coaches believed the training helped players understand that "they can do something together regardless of what level they are at" (Coach 2, NN), because they "can come up with something, even if they're not as good as some of the others". Accordingly, the creativity tasks were generally considered as a key to promote inclusion, allowing players at all levels to explore action possibilities based on their unique bodily capacity.

> The advantage of this [the creativity training] is for sure that everyone can participate. Regardless of level. And everyone thinks it's fun. (Coach 1, NN)

> Some of our players are really good and have played in several years, and others are quite new, but by training in this way, everyone can participate. (Coach 1, UU)

> They had great fun, regardless of whether it was A, B, or C players. […] And they were seen and heard, you can really see that on them. And some of them grow a bit by getting that attention. (Coach 3, WW)

Further signifying that the training balanced the team hierarchies by adding creativity as a key value and focus area, coaches noted that the duos and trios could be mixed in any way, and "it didn't need to be their best football mate" (Coach 1, NN). Football skills were not necessarily a vital a condition to succeed in these exercises, "so it doesn't really matter who you're on team with, and no one said, 'Oh, I don't want to be with him'. They have fun with each other. And there's no one who looks down on anyone. There's no difference between them. And it's not just about scoring goals" (Coach 1, EE).

In addition to fostering community and inclusivity, coaches highlighted that the creativity training in general, and The Idea Factory in particular, encouraged greater participation and inclusion of players who might not typically stand out on the field to shine. Coaches argued that several of these players, often less skilled in conventional football tasks, demonstrated remarkable inventiveness. This led to moments of recognition and success, boosting their confidence. Coaches described how the exercises allowed them to shine and found it rewarding to see them contribute in new and meaningful ways.

> I would also like to say something else that this form of training is good for, and that it's about is getting some players out of their shells who might tend to hide a bit. I would say that this training has been invaluable in terms of involving the quieter children and not just "the usual suspects". (Coach 2, WW)

> You can also see that some of those who felt they might not be as good; you can see that they have started to become very happy about it [the creativity training]. They discover that they can find out more things. They realize that 'I can actually do this, and I can actually try to do it in my own way'. And such things. … I think, generally speaking, all the exercises have been in such a way. Someone them, like Pete, for example, he never scores, right? And he might feel like, 'Do I even want to play football?' But this has really helped him to enjoy it. He found it super fun and laughed a lot during the sessions. And I think he found it great because it's not just about being good at everything, and scoring goals. (Coach 1, EE)

> One of the less competent players, one of those who focus on other things than football, right, but then suddenly... He got a lot of praise. Because he actually let his imagination run wild, right? And then it was him they looked up to... And then it was him they mirrored. And it was also him we used as an example. It wasn't the best player to do a particular skill, but it was about being creative and having the most solutions … So it helped us put other children in focus. And you could really see him shine… And you couldn't have done that if it had just been a normal exercise, because then they would have done the same thing. But the idea that you could, if there was someone who needed a little encouragement, could give them a pat on the shoulder. And give them the feeling that everyone is seen. (Coach 1, NN)

As expressed in these quotes, the exercises opened new participation possibilities for the less skilled players, fostering inclusion and diversity in the team environment. While enabling some players to showcase their creative abilities, the requirement to constantly come up with new and unusual ideas were less meaningful for others, particularly a few of the best players on the teams, who preferred relying on their well-developed skills, putting them at the top of the hierarchy (see also section 6.4.1).

Despite such issues, coaches were starting to recognize that the creative qualities had already been brought into regular training and matches. When asked what the players gained from the creativity project, a coach from Urban United replied that "they've gotten some new ideas about how they can play football. Like inventing something and being inspired by something. We can see it, like when they've been out for a match, or the weekly training where we haven't had creative training, we can see that they use some of the things" (Coach 1, CC). He continued to argue that,

> When you focus on it in training, I think at some point, when you play a match, you automatically start finding new solutions to the situations you face. So I think you take what you learn here, and you simply take it with you. And we're starting to see early signs of that. The idea that if I can't do it this way, then I have to run over there, or I have to run back, or... So in that way, I think they become more creative in their play. They start to move more on the field, instead of standing still. I'm pretty sure that's what they get out of it. (Coach 1, CC)

6.3. The Play Workshop

In he third creativity exercise in each session, The Play Workshop, groups of two or three players took turns to create a game plan for how to outplay, outsmart or overwhelm a defender placed in front of a small goal. Players repeated these 2v1 or 3v1 scenarios several times, but before each attempt, the

players were encouraged to make a new or refined plan for what they would do, while taking into account creativity-stimulating task-constraints such as finding new and different ways to surprise the opponent (CT1), be confuse he opponent (CT3), or play in aesthetically beautiful or impressive ways (CT8). Other types of task-constraints included all players only being allowed to pass either right or left (CT2), or forward or backwards (CT6), or each of them having between 1 and 6 touches on the ball (CT4). Besides describing the tasks, the training manual advised coaches to observe the planning dialogues and to ask open-ended questions to encourage adaptable risk-taking (e.g., what would be the opposite of the last attempt? How can you be even more unpredictable?), and to provide football-relevant input to broaden their exploration (e.g., open-ended game principles and skills that can be used in different ways; ways to be unpredictable such as sudden tempo shifts, or changes of direction).

6.3.1. Enjoyment and Engagement

The first theme related to The Play Workshop regards players experience of creating and attempting different plans, which e.g., involved agreements for combinations, passing sequences, running paths, or specific feints or dribbles to be tried out as part of their plan to surprise the opponent (field notes). The players found it fun and exciting to be allowed to plan their interplay without coaches predefining how they should play, in a process where they could explore all kinds of things. They enjoyed having the autonomy to come up with their own tactics and felt competent when creating good, useful plans.

> It was really fun that we got to make our own plans, and then we could pass the ball around, move the defenders, and take shots on goal. We got to choose what we wanted to do ourselves. (Player 1, UU)

> It's so fun because you could decide what you wanted to do. Then you could simply choose exactly what you wanted to learn, and if it was something you were bad at, you could get better at it. It was also very new, because normally, we don't decide ourselves. The coaches say it. He tells us what to do and everything. But here, we can decide for ourselves what we want to do in the exercise we're in. We can just do all sorts of things, and do fun things, and do fun things that make it fun, and everything, and where it's cozy, and it's just really fun to do it because you usually never get to do that in regular training. (Player 1, CC)

As with this player, several player highlighted the value of "As expressed by the players, the peer-to-peer-led planning process involved many different attempts. In this regard, a frequent observation was that the players were deeply engaged in producing plans, including technical and tactical considerations about who should be where, when and where the ball should be played, what feints each player should do, and who should take the shot (field notes). And during the planning, players helped each other develop and elaborate their ideas and plans (field notes, CT7, UU). Moreover, they often tried to transfer ideas generated in the previous exercises or sessions, such as tricks invented in the superhero theme in The Dream World (field notes, CT1, CC; CT5, NN).

In this regard, many players seemed to prioritize process over outcome during The Play Workshop. As mentioned by coaches, players didn't care much if their plans failed (see also section 6.5.1.). This was also highlighted by a Western Wizard player, who stated that "then you keep at it, if it fails and don't work, then you come up with another one" (Player 1, WW). Similarly, it was regularly observed that when the plans didn't work, players quickly went on to making another, even wilder, plan (field notes). Rather than simply scoring a goal, they were more focused on successfully executing unique or challenging parts of their plans, such as nutmegs, loops, tricks, confusing running patters, or other special features (field notes). This task and process-oriented approach provided them with success experiences and a sense of competence. As described by Northern Ninja players, when asked what made the tasks with forced passing direction fun (i.e., from CT2 and CT6):

> It was fun because if you could only pass to the left, so you had to run across. When you had the ball, you had to try to get it as far as possible to the right to pass left. It was fun because you couldn't pass to the right, so you had to try to get the ball over to the left and then shoot. (Player 1, NN)

Accordingly, players found it enjoyed the challenge of coming up with useful plans that satisfied the unusual conditions provided by the task constraints (section 6.3.). As in these examples, the players participating in the interviews enthusiastically talked about some of their very best plans from The Play Workshops across the program, demonstrating that this had been a focus area for them.

> It was two against one. Two (attackers) come here, and they have to dribble past him (defender) with something. By shooting over there, for example. Or the teammate runs up here. And then you dribble past him (the defender), because then he thinks he need to cover over there. Then, I do the shot fake to make hum run over there, but then I dribble past and shoot. (Player 2, WW)

> It was fun making plans, because then you could try to trick the one who defended, for example faking takt you played right and left. Then you could show that you are playing that way, but in the end, you just play the other way around, and then you could try to score. (Player 1, NN)

These plans often contained clear elements of surprise and deception. In this regard, several players highlighted that the most fun exercises were those where they had to make plans that could confuse, fool, surprise, and deceive and the opponent as much as possible. Among more, players argued that coming up with new tricks or surprises would help them to become more unpredictable in matches, thereby helping them outsmart opponents. Further, the open-endedness of these tasks (e.g., compared to tasks with forced direction, or limited number of touches) allowed imaginative and playful solutions, such as a player who abruptly pointed to the side, yelling "see, an ice-cream truck" or "see, there is a bird" to distract the opponent (field notes). Further, some players started using code words for elements of their plans, such as a particular pass or a cross run (field notes, CT5, NN).

> It was cool because you could confuse them and distract them (the opponent), while the other (a teammate) had the ball, so he could score … and do like, that you could fall and pretend like you had broken your leg. It was very funny. (Player 2, UU)

Such atypical solutions brought an additional element of fun to the exercises in The Play Workshop.

6.3.2. Involvement and Empowerment

Based on their experience of the players' engagement in the creation and execution of many different plans in these exercises, coaches stressed the value of the creativity training in terms of involvement and empowerment, putting players in charge, empathising autonomy, collaborative problem-solving and communication. Empowering players to device solutions fosters active and engaged participation, in terms of enhancing control, ownership and responsibility of their roles, decisions, and strategies.

> I like the exercises where they had to think a bit for themselves. For example, with the assembly line [i.e., a path created by cones, where players walked back to the start while planning their next move] in The Play Workshop, where they can actually make a plan. Now we did this, what can we do next time, to get to score, or to get past, or whatever. And I think it's a great way to do it. So they are very involved in the training and have to come up with some solutions themselves. (Coach 1, UU)

> I think you can see that it gives the boys some co-determination ... I think they feel that they have more influence on what happens. It gives some buy-in. And I think that will be invaluable to carry on from this process. Trying to give the boys some autonomy in the training, instead of us just saying, now you have to do this and this and this. And if you don't do it like this, then you're doing it wrong. Because normally we would say, at this station, we do this and at that station, we do that. And then we run it for 10 minutes, and then we rotate. But here they get to engage a bit in it, right. (Coach 2, WW)

Coaches also appreciated how players immersed in the creative planning (see section 6.3.1.), allowing them to take their time to generate and refine their plans. The coaches expressed enthusiasm in seeing the players unfold as creative sparring partners (also see section 6.2.1.), impressed by the variety of solutions discovered and attempted: "I think it was really fun to hear and see what come out of it" (Coach 2, WW). For example, a Northern Ninjas coach said that it was fantastic to see how the players engaged in dialogues like "Hey, wouldn't it be cool if we did it this way?" or "Try this, and then I'll do this," (Coach 1, NN). Allowing for football-relevant dialogues, coaches found the creative planning beneficial for players' development, as it put their techno-tactical knowledge to the test in many ways.

> They loved making the plans. And they didn't care at all if the plans didn't work. Most of them at least. Others said, "Hey, you didn't pass to me, like we planned" ... There were moments when the exercise almost came to a halt because they just had to finish making their plans. They thought it was so cool. Even though the plans didn't work so well for some of them. But seeing that, how they, once you get them started, they could really spend much time talking about their plans, right … And I also think it increases their football expertise. It increases their knowledge because they need to talk about some football-relevant things to find out how to get past the opponent. … A good thing to carry on from this project is to make them aware that it does not need to be a coincidence what happens. You can have a plan and can do something to confuse the opponent. So I think this way of involving the children is a good way to get the tactical aspect integrated, which is often difficult at this age. (Coach 1, NN)

Furthermore, from the coaches' perspective, creating and playing out their own ideas in the scenarios, developed their ability to find solutions during gameplay. When they are used to discussing strategies and solutions, they can better handle challenges during matches.

> They love being challenged. You know, where they have to come up with a plan, that's the coolest thing. Welcome to the Olsen Gang, right? They loved it. That's what we do too little of as coaches. Involving the kids. You know, getting them to think for themselves ... Last week, I had an indoor tournament with this team, and they started asking, can I be there, and so on. So I said, you know what, you can make the tactics. Just tell me what you want to do. And they did it. And then the parents are standing there, "why aren't you shouting more? Why aren't you doing this?" Just let the kids try, right! They are the ones who need to learn to solve the game. I think it's been great, the way this training opened this aspect about getting them used to talking to each other. … when they play matches on the weekend, then they can solve the game much better. They don't just stand there looking at us when it's not working. (Coach 1, NN)

As evident in this quote, the coaches' positive experiences with The Play Workshop exercises inspired several of them to also start integrating this way of involving and empowering players in other training sessions and even matches. Coaches note that the strong emphasis on involvement and empowerment in The Play Workshop have positively impacted the performance in regular training and matches.

> What I quickly found to be really good was the assembly line. Which we almost always use now, when we do this kind of small-sided games. I like that they get a break to talk to each other. What did we do now? What can we do next time to get past or solve it? … And when we play a match now, we actually say to them, "now make a plan for your lineup and how you will play". And that is directly a result of this project. And the boys also like that, that they meet briefly, and they talk about how we distribute ourselves and how we will play … every time we've had creative training, there's been that station where they had to find a creative way to get past a defender in one way or another [i.e., The Play Workshop]. And I can clearly see, that they're starting to do that when we play in a regular way, then there are some of those things they're starting to take with them. And it was super cool to see. And as I just said, before we play a match, we're also using it to say, "now you remember when we did creative training, where you had to find smart, surprising ways to get past. You can also do that when we play here. It's really the same way you should do it". And then they're ready to go out and try it in the match. ... We've also, for warm-up, we've done the assembly line, where they just have to think a bit about, "next time you come up and have to make a pass and shoot, or then you have to try to do it in a new way". It works super well. So some of those things, we've simply chosen to take forward. And we will continue to do so in the future. (Coach 1, UU)

6.4. The Challenge

The fourth type of exercise in each creativity session was called The Challenge. These exercises were designed as small-sided in a 3v3+1 (i.e., with players taking turns being the joker) format playing on a 30x20m field with a goal in both ends. However, the numerical and dimensional aspects of the game could be adapted to the number of players available and their skill level. In each session, the rules of the game were changed by introducing novel task constraints. These involved variants such as Reload vol 1 and 2, where a large dice with plastic pockets on the sides (i.e., inserted with the numbers 1 to 6 on paper sheets) should be rolled to reload either the number of available passes (CT1) or touches (CT5) every time a player had used all those provided at the beginning. The mega dice was also used in other formats in The Challenge, where it provided each player (or team) a fixed number of touches for each possession (CT7), a fixed passing direction (CT3) or a disorienting bodily task to be executed during gameplay (CT2, e.g., both hands on the back) or after each pass (CT6, e.g., spin 360 degrees). It should be noted, however, that the latter task constraints could also be chosen by the coach without using the mega dice. In another format, the two teams were asked to play with either 'risk-taking and bravery' or 'patience and control' (CT8). The last task constraint required all players to use a different part of their foot for each pass (CT4). Similar to the assembly line in the The Play Workshop (section 6.3.), the training manual advised the coaches to set up team huddles before and during the exercises, allowing the teams to make a gameplan, considering how the constraints impacted their teamwork.

6.4.1. Break Habits and Leave Comfort Zones

The novel constraints in The Challenge forced the players to improvise and adapt to the changing and abnormal game situations emerging in the exercises. Bringing their usual way to play out of function, the unusual constraints required the players think differently and come up with spontaneous solutions since usual choices would be inefficient. Breaking habits of thought and action, the diverse Challenge exercises disabled players habitual way to participate, their usual way to make decisions and interact during gameplay. This was considered highly relevant for both players and teams. For example, while previously relying on individual skills, the constraints compelled new individual and team strategies: "The tasks forced them to think, both on and off the ball" (Coach 1, EE).

> These exercises are good at disrupting the players' usual way of playing football, which is great. I think it's beneficial, because it forces them to do things differently than they are used to. … It's great to push the boys out of their comfort zone. … For example, the exercise where you can only pass in one direction is extremely good. These exercises are really good exercises because they cognitively force the player with the ball, and everyone else, to think about their next move. Otherwise, if you can only pass to the left, you suddenly end up on the left sideline, with no options. (Coach 2, WW)

As highlighted by the Urban United coach, the most task constraints implicitly enforced players to use the entire playing area which helped them discover that they need to move to open space: "If we play normally, they tend to bunch up, with everyone running after the ball, but to solve these tasks you simply need to use the whole area, constantly move around, use each other as a team, and find new ways to get past the opponents" (Coach 1, UU). As he argued, the creative approach with novel constraints would develop their tactical awareness and game intelligence in a more efficient and motivating way than to freeze a game and talk about how to create the space needed: "Here, they are forced to discover these solutions themselves" (Coach 1, UU). This was echoed in Eastern Eagles:

> You can see it in matches. Some of those who were really good in previous years, where they could just go through and dribble up. They can't do that anymore because the other teams have players who are just as good. You need to have a different strategy. So I think it's really good that they learn to use each other … In these exercises, you can't just do what you want, you shouldn't just do things by yourself all the time. There are some constraints on what you should do. Some things that challenge you a bit… And it made them realize that now we can't just run up and score. We have to play together. (Coach 1, EE)

Despite being quite unusual task constraints, several coaches identified game-relevant elements. As seen in the above examples, some constraints exaggerated the collaborative efforts in using the whole area and play together. Reversely, other task constraints pushed players to take more risks and attempt things that they might normally avoid due to the possibility of failure, such as dribbling in pressured situations. For example, the constraints with varied bodily disturbances (CT2, CT6) often led to unpredictable and demanding scenarios where players had to come up with spontaneous solutions, when teammates were occupied with tasks like performing a somersault after each pass (field notes, CT6, CC). Consequently, the rules inverted players usual ways to interact, e.g., making return passes impossible. The coaches also highlighted the value of these exercises in encouraging players to adapt to unexpected situations.

> The cool thing about it, uh, yeah, if you look at it from a football perspective, it forces the players to think differently. For example, when a player receives the ball, he could be like "damn, he is doing a somersault. I was thinking I would be under pressure and would play it back to him, but I can't. What do I do then?" So the player who gets the ball constantly has to think, okay, how can I be creative now, how do I get out of this situation, right. (Coach 1, NN)

Similarly, the task constraints involving a limited number of touches (CT5, CT7) altered the course of the game, creating many unusual and demanding situations (see also 6.4.2). Often, the player with the ball found themselves surrounded by several opponents, needed to spontaneously devise survival manoeuvres (field notes). For example, in the Tombola exercise (i.e., two-minute rounds, where each player had different but fixed amounts of touches for each action), the ball was played to the rearmost player on the field, who was then forced to take six touches in a pressured, risky situation before he could play it forward again (field notes, CT7, UU). A solution that would rarely occur in a normal game as the defender would typically get rid of the ball before facing too much pressure. Whereas this regards players who might not be that comfortable with the ball and might fear making mistakes if keeping it too long, rolling a low number of touches would be equally challenging for 'ball hogs', that spend too much time with the ball, or want to do things on their own.

> They can't just drive alone up the field, because they only had a few touches available. You could see that they couldn't just do what they usually do, especially those who just want to run straight up and score, where it's usually just the same two or three players that scores each time. (Coach 1, EE)

Similar to coaches seeing the value of The Challenge exercises in terms of challenging the players in new ways, several players expressed that they enjoyed being forced to not just play as usual.

> The Reload exercises was one of the funniest things we've done in the creativity sessions because there's a lot of play in it. Because we only had so few touches, so we had to remember to play with each other. Because we have more if we combined all the touches. (Player 2, CC)

> I thought it was fun that the dice decided our touches, because then we didn't have unlimited touches, but a random number of touches … For example, if you can touch it five times, and then only two, you need to do something different. It was fun with the dice in the reload exercise because you couldn't just dribble up the field all the time … It was fun that we were allowed to try something new, like only passing the ball in one direction, because then you couldn't always just play it forwards. (Player 1, UU)

While most players embraced the unusual challenges, others found it difficult to leave their comfort zones, being more bound by their preference to play regular matches, scoring goals, and stick to their

strengths and most proficient skills. In this regard, the novel constraints introduced some frustration among certain players. Sources of this frustration were shared in the focus group at Western Wizards, where a player expressed annoyance at not being allowed to utilize openings that would typically lead to scoring opportunities: "If there is a teammate totally alone up here (he points at the illustration), who can easily shoot, but then I still need to pass it to the left side. It's annoying, because then there are fewer chances to score" (Player 2, WW). Similarly, while the other two players in the focus group described playing with bodily disturbances as fun, the same player argued that "it was annoying, that you constantly had to stretch your arms up or to the side, because it was almost impossible to pass the ball". And while the other two found Reload fun (see 6.4.2.), he disagreed "because you constantly had to go out instead of continuing to play… It was annoying that you couldn't just keep attacking. Because then you couldn't score ... It's annoying that you can make all those mistakes when someone suddenly runs out" (Player 2, WW). As argued by an Urban United coach, such frustration reveals that the novel tasks did indeed challenge the players habitual intentions, pushing them out of their comfort zones and forcing them to explore other things than what usually works for them.

> We have sometimes experienced that some of them could get a bit frustrated. Like, "why can't I just dribble as I can", or... "Oh, I don't want to", and "Why do I only have to do a somersault every time?" ... They just want to play a regular game. That's probably the biggest challenge. But we have been able to handle it and say, well, now we're just practicing this, and then they accept it. … But there can be some frustration about it because it challenges them. … Especially in the first sessions, they often just wanted to do it in a way where they know they could succeed. The idea that they should do something they might not succeed at has been challenging to get them to embrace. And we probably haven't fully achieved that yet. They need to feel that it's okay to do something that might look silly, or that they might not score the next five times because they're trying something completely new. It's difficult to get them to move in that direction. They would rather just dribble past and score, right? (Coach 1, UU)

An example of such frustration was observed in Urban United, during the Disorientation exercise, which involved bodily disturbances during gameplay (CT2, e.g., play with a hand in front of an eye). Here, a few players were difficult to get to listen and expressed they just wanted to play a real match. Further, when they were told that the next rule was that they could only walk (i.e., not run), a player exclaimed that "we don't learn anything from that". Despite such initial expression of impatience and resistance, they embraced the task when the game restarted, committing to adapting their gameplay to the unfamiliar constraint. They appeared to enjoy themselves and have fun while coming up with new solutions to play and dribble past their opponents while walking (field notes, CT2, UU).

> My general conception is that the boys had a lot of fun with it. Once they got into the mindset, they've had a great time, even though some things have challenged them. The biggest point must be that they've really had fun with this. And so have I. Because they come up with good ideas and sometimes crazy ideas. And then I think that creating a space, especially with the group of boys I have, where it's allowed to make mistakes. And it doesn't matter if things go wrong, and that you talk openly about it. I think that has also done something really good for it. (Coach, UU)

Finally, coaches noted that those struggling with the accentuated demands for inventiveness were typically some of the teams' best players, who usually relied on some well-developed skills that enabled them to outplay opponents. As described in section 6.2.2., the creativity training disrupted traditional social hierarchies, particularly those based on cultural capital. Coaches observed that some of the players who typically excel due to their athletic or technical abilities were pushed out of their comfort zones, as the activities disabled them to rely on their usual strengths. This shift was seen as healthy for the group dynamic, allowing a rebalancing of roles within the team. Coaches believed that challenging

the usual leaders by putting them in unfamiliar situations can help them grow. As argued by a Western Wizards coach, this creative way of challenging habits should be seen as a long-term investment in player development, "and the question is how we succeed in getting it into their heads, so they can see that it actually benefits them in the long run" (Coach 2, WW). As explored in the next section, the immediate enjoyment value of The Challenge was easier to recognize.

6.4.2. Embracing the Unexpected and Unpredictable

As explored in this section, the new task constraints and materials (i.e., the mega dice) employed in The Challenge exercises were seen as exciting and inspiring additions to the teams practice repertoire. Resembling the qualities of involvement, engagement, inclusion and play highlighted during the first three types of exercises, the challenges created unexpected, unusual and unpredictable situations, that caught players attention and created another kind of playful engagement and participation.

> The different task constraints, and using the dice, turned it into play instead of a regular match. It's a training match, but they're essentially just playing. So time flies. They practice football, but they don't really notice it because they're just playing. … I think they are so stimulated by the different constraints that they have to use a lot of resources to solve the situation. So they don't even think about the possibility of making a mistake. Also because they face the same challenges as a team. So they are in it collectively, in using only the outside of their foot, or doing a somersault each time, or whatever the task is. When it's the same for everyone, I find that it's more okay. Because it's difficult for everyone. Whereas in a more normal game, some boys would definitely dominate more, and some would be passive. I didn't see that in these exercises. They were all involved and engaged. … It breaks that usual routine, that now we practice matches, and becomes more like playing rounders or dodgeball at school. (Coach 1, UU).

Coaches also highlighted the challenge exercises as a social experience, fostering bonding and shared excitement among players. When players felt they were in it together, they were more willing to buy into the tasks and embrace the challenges. As described by the Eastern Eagles coach for The Dream World exercises, "it makes them loosen up a bit, when they are in it together, and see each other do it. You know, when they see a teammate do it and think, 'Oh, you're crawling like a beetle, then it's okay for me to do it as well.' (Coach 1, EE). This collective approach helped them focus on the fun and engaging aspects of the exercises, rather than worrying about making mistakes, or fearing to appear foolish or incompetent. It fostered a supportive environment where players could experiment and take risks, knowing their teammates were facing similar task constraints. This created a vigorous and dynamic environment, where everyone was actively involved and motivated to participate.

> Especially the exercises with the dice were good. There was great energy and enthusiasm from everyone. For example, the thing where I quickly have to go out and roll the dice, then quickly come back in because "I've just been reloaded" right? They just thought it was extremely fun. (Coach 1, UU)

> The exercises with the dice were those they thought were the most fun. You could also see this when we used them for regular training. When I brought them out, it was almost like watching some fans in a stadium when the home team scores. I mean, they went completely crazy, shouting and screaming, and expressed that it was just super awesome … It's also the first thing they ask for at training. Did you bring the dices today? They thought it was amazing to use the dice. (Coach 1, EE)

As highlighted here, the unexpected, unusual and unpredictable situations created in The Challenge was often initiated by the large dice with a plastic pocket on each side (i.e., see 6.4.), which was used to randomly divide tasks for individual players or teams. Contributing to further buy in and fun, the dice added to the acceptance of the unusual rules, by taking responsibility for the players actions – as well as their mistakes. In the words of an 8-year-old, the dice made it fun "because it decided all kinds of

things" (Player 2, NN). This aspect was elaborated by a Western Wizard coach, who argued that the new rules were more readily accepted when introduced by the dice, and not "the annoying coach":

> The dice added a completely different element. A different dynamic to the training. Because it was cool to roll the dice. Oh, and then I can touch the ball three times. … It breaks the monotony of doing things the same way. And they just think it's fun. And it's not so annoying that you can only touch the ball three times because it was the dice that said it … It's like they accepted it in a completely different way. So it was perfectly fine that you could only touch the ball three times. Because if we say to them, without using a dice, now you can only touch the ball three times, it can be completely overwhelming for them. But by having this different prop, that's fun to roll, and is big and interesting, they accept it in an entirely different way. And then it promotes some creative solutions because it breaks the normal approach to an exercise. And then I think it makes them feel like they are playing rather than being pushed through some boring exercise. (Coach 3, WW)

Besides underlining such playful benefits, both coaches and players enjoyed how these exercises (and especially Reload and the bodily disturbances) created temporary states of disorientation and vertigo. Disrupting the player's perception and balance and requiring them to navigate the field and control their movements, the constraints created fun, exciting and intense experiences. Players enjoyed the sensation of momentarily losing control and overview (e.g., running out of the game to reload), and the subsequent challenge of regaining it (e.g., returning to the game after reloading), finding their way back in the game. Both leaving from and returning to the field led to unusual and unpredictable situations, where those players left behind and/or the player returning needed to adapt and improvise. Given such demanding requirements of the game, none seemed to care about who won (see section 6.5.2.), with no one keeping track of the score despite many goals being scored (field notes, CT5, CC). As noted during each observation of the Reload exercise, almost all players paid close attention to how many touches or passes they had left, except a few players who had difficulties in keeping track or did not understand the rules (field notes, CT1, CT5, CC, WW, UU).

During field observations at Northern Ninjas, players expressed that it was cool and unpredictable to try the reload game, as they were unaware when their teammates would need to reload. Consequently, they did not know exactly when either teammates or opponents would have to leave the ball to go out and roll the dice. A Crazy City player further addressed such unpredictability, when asked about their experience of the reload exercises. After enthusiastically replying that "it was really, really, really, really fun!", he then went on to empathise the quick pace of the game.

> It was fun because you had to quickly say "reload" to your teammates, and then you ran out quickly to roll the dice, and then you had to hurry back in. And it was really hard if the others had the ball and were deep down on our half. It was also very hard if all three had to reload at the same time. Then the others could just shoot at the goal right away. But you just had to be quick to do it. And quick to roll the dice and hurry back in. You just had to do it quickly. (Player 3, CC)

Describing the thrill of the fast-paced, unpredictable and unusual game scenarios in the reload games, this player highlighted how the sense of urgency and dynamism made it a unique experience. And when both players and coaches argued for why they would like to do these challenge exercises again, as proclaimed, they explained this with some of the odd, random and fun moments, that had occurred in the training (i.e., some of those that caused frustration a few other players, cf. section 6.4.1.).

> You had a certain number of touches, so if you passed to someone, and he passed it back, and he didn't know it was the last touch you had, and you were on your way out to get another one. (Player 1, WW)

> It was fun to watch someone dribbling down the side, then passing the ball. And instead of continuing, they had to do a star jump or an angel jump ... they had fun with it. And they could also see the humour in

> it, that it was quite strange... Like, he just received the ball, and then he runs completely the opposite way. It was so funny. Seriously. It was one of the better sessions. It went really well. (Coach, CC)

Similar aspects were highlighted for the other tasks in The Challenge, including those with different bodily disturbances. When the interviewer found the illustrations of these exercises during the focus group in Crazy City, players excitedly exclaimed "Oh yeah, that was crazy" (Player 2), "Yes, it was extremely difficult" (Player 3) and "It was so fun" (Player 2), before they started elaborating:

> You had to roll the dice and then do those things every time you pass the ball. Then you had to do the thing you land on with the dice. And it was just really fun because you have to quickly get up again if you have to do something on the ground, like rolling around, doing a somersault, or something like that. Or spinning around three times or something. So you have to quickly be ready again, you get dizzy from spinning around, you know. So you have to quickly be ready again, quickly. (Player 2, CC)

Besides acting quickly, and making quick decisions, the tasks constraints in The Challenge exercises also required them to orient themselves, coordinate with teammates, think strategically, and balance their actions to ongoing game dynamics. As argued by an Eastern Eagles coach:

> The reload exercises worked well. They thought it was fun, and it was great to see how they oriented and navigated the field. 'Oh, now there are two out rolling the dice', so they quickly had to see if they could get up and score. They tried to keep an eye on whether people were out, so they could find space to move up. Sometimes it worked, other times it didn't... For example, if they forgot that they only had two touches left and used them too quickly. But they thought it was fun. (Coach 1, EE)

6.5. Role Play

For the fifth and last type of exercises in each session of The Idea Academy, a series of player or team roles had been designed and printed on small, laminated paper sheets. These was to be used in a series of alternative 5v5 game formats. The Role Play exercises included various role sets. In chronological order from the project, these included player stereotypes (e.g., the magician and the captain; CT1), The Danish National Men's Team (e.g., Christian Eriksen and Rasmus Højlund; CT2), characteristic football cultures (i.e., Netherlands vs. Brazil; CT3) and international football stars (e.g., Lionel Messi and Christiano Ronaldo; CT6). Specifically, each role card included a headline (e.g., a metaphor or a player name) and a short description, exemplifying how to fulfil the role. The training manual inspired coaches to variously 1) hand the role cards out to each player (i.e., either randomly or based on what would be suitable challenges), 2) let each players choose themselves, or 3) help the teams divide a set of cards when partaking in tactical considerations (e.g., if roles suit certain positions). Further, it was advised that the players changed role during the game.

Besides such role sets, two novel games were invented for the creativity project. First, the so-called "Jackpot" exercise involved each team rolling the mega dice, with the number deciding how many points they would get if scoring during a two-minute game (e.g., playing 5 rounds). Without knowing each other's numbers, the teams had to make a strategy, such as deciding whether to go all-in or 'park the bus'. Next, the "Superheroes & Sidekicks" exercise involved three unique role cards with different superpowers: 1) invisibility, 2) magnetism, and 3) x-ray vision. If gaining the invisibility power (i.e., the opponents can't see you), the player was not allowed to score but could dribble without being touched and tackled. Two points were given if a goal was scored by with the magnetism power (i.e., you attract the balls to you), but this player could not make assists. Finally, a goal was also given two points, if the assist was made with x-ray vision (i.e., you see through everything), but this player could

not run with the ball. This exercise required not only the superheroes but also the sidekicks (i.e., the players not given a superpower) to creatively adapt and explore new ways to play.

While the players and coaches' experiences of the Role Play exercises also relate to the theme of breaking habits and leaving the comfort zone (see 6.4.1.), the following focuses on two interrelated patterns of meaning that clearly stood out as the main potentials of these kinds of creativity exercises: 1) immersion in tasks and roles, and 2) less focus on winning. Yet, as evident below, these two themes also draw on data pertaining to The Challenge. This indicates that while immersion and reduced focus on winning were significant dimensions of the Role Play exercises, these themes were also influenced by the broader context of the novel practices faced during the training sessions.

6.5.1. Immersion in Tasks and Roles

This theme regards how deeply players engaged with the exercises. By immersing themselves in their assigned roles and tasks, players were able to explore new perspectives and solutions. In this regard, coaches noted how players became absorbed in the roles, which helped shifting their focus away from typical outputs like who scored or won the game (i.e., as elaborated in 6.5.2.) and focused on different aspects of the game. Hence, immersing in the dynamics (i.e., the narrative about being a star player or a famous team), mechanics (e.g., the task to impersonate a particular role) and components (e.g., using the mega dice) of the creativity games, made the experience enjoyable and enriching.

> Many of them liked having those roles. They start to play and live themselves into that imaginary world that can be around it … Also in terms of how a game can proceed, when one is a magician and one is a fighter, then you can really do some other things than you are allowed to do in an ordinary match. I think they thought that was quite fun too. (Coach 3, WW)

As evident, several coaches shared the opinion that the Role Play exercises helped the players explore new ways to play. For example, the Crazy City coach noted that "in the Brazil and Netherlands game, you could genuinely see them step into those roles and do some different things" (Coach, CC). Indeed, during this exercise, a player who usually refrained from dribbling continued to do so and dared to challenge the opponents, because he chose a Brazilian who did so (i.e., Vinicius Junior). As he said, "I am him now" (field notes, CC, CT6). Reflecting this statement, several players argued that it was fun to get the role cards, because it made them feel like being those players.

> Playing Brazil against Netherlands was the coolest thing. Because you played as yourself, but then you felt like being one from Brazil or Netherlands. And it was really fun. (Player 2, CC)

> I liked it when we played like all those football players … For example, if you become Messi, you feel like you are Messi. And then you kick with your left foot … and if you are a fast player, you can run a bit faster. ... I just think it was fun to become a famous player ... You felt like the player you were playing as ... When we were Ronaldo and all those guys. Then you feel a bit better. (Player 2, UU)

As repeatedly observed during the Role Play exercises, the above examples illustrate how adopting the roles encouraged players to take more risks and worry less about making mistakes. Another clear example of how the players' immersion in the roles gave them more courage to attempt unfamiliar and difficult solutions is found in the field notes from the Northern Ninjas. Amid the game between Brazil and Netherlands, a player acting as Neymar pulled off a rainbow flick. Both coaches, parents, and teammates were surprised that he did it and thought it was very cool (field notes, EE, CT3). Then, in the briefing in the next session this player revealed that he tried to use this trick in the subsequent match, because he had trained it in the creativity training (field notes, EE, CT4).

And as observed during the sessions, the players cared a lot about which roles they got, especially in the exercises with Danish national team players and international football starts. For example, the players cheered at the opportunity to be national team players (field notes, CT2, UU). This shows that the idea of playing with such roles was meaningful for the players and instantly resonated with their aspirations and enthusiasm for the sport. Further, demonstrating their engagement, they started to call each other by the name of their assigned roles. And after the training, they couldn't wait to tell their parents which player they were (field notes, CT2, UU). As noted by the Eastern Eagles coach,

> They really wanted to show us that they could be Rasmus Højlund, for example, by just really fighting, and started asking 'did you see that game, did you see that he did this' talking about if you had seen this and that in TV. And then they yelled out to us, 'hey, I was just Højlund' or 'I was just Neymay, did you see it?', or something. They were very proud if they did something that looked cool that they had seen the person do, for example a cool pass or feint. (Coach 1, EE)

As implied in this quote, coaches – and a player too – noted that it was vital that the players knew the players on the role cards and were familiar with their style of play (e.g., had seen them om TV). The descriptions on the role cards were not always enough to help players understand how to play if they were assigned to a player they were unfamiliar with. As argued by a coach, "they could feel left out, and it could be difficult for them to immerse in it … So it worked the best with those really famous players" (Coach 1, UU). In this regard, some competition could arise in terms of who got the best roles. Coaches solved these issues with rotating the cards, letting more play with the same role and even by googling the players and watching some videos. Further, as noted by coaches, allowing the players to choose their roles themselves also facilitated engagement. Also, the abovementioned issues did not occur with the more open-ended abstract roles with player stereotypes (e.g., magician, fighter, captain), because the players could draw on knowledge from other contexts.

Despite such smaller issues, which also involved the aforementioned resistance towards transgressing comfort zones (also see section 6.4.1.), the various Role Play exercises were generally endorsed by coaches and players. And exhibited by a Western Wizards coach, these exercises played a key part in players becoming more open towards challenging themselves, and more willing to embrace difficulty, and the risk of making mistakes, for the sake of improvement and fun.

> I honestly think we've never focused more on letting them make mistakes than we have since starting this [the creativity training]. And I think it's really great that we can keep pushing that message: that it's totally fine to make mistakes. I've even started saying now, "I don't care if a hundred goals are scored here – that's not what matters. What matters is that you try out these roles, that you try these challenges." And honestly, I think if we can stick with that mindset, we can really get far with them. And this is really something what this [the creativity training] opens for – for both the kids and the adults. I saw it today too, in the exercise with the cards, where suddenly someone came over and said, "I really want the card where I can only use my weak foot." And I was like, "Okay, why?" And they just said, "Because I think it would be fun." And that was totally fine. That would never have happened if we were just playing a regular three-on-three drill, that they'd actually ask for a challenge like that themselves. (Coach 2, WW)

6.5.2. Reduced Focus on Results

Based on the immersion in tasks and roles as described above, this theme regards how the exercises in the Role Play (and The Challenge) modality shifted players' emphasis from winning to processes of creating, exploring, experimenting, adapting, and solving. The theme covers different perspectives on how the various creativity exercises reduced focus on competitive elements, scoring goals. Hence, it outlines the participants' experiences of the positive consequences of the creativity training in term of

reducing players' focus on results (e.g., who scores most goals). As described by a Northern Ninja coach, the creativity training "transformed the training into something else" (Coach 1, NN), fostering a more collaborative and playful environment, where the process was more important than the result.

> We have some boys who are very competitive; it's always about winning matches and scoring goals. And you see them go home from training upset because they feel they have played poorly, or the training match didn't end as they hoped… But then we had the reload exercise, where we just lost track of time, and ended up playing it for the rest of the training because they thought it was so fun. … They had a lot of fun with it, and many goals were scored, but no one knew the final score or who won. We still talk about this exercise, from that day. Usually, it's all about winning and scoring goals, but here, even though the exercise involved scoring, no one got upset when the other team scored. They just kept playing and having fun. That's the approach we want the kids to have… But often, you see that they get affected by it. It was great to see that it just didn't happen for them. I also clearly remember a goalkeeper who rolled a one and had to leave the goal to roll again, leaving the goal wide open for the other team. (Coach, CC)

In such ways, all coaches recalled exercises from The Idea Academy program, where the players usual focus on competition, results, and goalscoring was replaced by a strong focus on the creative process of solving the novel tasks provided. For example, a Northern Ninja coach said that "there was no focus on the result, and they didn't focus on who scored, not at all. The result didn't matter to them because they focus on other things, the dice, for example" (Coach 1, NN). Similar, coaches expressed surprise and appreciation at how little focus there was on winning during the new small-sided games and alternative match formats. This was experienced as a refreshing shift for everyone involved. For example, one of the Urban United coaches described how "the competitive element was somewhat dismantled in these exercises, which I think is really good" (Coach 1, UU).

> The biggest difference is that here, they don't think much about winning or losing. They are more immersed in the activity and find it fun. They are starting to get an age now, where they just want to win, and this can sometimes create some issues in the training if they lose. They can get upset, have disagreements or become unfriendly. But in these exercises, they just don't do that. They just have fun and don't care much about if they win or lose. It's not an issue. … Whereas if it were a regular match, it could be something they cared a lot about, right. But we don't experience that with any of these exercises, although it's still about scoring... It's just not something that occupies their thoughts ... Because I think, again, they are so stimulated to think creatively, that they don't think about the competition element at all. (Coach 1, UU)

As highlighted by coaches, the reduced focus on scoring and winning was a relief. The special game formats with unique roles and tasks were refreshing because they shifted the focus away from results. This approach left everyone in a better mood. While the usual focus on results was often the root of conflicts among players, this was rarely seen in the creativity training. The reduced focus on results also impacted the players' experience of the atmosphere. Among more, the players argued that the creativity training "was much more fun, because we didn't get into arguments as much as we normally do, and it's fun because we do something different than just regular football" (Player 2, UU).

As expressed by several coaches across the above quotes, the reduced focus on results was liberating because usually, the competitive element tended to dominate their practices, with consequences for the players creativity, participation and enjoyment. For example, the Crazy City coach told that when the "competitive instinct kicks in" the use of familiar strategies and actions took precedence, resulting in gameplay "where players only tried the things they think will work" (Coach, UU). Among more, this tended to happen in usual practice where the coaches e.g., formally instructed a series of ways to solve the game situation, that were repeated by the players (i.e., both using their weak and strong leg to make an active first touch, cut around a cone, and make a curve shot) but when progressing the exercise to make it more functional and game-related (i.e., adding an opponent instead of dribbling around a cone),

the competition gene ”they forgot all about the difficult variants they had just been very good at practicing. Basically, none of them received it with their weak leg although I encouraged this and we practiced it. Then it was more important for them to win the duel. So putting some creative constraints on this, like we did in the creativity training, would definitely have been good. Otherwise, they tend to be stuck in their habits, doing only what they know they can succeed with” (Coach, UU).

As evident above, the novel exercises in the creativity training shifted players' intentional orientation to the training from competing, scoring and winning to engaging with the unique tasks, materials and roles. Similar aspects were observed across all teams. For example, at the observers first visit at Eastern Eagles, the coach mentions that they had quite positive experiences with the various role cards in the two previous sessions (field notes, EE; CT3). Besides enabling other players than usual to get success experiences (see section 6.2.2.), the coach had experienced that they cared more about their roles than about winning. Similarly, when observing the Tombola game at Northern Ninjas, the player focused on succeeding with their touches than the score of the match (field notes, NN, CT7). And instead of focusing on the score, players were asking each other task-related questions like “who were you in this game?” (i.e., which role), or “how many touches did you have left” (field notes).

Further, a unique example of the reduced focus on results emerged in the Jackpot exercise. Although the special rules in this exercise ultimately regarded gathering many points, it proved as a useful way draw players attention from outcome to excitement, creative planning and trickery. As a Northern Ninja coach underlined, “Jackpot was just genius. They made great plans and for example fooled the opponents by pretending they rolled another number than they did … And even though the score was 6-2, they still talked about parking the bus if rolling a one and engaged in making plans about this even though they were far behind” (Coach 1, NN). This indicates that players were more engaged in the strategic and creative aspects of the game rather than the final score.

With that being said, it should be stressed that the creativity training is not a magic cure for all result-oriented thinking, as some players were still quite focused on winning during certain exercises (field notes, UU, WW, CT2), but it didn't dominate as much as usual. As argued by a Western Wizards coach, “I think it will take a longer period to really change something, but if we continue working with this, incorporating some of it going forward, then I think it could create a more playful approach to football. So it doesn't become so result-oriented.” (Coach 1, WW). Summing up several of the key themes from the findings, of the Northern Ninja coaches listed three things she would tell others about the outcomes of the creativity training to make them invest in this approach: “The children have less focus on results. Are happy when they go home. And you make them talk together.” (Coach 2, NN).

6.6. Conditions, Dilemmas and Issues

Whereas the above themes primarily focus on players and coaches' engagement with and experience of the five kinds of creativity exercises, the final themes more specifically explore the usefulness and application of the program, in terms of exploring the underlying conditions, dilemmas and issues regarding the organization and facilitation of the training.

6.6.1. Digesting the Manual

In terms of preparing for the creativity sessions, the coaches were provided with a training manual and required materials (e.g., dices and role cards). The training manual included a detailed 1-pager for each

exercise, providing advice and examples for how the given exercise could be introduced and facilitated. Given the different backgrounds and contexts, the program was received quite differently.

Some coaches experienced that the planning of the training sessions involved a large workload, and requiring a lot of reading and planning. While appreciating the new ideas, the number of unfamiliar things to keep track of across the exercises, both in terms of tasks, materials, and ways to organize and facilitate the exercises, was also considered as overwhelming. Accordingly, the program required additional capacity when preparing and performing the sessions (e.g., to remember when and how to use role cards). Highlighting the importance of the materials, a coach regretted that he forgot to bring the cues for the machine theme in The Dream World. It was frustrating since the exercise did not run that smoothly because he had trouble coming up with enough relevant machines to inspire the players.

The novel requirements resulted in, especially in the beginning, challenges in terms of maintain flow in transitions between exercises. Some coaches even considered that doing so many new, demanding things in one training session was mentally exhaustive for both coaches and players. They recognized that condensing things was necessary to gain as much insights as possible in the short project period. In the future, however, they agreed that the new types of task constraints, materials and practice forms could be integrated with existing practices to create a more balanced and manageable regimen.

Further, those having some issues with the planning noted that parts of the program could be difficult to grasp due to its somewhat academic language, necessitating multiple readings. At times, coaches found the descriptions confusing and struggled to visualize how the exercise would be executed on the pitch. This uncertainty led to them doubt if they were implementing the creativity principles correctly, and occasionally this resulted in the omission of key features of exercises (e.g., not using the huddle in The Challenge). In this regard, coaches argued that each exercise could have been described more simply, and by empathising the 'need to know' (e.g., the task) rather than the 'nice to know' (e.g., tips for facilitation; suggestions for progressions), and clarify that the additional advice was optional. Further, they suggested that these parts be moved to separate parts of the manual, as the facilitation advice were somewhat repetitive, making it harder to identify the 'need to know'.

Conversely, after an initial adaptation period (see section 6.0.) other coaches found the manual easier to digest and apply. While these coaches applauded that each session was structured in the same way (i.e., the five types of exercises. section 5.1.1.), which made it more familiar for the players, others found this uniformity somewhat confusing, as this made it difficult to distinguish how one exercise differed from the previous one. In this regard, somewhat contradictory to the experience of a high workload, some coaches also called for a greater variety of creativity exercises. As evident in quotes across the findings, others had already started to implement the principles from the manual across their own drills. Besides valuing the continuity across sessions, the coaches appreciating the program highlighted its well-structured format and useful illustrations. They liked that the description of each exercise was divided in boxes with headings, as this enhanced clarity and overview. They also found the facilitation advice practical and useful. Unlike others, and given more coaching experience, they were more confident in adapting the information from manual.

> I think it's nice to have a foundation to start from, so you can see how things are going. ... I've used the descriptions, which I found good to follow, as inspiration. And then I've also let the exercise take on a life of its own, maintaining the creative aspect while also letting the boys play. (Coach 1, UU)

In this regard, the program included recommendations on the duration of each exercise, but due to their unique and original nature (i.e., several exercises had never been tried before), this aspect was uncertain. Therefore, it was up to the coaches to adapt the timing based on their observations. If they found that players needed more time to engage with the exercises, they were encouraged to extend the duration (e.g., to overcome initial frustration and allow time for success experiences). In practice, and especially in the beginning of the program, the exercises often needed to be longer than expected. Introducing the exercises took longer than usual because they differed from standard drills. Further, the time spent on talking about plans (i.e., The Play Workshop) and strategies (e.g., The Challenge) meant that more time was needed to ensure a sufficient number of attempts or effective playing time. As noted in the manual, rushing through an exercise would not allow coaches and players to gain the full benefits of the training, and it neither allows this study to identify these (nor the barriers). Given the diverse training schedules of the five teams, ranging from one to one and a half hour (see section 5.1.3.), this meant that some exercises were skipped (i.e., mostly The Challenge or Role Play). Given the positive impact of the program some of the coaches chose to extend the training time.

Besides reshaping and simplifying the training manual, the abovementioned findings regarding the preparation for the creativity training suggest the need for further educational initiatives in terms of supporting the implementation of creativity-supportive coaching. Among more, such programs could draw on insights from the next two sections, regarding the organisation and facilitation of exercises.

6.6.2. Dividing the Resources

As described in section 5.1.3. and table 4, the teams applied the program in three different ways, depending on the number of players and coaches available. Northern Ninjas, Crazy City and Eastern Eagles kept all players in one group throughout the sessions, with either one (CC) or two (NN and EE) coaches (co)facilitating the exercises. Western Wizards divided the players in two parallel tracks, with two coaches for each half. Lastly, Urban United first conducted The Dream World for all players. Then the team of 27 players was in divided groups for three stations, covering The Idea Factory, The Play Workshop and The Challenge, each facilitated by one coach. Here, the orchestrator responsible for the training served as an extra hand, contributing where needed. Finally, Role Play was played on two parallel fields, with two coaches facilitating each game.

In terms of the findings for each specific kind of exercise, there are no clear patterns (and insufficient empirical material) to determine which organizational approach was most effective in fostering the positive outcomes of creativity as outlined throughout the previous sections. However, there may be additional benefits to station-based training, particularly in terms of reducing preparation workloads on individual coaches (see section 6.6.1.). Further, as noted by the observer, coaches responsible for the stations gained from running the exercises more times, both in terms of their ability to introduce the tasks for the players and their way to facilitate the creative process: "I liked to be responsible for the same exercise each time as it allowed me to find ways to facilitate it better and better each time" (Coach 1, UU). While he appreciated the benefits of the station-based training, they also expressed a desire to rotate between stations, feeling they might have missed out on valuable experiences.

In terms of coach resources, it was recurrently stressed during the interviews with coaches that more hands were needed. Especially The Play Workshop, The Challenge and Role Play involved several aspects that sometimes required them to be in two or more places at once. Among more, exercises on The Play Workshop, there was a need to support players planning (e.g., asking questions), act as an

opponent, observing if players complied with task constraints (e.g., number of touches), assisting with the dice and explaining tasks, and generally making the exercise run. Needing to choose where their presence was most needed, coaches had to leave some of aspects up to the player's self-discipline and responsibility. In such exercises, Northen Ninjas, Eastern Eagles and Western Wonders benefitted from having two coaches to divide the roles between them, e.g., enabling one of them to tag along with pairs or trios that needed additional guidance and assistance in making plans. For example, this involved providing inspiration for their idea generation, following up on their plans, and helping them reflect and elaborate on their previous attempt, thereby learning 'the creative planning routine'. In this regard, some coaches also discussed the possibility of involving parents in some of these tasks.

6.6.3. Running the Exercises

This section outlines the key insights regarding efficient facilitation of the five types of creativity exercises as identified during observations and coach interviews. Although considering one type of exercise at a time below for the sake of clarity and overview, the aspects outlined should be considered in general terms and can be regarded as advice for coaches aiming to integrate creativity-nurturing coaching into their practice repertoire. Depending on the organizational setup chosen (e.g., as outlined in section 6.6.2.), some of these insights would be more applicable than others.

6.6.3.1. Join the Fun

To effectively facilitate creativity-promoting activities like The Dream World, coaches should throw themselves into the exercises and join the fun by authentically demonstrating playful and imaginative examples. By actively participating and not merely observing from the sidelines, coaches can foster greater engagement among children. For instance, in when coaches lead by example by showing how to use the cues creatively, players are more likely to understand and embrace the concept of translating a word into an action. Further, when coaches took the lead in terms of experimenting with the cues, it encouraged a playful atmosphere. When coaches participate alongside the players, it can also reduce the feeling of being monitored, increasing players' comfort and involvement. In The Play Workshop, where the quality of facilitation significantly impacted the success of the exercise. In this regard, coaches noted how they managed to overcome the initial hesitation towards this exercise by becoming better to explain how to use the cues, starting to partake in the exercise themselves, and helping the players understand the benefits of using their imagination to come up with new moves. Initially, there may be skepticism and discomfort, but as coaches and players become familiar with the exercises, they gain confidence and imagination, ultimately finding the activities enjoyable and beneficial.

> They were a bit sceptical at first, with the superheroes, and those things, but I think it's because we had some issues explaining what they were supposed to do. …. At first, they didn't really want to do it and found it embarrassing. It was a bit too childish for them. But it gradually came along, as they started to dare more things, seeing it was not so scary. … and the further we came into the training program, the better they learned the exercises, so now they know they need to adjust their minds to imagine they're dribbling like something. Also, we've somehow learned to go down on another level, especially since we also started doing it as well as coaches. And it's like, the more times they've tried it, the more imagination they've gained. And towards the end, they thought these exercises were cool. (Coach 1, EE)

6.6.3.2. Dare to Lose Control

During the exercises in The Idea Factory, the players were encouraged to explore as many different solutions as possible. In this regard, it was noted that encouraging and praising peculiar, extraordinary

and unexpected solutions worked well in engaging players in the creative process. Further, coaches who cheered for creative solutions, showing their enthusiasm about players abilities to generate ideas, were more successful in create a playful and engaging atmosphere where creativity thrived and where players were less hesitant in attempting things that was at risk of failing. As noted by the coach from Crazy City, partaking in this project had led him to start focusing more on encouraging and praising creative solutions, even when they fail: "I've integrated this approach into our regular training. Instead of dismissing playful attempts, we now say, 'Nice try, let's try again next time.' This shift has made a noticeable difference" (Coach 1, CC). In this regard, it's crucial not only to praise visible and effective creativity but also to recognize the "invisible" efforts and unsuccessful creative attempts. Coaches should remain curious about players' ideas and avoid premature judgments. Even if solutions do not initially appear creative, there lots of ingenuity and imagination can at play (e.g., see section 6.1.2).

Furthermore, as seen in The Dream World and The Idea Factory, making room for imaginative, non-transferable ideas promotes inventiveness and enjoyment. In this regard, daring to lose control is vital in terms of fostering greater creative expression. Letting go of restrictions in terms of what is allowed in training sessions involves allowing activities (and solutions explored) to unfold for their own sake, without necessarily having a direct game-related utility. Hence, embracing a more flexible approach can transform training sessions into an enjoyable playground for creativity.

> During training, they laugh out loud, almost all of them, and have a blast. It tends to become a bit chaotic, I think. It easily turns into doing the craziest things they can think of. And maybe that's fine, I've also taught them to do that. And fundamentally, in terms of creativity. I it's a bit funny because all the illustrations of the exercises included the lines on the field. Because creativity is not a square, it's not some narrow field, that you have to be creative within. And if there's something the players can't figure out in these exercises, it's staying within the lines. They go completely outside that field. It's almost the first thing they all do. And at some point, no one was inside it. Everyone is somewhere else. And in terms of the creative part, that's fine. … If it was a classic exercise, we would been more over them, in terms of that square. Now we are a bit over them, but we also give them some freedom. And that's also what this can do. I think we have become a bit more loose in terms of restricting them. And that's a good thing. So they actually get to go a bit further out of the box. (Coach 2, WW)

6.6.3.3. Ensure Creative Success

To most effectively facilitate creativity-nurturing exercises such as those used on The Play Workshop, it is crucial to supervise the duos or trios' creative planning process. This involves asking questions and providing football-relevant inputs if needed (e.g., open-ended game principles such as overlaps, tempo shifts, pass-and-sprint strategies). Supervising the process enables players to explore a wider variety of solutions and help them become more comfortable and familiar with discussing plans with their peers. As noted by a coach "it was difficult to get them to talk to each other at first, but the more we work on it, the more they actually start to talk together" (Coach 1, UU). Further, the supervision involved making sure that the planning was not dominated by single players to further expand action possibilities explored and promote an inclusive environment (e.g., see 6.2.2. and 6.3.2.), ensuring that not players are not left out and all feel that they contribute to the creative process.

Another key point in terms of ensuring creative success experiences for all players is to ensure that the plans prepared are feasible. In this regard, coaches should adapt the amount of opposition to match the players' diverse skill levels. Acting as defenders themselves, coaches were able to provide tailored opposition, pressing just enough to challenge the attackers without causing unnecessary frustration. This allowed players to experience creative success and avoid the frustration of losing the ball before trying

their ideas (e.g., if the defender quickly won the duel). This also allowed the coach to prepare players for the type of opposition they would face in their upcoming attempt, which further inspired their planning. As a coach mentioned, "for example, I would say, next time, I will apply high pressure. Then they knew in advance what to expect". And rather than just acting as passive opposition, this also allowed coaches to spontaneously play along on playful, imaginative and untraditional solutions, where the players e.g., throw imaginary pee on the coach and thereby leaving him disgusted, or pulled the coach's beanie over his eyes to play past him while he was blinded (field notes; see 6.3.1.).

Finally, it is essential not to rush the players' planning process. Giving players time to delve into their considerations allows players to think over solutions and continuously challenge themselves to find new ways to succeed. Moreover, allowing ample time for planning demonstrates that the coach values the creative process and the players' ideas. Rushing the planning phase can inadvertently signal that the creative element is not truly important or that the coach does not fully believe in players' ability to come up with inventive plays. By giving players the time they need, coaches show that they trust and respect the players' creative potential, which in turn boosts their confidence and engagement.

6.6.3.4. Leverage Teachable Moments

Effective facilitation of exercises, such as those employed in The Challenge, requires patience and a steadfast commitment to continually encouraging players to challenge themselves. This involves encouraging them to step out of their comfort zones, take calculated risks and embrace mistakes. It is crucial to help players understand the value of exploring new approaches and improving their deficits, instead of only relying on their favoured solutions and proficient skills (see section 6.4.1.).

Further, to enhance players' openness towards new experiences coaches should highlight the benefits that come from deviating from usual practices. By fostering an environment where players feel safe to experiment (e.g., see section 6.1.2.), coaches can help them see the advantages of challenging their habits and embracing new strategies. As expressed by coaches, emphasizing the importance of failing and daring to make mistakes is vital for growth.

> I think we could spend even more time on that in the sessions and talk to them about it, that it's completely okay to make a mistake here, to just let it go. So they really feel completely secure in just doing something they've never tried before. Because it will develop them more. And they might find a new solution to something. (Coach 1, UU)

However, it may not be sufficient to just tell players about developmental and performative gains of creativity. In this regard, another aspect that proved useful in overcoming players resistance towards engaging in novel task constraints (e.g., see 6.4.1.) is to identify teachable moments and use these to highlight and discuss creative, match-relevant outcomes. When coaches talked to players about their conception of the task, their ideas, and their relevance to matches, it helped them engage. Specifically, it was observed that coaches could leverage such instances to highlight the transfer of learning (e.g., see section 6.4.2., on how the task constraints helped players utilize the entire playing area).

6.6.3.5. Be Patient and Trust the Process

Finally, in terms of facilitating novel exercises like those used in Role Play, the arts of repetition and familiarity is crucial in adapting to new practices, both for players and coaches. Coaches observed that the effectiveness of creativity exercises improved as they all grew more familiar with the rules (e.g., see 6.0.). These exercises require more repetitions and attempts for players to fully understand the premises and utilize the possibilities. Patience, humor, and engagement are essential qualities for coaches within

and across sessions. Within the single sessions, coaches must be be prepared to repeat the rules and instructions multiple times. Across sessions, coaches should consistently reinforce the principles and objectives of the creativity exercises, ensuring that players gradually build confidence and proficiency through continuous practice and familiarization.

Another point in terms of being patient involves resisting the temptation to dismiss novel types of exercises, task constraints and materials based on a single negative experience. Just as players are encouraged to persist in creative processes, coaches should also give new methods a fair chance. This underscores the importance of recognizing that growth often comes through repeated efforts and a willingness to learn from each experience. Without their commitment to the research project, some coaches might have chosen to not continue exploring the usefulness of the exercises they found most challenging. Luckily, and as exhibited by the following quote, coaches experienced a development throughout the process. Understanding the rules better and seeing the benefits, engagement and task performance improved. With time and persistence, coaches and players embraced the new practices:

> [..] when they are not allowed to repeat the same solution, it forces them to think of new solutions each time. And I found that quite difficult at first. It required a lot of pauses where we gathered them and said, 'Now you've done it this way. Next time, you need to try to do it in a new way.' And the more we worked on it, the better they got at it. They knew, 'Okay, we need to find new ways to solve this.' (Coach 1, UU)

Finally, it should be noted that despite the eight sessions in the Idea Academy involved the same five overarching types of exercises, no tasks were repeated during the project, except a few tasks being repeated across more types of exercises. Nevertheless, coaches argued that most task constraints used in the project as highly reusable and sustainable. They believed these tasks were perhaps even more effective than traditional exercises due to their ability in promoting involvement and enjoyment. One of the key advantages of these exercises was that there were numerous correct ways to solve the tasks and no wrong. This open-ended nature encouraged creative exploration. And as players develop, this would open new possibilities and perspectives to explore within the tasks.

6.6.5. Overcoming Resistance

While the coaches' experiments with The Idea academy was generally a success, it is not a one size fits all approach. The coaches mentioned that there was one or maybe two players on their teams that struggled more than others, and/or couldn't see the point of specific kinds of exercises. Despite this being a familiar issue in children's sport, it's worth elaborating, since resistance from team leaders can impact the rest of the team. The issue especially regard The Dream World exercises, but also The Challenge and Role Play, which brought players out of their comfort zones. Hence, this is linked to the issues of some players having a hard time leaving their comfort zone (see 6.1.2, and 6.5.1.). In terms of The Dream World, some children found this strange and childish. Remaining somewhat detached, they didn't take it seriously and did some silly things instead of engaging imaginatively.

> Those who only want to play football and are only passionate about playing football, and who don't want to be Hulk or anything else. You also force them to think differently. There was one in particular who had difficulty with it throughout all the training sessions. Who couldn't see it, in some way. Like, was a bit like, why should I do this. And he was one of the better football players. ... I hoped that as time went on, he would see it. But we never really got there… And I don't know what's going on at home, but there could be a father who says this is ridiculous. Who then planted an idea in his son's head, right. That's what we're up against sometimes. (Coach 1, NN)

> In my experience that this is the exercise where most of them had fun. As soon as they let go of their inhibitions, and could see that, okay, all of us have to try do it like a steamroller, then they think it's great fun. And they come up with all sorts of things. But we have one or two who still think it's silly, even during the exercises, but that's the same with other exercises. They just want to play matches and therefore think everything else is a waste of time. (Coach 2, WW)

While some coaches succeeded in overturning children's initial hesitation and helped them find this exercise meaningful (e.g., by engaging creatively themselves and help them understand the benefits, cf. 6.6.3.), other coaches also struggled engaging in this playful and imaginative activities. This was further connected to the theme of the cues, for example with the sports theme resonating more with these children than insects. And as noted by a coach, "when they first had crawled around on the grass like an ant, they never came up again and rarely touch the ball with their feet. Sometimes it could be too creative, but I guess that's my elite head that is talking to mee" (Coach 1, NN). Hence, there was a need to find a balance between playfulness and seriousness, as things could go off track, leading to excessive silliness and lack of focus that affected the rest of the training. However, some coaches experienced the opposite: "It's actually easier to get their attention when they have to be a superhero or come up with a new trick or whatever we're doing. It's like they're more focused" (Coach 1, UU). And as a coach from Western Wizards put it, "I think most of them actually found it really fun. If you ask them afterwards, they might say it's silly that someone does a ballerina, or something. But during training, they laugh their heads off, almost all of them, and have a blast" (Coach 1, WW).

Besides the resistance from players and coaches, it's also worth to consider parental influence, as noted by the Northern Ninja coach, in the first quote in this section. Indeed, the resistance from some of the players was largely influenced by their parents.

> A couple of players on the team don't think this creativity training has been as good as what they're used to. It's some of the boys who are the best at playing football. And who are leaders on the team, that the others look up to in the classic sense. And they are really struggling with this because it forces them out of their comfort zone, so they can't do what they're good at… And I think this is largely because the parents have a different opinion. Overall, it has been received well, and those who complain about this are those who already have opinions about many of things we do. And they certainly think this is strange. I have that in black and white. They can't see the purpose. But it's because their children come home and say it wasn't' fun, because they were not the best in this training. Then these result- and performance-oriented parents don't think it's fun either. In my view, as a parent, you should say, 'listen, you're trying something new, it can only make you a better player'. Instead, they just go along with the child's frustration. Unfortunately, that's how it is. But it should be said that out of the 28 players on our team, there are very few who are struggling with it. And there are very few parents who feel that way. But it's something we encounter. … But it's also, you know, the teams we are up against in the A-league are so result-oriented. They train and play matches in fixed positions. We don't do that. And it's insane, I mean, that's just something we suffer from in the short term, result-wise, but like we say, we prefer this over creating robots. But it's a bit funny to see ... And I can say this without hesitating. They play adult football. It's terrible, but they play adult football. In every way. (Coach 2, WW)

Besides highlighting the issues of parental influences on player experiences, this quote points to the need of considering children's football in a broader perspective and gives insights in the challenges coaches may face when wanting to do things differently. Besides gaining the acceptance of children, it is equally important that parents are informed about the rationale of doing things differently (e.g., about the developmental benefits of creativity and breaking habits), and to prepare key arguments when facing parental resistance. If parents are sceptical of new approaches, their children are likely to mirror these sentiments, making it harder for coaches to utilize the potentials of new approaches. Overcoming such challenges, not only involve local coaches and clubs. Besides building initiatives to support coaches in

applying creativity-supporting practice forms like those shaping the exercises in The Idea Academy, National Football associations also need to invest in educating parents about the benefits of new training methods favouring qualities such as creativity.

7. Limitations

The limitations of the study include the relative demographic homogeneity of the clubs and coaches who used the program. This arises from the geographic and logistical constraints of the recruitment process. For practical reasons, all participating teams were recruited from Northern Jutland. While two clubs were placed in Aalborg and two within a short driving distance from the city, only one was located further away (i.e., 45 minutes). This limits the diversity of socio-economic, organizational and cultural characteristics represented in the study. Consequently, the findings may not fully capture the breadth of experiences that can emerge in other settings.

Another related limitation is the potential predisposition of the participants toward creativity and values such as play, enjoyment, and development. This alignment with the program's underlying philosophy may have made these clubs more inclined to see the value of the program and motivated them to participate. Consequently, the study may lack insights into how creativity training would be received or function in more result-oriented environments, where success is measured predominantly by performance outcomes and competition results. Hence, the study may not fully account for the challenges or resistance that might arise in settings where creativity and play are less prioritized.

A further limitation of this study is the variability in sample representation across different clubs. While the recruitment strategy aimed to include three or four players from each club to participate in the focus groups, the actual number of participants in the training sessions was significantly higher. For instance, Urban United and Western Wizards had 30 and 28 children participating in the training sessions, respectively. Consequently, the focus groups represented a small proportion of these teams. This discrepancy highlights a potential bias in the sample, as the diversity and size of the teams were not uniformly represented in the focus groups, potentially limiting the breadth of perspectives and experiences captured. Additionally, the insights gained from the focus groups might not fully reflect the overall dynamics and interactions observed during the training sessions.

The inclusivity of the creativity exercises was highlighted as a key feature in section 6.2.2. As argued, everyone can participate in the imaginative and open-ended processes in The Dream World, The Idea Factory and The Play Workshop, except some variants of the latter. These kinds of exercises allow players to engage at their own level without specific skill requirements, often taking place in isolated "me and my ball" situations without opposition. On the contrary, several exercises in The Challenge and Role Play demand higher skill levels, both physically (e.g., in terms of being able to execute tasks) and cognitively (e.g., unable to understand the rules). In this regard, the same training program were tested by five different teams, and while all proved to be useful in more than one club, they were not equally effective everywhere. While some exercises worked well in Crazy City, they failed to do so at Northern Ninjas, and vice versa. In this regard, none exercises failed in terms of being considered as unusable at the U9 level in the particular clubs, but so did a number of more specific task constraints that were used across some exercises in The Play Workshop as well as The Challenge and Role Play.

This indicates that the exercises developed by the research team were not always suited to all skill levels. Given wide range of skills at this age group, this issue is a natural consequence of developing a plug-

and-play program. However, coaches highlighted that the tasks that had caused frustration due to varied skill levels would be highly relevant at the U10 and U11 levels, and even older ages.

8. Impact

This research contributes with novel insights into coaches' and children's experiences of creativity-nurturing training activities. This adds fresh insights into the potential of creativity training as a key to promote long-term participation and development, rather than short-term performance and results. Exploring the practical utility and impact of creativity training in children's football, the research contributes with in-depth, contextualized descriptions of how coaches and children engage with and experience a particular set of creativity-nurturing activities. To promote more creative experiences in children and youth football, it is recommended that this knowledge is used to inform coach education programs across European football and to develop new, inspiring coaching material.

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